



Efreem Smith with daughters, Jaeda and Mireya, and wife, Donecia.

## Efreem Smith, PSWC Superintendent Elect

### SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

I was raised in the church and have been in the church my whole life. My grandmother and mother played a tremendous role in my spiritual formation. Both were gospel singers. My grandmother sang gospel music during the same time as Mahalia Jackson, who was very involved in the Civil Rights movement and often sang with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Both my mother and grandmother were a part of planting an African American church, Redeemer Missionary Baptist Church in Minneapolis. In high school I went beyond attending church to accepting Christ as my Savior through a connection with Park Avenue Methodist, an urban, multiethnic, and evangelical church. At an outreach event sponsored by the church, I heard Tom Skinner, Joni Erickson Tada, John Perkins, and Tony Campolo preach. God used that experience to convince me that the church should look like heaven and be about reconciliation. Multiethnic ministry has been a part of my spiritual journey since coming to Christ in high school.

Reconciliation and multiethnic ministry have been a strong part of my ministry, but in the last ten years what has played a stronger part is understanding reconciliation as a spiritual process that comes out of the overflow of intimacy and relationship with Christ. Reconciliation has to be deeply rooted in a relationship with God and identity in Christ. Spiritual health has been the added dimension. Now I ask, "What does it mean to minister out of the overflow that comes from our relationship with and identity in Christ?"

### CALL TO MINISTRY

After I became a Christian through the ministry of Park Avenue, I went on to college and every summer I worked at Park Avenue with elementary and middle school kids. It was while serving at the church and working with kids that I initially sensed the call to ministry.

During this time, my wife Donecia's grandfather was the pastor of Rising Star Baptist Church in Minneapolis. I went to him, pastor Edward Berry, and shared this sense of call. He responded by saying, "OK. We're going to find out if you are called. In three weeks you are going to preach at the 4 o'clock Sunday afternoon service."

And so, during the summer prior to my senior year in college, I preached my initial sermon at Rising Star Baptist Church and after I finished preaching the congregation voted to license me as a minister. Rising Star was a church of about 100 people and probably 60 of them came out that afternoon. I still remember the sermon title, "Give Credit Where Credit is Due".

That sermon was an introduction, and for the next two years I had an "old school" apprenticeship with Pastor Berry. When he went to hospital, I went to the hospital. When he did visitation, I did visitation. When he preached, I prayed. The next time he preached, I read scripture.

Soon after, I went to Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, and graduated with a Master of Arts in Theology. Early in 1993 I was ordained by the National Baptist Convention. I have continued my pursuit of education to further prepare me for ministry and am currently in the process of completing a Doctor of Ministry degree in church leadership at Bethel Seminary in Minneapolis.

### MINISTRY SETTINGS

Park Avenue Methodist Church was important being urban, evangelical, multiethnic. Rising Star was pivotal in confirming my call to ministry. A couple of years after I was ordained, Pastor Berry died, so Donecia and I went back to Redeemer Missionary Baptist Church.

While in seminary I worked at Hospitality House in Minneapolis doing outreach to middle school boys. During this time I attended Redeemer Missionary Baptist Church and volunteered as the youth minister. Gerald Joyner was the pastor, and he picked up where Pastor Berry left off in preparing me for ministry. I call him my "father in the ministry". He currently serves as pastor of Zion Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

Eventually I also started working as Twin Cities Director of Minnesota Fellowship of Christian Athletes and coached high school basketball. During this time I volunteered as a youth leader.

Up until that point my ministry settings had been in urban Minneapolis with one foot in the local church and one in Para church organizations. (In urban churches there are always many places to serve, but not many places to hire you full-time.) The local church has always been of high value to me. I have always believed that the frontline of the Kingdom of God on earth is the local church even when I worked for Para church organizations.

