

CITE LINES

BUILT BY
IN SOUTHWEST HOUSTON,
THE REVEREND KIRBYJON
CALDWELL PREACHES THE
GOSPEL OF HOUSING

Faith

BY BILL MINTZ

Outwardly, Corinthian Pointe will be like many of Houston's new production home neighborhoods: 440 brick-accented houses sitting on small lots landscaped with young trees and seasonal plantings, a place where young families can go to fulfill their dreams of suburban tranquillity.

But inwardly, Corinthian Pointe will be different. It will be a product not just of bricks, but of belief, one of a growing number of examples in Houston of how the idea of good works is moving from the pulpit to the street. What sets this particular subdivision apart is the vision of its driving force, the Reverend Kirbyjon Caldwell, pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church. It was Caldwell who marshaled the enthusiasm and capital of his congregation to create the Pyramid Community Development Corporation. And it was Caldwell, a business school graduate, who allied Pyramid's resources with those of Ryland Homes and Chase Bank of Texas to create a neighborhood setting that has been out of reach for most families with low to moderate incomes.

The result promises to be something unique and, if it works, perhaps a model for other area religious institutions to follow. Although Houston now has about 30 community development corporations seeking to rebuild distressed neighborhoods, Pyramid is the first to use the tools of revitalization to build an entirely new neighborhood from scratch. "Kirbyjon is a faith-based community developer," says Richard Celli, senior vice-president and manager of community lending at Chase, on whose board Caldwell sits. "He is using the strength and infrastructure that the church provides and correlating that into real estate."

For decades, African-American pastors such as the Reverend William Lawson of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church in the Third Ward have led efforts to revive their communities by stepping in when government agencies or private sources of capital would not. But Caldwell represents a new twist on this old idea. He is one of a emerging generation of entrepreneurial African-American pastors who are taking advantage of a newly found focus on community development among politicians and the banking industry by combining that energy with the energy of their congregations. Nationally, the best known exemplar of this is New York's Reverend Floyd Flake, whose church in Jamaica, Queens, is referred to as a non-profit corporation about as frequently as it's referred to as a religious institution. In Dallas, the Reverend Zan Holmes has made a name for himself by mixing business with the gospel. And in Houston, the Reverend Harvey Clemons Jr., pastor of Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, established one of the city's first community development corporations in the Fifth Ward, a corporation that developed Pleasant Hill Village, an independent living facility for the elderly. Similarly, the Reverend James W.E. Dixon II, pastor of Houston's Northwest Community Baptist Church, established Visions of Hope Center, a 100-bed drug-and-alcohol treatment facility for women.

But Caldwell's Corinthian Pointe, construction on which was expected to begin this September, takes those ideas a step further. The subdivision, planned for a location on West Orem, just west of South Post Oak, is located in a part of Houston that was left behind by the city's economic revival. The last development

here was built before the 1980s oil bust. Many area homeowners lost their homes to foreclosure, and the remaining houses became rental properties.

Corinthian Pointe is designed to reverse that trend. Its houses, to be constructed by Ryland, one of the nation's largest home builders, will be priced so that they're within the reach of young families. One third of the houses built in the first phase will be priced so that families earning 80 percent of the median income — about \$40,000 per year — can afford them. Despite the low cost, Caldwell's models for his community-to-be are Cinco Ranch and Kingwood, Houston's larger master-planned communities. "We want to defy the stereotypical conception of low- to moderate-income housing," he says.

Caldwell borrows his definition of an entrepreneur from the neoclassical economist Joseph Alois Schumpeter: "The initial purpose of entrepreneurs was to attract intellectual capital; it had to do with galvanizing intellectual capital in order to address a certain need in the community," Caldwell says. "I am not a real estate developer, but from that standpoint, I am a 21st-century entrepreneur."

