

God's Business

A discussion with Tracy J. Brown and Dr. Steve Parson about black churches, investment, inner-city communities and the 'Modern Day Pharaoh System.' **INTERVIEW BY MATT STROUD**



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racy J. Brown is an author, speaker and businessman focusing on urban development through what he calls “biblical stewardship principles.” His most recent book, *A Moses for Urban America*, tells the story of his poverty-stricken upbringing and how he “rose from adversity to prosperity.” In it, Brown writes that, “Our underserved communities are plagued with poverty by the design of a social economic system that I call [the] ‘Modern Day Pharaoh System.’ In the Old Testament, the Pharaoh kept the Israelites in bondage. Today, the Modern Day Pharaoh System keeps those who lack understanding of the economic system in bondage. I believe the black church must free our people from [today’s] Pharaoh.” ¶ Through his nonprofit organization, Urban Awareness USA (UA), he hopes to encourage the revitalization of inner-city communities by educating ministries about real estate and business investments. He holds seminars and workshops on topics ranging from “A 21st Century Leadership Model for the Black Church” to “How the Black Church can Take Back Urban America.” The following is a phone conversation between Brown; Dr. Steve Parson, Brown’s partner at UA; and *Next American City*.

Next American City: Tracy, please tell us how you got started.

Tracy J. Brown: I own an affordable housing real estate company, and from that I began to work with the federal government. I did a board meeting on development in my city — Portsmouth, Va. — and throughout that process, I began to associate with housing authorities on a process that I thought was heated in the urban community. And from that, I realized something: The faith-based community has a real disconnect with the local quasi-government — the housing authority — and with community developers. So I developed UA about four years ago. Our goal was to bridge a gap between faith-based communities so that they can communicate to the government the needs of the community.

NAC: What do you mean by “quasi-government”?

TJB: “Quasi” means housing authority. They work in conjunction with the government, but it’s not really the government — it’s like a layer between the government. When you get a Hope VI grant [federal program via the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which allocates funds to rebuild troubled public housing projects into mixed-income developments — *Ed.*], the city signs it, but the housing authority administers it. The challenge, then, is that the housing authority needs to communicate with the urban community about how that money should be allo-

cated. But the gatekeepers of the community are the African-American church, and the housing authority often has a challenge connecting to that community. So my goal with UA is to bring all the parties together. If we unify, I feel the African-American church can take back the inner city and rebuild it. Dr. Parson is a partner we’ve been working with, and he’s been unifying similar groups on similar projects for many years. Specifically, he’s done a wonderful job with Richmond, Va.’s inner city.

Dr. Steve Parson: As a minister, the focus is to bring people into the saving arms of the Lord; the most important thing is a person’s spiritual and eternal life. But we have to live before we get to heaven. Over the years, I saw that people in the church were benefiting spiritually, but the church *community* was falling apart, dilapidating around us. So, in 1987, I formed a community development corporation — the Richmond Christian Center — and that’s where we began the process of community redevelopment through the church.

I’ve always said that the church is the most solid, stable, influential institution in the black community, and everything can come from the church. My first solution to rebuilding Richmond’s inner city was to purchase and occupy land, and then build — not only housing, but also income-producing property.

NAC: Let’s step back. Can you explain the Modern Day Pharaoh System?

TJB: In inner-city communities, there’s a general lack of knowledge about the economic and financial systems that make up our governmental institutions. This lack of knowledge keeps people in bondage. And oftentimes, people in the inner city resort to collecting welfare checks. Welfare is a handout; it’s not helping the community grow. And I can say this from experience.

I was raised on welfare. It’s a system designed to keep people down — to keep people in bondage. On welfare, the mentality is: If you work hard and make too much, you lose your support. And you get accustomed to that. You step back and say, “I’m not going to work,” or you lie, or you cheat the system for food stamps, or whatever the system will give you. It creates a lazy, lackadaisical attitude. “I can live comfortably in this project. I can get enough money to feed my family every month. And I can do what I want with the rest of my money.” It doesn’t empower you.

But when you’re partnering with the federal government side by side — that’s empowering. It’s participation. And if the government makes property and money available, the church can take advantage of it. And the purchase of property gives the city tax dollars. It’s win-win. But to make that happen, the government must communicate this to the urban community. But they can’t communicate it to the urban community without the church. If a pastor — any

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pastor of an urban church — says, “Let’s take this movement to the next level; let’s empower ourselves by owning land; let’s run our own area here” — then they will build better communities. But until that happens, the church will go nowhere. Because if the pastor says, “I don’t trust the state — it’s a struggle between church and state,” which they often say, and “It’s a Republican thing or a Democratic thing, and don’t get involved with it,” well, that’s why a lot of urban churches are dying. Because they follow the lie.

