



Final Urban Theological Paper

URBAN THEOLOGY – UR510 – NA/NOS – PROF. JOSE CARLOS MONTES

By: Denese Joyner

INTRODUCTION ---

The social context of much of the Bible, although agrarian in setting, was predominantly urban. Facing similar issues as city dwellers face today, Jesus addressed the most glaring needs of His 1st century, ancient, Roman and Hellenistic society. It is therefore imperative that urban theological practitioners glean from the biblical text theological understanding of what God was doing in the ancient world, in order to make theological application for how God is working in modernity. Endeavoring to follow in Jesus' footsteps, Community District #12, or South Jamaica in Queens, New York, has mirrored some of the urban social realities found in the New Testament. In exploring a few of South Jamaica's social issues, we will conduct a holistic analysis of factors affecting this town. We will review key components negatively impacting this community's flourishing. Reflecting on South Jamaica's social outcomes through the biblical lens will develop an urban theology and theological application to reverse some of the despondent and abhorrent conditions in South Jamaica; namely poverty due to underemployment and unemployment, as a result of lack of adequate education, and substance abuse.

SOCIAL ANALYSIS OF SOUTH JAMAICA---

This rich economically, ethnically, and socially diverse community of people reflect over 100 countries worldwide, speak over 30 different languages and are eagerly in need of holistic missional approaches to yield Christian commitment and spiritual growth. Community District 12 is a community of approximately 10 square miles, in the borough of Queens, of New York City. The community is comprised by smaller locales of Hollis, South Jamaica, St Albans, Jamaica Center, North Springfield Gardens, and Rochdale Village. It is home to approximately 226,000 residents, reflecting 3% of the Borough's 2.3 million residents. This densely populated community reflects over 42% foreign born residents. While populated with mixed minority residents, residents are predominantly black in race, with an increase in neighborhood ethnic

diversity. “We also see that mixed-minority neighborhoods are among the worst off according to the indicators presented. Such neighborhoods have the highest poverty rates, the lowest home ownership rates, and the lowest average incomes.” (The Furman Center 2015, 33) 14% of residents have limited language proficiency. Only 21% of Community District 12 residents have a bachelor’s degree or higher. Finally, according to NYC Planning Department’s February 2020 published report on Community District 12’s Needs and Budget Requests, this community has average poverty rate and crime rate per capita of residents, when compared to Queens County and NYC poverty and crime rates. They are 19% of residents below the poverty line, and 12.5% higher in major crime rates, than for Queens County.

With 19% of households at or below poverty rates, incomes are often supplemented by public assistance or social security income. There are many retailers within walking distance of residents, with product offerings ranging from food items in bodegas (not supermarkets), to vape or other smoking products. One of the most common retailers to open within the past 5 years are Vape Smoke shops, based on observation. The existence of liquor stores is almost as common as beauty retailers and churches within 5 block radius of residences. There are several Christian churches within the community. Other religious institutions were not noted particularly, but would reflect approximately another 30% added to the 144 total Christian churches. These reflect a pool of resources, gifts and talents within the community. In addition, neighborhood or civic associations contribute to the resource pool. Unfortunately, there were only 6 neighborhood organizations noted in Community District 12 which has a population of approximately ¼ million residents. Therefore, neighborhood/civic organizations, higher educational programs and substance abuse treatment facilities are grossly underrepresented in Community District 12.

CHALLENGES FOR COMMUNITY DISTRICT #12 —

Due to its diverse population and socioeconomic strata, Community District 12 has growth areas, unlike other metropolises around the country, germane to its residents. Some of these areas are unemployment or underemployment due to lack of higher education/training, and substance abuse. Further investigation and attention to the aforementioned areas, ideally, reflect a platform for holistic ministry in this community. We will explore the unique challenges faced by this community in each of the two areas.

This is a mixed-minority neighborhood which has the highest rate of unemployment in the city of New York. Unemployment, has several influencing factors, among them are education and training. Similarly, underemployment is usually due to higher costs of living versus income earning potential for the worker. Addressing the underemployment and unemployment rate can significantly diminish the crime rate and poverty levels, increase home ownership rates, and encourage family unity. As a mixed minority neighborhood, Community District 12 innately possesses a variety of skill sets obtained from home countries that can be developed into highly viable career outcomes. For example, there are migrants with masonry skills learned in their birth countries. Assessment of these capabilities can lead to ownership of a masonry business or state licensing to work for prominent masonry companies. Many migrants may simply need education and/or training to develop from part-time employee or wage earners to business owners or salaried earners.

