

**"On Saving And Losing Life:  
A Call To The Urban Church"**

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Jesus once said, "Those who seek to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." Let me tell you about one church that learned how to save its life by losing it.

First Presbyterian Church of Pomona, CA was, at one time, one of the largest and most vital churches in our denomination. Pomona First Church occupies one of the most strategic corners in the downtown of Pomona with a massive complex of buildings. It was the first church to be founded in Pomona, a midsize city of 150,000 in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. By 1939, First Presbyterian Church had swelled to over 2,000 members, it had a Sunday school in excess of a thousand children, and it had one of the most prominent preachers of that time as is pastor – Dr. Louis Evans. In fact, Evans went on from Pomona First to become the senior pastor of Hollywood Presbyterian Church, which then had a congregation of over 8,000.

Fifty years later, the world had radically changed for Pomona First Church. Its membership had declined from 2,000 members to 80, its formerly 1,000 student Sunday School had been reduced to 7 children, most of its buildings were permanently closed, and it had become known as a "clergy-killer" congregation, with no pastor since the 1970s lasting longer than two years there. What had changed that had brought this once-great congregation to its knees?

What had changed was its neighborhood. By 1989, downtown Pomona was a warren of closed and boarded up shops. Industry had fled the city, offices had abandoned Pomona's downtown, the theater, primary hotel and major department store had all closed.

But far more than Pomona's downtown had declined. The peopled-community within a one-mile radius of Pomona Church had radically shifted. Whereas in 1939, that community was clearly upper middle class with large homes and almost totally white, by 1989 it was 80% Hispanic, 8% African American, 5% Asian and only 7% Anglo. The homes have been subdivided and subdivided and subdivided again, so that the homes in the community have shifted from over 90% owner-occupied to 73% rented. 39% of the adults have less than a ninth grade education, and an additional 33% never graduated from high school. 52% of the households live at or below the poverty level, while an additional 20% make less than \$35,000 a year per family. Close to 50% of the residents are undocumented people – that is, illegal aliens. Only about half the workforce have steady jobs, and 64% of them hold hourly-rate part-time jobs with no health insurance or benefits. All these statistics, taken together, describe a parish area that is extremely poor with families' ill equipped to compete in the American economy, poorly educated, without legal rights, relatively powerless and marginalized.

Pomona Presbyterian Church was in real trouble, with its congregation almost at the point of collapse at precisely that moment when the needs of the people of their neighborhood was

greatest. So, in desperation, the Session turned to its presbytery – the Presbytery of San Gabriel – for help. And because I was, at that time, the chairperson of the Congregational Development Committee of the Presbytery, its executive asked me to begin working with that church.

Now you think I'm going to tell you that I came in, set them on a new course, saved the church and enabled them to impact the community! I would love to tell you that, but if I did, I would be lying! Rather than saving that church, I was a terrible failure as an interventionist from the presbytery. And I was a failure because I soon learned that not just the leadership of that church, but the membership as well, was utterly terrified about their situation. They were thoroughly intimidated by the troubles in their church's neighborhood. But worse than that, they could only envision themselves as the Pomona Church of 1939, terribly disappointed that their pastor wasn't another Louis Evans, and worried about not returning to their glory days of 2,000 in worship and 1,000 in Sunday School. I discovered that all they wanted to do was to preserve what they had been and seek to restore what could never be regained. They wanted to save their church, and consequently their very actions to save it was slowly destroying it as a viable community of mission in that neighborhood. But the story doesn't end on this sad note. I couldn't save First Presbyterian Church of Pomona – nor could my presbytery. But there were those who could and did – and I will tell you about them and what they did later on near the end of this address!

We are all familiar with Jesus' famous saying, "Those who seek to save their lives will lose it, and those who lose their lives for my sake and the gospel's will save it." What is intriguing about this statement is that it is used by Jesus both in terms of personal discipleship and for corporate and institutional discipleship. It is used by Jesus as an individual call to discipleship in a single account told by all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 16:25; Mk. 8:35; Lk. 9:24) when Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah and then rebukes Jesus for saying that the Messiah must suffer and die at the hands of the political and religious establishment. But there is a fourth time it is used in a profoundly different context, and that's what I want to look at today.

In Luke 17, the author reports, "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:20-21).

"The kingdom of God is among you." Although some translate this passage as "the kingdom of God is within you," it is hard to justify such a translation because the Greek used here, *entos hymon*, means "among you" or "within your midst." Jesus is not saying to these Pharisees that the kingdom of God is present to them as an inner, spiritual reality already at work in their lives. What he is saying is that God's dominion is already on display in their midst, directly in the person and ministry of Jesus himself, and obliquely, through his disciples and followers. The kingdom of God is coming to life in their very midst.

