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Pastoring the Urban Church
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ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN THE URBAN COMMUNITY

INTRODUCTION

In the United States today, there are many issues that plague the urban city. Racism, racial profiling, and police brutality, are just some of the issues blacks in the city have to deal with on a daily basis. There is a large disparity in income between blacks and whites. Blacks are denied equal rights for education and healthcare. The neighborhood is segregated along racial and ethnic lines. Statistics show that Blacks have the highest poverty rate in the city. There is also discrimination against blacks in housing. White supremacy continues to be dominant for blacks in the city. The question is what does it mean to be a pastor in an urban city and how can the church combat these issues. The church is called to be the voice to speak up concerning racial inequality. In my opinion, the church has to capture the cities for Christ and the gospel must be lived out in the city.

PASTORING AN URBAN CHURCH

Pastoring a church in the urban community can be very challenging. Pastors have to go out and meet the people in the community. He/She must understand that they play a part of the leadership role in the community. To be a pastor in an urban community, your responsibility is to help restore communities. A pastor is a shepherd who takes care of the flock. The duty of the pastor is to preach and teach the bible, so that lives can be transformed. A pastor of an urban church should have a heart for the community and the issues they face. Urban pastors as mentioned in the class lecture are biblical interpreters who are discerners of gifts. They are also culture teachers and prophetic agents. An urban pastor can also be a storyteller and spiritual educator. A pastor is called and set apart for holy living. This is the reason why one must be sure that they are called to be a pastor. Urban pastors, like other people, are not exempted from

trials in their lives. They go through storms as they lead the people. In defense of a pastor's humanity, Pastor H. Beecher Hicks stated, "We have the every right to hurt and and to be given the liberty to express all the human emotions of pain, anguish, anger, love and human need." (Preaching Through the Storm,32). In the lecture it was said that a pastor has to look and smell like their sheep. They have to get down in the trenches with the people in the community. The pastor also has to maintain self care, if he is not careful, he can get burnt out very easily. Rich Villodas alluded to this point by stating, "We try to give what we don't possess, and every time we attempt this, we put ourselves in danger." (The Deeply Formed Life,171). Pastoring an urban church takes commitment first to God and then to the people.

The church in the urban community is an asset. The urban church is called to be the epitome of the church in the book of Acts. They are to go out and share the gospel and make disciples of nations. The people in the community should feel free to come into the church, and see it as a place where they can come in and be rescued. According to Rich Villodas, "the church is called to be more than a sanctified subway car." (The Deeply Formed Life,62). The church should be the voice that speaks up on behalf of the people in the community. Eric Mason calls on the church to wake up and see the issues of injustice. He said, "No longer can we afford to see justice issues as separate from the gospel." (Woke Church,14). The church is not supposed to act as though these issues do not exist. The leaders should speak up and get involved in protest against social injustice. The church has been asleep for too long. In the words of Pastor Mason, "The evangelical church seems to be asleep to the hotbed of tensions that threatens to overflow into communities across America." (Woke Church,). What good is a church in a neighborhood, if the people do not know who is inside the church. Clearly there is more work to do outside of the church than inside.

SPIRITUAL WHOLENESS

As the church prepares to go out into the community, there are some approaches to follow. We have to ensure that we are not only physically but also spiritually equipped to go out. There is a certain lifestyle to be maintained in order for God to use us. Rich Villodas states, "As long as we remain enslaved to a culture of speed, superficiality and distraction, we will not be the people God longs for us to be." (The Deeply Formed Life,5). We have to slow down and learn to get in the presence of God. If we are exhausted, we cannot perform God's work. Pastor Villodas also talks about the monastic way of living. Spending silent time with God where we can practice our spiritual disciplines. He also talks about the practices of contemplative rhythms like silent prayer. In his words, "Silent prayer is not a technique to master but a relationship to enter into." (The Deeply Formed Life,24). Our main goal as Christians is to center ourselves in God. We can only do this if we have adequate rest. God has set time aside for us, which he calls the Sabbath, in which we can rest for twenty four hours. This rest rejuvenates us both in body, mind and soul. Rich Villodas emphasizes that slow reading of the scripture can be very beneficial to us. He states, "As we read Scripture, we come to understand that God is reading us." (The Deeply Formed Life,40). God knows who we are, we need to find out who we are in Christ. We are called to be missionaries. Jesus sent the disciples out on the mission field. Pastor Villodas echoed these words, "The missional task of being Jesus for others is open to all who would follow him, but I would be misleading you if I told you it didn't cost you anything." (The Deeply Formed Life,173). If we are to go out into the community, we have to be deeply formed.

