

Final Paper
Urban Theology Paper

Aura Soraya Angulo-Pichardo
ATS /NY City

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The term “Urban Theology” can mean different things to different people. There are varying definitions of what “urban” means . When one thinks of “urban”, the immediate association is the “hood”. The actual definition according to Merriam-Webster dictionary is “of, relating to, characteristic of, or constituting a city”¹. The same source defines “theology” as, “The study of God and of God's relation to the world”². “As a concentration of human life the city is where the titanic struggle between God and his Enemy is most graphically seen”³. It is a place where good and evil reign and yet the holy Scripture reminds us that God Himself had a deep love for the city. Luke 19:41-42 conveys that love, “As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it...” Jesus looked at the city that he had such love for and wept because he knew the judgment that would befall the city.

Urban Theology as defined in the Urban Theology lecture at Alliance Theological Seminary is, “Understanding the urban social reality through God’s lens, which lays the basis for a God-centered Urban ministry response.” In other words, it is identifying the social issues that a community is dealing with, seeing what God says about it in Scripture and what he expects us to do. Then implementing actions to mitigate those issues. Living within a community and serving in churches in the same community allows you to analyze the issues it's facing; issues that one sees whenever they walk down the street. Things that one sees that breaks the heart of God. “After all, has not theology often deployed the concept of the city and is not the scriptural vision of the reign of God sometimes understood as a heavenly city?”⁴.

When a church is embedded in a community, it is the responsibility of the Pastor and other members of church leadership to get to know the community. Not only the people there

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/urban> (Accessed April 22, 2023).

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theology> (Accessed April 22, 2023).

³ Hewetson, David M. “Towards an Urban Theology of Mission.” *The Reformed Theological Review* 56, no. 2 (May 1997): 82–91. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001025180&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁴ Graham, Elaine, and Peter Manley Scott. “Public Theology and the City: Urban Theology as Public Theology.” *International Journal of Public Theology* 2, no. 1 (2008): 1–6. doi:10.1163/156973208X256411.

and their personal issues, but the issues within the community that directly affect them. Once they become socially aware of the issues then there are some things that they need to do in order to begin to make changes in their community and in the lives of its residents. Ideally they should invest some time into conducting an **Urban Social Analysis** (Get to know members of the community, Identify any socio/cultural/economic/religious issues etc. that the community in the immediate surrounding church location is dealing with), **Urban Theological Reflection** (Biblical considerations, theological framework, themes and principles -What does God have to say about it?) and, **Urban Theological Implementation** (How the urban church ministry is dealing with the issues; Systems put in place to mitigate the issues identified in the *Social Analysis*).

The urban community chosen as the primary focus for this urban theology paper is in Washington/Inwood Heights, a large area of New York City; specifically Dyckman Street which is located on 200 street on both the #1 train and A train lines. It is well known that, “The general attitude towards the city seems to be negative, pessimistic, almost despair”⁵ and some would argue that there are areas in Dyckman where that may seem to be true.

According to the 2022 Census Report, Hispanics/ Latinos make up 49.4% of the Inwood population and Blacks/African Americans make up 15.6% of the population⁶. As the evidence shows, it is predominantly populated with residents who are Hispanic/Latino, the majority of which are from the Dominican Republic.

Roman Catholicism appears to be the dominant faith group in this *immediate* area; one can assume because it is predominantly a Dominican area and children are typically raised in the faith that is practiced in their parents countries; African Americans may identify with another denomination although they may not necessarily be practicing as well.

⁵ Ekkert, Henry. “Reconstructing Our Urban Theology.” *Direction* 13, no. 1–2 (January 1984): 61–66. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001431922&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁶ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/inwoodcdpnewyork/POP010220>.

In the Dyckman community, on any given day you will see people on the block hanging out. When the weather is nice, in the Fall, Spring and Summer months, you will hear the cacophony of music emanating from parked/ double-parked cars with speakers on the roofs or from someone's apartment. Blasting *Reggaeton*, *Bachata*, *Rap* with a little mix of *Salsa* or, especially, “*dembo*” music; people drinking liquor and smoking marijuana, cigarettes or the ever popular hookah right in front of their buildings and drug dealers waiting for their “customers”; the list can go on and on. Over the years with the increase in poverty, violence, homelessness and drugs, the question has become, “Can anything good come out of the ‘hood’?”⁷.

The rationale for choosing this specific area of Inwood Heights was for two reasons; the primary reason is because the author of this urban theology paper has deep roots within this community; it is where she grew up, was raised and where her history is; the very foundation of who she is is a result of her upbringing in the community of Dyckman- in the Dyckman Projects. The second reason is because as a long-time resident it is interesting to identify the changes that one has witnessed in the past few decades; the ways in which the community has changed and how these changes have affected its residents.

