



## Report on In the City for Good

In 1997 the urban initiative titled “In the City for Good” was adopted at the Churchwide Assembly in Philadelphia. It passed with 97 percent of the assembly vote as a directive and plan for renewing our ELCA commitment to urban ministry with a transformational vision. The materials that were published in support of the vision focused on the importance of ministry being planned locally using the transformational vision of changing lives, congregations, and communities.

A team of urban practitioners was put in place to provide the leadership for this initiative. During the 10 years of the “In the City for Good” initiative, the following persons have been part of the urban team: The Rev. Warren Sorteberg, Mr. James Sims, the Rev. Alice Williams, Ms. Sylvia Pate, the Rev. Ruben Duran, the Rev. Elise Brown, the Rev. Paul Koch, the Rev. James Echols, the Rev. Susan Ericsson, the Rev. George Tan, and the Rev. Jerrett Hansen.

The work of the urban team to advance “In the City for Good” has taken place through convocations, congregational consultations in cities and synods, seminary visits, conference meetings, bishop conferences, and staff meetings within churchwide units. In addition, consultations have taken place in Miami, Oakland, Saginaw, St. Louis, Kansas City, Toledo, Columbus, Louisville, Albany, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, the Quad Cities of Illinois and Iowa, Oklahoma City, San Antonio, Boston, and Indianapolis. Consultations were used as a time for practitioners (urban team) from other locations to visit a city or synod and ask questions, probe, provide some analysis, make suggestions about practices, and share models and principles. Frequently the process and its outcome report angered participants, but just as often it was seen, over time, to be truthful and catalytic for transformation.

Two summits were held (2003 and 2006) where urban leaders were called together to examine best practices and share insights about what was and was not working in their communities and congregations as well as give feedback to the urban team.

The consultations and the summits have provided a valuable view into the varied contexts of the urban church and the issues that dominate its life. Among some of the common threads that the consultations lifted up are:

- Pastors and leaders overwhelmed by the complexity of their settings;
- Aging and aged buildings consuming finances and time;
- Social service organizations that could be great partners in urban ministry remain largely disconnected from parish ministries;
- Pastors and leaders tired from trying things that did not have the hoped-for result;
- Pastors often isolated and working as “lone rangers” rather than in communities of support with other clergy;

- Systems within churches that are ineffective and relics of another time;
- Worship often culturally disconnected from the community the congregation is seeking to reach;
- Congregations more focused on maintenance of the current building and membership than on mission and discipleship; and
- A general naiveté about the cultural shifts that have occurred in the U.S. and how those shifts impact how this church goes about its mission.

In addition to consultations, an “In the City for Good” Fund was established to encourage innovative approaches to urban ministry and to build capacity for growth in congregations. A Fund Team was comprised of: the Rev. Ruben F. Duran, the Rev. Kathie Bender Schwich, Ms. Carol Birkland, Ms. Trudy Brubaker, the Rev. David D. Daubert, Ms. Inez Torres Davis, Ms. Katie Day, Ms. Jacqueline Hall, Bishop Kevin S. Kanouse, the Rev. Paul F. Koch, the Rev. Richard A. Magnus, Ms. Maria Paiva, Mr. Willie Scott, the Rev. Kathryn Bradley Love, the Rev. Phillip R. Baker, and the Rev. Jerrett L. Hansen, reviewed proposals and awarded grants each year. While it was hoped that the grants would be a standing part of “In the City for Good,” the corpus of funds necessary to institute that did not develop and grant requests were generally for social service or program delivery when the intent was to stimulate evangelical outreach and transformation of people, place, and community.

A key learning from the work with “In the City for Good” funds was that money remains a confusing thing in the task of renewing the church. Ministry projects that were funded through the “In the City for Good” grants process often involved new projects for congregations. The majority of these were new ideas that were outside the ongoing priorities of the congregation. As a result, they seemed to have little impact on the long-term ministry of the congregation and when grants concluded the projects disappeared. Only projects that were consistent with an already present missional core generally lasted beyond the original funding period. In other words, money rarely triggers renewal. Renewing this church’s missional core must precede the arrival of the funds in most cases.

### Essential Learnings

- Most, if not all, urban ELCA congregations still operate from a Christendom mode: legitimacy of ministry is validated by the calling of an ordained pastor serving in a church building; success is determined by attendance numbers and income figures; the ministry is driven by programs within the church building; and the organization of the ministry is bureaucratic and top-down.
- Too many congregations feel desperate and rely solely on being attractive as a means to reach people. This is a

survival mode driven largely by fear and the desire to conserve the past while hoping that new people will see the congregation as pleasant and come and join them. We often heard, “We can’t understand why *they* don’t want to join *us*.” An “us” and “them” mentality works against a spirit of hospitality and welcome to new people.

- Most urban congregations still are very clergy-centered, with a fierce dependency upon the ordained minister to fulfill and complete the work of the church.
- Large numbers of congregations lack the passion and abilities needed to become transformational congregations. This is evident in the lack of visioning ability, the absence of intentional ministry planning and strategizing, and the focus on maintaining.
- Few congregations have a clear focus on discipleship training and empowerment, primary marks of a growing, vital spiritual community.
- Many new mission starts in urban settings are overburdened by ownership of a high maintenance church facility that was built for a different time.
- Funding to congregations to keep them afloat has been done with good intent, but too often has developed a dependency rather than a window for mission and growth.

- Support the establishment of urban clusters in cities where pastors and leaders can learn from each other, provide and receive mentorship and become accountable to each other.

The church of the 21st century needs to be in the apostolic mode, lifting every person to be engaged in ministry using their gifts. Empowering people to use their gifts is the beginning of building healthy faith communities. The quality aspect of God’s people in the church needs to trump the quantity of attendance. Instead of building consensus, we need to build character. Instead of memorizing and recalling Bible stories and verses, we need to apply biblical principles to our daily lives. Having a beautiful facility with all the trappings of church is not cutting it now, nor will it in the future. We need beautiful Christian lives growing in their relationship with Jesus to impact the world.

A missional urban church is about equipping and sending people into the world. It is about focusing on both believing in and following Jesus. It is about creating communities where people can belong before they believe and where faith is formed rather than traditions just passed on.

The challenge is great, but God is great. We trust God’s faithfulness to lead us!

Jerrett L. Hansen, *Urban Team chair*

## What Should Be the Focus and Commitment in the Future?

- The urban context has to be taken seriously as the foundational issue in city ministry. In order for urban ministry to be authentic and life-giving it must appreciate, understand, and live within the reality of its context. It is not about tweaking little things and hoping for better results, nor is it about incremental change that hopefully will have a positive influence. It is about loving, engaging and understanding the city, while building ministry in response to the dynamic of the city and its great diversity. This engagement brings transformation to all levels of life.
- Support congregations that are being transformational, possess a vision and have a plan to support the vision. Be strategic in planning so that congregations that have an ability to address their future have the needed resources.
- Provide as much skill development and knowledge about current urban church practices as possible. Examine how skills for ministry in urban settings differ from other ministry settings.
- Learn from denominations and independent church movements that are doing effective urban ministry.
- Teach leadership skills to all pastors—urban in particular.
- Move from seeing ELCA urban congregations as denominational franchises to being mission centers within a defined urban context.
- Teach and model the importance of pastors and leaders “owning” their ministry.
- Support the emergence of indigenous faith communities, celebrate their expression of the Christian walk of faith, empower leaders from those communities and embrace their presence within the ELCA.