



# URBAN CURRENTS

## New currents in the Deep Blue Sea

**F**ebruary 22, 2011, will be extraordinary in Chicago history. Voters will go to the polls in a unique mayoral primary.

From time immemorial, the primary in Chicago has been the election. There is no Republican party. The Democratic machine pre-determines the slate, virtually cementing the result. It's the closest thing to coronation of the prince everyone knew would be king America has ever seen. This is the way it has been for as long as anyone can remember.

Mayor Daley has announced his resignation. Consequently, a slate of 20 candidates will appear on the ballot this month, a sight and choice no one could have imagined six months ago.

But that's just the beginning. Two of the candidates are not only friends of mine, but gospel-preaching pastors.

I've known James Meeks since 1988. We met at a Sunday school conference our church hosted. Over the years, we've become fast friends and prayer partners. Back then nobody knew he existed. Now, with 20,000 members and a new 10,000-seat auditorium, Salem is the largest Baptist congregation of any kind in the state of Illinois and one of the largest churches in the Midwest.

One day he got an idea to deliver Bibles to every home in his zip code. Only after he announced his intentions did he find out it was the most populated zip code in the city. He followed through. He had the chance to pipe his telecast into every prison in Illinois. He counted the cost and seized the opportunity. He took advantage of another open door giving every prisoner in Illinois a recording of the New Testament.

A few years back he told me he was launching a campaign to win 25,000 souls in one year. Long ago I learned not to doubt this

man. They closed the campaign with 28,000 people praying to trust Christ. Being located in a high-crime area, he decided to use the Chicago option to vote his precinct dry. In one election he closed 28 bars and only God knows how much drug distribution and prostitution along with it.

He decided his state legislative district needed better representation. He has now served as state senator for six years. His leadership in the area of education in our state and city has been unparalleled. A few weeks ago he was the lone Chicago legislator to vote against civil unions and the largest gaming expansion in our states history.

I first crossed paths with Wilfredo DeJesus about 10 years ago at a prayer vigil we were conducting, hours after a young man was shot dead on a corner near us. I did not know DeJesus was a pastor. I knew him as the chief deputy assistant to Paul Vallas, the CEO of Chicago public schools, also at the vigil. Today, DeJesus's church, New Life Covenant, is one of the largest Assembly of God churches in the state.

DeJesus formed a citywide network of pastors in a major anti-violence effort called Exodus 20:13. He had the full backing of the mayor's office and the support of city services. As far as I know it was the first time in my lifetime, and maybe ever, that many city pastors ignored the usual barriers and banded together around one cause.

He led the effort to stop a gay/lesbian/transgender-based high school. He has taken considerable heat from homosexual activists. The ministries of this congregation, from drug rehab for women to ministry to gangs, cut a holy swath through the Chicago darkness.

The candidacy of these two men marks a sea change in the spiritual landscape of our city. Twenty-five years ago there was little sign

of spiritual vitality in the city proper. The white evangelical and protestant churches that remained were dead, dying, or trying to buy property in the suburbs. There were no church plants. Now, these guys shepherd huge churches not even on the radar 15 years ago. They have become major forces in the city. They represent church growth that seems to be trending in several formerly neglected urban centers like New York City, Boston, and Seattle. While many white believers are still learning to spell urbanology, this duo, one black and one Hispanic, are evangelizing and working the salt and light thing like crazy, fulfilling Jesus' "greater works" prophecy.

Chicago is a Roman Catholic city on a scale unmatched anywhere else in the U.S. While Boston and New Orleans have some of the same Roman Catholic intensity, their populations and consequently the diocese size doesn't begin to match the Arch Diocese of Chicago. For years there has been little to no recognition of any other religion in the city. Having lunch with Mayor Daley about 10 years ago, I told him to watch for the rising evangelical tide in our city.

It remains to be seen how a growing evangelical presence will manifest itself politically in the deep blue sea alongside Lake Michigan. One thing's for sure, it's going to be interesting to watch.

*Post Script: Pastor Meeks dropped out of the race previous to the February primary*

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