

From the Crescent to the Cross

by Natanael Estrada

The crescent moon of Islam towers over every major city in the world, transforming abandoned churches into mosques. Powerful community activists in Houston such as Cornell X and influential personalities like Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan have lent credence to the Nation of Islam and have recruited hundreds of young African-Americans.

Within the vortex of the Nation of Islam, one man has experienced its enigma and its reality, its acceptance and rejection. Bryant Lee (right), now the pastor of a UBA church, Higher Expectations, first encountered the Nation at age of 19, when in the military came vis-à-vis with the Nation's tenacious disciples. In retelling his story, Lee recalls most of all how he was drawn into the Nation by the "beauty of their disciplines" and their "strong sense of community."



Growing up in St. Louis' inner-city, Lee was exposed to the Christian Church by his parents. But through the writings and elocutions of Malcolm "X" Little, Lee began to shy away from the Christian Church that he had once attended and soon found himself a part of the Nation of Islam.



Like many young African-Americans of his day, Bryant Lee was inspired by the Nation's strong desire to make a difference. Lee was magnetized by the Nation's effectiveness in penetrating culture and aptitude in crossing religious barriers rather than the religion itself. Lee was also impressed by how the "brothers" treated their wives with love, did not curse and were "peaceful people who were always willing to sit down and reason with you."

At a time when the Church was condemning the Hip-Hop culture of the 1980's, the Nation of Islam was engaging the Hip-Hop movement and utilizing it to their advantage. Emerging Hip-Hop songs such as Public Enemy's *Fight the Power* were imbuing young African-American youth to stand up for a purpose in life.

According to Walter Martin, author of *The Kingdom of the Cults*, there is an estimated "one hundred thousand members in the United States." In Lee's words, The Nation has been "planting seeds" in the African-American community "earlier and earlier."

After several years as a disciple of the Nation, Bryant Lee encountered Frederick Smith, a young pastor, who befriended him. As their friendship grew, Lee began to notice many of the same traits in Smith that he had noted many years before in his brothers from the Nation. Pastor Smith was truly living what he was preaching. Also, even after long and exhaustive discussions on the Qur'an and the Bible, Smith never bashed Lee for his beliefs but rather loved him and embraced his friendship.

As Lee notes, "God began to break me," and through the intercession of Catherine Josey and his friendship with Pastor Smith, Lee came to encounter Christ in a powerful manner.

It was over 13 years ago that God called Lee to plant a church in the inner-city of Humble, TX. Now pastor of a dynamic and growing congregation, Higher Expectations Church is one which builds men "who take care of their families," a church that "challenges men to become something greater than themselves."

Higher Expectations, a UBA supported church, is now two years strong and has had consistent perennial growth since its inception. Lee seeks to build genuine friendships with Muslims. And like the title of his church, Lee has high expectations for his congregation, believing that God is able to do more than we think or expect.

In explicating his life and ministry, Lee also expounded on what he believes the Church can do to counter the influence of the Nation of Islam. Lee believes that what is vital in our churches is "a firm understanding of what it means to be Muslim." The Church needs to have a more profound understanding of the needs of our inner-cities in order to serve them effectively.

It is also important "for the church to move away from event oriented ministry and back to transformational ministry." Lee quotes James Meeks, a pastor in Chicago's inner-city whose church has shut down all the liquor stores in its community as an example.

When the Church takes action, it becomes a transformational vehicle not just for change but for revolution. The Church must remember that we serve the greatest revolutionary of all time – Jesus Christ.

Lee also believes that in order to counter the influence of the Nation, the Church must establish intensive after school programs and community centers that will cultivate the untapped resources in our inner-cities. In becoming an active catalyst for vocational training and community education, the Church could transform communities from the inside out.

According to Lee, one thing that the Church can learn from the Nation of Islam is the importance of engaging culture. To not see culture as a threat but as a resource; to not see Islam as a threat but as people who seek the truth that we have in Jesus Christ.

"Men want to be challenged" Lee states, "challenged to be something greater than themselves." The Church must answer this beckon call because if we don't, the world will.