What most strikes me about this passage, however, is the difference between the question the Pharisees ask of Jesus and the question the disciples ask of him. The question the Pharisees ask is "When is the kingdom of God coming" (17:20)? The question the disciples ask seventeen verses later is "Where, Lord (is the kingdom coming)" (17:37)? Not "when" but "where" do we see God breaking through in human society?

The disciples are asking the right question. Jesus responds to the Pharisees inquiry about *when* the kingdom is coming by telling them, "The days are coming when you will long to see one of

the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it” (vs. 22). He then goes on to tell them that the world will go through much searching, with people “eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building” (vs. 28), *looking for the coming of the Son of Man*. And yet, all the time, he will have already been in their midst through his people, working for the transformation of the world. The job of the church, Jesus is saying, is to be tenacious in being Christ to the world, no matter what chaos might be going on around you. When Jesus will return in all his glory and the kingdom of God will be thoroughly realized is not to be our concern. To ask, “when will all this happen” is to simply tie ourselves up in endless speculation, diverting us from our primary mission of being Christ to the world.

The disciples then get it, and ask the right question. “Where, Lord?” they ask. Not “when will these things be” because “these things” are happening right now. The question is “Where is this happening? Where is the kingdom breaking out? Where do we see God’s work going on in this world of sin?”

Jesus then gives a most peculiar answer. He responds to the disciples’ “where” question with the answer, “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather” (17:37b). “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.” Whatever does Jesus mean by such a strange comment?

What Jesus is saying is, “You identify where the corpse is, not by looking for the dead body, but looking for the vultures circling in the sky. When you see them circling, and go to where they are, there you will find the body.”

Do you want to discover where God’s people are at work being Christ to the world? And do you want to see where God’s people are not focused on mission, but are simply trying to keep the corpse of the church alive? Look for the vultures! When you see them circling a dying church, you know that Christ is not among them. For, Jesus concludes in this passage, “Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it” (17:33). And this applies to the church!

When Jesus said, “He who seeks to save his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Luke 9:24), he was stating something very profound not simply about the individual Christian, but about the Body of Christ. If the Church is caught up in trying to preserve its institution, if all of its energy is invested in trying to preserve itself, then preservation and continuance is exactly what is going to slip out of its grasp! If what you become concerned in doing as a pastor is to simply maintain the worship and educational life of your congregation, to strengthen its fellowship, to maintain its property, to meet its budget and “mind the store,” the one sure thing Jesus is saying he can guarantee for you is that you will “lose the store.” This, Jesus is saying, is simply the way life is! “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather”.

On the other hand, if you want to preserve your church, the way to preserve it is not to preserve it. Instead, give its life away in service to the world. The very act of ignoring the temptation to maintain the status quo and to instead concentrate upon your mission outreach as a congregation will lead inevitably to the strengthening and preserving of your congregation -- without you even trying!

It has been my privilege over the past ten years to work with hundreds of both effective and troubled congregations all over the United States through Partners in Urban Transformation. And for ten years before that, I worked with hundreds more urban congregations in 34 cities in Asia, Africa and Latin America in my capacity as director of community organizing for World Vision International. Many of the most effective and even successful congregations with which I worked were churches that didn't seem to have much going for them – located in some of the worst slums and squatter settlements, often occupying a house or factory facilities, often with very little money and sometimes theologically untrained and inexperienced clergy. Other churches seemed to have everything going for them – excellent facilities, great location, highly trained and articulate clergy. As I worked with both effective and struggling congregations, I couldn't help but begin to observe some commonalities among those churches that were successful and those that were not. And what I soon began to discover was that success had absolutely nothing to do with the quality of the building, the centrality of their location or the training or even articulateness of their pastor. What the successful churches all had in common were three primary factors.<sup>1</sup>

**First, each effective church operated out of a common focus of mission that was perceived, affirmed and articulated by most of the congregation.** These churches knew what they were about!

When I would go to these churches and meet with the pastor, I would expect that pastor to be able to tell me what his/her church was all about. But then I would go to Sunday worship services, and I would ask the people sitting around me or would talk with people standing in the narthex after worship or gathering together afterward in the coffee hour, "Tell me about your church." And in situation after situation, these lay people would respond with the same articulation of mission - but in their own words. They, themselves, had inculcated and could articulate with affirmation and even conviction the primary mission focus of that church. And I found in many of the places I visited, the reason why they could do this is because they had all been involved in determining that mission focus.

Rather than the church trying to do all things equally well and trying to be all things to all people, *each effective church I visited concentrated on a single primary mission focus.* They sought to be about only one primary mission, and all their worship, education, fellowship and institutional maintenance existed to serve that mission.

**Second, each church was committed to outreach which was assumed by the entire congregation.**

What I found particularly intriguing was that the mission focus of each of these congregations was outside itself. Each mission focus dealt with that purpose for which the congregation believed God had called that church into that community. It was striking that none of these mission foci turned inward. None said, "We are going to be a joyous fellowship of believers" or "We will seek to be the family of God" or even "We will preserve our church." None of these churches was about preserving its existence, but was about reaching out in a particular way to the world.

