

Urban Church Revitalization: A Mission Field Any Way You Slice It

Randy Davis

Dr. Randy Davis is Executive Director-Treasurer of the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board.

Introduction

If Great Commission, Gospel-centered, urban church revitalization is to take place in North America, Christians must think like cross-cultural missionaries who engage unreached people groups rather than as pastors who recruit people to delay the death of a dying church.

The previous statement may seem harsh, but it is born out of statistical data and personal observation. According to the latest Annual Church Profile, 80 Tennessee Baptist churches have disbanded in the past three years,¹ and between 2007 and 2016, an average of 1,016 Southern Baptist churches have annually been removed from the Annual Church Profile.² The phenomenon is not unique to Southern Baptists. A drive through any urban area reveals churches of every denomination abandoned, boarded up, or converted for any number of other uses, like community drama houses, businesses, bars and more. Thom S. Rainer, president of LifeWay Christian Resources and a research specialist, noted the causes for a church's decline and inevitable death are surprisingly common:

1. They refuse to admit they are sick.
2. They are still waiting on the “magic bullet” pastor.
3. They fail to accept responsibility.
4. They are not willing to change.
5. Their “solutions” are all inwardly focused.
6. They desire to return to a more palatable era.³

Possibly the most telling of these causes is the third: “They fail to accept responsibility.” Rainer notes some of the reasons indicated by churches in the study as root causes of their declines were that their plights were the community's fault for not coming to the church. Some declines the faults of previous pastors, or a transitioning culture. Basically, they believe if everything returned to the Bible-belt mentality of decades earlier, the church would be fine.⁴

Culture is rapidly transitioning. Ken Easley states, “I cannot project what the church in North America will look like during the next half century. The rate of cultural change keeps increasing and the church struggles to respond well.”⁵

Over the past 20 years, Kevin Shrum, pastor of Inglewood Baptist Church located in East Nashville, has seen the neighborhood around the church transition multiple times. Inglewood, like so many churches, struggles to respond quickly or well. “It is not a loss of vision, because the church still has a desire to see people come to Christ,” Shrum says of urban churches in need of revitalization. “It is a loss of vision for the community. People [in the church] hold on to the living patterns from the way things were. Part of the challenge in revitalizing the urban church is working on getting the vision of the church to match what the community has become.”⁶

My personal observations support the conclusions of Rainer, Easley, and Shrum. As Executive Director of the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board, I have traveled more than 370,000 miles across the state over the past nine years. Many of the 3,000-plus churches associated with the Tennessee Baptist Convention reflect these statements. While there are pockets of bright-shining light, the proof is in the collective numbers. The total number of annual baptisms by Tennessee Baptist churches is about half of what it needs to be to keep up with the state’s population growth.

Our five major cities—Memphis, Nashville, Knoxville, Chattanooga and Clarksville – comprise the majority of our population. What I have seen traveling in these urban areas greatly concerns me. Tennessee’s population centers are increasingly becoming more spiritually lost. According to one research study, Knoxville was voted the No. 1 most “Bible-Minded City in America” in 2013.⁷ However, that same study also found that only 19 percent of Knox County residents were active in church, while 39 percent identified themselves as “nones” (those with no church affiliation), and 41 percent identified as “dones” (those no longer affiliated with church).

Those numbers reflect the spiritual reality across Tennessee, but there are also moral and socioeconomic signs of Tennessee’s spiritual brokenness:

- Ninety-four of ninety-five counties in Tennessee have double-digit poverty ratings⁸ and nearly one-in-four children live in poverty.⁹
- Tennessee ranks second nationally in the number of opioid prescriptions per capita and is near the top in overdose deaths.¹⁰
- Tennessee has the tenth-highest divorce rate in the nation.¹¹
- More than 132,000 people are incarcerated in Tennessee jails or are under state criminal justice supervision.¹²

These statistics do not even touch on human trafficking, illiteracy, teen pregnancy, crystal methamphetamine production and consumption, and urban

violence. Add Tennessee’s burgeoning ethnic diversity—with 145 different global people groups¹³ now living in our state, and 42 of those less than two percent globally evangelized¹⁴—and the challenge becomes more obvious. Given the context, here is the thesis restated more directly: If Great Commission, Gospel-centered, urban church revitalization is to take place in Tennessee, we must think like cross-cultural missionaries engaging unreached people groups rather than as pastors recruiting people to delay the inevitable death of a dying church. As we say, “Any way you slice it, Tennessee is a mission field.”

