



**SEEKING THE SHALOM OF NEW ORLEANS: 47 YEARS OF URBAN
COMMUNITY BUILDING**

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**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2015
November, 2015
Grand Rapids, Michigan**

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“You could get killed any day in Hollygrove,” one of my informants told me during an interview for my dissertation. He was partially right. The neighborhood does have a violent reputation, popularized by the rap lyrics of Lil Wayne and cemented in the memories of New Orleanians via media reports of neighborhood violence and a history of higher than average homicides in a city with the highest murder rate in the nation. Yet things have changed there, driven by residents who believe a better life is possible and persistent enough to pursue the dream of a community where Shalom bursts forth. In the midst of this neighborhood Trinity Christian Community (TCC) has faithfully sought to help shepherd this dream into reality.

Hollygrove is a neighborhood where about 50% of residents own their homes (Greater New Orleans Community Data Center). Many have lived there for their entire lives, some for 30, 40 and even 50 years. Once a mixed neighborhood of working class African and Italian Americans, the neighborhood has been devastated by structural forces over the last 40 years. The 1970s brought “white flight” with mass exodus to the suburbs which changed the complexion of the community. The 1980s were marked by loss of jobs and increases in the numbers of renters and the rootless transiency and accompanying apathy that marks many inner city communities. Throughout the 1990s the community saw an increase in the informal economy, drug addiction and prostitution that has plagued most post-industrial cities in a globalizing economy. By the turn of the century the neighborhood’s reputation as a dangerous, ghetto community was deeply entrenched.

In many ways longstanding Hollygrove residents were like the exiled Children of Israel who found themselves surrounded by an alien culture seemingly opposed to deeply held values. With their worlds dramatically altered two choices presented themselves: withdraw and develop a defensive siege mentality or take action. It was in this context that the Prophet Jeremiah, speaking the words of the Living God, called the Children of Israel to actively “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:11, NIV).

How bizarre these words must have sounded to the Israelites! Amidst what must have felt like debauchery, uprooted from all the touchpoints of their culture and longing for escape back to normality they were being called to anchor themselves and invest for the long term in a hostile place. Their values and folkways were being assaulted, yet they were being urged to bring peace and prosperity to the homeland of their foes.

Following the path of the whites who abandoned the community in the 70s, upwardly mobile African American residents with the means and ability left the neighborhood. Those who remained were homeowners with a stake in the community, renters seeking modest prices and a handful of seniors who continued to believe the neighborhood might someday emerge from its malaise. The latter group were those who sought Shalom, they hoped for peace and well-being, although many believed this unlikely.

Sampson (2012) suggests that neighborhoods develop reputations that are enduring and resistive to change. Once a neighborhood is branded as an inner city ghetto a vicious cycle develops, wherein internal conditions feed external perceptions which in turn prevents progress until the decay becomes almost insurmountable. Those who are trapped in poverty cannot escape, those with choices will not locate there. Thus the economic and sociocultural resources

required for community development and progress often bypass these neighborhoods (Wilson, 1997). This is what the neighborhood had become when I returned to take the helm of Trinity Christian Community in 1998.

From its inception in 1967 TCC had been at the forefront of the emerging Christian community development movement. Early programs had included drug rehab, job training, summer camps, evangelistic outreaches, and an urban ministry institute. Many of these programs were highly innovative and novel. The summer camps catered to African American youth at a time in New Orleans history rife with racial prejudice. The job training involved business incubators such as an auto mechanics garage. At a time when many were abandoning the city, the leaders of TCC called people to relocate to the inner city and build relationships to reverse the trend of urban outmigration. TCC, in partnership with multiple area churches, helped develop the Good Samaritan Network where individuals coming to ask for assistance were directed to one of a network of churches that specialized in their area of need; this allowed churches to better coordinate and dispense aid. Although worship was a key component of all the ministry did and despite planting several, TCC was not a church; instead the ministry would be an agency that both served and equipped churches, paving the way for many urban, parachurch ministries that would follow.

