



Reaching WAY Out in Urban Evangelism

George G. Hunter III

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Once, when the US population was only 25% urban, Dwight L. Moody perceived that “whoever wins the city, wins.” Today, with the population 75% urban, the urban imperative is greater than ever. The traditional denominations, however, still scatter about three-fourths of the churches and clergy into the hinterlands, where one-fourth of the people remain. No denomination seems to be utterly serious about reaching the city—the inner city OR the suburbs.

Today, more pre-Christian people surround the typical urban church than ever before, but the church still does not own its identity as a missionary congregation. The typical urban church wants to grow, but it confirms its own children and welcomes transfers much more often than it reaches pagans. IF it is growing, it is responding to seekers who visit the church much more than engaging in proactive outreach. Indeed, in many cities, no church is known to care enough and dare enough to invade enemy territory.

When the typical traditional urban church considers outreach, it thinks only of its inactive members and of people who are already on the church’s fringes. In the future, however, the effective apostolic urban congregation will be reaching much farther out than most churches ever consider, in three ways.

First, the church will reach out to the growing numbers of secular people who have no Christian memory and no church to return to, who are unlikely to visit any church before the church visits them. Willow Creek Community Church, in Northwest Chicago, has pioneered

this outreach by deploying laity in ministries of conversation wherever people are looking for life and engaging in conversation.¹

Second, the church will reach out to people groups not usually thought of as candidates for church membership. Ever since Jesus modeled the way by reaching lepers, Samaritans, tax collectors, and zealots, and the later Celtic Christian movement reached Europe’s so-called “barbarian” peoples,² apostolic movements have reached many people than the society’s establishment considered undesirable, or hopeless. Their changed lives, typically, establish Christianity’s credibility with those perceived to be regular people.

We find an inspiring case in a small city, Leesburg, Florida, which is not known for innovation.³ When Pastor Charles Roesel became First Baptist Church’s pastor two decades ago, he sold the people on the unusual idea of “reaching out to all the people that no other church seems to want.” The church began reaching out to sharecroppers, homeless people, addictive people, hard-living people, single mothers, and many others. When the church discovered that verbal witness alone does not reach many down-and-outers (the same is true for up-and-outers as well), they began developing outreach ministries.

The church lost some members, such as the attorney who protested, “I resent my wife and children having to walk past people like that to get to church.” At the same time other establishment people were attracted to “a church getting serious about Christianity!” The church began by declaring all of Leesburg’s nursing homes and homebound senior adults within the First Baptist parish! Today, this ministry deploys 72 volunteers in ministry within and beyond Leesburg’s eight nursing homes, ministering to 500 to 700 senior people per week. This ministry has dispelled the myth that “if older people haven’t become Christians by now they never will.” Between 50 and 90 senior people confess faith in a given year.

A Saturday Sunday School involves several hundred children from lower income neighborhoods. A medical clinic, employing volunteer time from physicians, nurses, para-med-

ical, and clerical people, serves 450 patients per month. Daystar Academy of Music and Performing Arts mentors over 250 children and youth in a range of performing and visual arts. A Christian School serves children through the eighth grade; 40% of the children do not come from an active Christian family.

The church began a rescue mission for men, which has evolved into a men's residence—providing support, training, counseling and the twelve-step process for recovery from addiction. The church began a similar women's care center, which includes children of single mothers. About half of the 60-voice choir in the church's 8:00 AM worship service are in recovery, most of them coming from the ministries of these two residences. The church also serves through a residential facility for children, and another for youth.

First Baptist's Pregnancy Care Center serves about 1200 women and teens each year; one of its ministries offers a ten-week recovery experience for women who have had abortions. The church's Benevolence Ministry serves about 8,000 people per year—providing help with food, gasoline, rent, electricity, prescriptions, clothing, and financial counseling. The church's many other outreach ministries include grief, hospital, prison, and mobile home park ministries, ministries with deaf people and preliterate people, and groups for cancer support and divorce recovery.

While First Baptist's range of ministries involves a competent staff, more than 1400 lay Christians deliver most of the specific ministries. Largely from its outreach ministries, First Baptist Church baptizes 250 to 300 new Christians per year, and has grown to over 7,000 members.

Leesburg's First Baptist Church, in a projected new Spanish language ministry, is now anticipating the **third way** in which many urban churches are destined to reach "way out"—due to the quiet demographic revolution occurring in most of our cities. In Lexington, Kentucky, for instance, the children in the school system speak at least 47 different languages in their homes. A gen-



eration ago, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Miami became multi-cultural and multi-lingual on a scale no one had predicted. Some churches in those cities anticipated the future, and began ministries in many different languages.

Unprecedented linguistic diversity has now spread to most of the cities of North America. The first language of more than 32 million people in the USA is a language other than English. For most new immigrants it is their only language; for decades it remains their heart language. Soon, some churches in every city will feature classes, fellowships, and worshiping congregations in six or more languages, while meeting needs through many ministries, serving as the people's advocate in the city, and deploying people in each people group in ministry.

While the complete shape of the urban mission that is emerging is not yet clear, these three features are clear, and the possibility is clear. Leesburg First Baptist's pastor, Charles Roesel, suggests, "If it can happen in Leesburg, it can happen anywhere!" □

¹ For more on reaching secular populations, see George G. Hunter III, *How to Reach Secular People* (Abingdon Press, 1992). For a profile of the kinds of urban congregations that effectively prepare and deploy their people in outreach ministry and witness, see George G. Hunter III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Abingdon Press, 1996).

² See George G. Hunter, III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Win the West . . . Again* (Abingdon Press, 2000).

³ I feature this church in a book I am just finishing *Getting Serious About Outreach: The Recovery of Apostolic Ministry and Evangelism* scheduled to be published by Abingdon Press in 2003.

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