

### Putting Out the Welcome Mat

Making the poor feel welcome takes more than friendliness and good intentions. It requires learning to see through their eyes, to examine every aspect of church life through the lens of whether it tends to include or exclude them.

To learn to see this way, we will need to involve the poor in decisions that shape the life of the body. We will need to become their students, learning from them how to shape policies with cultural sensitivity.

With their help, we can find ways to remove the price tags on Christian fellowship, to avoid offers of help that hurt, and to modify cultural practices that say to the poor, "You don't belong." We can learn how to make all the body's basic ministries available to all, on the same basis, in settings where people of different cultures can feel comfortable.

As poor and nonpoor come together, not only will the poor benefit by being included and the nonpoor grow through their new relationships with these brothers and sisters. Our life together will demonstrate to the world the gospel's power to break down the walls that divide us, its power to make us one.

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## 9. The Role of the Church in Community Development

by Wayne Gordon

THE CHURCH must do more than invite people in. It must also reach out to the local community. What then is the role of the local church in Christian community development?

To answer that question, we must begin by asking another. "What is the church?" The simplest answer is that the church is people who have put their trust in Jesus Christ and are allowing Jesus to be the Lord of their lives. The church is the body of Christ on earth. The local church is that group of people who gather together as a worshiping community, as an example of what it means to live out kingdom principles.

The traditional church, however, has often failed to live out kingdom principles. I became a Christian through a "parachurch" organization because I was not hearing the gospel in my own church. When the

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church has fallen short, parachurch organizations (Christian but not church-based) have arisen to fill the gap.

But there is a problem with this approach. Every parachurch organization I know of says it wants to channel people back into the church, but in reality that does not happen very often. In fact, all too often parachurch organizations actually compete with the local church for people's time, gifts, and energy. In the work of Christian community development, I think we need a new kind of parachurch organization, one closely tied to the local church.

At Lawndale Community Church in Chicago, we have created two parachurch organizations—a health center and a development corporation. Each is deeply rooted in the life of our congregation. Each helps us achieve our goal, which from the beginning has been to be a church that reaches out to people, that loves our community, that strives to meet the community's needs.

Years ago at a church meeting, we listed community needs on a chalkboard—better schools, jobs, all kinds of things. One item was affordable medical care. Once we had finished our list, I asked, "Is there anything here that we can do?" There was not much, but somebody said, "Well, Art Jones is in medical school. Maybe someday we could open a health clinic."

Almost ten years later, Lawndale Christian Health Center opened its doors, with Art Jones as director. Not only did the church start the clinic; it also provides the facilities for the clinic. And a majority of the members of the board of directors must be members of Lawndale Community Church. The church continues to have vital input into the clinic's direction.

Recently, during our prayer time at church, Art

stood and said that the county was planning to close a hospital that serves our neighborhood. He said we needed to go to an upcoming hearing to be advocates for the poor, to help the county officials understand that closing the hospital would hurt our community.

The county got wind that we were coming and canceled the hearing. But we went anyway—seventy-five people from Lawndale Community Church. About fifty from the hospital came too. We sat in the room and had our meeting with Art and others leading it.

The meeting room happened to be next door to the office of the Commissioner of Health for Cook County, and the commissioner sent a spy. He stood there watching us. Every now and then he would go back through the glass doors where the Commissioner of Health was, then return.

Soon the Deputy Commissioner of Health came out and sat and listened to us. The next day, Art and four or five other key people sat down with the Commissioner of Health. They began to build a plan that would make a difference.

Art could not have done that by himself. It took the church. It happened because Lawndale Community Church felt ownership of Lawndale Christian Health Center and concern for the needs of the community.

I believe the church has to be at the center of anything we call Christian community development for at least five reasons.

#### 1. The church fulfills its biblical mission by meeting needs of community people

In the early part of this century, we saw a division between what people called the social gospel and the spiritual gospel.

But if you have the spiritual gospel without the so-

cial gospel, you do not have the gospel. And if you have the social gospel without the spiritual gospel, you do not have the gospel.

When I love my son and help him learn to read or give him food to eat, everybody says I am a great dad. But when I love the guy in the street, people say that is the social gospel.

That is baloney! The gospel is for the whole person. Proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ means taking care of people's needs physically, mentally, and socially, as well as spiritually.

The Mosaic Law tells us that it is not God's plan for people to be poor (Deut. 15:4). But God understands human nature, so the Law continues, "If there are poor, open your hand freely to them, care for them" (v. 7). We are commanded to care for the poor (v. 11). If we don't, we are guilty of sin.

Yes, *not caring for the poor is a sin*. It is because of that sin that we have millions of people here in the United States and around the world whose needs are going unmet. And the suffering of a great many of those people is because we, the body of Christ, have not counted it as sin to not care for them.

Jesus told his followers, "You are the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13). The primary use of salt in Jesus' day was to prevent decay. It was rubbed into meat so the meat would not spoil. To be the salt of the earth means that we ought to be looking for places that are decaying, then going there to preserve them.

Next Jesus says, "You are the light of the world" (v. 14). What is light? Light is what comes to wipe out darkness. Where are the dark areas of our world? Those are the places we ought to be going to as people who believe in Jesus Christ.

The next time you move, I suspect you will go to a

real-estate agent and say, "Show me some nice places to live."

The agent will ask, "What are you looking for?"

You will probably say something like, "I want a place that's safe, that has good schools, something in a stable community [which probably means it's segregated], and good city services."

Do you know what you will have told the real-estate agent? That you want to live in the brightest place in that community, in the least decaying area. When you do that, you hinder your obligation as a Christian to be salt and light.

