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Theology of Ministry

Christian Community Development

Nehemiah begins with lamenting over the city of Jerusalem. "Those back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire." Neh 1:3b. This describes the situation in parts of most American cities today. They have been neglected and allowed to deteriorate for almost forty years. The church of Jesus Christ has at best sat back and watched this happen yet in many areas has contributed to the problem. The words of Nehemiah, "great trouble and disgrace," ring true for us in the church today.

The question arises as to what the response as Christians will be to the troubles of the poor and the inner cities today. The desperate conditions that face the poor call for a revolution in the church's attempts at a solution. Through years of experience among the poor, many have come to see these desperate problems cannot be solved without strong commitment and risky actions on the part of ordinary Christians with heroic faith.

There are many philosophies to solve the problems, but most fall short of any lasting change. The most creative long-term solutions to the problems of the poor are coming from grass roots and church-based efforts. The solutions are coming from people who see themselves as the replacements, the agents, for Jesus here on earth, in their own neighborhoods and communities.

This philosophy is known as Christian Community Development, which is not a concept that was developed in a classroom, nor formulated by people foreign to the poor community. These are Biblical, practical principles evolved from years of living and working among the poor. John Perkins in Mississippi first developed this philosophy. John and Vera Mae Perkins moved back to their homeland of Mississippi from California in 1960 to help alleviate poverty and oppression. Through their work and ministry, Christian Community Development was conceived. Christian Community Development has a proven track record with over 600 models around the country making great progress in difficult communities. (Perkins 1995, 239)

Christian Community Development has eight essential components that have evolved over the last forty years. The first three are based on John Perkins' Three R's of community development: relocation, reconciliation and redistribution. (Perkins 1995, 21-22) The rest have been developed by many Christians working together to find ways to rebuild poor neighborhoods. The following is a brief description of the eight key components to Christian Community Development. (Fuder 1999, 74)

Relocation: Living Among the People

Living out the gospel means desiring for one's neighbor and neighbor's family that which one desires for one's self and family. Living out the gospel means bettering the quality of other people's lives spiritually, physically, socially, and emotionally as one betters one's own. Living out the gospel means sharing in the suffering and pain of others.

How did Jesus love? "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." (Jn 1:14) Jesus relocated. He became one of us. He didn't commute back and forth to heaven. Similarly, the most effective messenger of the gospel to the poor will also live among the poor that God has called the person to. A key phrase to understand relocation is incarnational ministry.

By relocating, a person will understand most clearly the real problems facing the poor; and then he or she may begin to look for real solutions. For example, if a person ministering in a poor community has children, one can be sure that person will do whatever possible to ensure that the children of the community get a good education. Relocation transforms "you, them, and theirs" to "we, us, and ours." Effective ministries plant and build communities of believers that have a personal stake in the development of their neighborhoods.

Relocation is community based in the very essence of the word. There are three kinds of people who live in the community. First "**relocators**" are people who, like the project director, were not born in the inner city but moved into the neighborhood. Second, are the "**returners**." These are the people born and raised in their community and then left for a better life. Usually they return from college or the military. They are no longer trapped by the surrounding poverty of their neighborhood. Yet, they choose to return and live in the community they once tried to escape. Lastly are the "**remainers**." These are the ones that could have fled the problems of the inner city but chose to stay and be part of the solution to the problems surrounding them.

In 1975 the author moved into the neighborhood of North Lawndale on Chicago's West Side. This was a community, typical of most inner city neighborhoods with a high crime rate, inferior education, and abandonment by government neglect and white flight. There is no question that relocation is the linchpin of Christian Community Development and that all other principles of development draw upon for meaning.

Reconciliation

People To God

Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. Jesus said that the essence of Christianity could be summed up in two inseparable commandments: Love God, and love thy neighbor. (Mt 22:37-39) First, Christian Community Development is concerned with reconciling people to God and bringing them into a church fellowship where they can be disciplined in their faith.

Evangelism is very much a part of Christian Community Development. It is recognized that the answer is not just a job or a decent place to live but having a true relationship with Jesus Christ. It is essential that the good news of Jesus Christ is proclaimed and that individuals place their faith in Christ for salvation. Christian discipleship is very much a part of this philosophy also.

The gospel, rightly understood, is wholistic. It responds to people as whole people; it does not single out just spiritual or just physical needs and speak to those. Christian Community Development begins with people transformed by the love of God, who then respond to God's call to share the gospel with others through evangelism, social action, economic development, and justice.

People To People

The most segregated time of the week in our nation is Sunday morning during church services. American churches rarely are integrated and weaken the gospel because of this practice. Christians pray in the model prayer that the Lord taught: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Mt 6:9 Churches should reflect heaven on earth, and heaven will be the most integrated place in the world. People of every nation and every tongue will worship Christ together. This is the picture of the church Christ presents to his people.

The question is: Can a gospel that reconciles people to God without reconciling people to people be the true gospel of Jesus Christ? A person's love for Christ should break down every racial, ethnic and economic barrier. As Christians come together to solve the problems of their community, the great challenge is to partner and witness together across these barriers. Christian Community Development recognizes that the task of loving the poor is shared by the entire body of Christ, black, white, brown, and yellow; rich and poor; urban and suburban; educated and uneducated. The Bible transcends culture and race, but the church is still having a hard time with these essentials.