CHALLENGES IN URBAN MINISTRIES

Racism and Racial Inequality

While cities have an excellent opportunity for urban ministry, it does not go without challenges. These challenges can come in various ways. How we view the city is very important to how we do ministry in the city. The church has to be aware of these challenges, if we want to

become part of the community. One of these challenges is racism in the black community. The system in America has continued to perpetuate racism in the urban community. Dr. Jones reiterated this by saying, "However for Blacks there is no hiding place. Assimilation is impossible, for acceptance by whites is at best nominal and superficial." (God in the Ghetto,36). Blacks have to endure being treated in the most inhumane way. They are looked upon as the inferior race. The urban community faces these challenges everyday. Pastor Mason expresses his concern when he said, "Today I worry that we've forgotten our past and remain in denial about many of the challenges we face in the present." (Woke Church,14). The people in the community depend on the church to give them the answers they need. Racism is a never ending problem that plagues the urban community. John Perkins alluded to this fact by saying "Today the illegality of race based discrimination doesn't prevent social attitudes and public policies from being slanted against ethnic minorities." (Making the Neighborhood Whole Again,65).

The urban community is also forced to live with racial injustice everyday. Blacks continue to experience racial injustice in the judicial system. There are more blacks than whites in the jail. Whites are not equally punished for the crimes that they commit. The whites in America abuse their white privileges on the blacks. In the words of Pastor Jones, "God is disturbed over the victimized masses, controlled and manipulated by a few elitists." (God in the Ghetto,116). Every day there is a killing of an innocent black person. The blacks in the community are conscious of the inequality and they are crying out for justice. Blacks are denied their equal rights in American Society. In reflection to this racial injustice, Pastor Jones stated, "Unfortunately our current cultural moment is still marred by racial injustice and unrest, social and political upheaval, and economic inequalities." (God in the Ghetto,240). When going into the community the church should be able to address these issues.

Poverty

Another challenge that the urban church faces in the community is poverty. In the bible poverty was the main challenge in the cities and it is still ongoing up to today. Jesus commanded us to take care of the poor. There is a lot of depravity in the poor in the cities, which results in poor health. People in the poor neighborhoods in the cities do not have access to proper medical care. Dr. Jones explains that if the city has a high rate of poverty, then there will be poor health. Poor health is the result of the high death rate in the cities. According to the Center for Disease Control, the leading cause of death in the black community is heart disease, hypertension and cancer. Dr. Jones reiterated this by stating, "Poor families experience three times more heart disease, seven times more visual impairment and five times more mental disorder." (God in the Ghetto,51).

The issue that the poor face is that they are unable to eat healthy. In some parts of the cities there are very few options for healthy foods. The quality of the food sold in the cities is very poor compared to the suburban cities. Pastor Mason talks about doing ministry in the inner-city. He said, "I see fatherlessness, violence on our front steps, educational challenges, gentrification, redlining and the poor having very little access to healthy food options which impact education and mortality." (Woke Church,55). The poor in the cities are longing for someone to come in and rescue them.

Brokenness and Mental Illness

Looking into the issue of challenges in urban ministry, brokenness and mental illness is on the rise. The cause being stress in the family due to generational curses. The generational curses seem to plague the black community the most. Statistics show that blacks are more likely than whites to be depressed. The guest speaker in one of the class lectures mentioned that combating mental illness is very difficult especially for those in the poorer community. There is a push to curb suicide in the black communities. I believe one of the causes of mental illness

is brokenness in our lives. According to Perkins and Gordon, "There are no answers to the brokenness found in under-resourced communities." (Making Neighborhoods Whole,151). People get broken when there is dissatisfaction in their lives. Jesus came to save the broken and the lost. Spreading the gospel in the community can help those who are experiencing brokenness. Pastor Mason coined these words, "The level of brokenness is devastating. People are waiting, literally for the church to say something." (Woke Church,69). The church has to wake up and accept this challenge.

Gentrification

There is also the challenge of gentrification in the urban city. Whites are moving back into the cities and the rent is skyrocketing. Blacks are unable to pay the rent, and are forced to move out of the city. Whites are reclaiming the businesses in the city. Blacks are resorting to putting their things in storage and downsizing to a smaller apartment. Whites are taking over the cities that were once predominantly inhabited by blacks. It is that black property ownership is on the low as a result of gentrification. Blacks are selling their properties because they are getting cash for it. There is an increase of financial burden on the blacks in the community. Blacks living in the community are unable to purchase homes because of the high cost. Talking about his neighborhood, Perkins & Gordon said, "I have seen neighbors lament gentrification, but they have no national context or perspective on the issue." (Making Neighborhoods Whole,110). Blacks in the urban community must be taught the reality of gentrification and how they can join together to combat it.

