

Eight Urban Ministry Strategies

What does it take to have an effective transformative urban ministry? Depending on who you talk to you will find different answers. The starting point is to understand the vision God has for the city. Isaiah 61:1-11 describes the transformation that is to take place in the city. The transformative image painted by God through the prophet Isaiah is called *shalom*. *Shalom* is the Hebrew word translated “peace.” *Shalom* is more than simply the absence of violence. *Shalom* is the “reversal of human alienation from God, from creation, and from one another.” In addition, “because *shalom* is the end of poverty, injustice, and exclusion, to seek the *shalom* of the city is to work to reverse the effects of sin and the Fall on the city and to proclaim the news of One who comes in peace.”ⁱ

A holistic approach and strategic planning are needed to successfully reach lost people and restore the *shalom* of God in our cities. There are at least eight principles for effective urban ministry that are required for transformation in the city to occur. This does not mean that a single urban ministry has to offer each of these in a programmatic sense. It does mean; however, that partnerships must be formed in order for these eight principles to be implemented. These principles provide a strategy that is not optional. Some urban ministries are struggling to have a transformative impact in the community because they lack one or several of these vital components. The eight urban ministry strategies are:

1. Faith-Based
2. Church Planting
3. Outreach
4. Community Development
5. Leadership Development
6. Collaboration
7. Funding
8. Servant Care

Eight Strategies for Urban Ministry

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Faith-Based

An urban ministry, whether housed in a church or a nonprofit, must be faith based. The sin and brokenness of the city is ultimately a spiritual problem and cannot be solved by simply serving compassionately. Jesus showed compassion by healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, curing leprosy, and even raising the dead. Yet, Jesus healed the brokenness in the city by forgiving the sins of the outcast, the marginalized, and tax collectors. In Luke 4:18, Jesus clearly stated His mission, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good



news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed.”

This must be a core part of the mission of an urban ministry. Some leaders in urban ministry are reluctant to raise spiritual issues as part of their programs or ministries. Resources are spent on “doing good things” in the community without an intentional evangelistic component. Consequently, these ministries have negligible impact on the growth of the kingdom of God. Recently, Jim Harbin discussed evangelism with church planting coaches in Nashville. The conclusion drawn from these discussion was many Christians and especially postmodern individuals, view intentionally following Jesus’ model of seeking and saving lost people as manipulative (Luke 19:10). The fact is that every person needs a relationship with God in the context of His glorious kingdom. Urban ministries “misfire” when they do not intentionally help people become reconciled with God through Jesus Christ. The core problem in the city is of a spiritual nature and is not solved by simply providing food, clothes, and shelter.

Finally, to be faith-based implies that the program or ministries are filtered through Scripture. It is important for the ministry staff to spend time getting on the same page biblically. The ministry staff should take time for theological reflection to understand the spiritual implications of their ministry activities.

Why, from a theological perspective, do we offer a summer camp? What is the theological goal of a particular ministry activity? What are our spiritual goals? How will lives be transformed? How will we measure the spiritual outcome of our ministry activities?

Church Planting

Planting churches is a powerful evangelistic tool. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul writes, “*I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.*” One important advantage to planting new churches is that they are able to reach people that will not be reached by existing churches. This is true for the people in the city who live in poverty, like the homeless. The homeless and the poor tend not to feel comfortable attending existing churches that have not yet learned how to welcome people outside of their socio-economic circle.

One of the fatal flaws of church planting today is sending well-meaning, but unprepared, church plant teams into the field. Memphis Urban Ministry has partnered with Kairos Church Planting to avoid this dilemma (www.kairoschurchplanting.org). According to Kairos Executive Director Dr. Stan Granberg, “you never plant alone.” Kairos has engineered a Strategy Lab that is designed to help church planters put together a strategic ministry plan for planting a new church. In January of 2009, Dorn Muscar, Outreach Minister, and Jim Harbin, Executive Director, of Memphis Urban Ministry were trained at Kairos Strategy Lab to enhance the church planting arm of the ministry.