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<sup>1</sup> See my study, "Why Some Churches Succeed – and Others Don't" (Upland, CA: Partners in Urban Transformation, 2003).

Now, it's important to report that the particular theological perspective of each church radically influenced how it defined its outreach and carried it out. For example, some churches saw outreach in terms of evangelism, with the understanding that the job of each church member was to witness to his or her faith and to thus win people to Jesus Christ. Other churches understood outreach as working for social justice in their cities and others as providing social services to people. Still other churches defined outreach as seeking the transformation of the city. The church would define for itself what outreach meant. But the point is that, however it defined outreach, *the effective urban churches were those that saw their church as existing, not for itself, but for the world outside itself, and perceived that as its reason for existing.*

But a commitment to outreach was not the only thrust of these churches. The other perspective these congregations held was that *such outreach was to be assumed by the entire congregation.* In none of these churches did they operate out of the perspective that it was the pastor's or the elder's or the Mission Committee's job to reach out beyond the church. All of them saw it as their personal responsibility to carry out the gospel. They saw it as every member's responsibility!

**Third, each effective urban church has created and carried out a means by which church members are both empowered to discover their ministry and equipped to carry out that ministry together with other church members.**

Here, I think, is the most important point in making urban churches effective in their neighborhoods. It was not simply that each church had a common mission with which everyone agreed. Nor was it simply that every member of the congregation felt that she or he had a responsibility either to proclaim the faith or to work for social righteousness. It was also that *each church had devised some concrete, specific structure or strategy by which the church members were empowered to discover and carry out their unique and particular ministry.* Each church saw its task as equipping its members to carry out that ministry, and be able to act out that ministry within the parameters of that congregation. It is this third factor that I believe is most strategic in enabling these congregations to become effective, growing churches in even the worst of urban conditions.

What I am saying in this third point is simply this. The primary task of the church is to enable its members to discover and to live into that ministry to which God has called each one of them. The purpose of the church is to enable people to live practically and concretely into both the theology and practice of their calling as Christians.

The churches I studied certainly don't follow a common pattern of enabling people to follow God's calling on their lives. The strategies of these churches are as diverse as are the churches themselves. But all these churches see the leadership task to be that of empowering and equipping their members to discover and carry out ministry in the world. Thus, all of them have created some structure and strategy to enable the congregation to live into that third principle. Let's look at three of those strategies.

**A first strategy is *mission groups*.** Churches that develop a mission group strategy center their ministry around the doctrine of vocation, seeking to find ways to enable their members to listen to their own hearts regarding human need and seeking to hear God's call to service both from out of that human need and out of their personal and corporate spiritual formation.

The strategy of mission groups was pioneered by the Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC. Gordon Cosby and two other people were the founding members of the Church of the Saviour immediately after the Second World War. Today COS carries on an international ministry of such scope that it is felt by many to be the most influential church in the past 20 years in the United States.

The church in which I am currently a parish associate, the LaVerne Heights Presbyterian Church, is built around a strategy of mission groups. Unlike most Presbyterian churches, LaVerne Heights has no committees, only a Session and a Board of Deacons. The remainder of the life and mission of the church is built around mission groups – what we call ministry groups. We have ten such ministry groups, and we involve close to two-thirds of our total membership of 260 in those groups. Those groups involve our congregation in broad-based community organizing in the larger Los Angeles metropolis, working with a community center in Pomona, helping to build an orphanage in Nairobi, Kenya and another in Mexico, dealing hands-on with the homeless in the Los Angeles metropolis, working with autistic and retarded children, doing youth outreach with troubled youth, child abuse prevention, providing ministries of support for parents whose infants have died, and doing evangelistic outreach throughout the city of LaVerne. What is most significant about these mission groups, however, is that none of them have been developed or organized by the church; rather, individual members of the church felt called to each of these missions, shared that concern with the congregation, and others responded to their call – thus forming a mission group. Because of its strong commitment to mission, our congregation is one of the best-known in the Pomona Valley, our worship attendance exceeds our total church membership each week, and more than 25% of our giving goes to mission purposes beyond our church.

The objective of churches like these is to provide the structure of “mission groups” for their congregations. This mission structure assists people in their personal exploration of call, builds a strong support life in community and forms groups of church members and friends who feel called to a particular ministry in the world. As such mission groups form around the sense of call to address a particular human need, they request the Session to invest them with the responsibility to carry out that ministry on behalf of the church. Once so commissioned by the Session, the mission group members develop their objectives for that ministry to which they all feel called. They create and carry out plans of action, engage directly in that ministry, evaluate their effectiveness, build relationships with other non-congregation groups in their area of ministry and otherwise assume full responsibility for that ministry on behalf of the congregation.