Christian Community Development is intentional about reconciliation and works hard to bring people of all races and cultures into the one worshipping body of Christ. This comes not so much through a program but through a

commitment to living together in the same neighborhood. This is why relocation is so important and how each of the other principals builds upon it. Glen Kehrein and Raleigh Washington are both very active in Christian Community Development in the inner-city of Chicago and have written a book on racial reconciliation. They provide the church with the following eight principles for being reconciled to one another: 1) Commitment to relationship; 2) Intentionality; 3) Sincerity; 4) Sensitivity; 5) Interdependence; 6) Sacrifice; 7) Empowerment; 8) Call. (Kehrein, Washington 1983, 5)

Redistribution

When the body of Christ is visibly present and living among the poor (relocation), and when people are loving their neighbor and their neighbor's family the way a person loves him or herself and family (reconciliation), the result is redistribution. If God's people with resources are living in the poor community and are a part of it, the skills and resources will be applied to the problems of that community.

Redistribution brings the principles of Justice back to the underserved communities. Justice has left communities of color and lower economic status, leaving an unjust criminal court and prison system, unjust hiring practices, unjust housing development and injustice in the educational institutions. Justice has been available only to people with the economic means to acquire just treatment.

Redistribution brings new skills, new educations, new resources and puts them to work to empower people in a community of need. This is redistribution. Christian Community Development ministries find creative avenues to create

jobs, schools, health centers, home ownership, and other enterprises of long-term development.

Helping people help themselves, that is redistribution.

Leadership Development

The primary goal of redistribution is to restore the stabilizing glue and fill the vacuum of moral, spiritual, and economic leadership that is so prevalent in poor communities. This is most effectively done by raising up Christian leaders from the community of need who will remain in the community. Most Christian Community Development ministries put a strong accent on youth development, winning youth to Christ as early as kindergarten and then following them all the way through college with spiritual and educational nurturing. After that a ministry creates opportunities for leadership upon their return to the community. At the core of the leadership vacuum in inner city communities is an attitude of flight. For many, success is defined as being able to move out of communities like North Lawndale, not remaining there. The erroneous goal is to help a few people leave the neighborhood so that they can escape the problems of inner city communities. This core value of escapism has caused a major drain on the community. Success in the world's eyes is leaving the neighborhood and owning a home in a more affluent community.

Leadership development is possible only when there is longevity of ministry. All too often people are guilty of trying to have quick fixes in poor neighborhoods. Leadership development is of the highest priority in Christian Community Development. Each ministry must have a dynamic youth ministry

that is reaching young people with the good news of Jesus Christ and then discipling them in their faith. This will take at least fifteen years to accomplish, so a worker must plan to stay in the neighborhood for at least that long.

Felt Need Concept

The great question is: "How do we affirm the dignity of people, motivate them, and help them take responsibility for their own lives?" By beginning with the people's felt needs, it is possible to establish a relationship and a trust, which then enables the minister to move to deeper issues of development. This idea of beginning with people's felt needs is called the felt need concept. There are two major strands of community development that are prevalent today, the first being a needs-based development. This is development based on the needs in poor communities. The other is asset-based community development that focuses on the assets of a community and building upon them.

The felt-need concept of Christian Community Development strives to use the best of both of these philosophies. First, it gathers the community and discovers the wonderful talents, abilities and skills in the community. Every community has assets, but often these are neglected. It then realistically points out, through community meetings and efforts, some of the areas that people in the community would like to see improved. The areas to be focused upon are not looked at from some outside group or some demographic study that is laid upon the community. Instead, it is the community members themselves that decide what area they would like to improve.

After a community has decided where they want to focus some of their attention, it is then directed to the means with which they themselves can bring this about. What qualities, talents, and abilities does the community have that can help solve these problems? The focus is on the community members seeing themselves as the solution to the problem, not some government program or outside group that is going to be their salvation.

It is essential for the leadership to help facilitate the community to focus on their strengths and abilities to make a difference. The philosophy of Christian Community Development believes that the people with the problem have the best solutions and opportunities to solve those problems.

One danger of the felt-need concept is a preoccupation with the problems and needs in a community. The felt-need concept is only a tool for the beginning of development to listen to the people and give them hope for life-changing solutions. Quickly, this should then move to seeing the great potential that is in their community.

Church-Based

It is the writer's position that nothing other than the community of God's people is capable of affirming the dignity of the poor and enabling them to meet their own needs. It is practically impossible to do effective wholistic ministry apart from the local church. A nurturing community of faith can best provide the thrusts of evangelism, discipleship, spiritual accountability, and relationships by which disciples grow in their walk with God. One problem today has been that the church is not involved in developing its communities. Often, the church has been

an unfriendly neighbor in communities across our country. Churches are guilty of being open only on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights and being almost irrelevant to the needs of the people around them. Because of this, many parachurch organizations have started to do the work of loving their neighbor that the church had neglected. Christian Community Development sees the church as taking action towards the development of its community.

