



Interview with

Rev. Albert Phillips

Pastor, New Bethel Baptist Church
Sarasota, FL
March 9, 2009

Reverend Phillips was one of 30 Newtown residents to attend a community-building workshop with John McKnight of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute hosted by SCOPE in early February. At the workshop, residents focused on how to connect with the dreams, talents, skills, and resources of their neighbors and neighborhood organizations to realize common goals. We spoke with the Pastor about his reflections on the workshop, his church and involvement in the neighborhood, and his hopes for the Newtown community.

Can you tell me about your background and the history of your church?

New Bethel originally came out of Truvine. It was built in 1943, the same year I was born! The church was built by the first Pastor, Rev. J. H. Floyd. I've been here since 1978—31 years. The church itself is 87 years old.

I was born in Arcadia and raised up in Sidell and Sarasota. My Daddy worked with making turpentine, out on Bee Ridge Road by the railroad. My father worked the gum. from when I was four years old I would work out there too—raking the leaves, dipping the gum, hanging the aprons [to collect the resin]. They would pour the resin into 55 gallon drums. You can get a lot of stuff out of pine trees!

What kinds of things are you and New Bethel doing within the community?

We do ministry & outreach. People come in to tutor local children. We try to do community aid. A couple of our members work with other organizations like health, wellness. For instance, we work with Truvine Church to hold health fairs. We also have a coalition of churches who hold joint Easter Services and rotate the location each year. I used to be involved in a Ministerial Alliance but it hasn't been active for 10 years.

I was involved in the founding of a SURE (Sarasota United for Responsibility and Equity) and am still very involved. SURE is a faith-based organization that works on the concerns and issues in the community such as transportation, homelessness, drugs and crime. I also work with J.H. Floyd Sunshine Manor, which is a home for older people on 18th Street with apartments, rehab, and assisted living.

You attended the first night of a meeting in February with Newtown residents and Mr. John McKnight about building community using assets and resources within that community. How did the meetings and what was discussed connect to the Newtown community and the work that you do?

Everybody that did speak and came together [that evening] seemed to have an interest in helping the community. They had an interest and a common goal. For example, there was one guy who owns the apartment building and is trying to make them better.

I saw some things that were styled after the Evangelism work we do. You're getting to know a person, then you do a presentation of a truth, something that is standard and solid. It's about making the community aware of what's available for the betterment of their lives and lifestyles, but it takes a unified effort. You're not going to be able [to make a difference] if people aren't acting together. The wall [of Jericho] would never have got called down if the Lord did not call the people together in assembly.

It would benefit to network with already formed organizations. It's about getting something stable and unified. When you get too many and diversity of organizations and things going on, you can over-program and over-power people and they're going to run away.

It's really about unity. Like with churches—there's "The Church" but a lot of "churches." It's like I tell people, we are all part of one body. We might do different things—your hand doesn't do the same thing your hand does! But we're all one in the same body.

Like in a community?

That's right.

What is your dream for the community?

Togetherness and being able to work together.

Specifically, safe streets and equity for everybody, especially older people. Some older people are not able to get into nursing homes because the insurance rates are too high, and even their children are not able to help them because they're struggling too. [And finally, for an improvement with] the job situation. That's an issue right now. SURE is going to begin working on those issues: joblessness and also homelessness, because the job issue leads you straight to homelessness. What can you do once you lose your job?

What would you say are the “gifts” of your church? What are those things that you want to give or make available to the community?

Spiritually speaking, we have all of the gifts—in the people [of the congregation and in their spirituality]. We also offer tutoring and education. The vision of our church is “mission, education, and ministry.” [Ministry means] seeing a need and meeting a need, or people who are willing to help where needed. Some people in our congregation have jobs and are [doing work in the community] through programs like the YMCA’s HIPPY (Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters) program. We have a youth choir, a men’s choir, a young adult’s choir, and a senior’s choir. They will sing at community events when they are invited.



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Interview and photo by April Doner, SCOPE Staff