

Dirty Soil

By Andrew Jenkins

It has been a long (and often slow) ride in downtown Birmingham. I was always told that if you wanted to plant a church, you should go where there is “good soil.” That most often meant a well-developed suburb with a great school system and plenty of chain restaurants. What I am learning is that often the best soil is in the “worst” places—locations with the largest number of hurting people. The downtown hub of Birmingham—where our church building is located—is one such area. A few years ago, we signed a lease on a warehouse, one that had been a former auto repair shop. We moved in, did a little painting, and set-up some chairs (nothing more) and began holding services. Sure, there was still much to clean up, including the filthy concrete floor, but the place was far cheaper than what we were paying to rent the conference area in a nearby hotel. After a few years of growth and some major renovations, we had settled in. And I do mean *settled*.

A year ago, we stopped and evaluated what we were doing. Were we actually making a difference in our community? Or had we become so comfortable that we were simply coasting? We began our assessment by asking the question, “If we shut the church down, what would be different in our community? Would it even matter?” Turns out, it wouldn’t have mattered at all. If we cancelled our Sunday morning services, Birmingham would simply have one less church service. It struck me as odd. The answer was sobering. If “the church is the hope of the world,” as I have heard Bill Hybels say, then shouldn’t there remain a large, gaping hole in the community if a church closes its doors? We were familiar with Matthew 5:14, “You are a city on a hill...” The prophet Jeremiah even contended that the “church” was a “city within a city.” That is, we have the city of man (political bounds) and the City of God (spiritual, no bounds) that exists inside of that city—to love and benefit that city (Jeremiah 29:4). Were we actually blessing the city in any way? We had come into the heart of the city to change the city, but that wasn’t happening. We were simply providing a Sunday morning worship service with great music and sound biblical teaching. Our renovated warehouse provided us a great physical environment for this to happen.

You must understand our downtown area to grasp our thinking. In our downtown area:

- Almost 4,000 prisoners are being released annually from the state's prison system.ⁱ
- On any given night of the year, there are over 2,400 homeless people.ⁱⁱ
- There is an average income level of \$10,000 for the two miles immediately surrounding our building.ⁱⁱⁱ
- There is a housing community less than one half mile away from our building, with a loft apartment/condo district one half mile away in another direction, with a mixed-use/mixed-income development about one half mile in another direction. Each niche is 94% unchurched.
- A population in which 40% of the children do not have a man (either a father or a step-father) in their home.

For a long, long season, we were oblivious to the data. We would see people struggling with the issues mentioned above and simply move past them, rationalizing why they found themselves in such predicaments. We tried for years to get those people inside our building—on Sunday morning, of course. We were basing our success as a church upon the number of people who were sitting in rows facing the stage at the specific hour on Sunday mornings.

Don't get me wrong. We still celebrate the number of people in attendance. But now our motivations are different. In the past, we would minister to the people around our church from the standpoint of compassion and charity—not from the point of seeking justice and redemption and wholeness. Christians routinely feed homeless people under the bridges, take food to people around the holidays (as if that's the only time people need anything), and even buy gifts that will not last much longer than the food. We often minister, in other words, from charity, from a sentiment of love that beckons that we do something.

However, when we minister in these ways (as our church often did) we miss the point: the

Bible does not command us to minister out of compassion and charity—to simply address the symptoms of a need. Rather, we are called to minister justice, to get to the root issues and address destructive structures. We don't want to only feed homeless people; we want to address the structures and systems that have aided the issue of homelessness. We don't want to simply give money to poor people; we want to determine ways to help them rise above the poverty level by helping them get to a point of self-sufficiency.

In November of 2007, I received a phone call from the special projects coordinators at the governor's office. Their job is to work on whatever projects the governor wants to implement across Alabama. One of the projects he was seeking to implement was the development of a network of churches and faith-based ministries that would help tackle the prison re-entry issue. The stats are dismal. Currently 76% of released inmates will return to prison within the first year after their release, but 95% of those who "make it" through their first year, never return.^{iv} Everything in the world, however, seems to be stacked against them coming out of "the system" and staying out. They have no identification card like a driver's license when released from prison other than a laminated card (that looks like a Blockbuster Video card) that reads: "DOC ID" (for Department of Corrections). Most do not have a birth certificate or social security card. Without an ID, they cannot get a job or open a bank account (of course, they don't need a bank account, because they have no money). They have no money, because they do not have a job, and they cannot get a job because they do not have a permanent address. But they cannot get an address because they can't afford to live somewhere because they don't have a job, which they cannot get without an ID, which they cannot get without...

Do you see the vicious cycle that leads many to crack houses, old neighborhoods, the bottom side of bridges, and into the revolving door of moving from one shelter to the next? Many of the homeless people you meet on the street have been incarcerated and cannot work themselves out of the rut they are in because of this cycle. The special projects coordinators wanted to know if we would help implement a program that would help these individuals integrate into society and, therefore, possibly break the cycle of recidivism.

There was no money to finance this project. It was simply a “we want you to try this” sort of thing. We agreed to do it.

We had access to a few homes in a desirable area that we had used for ministry before. At one time, a group of four to five women from our church occupied one of the homes during the period of time leading up to their weddings. Their home had become a hub of Bible studies, country line dancing classes, and a place of refuge for those needing to talk. Another home had housed a couple with a child in the nearby neo-natal intensive care unit (NICU) for a brief season, had housed a mother and her three kids while the father was deployed on military duty, and had provided shelter for various other families who were between living situations. We had considered using these homes for some sort of re-entry ministry before—like helping the homeless—but felt that we did not (in our minds) have access to the people in need. We simply did not know how to go about implementing such a ministry.