A Strategic Overview

I feel the best contribution I can make to the topic of urban church revitalization is to narrow the focus of this article to Tennessee. It is what I know best. It is my responsibility as executive director to lead the charge for Tennessee Baptists in accepting the challenge of engaging the cultural challenges for the advancement of the Gospel. I believe the reader will be best served by receiving both general observations about urban church revitalization rooted in theology, and practical applications specific to Tennessee. I believe the applications will be apropos to other contexts as well.

About five years ago The Tennessee Baptist Mission Board’s leadership team rigorously evaluated the ministries of the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board and determined our focus needed to narrow. Given the challenges mentioned earlier, we realized we needed to become more effective in shifting the spiritual climate within the state. We prayed and took a hard look at the early church. The outcome is what we call The Five Objectives:

1. Seeing at least 50,000 Tennesseans annually saved, baptized and set on the road to discipleship by 2024.
2. Having at least 500 Tennessee Baptist churches revitalized by 2024.
3. Planting and strategically engaging at least 1,000 new churches by 2024.
4. Realizing an increase in annual local church giving through the Cooperative Program that reaches at least 10 percent by 2024.
5. Realizing an increase in annual giving for the Golden Offering for Tennessee Missions that reaches at least \$3 million by 2024.

We are four years into a 10-year strategy. We are holding steady on baptisms (around 22,000), but that is far short of the 50,000 per year we need to keep pace with population growth. We have seen just beyond 200 new churches, but we are hoping a shift in strategy from exclusively finding church planters to cultivating “Mother Churches” will accelerate multiplication. We have seen the most movement in church revitalization. We are currently beyond 300 churches involved in some

stage of the revitalization process. We call these first three objectives our “Reaching” objectives.

Our last two objectives are our “Resourcing” objectives. Cooperative Program giving among Tennessee Baptist churches has held at approximately five percent. Climbing toward 10 percent on average per church is going to be a challenge. Our most remarkable gains have been with our state missions offering, the Golden Offering for Tennessee Missions. This offering has increased more than 15 percent over the past three years. We believe Tennessee Baptists are hearing the call that any way you slice it, Tennessee is a mission field.

Ultimately, we at the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board recognize that if the Five Objectives are to be reached, it will be because Tennessee Baptists and their churches have caught a vision and a passion for reaching our state for Christ. Likewise, it is within these churches where the hope lies for reaching the cities. The remainder of this article defines what I believe is necessary if urban church revitalization is to become a reality in Tennessee, or anywhere else.

Missions: From Program to Obedience

Somewhere along the way, the Christian life and church participation became a spectator sport. The numbers bear it out. A recent LifeWay Research study indicated that 67 percent of churchgoers invited two or fewer people to church in the past six months (29 percent invited no one).¹⁵ It is safe to assume that if so few people are being invited to church then fewer are hearing how to come to saving faith in Christ. If there is to be urban church revitalization (or any advance of the Gospel elsewhere), then we must think like cross-cultural missionaries engaging unreached people groups. Obedience begets strategy. Comprehensively, every believer must embrace the direction Jesus gave to his followers (not just the 12)¹⁶ to go and preach that the Kingdom of God has arrived. He was markedly clear regarding the expectation of obedience.

