

## Primer on Urban Ministry

Urban ministry is about serving with the body of Christ which exist in the urban communities and trusting God to bring about change which will glorify God and empower the communities. Turn with me to Proverbs 13:23. The New American Standard version says, “Abundant food is in the fallow ground of the poor, but it is swept away by injustice.” The New Living Translation renders it, “A poor man’s farm may produce much food, but injustice sweeps it all away. This morning I will attempt to expound on this verse covering three ideas. First, that abundance already exist in the economically disadvantages neighborhoods of our country. Secondly, I will try to explain fallow ground, and what causes the ground to remain fallow and what can be done to cultivated it. And, finally we will talk about injustice. On each of these points I will try to make application of the truth by describing what I believe to be the Christ-like mindsets or attitudes that should accompany the Christian who seeks to help in these neighborhoods. Again the three ideas are: Abundance, Fallow ground and Injustice.

- A. The first idea here is that Abundance is present in the economically disadvantages communities in our country. This is critical to our understanding. One of the mistakes I see frequently among well intentioned whites is an attitude of superiority or paternalism. If you believe you have what the inner-city needs whether that is understanding, resources or ideas you are perceived or felt as disrespectful. I would like to illustrate this by telling you of my first visit with my pastor. My Wife and I have been members of Greater Open Door Missionary Baptist church for 10 years. Greater open door is a traditional black Baptist church a block away from where we live and minister. Eleven years ago we had 70 kids meeting for a Bible club in a small basement apartment. 70 kids in a small room was mayhem. We needed a larger place to meet. I tried the local library and a youth club and was turned down, so I went to meet with Pastor Richard Nelson of Greater Open Door. We talked for over two hours. Near the end of the conversation he said, “If you want me to believe that you were sitting in Cleveland Ohio and God said, “Come to West Side of Chicago. OK I will work with you, but I did not ask for you.” What did he mean by that? Let me tell you about Pastor Nelson. When Pastor was called to the ministry he was a regional manager for Marriot and was in charge of several food service establishments located in various corporate offices in the Chicago area. He was a professional. Very qualified for his work. What was some 30 year old, country, white-boy going to do in an inner-city neighborhood in Chicago that he could not do better? To his credit he trusted the sovereignty of God and agreed to work with me. I am the one that benefited from this relationship. I have learned more about the grace of God from Pastor Nelson and the rest of the Church than I had learned in my first 10 years as a Christian. The Abundance of understanding was in that community before I got there.

Shortly, after we moved in to the neighborhood we noticed that there was a lot economic activity going on in the alley behind our 3 flat. All day and most of the night there were people lined up in the alley to buy drugs. Frequently, there were

40 people standing in line to purchase drugs. My training is as an Electrical Engineer. Problem solving is 2<sup>nd</sup> nature to me. I was coming up with ideas that involved surveillance cameras and working with the police. We began to discuss the problem with some of the neighbors. Their solution was much better. They suggested a prayer meeting to take place in our back yard 15 feet from the drug line. Ms. Hattie led the prayer time. She prayed in the hearing of the drug line for the salvation of those in line and the dealers. She prayed that they would not just move to the next block, but that they get saved, get jobs and find hope in life. She prayed on for 20 minutes. When she was done everybody said amen. A couple days later the drug line was gone. In the 10 years since then the drug line has been in our alley only a hand-full of times. The Abundance of Understanding was in the community before we showed up. The community taught the missionary how to minister. The community taught the missionary how to wage a spiritual war. Abundance is in the fallow ground of the poor.

How should this principal of Abundance being in the community, before we arrive direct us?

### **1. Humility:**

Phil 2:3-8 says, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men.

Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

The urban worker must be humble. Jesus set the example when he moved into our neighborhood. He came as a baby. He came to serve. He came to give himself. Again Phil 2:3 says, "Regard one another as more important than yourselves... This is a conscious decision to regard others as more important. The Spirit of God is not saying that others are more important than you. No, rather we are to act as if they are more important than we are. Obviously, this principal applies in all our relationships but, especially is we are going to cross cultures, and economic classes.