Now we had an open door and someone asking us to do it! Within two weeks, we were sitting at a big wooden conference table in the department of corrections with their second-in-command, the lady over prison re-entry, and a few others who would be helpful in the process, presenting our plan. They agreed to enthusiastically support our plan by sending men from the prison system to us. In fact, we would receive them up to a year *before* their actual release date. They would be “plain clothes” prisoners! Our desire was to break the cycle of recidivism by assisting these men with obtaining their identification cards, finding a job, locating a permanent place to live, and so forth. We were receiving letters from men in prison requesting to come into our program by the end of the week.

In ten months, we have been able to help over 125 men. The offices of this ministry, called “The Village,” are housed in the warehouse (the former auto repair shop). The men even stay there at the church the first two months they are in the program.

The goal is that the men, after completing the 9-12 month-program, will have saved enough money to pay off fines, restitution, and child support. Furthermore, the goal is that they

have enough money to move into their own place, keep a bank account, and maintain the job they have found with the assistance of our staff.

As well as our re-entry program, The Village (which was set up as a separate 501c3/non-profit organization from the church itself) has become a food bank, a clothes closet, and a job development group. We now have someone from our staff on-site at the warehouse 24/7. This means that we can clothe, feed, shelter, or even begin the process of rehabilitation with anyone at any time. Just as someone can purchase heroine at 3:00 a.m. in the morning, so can someone connect with a disciple of Christ who will help them during their time of need.

Over the past year, we've hosted a screening of a Hollywood documentary, a conference on homeschooling and parenting, music concerts, and other community events in the warehouse. We could do much more, except for one thing: after every community event, we would have to turn the warehouse back into a church facility for the Sunday morning "church service." Could we do more if the warehouse was used exclusively for community events? We began to consider what it would be like to have the "church" (meaning the building) open 24 hours a day and not just on Sunday mornings. From our building you can walk a few blocks to one of the largest state-owned liquor stores, the largest gay clubs, and one of the most posh "gentlemen's" clubs in the South. These places are open virtually all night. In fact, even the gas station down the street, a few blocks from The Waffle House, is open all night. The truth is that people may "need" a beer, a cigarette, a dance, or just a pancake any time day or night. Should we presume that they might need Jesus at any of those times, as well? Would that be a safe guess?

The answer was obvious, so we moved our church out of the warehouse and into the community. Usually churches do the opposite. They begin portable and then move towards a permanent building. The warehouse became the place where we *used* to hold our Sunday morning services.

We are moving out into the neighborhoods, while using our warehouse facility as a base of operations. Our plans are to host worship services in the Southtown Housing Community (typically thought of as “the projects”) and begin small groups in the homes there. The people who live there are excited that we are coming to their neighborhood. Didn’t Jesus say the church should “go” (Matthew 28:18-20)? The Lord tells us to pray for laborers to go into the harvest, instead of waiting for the harvest to trickle to us (Luke 10:2). We would become the answer to our own prayers!

The worship service in Southtown will have a much different feel than what we have done before. We will contextualize our services to the community by adopting a gospel choir musical style for our worship services. This is very different from the musical style we used at the warehouse where we preferred the David Crowder Band or Hillsongs United.

We are also planning to begin worship services at Park Place, a mixed-use/mixed income complex that was recently built by the City of Birmingham. Both Southtown and Park Place have about 3,000 residents. Each group is extremely different. Our musical style at Park Place will be quieter, more acoustic-driven, and have a more “earthy” feel. Home churches will launch there concurrently, if not before. We will also evaluate other sectors in the downtown area—both on campus at the University of Alabama-Birmingham (UAB) and in the business district.

It is our dream to create thriving worship services—all of which look, feel, and sound like the environment in which they are located—in all four areas, all within one mile of our warehouse. It is our dream to have 1,000 people involved in house churches during that same season, all networked together to bring the gospel to the city. This allows our warehouse to be open around the clock, helping hurting people from the streets, providing ministry events like the weekly 12-step addiction recovery program, hosting a weekly college worship gathering, training leaders, and hosting community-based events.

It seems like it has been a long, long run. It also seems like so much good has been done. I cannot help but think that we are finally noticing the people that God wants us to see and

reaching them. Moving the church out of the four walls, out of that which is usual and accepted and commonplace, and moving into the harvest has been hard. The hours have been long. There are families that have left the church because they thought the church was supposed to *be* the community—not that the church was supposed to *reach* the community. Most of our neighbors have been supportive of our efforts, realizing that many of the hurting and wounded are around them anyway. But there have been a few who would rather have us push them into another neighborhood.

The gospel is not only about how to get from earth to heaven; the gospel is also about how to get heaven to earth. Did Jesus not pray for the kingdom of God to come? We've been seeing the kingdom of God ushered into Birmingham, Alabama. We celebrate with people who finally kick their addictions. We are baptizing adults as they find hope in Christ. We are experiencing families reuniting after decades of dismal downturns and dead ends. To close where I began, we are learning that the best soil is the dirtiest soil—soil packed with the hurting, rejected and wounded.

ⁱ Alabama Department of Corrections, <http://www.doc.state.al.us/>.

ⁱⁱ *The Birmingham News*, March 18, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alabama State Board of Missions census data, September 2008.

^{iv} Alabama Department of Corrections, <http://www.doc.state.al.us/>.