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# Community Transformation Partnerships<sup>i</sup>

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An Opportunity for Churches to Join In The Long-Term Transformation of Their

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## A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

Two members talking in a coffee shop began Pastor Dustin Willis' journey into the development of a community transformation partnership that is reducing homelessness in Columbia, SC. This conversation over coffee ended with agreement that they could do something about it, if they would try. Their church, Midtown Fellowship, started an event called "Homeless for the Homeless." People pay money to sleep on the street for a night and the money is used to address some of the root causes of homelessness in their city. The first year the church was sole sponsor, yet 700 people participated. The next year, interest and participation by other agencies dealing with homelessness increased.

The third event occurred on November 6-7, 2009. They partnered with the Dorn Veteran's Hospital, VA Homeless Stand Down, Mission Columbia, Metro Baptist Association, and the City of Columbia's "Project Homeless Connect" to not only raise money, but to host the homeless in the event. They provided winter coats, haircuts, and other services. Beyond this one event, the church has been instrumental in the development of an apartment building to help the formerly homeless make the transition from the street to apartment living. They also work with prisoners in a residential program to help them get ready for release. Their most recent project is to work with another coalition of agencies and partners to begin a mentoring program at a local school with very low achievement scores by its students. Midtown Fellowship was begun as a serving church to bring the love of Christ to the city of Columbia, SC. As they approach their 3-year anniversary, they have baptized some 250 souls. Ten to fifteen of these baptized converts were homeless and now are living stable lives off the street.

Midtown Fellowship's strategy of networking to transform their city by both witness and work is not unique; rather it is a strategy used more and more among Southern Baptist church planters in urban areas. This fresh approach wins a hearing for the gospel as well as puts hands and feet to the love of Christ for all people. This article highlights a few examples of Southern Baptists partnering with other groups to transform their community, but many more could be cited, and many more yet are under development.

Community Transformation Partnerships is one term used to describe coalitions of faith-based and secular partners who find common cause in addressing unjust structures in society. Usually, the initiative to cooperate among government agencies, non-government agencies, and faith-based groups like a church must come from the faith-based group because of agency concerns about church-state conflict. Once a church demonstrates its commitment to work for justice in a specific location and addressing a particular social need, government agencies will find a way to work together out of practical concerns for efficiency and non-duplication of effort. As the church gains credibility through sustained and

effective work, the partnership can flourish and expand beyond whatever tentative arrangement first guided cooperation. Southern Baptist churches are finding that when rightly constructed these partnerships let the church be the church and still build good will in the community through service. The interest of these coalitions is to go beyond charity to effectively address the underlying causes of poverty and injustice. A survey of SBC churches who are engaged in community transformation partnerships would include a wide variety of churches from mega-churches like Prestonwood Baptist's efforts to help transform an inner city neighborhood of Dallas with tutoring, job training and other projects, to small inner city church plants like some catalogued in this article.

## SHARING BEST PRACTICES

Several examples of community transformation partnerships were cited at a recent missional network gathering in Kansas City sponsored by the Kansas-Nebraska Convention of Southern Baptists and the Missional Network team of the Church Planting Group at NAMB. One woman at the Kansas City conference is helping women who are rebuilding lives wrecked by prostitution and drug abuse. One presenter works with veterans, some churches work with soon-to-be-released felons, some look at issues of poverty and education; all seek to both provide practical help and see spiritual birth through a relevant verbal witness. The main session speaker was Eric Swanson from Boulder, CO. He highlighted characteristics of externally focused churches<sup>ii</sup> taken from the book he co-authored with Rick Rusaw, *The Externally Focused Church*.<sup>iii</sup> He described the externally focused church having five characteristics:

1. They believe that their communities can't be healthy without the church.
2. They believe Christians don't grow until they begin serving.
3. They understand the power of service.
4. They lower the thresholds to service.
5. They partner with other entities.

