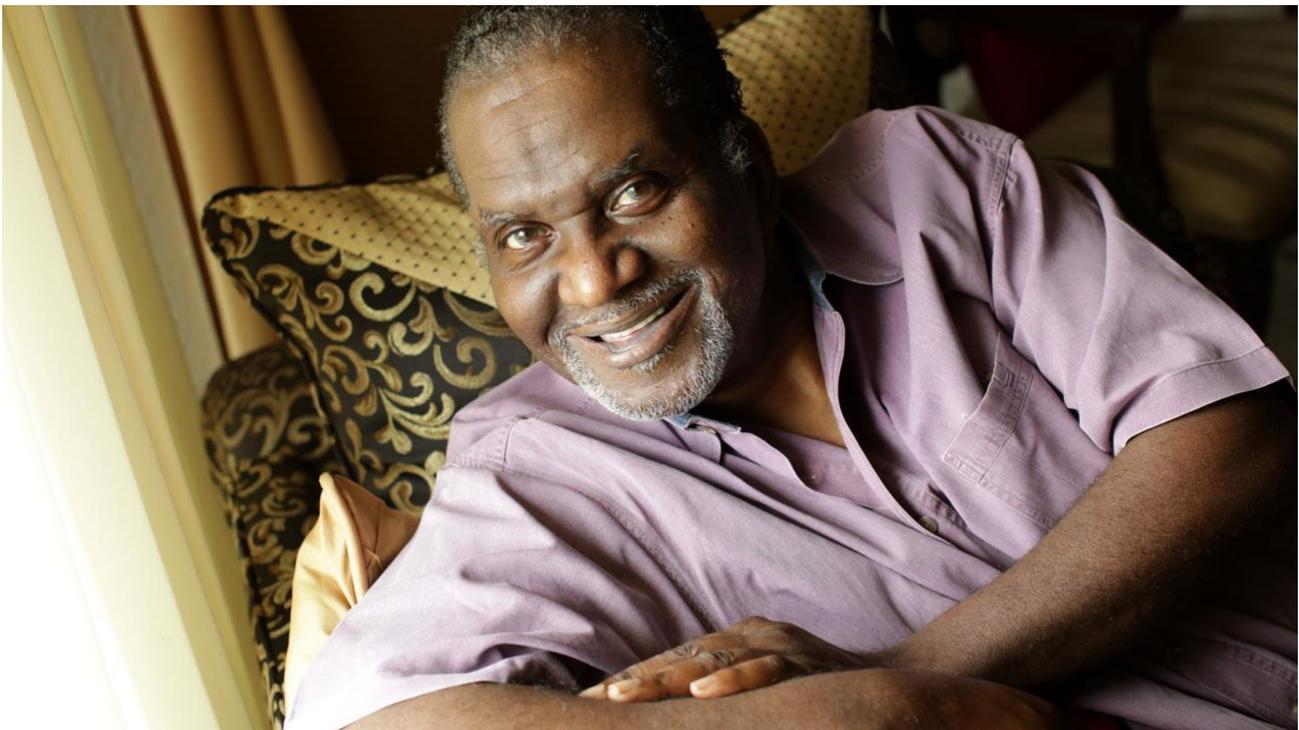


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This poverty-fighting champion quietly left his longtime Dallas job. What's next for Gerald Britt?

'I don't think Dallas knows what it has in Gerald, but I am so grateful that I do,' says one of the young leaders influenced by the CitySquare VP.

By Sharon Grigsby on February 12, 2020



After 22 years, Gerald Britt left the pulpit at New Mount Moriah Missionary Baptist Church in South Dallas in 2004 to serve the next 15-plus years with the poverty-fighter CitySquare nonprofit. (Photo: Jason Janik)

It's hard to envision the venerable nonprofit CitySquare without poverty-fighting heavyweight Gerald Britt at the table.

But even worse is to imagine Dallas without Britt's steady and inspiring voice. So I thank God that, although the 63-year-old preacher-leader stepped away from the South Dallas-based organization at the end of January, he's not looking to retire.

"I think I'm still too young to find a rocking chair," Britt said with a laugh as we talked this week at his home in Oak Cliff's Wynnewood Hills neighborhood.

Up till now, his life's work has been woven tightly with the narrative of a city that has changed significantly in the past four decades — but that has so much changing still to do. Through it

all, Britt has been on the front line advocating for those whose voices are almost never heard, especially those in the southern half of the city.

Larry James, CitySquare's CEO, says Britt not only has championed causes such as housing, education and job training that made Dallas a better place, but he also "has leveraged millions of dollars of benefit into our institutions."

Among his long list of accomplishments: Playing a big role in persuading Austin to increase compensation for the wrongly incarcerated and helping Dallas create ordinances to curtail the proliferation of payday loan stores.

Britt spent his public school years in the Hamilton Park neighborhood in the northeast part of the city, but his family's South Dallas roots run 120 years deep.

A third-generation pastor, he recommitted to the historic African American community as soon as he graduated from Bishop College. Only 25, he took the pulpit at New Mount Moriah Missionary Baptist Church and served there for 22 years.

