

Empowerment through community organization

HOW CAN THE CHURCH EMPOWER the poor? The very way we ask a question reveals a great deal about the assumptions we bring to an issue. For example, the above question is the wrong question. I would be immediately suspicious of anyone who posed that question that way. Why? Because such a question reveals that the person asking it neither understands the nature of empowerment nor what are appropriate or inappropriate roles for the church to play in its ministry with the marginalized, oppressed and impoverished around it.

The church in the city

There are three distinctly different responses that any church or mission organization can make to its city. The response the church chooses to make decides whether that church will play a significant role in the poor's empowerment, will provide social services out of its largess or will simply ignore the needy around it. What are those three responses which are either liberating good news or stifling repression to the city's poor and powerless?

The first response of the church to its city is to see itself as being *in* that city and *in* its community. It does not feel any particular attachment to that city. It does not particularly identify with the community. It is simply physically present in that community. That happens to be where its bricks and mortar meet the ground. It may have no particular relationship to the people of that community.

Now, often a church that sees itself as "in" but not "of" its community will have had in earlier days a significant commitment to that community. That church may have been created as a parish church, a church of that specific neighborhood. But then the neighborhood began to change and decay. As that neighborhood began to deteriorate, the people who had lived in that neighborhood and who went to that church began to move out. So, increasingly the church becomes a commuter congregation with people traveling into the city and into that neighbor-

hood in order to attend the church, but whose lives are lived out in another community. The result is that they have no stake, no psychological ownership in that community. To be a church *in* the city is the first response of the church with regard to the city and to its neighborhood.

The church to the city

The second response is for a church to perceive itself as a church *to* the city and a church *to* the community. In due time, many churches following the scenario I just described, will begin to realize that if they do not interact with their geographical community in some way, they are going to die. If the church is to live, it will have to find some way of reaching out to its neighborhood. So the church begins to become concerned about its city, its neighborhood and its problems. This, of course, is a much more holistic approach because of the recognition that the church must be present to the people around it and must be concerned both with evangelism and social action. It is inadequate to be concerned with the souls of the people around the church—particularly if those people are poor—unless the church is also going to be concerned about the social and economic needs of the people.

There is great potential in this kind of approach but there is also a fatal flaw. The Achilles heel of this approach is the perception that the church knows what is best for that neighborhood. Those Christians look at that neighborhood and say, "Look at all these poor people here; what these people need is a youth program for their teenagers to get them off the streets." The church says, "Look at all these children running around the streets here; they have no place to play. What the church needs to do is to develop a program for those children." Or the church looks at the number of senior citizens sitting on their porches and it says, "What our church needs to do is to develop a ministry to senior citizens."

Do you see the common element there? The common element is that *the church decides what is best* for the community. A primary assumption of effective urban ministry is to recognize that the people who are best able to deal with a problem are the people most affected by that problem. The people best able to deal with teenagers who are running amok in their neighborhood, for example, are the people who live in that neighborhood.

Now, although that seems self-evident, that concept is one of the most difficult insights for Christians to apply. We can understand it intellectually, but it is extremely hard for us to implement that perspective in our own ministries.

The reason why is that the church operates out of the unbiblical assumption that, because we know the gospel, we know what is best for that community. Therefore, we undertake ministry in that community out

of our “definitive” understanding of the needs of that community (“what this slum needs is a child-sponsorship, health care and family education program”). This, in turn, robs the people of that community from the responsibility of dealing with their own corporate issues.

The fate of any program or project developed under such assumptions is inevitable. It will function successfully only as long as the church or mission agency is willing to commit its people, money, materials and buildings to the program. But “burn-out” will eventually happen. And once programmatic exhaustion has occurred, so that the well-intentioned pastor or mission executive can no longer raise sufficient money or resources or workers to maintain that program, it will die. And it will die because it has never been a project of the people. They never perceived it as their program, but rather a program of the church or mission agency. And because the people have no ownership in the program, they will always remain spectators and clients of it, never participants and goal-owners. Therefore, its death is inevitable.

It is not appropriate for the church—in fact, it is strategically a very bad thing—to look at its community and decide what it needs to do to that community in order to change that community. It is not appropriate because that approach is to perceive the community and its people as an object to be ministered to and the church as the subject—the only viable change agent in that community. Such an attitude is actually colonialist in nature, and reveals a paternalistic attitude toward people.

