

# Restoring Urban Communities

BY LISSA M. SCHWANDER

**How can we help restore urban neighborhoods? Three books remind us to be wise—by connecting with work in progress across racial, ethnic, class, and generational divides—and to be hopeful—by remembering that we are rejoining a long process of renewal God has begun.**

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**W**hen Jesus called his first disciples to follow him, he invited them to enter what we today call “intentional community.” The disciples left behind their family and friends, lived with limited privacy and resources, and faced together what appeared to be an uncertain future. Christ challenged their misunderstandings and stereotypes about people who were different from them—people who were poor, sick, or seemingly far from God. In confronting these myths, Christ moved the disciples to a deeper insight about who is the neighbor.

Despite our having these and other biblical models of how we should live with one another, we struggle with the same questions as Jesus’ first disciples: Who is my neighbor? How are we to live in community? What are our obligations to the community? Myths still abound about the people we encounter—those who live in poverty, suffer from AIDS, are unemployed and homeless, are tempted by the lure of alcohol and drugs, or remain trapped in decaying urban neighborhoods. We are called, like the disciples of the early church, to challenge these myths and uncover the workings of Christ in and through all of his people.

Through a personal account of living in an intentional community in inner-city Atlanta, Robert Lupton in *Theirs is the Kingdom: Celebrating the Gospel in Urban America* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1989, 121 pp., \$13.00) shares what a modern-day response to “follow me”

involves. He describes engaging the structural, institutional, cultural, and societal issues that pit individual children of God against one another. Moving back into Atlanta's urban neighborhoods, Lupton and others come face-to-face with communities decimated by racial tensions and white flight, the movement of business and industry away from the urban core, and pockets of crime and substance abuse that are caused by and result in segregation, alienation, and prejudice.

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When the urban core is pitted against the perceived safety of the suburbs, those left behind in the city suffer. Reflecting on this situation, Lupton "wondered if all was well with an economic system where winning meant defeating another human being.

Could it be that among human beings cooperation was a better way than competition?" (p. 24). Lupton's vision for community overcomes his questions and the experiences that he and his family share in this Atlanta neighborhood do not end in hopelessness. He witnesses the presence of God in the strengths, abilities, and commitments of those he encounters:

Amidst the chaos of its crowds and the ominous power of its structures, there exist small, nearly invisible pockets of vigorous, healthy growth. In old storefronts and empty warehouses of decaying communities, gifted ones are finding each other. Called from different places by the same voice, they are joining hands and hearts to take on the overwhelming problems of the city. In the process they are creating kingdom playgrounds. (p. 88)

As we live, work, and play in such "kingdom playgrounds," places where God's children meet and enter into authentic relationship with one another, we encounter Christ. The path to rebuilding an inner-city neighborhood is not always an easy road, as Lipton shares. Misunderstanding and mistrust abound on all sides of the new relationships between people answering the call to relocate into the urban neighborhood and those who already live there. Yet Christ promises to be present in the midst of the struggle. Lupton wonderfully describes new urban neighbors from all walks of life, who have varying interests and skills, being drawn into dependence on and close community with one another.

Among those working and playing in these kingdom playgrounds are artists. J. Nathan Corbitt and Vivian Nix-Early's *Taking it to the Streets: Using the Arts to Transform Your Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004,

288 pp., \$24.00) presents a framework for transforming urban neighborhoods in holistic ways through these local artists' work. Corbitt, professor of cross-cultural studies, and Nix-Early, dean of the Campolo School for Social Change at Eastern University, are cofounders of Buildabridge International. Their "model of Arts in Redemptive Transformation (A.R.T.) offers a framework for how people, and artists in particular, can help to create a world in which people, communities, and societies are transformed through a journey toward redemption" (p. 25). As local artists engage their communities in new and transformative ways, they catch a glimpse of what Corbitt and Nix-Early call "the NU JERUZ."

[It] is not so much a place, though we use the term to refer to the urban context, but...a way of living in which all people are empowered to live lives that are full, free, and pleasing to the Creator in all aspects - artistically, economically, culturally, politically, spiritually, environmentally, and socially - until the journey of living faith is complete. (p. 22)

Corbitt and Nix-Early urge congregations to incorporate the arts—including visual art, performance art, music, and dance—in a new way in their ministries. The Church has long employed the arts to praise and glorify God in worship. But in addition to this "vertical" expression, the arts should be used in a "horizontal" way to open the doors of local congregations and reach out to the communities that they serve.

Works of art can function in a prophetic, agape, or celebrative way in the A.R.T. model. Art functions prophetically when it awakens us to a social problem or problems; then a communal response and solution to the problem may be accomplished through agape art; and the accomplishment is celebrated via celebrative art. For example, prophetic artwork can draw attention to societal issues like racism and social and economic inequalities that, in Lupton's words, "pit people against one another." Agape artists create works that help us "love our neighbor" and restore relationships. When awareness has been raised through prophetic art and relationships restored through agape art, celebrative artists can draw attention to the victory the community has won. For each component of the model, Corbitt and Nix-Early lay out a variety of specific steps individuals, congregations, and communities may take to use art as part of their ministry.

