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MEGACHURCH PASTOR JAMES GAILLIARD
PUTS FAITH IN AN ECONOMIC REVIVAL
FOR EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA.

Tabernacle *Tale*

BUILDING A MEGACHURCH IS JUST PART OF THE
INFLUENCE WIELDED BY A STATE LAWMAKER
SEEKING TO REVITALIZE ROCKY MOUNT.

BY EDWARD MARTIN

PHOTOS BY CHRISTER BERG



As if borrowed from an eastern North Carolina sunrise, pastel bonnets and Sunday suits brighten the Rocky Mount sanctuary on Easter Day. In the pulpit, James Gailliard is flanked by white lilies and two purple-draped crosses. Easter's message, says the trim pastor, wagging a slender forefinger for emphasis, is God's promise of "victory over death and the grave."

Congregants murmur *amens*.

Gailliard had preached about death on another spring Sunday several years before. His son, Kyol, and two other young men, all in their 20s, had died after their car slammed into a brick wall and exploded.

At the morgue, "they told me not to look at him, that I'd never get the image out of my mind," he says. "I unzipped the bag, and there was his charred body, but they couldn't have been more wrong." Today, the image he cherishes is of Kyol as his sound engineer, sitting at a nearby console every Sunday as he preached, sending his voice through the church.

"I said, 'God, when you sent me to Rocky Mount, this wasn't part of the deal,'" he says. "But as a pastor, it was important for me to share my grief, to show people what it's like to go through seasons in your life when you're questioning God."

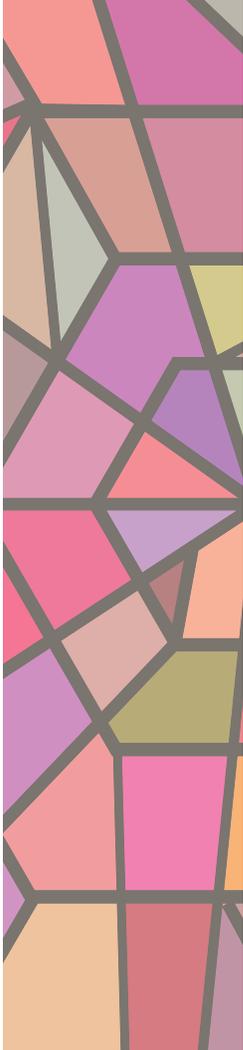
It has been 14 years since James David Gailliard sat down in borrowed space in Rocky Mount with a dozen others and founded Word Tabernacle Church. Collection plates yielded \$75,000 in 2005. Since then, he and the church have weathered personal tragedies, recession, hostile politics and other headwinds. Today, Word Tabernacle has 3,200 members, 33 employees, donations that exceed \$3 million annually and assets of \$14 million.



Thrive



James Gailliard's church emphasizes four themes: investing in people; improving the community; influencing the region; impacting the world.



Meanwhile, its senior pastor's influence has expanded outside the sanctuary into Rocky Mount's power structure and the N.C. General Assembly, where Gailliard was elected as a freshman representative last year. Word Tabernacle overlays the spiritual with daily-bread necessities of members and others — finding jobs, training, growing businesses, health care and, at times, paying overdue heating bills. Its Impact Center has mounted initiatives such as helping fill jobs at Rocky Mount-based Barnhill Contracting Co., one of the state's largest contractors with 1,100 workers. "They profile the kinds of employees they're looking for in certain positions and we, in turn, can help produce that employee through our own internal workforce-development initiatives," Gailliard says.

The preacher was among those who persuaded state leaders to move the 400-employee Division of Motor Vehicles headquarters from Raleigh to Rocky Mount, a major economic boost. Gailliard met with each of the 10 Council of State members who voted on the move. It's what you might expect from the man who received a distinguished citizen award from the Rocky Mount Chamber of Commerce in 2016.

"He's at ease with the power brokers but also the guys at the end of a shovel," says Norris Tolson, a former secretary of the N.C. departments of Commerce and Transportation who heads Carolinas Gateway Partnership, the industry recruiter for Nash and Edgecombe counties.

Word Tabernacle operates from an 114,000-square-foot former Home Depot store in north Rocky Mount, not far from the intersection of U.S. 64 and 301. Since acquiring the site in 2015, it has spent \$13 million to create a multipurpose institution. Beyond the sanctuary, it includes classrooms, gyms, and community meeting and performance spaces. Gailliard's no-nonsense outlook permeates.

