

Evangelizing Our Inner Cities

[Presented to Professor David J. Valleskey as partial fulfillment of the requirements of the WLS course: Pastoral Theology 358A, 1990-91, November 12, 1990]

by John A. Vieths

- I. Features of Black Inner City life which affect evangelism.
 - A. Features which present challenges.
 - 1. Poverty.
 - 2. Crime and violence.
 - 3. Broken families.
 - 4. Itinerant life.
 - 5. Poor Education.
 - 6. Racism.
 - B. Features which facilitate evangelism work.
 - 1. Population density.
 - 2. Unemployment.

- II. Approaches to Evangelism.
 - A. Conventional.
 - 1. Canvass and follow-up.
 - 2. Friendship Evangelism.
 - a. Among parishioners.
 - b. With Church workers.
 - B. Not so conventional.
 - 1. The Lutheran Elementary School.
 - 2. Social Services outreach.

When churches look for new places to plant missions today, they wrestle with the question of whether to begin a new foreign mission field or to start a mission right at home. Those missions which are begun in America inevitably are planted in areas where there is growth or where there are large concentrations of unchurched people. In the past this meant that mission congregations were founded in our growing suburbs. Today, however, more and more church bodies are recognizing that there is another rapidly growing part of our nation in desperate need of the gospel, an area where a majority of the residents are not regular members of any church. America's inner cities, once the home of prosperous, secure families and ambitious, healthy churches, face the dilemma of losing many of their churches even as their population grows. Mission work among residents of our inner cities possesses its own set of challenges and advantages. It may not be mission work to which most middle class pastors and evangelists are accustomed, but it needs to be done nevertheless. Success may be measured somewhat differently than in a suburban setting, but we can be sure that where the gospel is preached, even in the unique environment of the inner city, there the word will produce results.

Before going further, perhaps it would be helpful to limit the scope of this paper somewhat. Any attempt to describe all of the currently known advantages and disadvantages of doing evangelism in the inner city could probably fill a book. America's inner cities are home to a wide variety of peoples and cultures—Blacks, Hispanics, Hmong, and others. Since Blacks still make up the largest ethnic group in our inner cities, I will primarily focus on aspects of

evangelism work among them. Some of the observations drawn from pastors, books, papers and personal experience may apply in general to any inner city mission work. Some of the observations may be more unique to mission work among blacks. Even in the latter case, it should be noted that one can only speak in generalities, and that there are always exceptions to the rule. No individual person ever provides an exact reflection of the culture and environment in which he lives.

One of the challenges in inner city evangelism work which is more or less universal is the problem of poverty. As rich as our nation is, there are approximately thirty-five million people in the United States living below the poverty line. Another twenty to thirty million live above the official poverty line, but they still don't earn enough to raise them above a level that we would not classify as needy.ⁱ Many of these people are concentrated in our inner cities. Poverty presents a challenge to the inner city missionary because it is a constant distraction. The homes in which the poor live may be cold or crawling with roaches. Hunger may gnaw at their stomachs. Their clothing may be barely presentable, and in some cases not even fit for the person to wear in public. Those people whom the missionary is attempting to reach are often more interested in how he can help them with their bills or with their groceries. A missionary himself may find that he is distracted by the cold, hunger, unpleasant odors, and other poverty related features of inner city life. That doesn't mean that in every case physical needs have to be satisfied before a person is willing to listen to the gospel, but those who still don't know God and trust him as their provider may not be able to give their full attention to what the an evangelist has to give to their souls instead of to their bodies.

Another almost universal feature of inner city life which presents a challenge to the evangelist is crime and violence. For the evangelist it is, first of all, a personal challenge because he must make up his mind that he will enter this higher risk part of the city in order to preach the gospel. Because of the fear it produces, crime and violence has perhaps been the major obstacle preventing middle class Christianity from evangelizing our inner cities more aggressively. Once the evangelist enters the inner city, he then must do what he can to keep the risk of personal injury to a minimum. Dead missionaries aren't very effective. Inner city pastor Mark Van Houghton makes the following suggestions:

