

URBAN COMMUNITY:  
REFLECTING GOD'S CREATIVE AND REDEMPTIVE MISSION IN THE WOLD

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the community of The Love Grows Here Wellness Center who's missions toward creating community and wellness for all has inspired this journey. I am humbled by your leadership, grace, and love which reflects the Light of Christ to one another and to the world.

Thank you for allowing me to break bread with you each week.



To my colleagues and advisors at Luther Seminary, specifically the Children, Youth and Family Department who have taught me and encouraged me to always look through my unique theological lens.



To my family and friends who have supported me on this journey. Thank you.

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*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Mark 12:30-31*

On the last day of the Wellness Center season, I stood back in the corner of the large room, and with tears welling up in my eyes I began to wonder how we became this community centered in wellness and deep relationship with one another. As the director, I don't often get to stand back during Wellness and reflect on our journey together. I am usually running around making sure the evening is operating smoothly, but as the final night of Wellness came to a close for our third season, I became overwhelmed with gratitude for the transformative nature of God and what God was doing in the hall of our church and extending into the urban community that surrounds us. As I watched this celebration complete with over two hundred members of our community, neighborhood social service partners, amazing music, barbecued ribs, dancing, laughing, and plates of leftovers for the community, I couldn't help but think about what God was up to. As the musical harmonies, energy of the room, and smells from the grill washed over all of us, I thought about some of the amazing things I had witnessed and learned from this joy-filled yet broken urban community over the last few years.

As part of our mission of First Lutheran Church on the East side of Saint Paul, Minnesota, we ask that at the Love Grows Here Wellness Center that *you come as you are*, bringing your gifts and your brokenness to a place where you may find wellness, rest, and relationships. By offering pragmatic services like, free mental health counseling, pastoral care, alternative healing modalities, community education courses, food assistance, social justice organizations, activities for children and youth, we seek to be in relationship. In the true spirit of discipleship, we provide sacred space for nurses who come each week to wash and care for the feet of those in our community. We encourage everyone to call each other by name and take time to tell and acknowledge each other's stories. Each week we carve out

time in silence, reflecting with gratitude about one another coming together in community, about the hands that have grown and prepared the food, for the opportunity to find respite and wellness in a safe space, and for everyone who plays a role.

Making the wellness center a safe space to be is important, because many of the members in our community are suffering. They are suffering from experiences with homelessness, addiction, mental illness, abuse, poverty, broken familial relationships, severe health issues, and more. Coming to the Wellness Center offers a safe place to be for even a few hours a week where the mission toward wellness for all is the center of our mission statement. We have rooted this focus in building relationships and as a result are learning how to truly know and accept one another as neighbors in the community and God's world. This urban community comes through the doors of the church every week to break bread together and to be with one another, where we receive each other expecting and understanding the brokenness.

The embedded realities of the urban context provide greater opportunities for living in community, being in relationship, reflecting the true kingdom of heaven, and speaking the truth to the wider church about what it means to live in God's creative and redeeming mission in the world. And through our call to be the missional church, and not simply a church with a mission, I will illustrate how lives and relationships are transformed in this place, moving people toward a sense of hope.

Throughout my paper I will use stories from the lives of those I have come to know in our church's wellness community. The stories of our community will give insight into the struggles, despair, and challenges faced by many people in the community who are marginalized. The realities and the structures of the urban community are both intricate and complicated, beautiful and life-giving. The urban community has a deeply rooted and highly complex cultural heritage that, because of its geographical proximity to the center of the city, draws in a variety of ethnic backgrounds,

socioeconomic classes, highly educated professionals, families, elders, and impoverished and marginalized castoffs of society. Values and shared meaning in the urban context are both traditionally rooted and ever-changing, and the vast cultural rituals, traditions, and contextual realities are closely intertwined. It is in the relationships of the urban community where we see the gifts and challenges most clearly. Ronald E. Peters writes:

One of the biggest challenges facing practitioners in urban ministry has less to do with geographical or sociological context of the city itself than with the pervasive realities that define the era in which we live. Realities that define the context in which urban ministry is carried out today can be summed up in three words: *alienation*, *fear*, and *violence*. These are relational realities that are found in all communities, but their characteristics are more obvious in urban society.<sup>1</sup>

I explore theological ideas that take a deeper look at how the realities of the urban community speak to the wider church and how these relationships reveal God to us. I will argue that the theology of the cross is the redemptive move that allows all of us to bear one another's burdens and enter into a new kind of relationship with others at the foot of the cross where we meet Jesus Christ.