Throughout the decades, particularly the last twenty years, there have been significant shifts in aspects of the immediate community. Despite some, *seemingly* positive additions to the community (Starbucks, Tai Restaurant, Yoga Studios etc...), one can argue that it is a result of gentrification, the community continues to be plagued with issues, issues that, like in many parts of New York City, have increased as a direct result of the Covid-19 Pandemic; the remnants of which are still very much visible.

⁷ Tapia, Andres. “Can Anything Good Come out of the ‘Hood’?” *Christianity Today* 38, no. 6 (May 16, 1994): 28–32. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=33h&AN=81915&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

This analysis of the community of Dyckman is that of a long-time resident. As a long-time resident, member of a church that has evolved and possess an understanding of issues that have benefited the community as well as things that continue to cripple it; or cause the community to remain in a negative and stagnate position.

Many of the issues that plague the boroughs of the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island and other areas of New York City, are the same that plague the community of Dyckman. For example in the text *Seeing Jesus in East Harlem*, by Pastor Jose Humphreys, the author, when attempting to paint a picture of the conditions in the communities of the Lower East Side, Spanish Harlem states, “ LES in the 1980s was ripe with opportunities for bodily harm, and there was a well-founded paranoia for one’s personal safety”⁸. He goes on to describe issues of drug use, poverty, health issues, abuse (of varying kinds), gang involvement/recruitment and violence and the continued rise of crimes of violence.

Humphreys paints a picture very similar to that of Dyckman today although it may look somewhat different. Additionally, he acknowledges that there is not just one reason for the cause of the conditions of the Lower East Side, but a combination of things. Humphreys states, “Many things contributed to this breakdown in our ecosystem known as the hood, including a failed education system, lack of investment in local infrastructure , and extreme poverty, with few resources to support people to cope, much less thrive”⁹. What Humphreys writes about is very similar to the community of Dyckman, the current issues that they are facing is the combination of a myriad of reasons and cannot be attributed on any one thing. In the midst of all of this, the

⁸ José, Humphreys,., *Seeing Jesus in East Harlem: What Happens When Churches Show Up and Stay Put*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2018, 16.

⁹ José, Humphreys,., *Seeing Jesus in East Harlem: What Happens When Churches Show Up and Stay Put*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2018, 17.

questions then become, “Where is the church in all of this?”¹⁰ and what is God’s reality? What does He have to say about it?

The urban social analysis of Dyckman reveals a lot about the issues the community is currently dealing with and how it is impacting their the people that reside there. Although there are several issues worth mentioning that continue to cripple this particular community, there are two that will be highlighted: Food Deserts (lack of access to healthy food options) / food insecurity and lack of afterschool programs for the youth.

Much like communities all across New York City and across the Country, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic go beyond the physical symptoms and illness. As a result of Covid-19 a people all across New York City and across the Country lost their jobs. As businesses closed down or filed for bankruptcy, more and more people were forced into unemployment. Although for a period of time they were provided with funds for unemployment it did not suffice and many had to deal with the issue of how to survive.

As money ran out, families faced food insecurity or were forced to purchase unhealthy food options because they cost less, and healthier options were too far away and too expensive. “Those living in food deserts tend to be surrounded by fast food and convenience stores, consequently paying much more for lower quality food, including fruits and vegetables when they are available”¹¹. As a result, one can be certain that there was more than lkiley a spike in higher cholesterol and other health issues as a result of the Pandemic.

Once schools closed, families with children from Kindergarten to High School were forced to find ways to feed their children; children that were dependent on school lunches

¹⁰ Harvie M Conn. and Manuel Ortiz. . *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City and the People of God*. Dovers Grove, Illnois: InterVarsity Press, 2001, 19.

¹¹ Howerton, Gloria, and Amy Trauger. “‘Oh Honey, Don’t You Know?’ The Social Construction of Food Access in a Food Desert.” *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 16, no. 4 (December 2017): 740–60.
<https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=127466901&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

because they lacked food at home. Luckily, after some time, systems were set in place and children were able to pick up to-go sack lunches from the front of schools. The elderly struggled as well since they possessed limited financial resources anyway.

In the midst of the all too heartbreaking social realities of today, the question being posed *again* is, *What is God's reality and what does He have to say about this?* The Bible addresses themes and principles that can apply to the current social issues of present times, including those of the Dyckman community. The issues encountered during that period of time in the Ancient Near East is profoundly relevant in today's world. For example, the themes of hunger, disparity and poverty and the biblical principle of feeding the hungry are echoed all throughout the Scriptures. It is very clear on what Followers of Christ are expected to do for those that are hungry and in need.