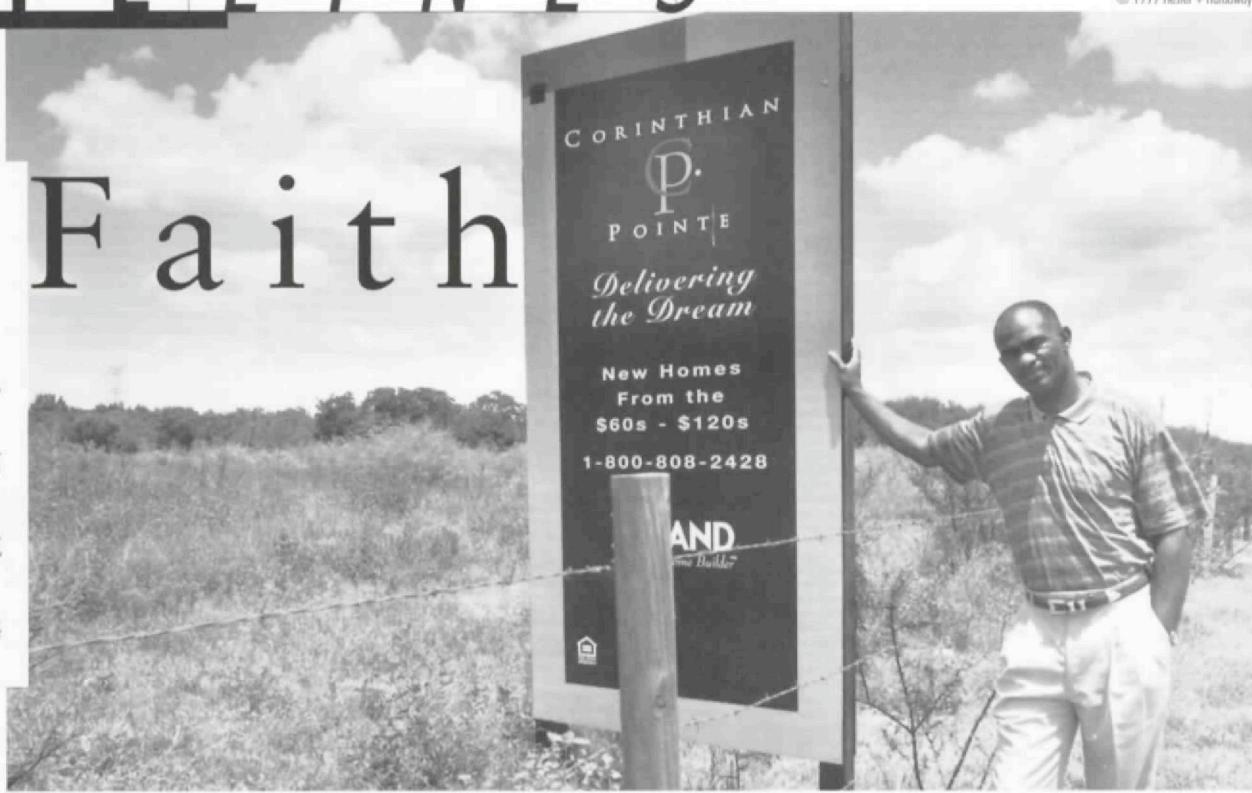
After his youth in northeast Houston, Caldwell entered the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. He graduated in May 1977, then a year and a half later gave up a promising career in finance to become a minister. He was assigned to Windsor Village, a congregation with only 25 members and its ongoing existence in doubt. Now, the church has more than 10,000 members. And through its Pyramid Community Development Corporation, Windsor Village has launched a thriving private Christian school, Imani School, and transformed an abandoned K-Mart into

what's known as the Power Center, a home for Imani School, a branch of Chase Bank, a clinic, a pharmacy, a Houston Community College branch, social services, and 7,000 square feet of leased office space.

To create the Power Center, Caldwell took a building donated by Fiesta Mart Inc. and then leveraged Windsor Village's resources with donated funds, bonds, and federal grants to complete a \$4.3 million renovation. The seed money for Corinthian Pointe, in contrast, came from heavyweight boxing champion Evander Holyfield, who pledged \$1.2 million for a prayer center that will be part of the development. Caldwell then leveraged that pledge to finance the rest of the development.

From the city he received approval for a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone, which means the taxes from increased property values will stay in the 234-acre subdivision to help pay for underground utilities and amenities such as landscaping. Because of the TIRZ financing, Ryland will be able to build homes that will have features — more bricks and steeper roofs on the outside and larger bathrooms on the inside — usually found in homes that cost \$15,000 more than the homes in Corinthian Pointe.

One of the things that has helped to advance the number and size of faith-based community development is the Clinton administration's strengthening of the Community Reinvestment Act, which requires financial institutions to make more loans in traditionally underserved areas. As a result, Chase and other banks must seek out partners in communities that are often short on seasoned entrepreneurs. Frequently, the strongest institutions in economically neglected neighbor-



The Reverend Kirbyjon Caldwell has plans for this stretch of land in Southwest Houston, plans that he hopes will create community where none now exists.