The church with the community

The third response of the church in the city is to be the church *with* the city. There is a profound difference between being a church *in* or *to* an urban neighborhood, and being a church *with* its neighborhood. When a church takes this third approach, that church incarnates itself in that community. That church becomes flesh of the peoples’ flesh and bone of the peoples’ bone. It enters into the life of that community and becomes partners with the community in addressing that community’s need. That means the church allows the people of the community to instruct it as it identifies with the people. It respects those people and perceives them as being people of great wisdom and potential. Such a church joins with the people in dealing with the issues that the people have identified as their own. That is the approach in which the most authentic urban ministry is actually done.

The third response of the church—to be the church *with* the people of its neighborhood—is an approach which enables the church to join with the people in addressing the issues of that community, but doing so from the recognition that the only people who in the final analysis have the capability to change that community and to deal with its problems are the

people of that community. The church comes alongside them and supports them and works with them in that endeavor, sharing with those people the particular gifts and strengths the church has to contribute to that situation. It is that body of Christ which identifies with the people, casts its lot with the people, works along with the people. But it cannot and will not do the people's work for them. Only the people can assume responsibility for their own empowerment.

Now can you see why the question, "How can the church empower the poor?" is the wrong question? It is the wrong question because no one can empower anyone else! Only you can take charge of your own situation. The task of the church is not to empower the community. The task of the church is to join the empowerment of the community—to participate in it, to be an integral part of it.

As we can see from this exploration, there are three essential responses of the church to the city.

- First, it can ignore the city and the needs of the people around it as it fixates on preserving its own life. It can view itself as a fortress.
- Second, it can provide social services and do good works for and to the people in the city. It can view itself as the savior of the community.
- Third, it can join in the community's struggle to determine for themselves what kind of community they want to have, a community with justice for all. The church can view itself as a partner with the community.

The task of the poor in the city is empowerment. The unbelievable living conditions of the urban poor—wretched jerry-built housing, polluted water supplies, open sewers, a lack of balanced food, terrible health conditions—are essentially manifestations of a far deeper problem. For the primary problem is a distribution of power. A few have considerable wealth and political clout—and back up that clout with the laws of the state, their control of the city's economic machinery, and often with military hardware, guns, police dogs and even tanks. Unless the poor can find ways to effect an economic and political redistribution of power, all the efforts to feed, house and clothe them will only be palliatives that will never significantly change their estate.

The task of the poor in the city is their own empowerment. And the task of the church is to come alongside the poor, both becoming their advocates before the rich and to join with the poor in their struggle to deal with the forces that are exploiting their community. The most effective

means for bringing about such empowerment in the city is community organization.

Community organization is a uniquely urban approach to Christian ministry among the poor. Modern cities are the centers both of great power and utter powerlessness, of absolute poverty and corrupted wealth. And it is in the midst of such power and wealth, vulnerability and poverty that the church makes its home.

Community organization is the process by which the people of an urban community organize themselves to deal corporately with those essential forces that are exploiting their community and causing their powerlessness. The church's place in such organizing is to join with the poor to take responsible action to identify and deal with the forces that are destroying that community.

How World Vision goes about doing this in an urban slum is particularly instructive. Each of the field offices interested in participating in World Vision's Urban Advance draws up its own strategy, identifying the slum communities in which it will organize, and contextualizing the generic urban strategy of this development agency.

Acting as a "mid-wife in the birth of a community," trained World Vision community organizers move into a selected slum or squatter settlement, live there and work among the poor and the churches for three to five years. Focusing on that slum, the organizer follows a five-step process:

- **Networking:** The organizer visits and befriends the people, identifying key issues and leaders while building trust between the poor and the church.
- **Coalition-building:** The organizer gathers the poor and Christians together into coalitions to address community needs identified by the people.
- **Acting/reflecting/acting:** A dynamic process begins. Coalitions reflect, act, evaluate, act again and reflect more deeply. Reflection includes a freedom to look at their own sinfulness and gospel solutions. The results? Root problems are addressed, systemic action taken. Self-confidence and community trust are built. And Christians who have joined with the poor in addressing these issues can naturally share their faith.
- **Leadership empowerment:** Coalition leaders inevitably surface, are identified and equipped. Church leadership integrated with the community also emerges and is trained. Support networks emerge among coalitions as a

vision for the birth of a community unfolds. Community-wide leadership results.

