

Site Visit and Interview Paper

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Churches within urban communities play a vital role in the lives of those who reside within its streets. These churches not only serve as places of spiritual worship and emotional support but serve as so much more. There are churches in these urban communities that go beyond the four walls of their church buildings and go into the streets. These churches not only tend to their spiritual needs but also tend their physical needs, their financial needs, and their employment needs in addition to a myriad of other things. These churches in their social analysis, identify the problems that are facing their communities, identify their theological reflection and framework, and then put their words to action with their theological implementation.

One such Church is a small urban church located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Way to Yahweh Ministries. The Senior Pastor is Pat Derosiers; a Haitian man in his forties, born and raised in the Projects of New York City, and has been incarcerated. His childhood, choices and personal story is much like the stories of both young men and women in the streets today. What he preaches comes from the storms in his life that God has brought him out of.

The Church is in a predominantly African American and Haitian community in a low-income community in Philadelphia. The central mission of the Church is “Revelation, Deliverance, Healing and Prophecy”. Through our conversation, it did seem as though the focal part of that vision and mission is on deliverance and healing. It is a church that is deeply rooted in the spiritual gifts that its members possess. The church is so deeply rooted and loyal to the community in which it is located and its primary mission proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the the healing and deliverance of people within their community. They are a church that wants to be seen among the people. The Pastor is well-known and respected and possesses integrity that has earned the trust of the people he serves.

The ministry approach of Pastor Pat is a combination of Pastoral (building up the body for personal growth and improving society), Prophetic (speaking on behalf of God to the society), and Evangelistic (Proclaiming the Gospel and establishing relationships). Because there are so many aspects of the church and community that need attention, he individually focuses on the pastoral aspect and depends on the support and guidance of other individuals in leadership positions both in his church and in addition to close Pastors from other, bigger churches. He, therefore, relies on other members of the church to fill the gaps with other ministry approaches. He wishes that he had a sufficient amount of time to dedicate to being actively a part of every initiative the church is a part of, but he admitted that when it did it was too much for him to handle and as a result had chosen to focus on the Pastoral aspect of his church.

In this community, it was revealed to me that there are several issues plaguing the community surrounding the church. In his own social analysis alongside members of his staff, they were able to identify the key issues within their community that they saw a need to address. Issues such as drug and alcohol use, food insecurity, unemployment, and gun violence. These are societal issues that are also flooding the streets of areas such as Harlem, Washington Heights, and parts of Brooklyn, and the cities and churches are trying to find solutions to mitigate these issues.

The community is plagued by drug and alcohol use. Similar to many other urban communities, liquor stores can be found on almost every other block. In the front of these liquor stores are the same individuals; drunks who are drinking, passing out, or pedaling for money; food insecurity and unemployment across the states have seen an increase, especially as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic. People have lost their jobs for a variety of reasons, one being the loss of employment due to businesses that have gone out of business. As is all across the Country,

gun violence continues to be a very hot topic that is causing many powerful City and State leaders to debate over the issue.

After conducting a social analysis and much prayer, there came many weeks and many conversations between Pastor Pat and church leadership. After identifying the issues that needed to be addressed, the church leadership very slowly began to brainstorm ideas on how they could support their community with the issues that have infested their communities. It is important to note that because the church is a very small church and has limited resources. As a result, they needed to decide of how they would be able to implement the changes and solutions that they discussed. The reality was they would not be able to try to begin mitigating every societal issue their community was facing right away; they needed to look at the resources that they did have and what they were able to do and start from there. Their focus was to put their words into action.

The two issues that they wanted to begin to address were food insecurity and unemployment. During their leadership meeting, some idea to help mitigate these issues was to set up a community/neighborhood food pantry because they realized that there were none in the surrounding area of their church. If residents of their community needed assistance with food insecurity or needed a food pantry, they needed to travel farther. This did not seem right to Pastor Pat and his church leadership. Why should someone have to leave their own community/neighborhood to receive food assistance?

In order for this to happen, they first reached out to members of their church to see what they would be able to contribute; they wanted to begin by starting in-house. First seeing how immediate members in the church could meet the needs of those experiencing food insecurity.

The first step of actual action was hosting community potluck dinners at the church every week. This included doing some footwork and advertising on the streets of the community. The target audience was not just someone that didn't want to waste money and just wanted a free plate, but someone that genuinely did not have food to eat; maybe the homeless person on the streets or the young Mother with several children who is just having a hard time.

The hope was in attempting to do this, the individuals that attended would feel accepted and welcomed. This action in and of itself could show them the love and Christ and could possibly plant a seed for a moment to share the Gospel. Pastor Pat needed to be intentional with his actions. Slowly but surely, they then began reaching out to people in the community and seeking support from a Community based Organization to help to supply resources to distribute to those in need; this was the initial seed that was planted for a small soup kitchen within the community.

The second issue of focus was addressing the lack of employment of the residents in the neighborhood. As with the food pantries and potlucks, the church first sought out the help of the church members. Church members that possess certain skills or were Teachers, Human Resources Managers, or even people that possessed skills such as resume and cover letter writing, Interview questions, setting up email accounts, budgeting on a low-income, GED help/advice were all sought after and encouraged to volunteer whenever they could assist members in the community. In the same way with the pantry, members went into the streets to see what kind of educational/ life skills courses they needed, and then they would see what they could provide and then take small steps towards their goal. In this way, the doors of the church were open to the community much more! Residents began to see the church not just as a place to get the spiritual support that they needed, but also where they can receive support

Two Scriptures (although there are several more) that is grounded in their vision is:

1 Corinthians 12:27-28 “Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.

And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues”.

and

Matthew 25:35-40 “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”

After conducting my interview, I have gained a better understanding of the positive effect that can happen on an urban community as a result of engaging in taking the time to conduct a social analysis and finding ways to turn hopes into actual, tangible action. The impact that a church can have, even though small, can tremendously change the fabric of that community. Regardless of how small a church can be, if the Pastor, other members of the church leader, the church, the community, and partnerships come together, change can happen. If everyone is making an earnest effort to mitigate the issues in their surrounding neighborhoods, there is no idea of the positive impact that it could have on the community.

Although the church has a clear vision, it is evident that there is still work that needs to be done and there should be more clarity on how the church regularly does theology when it comes to “Revelation” and “Prophecy” and is something that I am interested in learning more

about and should have raised more questions and concerns about in our initial meeting; like what does it actually look like in his church context.

One area of strength is the way in which, despite a lack of resources, members of the church came together to try to come up with ways in which they could best support and serve their community. Hearing the story of a small neighborhood church coming together with the community to help serve the community is a testament to the importance of what it really means to be a servant of God.

As with any church, business, or school, there are areas of strength and areas where improvement is needed. When churches such as “The Way to Yahweh Ministries” and other neighborhood churches come together with the same prayers and hopes for a better future for their community, then God shows up and makes what seems to have been impossible, possible.