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Chicago Tribune

November 11, 2005 Friday
Chicago Final Edition

SECTION: METRO ; ZONE C; Pg. 12

LENGTH: 1017 words

HEADLINE: Trumpeting a message of justice to the nation;
Magazine started by South Side church is vastly expanding its reach in its bid to engage the larger African-American community

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BODY:

Sitting in her office at the Trinity United Church of Christ, Jeri Wright took a deep breath and contemplated the task before her.

As publisher of Trumpet Newsmagazine, Wright has been charged with transforming a magazine that originated in the South Side church into a nationally distributed publication for the larger African-American community.

And as daughter of Trinity's senior pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, she also has the more difficult duty of building Trumpet into a proud legacy for her father.

"Trumpet aims to talk about social justice issues in the community and engage those that are socially conscious, whether they know Christ or not," Wright said. "But, for me personally, it is a challenge to take a giant like my father and carry out his legacy."

Though Trumpet faces tough competition against such enduring classics as Ebony and Essence, observers said there is a hunger in the black community for more faith-based magazines. Earlier this year, xii, an urban lifestyle magazine for the gospel music industry, debuted on newsstands. Precious Times, a new quarterly publication for African-American Christian women, is sold in Barnes & Noble bookstores.

Trumpet Newsmagazine held its national launch party in Chicago last week and is expected to be introduced to regional markets at separate events throughout the country next year.

"There is a real growing interest by both advertisers and consumers in faith-based magazines, because they are seen as a family-friendly alternative to contemporary magazines that embrace hip-hop culture," said Ken Smikle, president of Chicago-based Target Market News, a research firm that studies consumer behavior in the African-American community.

"We are at a place in society where people are more open about the place of faith in their lives. Readers are drawn to something that will help them celebrate their Christian values, and they find magazines like Trumpet to be very affirming of their faith, demonstrating ways that faith can play into their daily lives."

Trumpet began 23 years ago at Trinity United as a small magazine devoted solely to news about church members and ministries. In those days, it was a free folksy publication. Rev. Wright's picture usually graced the cover, and new church members could often see their names in print in a section called "Tootin' Our Own Horn."

Under Rev. Wright's leadership, Trinity United, 400 W. 95th St., embraced its African roots in every aspect of worship from interpretation of Scripture to music and ritual. The church motto proclaimed: "Unashamedly Black, unapologetically Christian." In 30 years, church membership has exploded from 87 to nearly 10,000, with more than 70 active ministries, several subsidiary corporations and an annual budget of about \$9 million.

As the church grew, its television ministry expanded into syndication, and the pastor became a more prominent figure. Rev. Wright began to see a vision for the magazine as a more sophisticated publication that would speak not just to black Christians but to the entire African-American community.

While echoing the pastor's message of faith and social justice, Trumpet now also includes information on leaders and news events in the black community as well as lifestyle features on health, food, travel, fashion and relationships.

African-American personalities on the cover have included U.S. Sen. Barack Obama, hip-hop artist Common, gospel legend Mavis Staples and African artist Samuel Akainyah. Readers can find perspectives on Hurricane Katrina, a tribute to publishing giant John Johnson, a report on church activism and the genocide in Darfur, Sudan, and a feature on actor Larenz Tate and his efforts to raise funds for sickle cell anemia.

In September, the magazine officially separated from the church and became its own entity. Trumpet is available at African-American bookstores in Chicago and 13 other major cities with large black communities. Circulation is about 5,000, and Jeri Wright said the goal is to reach 100,000 in 10 months.

"It's a lifestyle magazine for the socially conscious," she said.

In each issue of Trumpet, readers find a column written by Rev. Wright, often a blistering commentary on social injustice. Wright often writes frankly about his opposition to the war in Iraq, his disgust with Wal-Mart's treatment of workers and the widespread racism he sees throughout the nation.

Dwight Hopkins, theology professor at the University of Chicago's Divinity School, said many black Christian leaders preach about black inequality and liberation theology. But with Trumpet's leap into national distribution, Wright's message has the potential to reach people outside of the sanctuary.

"Black liberation theology is just now taking off. Several black leaders are out there preaching it. But the fact that Rev. Wright is taking his message and going on the national and international level makes this venture very unique," Hopkins said.

In his November column, for example, Wright laments what he describes as a shift in black church theology from an activist church to a prosperity-driven church.

"The Black church that led the anti-slavery movement, the Black church that was known as the

`underground church,' the Black church that had led in the Abolition Movement and the Black church that had produced Harriet Tubman was now a church that was interested in money, greed, private jets, Bentleys and `bling-bling,' ... a church that preached prosperity, money and `go along to get along!'" he wrote.

Jeri Wright said her father has been much scrutinized for the liberation theology he preaches, but she said there is a need for that message to be heard in the black community.

"There are so many of us who don't know who we are," she said. "And there are so many people who believe we should not be fighting for justice. I think there is a tendency to get lost sometimes and forget where we came from and where we need to go. Just because we can sit down at the same lunch counter, it doesn't mean we don't have a cause.

"Our hope is that this publication strikes the bell for justice."

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NOTES: RELIGION

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: Jeri Wright, publisher of Trumpet News magazine, said she hopes the publication's circulation will reach 100,000 in 10 months. Tribune photo by Zbigniew Bzdak.
PHOTO

LOAD-DATE: November 11, 2005
