What Needs to Be Done in the Inner City

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More than a half century ago, Methodist Bishop Frederick DeLand Leete, with keen insight and intense concern, wrote: "The central city church is a standing protest against impiety and the devil of greed. Where highways meet, and throngs crowd and push; where human tigers lurk, and rush upon their prey, and man-spiders weave nets of lust, trapping the unwary and the luckless; where the good are too busy to feel the sense of brotherhood, and rich and poor alike struggle for perishable gain, the church tower is lifted as a symbol of warning, of remonstrance, and of allurement to paths of purity, justice and peace." More recently, another Methodist churchman, Bishop William C. Martin, contended: "The church must save the city or the city will paganize our nation."

And now, in the year of our Lord 1967, we are fully persuaded that the church and the city must stand, or fall, together. To save the soul of man and to give the city a soul—this is always our commanding challenge.

Children do not cry without provocation, nor would the Christ of God sob bitterly without cause. Luke 19:41 relates how Jesus spilled His compassionate love upon the City of Jerusalem—"And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it." Surely there was a reason for the broken heart of our loving Lord. While serving a strategic inner-city parish in Indianapolis, Indiana, we resolved to discover why Jesus "cried over the city." As we walked the streets visiting precious people in dusty basements, cramped apartments and dingy garrets, the Inner Voice whispered the burden of concerns which prompted our Lord Christ to sob over the city.

Jesus saw the loneliness of His people! Many were lonely

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and wretched then. After two thousand years, multitudes still experience the pangs of aloneness. Paradoxically, we are crowded like frightened sheep huddled together in the midst of a storm, but we are also isolated like Robinson Crusoe on his desolate isle. Millions have migrated to the city from rural backgrounds and find it most difficult to orient and relate themselves to the congested conditions which are prevalent in cheap apartments of our urban centers.

Jesus saw the needs of His people! The inner-city sector of a throbbing metropolis becomes the "port of entry" where desperate people of all cultures, creeds and climes filter in to stay "until they can do better." In many instances, they are illiterate or handicapped physically or mentally. Migrants find that job opportunities are few and they do not qualify for welfare assistance. In their hunger and destitution, our Compassionate Christ is concerned for them.

Jesus saw the lostness of His people! In their confused state, Jesus observed that they were "like sheep without a shepherd." When people give up hope, a community becomes a slum. The impoverishment of hope results in moral decadence, juvenile delinquency, alcoholism, looting, rioting. In discouragement, many city dwellers find themselves on a "dead-end street." They have a diminished sense of worth, and develop in turn a calloused disregard for their neighbors, a weakened commitment to personal morality, and a conformity to hopelessness and despair.

God has placed the church in the city! What can we do? What must we do? These are questions with which we wrestled in our Indianapolis parish. We determined, along with the Apostle Paul, to "be made all things to all men, that we might by all means save some" (I Cor. 9:22).

1. We resolved to love people—and to like them, too! It is not always easy to associate freely with people who may be careless about personal cleanliness or base and vulgar in their habits and conversation. Sometimes it is easier to love them than it is to like them. The heart of Jesus overflowed with love for all mankind, but it seems that He had some difficulty liking the Scribes and Pharisees who reeked with hypocrisy, egotism and self-esteem. Love is expressed through kindness and attention, and so we maintained an intensive program of visitation throughout the community.

2. We realized that people want to be accepted! They want to belong! When Franklin D. Roosevelt was president-elect of the United States, a man named Joe Zangara tried to kill him. It was reported that at the trial, Zangara was asked: "Do you belong to any church?" Zangara dropped his head for a moment and then replied: "No! I belong to nothing—and it hurts!"

In the one square mile in the core-city of Indianapolis lived
some twenty thousand people. Surveys indicated that only one-tenth of them were identified with any religious group. Apparently eighteen thousand people preferred to remain shy strangers and reticent refugees in that seething populated area.

Various programs were instituted and administered. Realizing that our Lord is God of the flesh as well as the spirit, we set up a supply room where good used clothing and non-perishable groceries were issued to the needy of our neighborhood. We utilized our church gymnasium to full capacity with hundreds of children in various recreational programs. Reading and tutorial classes were organized in our library. For the girls of the community, cooking and sewing classes were created and well-staffed by volunteer ladies from suburban churches. Four college boys were engaged for a summer program and they proved their dedication as they visited and involved youth in various activities. Friday was scheduled as "Flick Night," when feature films were shown to large crowds of children and youth. The price of admission was simply the registration of names and addresses, affording an opening for the young men to get into the homes of the children.

3. We determined to relate Christ and His message to the community! To communicate the love of Christ, we must discover our role of servanthood. In a world grown exceedingly harsh and calloused, with so many people being "pushed around," we must be servants of compassion with "warm hearts to feel the suffering of others" and "strong backs to carry their loads."

Recreation, crafts and skills, social service and welfare assistance—these were all important. They were not ends in themselves but means to an end. These activities and involvements became "handles" to draw people to a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. We praise God for various miracles of salvation that came out of our inner-city laboratory of devotion and faith.

If the church is to win the city, we must love our people, live with our people, and lose our identity in compassionate service for them. The poet relates how the austere priest moved his living quarters to the church steeple so that he might be nearer heaven and better able to hand God's word down to sinful man. However, in the end the pious priest cried from his place of aloof loneliness: "Where art Thou, Lord?" and the Lord replied,

"Down here, among my people."