

Religion news

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MICHAEL SEARS / Sentinel photographer

Pastor Cornelia L. Beene, of the Ark of Praise Outreach Church in Milwaukee, leads the singing during a recent revival. Joining with her

are Jeanette Osley, a lay minister, and her brother, Kenneth Osley, associate minister.

Church fights drugs with divine help

By MARY BETH MURPHY
Religion editor

A Pentecostal church in the Inner City has a personal stake in stopping the flow of drugs in the black community — the pastor and majority of its members are ex-addicts.

The Ark of Praise Outreach congregation knows firsthand the devastating toll alcohol and drugs take on a life.

Thus, the members are committed to march in their neighborhoods, speak out at the State Capitol and preach to whoever will listen about ridding the community of drugs.

Pastor Cornelia L. Beene and some members of her congregation recounted their personal struggles one evening in the minister's North Side home.

Beene, 44, began abusing prescribed drugs in the early 1960s, then later combined pills with alcohol.

"I OD'd four times on drugs," she said.

After completing a rehabilitation program in the late '70s, she said she felt called to the ministry and began preaching.

In 1985, Beene established the Christian Miracle Retreat Center, with its theme "Changing Lives to Change the World," in the basement of her home.

The church, which grew out of the counseling ministry, was founded a year later. Of the 100 members, all but 10 are recovering alcoholics or former drug addicts.

"Most of the time when we seek help, the people (professionals) who help us only can tell us what they've been taught. . . . The church can (provide) a healing process," she said.

Today the center and church are at

3201 N. 28th St. In addition to counseling those with substance abuse problems, trained volunteers help people find jobs and provide personal and family counseling. There also is a tutoring program available to children in the community.

Last month, the center initiated a new drug education program for children ages 2 to 12. "What About Me" teaches youth that drugs and alcohol not only are harmful to their health but destroy their self-esteem. It also stresses discipline and self-control.

The congregation includes four members of the same family — three sisters and a brother — who were addicted to drugs and alcohol.

Jeanette Osley, 34, led her sisters and brother to Beene after the minister helped her turn her life around. Osley now is a lay pastor of the church and assistant director of the center.

For nearly 10 years, Osley was addicted to speed, using alcohol "to calm me down." Later, she said she turned to cocaine.

"I made \$400 to \$500 a week and I would spend it all buying speed," she said. "I was miserable and speed kept me going. I didn't have to think about where I was living or my family."

She and her brother talked about the loneliness they felt as children growing up in an unstable home. Some of those years were spent in different foster homes.

Kenneth Osley, 32, said, "There was no togetherness in our home so I tried to find it in the streets."

In the eighth grade, he started smoking marijuana. Several years later he was free-basing cocaine.

With no way to support his habit, he began breaking into homes and stealing items to trade for drugs.

"I didn't care. I'd do whatever I had to to get drugs," he said, adding he finally ended up serving some time in prison.

After his release, he met Beene through Jeanette.

"From that point on, I knew there was a better way and I saw it and felt it in her (Beene)," said Kenneth Osley, who is a counselor at the center and associate minister of the church.

Beene said her one regret was that the work of the retreat center had not been received with much enthusiasm from the male pastors in the black community.

"The black churches in Milwaukee are not too good with women being in leadership" positions, she said.

Beene added that the black churches needed to pool their resources and work together more "instead of fighting each other."

"If all the black churches in the city and state would get up and practice what they preach and pull together . . . to fight alcohol, drugs and teen pregnancy as a unit, our prayers and everything we do would be more successful," she said.