

Starting An Inner City Congregation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A discussion of the many factors and consideration which must be taken into account when one is considering starting an inner city or urban congregation.

KEY WORDS:

Inner city, urban, church of Christ

GLOSSARY:

Inner city or urban congregation: A congregation which primarily serves the disadvantaged in an urban location.

REPORT:

“Inner-city ministry,” though perhaps an outdated term, has come to signify churches or outreaches that minister to the poor and marginalized in an urban setting. These marginalized urban areas in the United States (“US”) were originally ethnically-segregated immigrant communities. Race, economics, job opportunities, welfare, and many other factors play into what has constituted the inner-city since the 1980s.

What churches have traditionally called inner-city ministry, however, is changing dramatically. There is no city exactly like another, but many large US cities are undergoing a process called “gentrification,” the redevelopment of urban areas, which is displacing the poor and marginalized to smaller pockets further from the middle of the city.

Inner-city ministry, or from here on, “urban ministry,” is ever-changing, and every city

is different. Therefore, there is no cookie-cutter approach to starting, maintaining, and growing an urban church. The following are some ideas to think about and put into place for an individual or organization that feels called to the area of urban ministry.

Know Your Context

What are the demographics (ethnicity, age, family make-up, income level, etc.) of the area in which you hope to minister? Is there a homeless population? What’s the weather like? Do people walk, drive, ride the bus, or ride a bike? What are the schools like? Are there retail businesses, eating establishments, or companies? Is it off the beaten path or the main thoroughfare?

The following are the kinds of questions one needs to be asking as one begins to look at community needs and ministry goals.

Needs Assessment

The easy answer is simply to say that every individual in a community needs Jesus. This, of course, is true, but in order to address spiritual needs, one must think about physical needs as well. If you’re mainly concerned about physical needs, spiritual needs are going to need to be addressed also. They go hand-in-hand.

What does the community need? Are jobs and housing scarce? Is there shelter for the homeless during cold winter months? Are drugs and crime rampant? Are families

broken and Godly men glaringly absent? Are the schools rundown, understaffed, underfunded, and overrun? Is there affordable healthcare? Are poverty levels high and are children going without food? What about job training, or job creation? Is there affordable childcare for single parents?

Be Visible

Be visible in the neighborhood! Before you ever start, developing relationships with people in your area is important. This will give you more insight into needs of the community, but will also provide you with unexpected team members and supporters. Residents and business owners will appreciate the opportunity to get to know you and will be more likely to support what you're doing if you have visibility. So often, urban ministries make enemies with many of their neighbors. Be sure to work early on developing good relationships.

Goals

For individuals and communities that become Christ-followers, transformation should be inevitable. The needs assessment not only reveals outreach opportunities for a new ministry, but it also reveals needed community transformation. These are not all needs that a church should have to meet on its own. There are many examples of ministries that have empowered a community to address these needs together, and have been transformed in the process.

What are your goals going to be? Number one is sharing the love of Christ. But how should one go about doing that? What kind of transformation do you hope to see?

Other Agencies/Ministries

What other agencies and ministries are already in the area? Are there any with which you should consider partnering? Are there needs others are already meeting? With what could you help them? An urban ministry shouldn't attempt to compete with something good already happening, but should instead figure out how to work alongside.

Supporting Congregation(s)

Do you have a supporting congregation? You're going to need people and money. Ministry won't happen without these things. The most successful urban ministries are those not with just one supporting congregation, but multiples. Over time, the stress of financially supporting a growing ministry and supplying much-needed volunteers becomes too much for one congregation to handle. They have their own ministry needs that must be met in their contexts. Developing a wide array of ministry partners is vital to a successful ministry.

What is your long-term plan for external financial and volunteer support? Do you expect for your ministry to always rely on other congregations and individuals, or do you expect for it to become self-sustaining? The reality is that in most impoverished neighborhoods, the church will never be able to support itself in a way that continues to meet the physical needs of its constituents. If community development is a main goal, however, this might be an attainable, very long-term goal.

