

A Basic Faith

BY JEFF COWART

Archie Whitlow is a man of God and family heritage right down to the tips of his deep southern roots. His daddy was a preacher and his granddaddy was, too. He married a girl whose daddy was a preacher. Her granddaddy was, too. Two of Archie and Jerrie Whitlow's three sons preach, one alongside him. His daughter works in the senior citizen ministry.

Maybe that helps explain why the notion of family is much at the core of the theological universe at The Community Church in Sterling that Whitlow started more than 20 years ago under an old-fashioned revival tent. Today, the church has a congregation of over 1,000. "It sort of runs in our blood," he explains.

For Whitlow, family is more than a foundational belief. It's a personal passion. Somewhere early on he came to understand that a successful church is built on ministry to the young and old. Address the spiritual needs of the children and their grandparents, and you also minister to the majority of the brethren in between.

Call it strategy, or common sense, or revelation. But, what Whitlow and his congregation know is that serving families has built a powerful non-denominational church. This year, the church celebrates its 20th anniversary.

In 1982 the Whitlows and their four children were living in South Carolina where he was pastor of a small church. "I got a call from a gentleman I knew who wanted me to come to Northern Virginia and start a church. At that time, I didn't know there was a place called Northern Virginia," says Whitlow.

Within three weeks of moving to Sterling Park, the high-energy Whitlow printed 10,000 fliers and started walking door to door. A few weeks later, 35 people showed up at the first service. The rest, as they say, is history.

The early years were anything but smooth as Whitlow sought a location for the new church. After being thwarted in several attempts to get approval from Fairfax County to build there, Whitlow's site was eyed by that county for development. His land was purchased in a forced sale and proceeds were invested in a more welcoming Loudoun.

"That began a real love affair of mine with Loudoun County," says Whitlow.

In the intervening years, Whitlow and his church have grown literally and figuratively. There's the church. And the day care center. And the new senior facility. And the teen center. And then there's the handsome architectural renderings for the new 1,000-student Christian school—he says it will be Jeffersonian to the core—and a new church to be built on the most recently acquired 55-acre site on Route 7 near Ashburn.

Over the years, Whitlow and his church have become much more than just prominent on the landscape. The Community Church is an influential community institution with a real impact on civic affairs and even politics. Every savvy candidate makes time to sit and chat with Pastor Whitlow.

"I believe in the separation of church and state," says Whitlow. "I don't believe it's my place to tell people how to vote. But, I didn't hang up my citizenship when I became a pastor."

Whitlow sees the proper relationship between church and state as the point where values intersect. He urges church members to study issues and candidates and to pray for the political process and vote.

"We really believe in America," says Whitlow of his congregation. "We have concerns about America. But, I don't want us to ever be seen as a political bloc. I think that demeans the congregants of this church."

In his library, classics of political history fill one section of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. His scriptural studies, which include his father's multi-volume set, fill two sections and more. The books of John and Genesis, by the way, are his favorites.

As for the future, Whitlow says his son, Charlie, is well prepared to succeed him, though not anytime soon. "It's my day now, but the sun is setting," says Whitlow. "The pulpit is a young person's place. In the meantime, 'I go day and night,' he says. "It's just my nature."

