

In Print: Friday, January 14, 2011 **God and a stranger lead former NFL player to pulpit in Riverview** By Sarah Whitman, St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer



[Photos by DIRK SHADD | Times]

Pastor Jomo Cousins, a former Florida A&M and NFL player, leads his congregation at the Love First Christian Center, meeting Sundays at the Riverview High School auditorium.

The 6-foot-5 Jomo Cousins walks onto the school stage turned pulpit, and more than 300 people rise from their seats to worship. They applaud and call out to the pastor in pinstripes, shouting impassioned hallelujahs while instrumental music plays. A sign with the words "Love First Christian Center" hangs behind Cousins, who murmurs to himself, closes his eyes and stretches his arms out wide. "Praise be to God," the former NFL player says, hushing the room with a sincere and commanding voice.

The days of the 35-year-old seeking praise for himself are long past. Still, he remembers packed stadiums, cheering fans and the pride that comes from stopping ball carriers and sacking quarterbacks.

A 1998 seventh-round draft pick of the Arizona Cardinals, Cousins played for several professional teams, including the New York Giants in 2000.

He thought he had made it.

Then came life after the game: career-ending injuries. Unemployment. And eventually, a calling.

He went from slamming players to the ground to inspiring people to drop to their knees.

"There's nothing worse than a satisfied Christian," Cousins tells his audience. "You should always be striving and pushing. You should always want more."

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Now, Cousins' suit jacket rests on the podium behind him and a hungry congregation looks to him for guidance.

"He's a blessing," Kimberly Gage says, greeting people at the back of the auditorium. "He's a pastor with a vision."

That vision began as a boy growing up in Maryland when Cousins was saved while watching a Billy Graham television special. His family didn't attend church, so when Graham asked viewers to lift their hands and pray, he did so. Cousins said the prayer and went back to playing.

"It didn't hit me until years later that I dedicated my life to the Holy Spirit that day," he said.

Cousins emerged as a star athlete in high school basketball and track. He wanted to play football, but his protective mom objected. At Florida A&M University, he pursued athletics, looking for scholarships to help pay tuition.

The FAMU football team offered him a full ride, so Mom said it was okay.

"I was fast and I was big," Cousins said. "People started saying I should be in the NFL and it blew my mind."

Cousins graduated with an economics degree in 1998, married his college sweetheart, Charmaine, and was drafted by the Cardinals. He spent the preseason in Arizona's training camp before they assigned him to the Berlin Thunder, an NFL Europe team. All the while he battled a painful shoulder injury.

In Arizona, Cousins was invited to attend church with fellow Cardinal Aeneas Williams. The experience forever changed him.

"I saw how God was moving in these other players' lives, and thought maybe he could move in mine," Cousins said. "I started to realize how the Holy Spirit had been with me through the years, ever since I said that prayer."

By the time he made the Giants starting roster in 2000, one of his knees started to give out. He fought to stay in the game, but soon after Charmaine gave birth to the couple's first child, Jomo Jr., in 2001, his injuries forced him out of the NFL.

He went through two years of physical rehabilitation. He struggled with depression. He fasted, read the Bible and prayed for God to help redefine his family's future.

"At that time my pride was gone. I shut up and just started listening," he said.

Charmaine worked three jobs while her husband recovered. She took a position as a high school teacher in Orlando, so the family moved there. Cousins worked nights at Walmart, did some substitute teaching and helped around the house.

Then God spoke.

"After football, I had to come off the mountaintop back to the real world," Cousins said. "I was totally humbled. I started seeking God like never before. I asked, 'Lord what is my gift?' I was doing dishes one night and he said, 'Your gift is to speak.' "

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Cousins went on to work as a motivational speaker for a company serving the real estate business, then moved the family to Riverview and started MVP Consulting. He traveled the country speaking to corporate America. Still, he felt disconnected from his true calling: preaching.

While attending Alive church in Tampa, Cousins spoke during tithes and offerings. Charmaine, Jomo Jr. and young daughter Jamya encouraged him to become ordained as a pastor. He did so in 2006. He wanted to start his own church but worried about the financial risk.

A stranger at a yard sale gave him the final push.

"This man I didn't know came up to me and said, 'God has told you to step out, but you haven't moved,' " Cousins said. "It was July 12, 2008. It was my wife's birthday, and that day she found out she was pregnant with our third child, Josiah. That day, I decided to start my own ministry."

Cousins named the ministry Love First because "I'd seen so many broken people, and I wanted our primary concern to be showing people love."

The church held its first service on July 27, 2008, at Visions for the Nations Church in Riverview. His late mother, a born-again Christian, helped him make the down payment on the space. About 15 people came to hear the first sermon, titled "Get Stepping."

Still, the church grew fast and last July, Cousins moved it to the Riverview High School auditorium. There, he preaches about love, humility and what it means to hunger for Jesus. There, he offers counsel to people in need.

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Member William Cooper describes Cousins as a genuinely selfless man of God.

"He's one of the best guys I've ever met," Cooper said. "When you need him, he's right there."

Jamal Hughes wakes up on Sunday mornings looking forward to church.

"I'd never come to church before I started coming here," he said. "Pastor Cousins is young, but he has a lot of life experience, so he's been through things. He's a mentor to me. I lost a child and he helped me through that."

Cousins' love reaches beyond church walls. On Wednesdays, Love First gives away bags of food. If needed, Cousins buys the food himself.

"I've said before, I will have no hungry people at my church," he said, adding, "God has big plans" for Love First.

Those plans include the opening of a youth center and women's shelter.

"A big church building is useless," Cousins said. "I'd rather have a youth center and help kids every day. Kids need more positive role models."

Cousins' children, now 11, 6 and 2, look to their dad as a role model. They sit patiently Sunday mornings and wait for children's church to begin. They listen to their dad start each service with a prayer.

"He used to be a good football player, and that's cool," Jomo Jr. said. "But it's good to be a pastor because it means he can do good things."

Jamya, 6, and a daddy's girl, can't picture her father charging across the field in uniform.

"I just think of my daddy as love," she said.

When Cousins prepares his weekly sermons, he thinks about his family and all the blessings woven into his life story. He said God's message flows through him like rain these days. He stands on the stage and the words just come to mind.

"Now I know football was never about playing football; it was about me being in the right environment to meet the right people to show me a life I never knew existed," he said.

"It was about becoming a man of God."