

# **THEOLOGICAL PAPER**

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The urban community that I chose to focus on is the Lower East Side (LES) the community my church Abounding Grace Ministries (AGM) calls home. The LES can be found in the southeastern portion of Manhattan. I have been acquainted with the area for almost the past twenty years and have seen both the poverty and gentrification and how each of these opposing forces has forced the area to both change and stay the same. My analysis of the LES is from my purview as an observer not as a resident. Due to my position withing AGM's leadership and my close relational ties with various members of my AGM family; many of whom still live within the community. I feel I have a deeper knowledge and understanding of the things that not only aid the community but also the things that cripple and hurt the community.

José Humphrey<sup>1</sup> author, pastor, facilitator and a graduate of Alliance Theological Seminary (ATS) was born and raised in the LES. Humphreys has stated that growing up in the LES of the 1980's found the area plagued with drug use, rising crime rates, gang violence and abuse (physical, sexual and domestic). Currently many of these issues are still to varying degrees prevalent with the addition of poverty, homelessness, teen pregnancy (though currently in rapid decline), air pollution and

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<sup>1</sup> Seeing Jesus in East Harlem

medical ailments (obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes) being the most acute. A large majority of our members who currently attend AGM have lived most of not all of their lives in the LES.

Agglomeration or urban community is an urban area or human settlement with a population density that is formed through urbanization and can be seen through the rise of communities within the urban context. The LES can currently be viewed as an agglomerate that has gone through steady and at times rapid changes within its community. Starting with the immigrant arrival in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century the community has seen urbanization take root and grow at a steady pace. In addition to its tenements starting in the late 1940's until the late 1970's public housing developments opened that are still being occupied today. This housing expansion brought many residents and family into the LES.

A demographic study of the LES would show us how feelings of neglect and marginalization gave rise as many in the area would begin to experience lower income economics, continually felt economic stagnation, subpar healthcare, the dilapidation of housing complexes and a decline in educational and job opportunities. I firsthand have witnessed the effects of gentrification within the LES. I remember it our founding Pastor

Rick Del Rio encouraging the congregation who at the time were upset about the latest phase of gentrification and him preaching and encouraging the congregation that God had placed them in the LES for a purpose and a reason and that they should consider this new influx of residents as those that they can preach and minister to about Gods everlasting love. Gentrification has many advantages and disadvantages and when considered in the urban landscape that we know it brings a much different perception of what actually experience.

As an urban community with the advantage oof serving the community from an urban theological standpoint - urban theology is the urban social reality through God's lens, which lays the basis for God-centered urban ministry response. I can proudly say that AGM has tried to bring a timely and effective ministry response to the issues and circumstances that occur within the urban context of the LES. Howard Thurman<sup>2</sup> author, theologian, philosopher, educator and civil rights discusses Jesus from the position of "against the wall" and how throughout history many ethnic groups (African Americans throughout US history) and other racial and ethnic groups have been placed in positions of wants and inferiority to their Caucasian brethren.

My enrollment to ATS and taking classes in urban ministry/

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<sup>2</sup> Jesus and the Disinherited

theology has given me more questions and thoughts and at times what feels like fewer answer and lesser understanding. My need for understanding has led me to seek out ABBA for deeper meaning, understanding and revelation to the things that I am still unclear or uncertain about. The question and thought that has constantly been recurring is where is the church and when will they rise up? Benesh<sup>3</sup>,Cimperman<sup>4</sup> and Smith<sup>5</sup> each illustrate in their texts how urban issues in varying degrees and forms have been occurring since biblical times. Jesus is, was and will always be the answer to those who were considered socially, economically and politically disadvantaged. Poverty/poor is mentioned in the bible four hundred times. Ray Bakke<sup>6</sup> offers this understanding of Jesus within urban ministry "The portraits we see of Jesus in the Gospels show him teaching in urban contexts addressing urban themes.