Eric gave examples from his home city of Boulder, CO of Christians working toward both community transformation and gospel impact. Another featured presenter was Jonathan Dodson from Austin, TX. He told the group about his community transformation efforts through Austin City Life church ([www.austincitylife.org](http://www.austincitylife.org)) and the church planting network of like-minded planters, PlantR ([www.PlantR.org](http://www.PlantR.org)).

Four other presenters also spoke about community transformation from their context and perspective. Linda Berquist, a strategist in San Francisco, spoke about two distinct kinds of people (among many) you find in San Francisco, those deeply concerned about saving nature, and those concerned with saving souls. She characterized these San Franciscans as being on a "yellow journey" or on a

“blue journey”, but then made the point that what is needed is more “green” people who combine aspects of both journeys.

Brian Audia explained how his organization, Surgance ([www.surgance.com](http://www.surgance.com)), empowers people of faith to tackle non-controversial projects in their community that give them credibility with the socially-oriented groups around them. The following excerpt from a November 17, 2009 press release by Brian Audia gives an idea of how Surgance works: “Surgance, Inc. announced today that it is assisting in the distribution of 100,000 new teen coats which have been donated by Aeropostale, Inc. Surgance received many coats designed exclusively for this outreach program. More than 120 agencies were brought together by One Warm Coat to handle the distribution of the coats in all 50 states.” They have tackled hundreds of projects like this. The usefulness of this organization for a church planter is that it allows a city planter to involve his small church in transformation projects without having to handle all the logistics – a daunting prospect when the church is small, relationally fragile, and in need of the focused attention of the planter. Surgance can empower a planter to make an impact far beyond his church’s size.

Dustin Willis presented information about his inner city church and the impact it is having in Columbia, SC through community-wide projects like “homeless for the homeless,” an annual event that raises money to address the root causes of homelessness in his city. Using the money raised in this event, and connections that came out of their labor on behalf of the homeless, Dustin’s church was able to acquire a building to re-develop into a transitional housing apartment building for the homeless. His church is now part of the dialogue of how to deal with homelessness in ways that permanently move homeless people into better situations.

Finally, Andrew Jenkins spoke about his efforts to plant a church that cares for its inner-city setting in Birmingham, AL. He has found a pool of young professionals who want to work together to change their community in downtown Birmingham. Each presenter gave examples of community transformation in their setting, but they also challenged the participants thinking about doing good. The overall message was the need to shift from just doing charitable acts to tackling the underlying issues of injustice that make charity necessary. Each gave a call for individual churches and associations of churches to create structures that promote justice, not just hand out aid. It makes sense to take this shift in direction from several angles. Long-term change for the better gives hope to both the helper and the one helped. For some, hope in one area causes them to consider other aspects of their life, including the need for a personal relationship with their Creator. Lasting results help volunteer workers avoid “compassion fatigue” and stay motivated for the work. This results in a growing, rather than shrinking pool

of workers, and the ability to tackle systemic problems in the community. Because most situations of injustice and poverty have interconnected causes, making progress in one area helps other agencies and partnerships advance in their area of concern. From a church perspective, it is to their advantage to emphasize ministries that produce lasting long-term transformation of the surrounding community. A key aspect of discipleship is learning to serve like Jesus, following the model of the early church. When service shows no lasting results, members are tempted to turn their efforts inward toward the existing internal ministries of the church. We gradually lose our capacity to make a difference in the world around us. However, when stories of changed lives begin to emerge from a church's compassionate ministry, then people are energized and more ready than before to serve and recruit others to the task.

## **FROM CHARITY TO TRANSFORMATION**

What then is the difference? Charity and kind deeds look like serving soup at a soup kitchen, giving a coat to a homeless person as winter approaches, and offering a dental clinic to fill cavities. Community transformation may ultimately engage in some of those activities, but the leader who wants to make long-term change starts with researching “why?” the community problem exists. Why are the homeless homeless? Why are there so many prostitutes in this area? Why is this a high crime district? Why are the elderly living in substandard housing. Then that leader looks to see who else is already addressing that problem at a level of long-term change. If possible the leader (the church planter is the person of interest here) will network with groups already at work and prayerfully find those willing to partner together for change. Not only is the process more involved, but the tasks undertaken are more strategic.