But these mission groups also build a strong life together of Bible study, prayer, worship, support of each other, and sharing of personal concerns. They meet regularly with each other, go on spiritual retreats with each other, pray for each other between meetings and commit themselves to building their personal relationships with God through daily reflection and Bible study.

The mission group, therefore, becomes the main way these churches organize themselves, for in them, mission group members study, worship, pray, support each other, raise funds, plan and carry out that ministry to which they all feel called. With a mission structure like that, about the most the entire congregation is called to do is corporate worship, educational programs beyond the scope of a mission group, and trustee duties.

**A second strategy for building mission-oriented churches is that of *clustering*.** The concept of clustering as an effective means for doing urban ministry was pioneered by Tom Dietrich of our denomination. The essential idea of clustering comes from the insight that churches working together can create a critical mass of power and motivation to accomplish far more than if they continued to work and exist independent of each other. It is the embracing of the perspective that the Body of Christ doesn't so much consist of individual congregations as it does all the churches in an urban community working together so that both the neighborhood and its churches are transformed.

There are four essential principles for the Cluster model of urban ministry. The first is the creation of magnet churches out of neighborhood churches. Most neighborhood churches operate under the premise that they must do all things equally well in order to reach the most people. That's fine if you're a large church with massive people, financial and building resources. But if you are a little church, you don't have the capacity to do everything equally well. Church as magnet therefore provides an entirely different model for being church.

A magnet, by its very nature, both attracts and repels. The magnet church does one thing supremely well – and doesn't try to do things it is not capable of doing! It builds its ministry on a clear, single focus of mission for itself, and then mobilizes its people, buildings and money in an all-out effort to carry out that mission. Therefore, the cluster works to bring together all of its magnet churches – each doing its own thing – to work together in a comprehensive mission outreach to its community.

A cluster also has one or two anchor churches, larger or well endowed congregations that can bring stability and permanence to the cluster partnership, and which can become a logistical center, education center or center for celebration and entertainment for the cluster.

The cluster assumes the role of integrating all these individual mission foci of all their magnet and anchor churches into a single comprehensive mission that seeks to reach all the people and to work for the transformation of the whole community. It does this by building a community of trust, having a director who acts as both coach and mentor to the cluster pastors, engaging all the churches in shared strategic planning, providing training for the members of the churches, and mobilizing the cluster for shared ministry. The result is empowerment – the lay and clergy leadership of all the churches working together to create and carry out a commonly-agreed upon mission focus, objectives and strategies for shared ministry to their community, while supporting and encouraging each other in their respective ministries.

An example of effective clustering was the Hollywood-Wilshire Cluster of Presbyterian Churches in Los Angeles. The Hollywood-Wilshire Cluster was formed in 1992, made up of the pastors of the seven Presbyterian churches in that mid-city Los Angeles community of 420,000 people. The first several years of the Cluster's life was spent in the pastors sharing with each other their problems and frustrations, and in building relationships of trust and support.

In 1995, however, an event occurred which was to profoundly shape the future of the Cluster. One of the seven churches made the decision to close! The Presbytery, realizing more than a million dollars from the sale of the church building, decided to re-invest that money in the Hollywood-Wilshire community in which that church formerly resided. So it contracted with me to work with the remaining six congregations and three other Presbyterian missions in that community to create a plan for the Presbyterian witness and mission there.

On October 1, 1995, the study began. Five of the six churches and two of the three Presbyterian mission agencies decided to conduct self-studies as a part of that larger strategic study. Each study of each church and agency was built around the concept of “magnet” churches.

Through this strategic planning process, each church and mission agency was able to determine a single “magnet” focus of mission, and each involved their entire congregation or constituency in determining that focus. Each church and agency created objectives and devised a strategy and plan of action to implement that focus. The leadership of all six churches and the mission agencies then gathered together in a retreat to study all the individual strategic plans; they discovered there was no overlap or competition between the churches. What all did need, however, was both support to be given to each church and also the identification of common areas of ministry that needed to be undertaken as a Cluster of the whole.

The result was the formal creation of a Cluster strategy in which the six churches and the three mission agencies determined three primary foci of cooperative ministry: community organizing, youth outreach to Hispanic, Korean, Taiwanese, Filipino and Anglo neighborhood youth, and the strengthening of a “hands-on” incarnational ministry program. I was asked to direct the cluster, and did so for the next five years. Over those years, all three mission areas of community organizing, specialized youth outreach and the strengthening of incarnational ministry was greatly developed, organized around neighborhood and church issues in three neighborhoods, developing four distinct community outreach efforts to neighborhood youth, and the providing of year-long immersion experiences for a total of 80 college graduates who were testing calls into urban ministry. Eventually, the Cluster became deeply engaged in neighborhood, citywide and then county-wide organizing in conjunction with the Industrial Areas Foundation, in the creation of an economic development effort, and in job training and the start-up of small (“Mom-and-Pop”) informal businesses for low-skilled or immigrant families who couldn’t enter the job-market.