"He's knowledgeable and open even about some

getting enough support to make payroll. They connected me with a lot of people who helped."

Gailliard, 54, was born to a Caucasian mother and African American father when interracial marriages were illegal in North Carolina and his home state of Pennsylvania. His wife's reluctance to move with their two daughters from Philadelphia to Rocky Mount led to divorce a few years after Word Tabernacle's 2005 founding and, subsequently, Gailliard's scolding by the Southern Baptist Convention. The denomination had previously invited him to speak about church growth at various events.

Gailliard has never been shy about revealing youthful indiscretions such as fathering Kyol at a college-weekend party for his girlfriend's 21st birthday when he was the same age. "He was a product of my irresponsibility," he says.

His past hasn't deterred members, who flock in from 10 Tar Heel counties and six others in nearby Virginia. George and Carol Green, both in their 70s, make a couple of 60-mile round trips weekly to attend services, study the Bible, teach Sunday school and take part in other activities. "It's not just all about the church," says George, a retired police officer. "It's about helping people."

In an interview, as at the pulpit, Gailliard is animated; a hyperactive CEO; a God-fearing, Bible-quoting preacher; and a community organizer. He belongs to the church's motorcycle club, riding a Harley-Davidson Road Glide. And, he's a survivor of a political campaign that saw him overcome mud-slinging to win an N.C. House seat, defeating retired Methodist minister John Check. The seat had been held for the previous eight years by Republican Jeff Collins, who moved out of the district.

The N.C. Republican Party sponsored unsubstantiated television ads accusing the Democrat pastor of paying a token \$500 for the 9,000-square-foot home in which he now lives, implying it was a sweetheart deal. Gailliard says the home needed substantial repair and was part of a distressed three-building package deal on 66 acres for which the church paid \$1.4 million. Before plans changed, Word Tabernacle intended to renovate the home as part of a headquarters complex. Tax records show Gailliard paid the church \$400,000, the appraised value, after vetting from lawyers and outside CPAs.

Gailliard's forthright melding of the religious and secular is unconventional, says David Farris, a former car dealer who became the Rocky Mount Chamber president in 2017. "He's disciplined himself, and he requires that of you," Farris says, citing Gailliard's weekly Bible study. "It starts at noon, and at the stroke of noon, the doors are closed," he says. "If you're not there, you can watch on televi-

"I'M EXCITED THAT PEOPLE ARE GOING TO HEAVEN, BUT I DON'T THINK GOD WANTS THEM STUCK IN HELL UNTIL THEY GET THERE."

— James Gailliard

of the mistakes he's made in life himself," says Solomon Maryland, a Rocky Mount heating and air-conditioning contractor and a regular church attendee since 2007. His 5-year-old business has 15 employees, and he recently hired more, aided by the Impact Center. "I had to get over the fear of not



sion monitors next door. That's just who he is. He talks it, and he walks it."

Gailliard says churches fail because of sloppy management, and he sees himself merely as pragmatic. "I'm excited that people are going to heaven, but I don't think God wants them stuck in hell until they get there," he says. "You see mammoth churches operating one or two days a week. That's a business model that works in no other industry. Nobody else can get away with having a \$3 million or \$4 million building open one day a week."

In choosing Rocky Mount to plant his new church, Gailliard landed in an antebellum town of about 54,000 that has shrunk by an estimated 4,000 people since 2000. For generations, the city had thriving textile, tobacco and banking sectors, supplemented by the headquarters of the Hardee's Food Systems Inc. restaurant chain and food supplier MBM Corp. Much of that commerce faded in the late 20th century, leaving scars symbolized by many downtown buildings that are now empty or boarded up.

"We took some body blows," says Farris, whose family sold cars in Rocky Mount from 1946 to 2012. "Just as it seemed things had bottomed out, we had the Great Recession in 2008."

Rocky Mount, on Interstate 95, the Florida-to-New York artery that naturally facilitates some illegal drug and human trafficking, recorded a higher per-capita murder rate than New York City in 2012. Gailliard has felt the violence personally.

Sitting in his church office in 2014, he heard gunfire. Sprinting outside, he cradled a bleeding 12-year-old boy who had been shot in the head until emergency crews arrived. The boy and three others injured survived. "Poverty, lack of hope, lack of jobs and poor education lead to the pipeline of violence," he says. "Those are things that a church can be part of."