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you (Matthew 28:19-20a).¹⁷

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).¹⁸

Unfortunately, the expectation of every believer on mission has migrated from personal responsibility to church program. Mike Pettengill, missionary and leader with Mission to the World, observes,

Many in the modern Western Church misconstrue missions and evangelism as simply another program in the church. The discussion of missions must move ... into the essential understanding that a missional church is at the core of Christian theology. A missional ecclesiology helps Christians understand what it means to be evangelical. Having a better grasp of Christ's mandate that His Church is to be missional will help Christians comprehend the foundational purpose of the Church.¹⁹

Bob Sjogren, co-founder of the missions-sending agency, Frontiers, writes that the ministries of churches have become an end in themselves rather than a means to an end. The end, he says, "is God's big picture of redeeming people from every tribe, tongue and nation ... resulting in a greater glory to the Lord."²⁰

So, if obedience is how we get from church program to missions, then how do we get to an obedience that drives Christians from their churches into the urban streets white unto harvest? It begins with love.

Love Thy Neighbor

The story of Jonah was written thousands of years ago but could not be more contemporary in its value. Recall that Jonah was God's prophet to Israel, but God called him to go to the quite large and pagan city of Nineveh located in the quite pagan kingdom of Assyria—a bitter enemy of Israel – and call the people of Nineveh to repentance. Jonah's speech and actions made it clear how much he hated the Ninevites, so much so that he initially responded in categorical disobedience to God. However, the book closes with God asking a remarkable question:

So the Lord said, "You cared about the plant, which you did not labor over and did not grow. It appeared in a night and perished in a night. But may I not care about the great city of Nineveh, which has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot distinguish between their right and their left, as well as many animals?" (Jonah 4:10-11)²¹

God loved the city of Nineveh because He loved the spiritually lost people of Nineveh. He called Jonah to love them too. God's call to Jonah is as valid for today's Christian as it was for Jonah. We are to love the cities because God loves the cities, and large numbers of people "cannot distinguish between their [spiritual] right and their left." Unfortunately, contemporary Christians are running from cities where the immorality of culture most seems to incubate.

Journalist and author Rob Dreher posits that the way to conserve and strengthen the American church is for Christians to withdraw and regroup.²² That seems odd to me, but my observation is that many embrace this idea and are withdrawing rather than engaging. When they do engage, it is often selective

engagement. Far more people contact me to say they believe God has called them to plant a church in suburban Williamson County, TN, (the seventh-wealthiest county in America)²³ than those who believe God is calling them to one of our five major urban centers. In fact, I seldom receive calls from anyone seeking to plant their lives cross-culturally in a city. Shouldn't love for God compel us to the cities, too?

In 2015, Rainer authored a blog post titled, "Fourteen Reasons for the Breakdown of Church Unity."²⁴ Every point is valid, but I believe each is a symptom of a single problem: lack of love in the church. What does Peter say? "Above all, maintain constant love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).²⁵

The term *love* is mentioned more than 600 times in the Bible and is easily consolidated into two commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).²⁶ If Great Commission, Gospel-centered, urban church revitalization is to take place in North America, we must think like cross-cultural missionaries engaging unreached people groups driven by an intense love of God and for spiritually lost people.

Unfortunately, secular culture is impacting American Christianity more than Christians are impacting American culture. You may recall the story a few years ago from Oklahoma Wesleyan University where a student approached President Everett Piper after a chapel service in which his sermon topic was love, taken from 1 Corinthians 13. The student felt offended because the passage made him feel badly for not showing love to others and didn't think it right that the president should speak on the topic.²⁷

Author Sheri Bell goes on to write in that same article that "cultural tolerance is a pale imitation of the personal freedom Christ offers. Sadly, many people are choosing it over Christ, because they don't know Him. Perhaps you and I are not taking the time to show Jesus through our words and actions?"²⁸

Unfortunately, Christians either isolate themselves from culture or are being seduced by a doctrine of cultural tolerance. What is the remedy and what has it got to do with urban church revitalization? The remedy is found in Jesus' spiritual brokenness for the city:

As he approached and saw the city, he wept for it, saying, "If you knew this day what would bring peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. For the days will come on you when your enemies will build a barricade around you, surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you and your children among you to the ground, and they will not leave one stone on another in your midst, because you did not recognize the time when God visited you" (Luke 19:41-44).²⁹

Like God's deep love for the salvation of the people of Nineveh was the motivation for sending Jonah to proclaim repentance, so too was Jesus' motivation in going to the cross for the salvation of mankind. Love was also the motivation behind commissioning His followers to go and make disciples. Urban church revitalization and the reaching of our cities will only happen if we are motivated by a deep love for the spiritually lost which is motivated by a deep love for the Jesus who loved us enough to die for our salvation. Missions motivated by anything less than love for God and for people is little more than an obligatory response to a directive and is not sustainable. Love compels us to go.