Unpacking the urban context will help us understand the importance of the place of the church in the neighborhood and in the world. Liberation theology provides a background for why it is important to understand the complexities of urban ministry and how we may find ways that the urban context helps us recognize who our "neighbor" truly is. It is my hope that by exploring the racial, cultural, and economic struggles of the urban community, we might have a better understanding of how the church can be a unique voice that actively participates in the day to day struggles of the community and experiences transformative relationships as we seek to honor all people as children of God.

The realities of the urban context help us live into our understanding of brokenness and see and experience the countless ways in which God is working to move us from a theology of the cross to a theology of hope. There is something about hope in the urban community that awakens us to a reality about God that gives us insight into who God is.

God calls us into community, but we limit our interactions and struggle to live into relationship with “the perceived other.” With this in mind I will suggest pragmatic ways in which the urban context speaks to the wider church’s unique call toward mission in the world, toward fulfilling God’s creative and redemptive work. Through the practice of radical hospitality, missional accompaniment, and the raising up of leaders, we allow Christ to work in and through us, putting less emphasis on programming and activities and revealing ministry to one another in more organic ways.

### ***A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH***

Embedded in the Theology of the Cross is redemption that moves toward a Theology of Hope.

*George* came to us for the first time earlier this year. When I met him he was experiencing homelessness, struggling with mental illness, had only the clothes on his back, and was looking for a place to dry out. He lost his job long ago because of his mental illness and was unable to find support without a fee. He has no family to speak of, is legally blind, and deaf in one ear. Someone on the street told him that we provide free mental health counseling and a meal. Hungry and tired, *George* came to the Wellness Center seeking help and support.

*Desiree* has been coming to us with her family since she was three years old. She is six now and comes with her mom and brother, two uncles, three aunties, a grandma, and a great grandma. Each week at wellness is a family affair. *Desiree* doesn’t know her dad, because he is in prison since she was a baby. She has never lived anywhere where she has her own bed, and she struggles with chronic health issues.

Earlier this winter a group of children and youth from the neighborhood started showing up at the Wellness Center. One of their uncles had been shot on the street corner just three blocks from church in a gang-related incident that made the news. Many expressed concern over not feeling safe in the

neighborhood and wanted a place to go where they could be with other kids. They told me they would



watch other people in the neighborhood walk down to the church each week, so they started following the crowd. Some of the youth who showed up had been expelled from school or were on probation and looking for a place to do community service. Many of the children showed up without winter jackets, and none of them had hats, gloves, or boots. That first night we sat down and had our first family dinner together at the Wellness Center.

What is it about the urban community that helps us understand what Jesus meant when he said to “Love your neighbor as yourself”? What can the urban context teach the church about hospitality and relational ministry in a world of difficulty and differences? How can the unique juxtaposition of diverse cultures, complex family systems, economic divisions, interfaith dialogues, and deeply rooted histories help us understand who our neighbor truly is?

The Theology of the Cross reminds us that we all are flawed. Acknowledging the existence of our brokenness allows every one to come to the table just as they are. Living into relationships in this place of brokenness, finding our commonalities, and supporting one another allow us a fuller understanding of God’s kingdom. The stories of George, Desiree, and the children in our neighborhood are examples of the brokenness people experience as a result of racism, poverty, and social and political challenges.

The urban context provides a unique opportunity to live into God’s creative and redemptive call where promises of the world have fallen short and change is constant. How do we understand this reality and use it as an opportunity to proclaim Christ in word and in deed? There is creative and redemptive movement in the gospel and an opportunity in the urban community to move from the oppressive realities of systematic racism, marginalized existences, and scarcity of justice toward a hopeful community that calls us to be in relationship with one another and acknowledges each other as neighbors in Christ.

It is important that we take a more in-depth look at how the Theology of the Cross and the urban context speak into one another. Time and again we fall short, but God continues to claim us all as his chosen people. Through the sending of God's Son Jesus Christ to the cross, God's love for the world and all that is in it is revealed.

The cross is God's radical affirmation of the compassion and solidarity with the world. Through the cross God gives us a new way to be in relationship with one another. Jesus Christ suffered and died on the cross so that we as human beings might know a new and more loving way to be in relationship with one another. It demonstrates the character of God in a new way. We see a God who now seeks to be involved with us so deeply that God sacrificed God's own Son so that we may live as forgiven people. As Christians we believe in the crucified God and risen Christ who showed us a new way to love one another.<sup>2</sup>

In many ways, the urban context is broken and beaten down, and yet God has compassion for all and desires solidarity even in the most unexpected places of sin and despair. The reality of this context is that it is a "world" God loves. It is a world that is constantly changing, has a deeply rich history in both love and conflict, and always has potential for good. The theology of the cross helps us to recognize that you come as you are, which means that its identity is rooted in the realistic nature of humanity.<sup>3</sup> Just as the mission of the Wellness Center invites everyone to come as you are and takes in the honest reality of our community, the cross allows us all to come to our relationship being honest and open about our own brokenness and sinful nature.

