



Urban-suburban partnerships for mutual transformation

Excerpt from Linking Arms, Linking Lives: How Urban-Suburban Partnerships Can Transform Communities by Ronald J. Sider, John M. Perkins, Wayne L. Gordon, and F. Albert Tizon (Baker Books, Baker Publishing Group, 2008). Used by permission.

Churches and Christian organizations that partner together across socioeconomic and racial lines can participate uniquely in God's transforming work in the world. This special kind of partnership flows out of two imperatives related to the biblical theme of the reign or kingdom of God. The first is the call to radical community—the countercultural formation of God's people throughout Scripture. The second beckons the people of God to engage in holistic mission—word and deed ministries that serve all, but especially those who are poor, oppressed, and marginalized. In stereo, these two biblical calls to radical community and to holistic mission produce the call to transformational partnership that dares to cross the urban-suburban divide.

DOS AND DON'TS FOR URBAN-SUBURBAN PARTNERSHIPS

Certain practices can either make or break attempts at bridging the urban-suburban divide. The list below of essential Dos and Don'ts for both sides draws on the experiences of ministry practitioners. These recommendations reflect the values of reconciliation, authenticity, and collaborative action that are critical to effective partnerships.

1. *Do begin with existing relationships / Don't attempt to partner with brand new contacts.* A partnership may grow out of a personal friendship, a referral from a friend or coworker, or a denominational connection. But if a partnership has no pre-existing starting point, accept that the two sides will have to undergo a lengthy process of getting to know each other before developing any kind of working ministry. Premature partnership is like rushing into a marriage before getting to know your future spouse. Don't even talk about

planning projects until a level of trust and communication has been established.

2. *Do let human need motivate us / Don't forget to love God!* Ministry partnerships begin when the needs of a poor community draw the faithful on both sides of the urban-suburban fence. Being motivated by human need is one thing, but being consumed by need is another. If we lose focus on the One who alone can ultimately meet human needs, the tone of the ministry may become primarily pragmatic, devoid of deep spiritual meaning. This is the formula for disillusionment and burnout. A partnership between urban and suburban Christians must encourage shared worship and celebrate the spiritual ground upon which their partnership is built. Loving God together reminds both parties that for all of their economic, cultural, and racial differences, they stand united in the grace, mercy and power of God.

3. *Do strive for equality and joint ownership of the ministry / Don't allow inequality to define the partnership.* Partnerships founded on the rock of Christ must reflect God's justice. If we let the standards of our racialized and class-based society define the relationship, then color, money, and positional power will determine a one-way flow, where one side contributes (usually the suburban partner) and the other receives (usually the urban partner). Such an arrangement perpetuates—perhaps even widens—the very divide we long to cross. While acknowledging the reality of inequalities of wealth and privilege, both sides must strive for equality, mutual respect, and mutual power.

4. *Do foster interdependence and mutual service / Don't be a burden and a liability to the other.* An unequal partnership reinforces patterns of dependency. In an interdependent relationship, each side recognizes its need for the other as well as its contribution to the other. A posture of mutual service is encouraged by

the biblical directive, “Outdo one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10). To play with a famous quote, “Ask not what your partner can do for you, but what you can do for your partner.” If one side is seen as a burden or liability to the other, this breeds frustration, resentment, and inevitable conflict. Enter a partnership only if each side honestly needs and appreciates the other.

5. *Do cultivate a relationship that transcends the ministry project / Don't forget to play.* The foundation of partnership is relational authenticity. Evidence of authenticity is when the relationship goes beyond professionalism and develops into friendship: Urban and suburban Christians begin to eat at each other's homes, go to each other's kids' soccer games,

play together, retreat together, and confide in each other. Because of the differences between urban and suburban realities, this kind of relationship will require intentionality as well as perseverance to endure periods of awkwardness and tension. Grow the relationship beyond ministry projects by setting aside time for shared recreation. Playing together can solidify a partnership.

6. *Do commit long-term / Don't give up too easily.* Partnership does not happen overnight. It requires patience,

creativity, flexibility, listening, and learning. Effective urban-suburban partnerships need a Crock-Pot®, not a microwave. On the other hand, it is important to have a set time frame for evaluating whether the partnership should continue. Some partnerships will only last as long as a specific ministry project; others become life-long relationships. But both short-term and long-term partnerships need the tenacity to stick together when (not if) problems arise. If partnership is going to work, both parties need to commit to doing what it takes to work out problems that arise in the relationship.

7. *Do aim for quality partnerships / Don't partner indiscriminately.* Because an effective partnership takes deep investment of time, effort, and heart, we should aim for quality and not just team up with any organization or individual who happens to be there. It is not as important that we form many partnerships as it is to cultivate deep ones. Working relationships based on time-limited projects do have their place, as well as financial partners and prayer partners. But it is the deep partnerships that make the enduring, significant impact upon the community.

