

Protagonist Corner

Joining God In The Inner City

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The new Jerusalem is possible in our cities today. Yet, I believe that most of us good Christian folk have given up on our cities. Many of us have lost hope in the possibility that anything can be done to stem what we believe to be the inevitable decline of our cities. We see only increased violence, drug addiction, poverty, underemployment and unemployment in our inner cities. Yet, if we are true to our faith, we are called to do something to show the people trapped in inner-city poverty that we will be with them in their struggle to be free from the terrifying situations they encounter on a daily basis.

As people of faith, we have shown that we do care about our hurting brothers and sisters living in our inner cities. The church, in some very concrete ways, has been responsive to Jesus' call to show compassion and concern for those most in need in our society. Churches across our cities, states, and country have organized soup kitchens, shelters, clothing closets, and food banks. These ministries have now become institutionalized with paid staff and thousands of volunteers ensuring that homeless people are housed and hungry people are fed. These ministries should continue; until, as a society, we have eradicated the need for them.

In spite of all our good intentions and hard work, however, we have done little to affect the underlying reasons why so many people are hungry and homeless in this, the most prosperous country in the world. The numbers of people who find themselves economically destitute are growing. In the city of Atlanta, for example, approximately half the children under the age of five live in poverty. These children appear predestined for poor education, poor health care, incarceration, or early death. The fastest growing segment of the population at risk of contracting the AIDS virus is the African-American woman living in the inner cities. A spokesperson of Fulton County Department of Family and Children Services (which serves Atlanta) reports that the average age of grandmothers who are their clients is twenty-nine years old. Unless there is massive intervention by caring people trained to help, this society can look forward to more low weight and sick babies, child abuse, gang violence, and school dropouts.

Every person living in the United States has a stake in ensuring that all the people in our country have a decent standard of living. Beyond a selfish interest, as Christians we are called by God to be our brothers and sisters' keepers, or as someone has said, our brothers' brother or our sisters' sister. Many of us feel that if we volunteer in a soup kitchen or spend the night in a shelter, we have met our "Christian" obligation to serve the poor. Although needed, these instances of charity do not meet the challenge of the *crisis* we are encountering in our society.

For the church to be available to help people in the desperate situations they find themselves in today, we need to rethink how we do our mission outreach in local churches. Certainly, we need to continue providing shelter and food, but we must also add a new dimension to our mission work. We must become much more integrally

involved both in our personal relationships with those living in poor communities and in our commitment to developing neighborhood structures that provide a decent and safe place to live and adequate employment.

This type of ministry is much more complex than soup kitchens and shelters. Churches interested in community based ministry must prepare their members much like missionaries are trained to go to foreign countries. These local missionaries need to understand the context, internal leadership structure, assets, and challenges of the communities they intend to assist.

Why is this training necessary? Last year a church in Memphis was eager to put into effect Jesus' message of caring for God's people and spreading the gospel. Reportedly, they selected a public housing project in Memphis and enlisted the help of a teenager who lived there to help them organize the event. They showed a religious film one night on the basketball court of the project. No one would argue the honorable intentions of the church but the result of their efforts was devastating for the teenager who lived in the project. Apparently, the place where the movie was shown was the hangout where drug dealers conducted their trade. Consequently, the drug gang targeted the teenager for revenge because their territory was taken over when the film was shown. The teenager felt the need to begin carrying a gun to protect himself and his family.

A similar incident occurred in Atlanta when a man delivering food in a public housing project was killed. His suburban church had read Matthew 25 and wanted to do something to help poor inner-city residents. Yet a teenage resident of the project, not valuing his mission, shot and killed him.

In our cities today, police officers often are asked to function much like ministers. For example, recently in Atlanta the police were called to a home because the teenage daughter was physically abusing the mother. The officer did not want to take the teenager into custody because he knew that eventually the young person would be returned to her mother and the chasm between them would be deeper. He tried to get the mother and daughter to talk but the mother refused. He had no choice but to take the teenager to the precinct. Where was the church in this situation? Where could the church have intervened? If church members had a long standing relationship with this family, a relationship built on mutual love and respect, is it not possible that the family would have called the church? Unfortunately, this family felt that they had no one to turn to except the police, which should be the last support system sought.

All these examples point to the critical need for the church to be involved in poor communities in a way that is effective and long lasting. Only with a commitment to training and sustained involvement can the church hope to make a difference in the lives of people caught in the trappings of modern day poverty.

Recently, a fellow churchgoer said to me that she would never go into some inner-city neighborhoods because she would be too scared. She was being open and honest with me. However, if we read our Bibles very closely, then we discover that the place where people are experiencing the most pain is the very place where Jesus would have us to be. Having said that, we must also remember the verse in the Bible that calls us to be wise as serpents (Matthew 10:16). We cannot go into some of these communities without an understanding of the internal dynamics and without an understanding of how the church can be an instrument of change for the people living there.

The church needs to be concerned about the way it enters a community, even the

most devastated one. Many people living in these substandard apartments, housing projects, and low income neighborhoods are the most dedicated and strongest Christians I have ever met. They have been working to improve their neighborhoods for years. The church is not carrying God to these communities. It is simply joining God who is already present in the lives of these folk. In most of these communities there are capable leaders who can help the church become involved in some revitalization plans that the communities have been trying to achieve. The church has always been in the transformation business. It is time now for the church to take seriously its mission of community revitalization. The church should enlist the help of well-trained community organizers who can train church volunteers how to work effectively with poor inner-city neighborhoods.

Transforming the inner cities of our nation will only come when we allow God to transform our own lives and transform the ways we have related to the neighborhoods that make up such a significant part of our inner cities. Is the task daunting? Certainly. Yet we have a vision of a new Jerusalem and we can begin to live toward that vision.