In the spring of 1998 I went from the inner city of Minneapolis to Tipp City, Ohio, to serve as youth pastor in a mega church of about 4000 located in a third-ring suburb. I went from being a pastor in an African American, urban setting to serving as a youth pastor for 300 kids in a predominantly white church. The youth group was the same size as the church I had just left. In that role, I realized how much urban youth culture was influencing all of youth culture. At first I was quite surprised that the church wanted an urban youth pastor. Yet, they did want to become a multiethnic church. Because the urban culture was influencing the broader culture, ministry to youth in this suburban setting was not a big stretch; the youth were already listening to a predominantly urban culture. I served in Ohio for two years and was then recruited back to Minneapolis to serve as associate pastor overseeing youth and outreach at Park Avenue Methodist Church, a role I held for three years. It was a full circle as this was the setting in which I had become a Christian.

## STYLE OF LEADERSHIP

My leadership style is one of leading by vision casting and through inspiration that mainly comes out of my preaching and teaching. Also, in many of ways it is definitely a team approach desiring to create an environment where people are equipped and empowered to use their gifts and abilities to move forward a mission.

My passion around reconciliation also has tremendous impact on my leadership style.

## THE COVENANT FAMILY

When I worked for Hospitality House my boss was a guy named Jon Karma. Hospitality House, a Para church organization reaching youth, was founded by a man connected with Brookdale Covenant Church. Brookdale Covenant supported the ministry financially and sent volunteers. Jon was the program director, and was a member of Community Covenant in Minneapolis, where Jim Sondheim, former Director of Covenant World Relief, was pastor at the time.

Fast forward to 2002, and Jon Karma is now working for the Northwest Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church. At the time I was wrestling; I felt pulled to something else but I didn't know what it was. The ministry was thriving at Park Avenue Methodist, but I was restless. So, I decided to contact Jon to process with him. During that meeting, he asked, "Have you ever thought about church planting?" My immediate response was, "Never."

But, that meeting launched my journey into the Covenant. Shortly thereafter, I met other staff including Mark Stromberg, Don Davenport and Dave Olson and was soon at the Covenant's Church Planter Assessment Center and Church Plant Training events. These experiences led to planting Sanctuary Covenant Church beginning in 2003.

When I came into the Covenant, I felt I had come into a denomination where everything I am passionate about – ministry, mission, and theology, were all captured. I couldn't believe it. When I was in other churches, I had never been involved in denominational activities. When I came into the Covenant, the more I was involved, the more I wanted to be involved. This was primarily because the Covenant is so relational. I have never been a part of denomination as authentically relational as the Evangelical Covenant Church.

## FAMILY

I grew up in Minnesota, but my father and mother are both from the South. Mom was from Alabama and dad from Louisiana. I grew up with two brothers and two sisters in a family that was very encouraging around spiritual growth and development. Even though my father wasn't a big churchgoer, I never questioned his heart for God. I watched my dad model the importance of prayer. I know that my hunger for prayer time with the Lord was very much influenced by my father.

My grandparents on both sides also played a tremendous role. On my dad's side, my grandmother was very involved in the church and my grandfather was a deacon. I remember my grandfather would get up early and read scripture aloud as the sun was rising. My hunger for the Word was shaped by my grandfather. That was powerful.

Donecia and I have known each other since high school. One of the things pivotal in my being drawn to her was not only how good she looked, but also her heart for God. She was the first girl I dated for whom God, family and, school were priorities, and at best I needed to know that I would be in fourth place. After heavy pursuit, she finally decided to go with me to the high school prom. We continued to date during college and were married in 1993 on the day before Valentine's Day.

Donecia, who has a Masters in Family Life Education, has been in education most of her career. She has been in higher education, working at a community college and also running a career and counseling center in Minneapolis public schools.

We have two daughters – Jaeda, 13 and Mireya, who will turn 11 just days after the PSWC Celebration. Both girls are very into music. Jaeda is involved in theatre and singing. Mireya is involved in singing and has a heart for karate. Both girls have red belts in karate and with their heading toward high school; I sense this might come in handy. Both are strong academically and we are proud of how well they are doing.