The theology of the cross is also contextual and refuses to accept that the cross is the end of the story, which means that just like God, it is both transcendent and relevant to all time and space.

Because it speaks into and of the world it pertains to all historical contexts. This is crucial for the urban context whose embedded realities still reveal pain and suffering due to our indignant response to God's call toward justice and liberation from these oppressive poverties. As Hall explains:

It would be difficult to grasp the character of this theological tradition without paying a good deal of attention to the eschatological dimension that runs through its length and breadth. One could even say that the chief difference between the theology of the cross and the antithesis that Luther uses as his contrast, the *theologia gloriae*, is their eschatology. The theology of glory depends on an eschatology that is fully “realized,” namely, realized in the church, realized in theology as true and irrefutable doctrine. There is a “realized” dimension in the theology of the cross, too; but it is not a realization to which the church and its theology can lay claim. The purposes of God are realized in Christ, and faith looks to God in trust and hope.<sup>4</sup>

Christ comes to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). Through his life, death, and resurrection, God was reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19). “It is critical to note that the reconciling work of Jesus affects both the vertical plane and the horizontal plane . . . . While mortals through the ages have tirelessly sought to build their own kingdoms, Jesus Christ . . . walked and died among us, and was raised again in order to inaugurate his kingdom. His reconciling work is also kingdom building work.”<sup>5</sup>

The good news for us as Christians is that the cross is not the end of the story. In the same way the imbedded realities of the urban context are not all bad news. These realities will give us a greater understanding of how the impoverished urban community serves as an example of the true kingdom of heaven and can speak to what it means for the wider church to live into God’s creative and redemptive mission in and of the world.

### ***A THEORETICAL APPROACH***

The urban context is challenging but also can be a rich environment of possibility. Author Brenda Olson summarizes in this way:

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Urban churches exist in complex, diverse environments. Simply by still existing in such an environment over time, persons in membership within urban congregations know and understand a language, which can engage the many themes of plurality. Language such as this, does not ignore the difficult conversations surrounding oppressions of many kinds, nor does it fail to embrace a hopeful tomorrow, transforming images of now, which may include disparaging reminders of the problems to overcome.<sup>6</sup>

Because of its geographical location, the urban church has the opportunity to open its doors to the complexities of the urban culture and allow the Holy Spirit to blow through a reciprocal relationship between church and neighborhood. Community is created first by mutually acknowledging the brokenness that exists in both the church and the surrounding community. It is also through radical authenticity and love that the community is created and maintained and that people shape and are shaped by their community.<sup>7</sup> The unique aspect of diverse cultures and marginalized existences in the urban community speak to the heart of God's multi-colored kingdom. Let us make no mistake, while it can be said that many of the realities of the urban community allow for deep despair, God is there. Though it may seem that God is absent in the struggles and suffering of those who are oppressed and seek justice, we as Christians understand that God is there and the church is a vessel that seeks to be in relationship, both in the world and of the world. It is in how we "be" the church, an extension of God's hands and feet working on behalf of God's creative and redemptive work in the world.

With that said, it is important to address some of the deeply rooted issues that have contributed to many of the complex realities faced by the urban community. It would be difficult with this limited space to deconstruct the enormous issues that we face as a church and as a society, which speak directly to the challenges of the urban culture. However, it is important to understand some of the background of the relationship between the church and the urban community. These two entities have worked together and have worked against one another. At times this intersection has provided shining examples of God's mission being fulfilled in the world, while at other times the church has failed to carry God's mission into the community.

As stated in the introduction, many people in the urban community are faced with feelings of fear and alienation and participate in or observe violence on a regular basis. The urban community suffers from racial, cultural, and economic struggles that are deeply rooted not only in our collective consciousness and our political and social history, but also in our church's history.

While it is not necessarily my intention to take on systemic racism or explore the power differential that exists in our midst, it is important to understand that church and the world have not only continued to allow but also participated in oppressive practices that exist in direct defiance of God's command to love one another. The Christian Church is not exempt from discriminating practices. While it seems the church of Christ should be the one true sanctuary for all who suffer this kind of threat from the sinful world, it is important to remember that the Christian church has participated in the perpetuation of systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and so on. We have failed to lived into the missional practices to which God calls. Darrell Guder reminds us that, "Neither the structures nor the theology of our established Western traditional churches is missional. They are shaped by the legacy of Christendom. That is, they have been formed by centuries by which Western civilization considered itself formally and officially Christian."<sup>8</sup> We have erred more heavily on right practice and historical traditions. In society and in the church we are seeing the effects of what can happen when the privileged voice is the one who establishes the rules. It has the power to shape the church, its surrounding community, and the world. When we as the church fail to create a space where every voice is heard, we not only maintain, we deepen the chasm between the privileged and the powerless.