Training and education are neglected elements within the community. “If we look at justice as an economic issue – especially the injustice of slavery that resulted in a lack of job ownership, job opportunity and education – we haven’t made much headway. We’ve got a few more rich blacks, but the system is still a problem for most.” (Perkins, 207) Deficiencies exist in

education and training in public schools where children do not have access to resources to become competitive in society as well as deficient adult education programs. Educational programming prepares children and adults alike to become higher wage earners or salaried employees. The quality of education is directly proportional to productivity in a community. Many heads of state, were afforded the highest quality education, which positioned them for higher level positions and eventually a high level government position. Similarly, the correlation between educational levels and employment are disparaging. According to Long Island Board of Realtors, 31% of South Jamaica residents have a High School degree, while only 13% have a graduate degree. According to 2018 Community Health profiles, under NYC Department of Health, Greenwich Village has 84% of its population as college graduates, and Community District 12 a modest 29%. While this may be encouraging to some, the fact that unemployment is higher here, at 12% of population, than the rest of New York, shows that a high school degree is not enough to ensure employment. Therefore, the GED programs currently in place and night school programs for High School drop-outs are ineffective and dated means of educating the community's adult populous.

It is not by mere coincidence, substance abuse has grown in this community. It appears that each neighborhood block has a church and a liquor store, both are positioned to present solutions to life's problems. Moreover, the increased and legal use of Marijuana has led to the rapid growth of Vape (smoke) shops in the area. Children and adults, have more accessibility to the gateway drug than ever before. Alcoholism and drug use have increased in a community faced with high poverty and joblessness rates. These prevailing issues of underemployment/unemployment due to education disparities, and substance abuse, are just a

few of the reoccurring themes which necessitate proactive, and intentionally focused theological reflection and planning.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ---

Acts 2 reflects a multi-ethnic, diverse community, awaiting to experience the power and relevance of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem, a Roman city. After two millennia, Community District 12 is no different than the early biblical witnesses of the Pentecost in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit empowered all on the Day of Pentecost. So much so that they were speaking in other languages and being understood by others, despite being from different nations. The Bible says, “Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” (Acts 2:9-10, NIV) There were a variety of races present, and amazed at what God was doing. This amazement unified them to the extent that they believed in Jesus, hearing the Gospel preached by Peter in the same gathering. Disbelievers thought they were drunk. But it was only 9am, so they couldn’t possibly be drunk. Drunkenness and abuse of other substances results in a lack of self-control. People behave erratically and impulsively when out of control. This often leads to a crime. There is a direct correlation between high crime and high drug/alcohol abuse in a neighborhood. Although, those at Pentecost were not actually drunk, the disruption caused by the Holy Spirit’s arrival, was enough for those observing to believe they were drunk. However, later on in Acts 2, after Peter’s persuasive discourse to the crowd, people believed in Jesus and they were intentional about meeting the needs of others, just like Jesus did. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe

at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.” (Acts 2:42-45, NIV) The actions of the disciples in response to the Gospel was to help those around them who were in need. That is what is needed in Community District #12. Disciples of South Jamaica have a call to action to help the poor and those who are addicts, not just in giving alms, but redemptively taking action to address some of the causes.

To bring resolve to the city’s ailments, confronting the systems and structures that perpetuate violence, oppression, poverty, and hopelessness are equally important. “In stressing His [Jesus’] divinity, the church has nearly forgotten His [Jesus’] humanity.” (Jones, 46) Jesus’ work on earth challenged the systems and structures that inflicted oppression and poverty. Churches can implement strategies that will not only bring healing to their immediate communities, but promote goodness for the welfare of the city’s inhabitants. It is the responsibility of the church to challenge obstructive institutions preventing the goodness of God from reaching society. “As incarnational missionaries, we must be woke to brokenness that pervades our society and be a voice for action in these areas. The church should be a leading voice.” (Mason, 130)

As a mobilized force of love, the church achieves the great commission the same way Jesus and the early church achieved it; by holistic ministry. Identifying the needs of the neighborhood and seeking to solve them one at a time is a great start to holistic ministry. Jesus said, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to

visit me.” (Mat. 25:34-36, NIV) As the church mobilizes and targets helping the community in areas of need, there will be opportunities to demonstrate the love and goodness of God without using words. “One of the things that is quite evident in the gospels is that Jesus spent most of His time dealing with public needs. It was His custom to worship on the Sabbath but when He wasn’t worshipping, He was healing and helping, serving and saving.” (Jones, 136) Expressing the 2nd half of the greatest commandment, “loving your neighbor as yourself”, is opportunistic to God’s glory being revealed on earth. “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (1 Pet. 2:12, NIV) The key to evangelism is service. The church is deeply ingrained in a life of service not only to their parishioners but toward their communities. If the work of God will be seen in the earth, it has to have a centrifugal affect, spreading outward wherever there is need. In fact, this is what Jesus’ ministry was about. Jesus proclaimed the good news of His advent by displaying His goodness in His communal surroundings.