James Gailliard says he reports to a nine-member board, though Word Tabernacle remains heavily dependent on its pastor, as is true at many nondenominational mega-churches. He's helping train a couple of younger pastors but says he's excited about the opportunity to keep building the institution that he's led since 2005.

Gailliard grew up in gritty north Philadelphia in a rowhouse neighborhood, playing stick ball with kids who often graduated to jail rather than college.

Gailliard was accepted to a school for gifted kids in the white, heavily Irish Kensington neighborhood, itself a fading textile center. "There were race riots," he says. "We'd get off public transportation and people would spit at us and throw stuff at us, and we'd have to run to make it into the school."

Remaining aloof from street gangs, the lanky teen attended Philadelphia's prestigious Central High School. Gradually, he became enmeshed in Gethsemane United Methodist Church, which had about 50 members and has since merged with another congregation.

"I started hanging around, painting the church and stuff like that," he says. "We started talking religion." The pastor arranged for Gailliard to attend laity training, and at 16, he preached his first sermon. "I fell in love with the church and the work of the church before I really knew God."

Gailliard graduated from Central High at age 17 with a scholarship to Boston College but never got there. "I was at a subway stop, trying to impress a girl," he says. "A police officer told me to move on, and I refused. I was arrested for disorderly conduct, assaulting an officer and resisting arrest. That was my first insight into how the system isn't always fair — I never raised a hand or touched the officer — but it caused me to lose my scholarship."

Suddenly grappling with his future, Gailliard was volunteering at a civil-rights banquet when a man in a wheelchair handed him a signed note, suggest-



Gailliard's church holds some fundamentalist beliefs, including the Bible's inerrancy, typically associated with conservatives. But in June, he voted to sustain Gov. Roy Cooper's veto of a Republican-sponsored bill to protect babies that survive a botched abortion. Critics noted that he'd previously supported the bill. Gailliard says he changed his mind after concluding existing law protects all babies.

ing he attend Atlanta's historically black Morehouse College. Once there, Gailliard recognized the man's name on a building: Benjamin Mays, who led the college for 27 years and was a prominent civil-rights leader in the 1950s and 1960s.

Morehouse's required daily chapel and religious underpinnings left their marks on Gailliard, who majored in biology. He later earned online degrees from Moody Bible Institute and Trinity College of the Bible and Theological Seminary. "Education was focused on making a difference, not a dollar," he says. "I began believing I could make a difference."

He toyed with becoming a missionary doctor — his idol was Albert Schweitzer — but after graduation in 1985, he drifted into corporate jobs. He married in 1999 and by his late 20s he was an assistant vice president at insurer Independence Blue Cross, working in a 22nd-floor office overlooking Philadel-

phia's Schuylkill River, making a six-figure income. "I was miserable," he says. "I felt God wanted me to plant a church."

He trained at a Southern Baptist-affiliated program near Atlanta, and in April 2000, returned to Philadelphia to start his first church, earning \$18,000 in his first year. It grew to 80, then 800 members within four years, and he was named Church Planter of the Year by the North American Mission Board and honored by a Billy Graham-affiliated group. On a mission trip to South Africa, he met a pastor who was attempting to start a multicultural church in Rocky Mount.



he city has a rich history. It was the birthplace of famous jazz pianist Thelonius Monk. It was the center of Operation Dixie in the late 1940s, when black tobacco warehouse workers unionized and began pushing for desegregation. Martin Luther King Jr. first used his famous "I have a dream" theme in a speech at Rocky Mount's Booker T. Washington High School in 1962.

Word Tabernacle's success has sparked grumbling among small black churches that accuse it of proselytizing members. Rocky Mount is 62% African American. Gailliard says the growth has come primarily from the 2,500 baptisms of formerly unchurched members in the last 14 years.

The church's efforts to encourage entrepreneurs are sometimes met with racial taboos. Some black people remain conditioned to automatically consider white businesses superior, Maryland says. "Honestly, about 90% of my customers are white," he says. "I've got the best products in town and the best service, but I'll call a person of color and quote a job for \$5,500. The going rate might be \$7,000, but they'll still call my competitor."

Gailliard's biracial parentage might have primed him for such contradictions. His late father, Wesley,

was a railroad worker, and mill-worker mother Ruth, now 86 and living with him in Rocky Mount, is an Irish woman with flame-red hair.