For example, poor, single mothers find it difficult to climb out of poverty for many reasons, even if they are motivated, diligent, and hardworking. One common scenario is that they work at hourly jobs, but there is no affordable day care nearby. They use a private sitter, but if their child gets ill, or the sitter quits, they can't go to work. A few instances of this and they are fired. Or there is no bus service to their work location, so they must drive. As soon as their old worn-out car breaks down, they lose their job. They can't afford child care while they look for another job; and on and on it goes. A strategic analysis of this scenario would identify two crisis points: child care and transportation. Affordable, reliable child care for single mothers who must work is a “common cause” that can engage both secular and faith-based organizations. Developing an organization to care for single mom cars, or to find and “recycle” affordable, reliable cars to single moms can be another partnership.

The involvement of a church plant in these kinds of projects helps to root them organically into the community they serve. They are known for the blessing they bring, and develop trust based on blessing that even the irreligious can appreciate. This opens doors for them to proclaim the gospel and journey with people from un-faith to faith in Christ. When this happens, the task of maturing a missional believer is certainly aided by hands-on involvement in ministry to the lost from day one.

## **DEVELOPING A STRATEGY FOR COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION**

It was clear to this writer that the positions presented at the recent conference and the challenges given will meet resistance from churches that conceive of all justice ministry as moving the church away from evangelism. Every association of churches has member churches who will view community transformation in this way. Questions will need answers; questions like, “Why should we consider exploring this avenue of service? Does it not just dilute our primary task of proclaiming good news?” A truncated theology of engagement can only be remedied by solid teaching and hands-on experience.

State, associational, or other leadership will need to provide teaching to establish the appropriateness of this kind of church planting. The testimony about Jesus was that he “went about doing good.” The gospel accounts further reveal that his pervasive practice of compassionate service drew and held the crowds as he preached and taught about the gospel and the kingdom of God. His practice was consistent with Old Testament teaching about the character and nature of God; of his concern for all creation and, particularly, all mankind. The Poverty and Justice Bible highlights two thousand verses that speak to the dual issues of poverty and justice.<sup>iv</sup> A particularly cogent example is Micah 6:8, NIV, “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” When we engage in labor to establish justice in our cities, we do what is right in the eyes of God. He will bless us in our work, all our work, not just our practical service, but our proclamation of the gospel as well.

The point of hands-on experience is to pilot the kinds of results that reflect both commitments: long-term community change and spiritual transformation in the lives of a significant number of people touched by the project. Pilot projects that can give this kind of real-world data require an association of churches to take risks and tolerate less-than-ideal results as they learn. Achieving a balance between doing long-term good and proclaiming the gospel in a way that actually produces new Christ followers will be difficult. It will probably require frequent “fine-tuning” before the results are satisfying to a majority of the stake-holders in

the initiative. Many are now arguing that the risks and hassles are worth the results over time.

Practically, acts of kindness, especially if taken to a strategic level that obtains long-term change, give our reputation a needed cleaning. Linda Bergquist, a church planting strategist from San Francisco, noted that the typical unchurched San Franciscan considers the church a parasite on society. Not only does the typical church use all its resources for internal concerns, but when a person joins they often shift all their volunteer labor from the community to serving in the church. The unchurched see neighbors who were active in charity and community service “withdraw” and become useless in the betterment of the community. This is not a phenomenon isolated to San Francisco. Few of us can say that the church we attend or the collective of churches in our city are the spearhead of forces working for justice and righteousness in the community. Most of us need to rethink our ministry in more holistic terms.