Of course, "art has no meaning without people," the authors note in exploring the limitations of their model for community outreach and development, and "it is not a neat or exact science" (pp. 64-65). Throughout the book they stress the importance of relationship building; it is not the art itself but the process of creating the art and the relationships that result from this process that provide an impetus for community transformation. Thus they realize that art cannot stand alone, but must be used in combination with other tools and methods in urban ministry.

Art can be the creative “outside of the box” kind of thinking that opens doors to new personal relationships. To inspire us to this end, Corbitt and Nix-Early provide many examples of places and ways that prophetic, agape, and celebrative artists – and not just Christian artists and congregations, by the way – are helping to bridge racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and generational divides among people in their communities.

While using art to build relationships is a relatively new approach to restoring urban communities, following Christ’s example by entering neighborhoods and engaging people where they live is not. *Restoring At-Risk Communities: Doing It Together & Doing It Right* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995, 264 pp., \$16.99), edited John M. Perkins, the founder and chair of the Christian Community Development Association, lays out Perkins’s influential model for community engagement and development. This model has inspired Christians who work and play in emerging kingdom playgrounds around the world.

At the heart of Perkins’s model is what he calls “the three R’s” – relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. He urges Christians to relocate their homes to neighborhoods that have been devastated by racism, poverty, and economic inequality, for it is only by living and working in close proximity with people that we can be reconciled to them. The redistribution of resources is grounded in the biblical principle that all things belong to God. “Redistribution means putting our lives, our skills, our education, and our resources to work to empower people in a community of need,” Perkins writes (p. 34). Other contributors to the book further describe the methods and provide concrete examples of Christian community development.

Foundational to this model is an understanding of poverty, racism, and segregation and their effects on individuals, families, and urban neighborhoods in the United States. In the chapter titled “Understanding Poverty,” Lowell Noble and Ronald Potter provide an overview of the middle-class flight that has devastated urban neighborhoods, leaving them with few positive role models and very limited resources. It is in the midst of such devastation, Perkins suggests, that Christian leaders and community developers are called to minister.

Yet Christian community development is not a job for heroic individuals and isolated families. Rather it is most effectively accomplished in partnership with local congregations situated within the communities they seek to develop. Glen Kehrein, who directs the Circle Urban Ministries in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago, IL, explains how many congregations have vacated inner-city neighborhoods and then condemned those left behind for the deteriorating situation. “Instead of condemnation we need to take appropriate responsibility,” writes Kehrein. “Our communities will not be reached unless we recapture a parish concept. We must reclaim the inner city by staking our claim and recapturing turf yielded to our enemy” (pp. 173-174). He recommends a holistic approach to reclaiming the city for

Christ that involves both individuals and churches working together toward transforming people and neighborhoods.

Perkins's model is explicitly Christian not only in the central role it gives to congregations in the process of community development, but also in its theological perspective on the issues facing inner-city communities. Because Christian community development understands the human need for spiritual as well as physical wholeness, it includes building of relationships between people and with God (reconciliation) as well as empowering individuals and communities through economic development (redistribution). As Noble and Potter put it, "The biblical vision for Christian community development is for people to be in loving fellowship with God and with one another," and this includes relationships across racial, ethnic, and socio-economic divides (p. 49).

Lupton, Corbitt and Nix-Early, and Perkins and his colleagues share a vision of community transformation through the work of those who respond to Christ's call and example by moving into urban neighborhoods. None of them are idealists. Though these authors believe in the power of leaders and neighbors to work toward change, they realize there are tremendous challenges and difficulties to be faced. So they remind us to be *wise*—by connecting with work that is already in progress across racial, ethnic, class, and generational divides—and to be *hopeful*—by remembering that we are rejoining a long process of renewal and redemption that God has begun.

"In spontaneous, inconspicuous ways, the God of history is fitting together new forms for the urban church—bold, compassionate forms adapted to the schedules, cultures, and special needs of the city," writes Lupton. "As I communicate with urban visionaries around the country and throughout the world, I am discovering some common characteristics of these new wineskins. Almost all grow out of contact with poor and disenfranchised people. They are often multi-ethnic or multiracial. They are reinstituting early church practices of sharing food, homes, and material possessions with those in need. And there is a rediscovery of the importance of spiritual gifts which are distributed to all believers and give special significance to even the least in the body" (p. 120).

These authors challenge us to stop watching from afar as cities suffer from middle-class flight and disinvestment and to start participating in the work of Jesus Christ in these urban neighborhoods.



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