

BRINGING LIGHT TO A CITY OF DARKNESS: A PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE ON URBAN TRANSFORMATION

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I have visited in many houses as a pastor in New Orleans. I have peered into the darkness of a home with no electricity and all the broken windows covered by plywood. I have seen the pallets on bare concrete where little children slept without heat or air conditioning. I have seen the stairwells of apartment buildings choked with debris where trash pickup as a city service seemed to have been abandoned.

I knew in my heart what a difference it would make if those children could grow up in a house that was safe and bright, warm in the winter and cool in the summer.

First Baptist Church of New Orleans operated a Kid's Club for 14 years in the Florida Housing Community in the Upper Ninth Ward. Every Saturday a group of volunteers went to the community center playground, played games with the children, taught Bible lessons, sang songs, and fed them lunch. Sometimes rudimentary medical care was provided by medical residents and nurses. Clothing and Christmas gifts were distributed to children and adults alike.

We started that ministry the year 17 people were murdered in that one housing community and New Orleans became the homicide capital of America. We helped families bury their teenagers shot dead in the streets. We comforted little children who tracked through the blood of murders outside their doors. We brought them to church, took them to camp by the hundreds, and placed some of them in the Louisiana Baptist Children's Home.

The Upper Ninth Ward, like most areas of high crime and poverty, was largely populated by single mothers and their children. The husbands and fathers were almost universally absent. One deacon at First Baptist New Orleans invested thousands of hours as a volunteer helping these families in every imaginable way, including showing up in jail and in court when they were in need. He gave more of himself in more practical ways to the poor in our city than any volunteer I knew. In conversation one day he told me that he never entered a home in the Florida housing area in which a married couple lived together with their biological children. He visited personally in dozens of homes.

The Florida Housing Community went through demolition and rebuilding before Hurricane Katrina. For a long time social stratification in the area was determined by whether one lived in the "brick" or the "paint." The old buildings were brick and badly in need of demolition. The new and beautiful buildings were painted in pastel colors and were

very nicely appointed. Unfortunately, the entire Florida Housing Community flooded when the levees broke, was boarded up after the flood, and will likely be demolished.

Our church ministry team began to discuss in the fall of 2004 how we could take the ministry in the Florida Housing Community to the next level and what that level might be. We had started two churches in the area in the previous 14 years. We were helping with recreation, school work, food, healthcare, legal services, and moral instruction. We did not know what to do next, but we knew that what we were doing was not enough.

THE MAYOR MAKES A STATEMENT

New Orleans' Mayor C. Ray Nagin initiated a prayer breakfast for pastors at a downtown hotel in the fall of 2004 in an atmosphere of increasing street violence and gang activity. I attended and tried to ask a question. I held the microphone for 10 minutes, but the organizers never recognized me. I gave up and returned to my seat.

In the waning moments of that meeting, Mayor Nagin began to discuss the impact of poverty on the community lifestyle and values. Poverty in New Orleans has proven resistant to all kinds of government initiatives. Government housing projects such as the Florida community where we worked tend to become seedbeds for drugs, gangs, and crime, the Mayor observed.

Then the Mayor said something like this: "The single most important factor in lifting a family permanently out of poverty is home ownership." I borrowed a pen and wrote it down hastily.

That sentence hit me like a lightning bolt. The Mayor went on to discuss other things, but I was captivated by that one affirmation.

"Could it be?" I asked myself as we rose to our feet for a closing prayer. "Is owning a home the most important factor in breaking the family cycle of poverty?" I couldn't get the statement out of my head. I had never before heard such a claim.

Several years earlier I had participated in the formation of a local chapter of Habitat for Humanity in Temple, Texas. The church where I served as pastor, First Baptist Church of Temple, had given the seed money to begin this good work in our community. Several months after the chapter was formed we helped build a home not far from our church. I attended the dedication ceremony for that home and met the new homeowner. I was impressed with every aspect of that process.

But it never occurred to me that owning that home had the potential to change forever the economic standing and future of that woman, her children, and her grandchildren.

Prompted by the Mayor's statement, I went with a friend and fellow church member, Jerry Riggs, to the local office of the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO). Jerry, a native New Orleanian with a great heart for people, owned a number of apartments and

houses in the city and was a principal at a local school. I asked the HANO representative about the Mayor's statement. He agreed with the Mayor's statement. Others confirmed the Mayor's assertion. Even beyond education and job training, home ownership was the most important variable in bringing a family out of poverty into economic self-reliance.