Here is a question I believe every follower of Christ and every church must answer: Is our lack of personal evangelism due to a lack of love and heart-hardening toward the culture around us? Do we resemble Jonah more than we do Jesus?

In the booklet, "Praying with Jesus: 40 Days Toward Church Revitalization," author Jamison L. Work, a former Tennessee pastor and mission volunteer to the Middle East, begins the 40-day prayer journey with a five-day focus titled, "Searching My Own Heart." The Day 1 devotional is "Do You Feel the Urgency?"³⁰ The church will have no impact in an urban setting (or elsewhere) if its members do not love the individuals living within their local mission field and feel the urgency of its people. The ability to love beyond the church begins by loving in the church.

Evangelism: The Expression of Love

Love draws us into relationships with other people and feeds the wellspring of personal evangelism. The greatest expression of love a Christian can extend to someone is sharing the words of hope that bring eternal life found only in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Evangelism is a non-negotiable necessity of church revitalization and planting. However, canned evangelistic approaches will not be effective, especially in an urban setting. One can no longer assume any level of biblical literacy exists in our culture. Evangelism must begin with people, not programs. We must see and hear individuals, and relate to them. Reaching large numbers will not be easy or fast.

According to the North American Mission Board, more than 290 million people (83 percent) of all North Americans live in a metropolitan area, and 269 million have no relationships to Jesus Christ.³¹ People ask me how we are going to double the number of annual baptisms in Tennessee from our current number to 50,000. My response is always the same: "One at a time." Seeing each person in need of Jesus' love is foundational to the cross-cultural mindset.

I believe Shrum is on to something. All churches go through seasons of life like people do, but a decline in a church's health is due largely to its turning inward. It has removed its finger from the pulse of its community. It loses a vision for itself in relation to its immediate surroundings even while having an overarching vision for

The Great Commission. Culture is dynamic. It is constantly changing and most often the rate of change is far quicker than a church's ability to respond.

Consider the challenges mentioned earlier in this article related to Tennessee (rapid growth in international populations, poverty, illiteracy, drugs, teen pregnancy, etc.). Those challenges are amplified within an urban context because of increased population density. However, we must not stereotype the urban setting. Yes, those challenges exist, but we tend to forget the urban context also includes middle and upper-class neighborhoods. In many cities like Nashville, there is the acceleration of transitional neighborhoods. Blocks of once dilapidated housing are being renovated or razed for new construction with properties now selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars, even millions.

Christians must get a handle on this diversity if they are to have any lasting spiritual impact. Our evangelistic approach must in every way mirror the approach of international missionaries entering a foreign culture. According to a study by J. D. Payne, former National Missionary with the North American Mission Board, there are at least 29 U.S. metropolitan areas with an evangelical population less than or equal to five percent.³² Payne also states that our approach must begin by asking, "Who are the most receptive people groups, population segments, subcultures, etc. to the gospel?"³³ This idea is very much in line with the "Person of Peace" approach employed by international missionaries.

By Day 28, Work transitions the focus of "40 Days Toward Church Revitalization" from "Searching My Own Heart" to "Re-establishing Jesus' Priorities." Day 28 is titled "The Priority of Prayer." He addresses both individual and corporate prayer for focusing on God's "Kingdom agenda" for a church's community.³⁴ Missionaries often testify that a person of peace—that individual who becomes a Gospel beachhead—is revealed through strategic prayer and by the Holy Spirit.

In 2017, the evangelism team of the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board studied the overall top 50 most evangelistic churches in several size categories with the goal to understand better what is working when it comes to reaching people for Christ, regardless of cultural context. A commonality among the churches was, "Evangelism by Design." Topping the list of what comprises "evangelism by design" was "intentionally praying for spiritually lost people."³⁵

Other common elements found among evangelistically successful churches included

- Training church members in personal evangelism.
- Engaging their communities through compassion ministries.
- Connecting with their communities through special events.
- Directing encounters with people toward "Gospel conversations."

