**Church plant emerges from walking-the-streets of Brooklyn**

By Jim Burton

BROOKLYN, N.Y. – When Camille Mumford started attending Bridge Church with her husband, she regularly sent Pastor James Roberson quotes from new age advocate Deepak Chopra. The Cleveland native wasn’t too sure about what she was hearing from Roberson, but she was sure that nobody in the church’s City Groups would understand her.

But she continued to attend the small group gatherings and learned the importance of discovering community, particularly when living in a new city. Within three months, she volunteered to bring food. Three months later, she started participating. Today, she can’t imagine living in New York City without her Bridge Church family.

Two years before Rich Bowman met Roberson, he had been an atheist. Though he had recently professed faith in Christ, Bowman and his wife, Emmy, had not joined a church. After finding one of Roberson’s online blog posts, he contacted Roberson.

The Bowmans appeared to be very introverted. Rich was “super quiet,” never interjecting during City Group Bible studies. Emmy would hide in the Roberson’s bedroom because she didn’t want to interact. Today, she’s the primary person Bridge Church women seek for discipleship.

Rich now preaches for Roberson at the Bridge Church. Next September, he will be the pastor of the Bridge Church’s first church plant in Flatbush, N.Y.

When Roberson sees Rich, who was “basically a mute,” now preaching, and sees Emmy discipling women, he can only explain it one way.

“It’s a Holy Spirit thing,” Roberson said.

When Jessica Powell attended a poetry reading, the college senior wasn’t looking for a church, she wanted to meet the featured poet. She also met someone who invited her to a Bridge Church Bible study.

Powell lives in Queens, which is a 90-minute train ride to Brooklyn. She had made a profession of faith on 10/10/10 and was anxious to grow in her faith.

The studious Powell had always been a note taker in the church. At the City Group led by Roberson, she received a handout on the topic of love, sex and dating. By the end of the study, Powell had drawn a conclusion.

“God, this is where you want me to be,” she said.

**Anywhere but NYC**

Getting to Brooklyn, a New York City borough, from Atlanta was a challenge for Roberson and his wife, Natarsha. After years of campus and church ministry throughout the south, Roberson knew that God was moving them into church planting, maybe in his native New York. A mission trip to Uganda and Kenya had put Africa on their spiritual radar screen.

Roberson recalls sitting in an Atlanta parking lot with Natarsha as they discussed their feeling about a new ministry pursuit.

“I could hear the fear in her voice and the angst,” Roberson said. He recalls his wife saying, “I’m not going to lie to you, if you had told me that God was calling us to Uganda I’d be happier with that. New York City is the last place I want to go.”

Natarsha did agree to visit Brooklyn with her husband as they wrestled with discerning God’s will. On that trip, they randomly met a young woman who had recently picked up a Bible and wanted to learn it but needed a teacher. Eventually, that young woman professed faith in Christ and joined a Bridge Church Bible study.

After that initial random encounter, Natarsha had a new understanding.

“I can’t believe that God has given us the opportunity to serve Him here,” she said.

She also couldn’t believe that God would take them and their small children from a spacious five-bedroom house in Atlanta where he was on staff with Blueprint Church, a predominantly African-American inner-city church plant that is now a sponsoring church in the North American Mission Board’s (NAMB) Send Network. Brooklyn real estate would be different.

They arrived in Brooklyn alone on Feb. 6, 2013, with no team, no relationships and no home. A 600 square-foot apartment that cost $2,400 per month became their first meeting place for City Group Bible studies and home. Next, they needed participants.

**Hittin’ the streets**

Roberson is a bit of an imposing figure. The six-foot-two-inch former collegiate defensive football tackle took his gregarious personality to the streets of Brooklyn. Much like a door-to-door salesman, he was looking for prospects with no leads.

“When I came up here, I just found myself walking around, praying and dreaming,” Roberson said.

Each morning during his quiet time, he would ask God what to do. In the book of Acts, he noted, “These guys just kind of walked around and prayed.” So his strategy was to prayerwalk Brooklyn asking God to open doors, and the doors began to open.

A church across the street from the Barclay Center, home of the NBA’s New York Nets, offered them a meeting place. One of the staff members recognized Roberson from his small part in a Christian movie called “Man Up.” That person became one of the worship leaders at the new church that Roberson had yet to form.

Then he walked onto the campus of Long Island University and soon became a campus minister with an office.

He kept walking until Bridge Church launched on April 20, 2014, with 180 people in attendance. The former football player wept as he considered what had transpired in 14 months. After arriving with only their obedience, God blessed them with a church in Brooklyn that mostly reaches second and third generation Millennials from Caribbean nations.

Since forming, the church has been active in the community with several initiatives. A desire to give coats to homeless people morphed into a campaign called I Am Known when member Yvonne Eseonu asked two questions: “What does it say to people that we’re giving you the coats that we don’t want any more? Why don’t we give them clothes that we would wear?” A person could now buy an I Am Known sweatshirt making it possible for a homeless person to receive a new, warm and free garment.

With the social unrest that has rocked the nation, the Bridge Church created an initiative called Do Justice that focuses on community relationships with police. Other issues of concern include over-gentrification, which has caused monthly rents to rise to the point that some of the Bridge Church’s members have been “rented out” of Brooklyn.

But the real issue for Roberson is discipleship. With nine City Groups meeting for Bible study and community formation, each becomes like a spiritual family. At their Easter service on March 27, 2016, the church saw the fruit of its family discipleship efforts. With up to 160 attending, more than 20 came to the altar to profess faith in Christ.

“It was one of those days when you go, what happened?” Roberson said.

Part of what happened was that Roberson received a startup grant from NAMB made possible by Annie Armstrong Easter Offering® (AAEO) funds to start the Bridge Church.

“You cannot start a church without resources,” Roberson said.

*James and Natarsha Roberson are AAEO Week of Prayer Missionaries for NAMB. Half of the funding NAMB receives to support, train and resource North American missionaries comes through the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering. Learn more about the Roberson’s and other missionaries at AnnieArmstrong.com.*

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*Jim Burton is a photojournalist and writer based in Atlanta. He formerly served Southern Baptists as the director of Volunteer Mobilization and Mission Education with the North American Mission Board.*