It is the responsibility of the church to evangelize, disciple and nurture people in the Kingdom. Yet, from the command of Jesus, it is also the responsibility of the church to love their neighbor and their neighborhood. Churches should be seen as lovers of their community and neighborhoods. It is out of the church body that ideas and programs should emerge.

This concept is certainly not new in the black community. The black church has spawned most of the substantial community efforts in housing and economic development. There have been shopping centers built, senior housing units developed and communities transformed by the church. As natural as these transformations have been for the black church, they continue to be foreign to the traditional white church. Often, opposition to the church's involvement in community development still occurs among many white denominations and church groups.

Lastly, probably the greatest sustaining power of community development is the community building of a local church. Because Christian community is based on relocation and people living in the community, having a local church to worship together is essential. It is the church where people gather to be

rejuvenated and have their personal needs met. This is true of staff members and non-staff members. How exciting it is to see doctors at a local health center worshipping and sitting next to their patients on a Sunday morning. This is community building at its best. The church helps people to understand that each person has gifts and talents and all must utilize those for the greater good of the community. A worshipping church breaks down many of the barriers including racial, educational and cultural barriers that often separate people in communities.

Wholistic Approach

Oftentimes, many in ministry get passionate and involved in one area of need and think if they solve this particular problem that all else will be resolved. Christians, of course, often focus this area on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Of course, the most essential element to Christian Community Development is evangelism and discipleship. Yet solving problems with lasting solutions is more than evangelism and discipleship.

There is never a simplistic answer to the problems in poor communities. Often, people will say that the problem is spiritual, social or educational. Of course these are problems, but they are only part of the larger problems. Solving the housing problem does not solve the emotional struggles that a person has. Christian Community Development has a wholistic approach to ministry that deals with the spiritual, social, economic, political, cultural, emotional, physical, moral, judicial, educational and familial issues of each person.

Of course, the wholistic approach is difficult because there are so many

aspects to a person's life. That is why there is no better way of helping a person than having him or her committed to a local church. A church that is committed to Christian Community Development sees not only the soul of a person as significant, but also his or her whole of life on earth. It is being completely pro-life for a person, not only eternally, but also as the person lives on this earth.

Therefore, Christian Community Development sees the church must be involved in every aspect of a person's life. It is important to network with other churches and organizations in communities. In order to accomplish the wholistic aspect of ministry, pastors and leaders must be networkers. Christian Community Development builds coalitions in communities so that they can work together to solve the problems.

Empowerment

Empowering people as community developers meet their needs is an important element to Christian Community Development. How does a pastor ensure that people are able to help themselves after they have been helped? Oftentimes, Christian ministry, particularly in poor communities, creates dependency. This is no better than the federal government welfare program. The Bible teaches empowerment, not dependency.

In the Old Testament, empowerment is an important aspect to God's care for the poor. In Deuteronomy 24 and Leviticus 19, God instituted the gleaning system. The farmers harvested their crops but were only allowed to go through the field one time. What was left behind or dropped on the ground was available for any widow, alien, orphan or poor person to come and harvest. This program

was one that empowered people.

Three principles come out of God's welfare system in the Old Testament. First, there must be opportunity for people to get their needs met. In Deuteronomy and Leviticus, this happened to be a field with food in it. Secondly, the person who had a need must be willing to work for it. The widow, alien, orphan or poor person must go into the field and pick up the crops. This, then, involved work on the part of the poor. This is also found in 2 Thes 3:10 which says, "If you don't work, you don't eat."

Thirdly, when these first two principles are working, a person's dignity is affirmed. All people have inherited dignity by being created in the image of God. Oftentimes, charity demeans a person and strips him or her of dignity. The last principle of empowerment affirms a person's God-given dignity.

Track Record

There are over 600 organizations in over 200 cities and forty states practicing Christian Community Development. These churches and ministries are showing that it is possible that the church can live out the love of God in the world; that black and white and yellow and brown, rich and poor together, can be reconciled; and that we can make a difference; that we can rescue the ghettos and barrios of this nation.

In these hundreds of communities and cities across the world, these defining principles of Christian Community Development are proving that grass roots, community-based ministries led by people who have made the community their own are the most effective agents for healing of the poor. (Fuder 1999, 84-

85)

The following poem is used as a philosophical guide to those working on Christian Community Development.

Go to the people
Live among them
Learn from them
Love them
Start with what they know
Build on what they have:
But of the best leaders
When their task is done
The people will remark
"We have done it ourselves."(Perkins 1995, 18)

Conclusion

Clearly there are great needs in poor inner city communities such as North Lawndale. There is a lack of leadership in these communities, and it is essential that new leadership be developed from among the indigenous people. Within the context of these cultural and environmental factors, new leadership needs to be developed.

The principles of Christian Community Development and the theological implications discussed in this chapter will now be applied in a practical program designed to produce competent indigenous leaders. The literature suggests through the leadership theory that leaders can be made and that there is a process through which this might be done. The implication that indigenous leaders can be developed from among the poor in underclass communities like North Lawndale has been explored and applied in a leadership development class at Lawndale Community Church. Lawndale Community Church has helped to empower leaders in all aspects of society and the community.