

FOREST PARK REVIEW

By [Tom Holmes](#)

I attended the Missions and Marketplace conference at Living Word Christian Center last week. One observation I made: Ninety-five percent of the more than 1,000 participants were African American, but in the day and a half I was present there, I didn't hear the word race (or racism) once.

What the Rev. Dr. Bill Winston has done at his mega-church is to create a no excuses culture. For Living Word's pastor, the enemy is not systemic racism or capitalism or the one percent. In fact, he promises that when you give your life to Christ and allow God to direct every business decision you make, you will be part of an unstoppable wave of Christian entrepreneurs who will swell that most wealthy class of Americans to two and three and four percent.

Pastor Winston sees America as the land of opportunity and the accumulation of wealth as a means of giving glory to God, bringing the blessing of God's kingdom to earth and thereby loving our neighbors with jobs and a shared prosperity.

Sometimes he calls what is preventing you and me from prospering "stinkin' thinkin'." At other times he might refer to it as "the enemy" (aka Satan). Whatever you call it, it is that which prevents you from letting God completely direct the way you do business and handle every other aspect of your life.

First and foremost, Bill Winston is clearly the boss. Call him the CEO, the head pastor, the charismatic leader. Whatever label or title you attach to him, he is in charge and that's the way 20,000 members like it. He often uses the term anointed to describe his authority to lead his huge congregation. You don't get anointing by earning a college degree or having an impressive resume. The paradox is that you get it by surrendering to a power greater than yourself, and when you have that kind of anointing, it is evident in the fruit your life bears.

Living Word is not a democracy. Many mainline churches have what is called a congregational polity, i.e. an organizational structure in which ultimate power is vested in the congregation. It is by a congregational vote that pastors are called to serve and their salaries determined.

It is telling that as you enter Living Word's complex via the southeast door you will see on the wall not a suggestion box but a box for testimonies regarding how God has spoken through Pastor Winston and used him to change your life.

Members of the mega-church don't grudgingly put up with their pastor's authority. They revel in it. I suppose the culture at Living Word is like that of a football team which wins the Super Bowl. Giving all eleven players in the huddle a chance to express their opinion regarding the next offensive play and then having a vote would be the stuff of an SNL skit.

Football players accept the authority of the coach to call the plays, because the system works. People flock to services and Bible studies at Living Word not in order to express their opinions but to

learn a proven method of living by the experts. In one form or another, you'll often hear the statement, "I did and so can you."

The speakers at Living Word conferences and services are not academic PhD's who have accumulated their learning from books. They are practitioners who hold up their track records as evidence that they, too, have been anointed and that their teaching is authoritative.

You won't find opinion polls at Living Word. What Pastor Winston has done is to assemble a paid staff who accept his authority as the anointed leader and enthusiastically buy into his vision and values, because they not only resonate with the culture he has created but rejoice in being part of a winning team.

The culture Bill Winston has created works, because his staff and members are willing to give up some of their autonomy to be part of the cultural consensus necessary for the organization to prosper. Many people, of course, try Living Word out and vote with their feet by not coming back, and no one forces anyone to remain.

What Living Word does have is a cultural consensus which energizes everything they do. Coincidentally, seven hours after leaving the Mission and Marketplace conference, I attended the most recent meeting of the steering committee which is working through a process to create a Comprehensive Plan for Forest Park. In that setting there was no charismatic leader calling the plays. The players in the huddle, in effect, were discussing which plays to call both in the short term and in the long run.

Their discussion of what we should do in the future, in large part, revealed their values, i.e. what was important to them. Youth, safety, recycling, home values. It's a very different kind of process than what I experienced at Living Word. Let's see if participatory democracy can achieve the kind of energized cultural consensus I experienced at the Mission and Marketplace conference.