

God in The City

Bob Adams

“While God began His story in a garden, it ends in a city.”

This quote by urban evangelist Ray Bakke is a most appropriate place to begin a look at urban ministry today.

Ray Bakke’s journey from rural Washington state to become one of the most renowned practical theologians of urban ministry is recounted through several of his books, most notably *Street Signs*. While attending seminary in Chicago in 1965 in preparation for his PhD at Yale, a series of events turned his heart toward urban ministry – where he has faithfully served ever since.

To fully understand the concept of urban ministry you must start with the greatest migration in human history: a world in motion of a rural-to-urban movement. Cities are growing at an unprecedented rate. The nations have been and continue to move into our neighborhoods. According to UN statistics, 80% of the world’s population will live in cities by the year 2030. Urbanization is here to stay, and churches wanting to reach these masses are faced with daunting challenges and will be required to develop innovative strategies. For Bakke, these strategies begin with the assumption that mission is no longer across the ocean and geographically distant, but across the street and culturally distant. We have moved from a world of 200 countries to a new world of some 400 world-class cities. Bakke’s definition of world-class is a city that has a population of one million or more and has international significance and influence. These cities, once defined by geographical place, are now defined by their roles and functions: political cities like Washington DC and Beijing; commercial cities like New York and Los Angeles; and cultural cities like Paris, Rio de Janeiro, and Mumbai. Cities also have personalities and unique community DNAs within their larger contexts.

How does the church meet these challenges? Bakke contends that the Lord is moving the whole world to the cities for Great Commission purposes, and that therefore the church has two primary functions in urban settings: first, to be signs of the kingdom of God, and second, to be agents for that kingdom in mission in an urbanized world. I encountered just such a church recently: Bronx Bethany Church of the Nazarene.

Bronx Bethany has a rich cultural history with roots of the Wesleyan tradition intertwined with Jamaican culture. Founded in 1964 in the heart of the Bronx, BBCN understands its importance in the community not as a religious outpost with walls to hide behind, but as a true center of faith in the community.

BBCN has had only two pastors in its history; founding pastor Rev. Dr. V. Seymour Cole, and current pastor Dr. Samuel Vassel, who came to the church in 2000. I first met Pastor Sam in 2008 when he attended a conference at which I was speaking. We talked and prayed, and he told me that God would bring us together again. Later that year, we again met at a conference –

JH Batten, Inc.

Huntersville Office
704.488.7225
badams@jhbatten.com

PO Box 879 Walkertown, NC 27051
336.595.8917
info@jhbatten.com

Goldsboro Office
919.736.7508
goldsboro.office@jhbatten.com

www.jhbatten.com

and this time he was accompanied by two leaders from his church: David Mendes, chairman of the board, and Lilly Webb, the Director of Organizational Development. We had great conversations, prayed together, and Pastor Sam's parting words were again, "We will be seeing more of you soon."

Within two weeks, Pastor Sam had initiated conversations with me about coming to BBCN to consult with them on leadership and ministry expansion possibilities. It is highly improbable that a white southern guy could have anything of consequence to say to a Jamaican church in the middle of the Bronx, but God had other ideas. In January of this year I spent four days in at BBCN, in a Bronx Adventure which totally rocked my boat. This is not about my story however, so I want to bring another of Bakke's urban ministry principles to your attention:

The assumption I have when I enter a city now is that God is already there working and I am on holy ground. I need to take off my shoes and hear and see what the Holy Spirit is already doing there.

At Bronx Bethany, here is what the Spirit is already doing there:

- Worship which consistently manifests the majesty, holiness, and beauty of the Lord through music, the arts, and proclamation of the Word of God
- Ministries of the church which reach out and touch people in the Bronx and the greater NYC region, effectively providing physical, spiritual, emotional, and social healing for all people
- Fellowship which provides dignity, nurture, acceptance, personal empowerment, and personal development for all people
- Discipleship which provides growth for members into Christ-like behavior and examples of redemption wherever their spheres of influence take them
- Pastoral staff team that is capable, effective, and efficient in equipping the saints for the work of the ministry

The mission of Bronx Bethany Church of the Nazarene is to be a Spirit-filled community of love with a place for everyone, where people may experience the forgiveness of sins and the cleansing of their hearts by faith in Jesus Christ. BBCN is committed to:

- Providing access to God's grace for everyone,
- Responding compassionately and practically to human needs in the name of Christ, and
- Being a redemptive influence in the Bronx and the world to the glory of God.

Bronx Bethany is living out the Word of God among people who are far from God. In addition to the "saving grace" that only God can provide, they seek to cultivate what Bakke calls "common grace" to live and grow in the city. Common grace is the grace God uses to animate architects, artists, prophets, politicians, teachers, and preachers alike to fully invest themselves in the city to provide healthy people, healthy families, and healthy communities. The cultivation of a good city is the business of all believers until the consummation of His kingdom occurs.

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It is not enough to look to the cities and see a great mass of unreached people there. A theology of the city must include, as Bronx Bethany Church of the Nazarene lives out daily, a biblically comprehensive gift of common grace for all people who call the city “home.” As Psalm 48 reminds us, God has an urban address: *Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God...*

Most of us (certainly me, before my Bronx Adventure) look at the inner city and see misery and despair. The congregation at BBCN sees promise and opportunity in an after school program that consistently has a waiting list and helps develop boys and girls in academics, the arts, and in social interaction. Who among us has not looked at efforts to eliminate poverty and seen a history of failed programs. Bronx Bethany sees progress – slow, but steady – and creates a community corporation to work with diverse groups in the neighborhoods to continue that progress. When we dare travel in the city, it is mostly through, from one place to another. The people of Bronx Bethany live there, or travel to there, to minister among the people there.

I don't know where my urban adventures will go next, but I do know that the people of Bronx Bethany Church of the Nazarene are living out a very clear biblical mandate in their city – they see solutions, not problems. They are committed and optimistic that God is indeed in their city – and they are making deliberate choices to join Him at work there.

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