- **The birth of community:** The slum people begin taking charge of their situation as the result of problem-solving coalitions. The community is organized, the church becomes integral to community life, and the poor are empowered. Under such community organizing, the slum's quality of life radically improves and the people increasingly take charge of their own lives and of their community.

A cup of cold milk—the liberation of a neighborhood

The scenario which we have just explored sounds like magnificent theory. But I would like you to see this liberating philosophy at work in the story of the organizing of one small *favela* in a medium-sized city in Brazil—Natal.

Natal is a city of over one million in the poverty-stricken northeast region of Brazil. World Vision Brazil is working for the empowerment of the poor in the slums of Natal. The following story was shared by our community organizer there—a profound example of the empowerment of a desperate slum community.

To truly appreciate this story, the reader needs to be aware of two factors. First, it is the policy of the Brazilian government that all urban slum children are to receive milk daily, which is supplied through redeemable milk tickets. Second, the urban slums of Brazil are officially organized by the government around neighborhood-sized residents' associations which then, in turn, belong to a district-wide community council.

Here, then, is the story of the liberation of a Brazilian urban slum through a cup of cold milk, as told to me by the World Vision organizer in that community:

"I had been visiting with the people in one favela, talking with them wherever I found them. While I was visiting, I became terribly thirsty. I went to a small snack bar in the favela, and I ordered a soft drink. Then something interesting happened. A small child came up to me, and asked me to buy for him a glass of milk. Then I thought to myself, 'But doesn't the government distribute milk?' So, I asked of the bar owner, and he replied, 'Here the community is very large. And the community council is distributing these milk tickets just for a part of the community.'

"Then I noticed that the group had grown even bigger. And I began talking to them all, 'What are you doing to solve this situation?' They replied, 'We can do nothing, because the community council is the only group that can distribute the milk tickets, and our leader is fighting with

the other leader.' And I told them, 'Do you know what the basic problem is?' And they replied, 'We don't know.' 'The problem is,' I replied, 'that it's not their milk to do with as they please. It's our milk—given to us by the government. Why should we let them decide how to distribute our milk?' Then I proposed we make a group of five to go to the house of the president of the residents' association.

"So we went there, and we waited for him. After quite a while, he arrived, and wondered why so many people were there. Then I asked him, 'Why are these people—who represent so many families—not getting the milk tickets?' And he told me, 'The problem is, I am the enemy of the president of the council. And the politician who provides the tickets to him for distribution is his friend. He doesn't provide those tickets to me.'

"Then I asked him to set a meeting with the residents' association, and he agreed. When the meeting occurred, we were very excited because there were so many people there, because everybody was interested in getting the tickets. Then I raised this question, 'How many times did you get together to solve this problem?' And they replied, 'Well, as unbelievable as it seems, this is the first meeting we have had on this subject!'

"Then we talked about what we could do, and a gentleman gave an idea. 'Why don't we go to talk with the secretary of health (a governmental regional administrative post)?' The crowd selected the people, representative of the community. But how could we get to the secretary? As we talked about it, someone in the group indicated that he was acquainted with the secretary. And we invited a neighborhood pastor to join us; he is someone whom many of the people trust. We set a meeting date, and we went to the secretary's office—ten community residents, the resident association's president, the pastor and me.

"We met with the secretary, who was impressed by the size and makeup of the delegation. He told us he had never received a visit like this, and he wanted to know what the problem was. The residents told him the problem. He was very frustrated, because he didn't know his aides were acting like this. He promised to solve the problem.

"But the delegation insisted that they wanted a public meeting with the health secretary in the community. He accepted the challenge, and came to the meeting. We invited all the heads of all the mothers' clubs, and all the community's residents to attend, as well.

"Before our public meeting was to be held, our delegation went into the community of the politician withholding the tickets. We asked the people whether they were happy to know that they were getting our milk tickets while we had none. They said, 'That's not fair, but we can do nothing.' We replied, 'What do you mean, 'you can do nothing?' You can

talk to the politician who supplied you with the tickets. You can explain to him everything that has happened, and our anger.'

"Soon the politician came to see us. He defended himself, of course, and blamed the man above him. 'He's not willing to distribute the tickets to the other side. So, I can do nothing,' he said. And we told him, 'If you can't do it, we will elect someone who can get something done!'

