

**IT'S** been said that the 11 o'clock hour on Sunday is the most segregated hour of the week. That's not the case at People's Church in Oklahoma City. There, blacks, whites, Hispanics and American Indians join together each Sunday to worship.

"We're all part of one big family," Jerome Bryson, a 35-year-old salesman who attends the church, says. "As our pastor always tells us: *We are a big family, and the best is yet to come.*"

More than 2,000 people attend the seven-year-old church, which is nearing the end of a massive building project that will boost the ministry center's square footage by nearly 45,000 square feet and includes an 1,800-seat sanctuary.

But Herbert Cooper, People's Church lead pastor, is not content to rest on a prodigious past or their present distinction as one of the United States' fastest-growing

"That's the nature of this church and what drives us."

Day 1 for People's Church was Mother's Day 2002. It included 65 people, a young pastor (Cooper) who had never been on a church staff, and a harsh reality — the encroaching summer season was no time to try to multiply, or even add to, a congregation.

"Our planning wasn't perfect," Cooper admits. "Despite our missteps, we believed the Lord had told us to plant a multicultural church. We obeyed, and He's been blessing the church ever since."

By the end of December that year, 150 worshippers were coming regularly. A year later, more than 400 people were in attendance. A few months later, People's Church bought 50 acres in northeast Oklahoma City. A building campaign ensued, and in 2006 a 17,500-square-foot church was built. Within

Cooper feels blessed that the congregation has grown and has embraced two building campaigns. He has also enjoyed the thrill that comes with starting a church from scratch. And he loves the fact that unchurched people feel drawn to and accepted at People's Church.

But for Cooper and his congregation none of that compares to the thrill of seeing individuals experience life change after embracing a relationship with Jesus Christ. To understand why this is so, one need only look at where Cooper came from.

**Transformation**

Wewoka, Okla., is a small town with a few thousand residents. Unemployment is high, wages are low, and there aren't too many things a kid can do except go to school, play sports or get into trouble. Cooper realized this early on and decided to excel at school and sports. A football scholar-

Instead of being schmoozed by a recruiter, Cooper went to a Fellowship of Christian Athletes meeting where he heard free pizza was offered. As Cooper ate pizza and listened to a former Oklahoma Sooners football player share his faith in Christ, he realized his need for a Savior. With a tear-streaked face he raised his hand in the high school locker room and committed his life to Jesus.

The decision forever changed Cooper, and he determined to point as many people as he could to the same life-transforming experience with Christ.

"I started carrying my Bible to school every day and speaking to youth groups," he recalls. "It was a radical turn because I had lived a wild life."

The following year he went to a college in Arkansas on a full-ride football scholarship. At the end of his freshman year he felt called to the ministry. He transferred to Oral Roberts University and then

# People's Church —

## Everyone's welcome, anyone can change

By Kirk Noonan  
in Oklahoma City

congregations. Instead, he's bent on rallying his people to reach even more of their community with Christ's message of love and redemption. Fulfilling that mission, he says without hesitation or a hint of boasting, is simply what the church does.

"From Day 1 people getting saved each Sunday has been a part of our DNA," he says.

two years of moving in, the congregation swelled to nearly 2,000 worshippers.

Extra chairs were brought into the sanctuary, additional services were added to the Sunday morning lineup, and laypeople were recruited to volunteer in the parking lot, nursery and hospitality ministries to deal with the influx.