Gun violence and Crime

In the urban communities there is a high rate of crime. These include rape, assault and killings by guns. According to the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Service, the average percentage of gun shootings resulting in injury for the year is 36%. Gun violence has become a threat to civilized living in the urban community. People are scared to leave their

homes. We are seeing an increase in gun violence among the youths in the schools. Perkins & Gordon talks about the systemic struggles of his neighbors, where gang violence and drugs in public schools has resulted in 50 percent of school dropouts. Crime in the city is also a big concern to the people. Pastor Mason stated, "As crime increases, fear and death do too. Families struggle with how to survive and remain stable with such strong influences." (Woke Church,153). People in the urban community are looking for relief from the senseless gun violence. They long for a city without crime.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES

To overcome these challenges, the church must confront the system and be there for the people in the community. A CCDA approach to these challenges is to listen, reflect and respond. The church has to listen to the voice of the people. They also must reflect on what they have heard and then respond to it in a godly way. We cannot solve these issues by implementing programs. The church has to continue proclaiming the gospel. In the gospel there is reconciliation. In the words of Pastor Mason, "But in the gospel, man is not just reconciled to God by faith. Man is also reconciled to man by faith." (Woke Church,41). Another approach to overcoming these challenges is by living out the gospel. In one of the approaches to relocation Perkins & Gordon stated, "It entails living out the gospel in a way that improves the quality of other people's lives spiritually, physically, socially and emotionally, even as one betters his or her own life." (Making Neighborhoods Whole,49).

The church has to wake up and speak out against racial injustice. The bible does not condone racial injustice. Pastor Mason speaks out about injustice by saying,"The church in America is not awake to the reality of what is happening in communities across this nation, and we are missing out on our calling to shine the light into these places of darkness for Christ glory." Woke Church,22). The church is called to be the light of the world. If we are the light, we can overcome the darkness of racial injustice. If we want to conquer these challenges the

church has to reclaim its prophetic voice. Pastor Mason talks about prophetic preaching as the voice. He said, "Prophetic preaching must be clear on the issues of our day. Being clear on these issues require more than just an awareness of our history. We must also examine the impact of our history on our current day experience." (Woke Church,121).

The church can also be a family training center where families can talk about the social injustice in the community. According to Pastor Mason, families struggle with how to survive and remain stable with such influences. He said,"The Church of Jesus Christ is uniquely equipped to speak into this deep need. (Woke Church,153). Family training is very essential to help them cope with all the issues that they face in the community. Every challenge in the community, affects the family unit. Pastor Mason emphasizes that the family is the foundation of our communities. When they are destroyed our communities fail. He goes on to say, "As the gospel family grows as a community of faith that is committed to restoring dignity through the gospel, generation dignity increases and the church is woke to the larger societal issues of race and justice." (Woke Church,154). Since women tend to play a more integral role in the community, they will benefit from the training. The older women can train the younger women how to conduct themselves in a biblical manner. Pastor Mason argued that the lack of a father figure in the lives of some black women leaves them feeling exposed and vulnerable without a sense of shelter, guidance or protection. (Woke Church,155). Biblically training these young black mothers can make a difference in how they bring up their children. As a result there would be less violence and crimes.

BUILDING THE COMMUNITY

Relocation

It is the church responsibility to build up the community in which they are located. In building the community, we have to bring the people together in unity. We must make the city whole again. Dr. Perkins gives us three concepts in which we can build up the community. One of

these concepts are relocation which he says is, "Theology of presence, a theology that lies at the heart of God's relationship with humanity." (Making Neighborhood Whole,46). We have to live out the gospel which means sharing in the joy, suffering and pain of the people in the neighborhood. The church must come back to the lost cities, those that were rejected and preach the gospel. As stated by Dr. Perkins, "Relocation is typically understood to mean moving from a safe, comfortable, convenient suburban environment to a struggling, impoverished urban area." (Making Neighborhood Whole,47). We cannot do something about a situation, unless we have lived in it and experienced what is going on. We should be active participants in the community in which we work and serve. Dr. Perkins said there are some of them who left the community and returned, he called the returners. There those who never left, they stayed on through it all, he calls them the remainers. These people are very important to building the community. Dr. Perkins stated, "Whether someone is a relocater, a returner or a remainder, the key principle is that the person lives and becomes a part of the community he or she hopes to see transformed." (Making Neighborhoods Whole,49).