The first of these elements involves training church members in personal evangelism. David Evans, evangelism director for the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board, noticed a gap between a church member's understanding of the need to evangelize and the member's ability to evangelize. To close that gap, he created a tool titled "Evangelistic Inches" designed to help Christians better understand evangelism as an extension of being a disciple of Christ. The four-stage process begins with helping people "cure the desire problem," and concludes by helping the Christian meet people "where they are" culturally and spiritually.³⁶ Effective Gospel conversations connect the unchanging Gospel with the specific needs and issues people face.³⁷

Jonah's evangelistic approach was to call for repentance and then to get out of Nineveh to watch judgment rain on a city of sinners. Jesus' approach was to go into the city, engage people, minister, open Scripture with them, let them challenge Him, weep for them, and ultimately give His life for sinners. Jesus was a missionary on a mission. If we truly desire urban church revitalization, we will only be successful following Jesus' model and not Jonah's.

Revitalization That Ends in Worship

If Great Commission, Gospel-centered, urban church revitalization is to take place in North America, we must understand its ultimate purpose. While love for God and for others is the motivation to reach our cities for Christ, leading people from the hopelessness of spiritual lostness to unadulterated worship of Jesus Christ is the destination.

To arrive there, we must have a workable definition of worship. "Worship may be defined—at its most fundamental level—as finding ultimate pleasure and delight in something or someone."³⁸ The goal, therefore, of urban worship revitalization is to foster worship gatherings where Jesus Christ becomes treasured and found to be of supreme value. This obviously encompasses both revitalized and new churches.

The urban lost need to see a full picture of God's glory, splendor, mercy, and grace—revealed most completely in the person of Jesus Christ. We perform a disservice to urban contexts if we dumb-down, simplify, or leave out parts of the Christian story. In the words of Zac Hicks, "While we should always strive for worship to be intelligible and understandable to non-Christians, nothing short of prizing the Gospel and making much of Jesus will create the kind of awe-inspiring zeal in the church that causes the watching world to cry, 'God is really among you!'"³⁹

This absolutely requires the existing church to catch a new vision for its community and it may quickly bring the church to a point of decision about styles. Mike Cosper, worship pastor at Sojourn, an urban church plant in Louisville, Kentucky, suggests the best way for the local church to learn the new culture is simple: "Listen. Listen to the people God has gathered. Pay attention to what kinds of music they are listening to and the ways they're celebrating. Pay particular attention

to the musicians in the congregation and look for ways to empower them to play music in styles they love and naturally gravitate toward.”⁴⁰

While content remains consistent and fixed across biblical worship contexts, stylistic expressions (the “language” of worship) is highly variable. To revitalize urban ministry we must translate biblical truth into the language of urban America. Missionaries endeavoring to reach unreached people groups plant themselves within a given people group with the intent purpose of getting to know the people, their culture, and their language.⁴¹

Conclusion

If urban church revitalization is contingent upon “getting the vision of the church to match what the community has become,” as Shrum earlier stated, then it is safe to conclude that churches must

- Acknowledge their internal and external realities and adjust.
- Recapture a love for members and for the community’s spiritually lost.
- Hunger for seeing people come to saving faith in Christ.
- Become students of their cities and the demographic segments living within those cities.
- Pray incessantly for the salvation of people.
- Develop “connecting” strategies that account for cultural context with the intentional purpose of sharing the Gospel.
- Initiate those strategies with vigorous cultural engagement.
- Lead people to worship the Living God in biblical truth and in culturally relevant styles.

Millions upon millions of spiritually lost souls are unknowingly desperate for the success of the urban church. The nations are amassed in our cities and any way you slice it, the cities are mission fields white unto harvest. To reach them will require contemporary Christians to shift their mindset from spectator to missionary. The investment will be worth it when we stand with the multitudes and see people from our cities represented in the presence of the Lamb.

After this I looked, and there was a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!⁴²

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