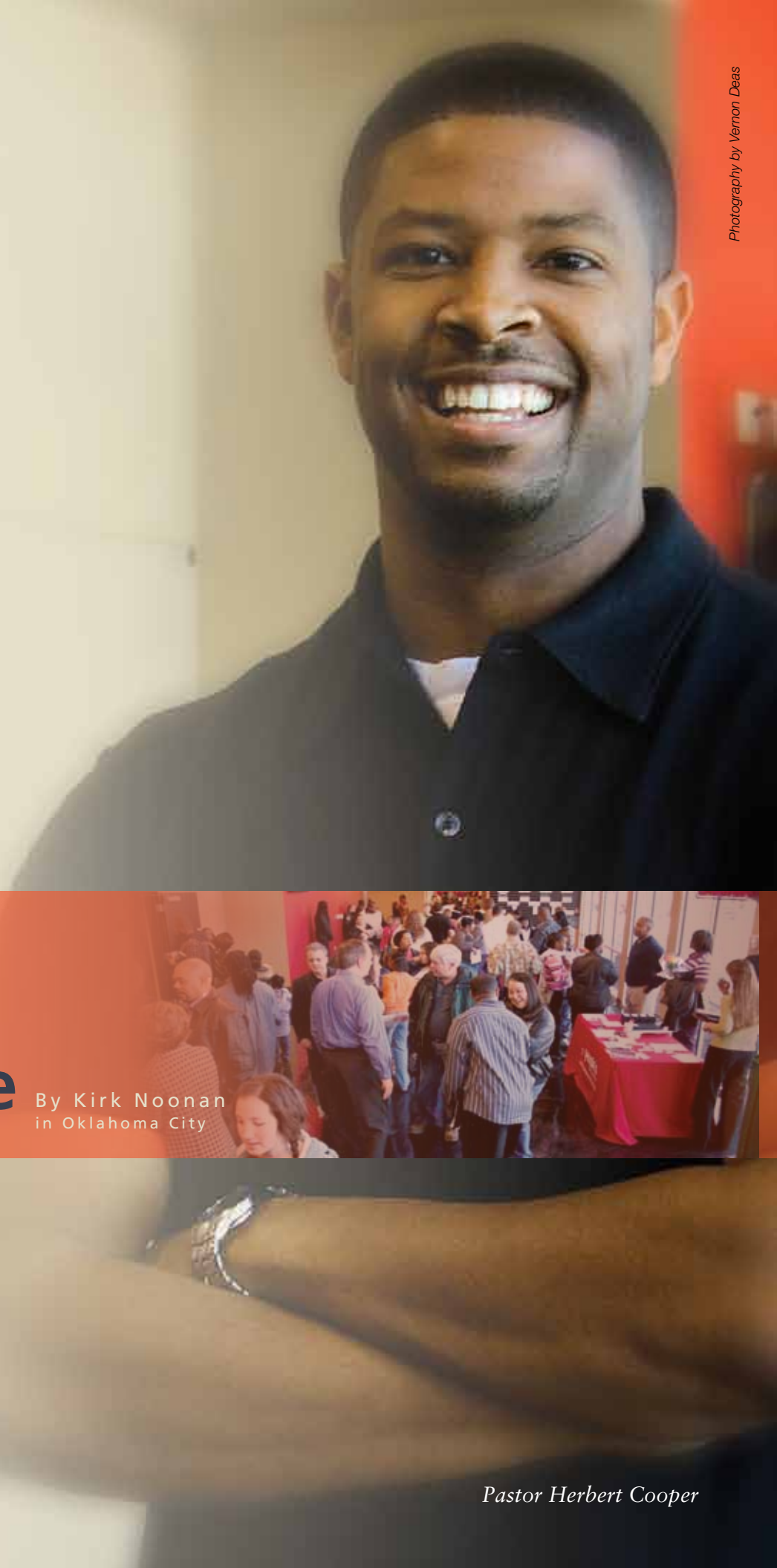
ship, he figured, was equivalent to a ticket out of town.

During his senior year in high school his prowess on the football field caught the attention of college recruiters from around the nation. A recruiter from Brown University scheduled an evening visit, but the day he was to arrive he called and postponed the meeting.

to Evangel University in Springfield, Mo., where he received another football scholarship.

Though athletic and a natural leader, Cooper preferred preaching to football. When he had free weekends or breaks from school, he traveled around the nation preaching to teenagers at churches and camps.