"We said we wanted him to attend the public meeting that the health secretary would be attending. He was fearful. But we said to him, 'If you do not go, we will tell the community you didn't want to come to clarify the problem. They will never vote for you again.' At the meeting, he was there.

"The public meeting began, and the people quickly began expressing their frustrations. And the health secretary invited all the leaders of the mothers' clubs and the residents' association to speak their mind. And after they were done, he said, 'Beginning next week, we will begin distributing the milk tickets. I will keep checking with you to be sure the milk is reaching the people. And from now on, not only your residents' association, but the mothers' clubs and the other clubs will receive the tickets to distribute to the families. And inspectors will check regularly with the leaders to receive any other complaints about health or food distribution.' And the head of the community council began releasing the tickets.

"This brought a very positive aspect because people began speaking out and standing up for their rights. I then said to them, 'If you could solve the milk problem, why can't you meet with the other side of the community and together solve some greater problems?' Thus, our association got together with the community council. And there was great fellowship, so that there were families who had members who belonged to the association and had also members of the council. And they began to realize we could accomplish more working together than working against each other. So they started to become happy, because of that. So both the residents' association and community council began having meetings with the community, to listen to the community.

"In the larger district, there was a group of very poor people who had moved into the favela and had taken possession of some available land. They had done so because their land had been taken over by a land development company, and they had been expelled from it. When this problem was told at our community meetings, all the people thought this was unfair. So the community got together. Even people who were not directly involved in the problem joined the displaced ones. So we went to the governmental housing agency. Again, we had a delegation of ten people. But the agency's director wouldn't receive us. Then we returned the next week with fifteen people, but he didn't want to receive us.

"What were we going to do? One woman said, 'If he doesn't receive us in his office, we'll have breakfast with him in his house!' So twenty people got together, and at 7:00 in the morning, while he was still asleep, we gathered in front of his house and began clapping our hands. It is a well-to-do district, and the neighbors became fearful, asking, 'What's going on? What's happening? Let's go to the police because they are planning to invade this man's house!' But the police had been notified by us about what we were planning to do. They had agreed we could meet. So, when the residents complained, the police did nothing.

"Then we rang the bell. The man was awakened, and then he said, 'I can't receive you now.' But he promised that he would receive the group in the afternoon at his office.

"When we met, he set a thirty-minute time limit on us. But we ended up staying four hours! He got involved in the case. He saw the possibility of going to the area, and he said he would send someone to go and check the situation. One of our people prepared the documentation so that we could get the government to give the land to the squatters. An engineer studied and reported to the government what would need to be done to make the area safe and sanitary for the people to live there. And the land became the home of these squatters.

"Through our visiting in the community and our involvement of the churches in dealing with the problems the people identify as important, we have seen some beautiful changes. The churches are getting involved in the problems of the community. The people of the community are becoming aware of the churches. Through this work of ours, some district associations are changing, working for the common good rather than simply for their own purposes. The people have a new optimism about themselves, and are feeling good about their favela. And through the people's growing power, many politicians are committing themselves with the pastors in a more direct way to the people. Even the president of the community council, who was considered an agitator, is now a fervent Christian. We have attempted to do the work, not just for the people but with the people, because the people are coming out with their own projects. They know their own realities and we don't want to do anything that interferes with their dealing with their own realities."

As you can see from this story of the empowerment of a Natal slum, this strategy is a proven strategy. It is proven, not just in World Vision, but in countless communities through both religious and secular organizations all over the world. It is a strategy that creates trusting community among previously suspicious city people. It enables the local church to incarnate itself in its barrio, just as Jesus did in Jerusalem. And it enables the poor to help themselves—not by relying on others, but by identifying their own problems and implementing their own solutions together.

We can't save the city, but . . .

We can make a difference! The church should approach its urban ministry with a sober awareness of the overwhelming predicament of the poor and of the exercise of power in today's cities. The strategy expressed above does not guarantee that in some magical way the church will transform the sin, greed and injustice of the city. Such evil will resist all attempts to exorcise it.

The urban strategy presented in this book simply provides a framework in which to do city ministry. It is a strategy that is designed to empower the poor, to equip the church and to evangelize those who do not know Christ. And it does so by enabling the church to become partner and messenger to the people by joining with them in action at the point of the people's deepest pain.