Whether city residents are Christians or not, people tend to subliminally look to religious leaders for support and guidance in social, political, economic, and spiritual matters. Those looking for food, clothing, money, and other staples, turn to the church, to God, to meet their material needs during their most desperate times. The urban church should not only be prepared for such interaction, but proactive in preventing such despair. “The condition of our communities is the scorecard on how well the church is doing at being the people of God.” (Gordon & Perkins, 143) This is a daunting task for any church. With guidance and dependence on the Holy Spirit, the transformative power of God is able to bring relief to those in despair and encouragement to the broken hearted in any community.

The Holy Bible is filled with encouragement for those in despair, and relief for those in bondage. Biblical characters such as Noah, Lot, Nadab and Abihu (who were Levitical priests) and Nabal have all experienced drunkenness and its sometimes, irreversible consequences. Drunkenness, as a means of substance abuse, plagued the ancient world as it does in modernity. So much so, that the writer Paul, wrote to the Ephesians warning, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.” (Eph. 5:18. NIV) Whether drugs or alcohol abuse, the Spirit of God is powerful to the release of those captive to it. Enslavement is not only limited to jail cells, chains and shackles, but also addictions. Addicts are bound to substances and are no longer in control of their minds and bodies as a result. Freedom in Christ means freedom from sin and all other forms of bondage. Paul again urges Corinthians that “all things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful all things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything.” (1 Cor. 6:18, NIV)

In light of the correlation between poverty and unemployment or underemployment, one specific reason for the latter is inadequate or lack of education. “By knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches.” (Prov. 24:4, NIV) The proverb makes the connection between knowledge and wealth. Having marketable skills and sufficient knowledge in a particular field of study, provides opportunity to increase wages. Thus, a quality education is vitally important to increasing household income. Adequate household income decreases dependency on social welfare programs, increases self-esteem, and lowers poverty within the community. Simply having a job, does not equate to earning a living wage. Thus, hopelessness pervades with the frequent solution being substance abuse. Increasing in knowledge is always profitable to a society. Real estate is sold based on the median income of a particular neighborhood, which is often dictated by the educational levels of its residents. With only 21%

of Community 12 residents having a bachelor's degree and higher, a boost to the earning potential of this community rests within an increase in their levels of education. "Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance." (Prov. 1:5, NIV)

Multi-ethnic and predominantly black communities have historically been plagued with joblessness and underemployment among adult residents. Immigrants especially have difficulty learning a new language and earning a living at the same time. Taking a proactive stance within a community, the church can minimize barriers to higher education that perpetuate low income earners. As Americans, the unemployment rate is usually touted on a national level instead of a local level. In truth, jobless rates are often 2 or 3 times higher in low income communities than the national average. Educational opportunities that promote middle and upper class earning potentials are limited in South Jamaica.

Reflecting on two great leaders from the Old and New Testament, Moses and Paul, education played a major role in the work they did in service to God's people. In fact, Moses, Daniel, Esther, and Nehemiah to name a few, "seem to have been educated in so-called pagan educational systems to the glory of God for public leadership in their respective cultures." (Bakke, 48-49) In Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin in Acts 7, he tells them, "Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action." (Acts 7:22, NIV) The religious leaders were made aware that Moses was highly educated for his time, and used of God to deliver the Israelites from the pagan Egyptian society. Furthermore, Paul addressed a crowd of Romans and Jews, after his arrest in Jerusalem, and stated in his defense, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today." (Acts 22:3, NIV) Paul's educational achievements allowed him to speak to an elite

crowd in his defense. He was able to communicate in Aramaic as well, which amazed his audience. Both Moses and Paul were able to use their knowledge to bring freedom to an enslaved society. They were both able to write significant portions of the Bible. Moses is attributed as the dominant writer of the Old Testament in writing the Pentateuch, and Paul writing 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament. Education plays a key role in leadership and skill development. Community District 12 is lacking in leadership and qualitative skill sets amongst its residents due to lack of quality education which is needed to decrease unemployment and underemployment levels.