Even after joining CitySquare in 2004, when it was still known as Central Dallas Ministries, and eventually becoming its vice president of public policy, Britt has remained, at his core, a community organizer guided by a deep faith. Nothing lights him up like working on the city's most stubborn challenges. "To create the argument, to introduce into the public conversation those issues and then to get some amount of change is probably the thing I'm most proud of," he told me.



During a May 2017 rally by the Strong Schools, Strong Dallas coalition, Gerald Britt read a statement in support of the passage of a tax increase to help pay for additional programs and teachers in DISD schools. Dallas voters approved that initiative in November 2018 (Jae S. Lee/Photo)

Whether in the long-running opinion column he wrote for this newspaper or through his work in local, state and national places of power, he has relentlessly shed light on inequities. I've had the privilege to know Gerald well for many years, and I can vouch for him being resolute in his convictions and unflinchingly honest, yet graciously forgiving.

James considers Britt a hero who has "time and time again, stood in lonely places and spoken the truth." He describes the former CitySquare VP as always committed to understanding the other side of the argument. "But he never surrendered his position of moral authority or the morality that Dallas needs to embrace to go further," James said.

So what broke up the band? Britt pegs his departure to a challenging financial year and subsequent restructuring within CitySquare. James mostly concurred and said the organization has made a renewed commitment to work that has a measurable payoff to its Old East Dallas and South Dallas neighbors.

Britt is mostly focused on the future. “I just want to make sure that what I’m going to do will be helpful, insightful and provide more perspective,” he told me.

His lifetime of advocacy work first shows up in 1990 *Dallas Morning News* articles as the young pastor helped get city money for Rochester Park and Cadillac Heights residents who were suffering in unhealthy conditions long after floods badly damaged their homes.

In 1991, Britt raised his voice again, this time alongside national figures in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to prod the city as it dragged its feet in complying with court-ordered changes in council representation.

As the 14-1 fight was going on, Britt and a handful of other church leaders founded **Dallas Area Interfaith**, with a focus on grass-roots issues such as community policing, educational equity and fair housing policies. The organization also trained and empowered ordinary folks — stay-at-home moms, day laborers and blue-collar workers — to take concerns to government officials.

When a Dallas City Council member tagged Britt and his fellow pastors as belligerent and militant, he acknowledged, “We’re not your father’s civic group.”

Britt and his interfaith co-founders secured council funding for housing in South Dallas and afterschool programs at elementary campuses. Britt also led a jobs creation and training initiative that he took with him to CitySquare.

The responsibilities of juggling a 400-member church and Dallas Area Interfaith put a heavy burden on Terrie, Britt’s wife of 40 years, and their children. “They made it possible for me to do that work, and they are the ones that paid the greatest price,” he said.

That’s just like Gerald — to shift the spotlight to others. And it’s why he’d like to next find a way to help educate the next generation of community advocates, especially when it comes to moving from criticism to action. “If I can in any way be helpful in regard to that, I want to do that,” he said.

One of those young leaders is Alia Salem, founder and executive director of Facing Abuse in Community Environment. She worked closely with Britt and others last year in their fight to remove the city’s Confederate monuments.



Gerald Britt was an early leader in Dallas Area Interfaith, along with fellow executive committee members Margy Veatch and Cynthia Salinas-Dooley. This photo, taken in April 1996, shows the three at Dallas Area Interfaith's office. (Staff Photo)

Salem told me this week that Britt is “one of the elite few keepers of the keys to Dallas,” someone whose knowledge and experience is invaluable to the up-and-comers. “He can calmly put things into perspective and either inform or remind us that our experiences today are not new or unique — without being condescending or dismissive,” she said.

“I don’t think Dallas knows what it has in Gerald, but I am so grateful that I do.”

Another of Dallas’ young leaders, school board president Justin Henry, said Britt’s role in promoting the passage of a tax increase in 2018 to help pay for additional programs and teachers in DISD schools is an example of his commitment to “seeing things through, all the way through.”

“He was out in front on that,” Henry told me. “But he was still there on the back end, holding the district accountable for doing what they said they would do, especially in regard to issues of racial equity.

Henry has looked up to Britt since they met more than a decade ago while the younger man was volunteering in a CitySquare after-school program at Roseland Homes. “He’s a courageous leader,” Henry said. “He’s one of those giants whose shoulders I stand on, one of those we owe a debt of gratitude for serving our community in that way.”

When I suggested to Gerald that his CitySquare departure seemed an appropriate moment to remind readers of his consequential role in Dallas, he responded with his trademark sense of humor and deep laugh: “Just don’t make it sound like an obituary.”

Toward the end of our interview, I asked him about regrets. After years of speculation about him seeking a seat on the City Council, he acknowledged that when he finally ran in 2015, he made mistakes that contributed to his defeat — getting into the campaign late and making decisions that weren’t based on his own best instincts.

But when it comes to his preaching and poverty-fighting, Britt’s only regret is “I wish I could have done more. I think we have the capacity to do more.”

Whatever next chapter Gerald opens in his life, I hope he will keep prodding us all to do just that.