Biblical and theological framework shows the divine intention within the City. City has always been associated with order, creation, civilization, life and beauty. The Garden of Eden not only gives us the creation narrative but also our first look at an urban mandate. One of the purposes of Adam and Eve within the Garden was to be fruitful and multiply providing citizens of the City.

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<sup>3</sup> The Urbanity of the Bible

<sup>4</sup> Social Analysis for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

<sup>5</sup> Seeking a City with Foundations

<sup>6</sup> A theology As Big As The City

Churches/Ministries found in an urban setting must maintain a balance of public and private along with personal and corporate opportunities. These settings allow urban settings to be viewed both systematically and individually. These factors or settings allow Urban Ministry in its current context to see many dilemmas and challenges. They are alienation, fear and violence. Many may be surprised to see alienation as a challenge due to the close geographical proximity between individuals in the urban setting. Although close physically their emotional proximity can be quite distant and was made more visible due to the COVID restrictions. Fear is another barrier that many may not see as a dilemma or challenge, but fear is interwoven with survival and make one who is an ally an adversary or vice versa. An abundance of fear or an unhealthy amount has the potential to do irreversible harm and can lead to violence. Violence can be represented as the basis of all failed human relationship. Personal violence which is suicide, homicide, substance abuse and domestic violence. An increase in urbanization has caused cities to experience a renaissance. U.S. economic growth has created new wealth and new jobs in knowledge sectors. An overall decline in crime happening within cities. The development of a cultural mood which embraces eclecticism -mixture of old and new, cultural diversity both artistic and organic has led to a current migration of younger people from rural communities to current

urban centers. Changes in immigration laws has also contributed to the population growth. These factors will continue to bring rise to globalization and continued urban development with focuses on compact, public transit-oriented, walkable and mixed-use development. These factors will be the driving forces behind urbanism, smart growth and a continued reduction in crime.

Currently urban ministries may find themselves on in one of two fronts either facing growth or decline. Analysis of this view can be found upon one's understanding of what God created the city to be and involves a theological understanding of how ABBA wants to enhance the quality of life for his children.

The peace of God in community or lack of it leads many to mistreat or malign those that as believers we should be caring for. In the New Testament James<sup>7</sup> gives clear instruction to look after the widow and orphan. Yet the church especially within the United States does not do its part to aid those within its own borders. Looking at the racial inequality and injustices that

have occurred within the US the last two hundred years is a good

indicator of how not only this country, but the church has turned a blind eye and deaf ear to the injustices that occur on a daily basis. One cannot help but wonder if the church was the standard what shape would not only this country, but this world be in.

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<sup>7</sup> James1:27

Two thousand years after the crucifixion the church at times is ministering and bringing forth change from a position of defeat rather than from a position of victory. Urbanism tends to centralize power in itself, to take control and authority in every kind of direction. Despite this the church is the best outlet available to the current missionary work needed to be accomplished in order for evangelism to occur within the City. In order to get these mandates and policies to occur church politics, policies, priorities, or personalities, must be forgotten and the church universally must stand as rightful heirs to ABBA's goodness and mercy. Moving forward the church cannot ignore or escape the integrating influence the city has. The social, political and economic environment of an urban community has immense impact on the church. Genocide, global warming, poverty, global catastrophes, mass shootings, hate on a global level has led to the destruction and decay of this planet that God has gifted us. In order to see the local community, grow substantially and maintain continual growth and long-lasting change. These changes must highlight the density, vision, and direction of church. Cities can be viewed as a large, compact and socially heterogeneous center of integrative social power, capable of preserving, changing and interpreting human culture both for and against God's divine purpose. Characteristics of a city could be regarded as magnets that amplify and drive change.

These changes can be in the form of ministry to the sick, Pastoral care, interpretation of local, national and world events, public speaking and proclamation of God's Word, public worship, religious education, training and equipment of future generations, combating street gangs and gang violence, preaching apologetic messages to unbelievers, private and public prayer promoting urban renewal projects, and officiating dedications weddings and eulogies.