Two particular Scriptures that convey this principle are Matthew 25:37-40, "Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 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.'" When one is of service to those in need and meeting the needs of others, they are serving God. It is their assignment to share the resources that God has blessed them with and share with their fellow brothers and sisters.

The second Scripture is James 2:15-17, "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,'" without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead". This verse is not only a call to action but it is a realistic reality check.

This is not about words, but action. The old saying, “Actions speak louder than words” is the truth! Action is what separates the world from Followers of Christ. One does not say, *Oh, that homeless person looks hungry, he/she needs to go get food*, rather, one must say, *Oh, that homeless person looks hungry, let me get him/her something to eat*. It is about ACTION and as a church embedded in the Dyckman Community, it is their assignment to find resolutions to these issues and do what they have been called to do as the Scriptures instruct. This action needs to be real. “Urban Theology demands concreteness. Abstract generalization without personal, local, and regional specifics merely enhances the worldwide deterioration of the present urban mess”¹².

In the text *Theology From the Trenches : Reflections on Urban Ministry* by Roger J. Gench, the author cites the following noteworthy information pertaining to the District of Columbia put is very relevant to the Dyckman community as well as other parts of New York City :

“The Executive Summary of “When Healthy Food Is Out of Reach: An Analysis of the Grocery Gap in the District of Columbia”—2010 reports:

In numerous cities across the United States, studies have documented a troubling “grocery gap”: low-income and minority communities often have far less access to full-service grocery stores than do higher-income communities. Nationally, the grocery gap forces many low-income people to spend money and time traveling long distances to access food at full-service grocery stores. In some neighborhoods where full-service stores are absent, shoppers may rely on small corner or convenience stores, which often do not have sufficient healthy food and may charge higher prices for the limited nutritious food available¹³.

As mentioned previously, the Bible is very clear on what the Followers of Christ are expected to do. After identifying this particular issue of food insecurity/ lack of access to healthy food choices in the community of Dyckman, some solutions which can be implemented are: establishing Food Pantries, arranging intentional Potluck meals in the church not only to serve

¹² Georgi, Dieter. *City in the Valley : Biblical Interpretation and Urban Theology*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005. Accessed April 23, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹³ Roger J. Gench. *Theology From the Trenches : Reflections on Urban Ministry*. Vol. First edition. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=859691&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

meals for those in need, but also as a possible entrypoint to sharing the Gospel, set up Programs that inform residents of the community of public assistance and food Programs.

Partnering with the Community-Based Organization *Catholic Charities (Alianza Dominicana)*. “Catholic Charities helps solve the problems of New Yorkers in need, non-Catholics and Catholics alike. The neglected child, the homeless family, the immigrant and refugee, the person with special needs, and the hungry senior are among those for whom we provide help and create hope – with compassion and respect”¹⁴. Partnering with an Organization whose primary mission is servicing those in need in high-need communities such as Dyckman, can be of great help in contributing to the resolution of this issue.

This organization has deep roots in the Latino community and has a myriad of resources and connections with other organizations including the Archdiocese of New York. Some of the resources and connections that *Catholic Charities* has access to and could help alleviate this issue of food insecurity/lack of access to healthy food are: Partnering with local Farmers Markets where affordable plans can be arranged at discounted prices or can be used with Food Stamps which a significant amount of residents in the community qualify for. Also, *Catholic Charities* can partner with Organizations that provide resources to education the Residents of this community on how to identify when fruits and vegetables are ripe and fresh and in-season.

Additionally, *City Harvest*, an organization that has been serving New York City for over forty years can also be a solution for the Dyckman Community. Their Mission Statement states, “City Harvest exists to end hunger in communities throughout New York City. We do this through food rescue and distribution, education, and other practical, innovative solutions”¹⁵. Setting up a schedule where *City Harvest* can visit the Dyckman Community and provide healthy

¹⁴ <https://catholiccharitiesny.org/#> (Accessed April 22, 2023).

¹⁵ <https://www.cityharvest.org/our-story/> (Accessed April 22, 2023).

and fresh fruits, vegetables and other foods to members of the community for no cost could help alleviate this issue the community is facing.

The second issue that was identified in the Social Analysis was the lack of afterschool programs for the youth in the community. Similar to what Jose Humphrey's articulates in his book *Seeing Jesus in East Harlem*, the streets are a dangerous place for the youth; the youth that need to be shielded and protected from the violence that exists; the youth are vulnerable and can fall prey and are easy targets for drug dealers looking for workers or gangs looking for new members.