As well, courses and learning opportunities for church officers, church school teachers, evangelism and community workers were developed, as well as joint worship opportunities and retreats for spiritual formation. Nine staff were employed (two full-time, seven part-time) to be deployed to the churches and mission agencies to carry out the commonly agreed upon strategy. The staff salaries were paid by the presbytery from the invested monies from the sale of that seventh church building.

The success of the Hollywood-Wilshire Cluster was built around turning a *ministry liability* (the seventh church that was no longer viable) into a *funding asset* (using invested monies from the sale of its building), in order to enable a significant *mission advance* to occur. And all this happened because six churches, three mission agencies and a presbytery were willing to “color outside the lines” of how ministry ought to be done! This is the Cluster approach to ministry in urban communities.

**A third strategy for mission advance is church-based community organizing.** Let me tell you of how one church used the principles and strategies of community organizing, not only to bring about significant change in its neighborhood, but also profound change within the congregation itself.

Edgewater Presbyterian Church was a dying "tall-steeple" congregation in Chicago when, as its pastor, I challenged that church's leadership to join me in learning about our inner-city

community. In four months, 54 members of our church made over 2,000 calls on pastors, politicians, local businesspeople, education, health and social service providers, and particularly on "ordinary folks" in the community. Out of this calling, our church leaders realized that the primary problem of that community was neither poverty nor prejudice as much as it was powerlessness. Consequently, the church leadership decided that our congregation needed to concentrate its mission resources on the development of a local community organization.

Out of that decision, the Organization of the North East was born which mobilized the people of that inner-city community and most of its churches to successfully deal with political disenfranchisement, economic exploitation, pornography and prostitution, and a host of other problems. Through community organization, our inner-city neighborhood became a community with a future and a hope. We were not prepared, however, for the profound impact that participation in community organization would have in arresting the decline of our church.

Within two years, Edgewater Church had arrested a fifteen-year decline in membership from over 1500 to 500, added in one year nearly as many members as it had lost over the previous five (47% of whom were adult converts to the Christian faith), increased the church's income by 56%, developed 22 active community ministries and doubled Sunday worship attendance. Involvement of our church members in the formation and leadership of ONE also resulted in the profound reversal of the decline Edgewater Church had been facing for over ten years.

Community organization is that process by which the people of an urban area organize themselves to "take charge" of their situation and thus develop a sense of being a community together. It is a particularly effective tool for the powerless poor and middle class as they determine for themselves the actions they will take to deal with the essential forces that are destroying their community and society. Its ultimate objective is to create an authentic sense of community in that neighborhood, rather than simply organizing it to address its issues. Organizing thus becomes a means to the end of creating community, and not an end in itself. Therefore, it places a strong emphasis on the clarification of those values by which that community chooses to live its life, and applies those values to the way the community deals with its enemies as well as its friends.

These, then, are three strategies by which effective churches have empowered and equipped their members to discover and carry out ministry. The strategies we surveyed are mission groups, clustering and church-based community organizing sustained by small groups. There are other strategies we have not had the time to explore, such as house churches, organizing around people groups, the provision of social services, the work of advocacy, community development, economic development and housing development. But the important point I wish to make is that – no matter what strategy might be used by a particular church -- all of these effective churches are operating on the premise that the church exists for the world -- not just in theory or in rhetoric but in the very way the church is organized. Each church we have thus far examined has found a specific way to enable congregational members to enter into mission, not just individually, but together as a congregation. They all have different ways of doing it. But all these churches are operating essentially out of the same realized commitment to mission.

And that brings us back to First Presbyterian Church of Pomona. Remember the Pomona Church? I had failed them pretty miserably. And so had the Presbytery of San Gabriel. But they had failed themselves pretty miserably, as well. Around their church, this congregation had a neighborhood in crisis economically, educationally, in housing, in social need and filled with

people afraid to act on their own behalf because most of them were here in the United States illegally. And yet these Christians were paralyzed to do anything about their community because they were thoroughly fixated on saving their own church institution, hunkering down and fighting to stay alive against mounting bills, decaying buildings and a congregation so small it seemed lost when it gathered in its giant sanctuary.

I returned to the executive of our presbytery and to the Congregational Development Committee with a most pessimistic report, predicting that the First Presbyterian Church of Pomona would be closed within five years. But I was not taking into account what God might do.

Two years later, several young adults who were students at the Claremont Colleges just six miles from Pomona Church began to attend worship there. These Christian students had been gathering for close to a year in a small group, studying scripture, reflecting on the church's role in the urban world, and seeking God's leading for how they should be about becoming engaged in urban ministry. They decided to begin attending worship in the sorriest urban church they could find in the poorest city in southern California. And God led them to Pomona Presbyterian Church where, for the next year, they worshipped, sought to be of help in whatever ways they could and began to visit with the people in the neighborhood.

