BACK TO THE FUTURE FOR INNER CITY MISSIONS

Michael Lonergan

The rescue mission movement in America has its roots in the last century — a New York City mission founded in 1872 by Jerry McAuley (himself a saved sinner, reformed drunk and ex-offender) is still in operation. Today there are over 250 member organizations of the International Union of Gospel Missions — each operated independently by local non-denominational Christian boards.

Many of these urban missions bear little outward resemblance to the “mom and pop” operations of years gone by, where a man on the skids could get a bowl of soup and a bunk for the night, after he first heard a salvation message by the mission founder or a minister-in-training from a local church or seminary. Dozens of them operate with multi-million dollar budgets and a myriad of programs to address the issues of health, education, employment, mental illness, and chemical dependency faced by homeless families and individuals.

Yet all of the IUGM member missions still maintain their evangelistic purpose, in varying degrees, while a new crop of government and private agencies have grown up in our cities to address physical needs with no thought to the spiritual. Professor Marvin Olasky disguised himself as a street person in March of 1990 and visited several such helping stations. He writes, “In two days I was given lots of food, lots of pills of various kinds, and lots of offerings of clothing and shelter. I was never asked to do anything, not even remove my tray after eating. But there was one thing I did not get, even though I asked for it many times: a Bible.”

Even among the IUGM member missions, there exists a dynamic tension between two scriptural models which Christ gave us for ministering to society’s neediest people:

1. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” (Luke 4:18 NIV)

2. “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.” (Matthew 25:35 NIV)

Certainly, Christ’s two instructions to the Church are not mutually exclusive — we can preach the Gospel and provide food, clothing and shelter. However, there is a critical question of which will have priority, and we need only look to such fields as higher education, medicine and the YMCA/YWCA movements to see examples of organizations strongly rooted in evangelism which have lost their Christian distinctive and become “just another” university, hospital, or recreation center where a Bible or a prayer may be scarce commodities.

Back in 1974, Dr. William Seath compared the annual reports of two urban missions and cautioned about losing sight of the original purpose of the Rescue movement. “One had a
property valuation of $200,000, large staff, annual budget $100,000. This organization reported 105 Gospel services, average audience of 40, and 200 people prayed with. The other Mission, in a rented building, annual budget of $3,000 held 366 services, average attendance of 12, but indicated 400 people prayed with! One thirtieth the amount of money spent but twice as many prayed with. How big is big?\(^2\)

Currently, the need for more resources to meet the growing homeless population, including an alarming number of families with small children, has led some urban missions to enter into a partnership with local, state and federal government. This yields resources in the form of grants and service contracts to meet the physical needs of the homeless, but sets up the potential of another conflict, since many government contracts stipulate that there will be no religious requirement connected with the provision of tax-funded public services. A bright note is that the United States Congress has recently recognized the ability of faith-based organizations to meet pressing social needs cost-effectively and usually with better success rates than their secular counterparts. The result is the “Charitable Choice” rules adopted with the 1996 welfare reform law, aimed at rendering both to God and to Caesar, by allowing the client to receive government-subsidized help from either a spiritual or a secular organization. Interestingly, a recent survey of the homeless indicates that 79% prefer a spiritual emphasis in the services provided to them.\(^3\)

What is the role of the local church and the individual Christian in these growing and evolving inner city missions? There may well be a pendulum swing underway in the philosophy and delivery of homeless services, and involved Christians will help determine the rate and extent of that swing. The social gospel has held sway in the field of urban ministries for some time, often resulting in the “no questions asked” provision of services for an indefinite period to whosoever comes expressing a need. Now, as urban poverty has grown despite these sincere but apparently misguided programs, the issue of homelessness is increasingly being viewed as a symptom which may have an underlying cause, and thus may also have a cure.

If an endless supply of free food, clothing and shelter is not the answer, then may we suggest going back to the roots of the urban mission movement, that *Christ is the answer*. Lives are rebuilt with our Savior at their center, replacing a welfare mentality, a government check, a prescription of anti-depressants, or an addiction to illegal drugs. Rev. Stephen Burger, director of the International Union of Gospel Missions, has said that his is the only profession where a man can crawl in the door as a drunk and walk out the door a few years later as the executive director. God is still changing lives at rescue missions!

Such transformation only happens when compassion is balanced with accountability, when there is one-on-one contact with the homeless person to determine not only what they lack, but rather what they can do with God’s help. Thus, committed volunteers and cheerful givers are needed from the Christian community, as urgently now as they were a century ago, to disciple and “Rescue the Perishing,” one soul at a time.

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