I learned in my research that the majority of the personal wealth of Americans is in their homes. Home ownership is the normal and natural way that many Americans increase wealth and create a financial estate for their children.

A BAPTIST FOUNDATION REACHES OUT

An administrative assistant at Baptist Community Ministries (BCM) called me in the fall of 2004. She asked if I could attend a meeting of a subcommittee of the board of directors. I told her I would be there.

I served for three years on the visiting committee of the McFarland Institute, one of the subsidiary organizations under the BCM umbrella. The Institute offered a program in Clinical Pastoral Education for those training for the chaplaincy and other ministries.

I already knew that BCM was the largest foundation in the state of Louisiana. Byron Harrell, the CEO and president of BCM, was a big man with a big heart. He led the board of trustees of Southern Baptist Hospital to sell the hospital when it became apparent that a single hospital operation could not compete with the large conglomerates in the emerging climate of medical delivery services. The board of directors converted the assets of the hospital into a foundation aimed at addressing the most pressing needs of New Orleans.

Byron Harrell and the board of BCM were focused on healthcare, law enforcement, and education. But they were anxious to join with other Baptist entities to expand our work and witness in New Orleans. Joe McKeever, director of missions for the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans, attended the meeting with me. This question was put on the table for all of us to contemplate: "What can Baptists do together in our city?"

I leaned back in my chair. I knew what I was about to say was not common practice for Baptist churches. I knew that it fell outside of the BCM mission focus. But I also knew that I couldn't get it out of my heart.

"Let's build houses," I replied. "Let's put together a building blitz and build an entire city block of homes."

"How many homes are you talking about?" a board member asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "I guess a city block would accommodate 40 homes, 10 on each side. We could establish a partnership with Habitat for Humanity."

"Would Habitat be able and willing to do that?" someone asked.

“I’ll find out,” I answered, and felt a surge of hope and excitement in my soul. “If we did this together, it would be a great witness to our city. It would capture the imagination of our people. And it would change forever the economic future of 40 hard-working families in our city.”

This idea, more than any other, energized the people in the meeting, and everyone left with a sense that we should proceed down this road with further investigation and discussion. I called Jim Pate with the local chapter of Habitat and asked about a building blitz of 40 homes.

“We can do it,” Jim said without the slightest hesitation. And so began the project that, after the great flood, would become the most hopeful place in New Orleans.

AN ARMY OF VOLUNTEERS

Church groups have seen New Orleans as a destination of choice for many years. Inner-city ministry here was full-blown before the storm. Thousands of students arrived every spring break looking for ways to help. And thousands more came every summer to help conduct recreation ministries, children’s clubs, and every conceivable outreach to those at risk and in need.

As a pastor, I watched them come and go. Their numbers and their energy amazed me. They worked on projects of every description and were deployed through a host of local churches and ministries.

I know these volunteer groups made a difference in the lives of thousands of people. But I also know that they came and went like a water spout on the surface of Lake Pontchartrain. When the great volunteer influx of spring and summer was over, it was hard to tell what had been accomplished.

At various times before Hurricane Katrina, I suggested to my friends and local leaders of the churches that we should consolidate our efforts, put a fine point on our purpose, and work together to make a greater impact in the city. That idea was met with interest and affirmation, but we had no central clearinghouse for projects or volunteers.

Building homes seemed to me to be a great way to use the volunteer workforce that came to our city to make a significant and lasting difference in the community. The building blitz was easy to conceive, inspiring to contemplate, and would result in visible, physical, and positive change for our community.

GOD LED US TO BUILD HOUSES

I knew that God had called us to love our neighbors. I knew that deeds of kindness and concern were part of following Jesus. Therefore I knew that helping poor families achieve homeownership was a good and loving work consistent with the character and calling of God.

But I wasn't absolutely certain that "build houses" was a specific word from God just for me. I am not accustomed to having God tell me things like this—a specific instruction to accomplish some concrete task. I always couched my spiritual inclinations with the proviso, "I feel led to..." It seemed too arrogant and arbitrary for a pastor to always be announcing that he had heard a specific word from God to go do a certain thing—unless that certain thing was clearly spelled out in the Scriptures. It seemed to me to be wide open to abuse—and use as a tool for manipulating others.