In 1993, several of these students graduated from the Claremont Colleges, ready to launch their careers. But by this time, they were feeling an irresistible call from God to Pomona. So these students made the decision to move into Pomona, cast their lot with the church, and see how God would lead. They first moved into the church building and lived in community there. But soon, they began to marry and to buy homes in that poor community. Some of them got high-level jobs with major corporations, but others chose to work full-time in the community or with the church, financed by the money generated by their working compatriots. Over the next several years, they experimented with several forms of ministry. Little by little, they moved into the leadership of Pomona Church, becoming elders and deacons, sharing in the leadership of worship and teaching the Sunday school classes that were now growing through the children they were both bringing into the church from the neighborhood and the children they were birthing. By 2003, they were ready to launch a major effort to work for the transformation of their Pomona neighborhood. They called it "Pomona Hope".

Recognizing that they did not have the capacity within themselves to make Pomona Hope a success, the leaders of Pomona Presbyterian Church turned to my congregation, LaVerne Heights Presbyterian Church. Our Session came to our congregation and asked if there were members who would be interested in working with the Pomona Church and Pomona Hope to develop a mission with the poor and powerless of Pomona. Several church members responded. Because of my previous experience with the Pomona Church, I was among those who agreed to begin meeting with the elders of Pomona Church and the leaders of Pomona Hope.

We met for close to a year, built relationships of trust with one another, spent many days talking with the people in the neighborhood around the church, spent time with Pomona church members (especially the old timers), began negotiating with ONE LA, the Los Angeles-based affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation about organizing in Pomona, and met with the pastors and Sessions of two other Presbyterian churches, and with the Council of the Presbytery of San Gabriel. The result was the decision to initiate a comprehensive launch of Pomona Hope in the areas of community organizing, community economics and community education, to go along with Pomona Hope's current ministries of community incarnation and community

spirituality. Providing the funding for this venture would be the four participating Presbyterian churches, the Presbytery of San Gabriel, the Synod of Southern California and the General Assembly, along with volunteers being provided through the four participating Presbyterian churches and from the colleges from which the students originally came to begin this work in 1993. This organizing effort began on September 26, 2005 following a celebration and dedicatory service that filled the Pomona Church sanctuary. And here is what has happened since that September in 2005.

In community organizing in the last 18 months, 75 volunteers have held more than 400 individual meetings with people in the neighborhood. They have gathered those people into house meeting in which the people identified the issues of crime and safety, immigration, and the absence of streetlights. Working in conjunction with ONE LA, the IAF affiliate in Los Angeles, Pomona Hope and the people have held meetings with the Pomona City Council, including more than 500 people attending one such meeting. These meetings resulted in an agreement with the city for them to install 5,000 streetlights in Pomona's poorest neighborhoods. The people held meetings with the Pomona chief of police to correct harassment of Hispanic drivers, and with the superintendent of the Pomona Unified School District that allowed for parent access to teachers.

In community education, the Pomona Hope Community Center was launched with four staff and 40 volunteers working with 60 elementary school children and their parents. The community center has made active use of the education building of the Pomona Church that once accommodated over 1000 students but has now sat vacant for the past decade. It is now filled with children and youth five afternoons and evenings a week with a one-on-one tutoring program, a computer learning center and lab, specialized youth activities, a family literacy program and an after-school program of gymnasium sports, recreation, arts and crafts, help with homework and a Bible story time. Later in this season, the computer lab with its 21 networked computers will be used by children, youth and adults for strengthening computer skills, building English language facilitation, teaching and honing typing skills, and for Internet use and training.

In community economics, Pomona Hope has been invited by the Department of Housing and Human Services of the federal government to make application for a major grant that will enable Pomona Hope to work with Pomona's business community to create ongoing moderate-pay jobs for poor residents and to stimulate local business. A member of the Pomona Hope board who was one of the former students who moved to Pomona was granted a yearlong sabbatical by his company with full pay to head this effort to bring federal dollars into Pomona to stimulate business.

In community incarnation, fifteen middle-class couples and singles have moved into the poorest areas of Pomona, bought homes there, built relationships of trust among their neighbors, entered fully into the city's public life as residents and citizens, and are working together with ONE LA, Pomona Hope and their neighborhood associations to bring about the transformation of the city. An additional six middle-class singles have moved into the community in this incarnation program during 2006.

In community spirituality, the Pomona Hope participants and those couples and singles who have moved into the community join in highly-contemporary worship at First Presbyterian Church each Sunday. They and many people from the neighbor also gather in community homes each week all over the city for Bible study, sharing and prayer. Throughout the year, a number of street parties have been operated by Pomona Hope, a weekly "Friday Night at the Movies" in the

largest backyard of one of the Pomona Hope members, showing some of the classic films from the Golden Age of Hollywood and Mexican cinema, and the holding of backyard barbeques throughout the city. All of this effort is to work for the transforming of the spiritual atmosphere of Pomona into a city of people enjoying gathering together and learning to trust and care for each other.

