

# — Spirituality —

## An unconditional ministry: Arnold's greatest desire

By Pat Stansberry  
Times Staff

Novella Smith Arnold's trail blazing ministry is one that is second to none. As executive Director of the Criminal Justice Ministry, she has learned to say yes "unconditionally to God's will for her life — especially as it relates to the downtrodden who she sees as "God's special people."

While interviewing her it was very easy to see that she is a woman of tremendous concern with a wealth of knowledge. She activates it not only in words, but also in the deeds she does on a daily basis. A woman of many talents — Novella finds herself often opening the doors not only of her office, but also the doors of her home to listen and offer counseling to those in need — with hope in her heart that something she has said or done for the individuals will help turn their lives around. "Listening to others must be a gift from heaven bestowed upon me," says Novella. In order to help people in need (across the board) we (ministers) must learn to listen. People do not always want to be "preached" at. Usually they know better what they have done wrong — than anyone else.

When one ministers — in whatever area of life — it is important that it is done in an unconditional way. People deserve second chances. A second chance is not always probation — just as it isn't always giving a pan handler a dollar every time our paths cross. "I learned this early on," she says. "I can remember during my early days as chaplain, I would find

myself crying with the prisoners and for their families — especially if the case involved a juvenile. I told God — hey, wait a minute — this won't work. This is touching me too deeply. Perhaps (with a thoughtful look) this is why many prefer to just come and speak to inmates in services because this way you remain more detached.

Growing up, Novella wanted to be a "star." She wanted her name in lights and studied as much theater, dancing and singing as her college days would allow. Upon graduating from college, her career became fast paced and because she was exceptionally good with her stage crafting abilities, she easily landed appearances in three movies in Munich, which is the Bavarian capitol and is considered the Hollywood of Germany.

Upon falling in love, Novella married and returned to the United States. She mothered three children, of which only one lived. Doctors informed her that even this child would not live past 12 hours. She prayed and promised God that if he would just let this child live, she would do whatever he wanted her to do. The child was soon upgraded and out of the danger zone. Today she is a graduate of Princeton University and doing quite well putting God first.

In the early 60s, Novella moved to Houston seeking theater work, but discovered quickly that the doors were not open to blacks. The media also was segregated. She found herself in a catch 22 situation, because TV would not hire her because she was black and



Novella Smith Arnold (front left) leads the march during the Absalom Jones Day Celebration at the Calvary Episcopal Church.

black radio stations thought she sounded too white. However, through prayer, she eventually landed a job as a radio disc jockey and became famous in that area. Being black and in the media also put her in a leadership position in the black community.

Novella moved to Memphis where she would soon discover that the promise she had made to God years earlier would be manifested. It was in Memphis where she became extremely restless inside with the progress in the community

and decided to get involved. As fate would have it, her footsteps were led to the area of criminal justice and ministering to the needs of those convicted without compromising the laws of the land. She firmly holds that it is important that we keep the written laws as well as God's laws. Through her efforts, the Homeless Ministry was born. She is about to give birth to "Novella's Kids," a ministry for inner-city children. Many of the programs started by Novella have become so overwhelmingly large that Novella decide to become less visible in most and focus in on one, the prison ministry. It was in zeroing in on the prison ministry that she soon learned of all the do's and don'ts, of all the rules and red tape that many ministers were putting on those in the criminal justice center, who were already at rock bottom. She began to create a new form of ministering to the spiritual and total needs of those incarcerated. She also discovered that many ministers were doing more harm than good in many areas by attempting to implement criteria and rules that an inmate must meet, before being assisted by the church. "I realize every organization needs guidelines with which it must operate by. However, some of those rules were just ridiculous and would cause the esteem of some to be lowered even more.

With an abrupt change in her voice, Novella emphatically states, "I want to talk about the black churches. Many of them are too busy talking about what we can't do,

that they aren't doing what we can do, especially. As it relates to people living with AIDS. I can't get over the misconceptions, that many ministers have when it comes to educating their members on the subject of AIDS and safe sex. The first thing I hear is, "We don't want to condone homosexuality, or appear to be promoting safe sex," and that is not what understanding people living with AIDS is all about. AIDS epidemic and we need to get the attention of all people and explain God's unconditional love because many of our people are dying without knowing the Lord. Tell them all about God's love and what He will do for them if they accept him. I believe we will then see the crime rate do down, we will see the AIDS epidemic brought under control and we will live in a more peaceful society. That's what I want.

But for the grace of God, there go I. I must reach out and touch somebody's hand. I have to be God's eyes and hands on earth because he uses people. I have to hug people because if I were in a ditch, I would want someone to help me out and give me a hug.

God bless the white evangelists, but no one knows the black culture, like the black culture. It's time for us to do for ourselves. I know that in the spirit we are one, however, on earth we are many, and there many in the criminal justice system who really need to hear (not only in words) from their own. They need to hear that God really cares. What genuinely goes from the heart, reaches the heart. ♦



Arnold (standing) addresses the audience at the Jack the Ripper Awards Dinner in Atlanta, Georgia with Jessis Jackson in attendance.