

iv) An Urban Ghetto - New York

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There have been those who have seen mission simply as the changing of social structures, and have ignored the predicament inherent in Man himself: there have been others who have interpreted mission as the rescuing of individuals from society and are unaware of any concern of God for the community of Man. Both views are inadequate and unbiblical. There is only one gospel: it raises personal issues demanding personal change; it raises social issues demanding social change. The scope of mission extends to the exposing' and opposing of all destructive powers that deny the Lordship of Christ and keep Man less than fully human. Such powers are everywhere with us, but nowhere more evidently than in the urban ghetto.

When given the opportunity of two years in New York, I had no experience of a ghetto or of the racism on which it is based. I had been both shaken and challenged by Bruce Kenrick's story of mission in Harlem (Come out the Wilderness) and greatly moved by John Sherrill's account of Dave Wilkerson's work among addicts in Brooklyn (The Cross and the Switchblade). But I was very conscious of being quite ignorant of the enormous problems facing those living in a ghetto - and black - and that there might be no contribution I could make of value in any way.

The area was predominantly Black, with about 10% Puerto Rican, and a smaller representation of Whites: the problems were very considerable. There was widespread poverty (with an index of 48.4): unemployment - especially among teenagers was acute and demoralizing, and such jobs as were available were 'dead-end' or demeaning; wages were low, and rents, food and medical costs high; houses were often greatly overcrowded and absentee landlords extorted rents through agencies and

couldn't be contacted about housing violations, cockroaches, rats, etc. (One child was severely bitten on the face thinking a rat was a kitten.)

The cost of medical attention meant a highly disproportionate share of disease and mortality; the discouragement, depression and loss of self-respect made many easy prey for the racketeers from outside, especially peddlers of dope. A 13-year-old youngster on our block died after injecting rat poison given as heroin. Desperate dependence on expensive drugs led some to violence against their neighbours, to 'muggings', and to theft; while girls supported the habit of boyfriend or brothers by turning to prostitution. Many of the local police were known for dishonesty, harassment and brutality and were consequently mistrusted or despised; many families had menfolk in jail for months before trial because few could afford bail or personal lawyers, and there was resentment that the legal process seemed discriminatory when juries had no black members.

The family structure (a hangover from the slave system) was quite new to me and many families (perhaps 30%) had no continuing father but a succession of uncles; motherhood was supremely valued and children wonderfully cared for, though discipline often alternated between over-lenience and harshness; as a matriarchy lacking disciplined father images, the ghetto had many disturbed children with unresolved conflicts and unmet needs.

The education of youngsters was less of a problem than in neighbouring schools (where armed guards patrolled corridors) and there were active community and parent associations; but

curriculum was largely unrelated to job possibilities, textbooks were culturally alien, and teachers tended to be transient trainees from such a different background that they were unable to understand the black child or help him to self-discipline, and sometimes just unable to teach.

Few churches had the confidence of the community: the black 'store-fronts' met largely emotional needs, and were charismatic in a fairly superficial way; the denominational churches were poorly attended, and hardly involved in mission of any kind, though individuals from a number of congregations did a great deal in community development.

So I arrived in a strange situation knowing only that I ought to be there, and that I could only be a learner. Initially, as Assistant Pastor, I was asked to attend local meetings and committees as the congregation's representative, but involvement became such that a new position was devised - 'Minister in the Community' - and with it the freedom to pursue all that seemed necessary and right. Community development means helping individuals and groups to identify needs for themselves - and to see that they themselves can move decisively to meet these needs - and then to support them 'whenever support can be given without interfering with their autonomy.

In our community this involved working in existing-groups and being a catalyst in the formation of new ones; it meant encouraging self-directed group and community research and action; it meant helping them to face such problems as those above, to examine resources, explore available skills and abilities, plan action and bring it about. So some began

play-groups, or helped youngsters with remedial reading, or ran community programmes and clubs; some organized street clean-ups or brought pressure upon the sanitation authorities, some got involved in fighting extortion by absentee landlords or in opposing 'development' plans that would leave hundreds of poor families homeless; some fought drug traffic and some ran local rehabilitation for addicts; some kept records of police harassment and bribe-acceptance and ran a community meeting which resulted in our getting a new police captain; some made it possible during a teachers' strike to keep all our schools open and staffed with community volunteers.

Community development, then, is an approach towards facilitating maturity and responsibility, it recognises the need of many in a community to become more confident and competent in analysing situations, making decisions and carrying them through for themselves. It has proved itself an effective - perhaps the only effective - approach in the urban ghetto. It is an approach which has much to offer us in frontier youth work, and in the Youth Service there is a widespread emphasis on community and on participation by young people in responsible decision-making within society.

'Full participation in God's mission ... will demand costly service, both in meeting the needs of man and in seeking to reform the patterns of society which produce those needs, service which is neither an excuse nor a cloak for evangelism but a genuine expression of the love of God.'
(On the Other Side - p.81)