A good friend and deacon in the church had asked if I really felt that building houses was good for us to do. It seemed to him to be outside the mission and ministry of our church. I went to God again in prayer. I sensed in my soul that we should do this good work. I spoke to the congregation and told them of my earnest prayer for God's direction and my great sense of peace in proceeding with the plan.

I shared the idea of building 40 new homes with pastors who have been my friends for many years. Some of them expressed honest concerns.

"Building houses is not really the work of the church," some said. "Where does it say that we should do that in the Bible?"

"What about 'I was a stranger, and you took me in'?" I mused out loud (Matthew 25:35). But I knew that what I was feeling led to do was too specific to claim a direct biblical mandate.

Some pastors were concerned that the project did not seem to directly benefit the church.

"Will these new homeowners be Christians?" they asked. "It makes more sense to provide homes for God's people so they can be witnesses in that area."

"No," I replied. "Our partnership with Habitat for Humanity will not allow that kind of discrimination. Besides, this project is about following Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan loved his neighbor without regard to his religious affiliation or future religious prospects" (Luke 10:25-37).

Their feedback sent me back to God in prayer, pleading for him to show me if this was not the right way. But I felt a strong sense in my soul that this is what God wanted us to do. I stepped up to the church dais the next Sunday in May of 2005. I opened my Bible and preached from the parable of the Good Samaritan. I told the congregation that I felt led to engage in this unusual work, and I believed that God would use it for his glory and to exalt the Savior in our city.

We had a kickoff Sunday in our church for the home-building project June 5, 2005. Everyone seemed inspired and challenged. We had broad support within the leadership of the congregation, and many churches were already interested in helping with the project. We launched the website www.baptistcrossroads.com.

The church and our partners were enthusiastic in their support, but I was continually checking with God about our direction. Truthfully, I believed it was a good idea—even an inspired idea. But I did not begin to understand how truly God had spoken this word until after the great flood of New Orleans on August 29, 2005.

God did not tell us about the flood. Only God knew that the flood was coming.

God led us to build houses. Because God spoke that word, the most hopeful place in New Orleans after the flood was the corner of Alvar and Roman Streets in the Upper Ninth Ward. Some people know it as Musician's Village. We always called it the Baptist Crossroads Project. Every dignitary who came through New Orleans the year after the flood went to that corner to see the progress the city was making. It is a beautiful and inspiring site—dozens of new homes painted bright colors in the middle of dozens of square miles of unimaginable devastation.

Five vacant city blocks were purchased in the Upper Ninth Ward before the storm in anticipation of “the largest building blitz by a single denomination in the history of Habitat for Humanity anywhere in the world,” according to Jim Pate, the director of the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity. We initiated the partnership with Habitat almost a year before the flood.

We had determined that we would build 40 homes in 10 weeks in the summer of 2006 with 3,000 volunteers from churches all over the country. Most of the funding was in place before Hurricane Katrina, and thousands of volunteers were already committed to come.

Then came the terrible storm and the failure of the levees on the interior canals in New Orleans. Some people call it the greatest natural disaster in the history of the United States. Others call it the greatest engineering failure in the history of the U.S. Corps of Engineers. Some call it a judgment from God.

Overnight, the city with the worst housing stock in America became the city with the least housing stock. I watched by television from our evacuation perch in a hotel Hot Springs, Arkansas, as the saltwater rushed through the levee breaches and the City of New Orleans became part of the sea. And I began to realize that the home-building venture we had planned was something in a different category, a word of great weight and promise.

And I knew that 40 homes would not be near enough.

THE WORK OF COMMUNITY-BUILDING

We formed the Baptist Crossroads Foundation back in 2004, well before the flood, to facilitate the launching of the home-building project. My first communication with that board after the storm was by email from my evacuation perch in north Louisiana. I suggested to the board that we might have to build 400 homes instead of 40.

I contacted our local affiliate of Habitat for Humanity and suggested the same. Jim Pate was on board immediately. We renewed the commitment for the building blitz in the summer of 2006, and we built 30 homes.