First, get to know various business people—waiters, bartenders, the local firefighters, whoever is there...When the streets get too “hot” to handle, these will be places with friends you can run to...Pay special attention to the action, movement, mood and if possible, the tone of conversation among gangs, drug dealers, pimps, and police. Perhaps you may then get a feel for whether or not fights are brewing...When you walk the streets, show that you are aware and alert. Most victims are people who look like victims. Look people in the eyes. When your eyes meet those of another, you become flesh and blood and less likely an object of potential personal gain. Never cross an alley close to its entrance, and always look directly into it when passing by it. Look in the window of an establishment before entering.ⁱⁱ

Crime and violence do not threaten the missionary only. Those whose homes are in the inner city must deal with the threat of harm to themselves or their meager belongings almost every day. Although one might expect that inner city residents become callused to such threats, that is not the case. Pastor Rolfe Westendorf tells the story of a lay evangelist who was surprised at the fear shown by the inhabitant of a house on which she and Pastor Westendorf were calling. When the lady in the house peered out the window suspiciously, then slowly turned the key, the evangelist, who happened to be a lady, remarked with surprise, “She’s as scared in this

neighborhood as I am.”ⁱⁱⁱ Pastor Westendorf points out, “The fear of attack or injury caused her the same kind of anxiety that a white person would feel.”^{iv} This, of course, can make it hard to gain an audience with some, especially those who have been victimized by crime personally. The inner city worker is wise to present himself in as non-threatening a way as possible. Wearing a clerical collar or some sort of bright badge which clearly identifies a person as a church worker is helpful for overcoming the fear and suspicion which people in a high-crime area might feel. Other common sense matters of behavior that are important anytime one is doing door to door evangelism, like stepping back from the door after knocking, is doubly important in the inner city.

Everywhere one looks in America there are broken or wounded families, but the black inner city has more than its share. In many cases these families have become matriarchal, which makes black men particularly hard to reach. First of all, they are rarely at home. One man might have children by as many as a half dozen women. Although he occasionally visits these children, chances are that he is not a full time companion to any of their mothers. Thus, it is hard to determine where he lives. Any sort of follow up visit to such a person will be hit and miss. Those who wish to reach such people must be ready to seize the opportunity to share the gospel whenever it comes.

Secondly, since there is little encouragement for men in this setting to find self worth as providers for their families, there is a false system of values which encourages them to prove their manhood through violence, intimidation, or sexual conquest. Those who fail to prove themselves in these ways may turn to chemical solutions to console themselves. In either case, it is not a backdrop conducive to a presentation of the love of God. Obviously, these people are in desperate need of Christ’s forgiveness, and when the message gets through, the Holy Spirit does change such people. But once again, the problem is finding an opportunity to be heard. It requires the evangelist to be patient, to be a friend, and to reserve judgement of the person for his sins. Although an evangelist will certainly not give the impression that he condones sinful behavior, any sharp-tongued harangue against such behavior will usually be counterproductive, at least among those with whom no rapport has been previously established.

Though it may be the men in the black inner city culture who are hardest to find, they aren’t the only ones on the go. Entire families can disappear overnight. This may happen for several reasons. A mother may determine that there is imminent danger for her family in her neighborhood. The family may move to avoid bill collectors or the police. Families may be forced out suddenly by angry landlords (even though such immediate eviction is illegal). For whatever reason, a family that lived in a house when you visited it yesterday may not live there when you visit it next week, or even tomorrow. Sometimes the family itself will reestablish contact with the missionary after the move, but sometimes they vanish without a trace. In my experience, I have found that an average family moves about twice each year.

Our public education system has been severely criticized over the past few years. Whether it is the fault of the educators or the fault of students whose parents are not well educated and not particularly supportive, the education of those who live in the inner city is often substandard. This doesn’t present much of a problem when first presenting the good news, but if a person then desires to learn more and enrolls in a discipleship class, he or she may find it difficult to read the Scripture passages upon which the class is based. This again requires patience on the part of the evangelist. It does force the Bible class teacher to explain most theological terms, which is helpful even in a suburban setting where the language of theology is often foreign to the new convert.