## **GETTING STARTED**

The question that follows being convinced that this approach is right and needed is, “How do we start and sustain a focus on proclaiming the gospel in a context of fighting for justice and seeking to transform our community?” One of the powerful points of this recent conference was that all the presenters are working primarily through the local church rather than a parachurch agency. The focus is evangelizing people into a community of faith, and discipling the people of that faith community. The goal is both to evangelize AND tackle the complex problems of their community. Three approaches exist to begin involvement in transforming a community. The one most often cited by speakers in the recent conference was church planting with community transformation in its DNA from day one. The planter in this scenario needs to be a person with a heart to see people saved AND their community transformed into a place that reflects the broader concerns of God for creation. The steps to planting a community transforming church might look like this:

1. Screen for a planter who already has a passion to see the city change and has a balanced theology that will result in aggressive evangelism AND strategic engagement in the problems of the community. Depending on context, this could be an indigenous leader or imported, of an appropriate ethnic background or someone with cross-cultural gifting, and bringing a strategy that varies from house church networks to a program-based attractional plant.
2. Mobilize teams to help do research that identifies the major “poverty and justice” issues in the city, and how they are interconnected. Find out who

is already working on some of these problems and whether their work is charitable or seeking to change the underlying causes of the problem.

3. Coach the planter in community engagement and networking for evangelism. This must proceed on two levels. He needs to work with his core team to identify the relational networks in his area and begin to make friends in those networks for the sake of evangelism and church establishment and growth. The other aspect of networking is to find people who are at work changing their community and join them in short-term projects to learn the ministry setting from the inside out.
4. Help the planter develop a small group system that supports, disciples, and empowers members to “do life together” in an accountable way. Help him to shape these groups so they project ministry into their networks of relationship.
5. Help the planter develop a strategy of attraction to balance the projection of ministry. Events, seminars, worship services, etc. allow the whole group to draw close to each other and to God, and it provides a variety of “safe” venues for the curious or seeking to check out the church. This centralized aspect of the church also allows the church, collectively, to “speak to power” in ways that an individual cannot.
6. Provide assistance to the church plant in the form of grant writing assistance or other material help so that they can engage other city-focused partners on terms where they have something significant to bring to the partnership.
7. Assist the planter in establishing a physical presence, through an office or other space, in the area that they want to impact with the gospel.
8. Mobilize other churches, especially suburban churches with little access to the central city, to assist the church plant project. They can support financially, provide short-term mission teams, and adopt the plant for continual prayer. They can make sure that the planter and family have emotional refreshment and support as they persevere in what is usually a difficult task.

A second approach is to create a network of existing churches that cooperate on strategic projects through partnerships that may include non-faith-based organizations as well. The downside of this approach compared with a fresh plant is that the churches are not local, so assimilation of converts takes extra focus and extra skill to complete. The advantage is a much larger pool of workers to draw from, each with their own particular gifting to bring to the table. The extra stability of many partners is also a plus.

The third approach would be to recruit a team with a heart for community transformation and let them tackle one of the thorny problems in the target area. As they work, they will develop a community of faith from those who respond to

the ministry. There are several positives with this approach. They are not labeled a church and can partner more broadly from the first. That they can give unusual focus to the transformative ministry beyond what a church planter could do. They can recruit workers from sister churches without a conflict of interest. There is a serious downside to this approach. It is that this approach can easily get stuck with just being a community organization without actually birthing a church.

Regardless of approach, long-term impact will need many church partners. If state or local leadership finds it difficult to mobilize their churches to do this, the churches already seeing success in other cities would undoubtedly be ready and able to assist another church of like heart get established in a new urban setting. Churches with a transformative focus to their ministry already network across North America, so this pattern of mutual support makes sense to them. In fact, until such community transformation-focused churches increase in number, networking broadly may be the only way to sustain the effort so needed in the cities of this continent. As a minimum, the initiating organization, whether denominational or just a local partnership, should support the planter in acquiring coaching from a “community transformation” planter/pastor who is further along in developing a church that is able to impact the city for Christ. Hopefully, through helping the plant and participating in training, several churches in the local field will become vital partners in transforming the city.

