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Shiloh Baptist leader hopes 'church campus' will foster community in Trenton

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By **Wendy Plump/For The Times**
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TRENTON — In his office at Shiloh Baptist Church one morning the Rev. Darrell L. Armstrong pulls out several oversized foam board maps of the church neighborhood — Calhoun Street from West Hanover down to Pashley, up and down Bellevue, Marion Street and the Spring Street Park and everything in between.

The maps encompass homes and small businesses, the D&R Canal, boarded up buildings and empty lots, and much that is blighted and run down. This is the home turf for a dream Armstrong has. It's a big one, and it's going to need the help of his 2,000-plus congregation and a whole lot more besides.

He wants to build a "church campus" with Shiloh at its close-knit center, a shelter of homes, businesses and programs that provide a sense of belonging to the families in his congregation.

It's a dream Armstrong plans to evangelize throughout Trenton and the country, and, if he has his way, a patchwork salvation for what he sees as one of the biggest problems facing this country — broken families with no sense of a broader community.



Enlarge Andrew Miller

Rev. Darrell L. Armstrong greets guests in the afternoon light before the 131st Church Anniversary celebration for the Shiloh Baptist Church in Trenton on Sunday, October 30, 2011. Andrew Miller/For The Times of Trenton

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Rev. Darrell L. Armstrong in Trenton gallery (28 photos)



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"We bought that piece of property, we bought a property on this street, we bought what used to be a bar along the greenway," says Armstrong, pointing out the parcels. "I want to create a campus environment that says, 'We're gonna' change this community house by house, block by block.'

"And if we change this little part of the world and another mosque or church or synagogue changes that part, it multiplies itself. And then you have communities that are not gun-infested, that are not drug-trafficked. If I can create healthier communities by addressing it family by family, and create good housing stock and job opportunities, well, that's one of the ways you fix it.

"But if I live in a community that's full of abandoned houses and broken down cars, then that's going to shape how I think about my community and myself."

Having hailed from a childhood rife with neglect in South Central Los Angeles, Armstrong knows a thing or two about overcoming misfortune. And using the faith that guided him through that mess — using the stories in the Psalms as his particular inspiration — he is quite prepared to prove it.

At 43, Armstrong is only the third pastor to helm Shiloh Baptist, one of Trenton's most historic churches. Founded 106 years ago, the church appointed Armstrong to the post in 2000, following a 54-year pastorate held by the Rev. S. Howard Woodson Jr.

Armstrong spent two years as his assistant and says he learned well from Woodson how to best use faith and energy to move mountains. In celebration of this mentorship, Armstrong will publish a collection of Woodson's sermons next month, among other projects.

Armstrong is a busy man. He visited the White House last week to address a panel assembled in honor of National Adoption Awareness Month. He rode his bike from Princeton to Trenton recently to highlight the importance of foster families, on which his own salvation depended. He preaches several sermons every Sunday and runs workshops and clergy training and men's groups. He also does speaking engagements, funerals and baby blessings, and is involved with organizations devoted to foster children.

At times, Armstrong has crossed paths with history. He was on a student mission to South Africa when Nelson Mandela was released from jail. He was on a community mission in Haiti when the earthquake struck two years ago. He is publishing two books, and helping his wife to raise two small children.

It is a lot to do. But Armstrong sees it all of a piece. The focus of his life centers on helping families, and more specifically, saving children — foster children, adoptive children and children at risk. Something else he knows a lot about.

Armstrong was born in 1968 in South Central Los Angeles to a 15-year-old single mother who later became addicted to drugs and was unable to raise him. After witnessing the brutal scalding of a younger brother at the hands of his mother's boyfriend, the young Darrell was taken into the foster care system for three years. Eventually he lived with his maternal grandfather.

His mother, Genice Armstrong, died of a drug overdose at the age of 45, although she was alive to see him graduate with a bachelor's degree in public policy from Stanford University. He later went on to receive his master's in divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary.

Armstrong credits the few strong mentors in his life in particular and the church in general with his survival. It contributes to his commitment today to champion the needs of children and the necessity of healthy families.

"It was the church. ... That's where my hope came from. I believe if I didn't have good role modeling at home, I could go to church and see good role models. Those who were trying to raise families through the church, strong men and women who gave me hope.

"I channeled my energy into church and school. Those were the two institutions that really formed me. And the people that mentored me — my grandfather, my social worker, my first pastor. I'm an example of someone else's investment. And if we can look at the fact that, here's what true

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authentic investment can bring if we all do it, then the question is, why don't we all do it? Can we all do more of it?"

To that end Armstrong is shepherding a new program through his congregation based on baby blessings. Similar to christenings and bar mitzvahs, blessings take place when a child is about a year old and welcomes them formally into the church fold. Prior to those occasions, Armstrong is enrolling parents in an eight-session program designed to focus attention on the scale of their responsibility.

It will begin with a pastoral visit to the home of the new parents followed by sessions on baby and young child development, and strengthened through connections with other young mothers in the congregation who can provide companionship and support.

"Our society doesn't value prevention," says Armstrong. "I want to address the problems that children face before they become tragedies. That's my hope. That's what I'm driving towards. How do I keep families intact? How do I keep babies from being dropped in a tub of scalding water?"

"The only way I can do that is by making families stronger. And the only way you can make them stronger is to give them the resources they need so they can be stronger.

"Every family is going to meet crises and stress. It is how we meet those points of stress before they become crises. So I am evangelical now about prevention. The only way you can prevent something is by strengthening something."

There is one last message that Armstrong takes care to stress during every appearance, sermon and discussion. "Never underestimate," he says, "the impact you can have on one child's life. "

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