

Jimmy Dorrell: ‘The renewal of the church for God’s mission’

July 19, 2021

Jimmy Dorrell stays busy. He has been engaged in ministry, education and community development in Waco for 28 years. He also has written four [books](#) on the church and Christian community development. From deep in the heart of one Texan, he shares his background and thoughts on the church and ministry. To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated leader to be featured in this column, or to apply to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

Background

Where do you currently serve, and how long have you been there?

- Senior pastor of [Church Under the Bridge](#) in Waco, 28 years.
- Co-founder and executive director of [Mission Waco/Mission World](#), 28 years; president emeritus, two years.
- Helped establish the [Texas Christian Community Development Network](#) in 2011; president emeritus, three years.
- Adjunct professor at [Baylor University and Truett Theological Seminary](#), 28 and 20 years, respectively.
- Teaching Christian community development courses for churches and nonprofit organizations in Texas, Louisiana and Oklahoma.

Where else have you served in ministry, and what were your positions there?

- Highland Baptist Church in Waco, youth director, 1969 to 1975.

- West Memorial Baptist Church in Houston; youth, college and singles minister; 1979 to 1982. This was an important season of ministry for me to be a part of a nontraditional church with Ralph Neighbour Jr., doing cell groups in the Houston culture in the late 1970s and early 80s.

Where did you grow up?

Conroe, Texas.

How did you come to faith in Christ?

I accepted Christ in the First Baptist Church of Conroe around age 10.

Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?

- Baylor University, Bachelor of Arts in Religion in 1972 and a master's in environmental studies in 1993.
- Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Master of Divinity, 1978.
- Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Doctor of Ministry. My doctoral project was on renewal of the church for mission.

About ministry life

Why do you feel called into ministry?

As a teenager active in my home church, I sensed God's leading toward full-time ministry and chose to go to Baylor to study religion. Throughout my life, I have experienced the Holy Spirit's guidance step-by-step to that call toward the renewal of the church and compassion toward the poor, marginalized and unchurched. Many of those confirmations happened through personal experiences, jobs, education and global travel among the poor. In particular, the biblical principles of Christian community development to empower the poor and marginalized have convicted my

call.

What is your favorite aspect of ministry? Why?

Moving into an under-resourced, African American neighborhood 44 years ago changed our lives and our worldview of how to build relationships across cultural and racial barriers. It made the gospel come alive and continued to redefine what New Testament church and ministry meant. Added to the local context, our work in Haiti, Mexico City and India also expanded our compassion for the unreached and extremely poor, and caused us to be global Christians.

What one aspect of ministry gives you the greatest joy?

The privilege to lead and serve a very diverse, multiracial, economically varied, creative, genuine and challenging body of Christ is so joyful. It causes me to use so many of the gifts and lessons God has given me all these years.

What one aspect of ministry would you like to change?

My heart is for the renewal of the church for God's mission. As the Western church loses ground, my disappointment is the lack of honest congregational examination, brokenness and change that is occurring. I deeply desire the Spirit's leadership for new wineskins in American churches.

What did you learn on the job you wish you learned in seminary?

While I cherish my seminary training as a foundation of biblical training, I have learned most of the skills needed for our unique ministry among the poor and unchurched outside of seminary, though learning under Ray

Bakke at Eastern Seminary was profoundly impacting.

What is the impact of ministry on your family?

Since the majority of my children's lives were shaped by living in a poor and multiracial neighborhood and by attending a church under a bridge, their values are significantly different than middle-class Christians.

My oldest son leads a ministry in Galveston similar to Mission Waco called Galveston Urban Ministries and lives in a poor neighborhood with four children. We adopted our Hispanic daughter at age 3 from the parents of an ex-offender and prostitute.

My wife is the hero in our family. She dove deeply into the lives of our poor neighbors and now leads our global missions. We love how God has used us and the joy it has brought all of us.

How has your ministry or your perspective on ministry changed?

We work from a model of ministry called Christian community development that has basic principles on helping and empowering others I never knew in early ministry.

