

The Principles of Christian Community Development

The desperate conditions that face the poor call for a revolution in our attempts at a solution. Through years of experience among the poor, I have come to see these desperate problems cannot be solved without strong commitment and risky actions on the part of ordinary Christians with heroic faith.

The most creative long-term solutions to the problems of the poor are coming from grass-roots and church-based efforts people who see themselves as the replacements, the agents, for Jesus here on earth, in their own neighborhoods and communities.

Their calling is one of Christian Community Development, which is not a concept that was developed in a classroom, nor formulated by people foreign to the poor community. These are biblical, practical principles evolved from years of living and working among the poor.

MEETING FELT NEEDS

The great question is, "How do we affirm the dignity of people, motivate them, and help them take responsibility for their own lives?" By beginning with the people's felt needs we establish a relationship and a trust, which then enables us to move to deeper issues of development. This idea of beginning with people's felt needs is what is called the felt need concept. It is summed up in a Chinese poem:

Go to the people
Live among them
Learn from them
Love them
Start with what they know
Build on what they have:
But of the best leaders
When their task is done
The people will remark
"We have done it ourselves."

WHOLISTIC: EVANGELISM & SOCIAL ACTION

The gospel, rightly understood, is wholistic. It responds to people as whole people; it doesn't single out just spiritual or just physical needs and speak to those. Christian community development begins with people transformed by the love of God, who then respond to God's call to share the gospel with others through evangelism, social action, economic development, and justice. These groups of Christians start both churches and community development corporations, evangelism outreaches and tutoring programs, discipleship groups and housing programs, prayer groups and businesses. However, the next principle is an additional commitment that distinguishes this movement from traditional approaches.

RELOCATION: LIVING AMONG THE POOR

Living the gospel means desiring for your neighbor and your neighbor's family that which you desire for yourself and your family. Living the gospel means bettering the quality of other people's lives spiritually, physically, socially, and emotionally as you better your own. Living the gospel means sharing in the suffering and pain of others. How did Jesus love? "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Jesus relocated. He became one of us. He didn't commute back and forth to heaven. Similarly, the most effective messenger of the gospel to the poor will also live among the poor that God has called him to.

By relocating, we will understand most clearly the real problems facing the poor; then we may begin to look for real solutions. For example, if our children are a part of that community, you can be sure we will do whatever we can to make sure that the children of our community get a good education. Relocation transforms "you, them, and theirs" to "we, us, and ours." Effective ministries plant and build communities of believers that have a personal stake in the development of their neighborhoods.

RECONCILIATION: PEOPLE TO GOD, NEIGHBOR TO NEIGHBOR

Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. Jesus said that the essence of Christianity could be summed up in two inseparable commandments: Love God, and love thy neighbor. First, Christian Community Development is concerned with reconciling people to God and bringing them into a church fellowship where they can be disciplined in their faith.

But can a gospel that reconciles people to God without reconciling people to people be the true gospel of Jesus Christ? Our love for Christ should break down every racial, ethnic or economic barrier. As Christians come together to solve the problems of their community, the great challenge will be to partner and witness together across these barriers. Christian Community Development recognizes that the task of loving the poor is shared by the entire body of Christ, black, white, brown, and yellow, rich and poor, urban and suburban.

REDISTRIBUTION: EMPOWERING THE POOR

When the body of Christ is visibly present and living among the poor (relocation), and when we are loving our neighbor and our neighbor's family the way we love ourselves and our own family (reconciliation) the result is redistribution. If we as God's people with resources are living in the poor community and are a part of it, our skills and our resources will be applied to the problems of that community. Bringing our lives, our skills, our educations, and our resources and putting them to work to empower people in a community of need is redistribution. Christian Community Development ministries find creative avenues to create jobs, schools, health centers, home ownership, and other enterprises of long-term development.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The primary goal of redistribution is to restore the stabilizing glue and fill the vacuum of moral, spiritual, and economic leadership that is so prevalent in poor communities. This is most effectively done by raising up Christian leaders from the community of need who will remain in the community. Most Christian Community Development ministries put a strong accent on youth development, winning youth to Christ as early as kindergarten, following them all the way through college with spiritual and educational nurture, and creating opportunities for leadership upon return to their community.