Kairos also has created a Discovery Lab in which potential church planters and their teams are assessed for their ability to plant a successful church. Jim Harbin has been trained at the Kairos Discovery Lab and also served as an Interviewer of potential church planters. Recently, Jim Harbin completed the coaches training at a Kairos Strategy Lab in Nashville. Memphis Urban Ministry has concluded that training of this type is a requirement in order to plant missional churches. Missional churches are self-sustaining, self-propagating, and self-governing.

Today, successful and vibrant churches can be planted with appropriate support and training. With this approach, many of the mistakes made by church plants in the past would be eliminated.

Outreach

Poverty is a major problem in most cities. The urban ministry principle of outreach addresses reaching out into the community to connect with people by addressing their felt needs. In most cases, outreach ultimately means providing services or ministry to the poor. There is a synergistic relationship between outreach and a church. It is hard to connect someone to a church who is struggling with the daily concern of having their basic necessities met. The rhetorical question asked by James the brother of Jesus sheds light on this, *“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?”* (James 2:15-16 NIV)

The writer of I John connects our effort and concern to address the needs of others to the presence of the love of God within us. I John 3:16-18 ¹⁶“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” If we are doing nothing about the needs of those around us, can the love of God be in our urban ministry?

Addressing poverty is extremely complex because there are so many interrelated issues. There are sixteen areas of life that must be considered when helping people living in poverty. The sixteen areas of life are: spiritual needs, addiction, crime, employment, education, financial, healthcare, housing, identification, immigration, legal issues, possessions, recreation, relationships, security, and transportation. Each individual must be assessed to determine what assistance they need in the crucial areas of life.

The importance of meeting spiritual needs has been discussed. Drug and other addictions are prevalent in the urban context. Those living in the inner city experience crime as a regular part of their daily lives. The unemployment rate in the inner city is above the national average due to the lack of education, marketable skills and adequate jobs. The lack of employment produces a dependence on the government and others for financial

resources. Inadequate finances in impoverished communities have created a bartering system within the inner city culture. EBT cards and other resources are used like currency and exchanged for cash, shoes, and other items.

Memphis also has one of the highest infant mortality rates in the country. This is a sign of a problem of healthcare. Urban renewal has resulted in moving individuals far away from neighborhood clinics and other readily assessable health care options. Both access to healthcare and education regarding how to care for one's health is crucial in the urban environment.

Due to urban renewal in the city, projects are being torn down and are being replaced by single family homes, more upscale conventional apartments and mixed-income communities. These are attractive to young professionals, which has caused a migration back to the city. The poor who were concentrated in inner city projects are being displaced from the inner city throughout the city. This is creating complex housing issues for individuals served by urban ministries. In some cases, an entire apartment complex is torn down and urban churches have faced the displacement and scattering of significant chunks of their membership into far away parts of the city. Bob Lupton, the president of FCS suggested at a North American Christian Convention lecture that urban ministries need to offer "Gentrification with justice." Basically, use urban renewal as a way to provide affordable housing for the people we serve.

In addition to problem with housing, something simple as having identification can be troublesome. The homeless in particular have a problem obtaining and keeping identification. The homeless often carry their possessions in a bag and these items are often lost or stolen. Without identification you cannot enter many shelters, receive service and certainly not find a good job.

For the Hispanic population, even Hispanic ministers, immigration is a crucial issue. Many Hispanic urban churches have members who are facing deportation. This creates legal issues for them and requests for legal assistance from the urban ministry or church. Often other legal issues such as custody, unpaid traffic tickets, DUI, lack of adequate legal counsel, etc. are faced by individuals living in the city.

The quality of life for some is low and their possessions are often inadequate to meet their basic needs. Children often need coats, hats, and gloves in the winter and tennis shoes in the summer. Without summer day camps and power hours, many children would not have access to a positive recreational outlet in their own neighborhood.