THEOLOGICAL APPLICATION ---

Regarding substance abuse prevention and rehabilitation, Community District 12 is significantly handicapped with only one facility in the entire district. An extension of professional counseling services for substance abusers can be housed in local churches. These professional counseling services can be AA groups as well as drug abuse counselors providing weekly, outpatient day treatments. Having weekly, group and individual, counseling sessions led by members of the community or trained laity can promote the engagement of the unchurched and revolutionize the community. The churches in Community District 12 can be equipped and/or offer substance abuse counseling services. Congregations that have members who are professional counselors can assist in creating a bridge between the community and their respective jobs. In effect ministry to the spirit and soul of man is warranted. Moreover, there may be incentives available from local and state government for the churches' participation in providing substance abuse counseling and treatment.

Visionary outcomes to implement change within the next year, five years or even twenty years, require the convening of neighborhood stake holders and residents. Having one substance

abuse rehabilitation facility in the community is insufficient to incite any formidable decline to current substance abuse levels. The convening of community members can not only solve the problem together, but experience success together, increasing neighborhood safety and economic growth. Joining forces, community stakeholders who want an economically flourishing and crime free neighborhood, can form community based organizations positioned to achieve this goal.

Underemployment and unemployment in a community can largely be attributed to lack of higher education. With less than one third of its population being college graduates, Community District 12 is positioned for marginalization within greater employment opportunities for the city. Speculatively, providing a job may not be the best remediation of this problem. Howard Thurman in his book, “Jesus and the Disinherited”, stated, “In the absence of all hope ambition dies, and the very self is weakened, corroded. There remains only the elemental will to live and to accept life on the terms that are available.” (Thurman, 36) In observation, the low educational levels in the community, is more attributable to lack of hope in pursuing advanced training and skill development. The jobs available in surrounding areas, typically require advanced degrees and training. With the two local colleges in the community, outreach to community colleges and neighborhood schools, is vital to build programming that would campaign for obtaining bachelorette degrees or training certifications.

Partnering with non-profit organizations sharing the same vision for neighborhood reform and social justice within communities are an excellent option for smaller churches to be missional in urban communities. “The community of God’s people – the church – is uniquely capable of affirming the dignity of the poor, which includes providing people with the skills and opportunities they need to meet their own needs.” (Gordon & Perkins, 122) In addition to

financial resources, church members possess exhaustive skill sets and professional capabilities to invest in their local neighborhood's development. Moreover, the investment of time toward voting registration rallies, neighborhood clean-up events, health symposiums, immigration services, and educational programs, are just a few ways the church can participate in restorative measures for their communities.

“When we look at the poor getting poorer through the self-perpetuating cycle of ignorance, poor health and lack of opportunity, two truths are evident: (1) money must be made available to develop potential, and (2) the community itself must develop its potential to utilize and multiply economic resources.” (Perkins, 122) There are a variety of community based programs that churches can host annually or bi-annually promoting the educational advancement of its residents. Churches can host or promote local job fairs, invite trade organizations to host workshops, provide resume writing and college application classes, and offer scholarships to youth in the neighborhood aspiring to attend college. Scholarships do not have to be only academic awards. Finally, ecclesial efforts to cooperate with local schools to host or promote GED and English classes to serve the ethnic make-up of Community District 12 are needed.

CONCLUSION --

With a church present for every 1/8 mile radius, the active participation of local churches in South Jamaica is urgently needed to provide reform. It is the church's responsibility to address the needs of the community it serves. “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.” (Prov. 31:8-9) In doing so, the church not only brings healing and restoration to the community, but also makes the Gospel message relevant, and Jesus glorified.

RESOURCES

- Bakke, Ray. *A Theology as Big as the City*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997.
- Gordon, Wayne, and Perkins, John. *Making Neighborhoods Whole: A Handbook for Christian Community Development*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2013.
- Jones, William A., Jennifer Jones Austin, and Michael Eric Dyson. *God in the Ghetto: A Prophetic Word Revisited*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press Publishers, 2021.
- Mason, Eric. *Woke Church: An Urgent Call for Christians in America to Confront Racism and Injustice*. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2018.
- Perkins, John M. *Let Justice Roll Down*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1976.
- “Statements of Community District Needs and Community Board Budget Requests” Fiscal year 2021. New York City Planning. February 2020. Accessed April 25, 2023.
https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=https://github.com/NYCPlanning/labs-cd-needs-statements/raw/master/QN%20DNS%20FY%202021/FY2021_Statement_QN12.pdf
- “The Changing Racial and Ethnic Makeup of New York City.” Accessed April 25, 2023.
https://furmancenter.org/files/publications/The_Changing_Racial_and_Ethnic_Makeup_of_New_York_City_Neighborhoods_11.pdf.
- Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. (Boston: Beacon Press) 1976.