How do you expect ministry to change in the next 10 to 20 years?

I think for the Western church to flourish, it must change dramatically, though it may take more years of diminishing fruit to get the American church there. It must adopt many of the principles of Christian community development, reduce its dependency on buildings and high-salaried church staff, and allow God to prune us to become servants in the culture.

Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing your ministry.

As pastor of Church Under the Bridge, our challenges are (1) needing professional assistance for those with mental disabilities in our congregation and community, (2) learning how to build a team to be a greater advocate against systemic injustice, and (3) personally, the wisdom to know how to use my time wisely as I “age out.”

What do you wish more laypeople knew about ministry or, specifically, your ministry?

I wish more would come experience Mission Waco’s poverty simulation and visit those ministries, as well as experience Church Under the Bridge. Reading my books [*Commonwealth: Transformation through Christian Community Development*](#) and [*Trolls & Truth: 14 Realities about Today’s Church that We Don’t Want to See*](#) would challenge those who don’t want to visit.

I also wish more would learn how we empower others—including the poor—to engage in ministry, as well as how we do microloans for the poorest of the poor in Haiti.

If you could get one “do over” in ministry, what would it be, and why?

Nothing. We have loved our life in ministry and thank God for it.

Have you ever been so disappointed with Christian ministry that you considered leaving it?

Only the “church staff” roles that boxed in the gifts God provided us.

About Baptists

Why are you Baptist?

Honestly, I am not sure what that means to me anymore. While I appreciate what I learned in my home church, the two Baptist churches where I served on staff—particularly West Memorial Baptist Church with Ralph Neighbour Jr.—and some of the theological training I received—mostly at Eastern Baptist Seminary—the label “Baptist” has been confused and distorted so much, I rarely use it.

The denomination is far behind and losing ground. My world with the unchurched works better without denominational labels and traditions, though I still think my theological roots are grounded in many Baptist precepts, as well as in the radical Reformation and church renewal movements.

What are the key issues facing Baptists—denominationally and/or congregationally?

1. An honesty and brokenness about how the culture has usurped our calling and values.
2. The chains of tradition that keep older Baptists from the freedom to become what God desires.
3. The lack of genuine and healthy engagement with and advocacy for the poor and marginalized.
4. The lack of skills in social justice arenas to make a difference in our own culture.

What would you change about the Baptist denomination—state, nation or local?

I have no idea. I think it will take a fresh work of the Holy Spirit to renew

our hearts and minds even to begin that renewal process. Yet, I believe God can do that.

About Jimmy

Who were/are your mentors, and how did/do they influence you?

- Ralph Neighbour Jr., created a new model of church even when often criticized.
- Ray Bakke taught me theology in a global context.
- Several Christian Community Development Association leaders like Robert Lupton, Mary Nelson, John Perkins and Wayne Gordon spoke prophetically and lived out the eight principles of Christian community development in their own communities.

Other than the Bible, name some of your favorite books or authors, and explain why.

- *Theology as Big as the City* by Ray Bakke broadened my call to the global church.
- *The Next Evangelicalism* by Soon-Chan Rah addressed current messes and yet affirmed my call.
- *When Helping Hurts* Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert and *Walking with the Poor* by Bryant Myers offered a healthier approach to helping the poor.
- *Building a People of Power* by Robert Linthicum called the church to understand how God can use congregations for change in the culture.
- *Transforming Mission* by David Bosch provides a broad sweep of Christian history and clarity on theological and historic eras of thinking about mission.
- *Divided By Faith* by Michael Emerson explains harsh realities of black and white division in our churches.

What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?

Galatians 1:27—the selfless life of Christians—and Galatian 2:10—don't forget the poor.

Who is your favorite person in the Bible, other than Jesus? Why?

Philip the evangelist, because his willingness to reach out to and baptize the Ethiopian eunuch.

Stephen, the martyred deacon, because he fed the widows and challenged the Jews, while filled with the Spirit.

Name something about you that would surprise people who know you.

I have been an avid table tennis player for 55 years and have played in national tournaments.