We have to name the fact that the church in this world has played a role in perpetuating and participating in systematic racism, even though the Bible gives us so many reasons not only to treat one another justly, but also to remember that God is the Lord of all Nations. God did not stop with the chosen people of Israel; instead God reminded us that both Jew and Gentile, slave or free, woman or man is a child of God. The diversity of the urban culture speaks directly to this idea.

The church in and of the urban community can be a forum for those who are marginalized and imprisoned in a state of judgment and silence, and paralyzed by the short-comings of society. Yet we see time and again that the way in which we "do" church is often an institutionalized example of the displacement of privileged power that results in the rejection of true communal living.

The realities of the wider church and, more specifically, the wider urban church are also complex. To understand its complexities, one must also be willing to understand the contextual, historical, and theological culture of the church.

The gospel is always conveyed through the medium of culture. It becomes the good news to lost and broken humanity as it is incarnated in the world through God's sent people, the church. To be faithful to its calling, the church must be contextual, that is, it must be culturally relevant within a specific setting. The church relates constantly and dynamically both to the gospel and to its contextual reality.<sup>9</sup>

If this is true, what can the urban church along with the urban culture speak into the missional aspect of the wider church? The embedded realities of the urban context speak into the kingdom of God in a way that is real and messy. What does it look like to create church where the promises of the world have fallen short and the reality of the sinful world is present and in your face? How can the church be a place that both recognizes brokenness and provides hope? How do we use this as an opportunity to proclaim in word and in deed not only in what we say but who we are?

Author Ronald E. Peters reminds us that, "Nearly half of the people on the face of the globe live in urban areas . . . as a life-long city dweller, I have long appreciated how human relationships are interconnected in ways beyond provincial characteristics of particular communities."<sup>10</sup> Peterson shares a perspective on the urban community that helps us grasp the importance of lifting up the urban context as a reflection of God's kingdom and celebrating its unique qualities and deep relationships. By numbers alone we cannot avoid this issue.

In the book, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations*, author J. Andrew Kirk reminds us that, "Poverty is a reality of every day for the majority of people living in the world. Its extent is so great, and its eradication apparently so problematical, that those not affected become dulled to the suffering which it causes."<sup>11</sup> When we live in silos, it can be difficult to see the suffering around us. But as Christians we do not have the choice to be complacent regarding this issue. Christ calls us to work

toward justice for all. Kirk writes, “From a Christian perspective the reality, causes, and resolutions of poverty are inseparable from the call for relationships of justice between individuals, communities, and nations.”<sup>12</sup>

The urban community feels the effects of the displacement of power and the divide between the privileged voice and the outcry of the margins. It understands the importance of a leadership that reflects the voice of the whole community. Unlike political and secular institutions, the church’s existence is a unique theological voice that speaks into and on behalf of those experiencing oppression. It might be difficult to envision someone like *George* as a council president in the state we received him in. He doesn’t appear to “fit the part.” Yet in getting to know him, I have found that his academic background equipped him with wonderful organizational skills, and he enjoys public speaking. We have informally discussed a variety of ways in which the Wellness Center could improve and he has interest in volunteering.

We do not always want to see who our neighbor is. We do not always name one another. “Different” can be scary, and therefore we do not always embrace who and what is not like us. Because we feel uncomfortable or challenged by what we don’t know, we overlook who God places right in our midst. Guided by the perspective of liberation theology, we seek to understand and embrace the urban community by naming the oppressive nature of our society and moving toward bringing justice to the oppressed. “Liberation theologians challenge us to understand the radical action that conversion invites us into.”<sup>13</sup>

As previously mentioned, theology of the cross allows us to come just as we are and participate in relationships bearing our own brokenness as well as the brokenness of others. Similarly, “For Liberationists, to place oneself in the perspective of the kingdom means to participate in the struggle for the liberation of those who are oppressed by others or the struggle of those who suffer and die for want of human dignity.”<sup>14</sup>

Jesus Christ calls us to act on behalf of those who are experiencing injustice, inequality, economic and social hardship, and struggling to find hope in their community and in this world. We are called to act on behalf of the poor, seeing Christ in others. Author, J. Andrew Kirk writes,

“One of the most decisive and pressing issues to confront Christians in all parts of the globe in the last 40 years has been what Gustavo Gutierrez calls the “interruption of the poor”: This phrase means that those who until now were ‘absent’ from history are gradually becoming ‘present’ within it. This new presence of the poor and oppressed is making itself felt in the popular struggles for liberation and in the historical consciousness arising from these struggles. It is also making itself felt within the church, for there the poor are increasingly making their voices heard and claiming openly their right to live and think the faith in their own terms.”<sup>15</sup>