Ultimately the first Executive Director, Rev. Bill Brown, would connect with a group of like-minded thinkers which included Dr. John Perkins and Dr. Ray Bakke among others, to form the Christian Community Development Association. Their early work would lead to 8 key principles of faith-based community development that guides the work of urban ministry practitioners today (Gordon & Perkins, 2013). These are:

- 1) Relocation of practitioners back into long-abandoned urban neighborhoods,

- 2) Reconciliation of broken humanity to God and to each other (especially racially),
- 3) Redistribution, or voluntarily moving resources from well-to-do churches and communities to fragile, vulnerable neighborhoods,
- 4) Indigenous Leadership Development that rise to lead the work,
- 5) Listening to the Community, beginning with their felt needs rather than leading with programs that may not adequately address the desires of needy communities,
- 6) Church-Based ministries, where the church forms the core of the work being done,
- 7) Wholistic ministries that reach beyond spiritual fixes to meet the needs of whole persons,
- 8) Empowerment focus that affirms the dignity of the vulnerable and resituates power into the hands of the historically disenfranchised.

Armed with this historical perspective and a philosophical framework for ministry, I took the helm in August of 1998. For the next seven years, until a catastrophic event in 2005 reshaped our lives and ministry, we eagerly walked in the footsteps of our predecessors seeking to bring about the changes sought by community residents. Our lives were filled with after-school tutoring, teaching entrepreneurship to high schoolers, evening Bible studies, community actions, engaging politicians and power brokers, summer camps, short-term missions and evangelistic outreaches. Just as the momentum was building disaster struck.

Our AmeriCorps team had spent the day before Katrina planting gardens so that community residents could grow healthy vegetables, thereby improving the health of the community. We were ready for the start of the school year, prepared to do both in- and after-school reading intervention. Summer camp has just concluded, our neighborhood community

center was clean and decorated. Our shiny new computer lab, one month old, was filled with innovative reading software. Students were enrolled and parent volunteers were ready to serve.

In one weekend we lost everything!

During the next ten years we would discover how to re-build our lives, our ministry and our community. Beginning with a completely abandoned neighborhood, every home was completely flooded and needed to be gutted and rebuilt, we began to envision our community being rebuilt better than before. The Senior Citizens returned first, they were less encumbered and freer to be the early rebuilders. We helped rebuild their homes and then enlisted them to be block captains who welcomed the next wave into the community.

With the help of the Corporation for National and Community Services we were able to recruit, train and deploy hundreds of AmeriCorps members to do something CNCS had never tried, gutting and rebuilding homes. Today CNCS responds to disasters and rebuilds homes routinely, but 10 years ago they were resistive to the idea until touring with us through the city and seeing both the devastation and possibilities. Ultimately our AmeriCorps members led teams of volunteers into the community to work on homes, dispense relief supplies, clear debris and being rebuilding a broken city.

As the people returned we were able to incubate a separate 501c3 community development corporation devoted to re-imagining the community as we rebuilt. As we stood around maps of the neighborhood and the city, our residents planned a new school, a new community center, new parks, and imagined lower crime coupled with greater opportunity for the most vulnerable. From those humble beginnings the community emerged better than ever and accomplished every item from the initial planning charrettes and then some we never imagined. There is a new first-class school, whose facilities are being fought over by competing

charter operators, constructed on the site of a once-segregated (black-only) school. We have a new community center built on the lot where a segregated (black-only) hospital once stood. We have a one-acre pocket farm, built on the site of an abandoned plant nursery, that has been extensively studied by urban agriculturalists from across the nation. Our partners, like Tulane University, taught us how to build water retention ponds in backyards to ameliorate future flooding. And the community was sufficiently empowered to close a nuisance business that catered to the drug trade and was the epicenter of neighborhood violent crime, making the neighborhood safer than it had been for over 30 years. These are but a few of the amazing developments that occurred in the aftermath of the 2005 devastation wrought by the failing levees.

Shalom emerges in the midst of tragedy. TCC was founded in the midst of the tragic remnants of codified racism in the 1960s. It burgeoned in the tragic aftermath of Katrina. Today, almost 50 years after its founding, the ministry thrives under the leadership of its third Executive Director, a young African American man from a broken, fatherless home in the midst of the inner city. He works in a neighborhood where Shalom has broken out, where peace and prosperity have emerged in the midst of brokenness. A community that was once thought to be irredeemable has become a model for the nation, testament to the power of the gospel to transform not only people but places.

It's no longer true that you could get killed any day in Hollygrove, God's Shalom has burst forth.

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