CHURCH-BASED

Nothing other than the community of God's people is capable of affirming the dignity of the poor and enabling them to meet their own needs. It is practically impossible to do effective wholistic ministry apart from the local church. A nurturing community of faith can best provide the thrusts of evangelism, discipleship, spiritual accountability, and relationship by which disciples grow in their walk with God.

TRACK RECORD

Our work and growing understanding of the effectiveness of these principles began in 1960 when our family returned to our hometown of rural Mendenhall, Mississippi, caught in the vice grip of racism and poverty. Saddened and concerned by the great number of young people leaving this little ghetto for the "big city," we recognized that long-term development had to begin with introducing these young people to God and nurturing them in their faith, continue with encouraging them to go to college, and end with these young leaders returning with valuable edu-

cation and skills to start programs to develop their community.

There in Mendenhall, we saw home-grown leaders such as Dolphus and Rosie Weary, Artis and Carolyn Fletcher, and many other young people return to their community to begin a health center, businesses, a Christian school, a law office, a church, and a pastor development program which is nurturing black church leadership throughout the state of Mississippi. These programs in turn led to economic development, creating jobs and opportunities for many others in Mendenhall.

The development of indigenous leaders in Mendenhall enabled us to move on to Jackson, where we planted a similar work Voice of Calvary Ministries which is today led by Melvin Anderson, another disciple who grew up in Mendenhall, went off the college, and moved into Jackson's inner city. Voice of Calvary includes a church, home ownership/family development program, health center, and thrift store. The same process of indigenous development is now taking place in Northwest Pasadena, where we moved in 1982 after 10 years in Jackson.

A SEEDBED FOR THE NATION AND THE WORLD

During the years in Jackson, we started an International Study Center and began to share our vision and principles through workshops and conferences. Other ministries began to sprout up led by people committed to living and making God's love visible among the poor.

Bob Lupton went to Atlanta and became burdened by the plight of young black boys. Out of that burden came FCS Urban Ministries which is pioneering in the "re-neighborhooding" of the deteriorating Summerhill community, site of the 1996 Olympics. Kathy Dudley, a young white woman mentored by Dolphus Weary, moved into west Dallas and began working with the children there, starting Voice of Hope. A young white Moody Bible Institute graduate named Glen Kehrein relocated into the Austin neighborhood of Chicago and started Circle Urban Ministries. He was joined by a black pastor, Raleigh Washington. Wayne Gordon, a white Wheaton College graduate, moved into one of Chicago's more severe ghettos, and started church from which more than 50 youngsters have graduated from college, many returning to their community to head up ministries there. Other ministries were started in Detroit, Denver, Baltimore, and Seattle.

With these men and women and many others attempting to live out the reconciling love of God among the poor, we recognized our need to encourage and learn from each other. In 1989 the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) was born. CCDA is now nearly 400 member organizations in over 100 cities and 35 states. These churches and ministries are showing that it is possible that the church can live out the love of God in the world; that black and white and yellow and brown, rich and poor together, can be reconciled; and that we can make a difference, that we can rescue the ghettos and barrios of this nation.

The vision has also been seeded beyond the U.S. through leaders from other nations who visited Voice of Calvary and other CCDA members, and transplanted the principles of Christian Community Development back in their own cities and communities. Graham and Dorcas Cyster returned to Capetown, South Africa, to begin a ministry of reconciliation and development there. Jean and Joy Thomas relocated to Jean's native country of Haiti and are heading up one of the most significant efforts of church-based community development in the Western hemisphere's poorest nation. There are many others: Patrick Sookdeo in London, Sam Chapman a native New Zealand Maori, Australian Aborigines, and in Mexico and Kenya.

In hundreds of communities and cities across the world, these defining principles of Christian Community Development are proving that grass roots, community-based ministries led by people who have made the community their own are the most effective agents for healing of the poor.

Taken from the Christian Community Development Association