### **2. Avoid making distinctions (Judging):**

**Jam 2:1** My dear friends, don't let public opinion influence how you live out our glorious, Christ-originated faith.

**Jam 2:2** If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes in right after him,

**Jam 2:3** and you say to the man in the suit, "Sit here, sir; this is the best seat in the house!" and either ignore the street person or say, "Better sit here in the back row,"

**Jam 2:4** haven't you segregated God's children and proved that you are judges who can't be trusted?

**Jam 2:5** Listen, dear friends. Isn't it clear by now that God operates quite differently? He chose the world's down-and-out as the kingdom's first citizens, with full rights and privileges. This kingdom is promised to anyone who loves God.

diakrinō **Thayer Definition:** to separate, make a distinction, discriminate, to prefer

The error here is not that we simply judge or discriminate between people it is that we make distinctions at all. The message of the cross is that we are all guilty. The message of the cross is that we are in Christ because of what Christ has done. The mentality that says we need to help the poor people is wrong. We are all poor. The word for poor here describes a beggar. We are all beggars in need of Jesus provision on the cross not only for salvation but, for all of life. We all need salvation everyday. The word for savior means deliverer, rescuer and preserver. My experience is that lower income believers have a much better understanding of this. They need Jesus to come through for them or they do not make it.

Frequently, middle-class believers have their basic needs met and look to Jesus for help for their eternal security and do not experience him as deliverer. We need the poor to teach us faith. We struggle for years with some besetting sin because we do not know how to hang on to Jesus to rescue us. I know there are many exceptions to this in our today. I am speaking of our tendency as a class of people. I am the greatest offender on this point. When I came to Christ I remember thinking, "this is the right thing to do, Jesus is the truth, Jesus is Lord." He needs to be the head of my life." Salvation to me was secondary. I was not until I went through very serious personal struggles that I met Jesus as Saviour. He longs that we call on Him in our day of trouble.

3. **Come to Serve:** **Act 13:5** says, "When they reached Salamis, they *began* to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. Helper is translated from the Greek word hupoeretes. Which means, "an under rower" (hupo, "under," eretes, "a rower"), hence came to denote "any subordinate acting under another's direction;" There are three Greek words that are translated helper in the NASB. The most common is the word Paraklete. Paraklete is only used in reference to the Holy Spirit and it means: to call to one side. King James translate it comforter or counselor. John is the only NT author to use Paraklete. The third way *protatis* was used in acts to speak of female hand maid or assistant.

Men and women are never called to be a paraklete. This was somewhat disappointing to me when I studied the word. I used to think that was the role I was playing in urban ministry. But, you see I was suffering from a lack of humility. If the abundance is already present in the uncultivated ground of our urban neighborhoods the need is for workers not leaders.

**Joel 2:28 says, "It will come about after this That I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; And your sons and daughters will prophesy, Your old men will dream dreams, Your young men will see visions. The spirit of God has empowered the old men of our urban neighborhoods to dream dreams. Our job is to come under their direction and help them accomplish what God has laid on their hearts. The proper word for this is *hupoeretes* an under rower. We are to take our direction from them.**

If you ask the godly men in a community like ours they will say, "We need jobs!", "We need better schools!" My experience is that whites are quick to write off these requests. A typical white response to the need for jobs is to say that there are jobs if someone is really hungry for work. For the reasons I will present in a moment, men in these communities have a much more difficult time getting a job. Also, the job market has changed. 20 years ago most jobs did not require skills. Nearly 80% of jobs in the newspaper were unskilled. Now the number is 20%. There are few unskilled jobs available.

We need better schools, is rebuffed by saying that more money is spent per student in the cities already. Why can't they educate their children on what we spend to educate children in the suburbs? The answer is that the context is very different. The support systems in the suburbs do not exist in the cities. Most families are headed by single working mothers who are out of energy and time to be as involved in their children's education as most suburban families. We cannot blame the mothers for their situation. That does not help. That may rationalize our non-involvement, but it does not solve the problem.

Abundance of food is in the fallow ground of the poor, but it is swept away by injustice. The next idea I would like to discuss is fallow ground.