Reconciliation

In order to make communities whole again there must be reconciliation. Speaking about the term reconciliation, Brenda Salter McNeil states, " Among those who seek to follow Christ, it is generally understood that in order for reconciliation to occur, there must be repentance, justice and forgiveness." (Roadmap to Reconciliation,21). Reconciliation is part of the gospel. Dr. Perkins noted, "Reconciling people with God is virtually inseparable from efforts to reconcile people with other people. In the community there are people of different races, who have experienced racial inequality. These people need to be healed from their wounds. There are some conversations that would be necessary to have. In the words of Salter McNeil, a wrong has to be acknowledged. Salter McNeil believes that an absence of hostility is possible without a spiritual dimension, but reconciliation is not. (Roadmap to Reconciliation,21). In class lecture it

was discussed that reconciliation is the essence of shalom. Restoring relationships where nothing is missing and nothing is broken. It is very crucial to restore relationships when building up a community. Perkins & Gordon stated, "When people, motivated by faith in Christ are living in the same community and working together in pursuit of the same goals, differences are more likely to fade to insignificance." (Making Neighborhoods Whole,66). Reconciliation calls for people in the community to settle their differences. They must be taught how to have a true relationship with God which will make them whole. In the words of Dr. Perkins, reconciliation is the only cure for the violence that has its roots in people who are different from one another. (Making Neighborhoods Whole,67).

Redistribution

It is very important to share the resources in the community, so that everyone could have an equal share. According to Dr. Perkins, this sharing is motivated by love for others and by a desire to abide by scriptural principle. (Making Neighborhood Whole,76). Redistribution is about helping those that are in need by creating economic opportunities. As discussed in the class lecture, redistribution means creating equal access to resources, power and opportunity for all humanity. Dr. Perkins argues that those in control tend to make laws and establish policies that consider their own best interest over the interests of others, especially the poor, who are often voiceless and disenfranchised.(Making Neighborhood Whole,77). He also talks about bringing justice to the criminal courts and prison system. The school system in the community is another area that desperately needs redistribution. From the class lecture we learn that redistribution confronts the unjust distribution of economic, social and relational resources.

The church role in redistribution is to go into the community and assess the needs of the people. They are to address the cause of inequality. Find out the skills of the people and help them implement programs that will create jobs and equal opportunity for the poor in the community.

URBAN MINISTRIES APPROACH

After assessing the issues in the community, there must be a strategy of how to combat these issues. Each issue should be addressed wholistically. According to Dr. Perkins, "If we are to be imitators of Christ, then we too must grow wholistically and help others to do the same." (Making Neighborhood Whole,138). To do urban ministry, we have to learn to love others wholistically. Helping them to see themselves as whole. We must meet their material, social and emotional needs. In the community there must be restoration and development. Evangelism and discipleship is very important in the process of bringing people to Christ but we still have to take care of their needs. It is not either or but both and. We cannot choose between the two, both make up the wholistic approach. Dr. Perkins pointed out, "Coming to Christ may not automatically put food on a poor family's table, but neither will providing a family with nutritious meals address their spiritual needs." (Making Neighborhoods Whole,140). We have to see that bringing someone to Christ and feeding them is equally important. Sometimes it is better to feed them and then give them the word of God. Dr. Perkins argues that we need church based ministries to address all of the challenges and more wholistically, recognizing the relationships between and among them. (Making Neighborhood Whole,140).

There are so many homeless people in the city waiting for someone to care for them. A political solution to this problem has proven to be catastrophic. Dr. Perkins said that he is part of the Home for Good and 100,000 Home campaign seeking to end homelessness. In the words of Perkins, "These campaigns ensure that government and philanthropic funding is effectively and efficiently dispersed in a way that respects and preserves relational connectedness for those the resources are intended to help." (Making Neighborhood Whole,145). The issue of homelessness has grown tremendously in the cities. Some churches in the city are getting involved in coming together to build affordable housing. They are also collaborating with health insurance to get affordable health care for the homeless. There are also churches that are using the empty

spaces that they have to house the homeless. The church is called to take care of the poor and marginalized.

The church must come together to help to decrease poverty by creating employment. Dr. Perkins talks about a group of volunteers who created a lawn maintenance company which provided employment and supportive discipleship during a critical time for people with employment barriers. The church has to use their resources they have available to help those who are in need. According to Dr. Jones, "The war on poverty has been a battle ground where blacks have been forced to compete for crumbs." (God In The Ghetto,54). The major battle in the city is poverty which is as a result of unemployment. There is also poverty due to social injustice. The goal of decreasing poverty is that the people in the community can live a better life. Dr. Perkins praises the church by saying, "It's hard to imagine being as successful as we've been without the spiritual grounding of the church and without individual congregations working together instead of looking out for themselves.(Making Neighborhood Whole,147). The community needs the church. They play a pivotal role in improving the community.

CONCLUSION

The church is called to be the voice of the people. They must stand up and confront the system that perpetuates racial inequality. We have to keep up the fight for social justice. The church is able to combat the challenges that they face in the community. We were commissioned to take care of the poor and marginalized. The church must be a beacon in the community. They are called to participate in finding a strategy to end homelessness. When the church goes into the community, they must learn to listen, process and then take action. We have to remember the 3 r' that makes a community whole. Relocation, Reconciliation and Redistribution. It is very important that the church stays connected with the people in the community. Pastoring a church in an urban community can be challenging. The pastor must have a heart for the community.

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