NAC: So how does this work? Do individuals within the church — pastors, say — rent the properties? Or does the church invest donated funds?

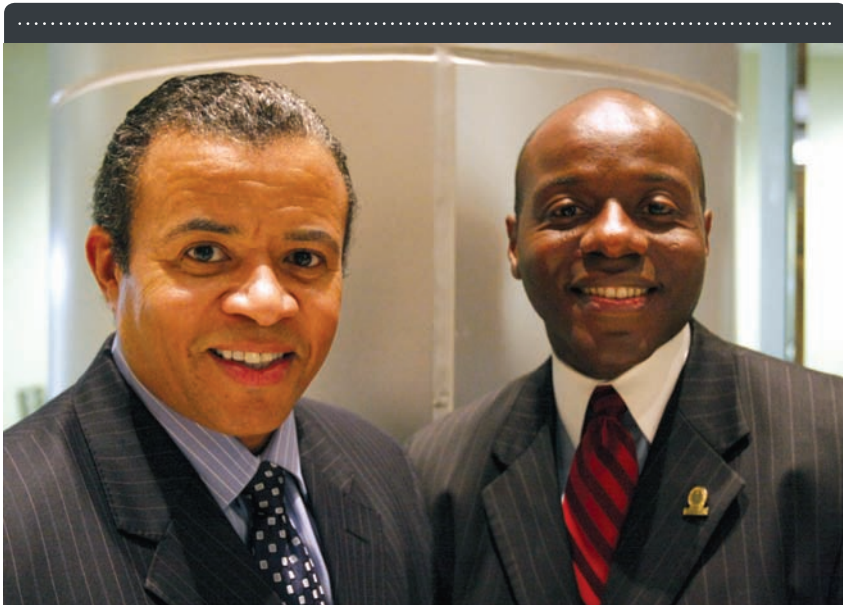
TJB: The church has to position itself to practically, legally invest in the community. One way is for church leaders to form their own community-development program — to work through a nonprofit. But leaders are all from the church. So it’s legally separate, but you’re using profits to support the church and its community programs. Our main goal is to provide services to meet the needs of the people.

ple leave the church, and then the church is dependent on less. Now, certainly our trust is in the Lord, but he loses people. So what I began to see is this: The church shouldn’t be totally dependent on just what people give; don’t depend totally on a job. God forbid if something happens to your job, then what? So you need to realize that we need to look into starting businesses; we need to look into creating business; we need to look into investing our money and then let the business be cash and income that’s going to come in and support us. And we’re not going to be dependent on a job any more. Well, the church shouldn’t be dependent on giving. So what we did is, we purchased some land, and we purchased a shopping plaza so that what we can do is put ourselves in a position where we can have some income-producing property.

NAC: And who bails the church out if you’ve invested a large sum into a shopping center and no businesses follow through and all of a sudden you have a worthless piece of land?

TJB: It’s an investment, you know? People make bad investments. But that’s where you have to use diligence and do research, and you have to do what’s necessary to eliminate the possibility. ❧

For more information on Urban Awareness USA, please visit urbanawarenessusa.org. Please send any follow-up thoughts or questions to letters@americancity.org.



Playing the game Steve Parsons (L) and Tracy Brown

NAC: The lie being that they shouldn’t vote and shouldn’t participate in a system that doesn’t care for them?

TJB: Absolutely.

NAC: Play the game, is what you’re suggesting.

TJB: Absolutely. If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. Understand the process. Don’t sell yourself out, but be a part of these dollars. Catholic charities have been receiving funds — through grants, to do philanthropic services — but the average black church has been doing everything alone, through tithes and offerings by congregations. Maybe this once worked. But today, I hate to say it: People are less spiritual, and they’re giving less and less.

NAC: You’re saying to focus on business interests, and, more specifically, on housing investment?

TJB: Why not? Most of the rundown urban communities are full of renters. The church should be involved.

DSP: Folks stereotype that the church is not supposed to do anything with the community; folks assume the focus of the church is only spiritual. Well, I don’t agree with that. I think that God is concerned with our whole being, spirit, soul and body, which includes the neighborhoods we live in, the cities we live in. We teach our members about life — how to deal with aggression, with relationships; how to deal with the problems and circumstances of existence. It can be the key to everything.

NAC: What sorts of communities have you helped to build up?

DSP: One example is that my church, in Richmond— we purchased a commercial property through tithes and offerings. A tithe is from people who are committed to the Lord — they take a tenth of their income, and that’s how the church is supported. But the thing about that is, it can change any moment. If people stop giving, or people don’t want to give, peo-

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