B. Fallow ground is a farming term describing fields uncultivated. Sometimes farmers will plow the field at the end of harvest and let it lay dormant for the next year. This is healthy for the fields. The picture the writer of the proverb is creating is that there is much wealth in uncultivated fields of the poor. The question we must answer is why are the fields of the poor left fallow? When Jesus explained the parable of the sower in Matthew 13 He said the ground was what the seed of the gospel is sown in. Indicating that the heart of man is like soil or ground. How are the hearts of man and women in the urban neighborhoods like fallow ground? I submit that the primary reason is: hopelessness. To be without hope leaves the heart full of pain and in search of pain reliever. Drug use is frequently a result of hopelessness. Why is there no hope? Let me explain why men in my community are without hope. High school drop out rate is 75%, most of the schools in my neighborhood are on academic probation. Class rooms are over crowded. Text books are old and out dated. Many teachers are frustrated and not properly resourced. Parental involvement is poor. We do not have time to analysis the problem here, but the result of the problem is that students are not achieving academically. Students fall behind and many give up on school, thus

the high drop out rate. Without basic skills and no marketable skill they turn to the local drug economy for work. Gangs in the African-American communities are all about money. If you work a corner you get paid. This works out until you get pick up by the police. With a felony on their record the hope finding a legitimate job get worse.

If this was an isolated example it would not be so bad. The problem is that this is common. A typical 23 year male in the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago does not have a high school education, has a felony and is unemployed. Chances are that their immediate family is in a similar situation. There is no support network for them to climb out of this situation. The guys driving the Lincoln Navigators and Cadillac Escalades are the gang-bangers. What are their options? What are they going to set their hope on?

To combat this problem we started APL Teaching Factory. APL is from Is 61:3 “A planting of the Lord” Our first priority is to give the men and women hope. We try to accomplish this by starting each day reading the gospels and praying with them. Secondly, we love them. We help with their résumé’s. We find out their story. We listen to them. Thirdly, we challenge them to trust God. They are invited to demonstrate their trust by showing up to class on time and do the homework and stay off drugs. If they do that we will do every thing we can to help find them a job. Half of the students who start the class drop out. The ones who make it through the first two weeks usually stay with us for the entire 6 weeks. We find most of them jobs.

What we also find is a lot of talent. We see in each class a lot of talent that has never been cultivated; it was fallow ground. Lawrence came to us after he had just been released from a 24 year stint at the state prison. He bought in to what we had told him. He went two of our 6 –week classes. He stayed two hours after each class to work on his math. By the end of the second class he scored high enough to enter the community college in a metal working training program. He is due to graduate in a few weeks and begins his career as a machinist.

Lawrence is going to make it because he has hope. His hope has resulted in him disciplining himself to gain the skills he needs to be successful.

APL Teaching factory works best for guys who are 23 year old and up. The younger guys are not convinced that the way of the streets is a dead end. They have hope, but their hope is in the wrong thing.

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The mind-set or attitude which should result from the understanding of Fallow ground is that of a learner.

1. A learner's heart. [Isa 50:4](#) says, "The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples, That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens *Me* morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. The word disciple means learner, or student. Men and Women in urban communities are weary. If we are to be like Jesus to them we must come to sustain and help. We cannot accomplish this without first learning from them. What is it like to walk in their shoes? What is it like to live where they live? What is it like to go to their schools?"

I would illustrate this by describing the evolution of my thinking about the criminal justice system. When I first began living in the community I tended to believe what the police and prosecuting attorneys said when they were in the nightly news. And when residents or suspects were interviewed I tended to not believe what they said. This, by the way, is prejudice. Everybody has prejudice. This explains why during the OJ Simpson trial, whites believed him to be guilty and blacks believed him to be innocent. After I had been there awhile I began to see things differently. One of my first encounters with the law was with a sheriff who drove quickly down the wrong way on the street in front of my 3 flat and jumped out of his squad car and ordered me to put my hands on top of the car. After frisking me he asked what are you doing in this neighborhood? I said, "I live here". He did not believe me. I reached for my wallet to show him my driver's license. He said, "Keep your hands up" I said I would like to show you my driver's license. He agreed. He looked at the license and said, "Get a gun". I said, "In Chicago, I am not allowed to own a gun." He said, "Get a gun" and he jumped back in his car and raced away.

On another occasion, I was talking to some guys from the neighborhood on the street and a Chicago Police officer pulled up and ordered the two guys I was talking with to put their hands up on the side of the building. He frisked them and not me. He asked what I was doing here. I said I live here and these are my friends. I am a youth minister trying to help out around here. He grumble got in his car and drove away. My friends were black.