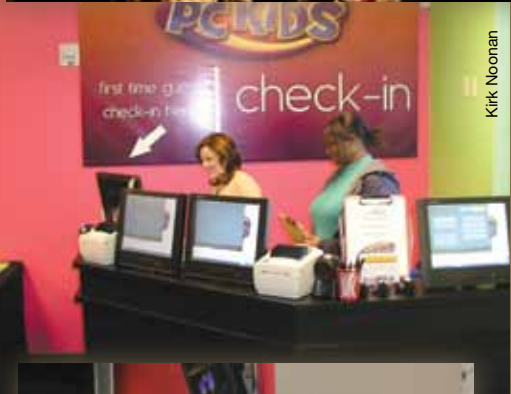
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Top to bottom: Worship, volunteers, fellowship and family are cornerstones of People's Church.



Brian Rush



Kirk Noonan



Kiama Noonan

After he graduated from Evangel in 1997, Cooper married Tiffany Rust, who also attended Evangel. Cooper continued to travel the world as an evangelist, speaking throughout the United States and in far-flung places such as Ukraine, Malawi and Uganda. But after preaching a youth revival in Tulsa, Okla., his ministry plans suddenly changed.

"I had no intentions of planting a church," he says. "But the Lord told me to plant a multicultural church. Where? I didn't know."

He and Tiffany prayed and began researching cities where they might plant a church. Minneapolis, Phoenix, St. Louis and Kansas City were all possibilities, but for reasons they couldn't pinpoint, no city felt right until a friend pointed them toward Oklahoma City.

"When we visited Oklahoma City my wife said, 'This is it!'" Cooper recalls. "Immediately, I felt the same way."

A little more than a year later People's Church held its first ser-

monial system have a 90 percent survival rate after five years. Boot camps are part of that intentional system. So is a partnership with what is known as a mother church that helps with finances, mentoring, and moral support, and sends volunteers as needed.

Because Cooper had struck out on his own, he had to raise his own finances and rely on the goodwill of friends who believed in the power of planting churches.

"Starting a new church is all about taking calculated risks for God," Cooper says. "Starting a multicultural church can be even riskier. But we wanted a church that was for everyone — rich, poor, black, white, Hispanic, Indian, Asian. That's why we named it People's Church."

### Life change

Shelby Johnson, a former alcoholic and drug addict, came to People's Church the day it opened.

"Cooper was at the door," recalls Johnson, who now serves on

the order of the day. Teams were also regularly dispatched into the community to paint and fix run-down schools and to distribute food to the impoverished.

He is not yet sure exactly what he will speak about. But if his life is any template for his sermon, he'll likely include points on dreaming big dreams for God, embracing God-given visions with reckless abandon, the value of planting churches in urban areas, and loving people unconditionally so that they come into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

After all, those things are just a part of his and his church's DNA. **tpe**

Visit Herbert Cooper's blog at [www.herbertcooper.com](http://www.herbertcooper.com), or the church's Web site at [www.peopleschurch.tv](http://www.peopleschurch.tv) for more information.

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"We were highly aggressive in our efforts, and people from the neighborhoods we visited started coming to our church," Cooper says. "Our goal was to create an environment where unchurched people felt welcome and comfortable. Then we let God change them."

Brian Rush, programming director at the church and one of its founders, concurs.

"We knew if we would invite people regardless of where they were from, what they had done, or how they looked, that God could change their lives," he says. "We've seen that happen many times over."

### Vision

In August, Cooper will speak at General Council in Orlando, Fla.

**"We wanted a church that was for everyone — rich, poor, black, white, Hispanic, Indian, Asian. That's why we named it People's Church."**

— Pastor Herbert Cooper

vice. Looking back now, Cooper wishes he had done a few things differently — like attending the Assemblies of God's boot camp for church planters before he started the church.

"The day after we launched People's Church, I went to boot camp," he laments. "I learned a lot of things there I wished I had known before starting the church. It would've made the first few months a lot easier."

Studies show that churches planted using a proven and inten-

the leadership team at the church. "I didn't know he was the pastor because he was so young. But when he cast his vision for the church, I caught it. This was a church that was all about reaching prostitutes, drug addicts and alcoholics — the kind of people who were struggling with the same things I struggled with before I became a Christian."

Run-of-the-mill unchurched people are also the focus of the church's ministries.

Chrissy Duncan grew up attend-



Vernon Deas

Herbert and Tiffany Cooper with their children.

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