Relationships are complex and sometimes require careful research to understand the family structure of individuals being served. The urban environment can also be a dangerous place. One who lives in the inner city will inevitably be exposed to the evil sights and sounds of the city, which include gunshots, drug deals, and prostitution. Security of city dwellers becomes a paramount issue.



The last of the sixteen areas of life that needs to be addressed is transportation. Many residents of the inner city do not have cars. In addition there are few well-paying jobs in the inner city. This requires utilizing the city transportation system. Depending on the city, this can be a nightmare. A gentlemen we helped find employment gets to the bus station at 6 am and takes a 2 hour ride to get to work. He has to take the same 2 hour ride home. He does not get home until 7 pm. This means he has spent 4 hours getting to and from work, but you know he is thankful for the job! Imagine an unemployed mom with 3 to 6 children trying to get to a grocery store 3 or 4 miles away to purchase groceries and bring them home on a bus.

Leadership Development

Urban ministries cannot be sustained or reproduced if leaders are not developed. This is true of churches and nonprofit ministries. In churches this process is called discipleship. An urban ministry must develop indigenous leaders from within the community. This is a goal that should be achieved. In order to fulfill this principle, some urban ministries and urban churches have put indigenous leaders in position before they are ready. This pitfall in indigenous leadership development has devastated some ministries by having individuals lead who are not adequately trained and spiritually ready.

II Timothy 2:2 gives us great insight into effective leadership development. It reads, “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” We must be looking for the reliable men and women in our urban context that are willing to be developed into godly leaders. Many urban ministry practitioners say that these individuals are already leading in their neighborhoods and merely need to be recognized and discipled.

In addition, urban ministry staff, volunteers, partner church leaders, community participants need to be trained. This training should be both in-house training and training provided by experts in pertinent fields. Since the 1990s when many urban ministries started, much has been learned about the best practices in urban ministries.

A method of developing leaders that can carry on the ministry is to have an apprenticeship and internship program. An urban ministry can develop a formal apprenticeship with a local university where a student gets credit for serving in the field through an urban ministry. Memphis Urban Ministry has such an apprenticeship arrangement through Harding Graduate School of Religion. The apprenticeship is a two year program in which the graduate student receives two years of field training. An internship can be modeled in a similar way. However, internships are usually for much shorter periods of time and are not usually connected to a university. This is a valuable way an urban ministry or urban church can contribute to the development of urban workers in the kingdom of God.

Hosting Mission Teams including college, youth, and children’s groups is another way to develop leaders. The key is to be intentional about leadership development. It



requires an investment of time in order to orient the mission teams properly. Memphis Urban Ministry, for instance, offers a Poverty Plunge that immerses a mission team into poverty for a week end. They get to experience the sights, smells, sounds, and activities that the poor experience in a controlled environment. This program is based on a program in Waco, TX.ⁱⁱ

Community Development

Christian Community Development responds to the needs our cities face in a holistic way. Community Development is the process by which local capacities are identified and mobilized to transform the community into what God intends it to be.

Jeremiah 39:7 is informative for the community development task. It states “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” The idea is that we should pursue the well-being of our cities. The well being of people is tied to the well being the city in which they live. If a city is overcome with violence, unemployment, and poor education then that city is going to struggle to experience the shalom of God. However, the people of God should be addressing these issues, which we call community development, to bring the peace that God desires for every city.

According to Bob Lupton, our focus should not be on charity, which he calls betterment, but, on development. “Betterment does for others; development enables others to do for themselves.”ⁱⁱⁱ This means, of course, that urban churches and ministries are concerned about what is happening in the community and how the church or ministry can help people create solutions to the problems in their community.