One time I was walking with two white friends who were visiting me. Again a couple police officers pulled up. "What are you guys doing around here?" I said, "I live here. I am a youth minister working with young men." He said, "there is not anyone any good around here." I contested, "that's not true, 95% of the folks around here are good, decent people. Only 5% are the gang bangers others are just trying to survive. The officer, speaking to the other men with me said, "I do not know about him, speaking of me, he is crazy. You guys should get out of here."

How would the fact that the police do not believe there is anyone any good in my community effect the way they do their job? Perhaps some would look for any excuse to lock up someone. Have ever heard a urban resident complain that cops will lock up anyone for a crime regardless of their guilt. After living in my neighborhood for several years I began to think more like

my neighbors. I have many more stories to illustrate this point. It took me walking in their shoes in a very limited way to begin to understand why they do not trust the law enforcement personnel. I now tend not to believe the police when they speak on the evening news. I am still prejudiced.

I am better equipped to comfort the weary with a word. We need to come with a learner's heart. We need to seek to understand why people do the things they do. There is a reason that makes sense to them for all of their actions. We may never agree with their decisions, but we can understand their decisions.

I met Michael in a Maxima Security division of Cook County Jail (there are 14 divisions in the Cook County Jail housing over 10,000 detainees). He made the mistake of getting in the car a friend was driving. While in the car his friend went through a drive thru ATM. The camera in the ATM saw him and his friend. His friend was getting cash using the card of a woman he had murdered a short time earlier. Michael and his friend were picked up by the police for questioning. The officer told Michael that he knew his friend had murdered the woman and if he would just make a statement that he broke into the house with his friend he would make sure that he would only be charged for breaking a entry. If he did not he would be charged with the murder. After 72 hours of interrogation, and having a baloney sandwich he was scared and confused he agreed and signed the statement. He has been in Cook County Jail for over 5 years now charged with 2, 1<sup>st</sup> degree murders. Michael had no prior felonies. His friend has the same charge. Michael has come to Christ and is a leader on the Christian deck where I teach the Bible and disciple the detainees. He has never been found guilty, yet he sits there unjustly accused. It does not matter to the law enforcement people because there is no one any good where he comes from. Michael one example, there are others. When I make a mistake it cost me a traffic ticket. Some of my friends have lost much more.

To be a blessing in the urban neighborhoods of our county we must come with a heart of a learner. We need to be willing to re visit some of the things we believe.

Santos was arrested and charged with murder. He was at work at the time of the murder and had his time card and witness to prove it. Someone told the police that it was him. Santos had no prior arrest and was not involved with gangs. Santos is Puerto Rican. I met Santos on the Christian deck in Cook County Jail after he had been there 4 years. He was never found guilty and did not have money for a good attorney. His wife and two kids struggle to get by without his income. It became obvious the system did not have the right guy. However, for fear a law suits for false imprisonment the refuse to release him unless he pleads guilty to some thing. After he had been there for 5 1/2 years and knowing that he was innocent he finally gave in and plea guilty to

the lower offense and was sent to State prison to serve his 6 months. While serving his 6 months the FBI contacted the state of IL and told them that had a confession to the murder and to release Santos. They refuse at first, but with added pressure from the FBI Santos was released. The criminal justice system stole 5 ½ years from Santos and his family. Most of the guys on the deck where I minister are guilty; however there is a lot of injustice in the way the guys are treated in the system.

Abundance is in the fallow ground of the poor, but it is swept away by injustice. These last two stories speak of injustice. The final point in the Proverb is injustice

C. Injustice. Absence of Justice. Lack of fairness. Inequalities. The lack of justice is what keeps the poor from realizing the abundance that God has given them. The lack of fairness keeps the poor from experiencing the opportunities that you and I take for granted. God's Word says, that there is abundance there for them, but something is keeping them from it. God has exhorted his people to take up the cause of the widow, orphan and stranger because these are the ones who get taken advantage of by the powerful.

Deuteronomy 10:17-19

For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe.

"He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing.