This is how the Body of Christ – Pomona Hope, First Presbyterian Church of Pomona, LaVerne Heights Church, Northminster Presbyterian of Diamond Bar, Glenkirk Presbyterian of Glendora and the Presbytery of San Gabriel, the Synod of Southern California and the General Assembly are now all working together both to contribute to the transformation of the City of Pomona into a more equitable and just city and to bring about renewal to what was once a deeply troubled Presbyterian urban church that has now found new purpose and direction for its life and witness in Pomona. And, most of all, Pomona Church is no longer a “clergy-killer!” The present pastor, Santos Ramos, has been there 12 years – the longest tenure for a pastor since Louie Evans back in the 1930s!

Before I conclude, let me just take a moment of personal privilege to suggest to you that if you want to explore further the various philosophies and strategies for enabling the local church to become increasingly effective in its mission outreach to the world and in the building of its interior life, please explore the catalog of Partners in Urban Transformation that you should have found on your chair. That catalog provides papers, books, curricula, DVD and video courses both for your own edification and for your congregation’s instruction. As well, please note the Bible studies and Sunday lectionary commentaries on our website and the learning opportunities we offer both through our Project Advance Academy and through events we can plan with your presbytery.

The biblical theme for this conference is found in Isaiah 58:12 – “You shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of Streets to live in.” It is an appropriate theme, given both the catastrophe that has visited this city through Hurricane Katrina, and the way that the church throughout the United States and other people of goodwill have responded to this disaster. But the larger scripture passage from which our conference theme has been taken has something far more profound to say to us Presbyterians as we contemplate how we are to respond to the “Katrinas” of poverty, powerlessness, and marginalization of people in every one of the cities represented in this room today. So that we experience the full impact of this scripture, I’m going to change one Hebrew word, *tsom* or “fast” to the word “worship” – the purpose of a Jewish fast – so that we can truly receive the emotion this passage was meant to evoke in its Jewish reader.

It begins with the people making a complaint to God:

“Why do we worship you, but you appear not to see?  
Why do we humble ourselves, only to have you take no notice?”

God then replies:

“Is this the kind of worship that I want,  
a day to humble yourselves?  
Is it to bow down your head like a bulrush,  
And to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
Will you call that worship,  
A day that is agreeable to the Lord?”

Is not this the worship that I choose:  
 For you to loose the bonds of injustice,  
 To undo the thongs of the yoke,  
 To let the oppressed go free,  
 And to break every yoke?  
 Is not worship to share your bread with the hungry  
 And to bring the homeless poor into your house?  
 When you see the naked, to cover them,  
 And not to hide yourself from your own kin?

When you worship like this, then your light will indeed break forth like the dawn,  
 And your healing shall spring up quickly;  
 God will then go before you,  
 The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.  
 It will be then that you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
 You shall cry for help, and he will say, 'Here I am!'

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
 The pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
 If you offer your food to the hungry  
 And satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
 It will be then that your light shall rise in the darkness  
 And your gloom be like the noonday.  
 It will be then that the Lord will guide you continually,  
 And satisfy your needs in parched places,  
 And make your bones strong;  
 Then you shall be like a watered garden,  
 Like a spring of water whose waters never fail.  
 It will be then that your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
 You shall raise up the foundations of many generations.  
 It will be then that you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
 The restorer of streets to live in." (Isa. 58:3-12)

The great Reformed theologian, Karl Barth, had it right when he wrote, "The worship of God is the service of man." And when your congregation centers itself on loosing the bonds of injustice, undoing the thongs of the yoke, letting the oppressed go free and breaking every yoke, when your congregation becomes "Repairer of the Breach" and "Restorer of Streets," then God will act to make your congregation "like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail," and "the Lord will guide your congregation continually, satisfy your people's needs in parched places, and make your church's bones strong." For it is in losing yourself and your church in compassionate outreach and commitment to justice to your city that you will find your life and your congregation's life preserved and made secure! For this, my brothers and sisters, is the word of the Lord.

Amen!

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Sample mission statements:

LVHPC: “As a people committed to the Lord Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we nurture and equip each other to be disciples who perceive and carry out God’s call to our mission: to share the Gospel and address community and world needs to the glory of God.

Pomona Hope “The mission of Pomona Hope is to bring hope, peace and well-being to the city through engaging in community organizing, economic development, serving the people by providing educational opportunities and working for neighborhood transformation.”

