

Faith and the City: Relationship-building crucial to urban evangelism_41805

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FAITH AND THE CITY: Relationship-building crucial to urban evangelism

By Ken Camp

Managing Editor

Christians committed to sharing their faith with city-dwellers must learn to embrace paradoxes, urban ministers agree.

Crowded people crave relationships but build barriers, and hurried people with no time want other people to make long-term investments in their lives.

“We need multiple points of contact to establish trusting relationships,” said Tommy Goode, City Core Initiative strategist with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. “We need a missionary strategy for the city where we go to the people rather than a gathering strategy where we expect people to come to us in our churches.”

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Those multiple points range from benevolence ministries and job-training programs for people at the lowest end of the socio-economic spectrum to coffee house ministries and art exhibits for urbane sophisticates in high-rise, high-dollar lofts. But the common denominator is relationships.

"There's no substitute for building relationships, and you have to work harder to find those venues in the city where you can form the relationships," said Camille Simmons, coordinator of ministry missions for San Antonio Baptist Association. She described many urban people as

"disconnected and isolated."

Mistrust and fear present major barriers Christians must overcome before they can share the gospel with people in cities, said E. B. Brooks, coordinator of the BGCT's church missions and evangelism section.

"You have to touch people, and you have to touch them more than once to build trust," Brooks said.

Building relationships and establishing trust requires long-term commitment, said Chris Simmons, who has been pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church near Dallas' Fair Park area since 1988.

"I was here five to seven years before I felt I was making an impact," he acknowledged.

"You have to build bridges through relationships. Cold-call evangelism often doesn't work. ... You generally cannot reach people through one-time big events and evangelistic meetings."

Because city-dwellers are surrounded by people who demand time from their busy schedules, they often close themselves off, Simmons said. But while they have plenty of unsatisfying superficial contact with people, they hunger for deep, meaningful relationships.

"There are people, people everywhere in the urban context, but there's a lot of loneliness," he said. When it comes to urban evangelism, "It's all based on relationships. If it's not relational, they will shut you out."

Christians cannot effectively develop strategies for reaching cities solely by digesting demographic data and crunching numbers, said Dian Kidd, associate director of Union Baptist Association.

"We don't need to develop a strategy. We need to develop the attitude of being a missionary," she said.

“Walk through the community. Spend time, and see the people. Get out there and find out who the people are.”

On one level, urban evangelism is a much simpler approach than the pre-packaged programs and expensive events many Baptists have come to associate with evangelism, she explained. But on another level, it's much more demanding, because it requires a fundamental change in attitude and a life-commitment.

“It's not big events. It's not memorizing certain evangelistic presentations. It's not presenting some complex, logical apologetic for Christianity,” she said. “It's just being the presence of Christ and entering into life alongside them.”

For different categories of urban-dwellers, the “incarnational witness” Kidd described demands different approaches.

The multi-ethnic nature of metropolitan areas demands culturally appropriate expressions of ministry and mission, she noted. And the sheer density of the population—where one ethnic group may bump up against another group within a block—makes church-starting and evangelism in that context even more challenging.

Among the urban poor, community ministries designed to meet needs continue to provide an effective avenue for establishing relationships, Simmons said.

“Meeting people at their point of need is key in an urban setting,” she said.

Churches respond most effectively when they work in partnership with other like-minded Christians and when they collaborate with other groups who may not share their faith commitment but who have the same goals for responding to human need, she added.

“Our churches must be willing to get out of where it's comfortable and get out into the middle of our communities to let their light shine,” she said.

In some ways, reaching affluent city-dwellers who isolate themselves in gated communities or behind the security locks of upscale lofts can be even more challenging, some urban evangelism strategists noted.

“We're not going to get through the gates. We're not going to knock on their doors. We're not going to hand them a tract,” Kidd acknowledged. But Christian co-workers and neighbors have opportunities to build relationships that can lead to a gospel witness in time.

“It doesn't happen on Sunday morning,” she said. “It happens throughout the week, where people live and where people work.”

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