“Interracial marriage was not popular [in 1960],” Gailliard says, including among conservative black people. “We were limited, to a certain extent, where our parents could take us. That’s when I began to realize the power of laws, regulations, legislation, to relate to people’s lives.” Wesley was a functioning alcoholic and an avid reader, Gailliard says, occasionally abusive to him and his mother, though insistent his son go to college. Neither he nor Ruth had done so. “He’d say, ‘Education is a type of salvation,’” he says. “It won’t get you into heaven, but it can sure make getting around earth a lot easier.”

During his visit in mid-2004, Gailliard says he immediately fell in love with eastern North Carolina. His new church had a simple premise of teaching scripture and doing social ministry. “Our emphasis began with utility assistance, prescription drug assistance, mental health referrals, dropout prevention, things like that.”

By 2011, the church had more than 2,200 members and five Sunday services. Meanwhile, Rocky Mount’s struggles prompted The Home Depot to close its local store that same year. Having read Oberlin College professor Julia Christensen’s *Big Box Reuse*, which studied new uses of abandoned Walmart and Kmart stores, Gailliard realized the well-situated property could work for his church. Word Tabernacle started negotiating with the Atlanta-based home-improvement retail giant.

It wasn’t a deal made in heaven. After initially agreeing on a \$1.4 million sale, Home Depot raised the price to \$2 million. “At the time, we had probably \$1.5 million in cash on hand,” Gailliard says. Offerings were about \$50,000 a week, but when the church attempted to borrow \$2 million for the building, doors slammed.

“We had audited financials, we were over-collateralized and had a clear path financially, but not a single bank would consider us,” Gailliard says. “We were repeatedly told, ‘We don’t fund churches,’ though in my opinion, they were mostly uncomfortable that we were African American.” But Durham-based Mechanics & Farmers Bank, which was formed in 1907 to support African Americans, made the loan.

Now, the church has 50,000 square feet of educational space, 18 classrooms, a fitness center, gym, library, day care facility and outreach center. A culinary arts and hospitality training area and a broadcast and media center should be finished by late 2020. “It’s a sustainable model,” he says. “Three or four years from now, we expect to have 75 people on staff and to make this a shared-use facility that other nonprofits can use to attract trade shows and other events.”

Other construction projects totaling more than \$1 billion are raising regional hopes. A few blocks from the Impact Center, the DMV is scheduled to move into the former Hardee’s complex by next October. Railroad giant CSX Corp. is opening a \$160 million intermodal hub that Tolson calls “a game-changer for all of eastern North Carolina.” Chinese-owned Triangle Tire USA is building a \$580 million plant that will employ 800. New York-based Corning Inc. will open an \$86 million, 111-employee warehouse at year-end.

Other projects include a 270-employee call center that Raleigh-based Millennia Inc. opened this year in a former Devil Dog Manufacturing Co. textile plant in Spring Hope. On the Tar River, Rocky Mount Mills, a 300,000-square-foot, 19th-century cotton mill, has been converted into a thriving retail, office and residential space by Raleigh’s Capitol Broadcasting Co.

Tolson credits Gailliard’s influence in many of the projects. “I have no reservations about putting him in front of clients. He can handle discussions with people on their level, and that’s what economic development is all about — building a bridge between you and your clients.”

Gailliard says he would have been content with a church of 50 “if that had been my lot.” Like many megachurches, Word Tabernacle’s succession plan is unclear; Gailliard has a couple of associate ministers, but no clear No. 2. He reports to a nine-member board. His main political goal is to establish a statewide office of faith-based initiatives. “The one asset we have in all 100 counties is churches. Our model here in eastern North Carolina proves it can be done.”

Using religion to justify a progressive agenda is a rare approach among evangelicals, says Jarrod Kelly, a political science professor at North Carolina Wesleyan College in Rocky Mount. “He’s one of the new crop of Democrats using a faith-forward approach to connect to voters. Republicans have been dominating that segment for the last 30 years.”

On a Sunday morning in early June, Gailliard, in a white robe, along with elders of the church, surround a baptismal font. A girl in a white gown, perhaps 10, with a bow in her hair, holds her nose as she’s gently submerged. She comes up smiling. Older men and women cross their arms in front of their chests and are immersed. There are hand-clapping expressions of joy.

Projected on the blank wall behind them is the word “Thrive,” partly a capsule of the church’s dual role as economic and spiritual developer and partly an explanation for its rise to megachurch status.

“If you accept the people no one else wants,” Gailliard says, “God will begin sending you the people everyone else wants.” ■