Key Elements of Community Development:^{iv}

Christian Community Development, according to John Perkins, consists of ministries to the poor that:

1. begin with felt needs of the people in the community
2. respond to those needs in a holistic way
3. are based on clear biblical principles
4. are “time-tested”
5. develop and utilize leaders from within the community
6. encourage relocation – living among the poor
7. demand reconciliation – people to God and people to people
8. empower the poor through redistribution – all community members
9. sharing their skills, talents, education, and resources to help each other

**The following represents a small list of potential
Community Development projects:**

- Establish a Technology Resource Center and Training Course
- Build a network of after-school tutoring programs
- Transition food pantries into food stores
- Transition clothing closets into clothing stores
- Create a network of urban community gardens
- Continue to build upon the success of the Christmas Toy Stores
- Establish a micro-lending/community loan fund
- Partner with various youth athletic programs
- Put together a nutrition education program for churches
- Organize community clean-up days with neighborhood associations
- Host Poverty Simulations for youth groups and mission teams
- Organize financial budgeting courses for urban churches and communities
- Host medical/dental outreach days in targeted neighborhoods
- Continue to build on the success of the School Stores
- Replicate the English Language courses and offer at various locations
- Establish a Scholarship Fund to assist youth in urban churches to attend college
- Organize housing rehab efforts in targeted neighborhoods

Collaboration

Collaboration is a key principle for successfully impacting the community by forming strategic partnerships. No one ministry can provide all the services needed to meet the felt needs within a community. Through formal networking and collaboration, ministries can effectively provide quality services to the people in their communities.

Funding

With the downturn in the economy, resources available to fund urban ministries are down. In addition, partner churches are faced with the same problems in mainstream society. Church members have lost jobs, contributions are down and as a result some churches have cut staff and ministries. Churches have to pick and choose what they fund in the future with more diligence.

Urban ministries must look to other sources of revenue for funding programs. For example, grants are an untapped source of revenue for many ministries. Usually, a requirement for receiving those grants is becoming a 501c(3). Some urban ministries are operated as a ministry of a local church, and not as a separate nonprofit. There are advantages and disadvantages to both models.

In addition, urban ministries can increase revenue by operating nonprofit income generating ventures such as a child care center. A licensed child care center is able to accept certificates that pay for individual's child care services. There is also a Federal Food Program that provides reimbursements for meals served in a child care center to those who qualify. Through collaboration, multiple organizations can combine efforts to apply for a grant in which each participant provides a part of the program. The idea is to be creative and seek additional funding resources beyond partner churches and individuals.

Servant Care

Urban ministry is intense work. It is unique in the demands placed on workers because of the multitude of problems people face. Urban workers tend to be overworked because of the desire to serve and being shorthanded. Some urban workers not only work long hours, but have a hard time taking a day off. It is important for urban workers to intentionally take care of themselves and their families. Quality down time is a must. Spending time away from the grind of ministry on retreats and actually taking vacation is a must. Each ministry must have someone who acts as a "gatekeeper" to hold urban workers accountable for self-care. Galatians 6:1 reminds us that though we are responsible for the spiritual well-being of others, we must be careful to look out after ourselves since we too can be tempted.

Utilizing Best Practices

Utilizing best practices is a foundational principle that undergirds everything that is done in urban ministry. Best practices is the infrastructure of each of the eight principles. Research, training, networking, collaboration, and prayer are important steps in developing a system that incorporates best practices.

The number and magnitude of the issues related to serving people living in poverty is tremendous. Moving people from poverty to empowerment requires an individual life plan in order for a program to be successful. A considerable amount of research is available that address the best practices for implementing ministries in an urban context.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and he will make your paths straight." Proverbs 3.



ⁱ Gornik, Mark R., *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith in the Changing Inner City*, p.103.

ⁱⁱ Dorrell, Jimmy and Janet, *Plunge 2 Poverty*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lupton, Robert D., *Compassion, Justice and the Christian Life*, p.38.

^{iv} Perkins, John, *Restoring at Risk Communities*, p. 26.