



In His Father's House

October 23, 1995

FIVE YEARS AGO, BISHOP BENJAMIN Crouch Sr. took his son Andraé aside for a serious chat. “The moment I see you in the pulpit, and you’re preaching, and the people are responding,” he said, “I’m outta here.” Andraé, a world-renowned gospel singer who had no intention of giving up his show-business lifestyle, looked askance at his father. “Well, Daddy,” he replied cavalierly, “you’ll be here forever because that’s one thing I won’t do!”

Benjamin Sr. never got his wish during his lifetime. But last week, two years after he died of liver cancer at 76, his once-prodigious son officially took over for him as pastor of the Christ Memorial Church of God in Christ in Pacoima, Calif., a predominantly Hispanic town outside L.A. When Andraé, 53, began preaching in April, it came as a shock to the more straitlaced members of the Pentecostal congregation, who could remember him showing up for church in sweatpants—when he came at all—or collaborating professionally with scandalous performers such as Madonna. In 1982, Andraé was even arrested for possible cocaine possession when police found a white powder—which Crouch says was dried soup—spilled in the back of his Mercedes. (No charges were filed.) “God told me one day I was going to be pastor of this church,” he told the skeptics on Sept. 23. “I know I may sound a little radical. I may be a little different, but I’m just trying to do what the Lord wants me to do.”

For most of his life, Andraé thought his calling was music. A born-again Christian since age 9, he believes his musical gift resulted from a pact between his father and God: If

God would give Andraé the gift of music, his father said, then he, Benjamin Sr., would become a pastor. One Sunday when Benjamin Sr. was a guest speaker at a church in Val Verde, Calif., he called Andraé, then 11, to the church piano as the choir sang “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” Miraculously, Crouch, who says he never before had played the piano, was able to find the keynote. For a shy boy who stammered so badly that his twin sister Sandra often spoke for him, music became a way to conquer his impediment. “I started singing what I had to say,” he recalls. “People became music to me because everything they said was a song.”

Crouch proved to have a gift for songwriting too. At 14 he wrote his first song. In the 1960s he recorded the first of some 20 albums, eventually developing his signature rhythm-and-blues-influenced brand of gospel and collaborating with many secular musicians as well, from Diana Ross to Bob Dylan. “He does powerful things,” says country vocalist and fan Barbara Mandrell. “When you’re standing in the same room with him, you just feel it.” After 20 years in the business—and several Grammys—Crouch was living in a large house in Woodland Hills and happily fine-tuning his high-rent celebrity lifestyle.

That part of his life ended abruptly in 1992 when his 72-year-old mother, Catherine, became the first of three members of his immediate family to die of cancer over a three-year period. Andraé, who says he had been too busy even to get married, began to rethink his priorities. “There was a real gulf between Andraé the songwriter and Andraé the pastor,” says Terri McFaddin, an evangelist who helped Crouch prepare for the ministry. “He used to be very distant. Whenever you had a conversation with him, it would be very superficial. When his mother passed, it was real sobering.” Crouch moved into the family’s two-bedroom house in Pacoima to be closer to his father. When Benjamin Sr. died in December 1993, Andraé’s brother Benjamin Jr., at 53,

became minister of Christ Memorial. But five months later he, too, died, and the church was left without a pastor.

During that dark spring, as they searched in vain for a replacement, Andraé and Sandra, also a well-known gospel singer, watched attendance fall off at the church their family had built. Then one day, according to Andraé, an unworldly force threw him to the floor

as he was listening to a sermon at Christ Memorial. As he lay there he heard what he believes was the voice of God telling him to take over the church. “You will tell me yes,” Andraé recalls the voice saying. “I’ve put too much into you for you to say no. Not ‘right on,’ not ‘uh-huh.’ ‘Yes!’ ” From that day on, says Crouch, he could sleep uninterrupted at night for the first time since his mother’s death.

Andraé said yes, but it took him a couple of months to persuade the governing bishop of the church that he was ready to lead the flock. Since being approved as pastor in April, Crouch has set up a 12-step drug-abuse recovery program in Pacoima, a town ravaged by gang violence, and plans to put the church’s Sunday radio broadcasts on TV. Crouch hasn’t given up his other career: He still composes songs every day—during prayers at 6 a.m.—and he and Sandra traveled to New York in September to sing backup for Michael Jackson at the MTV Video Music Awards. But for the moment, Andraé is happy to curb his globetrotting if it means helping to bring salvation to his congregation, which has doubled in size. “The Bible says, ‘In Jerusalem first,’ ” he says. “That means, ‘Start at home.’ ”

PATRICK ROGERS

KAREN BRAILSFORD in Pacoima