Kirk, is begging us to realize that it is our Christian duty to pay attention to and live into relationships with the poor, the needy, the stressed, and the marginalized and to realize that these voices are clear and surrounding us. He adds:

It has often been pointed out that most of the members of Christian communities worldwide are themselves poor. The Church, therefore, does not stand over and against the poor. It does not even stand alongside or in the midst of the poor. The poor are in the Church or *are* the Church. Thus the Church has an immense interest in the transformation of their situation, and it is also a major player in the struggle for justice.<sup>16</sup>

Through the stories of *George, Desiree* and the youth in our community, it is clear that the challenges facing the urban community speak directly to the injustice in the world. As people of the church, we are called to ask who our neighbors are, and who makes up our local and global communities.

It is important to remember that God is there. God working in and through the church and the community to bring hope. The embedded realities of the urban community are also alive with opportunities for cultural celebrations, interfaith dialogue, and intergenerational living. It often serves as a reticulum for social service agencies whose missions include social justice and seeking to bring those who are marginalized back to the center of society.



### ***A THEOLOGICAL MOVE TOWARD HOPE***

By starting at the foot of the cross, we allow everyone to come as broken individuals. What binds us together is the shared belief in the movement toward hope. “A theology that confesses hope, not finality or consummation will certainly have a mission in the midst of a despairing world, but it will be a mission that recognizes an expansiveness of divine grace that far exceeds its own grasp and representation of the mission.”<sup>17</sup>

When we meet one another in this space of brokenness and begin to understand one another’s stories, together we can work toward a future of hopefulness instead of despair. Imagine a place that seeks to reject judgment and not only honors but lives into one another’s brokenness. Who among us does not know pain? It is our common denominator. It is the tie that binds us. But what is stronger than brokenness and despair? It is hope; in particular, hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ who died on the cross so that we might know another way to live. It is through the radical notion of living in love that we can know a new way to be in relationship with one another.

“Jesus on several occasions, engaged in conversations about what constituted the greatest commandment. In each instance, he affirmed that love of God and love of neighbor are the most basic of God’s requirements for humans. Scripture consistently testifies that these two commandments are inexorably connected to each other.”<sup>18</sup>

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Stanley Hauerwas writes: “Love is the fulfillment of the law. But this is not a sentimental love, rather this love is a radical politics that challenges the world’s misappropriation of God’s good fight. Christ’s being the embodiment of God’s love means that disciples cannot know love apart from loving one’s enemies, for that is precisely what God has done regarding us: we are God’s enemies, yet God would still love us--even coming to die for us.”<sup>19</sup> To love God and your neighbors with all your heart, soul, and mind truly is a radical new way of being in relationship with one another.

The stories of the members of the Wellness community are true examples of hope. It is a struggle for *George* to find his way to Wellness each week, navigating his way from The Union Gospel Mission downtown. Last week he told me he was so happy to find this community and that, “With God’s help and my seeing eye dog, *Roxy*, I’ll make it every week. I promise. Besides, I know the kids look forward to seeing *Roxy* each week, and I can’t let them down.” We met *George* when he was suffering with deep depression and struggling with thoughts of suicide. Someone told him about the “nice people” in this community and that he should come and at least get a meal and maybe some counseling. The day he came, he joined a support group with others in the community and now they sit together at a table and play cards each week, and with the help of community organization represented at the Wellness Center, *George* has a place to sleep at the Mission. He told me with a smile, “It’s been a very long time since I’ve had any friends, and a safe place to sleep, and now I both.”

*Desiree* is in first grade now, and we’ve watched her grow so much over the last few years. Adults in the community have helped her learn how to write her letters, and a retired teacher from the community brings flash cards each week to help her with her numbers. *Desiree* helps *John*, a retired war veteran, wipe down the tables after dinner each week and always saves a spot for me at dinner. *Desiree* has plans. She tells me every time we eat together that she is going to grow up to be a nurse. “Just like the ones here at Wellness, so I can help all the people! Or maybe a doctor even. Or maybe I will grow up to be a chef and cook food for everyone here! I want to live here, because I love everyone.”

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With her compassionate spirit and contagious energy, I don’t doubt that *Desiree* will make this happen. This community that surrounds her will see to it.

After spending some time with the youth, I began to see a change in their demeanor, and a profound curiosity about the church was building in them. I told the children who showed up at our church doors to continue to come to Wellness and learn about the things happening at church. I expected them to show up excited to hear about God, learn about the stained glass windows, look at the organ, and maybe

do a few activities. Because of how word travels in the community in the urban neighborhood, the following week we were blessed with four times the amount of children ready to be “baptized” and asking to “take that stuff that supposed to be like, Jesus’ body or something?” After we communed for the first time, we sat, talked, and rapped about what is going on the community and in their families. What sorts of things they like to do and how the church could be a safe place for them. They revealed that it is difficult to feel safe in the neighborhood sometimes. Together, we came up with a plan to create a wall mural that would reflect the neighborhood. They will design and paint on a wall in the Wellness Center, and this summer we will spend some time together cleaning up gang graffiti in their neighborhood. Church staff and members of the community now go and visit them at their home each month, and many of them have experienced their first trip out of the city and up to camp.