Perhaps the obstacle for white middle-class evangelists in the inner city that many would have put at the top of the list is racism. This can work against the evangelist from two directions. First of all, an evangelist does well to realize that whether or not he wishes to admit it, he has some racist ideas. It is highly unlikely that anyone who has grown up in the United States has not developed some racist stereotypes. If a racist remark slips out, even about something that is not derogatory, much hard work for the sake of the gospel can be destroyed. Pastor Westendorf states the general rule, “Among whites, never speak negatively of the black race. Among blacks, never speak of race at all.”^v

The second way in which racism may work against the evangelist is racism on the part of those people whom he is trying to reach. On my first visit to a black inner city home, the door was shut in my face because the person who answered assumed I must be a policeman. She had developed the racist stereotype that any well-dressed white person in her neighborhood is probably a cop. Others have mistaken me for a building inspector. As mentioned earlier, wearing a clerical collar or a badge which clearly identifies you can help overcome such cases of mistaken identity. Sometimes, though, the racist stereotypes are not so easy to overcome. I have also met some who refused to believe that any white person, including a church worker, could possibly have any unselfish reasons for coming to their neighborhood and refused to talk to me simply because I am white.

Other roadblocks to inner city evangelism could be listed, but the preceding list covers the most difficult to overcome. After having said so many negative things about evangelism in the inner city, one might assume that this writer feels it is a very burdensome task. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In many ways spreading the gospel among poverty stricken urban dwellers is easier than bringing the gospel to their counterparts in the suburbs. Though the list of features which facilitate outreach work in the inner city is shorter, the items which follow make the work significantly easier.

In suburbia, wealthy people with riding mowers build large homes hundreds of yards apart. This means travelling a considerable distance to reach few people, at least in comparison to the distance traveled to reach the same number of people in the inner city. A single dwelling unit in the inner city may house as many people as an entire block in the suburbs. When America’s cities were first built, people had no great interest in caring for large lawns. Many simply could not afford them. For this reason homes were built so close together that neighbors could sometimes pass things between their homes simply by reaching out the windows. Later, when the neighborhoods became old and homes began to lose their value, many of them were remodeled into apartments which might house two, three, or even more families. For these reasons the population of our inner cities is dense. This makes it possible for the missionary to reach a large number of people by travelling a short distance. Those apartments in the inner city are often home not just to mother and children, but to extended family as well. I have had audiences of nearly twenty people in a single home as I shared the gospel.

The next advantage of inner city life for missionaries might sound like a disadvantage at first glance—unemployment. While I do not wish unemployment upon anyone, and at times have helped “parishioners” to find employment, it does make the work of spreading the gospel somewhat easier. To put it simply, those people who have no jobs outside the home spend much more time at home. If they were at work, they would be beyond my reach, but while they are at home, I can bring the gospel to them. Since so many in the inner city are unemployed, I can do mission work at almost any time of day. I am not limited to the evening hours as many suburban pastors are. The unemployment “problem” also suggests another interesting possibility for the

spread of Christ's kingdom. If those new Christians who are out of work can be trained to share the gospel with others, they could also evangelize throughout the day. Of course, one prefers that they get a job and fulfill their responsibility to provide for their families. But in the meantime, the unemployed may be an untapped mission tool.

Taking into consideration the unique features of inner city life and how they affect mission work, the next logical question may be, "What methods do we employ to bring the gospel to these people?" First of all, there are the conventional methods used by congregations in the suburbs or small towns. Each of our inner city Wisconsin Synod churches does canvassing of the homes in their neighborhoods in order to find prospective members. Usually this is done in connection with some event or service offered by the church—vacation Bible school, elementary school, friendship Sunday, etc. However, the poorer the neighborhood, the less effective such an approach becomes. In neighborhoods not in easy reach of our churches, neighborhoods where the poverty is especially miserable, getting the people to come to us is nearly impossible. Perhaps the most effective way to witness in the inner city is through friendship evangelism. There may be no place where building or having a personal relationship with a person is more important in order to carry out mission work. Because of the crime and vice and suspicion that are ever present, building a relationship, earning the right to share the gospel, takes time, patience, caring and friendship. When a parishioner shares his or her faith with a friend, or invites a friend to Bible class or church, that is most effective. But even the full-time evangelist or missionary can be a friend, can do friendship evangelism, if he is patient and willing to postpone judgment of people with whom he comes in contact. By postponing judgment I mean following the example which Jesus gave in his treatment of the adulterous woman in John 8. Missionary Mark Van Houten demonstrates the importance of this with an episode from his ministry:

When propositioned by a person in prostitution I usually answer, "No thank you, not tonight," or "No thank you, I've had enough tonight." One night I bailed Suzanne, a female in prostitution, out of jail. In an effort to express her gratitude, Suzanne asked if I was interested in a "freebie." I replied, "No thank you; I've had enough tonight." She said, "Yeah, me too." Then what I said sunk in and she asked, "What do you mean you've had enough tonight; you mean you violate your vows?" (Suzanne thought I was a priest.) I responded with exaggerated surprise, "Oh, I thought you meant coffee!" After studying my face for a while Suzanne figured out that I was joking and laughed herself silly. From this incident a wholesome friendship developed between us, and Suzanne has since sought help and accepted Christ as her personal Savior and Lord. To God be the glory.^{vi}

Willingness on the part of the evangelist to be a true friend to those he works with in the inner city, even those whose lives are filled with sin and vice, will open up opportunities for gospel sharing. Some inner city evangelism methods seek to turn the negatives of inner city life into positives for the gospel. One of these is the Lutheran elementary school. As mentioned earlier, education among people living in the inner city tends to be substandard. While some are indifferent to this problem, others are seeking a remedy. Years ago, when the neighborhoods around our inner city Wisconsin Synod churches began to change from black to white, those churches which had schools were able to integrate and survive much more easily than those without schools. Although the pastors had known it for years, a 1977 study by the Anderson/Roethle consulting firm confirmed that the Christian school could serve as a primary mission agency of the inner-city church.^{vii} Those schools accept black children as tuition

students until their parents join the church. Parents are expected to learn the doctrine that their children learn in school, and if they agree with it, they are welcomed into membership.^{viii} Today, of course, not only our inner city schools, but many of our suburban schools also serve as mission tools for their churches.

Another “negative” of inner city life which can be made to serve the cause of the gospel is poverty itself. Through “diaconal” ministries the church can use programs which help alleviate the physical problems of poverty (hunger, cold, lack of clothes) as opportunities to touch the same people with the gospel. This doesn’t mean that churches should make a blind leap into the “Social Gospel” and substitute the elimination of poverty for the preaching of Christ as their chief goal. On the contrary, Roger Greenway says of diaconal ministry:

Central to the task of the church in the city is the proclamation of the gospel (Matt. 29:19-20; Rom.1:1-16). This task never competes with diaconal ministry, but accompanies it, complements it, and becomes the driving force of diaconal concern (I John 3:16-18)^{ix} Walther Memorial Lutheran Church (LC-MS) in Milwaukee serves as an excellent example of how this can be done. They have a food pantry run by people trained in evangelism. Those wishing to receive food cannot come to the church and pick it up themselves, but when they call the church, one member of the food pantry staff brings the food to their home. There the food pantry worker takes the opportunity to witness a brief law-gospel message. In my own inner city work, our food voucher program with area grocery stores has often been the first point of contact with and beginning of a relationship with people with whom I have later shared the good news.

Evangelism in our inner cities is certainly unique in many ways. It has its own set of problems, its own advantages, and its own set of strategies for witnessing about our Savior. The message, of course, is exactly the same as it is for rural folk, inhabitants of other lands, and people of all time. Despite any obstacles, that message has the power to change the hearts of those who hear it and make God’s kingdom come also in America’s inner cities.

Bibliography

Greenway, Roger and Timothy Monsma. *Cities: Mission's New Frontier*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1989, pp.169-233.

Van Houten, Mark. *God's Inner City Address*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988.

Westendorf, Rolfe. "The Inner City Call," 1975.

Westendorf, Rolfe. "Ministry to the Poor—A New Frontier," 1985.

Westendorf, Rolfe. "WELS In The Inner City," 1982.

The Parishioners of Northside Lutheran Ministry.

Weekly meetings with Rev. Westendorf, May 1988-May 1989.

ⁱ Greenway, Roger and Timothy Monsma. *Cities: Mission's New Frontier*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1989, pp. 170-171.

ⁱⁱ Van Houten, Mark. *God's Inner City Address*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988, pp. 32-33.

ⁱⁱⁱ Westendorf, Rolfe. "The Inner City Call." Paper written for ministers new to the inner city, 1975, p. 1.

^{iv} Westendorf, op. cit., p. 2.

^v Westendorf, op. cit., p. 11.

^{vi} Van Houten, op. cit., p. 40.

^{vii} Westendorf, Rolfe, "WELS in the Inner City," 1982, p. 10.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Greenway, op. cit., p. 178-179.