H-W Cluster: “We, as an intentional Christian community of Presbyterian churches and mission organizations, are called by God to proclaim Christ’s love through partnership with the neighborhoods of the Hollywood-Wilshire area in order to build bridges of mutual empowerment, reconciliation and transformation.

A Korean magnet congregation:

“to reach second generation English-speaking Korean-American youth with the gospel of Jesus Christ and to build with them a strong Christian community, while continuing a vital full Korean-speaking ministry to the first generation Korean-Americans.”

A neighborhood outreach:

“to empower the South Hollywood neighborhood to experience fullness of life in Christ by effectively sharing the gospel, enabling the neighborhood to successfully address its own issues, identifying and developing the leadership capacities of its people, and working for the spiritual transformation of the neighborhood.”

An Hispanic congregation:

“To reach with the gospel of Jesus Christ the Hispanic families that live around the church, sharing our faith, serving that Hispanic community, and building our life together as a church.”

An economic development corporation:

“to facilitate the economic growth of poor families in the Hollywood-Wilshire community through the development of locally-owned businesses, in order to contribute to our mutual economic and social transformation.”

An anchor congregation:

“to embrace and join with the Wilshire Center for our mutual transformation, especially encouraging the business and residential communities to work together for the neighborhood’s common good, to organize the people and our church to identify and address powerfully common issues, and to encourage our youth and their families in a revival of faith.”

Elements of a Cluster:

- Magnet churches, each focusing on a single mission emphasis outside themselves, yet integral to their essence as a church;

- Anchor churches to provide stability, permanence and as a “cathedral” congregation (center of art, music, education, worship, celebration);
- A cluster or center that integrates the individual foci of the member churches into a single comprehensive mission thrust while undertaking ministry on behalf of the churches that the churches are not equipped to conduct themselves;
- A director and cluster staff;
- A coach-mentor who works with the pastors of the churches (the c-m may also be the director);
- Cluster-wide strategic planning that establishes with the churches mission priorities, objectives, directions and strategies for the Cluster and all its member churches;
- Staff employed by the Cluster, working as a team, and yet dispersed throughout the Cluster (some being assigned to individual congregations).

Various strategic structures for community transformation:

- **Mission groups:** small groups in a local congregation that are focused on carrying out the work of that church to a specific social issue or concern to which it feels itself called, and building the interior life together to enable its members to carry out that mission;
- **House churches:** small groups in a local congregation that feel called to a given neighborhood, and carry out the full ministry of the Body of Christ to that neighborhood, but working in unity with the other house churches of that congregation that are doing the same in their respective neighborhoods;
- **People group mission:** small groups in a local congregation that carry out the ministry of that congregation for a specialized collection of people who are already in affinity with each other that creates a commonality or cohesion among those people;
- **Clustering:** churches in geographical proximity working together in order to carry out ministry to that neighborhood more effectively and efficiently, to share resources, and to create a critical mass of power and motivation to accomplish far more than if each church worked independently of the others;
- **Community organizing:** the process by which the people and institutions of a given urban area organize themselves to take charge of their situation, to address commonly identified issues together, to build the collective power to be able to negotiate successfully with the economic and political powers of the city for the good of that area, and to build around commonly articulated values a sense of being community together;
- **Social services:** the provision of short-term aid or longer-term services to a community from an outside agency that provides emergency aid, rebuilds infrastructures, provides jobs and is designed to give people the capacity to survive on their own;
- **Advocacy:** Engagement in public life by an outside, powerful agency on behalf of a victim group of people who don't have the means to stand up for themselves;
- **Community development:** Work by an agency for the transformation of a poor community to identify the essential problems of that community and then mobilize the people as well as resources from both inside and outside that community so that the community can solve those problems. Development efforts can specialize in specific areas of need, such as economic development (jobs generation, business development) or housing development.

***The essential difference between community organizing and community development:*** *Community development agencies* perceive the community they are serving as in some way dysfunctional and unable to compete in the economic mainstream without intervention. Therefore, the primary task of that community development effort is to “raise up people by their bootstraps” so that they develop the skills, capacities and willingness both as individuals and as a community to compete in today’s world.

***Community organizing*** sees the problem facing the poor, not so much as being their dysfunctionality but that the political, economic and values-sustaining systems of the city are organized to maintain themselves in power at the expense of the poor. In other words, the problem isn’t the poor; the problem is the systems and their lust for power. Therefore, the primary objective of community organizing is not to solve a problem (that’s a means to an end), but to build in people their capacity, ability and willingness to act together to use the people-power at their disposal to demonstrate to the city’s systems the people’s capacity, ability and willingness to use their power, and thus enter into good-faith negotiations that make decisions that improve the lot of the people. Therefore, organizing seeks to discover the people in a community who have the capacity to lead, to call them out and train them to lead, and to get them to organize their people to address the issues the people perceive as their issues, addressing those issues in ways that will require government, business, educational, religious and social agencies to be truly responsive to the people’s demands.