

**Charlotte World** *published December 23, 2004*

## **Moving past the Bill James controversy**

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### **Christian ministries address problems in urban black communities**

*By: Jamie Dean*

**CHARLOTTE---** In a political season that was marked by deep divisions, Bill James managed to unite local Republicans and Democrats with just two words: "moral sewer."

When the Mecklenburg County commissioner wrote in a Nov. 30 e-mail to 1,200 recipients that children in the urban black community "live in a moral sewer with parents who lack the desire to act properly," at least 20 Republican leaders joined Democrats in condemning James's comments, and demanding an apology.

The newly-elected Republican county commissioner Dan Bishop said, "I condemn what Bill James wrote because I think it is hateful and divisive and unconstructive." Mayor Pat McCrory called James's e-mail "revolting." And outgoing Republican county commissioner Ruth Samuelson, who made racial reconciliation a focus of her two terms in office, said, "I agree it's probably time for the Republican leadership in Mecklenburg County to publicly say they don't agree with the way Bill handles things."

Indeed, James has been criticized more than once for the way he handles the issue of race, including his choice of words in a September 2004 e-mail in which he said busing for desegregation fails to increase literacy. In that e-mail, James wrote, "Having little Twanna and Ahmad sit next to Skippy or Susie did NOTHING except hide the extent of the problem and leave kids out on the bus for hours at a time."

But it was James's November "moral sewer" e-mail that unleashed a political firestorm that even James could not have anticipated. The usually-quiet county manager Harry Jones was the first to speak out against the e-mail, writing in a scathing response that the commissioner's comments "smack of racism in the highest form," and that "there has got to be a kinder, gentler way for you to express yourself."

After three days of intense criticism that included harassing phone calls to James's home, the commissioner said that he could have chosen his words more carefully. "I think that if you have to categorize it, is it an apology or is it not, the answer is, it's an apology for not qualifying and clarifying my statement," James said. The commissioner said he acknowledges that "not everyone 100 percent in the urban black core has a moral problem."

But James made it clear that he was not apologizing for the essence of his e-mail. "It's not an apology for bringing it up, and it's not an apology for me believing the problem in the black community is moral," he said. Days later, he reiterated to the "Charlotte World" that "I stand by my statement, and my conclusion, and the facts, but I could always have phrased it better."

James said he publicly clarified his comments in part to move past the tension of the moment, and said, "I felt while I had everyone's attention I needed to move the debate to the overarching problem regarding the break-down in the urban black family."

While many local leaders agreed that James's comments should have been worded better, they also

agreed on something else: there was truth to what James said.

### **Looking for answers**

According to 2000 North Carolina Census data (the latest data available), nearly 75 percent of the jail population is black. Sixty-eight percent of black mothers had children out of wedlock in 1999. Twenty-three percent of blacks live in poverty.

Those high percentages point to an undeniable problem in the black community, as well as an obvious question: What's the cause and what's the solution?

While politicians and sociologists debate that question at length, some leaders in the Christian community, who work day-in and day-out in urban black areas, have a ready answer. They say the problem is spiritual and the answer is a transformed life.

Kelvin Smith, pastor of the multi-racial Steele Creek Church of Charlotte, is also the founder of Jackson Park Ministries, a Christian ministry in the urban Jackson Park community on Charlotte's West side.

Smith, who has worked in Jackson Park since 1985, says there are moral problems in every racial and economic group in the city. As far as the urban black community goes, Smith sees the fundamental problem as "a lack of biblical order in people's homes."

Smith says that most of the families Jackson Park serves are led by single mothers. "Many of these ladies are God-fearing, love the Lord and love their children," he says.

"There is certainly a lack of male leadership," he adds. "And there is a tremendous need to see the family restored."

### **Finding solutions**

Jackson Park Ministries focuses on discipleship, family-building, financial responsibility, and church involvement, and even offers free housing for those willing to meet a rigorous set of requirements. "We teach people how to have a relationship with Christ, how to have biblical marriages, how to lead their children spiritually, and how to order their financial lives," Smith says.

"The philosophy of our ministry is to give people a hand-up, not a hand-out," he adds. "We desire to give them biblical instruction in the context of a relationship."

Ministry through relationships is something the men at the Charlotte Rescue Mission (CRM) find as well. CRM, which is located in the inner beltway, offers a free Christian recovery program for drug and alcohol addiction. Executive Director Tony Marciano says 65 percent of the mission's clients are black.

The mission offers an intense rehab program, training in literacy, job and computer skills, as well as personal counseling and regular chapel services.

Marciano says the basis for lasting recovery is a biblical foundation: "Jesus Christ is an integral part of everything we do."

While not located in the inner city, a high percentage of the Charlotte Pregnancy Care Center's clients come from urban areas as well, according to Executive Director Bobbie Meyers.

Meyers says a common thread among many of the center's clients is "a lack of consistent home training."

The center, which offers free pregnancy testing and ultrasounds, also offers free counseling to girls and women facing unplanned pregnancies. "Our goal is to help her [the client] look at her life and make choices that are physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy," Meyers says. "The best hope for her is to find a relationship with Jesus Christ and to find that relationship meaningful."

Inner city ministry is something all Christians should be involved in on some level, Meyers says. "Not everyone is called to work in inner cities," she says. "But all of us have a responsibility to do something in the city God has put us in."

If Christians don't feel ready to volunteer in inner city ministries, Meyers says they can contribute through prayer and financial support.

Kelvin Smith agrees that "doing something" is, in fact, the church's duty. "It is the church's responsibility and privilege to address these issues in the inner city the way Christ has taught us," he says. "The church has got to be the church."