Jesus gives us two great commandments: to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-38). To find out who our neighbor is, we need to study Luke 10 (see chapter 6), where the smart aleck asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus answers with the story of the Good Samaritan. My neighbor is the man beaten up on the side of the road, the person who can't help himself, the person who is hurting to the point that nobody else would even care for her.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus stood up in the synagogue. The scroll was handed to him, and he read from Isaiah 61:1-2.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Several verses later, Isaiah proclaims, "They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long dev-

astated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations" (Isa. 61:4).

The role of the church in the world is to rebuild the structures that are hurting, to raise up a new generation of Christian leadership among the poor, to repair cities or rural areas or reservations that have been so downtrodden there is only despair.

Not long ago I was having dinner with a man from India who works among the poor. In India countless people are poor. This man, though he has a Ph.D., lives among those who belong to the poorest 2 percent of the population.

I asked him, "Of all the places you've traveled throughout the world, where did you find the people to be the poorest?"

I was expecting him to say it was the people he lived among, but he said, "It seems to me that the poorest people in the world are the U.S. poor."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The U.S. poor are the only poor I've found who have lost hope. The poor I work with in India have hope. The poor I've seen in other parts of the world have hope."

My own experience confirms this. When I was in the Philippines, I was in an extremely poor community. Yet I saw a hope in the eyes of the squatters that I do not see in the eyes of people in my own neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago.

The church is called to bring hope. Your church may not be located in the ghetto, but it can still reach out to the poor, the widows, the orphans, the aliens, and the hurting (see chapter 12). If all our churches would be true to their calling to serve the poor, we would not need all our independent parachurch organizations. But the church is not doing its job.

## **2. To be wholistic, Christian community development must be church-based**

We like to talk about wholistic ministry. But do we know what we are talking about when we say we want a "wholistic" approach?

Physical healing is clearly a part of wholistic ministry. Jesus helped the blind to see and the lame to walk. That is not insignificant. But even though a doctor or nurse may be able to help a patient get better, that patient will still eventually die. If all people are going to die someday, shouldn't we also help them understand what death is all about?

In the work of health care or other community ministries, it is important to link with a supportive church which can help you minister to the whole person. The church ought to care about empowering people, discipling people, enabling them to live the lives God has called them to live. When a health center is part of a church's ministry, the health center can help the church fulfill its responsibilities, and the church can help complete the healing work of the health clinic.

This is a wholistic approach. The solution to the plight of our inner cities is not simply to open a health center. Yes, many neighborhoods need one; it is a lofty goal. But a health center will not save the inner city. Nor will giving everybody a job or a nice place to live. Long-term change is going to take a wholistic approach. This means ministering not only to people's physical needs but also to their emotional, mental, economic, social, and spiritual needs.

## **3. A church can break down divisions between people**

When health professionals work among the poor, it is not unusual for them to refer to their poor patients, these who cannot seem to help themselves, in general-

ities like, "they this" and "they that." In the church, however, those divisions can begin to melt. Instead of a "we/they" relationship, it can become just "we" because we're all in this together.

When those of us who minister to the poor also live and worship among those we are serving, we are no longer here to help them. We are here to work together, to help each other. It is good for both groups, for all of us. It is good for the relocated group, those with skills and abilities to share. And it is good for those who have been disenfranchised, those who did not get a piece of the pie. When we worship with each other and rub shoulders week in and week out, barriers can begin to be broken down.

#### 4. *The church is a built-in support system*

If you have not been in the inner city long, you may not think you need a support system. But believe me, you cannot make it alone. You need a support system because it is tough to live in the inner city. I do not see many folks coming to live here with my wife, Ann, and me. For many years, Linda and Art Jones were the only "outside" people who had actually moved into Lawndale with us. Lots of people talk about it, but not many do it.

I once sent out a letter to a thousand people. "God," I prayed, "we are asking for just one other couple to move in and help us." I really believed somebody was going to move in. We had one nibble, a couple who said they would consider it. Eight years later, they are still not here—but they have bought a house and are trying to move in. People are not flocking to live in the inner cities.

If you sense God calling you to be a teacher, an attorney, a doctor, a nurse, a physical therapist, a dentist,

a receptionist, a business manager, or a janitor in the inner city, it is not going to be easy. And if you are not church-based, I do not think you will have the support you'll need to make it.

In the past few months, I have been struggling with discouragement. It has been hard for me to keep going. I have not had the energy to do all the things I need to do. I shared that with my staff. Then I preached about discouragement one Sunday at church, among the people with whom I could share my story and struggle.

Confessing my discouragement did not automatically change things. But since then several people have called me. Others have written notes. One Sunday someone passed me a note that said, "Coach [that's what a lot of people call me], you're a good man. I'm praying for you." That was the church being the church. If we are going to succeed in the inner city, we need the church to be our support system.

#### 5. *The church keeps the various ministries in balance*

Once in a while Art will be talking with someone about the health center after church. Next to Art will be the guy in charge of the development corporation and trying to run our welding business. Next to him is a person running our educational programs. Each may be needing space and resources for his or her ministry.

When we immerse ourselves in our ministries, we sometimes lose sight of what is happening around us. We can forget how our ministries relate to the whole community.

But when those ministries take place within the context of the church, the church can bring them into balance through both formal and informal channels. The church continues to bring us back to our mission of

loving God and loving people, of caring for the poor, of helping people become disciples of Jesus Christ.

For the church to be all that it is called to be, it needs to be on the cutting edge of community development, finding ways to work with our neighbors to meet the needs of the community. And for community development—whether it is a health center, a jobs program, or an alternative school—to be all it should be, it needs to be rooted deeply in the local church.

If we are truly committed to bringing the whole gospel of Jesus Christ to the whole person, we will find no better way to do so than through church-based community development.

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