

THE BUSINESS OF A CHURCH - Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - September 17, 2004 - page B02

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Summary: Celebration Tabernacle is the driving force behind new businesses in Kenton in North Portland

The intersection of North Denver Avenue and Kilpatrick Street in North Portland is a flurry of construction, with new businesses opening on almost all four corners. And at the center of it is Celebration Tabernacle.

The church is the 16-year-old brainchild of **Elbert Mondaine**, the spiritual journeyman who doubles as the mad scientist of the tabernacle's economic development ventures.

"The church is supposed to be the core of the community and responsible for at least a portion of social and economic development," says **Mondaine**. "The church needs to be a place of empowerment."

Mondaine has carried this mantra from his founding of the 200-member church in a North Lombard Street storefront to the opening and operation of the church's first business, Friday's Espresso & Deli on North Denver Avenue. Now, a new generation of church members -- many of them college-educated -- is following their pastor's advice.

Antjuan Tolbert, 23, who recently graduated from the University of Idaho with a degree in graphic design, grew up in Celebration Tabernacle, an unaffiliated Christian church that is close to the Pentecostal tradition. When he returned to Portland last year, Tolbert started a graphic design company based on the church's "campus" at Denver Avenue and Kilpatrick Street.

"You get to build from the ground up. You get to become part of the establishment," Tolbert says.

Behind 10 businesses

Celebration Tabernacle has launched or is planning to launch 10 businesses, including a dance studio, a catering company and a day care. Heaven's Archives sells antique glass on the Internet. Most of these businesses have started in the past few years by people in their 20s and 30s.

Friday's Espresso came about when a young church member proposed a detailed plan for a Celebration Tabernacle's kitchen. **Mondaine** was so impressed with her ability and drive that he suggested they open a coffee shop. "These girls were viable," **Mondaine** says. "How can we get them to use this gift inside them and get out of this economic place of nothingness?"

Ten years later, the church has moved into what was previously a no man's land of hypodermic

needles and condoms and helped put pedestrians on the street and businesses in the storefronts. For those young people who don't want to start their own businesses, employment at Friday's or another business means work experience and a reference.

"We can't pay them like Denny's, but I can train them to go out there and be competitive," **Mondaine** says.

"It's a chance to pursue our dreams," says Don Elliott, 25, who runs the graphic-design business with Tolbert and also puts together "Jam Night," a comedy and music show every Friday night at the Wave Room, also on the church's campus. "All the resources, all the support. You can find a niche."

Elliott didn't grow up in the church, but he discovered the live jazz at the Wave Room when he was 16 and became a regular there. Eventually, he joined the church as a member.

"It wasn't my comfort zone," says Elliott, who is among the white minority in the predominately African American church. "I was used to more subdued suburban white people. But the bottom line was they were actually trying to help people."

Keeps businesses separate

Mondaine says that the church tries to separate its businesses from its preaching. "We don't want people to notice we're Christians," **Mondaine** says.

Still, Doretta Schrock, chairwoman of the Kenton Neighborhood Association, says there are people in the neighborhood who aren't happy that a church owns or operates much of Kenton's key intersection. But Schrock likes that Celebration Tabernacle brings people into the area with events such as Jam Night. She calls Friday's "a great gathering place for people."

The church affords Empyrean Perspectives and other businesses a large network with which to get off the ground. Many of Tolbert's first design projects have been for other Celebration Tabernacle ventures or members.

Vanessa Gaston, president and chief executive officer of the Urban League of Portland, a civil rights and social service organization focused on the African American community, supports using this network to create jobs. The African American community in Portland, Gaston says, "doesn't have a lot of assets. We need to look at, how do we build wealth in our community?"

And the church is a natural hub for economic development, Gaston says. "Historically in the African American community, if there was one place people would go, and if you want to get a message out, it's the church," she says.

But **Mondaine** says that role is in danger.

"People have lost faith in the church because the church isn't showing them anything," he says. "If the 12 churches in the 1-1/2-mile radius of this place each started two or three businesses, we'd have it goin' on."

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