Now we are laying out our plans for the next five years. Mike Flores, a deacon at First Baptist and executive vice president of the Baptist Crossroads Foundation, has formulated an effort to renew the Upper Ninth Ward of New Orleans in a comprehensive way. He has identified 76 city blocks of residential housing that we will target for new construction, renovation, and demolition. By the end of 2011, Baptist Crossroads will seek to help 1,500 homeowners move into their new home, demolish a home that is no longer viable, or renovate a home for re-occupation.

Concurrent with the housing effort, we are formulating partnerships that will pave the roads, do the landscaping, and start up schools in the community. Churches are joining as partners in the effort along with many other business, public and nonprofit entities. We hope that the Upper Ninth will continue to be “the most hopeful place in New Orleans” as a new community emerges from the ruins of the old.

THE PASTOR OUR CHURCH NOW NEEDS

I have always loved the work of the pastor. The diversity of assignments is invigorating to me. Preaching, staff development, and hospital visitation are delightful for me.

But I have never been a pastor in the way that I am doing it now in our devastated city.

I find that the devastation of the flood, which physically surrounds our church facility, is never far from my mind. It disturbs me every day. And it creeps into my teaching and preaching no matter what the text or theme. When I inquire about the appropriateness of this intrusion, I receive mixed reviews. Some people went through the storm virtually unscathed while thousands lost everything. They sit together in the church pews. One is ready to move on. The other lives in a FEMA trailer still and cannot move on.

Churches and other nonprofit organizations have led the way in the rescue, the relief, and the recovery of New Orleans. It now appears that they will also lead the way in the city’s rebirth. As a pastor, I have actively participated in each of these stages of the disaster and its aftermath. My calendar was typically too crowded before the storm. Now I must add to the funerals and weddings and hospital visits and committee meetings another layer of activity—the recovery. This week alone I have had meetings concerning economic development, education, healthcare, criminal justice, and housing. I am continually groping for a balance between the traditional responsibilities of pastoral ministry and the new responsibilities of disaster recovery.

Many new partnerships and coalitions have been formed as a result of the flood. Organizations of all kinds from all over the country are interested in our needs and opportunities. I meet with them eagerly because I know we must have their continued

support. Ministers are gathering to develop unified strategies for dealing with common problems. I want to be there.

The media are interested and concerned. The newspaper asks for a guest editorial, a local radio talk show needs an hour of live conversation, and a radio network in Illinois wants an extended interview. Everyone in higher education and church relations is studying the response to the disaster and needs a moment.

I am fully aware that my assignment has changed. I know that the pastor of First Baptist Church of New Orleans must be engaged in the work of recovery. I did not choose this context for ministry—God chose it for me. Therefore, I must make the adjustments that are required to be faithful in my new role. I stay in a steep learning curve.

CONCLUSION

First Baptist New Orleans is in the most unreal and surreal situation imaginable, sitting in the flood zone of New Orleans with 85 percent of the population still gone, and I am finally having a ball. For the first four months after the storm I felt that we had all fallen under God's judgment. Now I realize that we have all fallen under his favor—we are the chosen ones. We have been given the incredible opportunity to participate in shaping of the future of a great American city. We are operating right now in the land of dreams and legends. From the rich soil of this moment will come the poetry and songs and prose that will bless the lives of thousands and memorialize these days for generations to come.

God knows why, but we have fallen heir to history's turning point. Out of this unprecedented devastation has arisen an unprecedented opportunity—the building of a major city, a beautiful city, an economic and military center, a world class port, the most interesting city in America.

I thought for awhile that we were in limbo—that outer parking lot of heaven reserved for the unbaptized infants. I realize now that our city is in an embryonic position, being reconceived in the 21st century, and we are its parents and guardians.

This great devastation has occurred, not in the tsunami area of eastern Asia but in the United States of America. That means that we have immense resources to apply to this immense need. Out of this seedbed of destruction will come new ideas in economics, politics, and theology that will change the thinking of future generations.

The church of Jesus Christ in America must rise to this unique challenge. We must show the gospel here as well as speaking it. We must consistently love the displaced and disturbed with love that goes the second mile. In the end we will discover that the experience of devastation has been a tool of sanctification in the church as well as in individual believers. And we will see that our determined presence and witness has exalted the Savior and produced abundant fruit.