## **FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION**

The process of developing a local network of active churches begins with awareness that some of the charity we provide is like putting a bandage on a cancer. Unless we also are willing to do the harder job of figuring out “why?” this person in front of us, and others like them, needs charity, we will find them needing charity again in the future. When churches are willing to give more than their money, they find that their labor of kindness opens doors for the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. Our practical labor in a community wins goodwill that translates into openness to listen to our message. This isn’t true just of those who benefit from our service. It is also true of those who work alongside us from the larger community that holds no faith position, but passionately believes in making the world a better place to live.

Finding out what to do to address underlying causes of injustice can seem a daunting task. The good news is that much of the research on causes and dynamics of underlying issues of injustice has already been done. A church or association can find government agencies and NGO’s<sup>v</sup> with mountains of data; what is often lacking are people of good will who will labor towards a righteous outcome. It is at this point where churches have “leverage” to preserve their faith

commitments and voice, they can provide the passionate good will and hard work needed to turn theory into reality, but only if they participate openly as people of faith. Churches engaging in these community transformation networks do so with integrity, they don't violate protocols by forcing a verbal witness on others. Yet they find many opportunities for faith conversations. Even if some partnerships are unworkable due to restrictions on our ability to be "up-front" about who we are, there are always people of good will ready to work with us for the greater good of the community. When we act with integrity and walk our talk, we are welcome at the table to decide how to make our community a better place to live.

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Book: Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church*.

Churches, networks, and organizations involved in Community Transformation Networks:

Midtown Fellowship, Columbia, SC, [www.midtowncolumbia.com](http://www.midtowncolumbia.com), Dustin Willis, pastor

The Downtown Church, Birmingham, AL, [www.thedowntownchurch.net](http://www.thedowntownchurch.net), Andrew Jenkins, pastor

Surgance – [www.surgance.com](http://www.surgance.com) – “Surgance is a nonprofit organization that transforms communities by aligning Government, Nonprofit and Corporate resources. We connect uncommon partners on common ground to change lives!”

PlantR – [www.plantr.org](http://www.plantr.org) – Austin area church planters network (currently about 50 planters involved). Their mission statement is, “Catalyzing a Christ-centered context-sensitive church planting movement for social and spiritual renewal of Austin and beyond.”

Perpetual Help Home, Victoria, TX, [www.perpetualhelphome.com](http://www.perpetualhelphome.com) a “restorative justice organization assisting women in breaking the cycle of incarceration and homelessness through making life changes... We help women become productive members of society with transitional support, new life-skills training and permanent supportive housing”

Page Street Baptist Center, San Francisco, [www.pagestreetcenter.com](http://www.pagestreetcenter.com), “Serving in His name, sharing living water, partnering together.”

## END NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Both Community Transformation Partnerships and Community Transformation Networks are used to describe what is being done. Partnership may communicate a more formal arrangement, while the word network indicates that many cooperative arrangements may not have anyone driving the process, rather each entity contributes what it can, when it can, and where it can to help the whole network advance toward a common goal. Whether one word or the other appears in the title, goals are pursued through both formal and informal arrangements among the agencies, churches, and individuals making common cause. The key in all cases is good communication so the common goal can be achieved.

<sup>ii</sup> Audio files of the first two plenary sessions of the conference are available at <http://missionalchurchnetwork.com/audio-from-kc-missional-church-conference>. Additional audio is available at <http://missionalnetworkweb.com> under the KC Missional Network Conference headline.

<sup>iii</sup> Go to [www.externallyfocusednetwork.com](http://www.externallyfocusednetwork.com) for more information and specific ideas on how the church can impact its community through service. The site maintains a blog that includes the posts of churches who have successfully executed community ministry projects. For instance, note the post by Steve Bowen on his church's turkey giveaway – "Turkeys giving away Turkeys." He explains what they did and the lessons they have learned from doing this project for 20 years.

<sup>iv</sup> [www.povertyandjusticebible.org](http://www.povertyandjusticebible.org) – This Bible is sold in the UK through the marketing arm of a worldwide coalition of Bible societies. The text is the Contemporary English Version (CEV).

<sup>v</sup> Non-government Organizations – a common term used worldwide for agencies unconnected with national, regional, or local governments, who engage in community relief and transformation projects funded by private donations and/or government grants.