Although I hadn’t met many of these children and youth before, they seemed to know many people who had come to Wellness. In fact, most people know each other at Wellness from the neighborhood or from the street. We are neighbors. We are a community that has many needs, many difficulties, many cultures, many dreams, many goals, and many hands working together. In the same way that God and the church seek to be in and of the neighborhood and the world, the Wellness community is transforming our congregation and the traditional ideas of what church is.

Each week at Wellness we spend time sharing community announcements, acknowledging birthdays,

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or applauding whomever has decided to play the piano that night. After that, *Karl* dismisses each table for dinner, making sure that all the parents with small children get to go first. The line tends to move slowly. *Lenore* stands at the head of the line with a bottle of hand sanitizer and requires both a hug and clean hands from every person hoping to eat a meal that night. I have watched children and youth, alcoholics and drug users, elderly, handicapped, black, white, native, gay, straight, and everyone in between melt into Lenore’s mandatory loving embrace. If she has to be gone, I always get a call from Lenore telling me who she has picked out to be the “hugger” at Wellness on Thursday.

*Nora* and her sister bake communion bread for Sunday worship each week, the youth from down the street planted all the flowers in the gardens this year at church, and the elderly “church women” are finally passing on the preparation of funeral lunches to a group of youth who have started their own catering business with the skills they have learned working in the kitchen at Wellness and camp. It has been amazing to watch the intergenerational transformation of both the youth and these faithful women as they work together with a new vision toward helping families through this time of life.

The Wellness Center as a metaphor for the urban context gives us a natural and organic example of how to live into God’s call to relationship and allows the church to live into the core of radical hospitality and discover what it means to deeply know and love one another as neighbors. “Love of neighbor is doing unto others as we would have them do unto us. Such love does not pause to pepper the needy with qualifying questions: ‘Where are you from?’ or ‘What manner of life have you lived?’ or ‘What is your religion?’ or ‘Are you one of us?’ or even ‘How did you get into this mess?’ . . . The right question is ‘Will I obey God’s clear command by *being* a neighbor to others?’”<sup>20</sup>

When we answer this call, relational boundaries are shifted, and it is here where we learn that we need one another and how our lives are bound together in order that we might all be liberated and recognize one another as children of God.

### ***PRAGMATIC OFFERINGS***

It is not my intention to provide the reader/audience with a variety of practical programming ideas. Rather, in keeping with the theme of the urban community, I urge the reader to consider that it is more about intentional practice than programs. The pragmatic ideas that I suggest center on celebrating the unique challenges that the urban community brings to the wider church and which allow us to participate more fully in God’s creative mission in the world. Each of these pragmatic suggestions focus on relationships and mission that seeks to challenge the wider church to consider reframing our Western way of *doing* church and to live more fully into *being* church.

The church and, specifically, youth ministry has a history of programming to get people into the church. I would go a step farther to say that the programming usually reflects the culture and class of those running the programs and of those they are hoping to attract. While it is true that many churches provide “missional programs” that seek to fulfill God’s call toward justice, those programs often result in important memorable experiences but not necessarily transformational relationships. Programming does not always speak to the spiritual identity of the worshiping community. Nor do missional programs necessarily mean a missional church. The urban community seeks out interdependence for survival, the preservation of cultural heritage, communal living, and the celebration of life!

Surrendering to what it truly means to live in community leads to a gracious loss of individual control and a dissemination of power. When the priorities of the church are less about semantics and logistics and right practice, and more about spiritual discernment and listening to God’s call, something amazing can happen in this space. The Holy Spirit can begin to move in ways one might never expect. In our recent history the church has leaned toward programming, providing experiences in which we think we can bring God into our lives and into the lives of others. As human “doings” we try to give people experiences that have the potential to draw them ever nearer to Jesus Christ. Programming has become the key to success. I argue that perhaps programming is not the answer, and missional church is.

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“It has taken us decades to realize that mission is not just a program of the church. It defines the church as God’s sent people. Either we are defined by mission, or we reduce the scope of the gospel and the mandate of the church. Thus our challenge today is to move from church with mission to missional church.<sup>21</sup> We need to remember that we are human “beings,” and it is through our being and our relationships that our transformation happens.