After school and late into the evening, in the Dyckman Community/Projects, one can see young children hanging out on the blocks, being exposed to the drugs, alcohol, unprovoked violence and smoking in the environment. Although some after school Programs exist for students in particular schools, there remains a need for an Afterschool Program within the Dyckman Projects; which consists of seven buildings, fourteen floors, with 12 apartments on each floor.

The biblical themes of hospitality and vulnerability and the biblical principle of protecting the children are echoed all throughout Scriptures; children are viewed as vulnerable and Jesus Christ had much to say regarding children. One verse of Scripture that conveys this message is Matthew 18:2-6, "And whoever welcomes one such child in My name welcomes Me. If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in Me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." Additionally, Psalm 127: 3 articulates how wonderful children are, "Children are a gift from the LORD; they are a reward from him". Jesus makes it clear that children are a precious

resource and should be protected at all costs. Serving children, welcoming them and providing a safe space for them such as an afterschool Program is doing what Jesus has called us to do.

An additional verse of Scripture that serves as supporting theological evidence is Mark 9:36-37, “Jesus reached for a little child, placed him among the Twelve, and embraced him. Then he said, ‘Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me isn’t actually welcoming me but rather the one who sent me’”. Welcoming the children of Dyckman to a space where they feel loved, accepted, safe and appreciated is doing what God has called them to do. It is ones faith in action.

One way in which the Church can help contribute to the resolution of this issue is again, by partnering with Community-Based Organizations that have services that offer after school services for the youth. Community –Based Organizations remain a vital asset within communities. The location can be the Community Center located in the center of the Dyckman Projects which is primarily rented out for small events such as baby showers, it is a voting poll site and also a space to have a variety of community meetings.

The Community-Based Organization can provide tutors, coaches to facilitate sports activities, after school lunches and snacks, additional extracurricular activities to keep the youth interested and involved in the Afterschool Programs. Additionally, they could survey the youth in the immediate area and see what interests them and activities would make them want to participate in an afterschool program. Moreover, the Church can request any willing volunteers from the community to serve in the Afterschool Program in a variety of ways; in doing this once can see the community coming together to serve their youth. It could be a very successful initiative that could develop into something which could extend to other areas.

As with any initiative there were justice issues that were considered with the development of this particular theology. The reality of the disparities between black and brown neighborhoods and the more affluent neighborhoods, for example, in the Upper West Side were evident. In order to get fresh fruits and vegetables, members of the community in Dyckman would have to travel a few stops on the train. “There is growing evidence that physical access to different types of food outlets substantially influences dietary patterns and weight status at the population level”¹⁶.

Emphasis must be made on the term “fresh”. Yes, one can argue that of course there are a plethora of supermarkets and neighborhood grocery stores that sell fruits and vegetables but they are not “fresh”; bananas overflowing with brown rotting marks, strawberries for \$1 but flip the package over and there is fungus on the bottom, limp and wilted celery stalks and browning lemons. Residents purchase them because it is their only option. This would not happen in a predominantly white community. That is the sad reality and quite frankly, one of many disparities between black and brown neighborhoods and the more affluent and/or white neighborhoods.

During the social analysis of the Dyckman Community, it was evident that although there has been progress in supplying the residents of the community with fresh foods and a safe place for the youth to go to after school, there is still more work that needs to be done. As with many issues crippling these black and brown communities, when looked at with a biblical and Christian lens, the questions that arise are: *What is the Church doing about it?* Church Pastors and leadership should then ask themselves what does the Scripture say they should do? What does God want them to do? How would God want them to serve his beloved cities? What are

¹⁶ Yang, Meng, Haoluan Wang, and Feng Qiu. “Neighbourhood Food Environments Revisited: When Food Deserts Meet Food Swamps.” *Canadian Geographer* 64, no. 1 (March 2020): 135–54. doi:10.1111/cag.12570.

their first steps? How can they use their resources and form relationships with Community-Based Organizations to support the community?

As Followers of Christ and men and women of God, we have been given our assignment; we are called to serve the people of God in any capacity that we are able to. The love that God has for the City, the City that is often the center of everything, needs to flourish and prosper as it was intended. Change can happen through prayer, the power of the Holy Spirit, resilience and the coming together of all members in a community too work together to improve their neighborhoods; everyone is a stakeholder. The Church can be a vital role in the development of initiatives to improve the lives of the residents in the communities in which their Church serves. It is simple; Matthew 22:36-39Love God and love people. *Love* them and *serve* them as servants of Jesus Christ.

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