CITYLIGHTS

One partnership that demonstrates these qualities is CityLights, a network of urban and suburban agencies and individuals seeking the welfare of Southwest Philadelphia, birthed out of suburban Wayne Presbyterian Church.

Monthly meetings give representatives from churches, schools, youth programs, and neighborhood-based nonprofits the chance to get to know one another and to discover what each can do to assist one another for the good of the whole community. Rather than the suburban partner always being the “giver,” CityLights creates opportunities for building relationships, solving problems and sharing resources within the urban community. At one network meeting, for example, when an urban pastor mentioned that her church needed a computer, another urban leader said, “We have a spare one we can give to you. I can put it in my car and bring it over.”

CityLights also guides suburban church members (many of them retired professionals) in volunteering their time, effort, expertise, and friendship with a variety of urban organizations. Initiatives supported by CityLights volunteers have included the

Philadelphia Training Program, helping at-risk youth develop construction skills as they repair the homes of elderly residents; Cornerstone Common Cents Club, a financial investment program with urban and suburban participants; African American Brotherhood, a Christian group formed after the Million-Man March in 1995 to affirm African American culture and achievements; and a community newspaper, the Southwest Globe Times, highlighting positive local news and events.

Pat Leidy, a full-time mom and part-time librarian, participates in CityLight's partnership with Cornerstone Christian Academy.

Leidy recruits and coordinates volunteers from surrounding suburbs, working strategically with school staff.

For the last 12 years, Leidy has driven weekly into the heart of Southwest Philadelphia to oversee the work of volunteers and to offer her own assistance wherever the school has need.

Cornerstone depends on the volunteer corps coordinated by Leidy and others to continue its services to families in Southwest Philadelphia. Volunteers fill staff

positions that schools usually can afford to hire. Principal Deborah Lee enthuses, “Our volunteers come regularly like they're on the payroll! They're incredible, indispensable.” She adds that all involved—from the parents to the children to the volunteers—are helping to close the racial gap that exists between predominantly black Southwest Philadelphia and white suburbs.

Pat Leidy claims her faith as a motivating factor for her involvement. She recalls a National Day of Prayer when Cornerstone teachers and students pinned prayer requests on a wooden cross in the schoolyard, eventually covering the cross with their requests. The sight of the cross, figuratively bearing



the weight of the world, evoked in Leidy a profound sense of gratitude toward God. The bond of Christian community was strengthened as songs, hugs and tears were shared among staff, students and volunteers. Leidy says the event reinforced her desire to serve at Cornerstone through CityLights “because it lets me see God in action.”

The cross-cultural relationships that have formed are also a powerful motivator for her enduring commitment. Leidy has developed many friendships with Cornerstone staff, but she beams when she talks about Principal Lee, who started out as a teacher. They met when Leidy helped Lee set up for her third-grade poetry class. “Pat and I established this magnetic bond to each other from the time we met,” says Lee. “There’s no other way to describe our relationship except that we’re sisters.” The camaraderie that Leidy experiences weekly with Lee and others is solidified at the annual staff dinner at the Leidy’s suburban residence.

Her commitment to Christian love and service through the partnership has also yielded a deeper discipleship. Says Leidy, “I’ve always cared about people, but through

my involvement with CityLights I’ve learned the reasons behind that care and the ways in which I can demonstrate it.” Witnessing her mother form meaningful relationships with people in Southwest Philadelphia through the years has undoubtedly helped shape her children’s view of God, mission, and the world. One of her daughters now works for a nonprofit that seeks educational excellence for middle school students.

Leidy is just one of many members of Wayne Presbyterian Church who has renewed her faith and found deep friendships while providing services to support the vital work of urban partners. CityLights founder Carey Davis affirms that through this interdependent relationship, “leaders have worked to improve the quality of life for residents of [Southwest Philadelphia] while simultaneously encouraging growth and understanding within and between both communities.” As CityLights demonstrates, in a partnership that befits the kingdom of God, both urban and suburban parties benefit greatly, both personal and social transformation occurs, and God is glorified.

When I really bring others into my innermost being and feel their pains, their struggles, their cries in my own soul, then I leave myself, so to speak, and become them; then I have compassion. Compassion lies at the heart of our prayer for our fellow human beings. When I pray for the world, I become the world; when I pray for the endless needs of the millions, my soul expands and wants to embrace them all and bring them into the presence of God. But in the midst of that experience I realize that compassion is not mine but God’s gift to me. I cannot embrace the world, but God can. I cannot pray, but God can pray in me.

– Henri J. M. Nouwen