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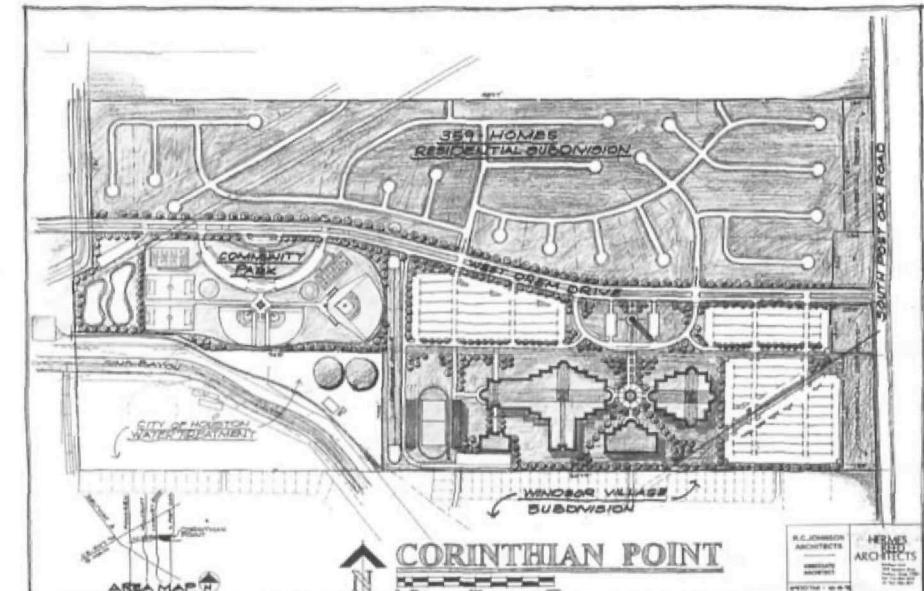


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The plans for Corinthian Pointe draw on ideas from more expensive developments such as Kingwood and Cinco Ranch.



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hoods are the churches, and the pastors are the strongest leaders.

Inevitably, though, mixing church and state raises certain questions about where the line of separation between the two is to be drawn. Caldwell insists that his and Windsor Village's role in the development does not mean that Corinthian Pointe will be a church encampment. By philosophy and design, Caldwell says, the subdivision will not be a place where life is ruled by his church; the houses will be sold to buyers regardless of their religious beliefs. "This isn't Jonestown," he says. "It isn't some clandestinely controlled housing development where preachers and deacons are moving around pulling strings."

Still, about half of the 1,500 people who have expressed interest in living at Corinthian Pointe are members of Caldwell's congregation. And Caldwell, a tall man who modulates his answers in conversation much like he delivers a sermon to his congregation on Sundays, is not shy about remarking that "my vision for communities is to create an environment where children can become what God is calling them to be. I don't think children should have to say no to a drug dealer; they should not have to walk on broken sidewalks or no sidewalks at all to get to school."

The hope, however, is that families will be attracted to Corinthian Pointe by quality of life issues that cross religious divides. "Houston does not have a lot of communities where you can buy a

house for \$72,000 and the streetscaping and the landscaping are nice and where the deed restrictions are strictly enforced," Caldwell says. "This will be that kind of place."

On the south side of West Orem, and reachable via a pedestrian walkway, will be a community park with athletic fields, the Holyfield-funded prayer center, a community center, catfish ponds, and facilities that offer a continuum of care for elderly residents.

Caldwell's description of Corinthian Pointe — a place where the residents of elderly housing will help care for the children of younger families — sounds much like the extended family that helped raise him in Kashmere Gardens in the 1950s and 1960s, something he described in his recent spiritual self-help book, *The Gospel of Good Success*.

But while he wants to recreate the good of that era, Caldwell hopes to avoid the bad, eliminating the burglaries that plagued his father's tailor shop, the drugs, the prostitution — the presence of Satan. Or, as he notes when talking about the commercial enterprises he hopes to attract to the land surrounding Corinthian Pointe, "Obviously, there are some tenants we won't pay any attention to. We got a call from a liquor store; that's out — we won't do that." It's just not the sort of thing you do, Caldwell realizes, when you're trying to develop in good faith. ■

Cite Receives NEA Grant

The National Endowment for the Arts has awarded *Cite* a grant of \$30,000 to help fund four issues to be published this year and next. The grant, the fifth from the NEA to be given *Cite* since 1991, is in part recognition of the magazine's importance as a source of information on Houston's architecture and urban planning. The NEA funds will help *Cite* continue its critical examination of

Houston's current growth, as well as chronicle important aspects of the city's architectural heritage.

Cite maintains a base circulation of 5,000. It is distributed to subscribers, Rice Design Alliance members, schools of architecture, selected libraries through the country, and nationally to some 100 bookstores and outlets. ■