"So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

**Isa 1:17** Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow.

**Jer 7:6** if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, nor walk after other gods to your own ruin,

**Jer 7:7** then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.

**Zec 7:10** and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.'

**Psa 72:13** He will have compassion on the poor and needy, And the lives of the needy he will save.

**Psa 113:7** He raises the poor from the dust And lifts the needy from the ash heap,

**Psa 140:12** I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted And justice for the poor.

**Isa 10:2** So as to deprive the needy of justice And rob the poor of My people of *their* rights, So that widows may be their spoil And that they may plunder the orphans.

**Luk 4:18** "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED,

Jesus took up the cause of the poor and oppress and has call us to do the same.

In my opinion this is one of the greatest opportunities for the Gospel. What better way to show the world that Christians are indeed different. Race relations in our country are and have been one of our greatest problems. Last year in Cincinnati is a good

example. What if white and black churches stood arm and arm to confront injustices confronting the communities of the black church? I am not suggesting that we believe every thing we hear and blindly back every one contesting the powers that be. What I am suggesting is that we engage with some of the churches in these communities with humility, w/o judging, with a learner's heart as servants and seek to understand and act as the Lord leads with all wisdom. This would demonstrate the power of the gospel to break down the dividing walls as Paul talks about in [Eph 2:14](#) *For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall,*

How did the Church grow from 70+ at the day of Pentecost to the point that 300 years latter Constantine makes Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire? The historians that have studied this say it was accomplished by a 3% annual growth. It was not a result of a massive revival rather by Christian engaging their world as salt and light. For example, one of the activities discovered by historians was the practice of Christians rescuing the abandon babies and raising them. Another practice was Christians going to the garbage heaps and taking the dead bodies and burying them. Jesus touched the untouchable of his society and this screamed to the world that there is something different about the gospel. How could we likewise take on some of the crisis in our country and bring about change impact the gospel? There are opportunities like these in the urban neighborhoods of our country.

Injustice can take many forms from the injustice of one individual to another or injustice of a corporation towards a group of people. For instance, Denny's the restaurant change was sued for racism in the way it treated African- American patrons. This case was settle last year I believe. Then there is our biggest problem and that is systemic racism. Systemic racism is what I describe in the criminal Justice system in Chicago. Another example of this is the way schools are funded in Chicago.

The Chicago public school system is one big school district. However, funding to the local schools is based on the property tax revenue from the local wards. So, on the north side the schools have computers and new text books while the schools in my neighborhood work with 20 year text books. Vanessa a co-worker of mine told me that when she taught in an elementary school in my neighborhood she had no text books at all for the first 3 months of school. She was then given text books that were 20 years old. So, she went to Kinko's and made copies of good material at her own expense to give to here students. The system is broken. It does not work for the poorest residents; and it is a result of systemic racism.

Sadly, another example of this is within the Navigators. Of the 1500 staff there are only a handful of black staff. The Navs have trained over a hundred black staff. Blacks have a very difficult time doing fundraising. Traditionally, black churches do not have mission budgets. Para-church groups are rare in the black community. Most of the friends and family of black staff are poor. So, the Navigator funding model does not work for Black or Hispanics. The Navigators Desperately want minority on their staff, but the current funding system prevents it. I am a member of the Ethnic Funding task

force and we are working to correct the problem. This illustrates, however, how systemic injustice permeates our society and should change.

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What is our charge? I believe we need to engage in the communities of need around us. We need to take on the attitude of a servant and humbly partner with local churches and work to bring the change that they believe we need to change. If you endeavor to do this, please realize you will not be welcomed with open arms. You will likely be greeted with suspicion. We cannot let that stop us. I sat in the pew and tithed for 3 years before I was invited to begin to contribute to the church's ministry. We need to take a learner's heart and try to understand why they do the things they do. Be very slow to criticize anything you see. Wait until you understand the whys and have earned the trust of people involved before you speak. This is a lonely process. Expect to be helped in your personal walk with God more than you will be helped. This is a two-way process. Be careful to choose a Church that is independent and does not need your financial help. If money becomes involved too early it will thwart the process and you will only be viewed as a financial resource. Endeavor to build relationships with those whom money is not the first concern. You will be taken advantage of, so was Jesus. They have been taken advantage of as well.

Let's trust God and move ahead to build long-term relationships that can demonstrate the power of the gospel.