Perhaps the answer also lies more in what manifests in relationships. When you are in relationship with someone who is hungry, you want to be able to feed them or even better, share a meal together. This is ministry of time and space, and this intentional, relational ministry leads to transformation in Christ. Being transformed by the community leads to being transformed as an individual.

Author and deaconess Sara Miles recalls an experience in her faith journey when she was searching for the right way to minister to people in her life and speaks to this directly.

In that dark time, I was inching toward what religious traditions called ‘othropraxy’ (right practice) rather than orthodoxy (right belief). I was hearing that what counted wasn’t fundamentalist theology, or liberation or traditional or postmodern theology. It wasn’t denominations or creeds or rituals. It wasn’t liberal or conservative ideology. It was faith, working through love.<sup>22</sup>

The urban church and community celebrates true mission by listening to the needs of the immediate community that the church is serving, providing opportunities that bring change to broken lives and new hope amid messiness and despair. So many churches operate with the “client” in mind. What can we offer that will draw people in? But doesn’t it make sense that using this rationale, you will attract a bunch of people who like to do the same stuff? What percentage of ethnic diversity in a congregation defines a successful worshiping community? When God is truly at the center, the relationships become the focus. The Lutheran Church seeks to fulfill percentages of diversity in order to show what exactly? When we proclaim to be One Body in Christ, how does the church justify defining success in this way? Instead of putting more emphasis on successful programming and activities, I suggest more organic approaches that, inspired by the urban community, reveals God’s creative movement in the world.

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### ***Radical Hospitality***

In the book *A Many Colored Kingdom*, author Elizabeth Conde-Frazier writes about the importance of hospitality in churches: “Hospitality as recognition involves respecting the image of God in others and seeing their potential contributors as being of equal value to ours.”<sup>23</sup> We need to open our doors to our surrounding community and avoid living out the Word of Christ in a vacuum. Conde-Frazier goes on to write, “When we practice the rearrangement of relationships through even the smallest act of respect and welcome rather than disregard and dishonor, we point to a different system of values and to an alternate model of relationships.”<sup>24</sup>

Radical hospitality is not just about welcoming and accessible signage, name tags, or even serving a meal. It becomes missional with the intentionality of being in relationship and understanding who our

neighbors are. If you've ever known the feeling of being an outsider, you understand the senses of relief and gratitude when you are accepted. Author of *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*, Letty M. Russell speaks to this obstacle in the church:

My experience as an outsider within has clearly led me to question the rigid clergy line that divides our church communities and increases hierarchy and competition for power in our denomination. At the same time, it has led me to focus on the theology of hospitality that emphasizes the calling of the church as a witness to God's intention to mend the creation by bringing about a world of justice, peace, and integrity of the natural world. There are a lot of "missing persons" in our world today whose situation of poverty, injustice, and suffering makes God weep. These missing persons are not strangers to God, for God already has reached out to care for them. Yet they are strangers in the world who need to know God cares through the witness of a church that practices a ministry of hospitality and justice on their behalf.<sup>25</sup>

The urban community understands hospitality as more than an act. It is a unique practice that is rooted in both culture and survival. As the church seeks to welcome both the *stranger among us* or the *other*, we perpetuate the chasm that exists between race and class by defining someone who is different as stranger or other instead of first seeing one another as children of God. Radical hospitality is a shift in

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our language and our consciousness. When we radically welcome one another, we welcome and honor one another's histories, differences, and similarities. Changing our mindset moves us from a church with a mission, to a missional church that creatively participates in God's call.

Through the practice of Christian hospitality the church participates in God's peaceable kingdom. Such hospitality indicates the crossing of boundaries (ethnic origin, economic condition, political orientation, gender status, social experience, educational background) by being open to and welcoming of the other. Without such communities of hospitality, the world will have no way of knowing that God's creation is meant to live in peace.<sup>26</sup>

The church's call to being in relationship and serving others makes it critical to build relationships with para-church organizations and neighboring community organizations that are also seeking to serve the neighborhood. The urban community understands the importance of multiple organizations working together to better the lives of the members of the community.

God calls us to be in relationship with one another. The urban church can speak into the heart of compassionate relationships by defining what it means to provide missional accompaniment to members of the congregation and the community.

### ***Missional Accompaniment***

Through the stories of the people I have gotten to know, it is clear that supporting one another in these relationships is paramount to mutual growth and success. Because of the realities in the urban community accompanying one another in relationships takes on a collaborative quality that gets to the heart of neighbor love. Brenda Olson's article on faith formation and the urban church unpacks the theme of relationships by engaging the idea of *accompaniment*. Olson defines accompaniment in the urban church as, "a joint venture in which collaboration and community building serve the margins of our society to develop a new generation of leaders ready to change the culture of our churches and our neighborhoods and serve the common good."<sup>27</sup>

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It is clear that accompaniment is the true commitment of walking along side one another in our their faith journey and that this missional accompaniment serves as the basis for building community in the church and in the world. God's mission (*Missio Dei*) is revealed in God's active relationship in the world and our participation in it through the work of the church reasserts proper relationship between God, Church and World. Through this work, God accompanies us.<sup>28</sup> Missional accompaniment takes time, practice and intentionality that seeks to be in deep relationship. Accompanying one another in the church and in the community often reveals one's spiritual gifts for missional leadership.