Gentrification as I mentioned before as muddied the urban ministry waters. America has fallen in love with gentrification- foodies get their restaurants; developers get their business and politicians get their tax dollars. Only people who don't experience gentrification are the people living in the neighborhood before gentrification starts. Gentrification has changed what we imagine when we hear the word urban...although it is often equated with neighborhood improvement, in reality gentrification is a process of class transformation. I will give you an example that I personally know of when AGM encountered gentrification. Due to the fact that many of its members live in the housing projects many have fixed financial resources that coupled with real estate prices in the LES has not made it easy for us to have our own physical location. Prior to COVID we meet in the local Public school. Even as we are slowly coming out of the pandemic and things are reopening, we have still been unbale

to resume worship at the school. We begin and currently are holding services via FB Live. During the end of 2020 a church whom we have been in fellowship with offered their church space to have in person worship. The departure of their led Pastor has made future gathering problematic. This raises many concerns and issues for me the primary question is the behavior or stance that do not align with kingdom values or principles. If God blesses you with something, is it our job to hoard it or to use it to grow the kingdom of God as a whole. I have a very strong feeling that heaven will not be separated by church denomination, financial status or race. What then should be our stance as believers and children of God be; should we look down at our brother or sister in their poverty and squalor or ask them how we in our respective spheres of influences can help bring them to areas of change and reconciliation,

Jesus brings a message of hope and restoration to urban life his bottom-up ministry creates an intimately transforming relationship. His preaching of the Kingdom of heaven being near along with his ministering on the Kingdom of God and God's reign. Jesus' march to the cross and his resurrection shows that our God focuses on the issue of ethnicity, riches, poverty, justice and women are all accurate themes in issues you will find in our current urban agenda. Jesus Christ is the embodied form of the rule of God through his life, death and resurrection. Jesus's

life and ministry accurate illustrates that God is more than one's personal salvation story but is crux of salvation as a whole, its structures and its systems. When we view Jesus Christ as both the message, the model and the sacred space - any place Jesus goes becomes a sacred space where believers reside and live is therefore holy ground.

Brokenness can still be found in our current urban context due to corrupt religious and legal systems. Despite this and other factors urban and city living will always be on some type of incline. The following factors or issues: government, education, health care, and information all contribute to urban growth or increase. High mortality rate over morbidity rate is a significant fact. The overall mission and message is the encouragement of urbanization.

Missions has taught people skills to be utilized for the growth and sustainability of the urban landscape. By linking the religious right and the secular left we are asking that faith be combined with energies of justice and peace in service of the Living God to help aid in bringing about social transformation

Advancement in urban communities can be made by using the social analysis - root causes and values behind the social issue, prayer and theological Reflection - where one makes judgments about the issue and its causes based on the Biblical and theological tradition have changed significantly. Application of

these principles to our current urban context shows us how pastoral action plays a vital role in the urban community/ministry. Pastoral action is defined as acts of the judgments made in a manner consistent with one's own moral values. By individually exploring the issue from the perspective of faith—the Bible, the social teachings of a denomination, the resources of the Christian tradition, and the lived faith of the church community. Reflection should demand not just an intellectual assent to faith, but a commitment to incorporate it within one's life. God's Word provides situation to not only challenges old ways of thinking and responding by raising new questions, suggesting new insights, and opening people up to new action possibilities. As God's children and his hand extended on earth it is not only our moral responsibility but our biblical and theological expectation that we minister at soup kitchens or food center, visit the elderly and/or sick, and tutoring children are common examples of direct service. Direct service needs to be coupled with actions aimed at removing the causes of the problems that direct service is addressing. Legislative advocacy, community organizing, and working with organizations that are changing the structures that promote injustice are examples of social change actions. As believers these are causes and solutions that we should find ourselves involved in.

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