Ministry Team

Don't go into it alone. Urban ministry is hard. It will make great demands of you and your family. You need people to pray with and lean on, and to share the burden with. A diverse team with different talents and opinions is good as well. You need people you can work with on a daily basis, but different approaches are important.

Space

What kind of space do you need? Do you start in someone's home and be incarnational? Do you rent from the local YMCA, elementary school, or community center? Do you own a building? Do you build a building? How will your space affect the rest of the neighborhood? What should your space look like? How nice should it be? Should it fit in with existing structures in the neighborhood? Should it be completely different and stand out from everything else? Ultimately, the relationships you're building, the people you're serving, the main values of your church, your mission and goals will determine what your space should look like.

Safety

Safety anywhere must be a concern. You yourself might be okay with putting your life on the line every day for the sake of bringing the gospel to the poor, but you need to be extremely careful about what you're asking others to do. Will your ministry target children or families? Will it at the same time target ex-felons and drug addicts? You need to organize your space and ministries in a way that people are safe -- especially children, but also other members and volunteers. How can you make your ministry a safe haven for the broken?

Grace and Expectations

A former president coined the phrase, "the soft bigotry of low expectations." This plays itself out in many ways. I often, however, see it happen like this: A visiting mission group comes in to serve for a week. They've been appropriately prepared to minister to the poor, and come with soft, gentle hearts. This is wonderful, but it sometimes creates an idea that they are reaching down to lift people up to where they are. It often plays out with children in the following ways: "Those poor children haven't had anyone teach them how to listen in class, so it's okay if they don't ever pay attention or are disrespectful."

Children may indeed have been taught differently. This approach, however, does not prepare children for the future. It does not hold them to any expectations to which society itself will hold them. And ultimately, it tells the children that they are not capable of meeting the same expectations. It's a recipe for failure.

Finding the proper balance between grace and holding people accountable (not just children) is extremely important. Most of those involved in urban ministry have very soft, gentle hearts. You need this, more than anything. But you, and others, also need to be willing to have the hard conversations and help others to grow.

Office Time

Office time is going to be important. You need to be around to answer the phone, send e-mails, meet and pray with people who stop by, and prepare lessons, budgets, events, etc. You must, however, get out of the office.

This is not a ministry where you can spend 8 hours a day in the office, nor should you be expected to do so. You should be in the community visiting and praying with families, visiting shut-ins, holding Bible studies outside of your building, helping the local small business owner put up some new shelves, giving a teacher at a local school a break for one hour a week, eating pizza during lunch around a table of middle schoolers, etc. Get out of the building. Jesus didn't expect people to come to him. He left heaven to minister to the least of these. You shouldn't expect people to just come to you either.

Benevolence

It won't take long for you to be completely overrun with benevolence requests. Decide ahead of time how you will handle these. There is a limited amount of funding. Some situations are much more important than others. You must be willing to say "no" at some point.

There are some situations you encounter when people will need immediate help. A house burns down, a family with 3 children will have their electricity cut off that afternoon when it's 25 degrees outside, etc. How will you address these kinds of immediate needs? Are there other agencies with which you can partner?

What about the chronic needs? The people who come to you over and over again? Do you continue giving? Will this create a dependency? Do you give once or twice, and then work on giving someone the tools and life skills necessary not to be in that situation again? This type of ministry is hard, long term, and has a lot of ups and downs along the way, but ultimately is extremely rewarding and good for the community.

Conclusion

Obviously there is a lot to think about. This article is in no way comprehensive, but hopefully will get the gears turning. Sharing the life-transforming gospel of Jesus in an urban setting is certainly a worthy pursuit. There are ups and downs, but it's never boring and seeing lives change before your eyes is the most amazing experience you'll ever have. Pray a lot, be ready for anything, be flexible, but have a plan, know where you're going and how you're going to get there, and certainly God will bless your pursuits.

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