### ***Raising Up Missional Leaders in the Community***

The urban community comes with a variety of challenges and embedded realities where suffering exists. It is also a place where spiritual gifts abound and qualities of leadership are plentiful. Another mission of the Wellness Center seeks to lift up not only one another's spiritual gifts, but also presupposes that



everyone who walks through our doors has the ability to be a leader. We assume that each voice in the community is unique and valuable, and we are intentional about being a place where these ideas are brought to the center of the conversation. *George, Desiree*, and the youth in our community are great examples of this. As marginalized members of the community are brought to the center of leadership, our worshiping community along with the Wellness Center is being transformed. There is a unique dance that is happening between the “old” and the “new” that is messy and exciting and speaks to the heart of the urban community and is transformational for all.

Stanley Hauerwas pointedly expresses that the role of the church is to cultivate people who “can risk being peaceful in a violent world, risk being kind in a competitive society, risk being faithful in an age of cynicism, risk being gentle among those who admire the tough, risk love when it may not be returned, because we have the confidence that in Christ we have been reborn into a new reality.”<sup>29</sup> One of the biggest risks for ministry professionals and people who are called to be Christ-like, is to love our neighbor deeply. For Darrell Guder, this new reality is about the formation of community:

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“The church is a social reality that continually engages in the practices that cultivate people of truth, peace, wholeness, and holiness. The forming of Christian community is therefore not an option but the very lifestyle and vocation of the church.”<sup>30</sup>

I would conclude that the church’s vocation is *faith working through love*. We meet Jesus Christ at the foot of the cross, so we might know this new way. Christ has set us up to be able to live in love in a new way, to live in community in a new way, to hope in a new way. The realities of the urban community might envision hope in different ways. Sometimes the hardships and realities don’t allow people to dream on a grand scale, but that doesn’t mean the Holy Spirit can’t be life-changing. The people of the Wellness Center have found hope in their future by forming relationships and sharing a space that seeks to honor and identify the spiritual gifts which they bring to the broader community. The people of the congregation are being transformed through the deep relationships being formed by living into the question, “*Who is my neighbor?*”

## Notes

1. Ronald E. Peters, *Urban Ministry: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 12.
2. Douglas John Hall, “The Theology of the Cross: A Usable Past,” (Paper presented at The ELCA Consultation on Vocation and Service, 2007), 3.
3. Hall, 6.
4. Hall, 5.
5. Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, S. Steve King, and Gary A. Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 56.
6. Brenda S. Olson, “Joint Venture: Missional Accompaniment in the First Third of Life,” (Paper presented at The Missional Church Consultation: A Faithful Future, 2011), 18.
7. Kang, 81.
8. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 5-6.
9. Guder, 18.
10. Peters, vii.

11. J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 25.
12. Kirk, 103.
13. Conde-Frazier, 116.
14. Conde-Frazier, 116.
15. Kirk, 96.
16. Kirk, 111.
17. Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 195.
18. Parrett, 65.
19. Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 89.
20. Conde-Frazier, 66-67.
21. Guder, 6
22. Sara Miles, *Take This Bread* (New York: Random House and Ballantine Books, 2007), 161.
23. Conde-Frazier, 172.
24. Ibid.
25. Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 18-19.
26. Guder, 177.
27. Olson, 1.
28. Olson, 12.
29. Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 118.
30. Guder, 153.

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## Articles

Hall, Douglas John. "The Theology of the Cross: A Usable Past," (Paper presented at The ELCA Consultation on Vocation and Service, 2007)

Olson, Brenda J. "Joint Venture: Missional Accompaniment in the First Third of Life," (Paper presented at The Missional Church Consultation: A Faithful Future, 2011)

If Chris Wright's *Mission of God's People* is a harbinger of things to come in Zondervan's new series, *Biblical Theology for Life*, we are in for a treat. As the first in this series, this volume not only serves as a delightful sequel and complement to his highly acclaimed *The Mission of God*, but it has also put his holistic interpretation of the Scriptures into the hands of laypeople. This is biblical theology at its best. May this work inspire his church to greater faithfulness in giving verbal witness to God's redemptive grace for the cosmos, but also to greater ethical faithfulness as we embody his grace in the microcosms in which we live. - - Daniel Block, Professor.