

Learning from John Wesley for Passionate Urban Ministry

FACING THE CITY

Mary Brooke Casad

Sometimes the past provides us with a guide to the future. At least, that's what I discovered while trying to help my conference create new urban ministries. For more than a year, persons involved in and passionate about urban ministry in the North Texas Conference gathered regularly to discuss a challenge issued by Dr. Zan Holmes to "face the city." Urban ministry was adopted as a conference priority, and \$4 million pledged to this effort: \$1 million for Perkins School of Theology urban intern scholarships, \$3 million for new urban ministries. What would this "new" urban ministry look like?

"It will have a worshipping faith community composed of people who live in the neighborhood," one pastor offered.

"It will have a place where urban interns can live and minister, where we can help people foster a passion for urban ministry," said a seminary professor.

"It will offer many different kinds of programs and services, as determined by the surrounding community," a director of a community center proclaimed.

The conversations continued. Then,

one day, in preparation for a Sunday School class I was asked to teach, I read a book about John Wesley. Now, I had heard of Wesley's Foundry Church before, an old cannon factory he bought in inner-city London, but as I read this particular description, it sounded vaguely familiar—a large preaching hall, living quarters for Wesley and other pastors, a school and medical services for the people of the neighborhood.

At the next gathering of our urban ministries group, I asked the question: Would our new urban ministry look like John Wesley's Foundry Church of the mid-1700s? As we studied a ministry of the past, a new vision for the future emerged!

Our bishop, Bishop William B. Oden, encouraged us to seek the area of Dallas that had the greatest need. Sarah Wilke, a laywoman who directed Wesley-Rankin Community Center in west Dallas for 14 years, became the conference urban strategist, and the search was on. The search led us to an area of Dallas near Love Field airport known as Bachman Lake, named for the lake at the end of the northwest runway. Census figures told us that the area boasted one of the largest elementary schools in the state, and the majority of the residents resided in apartments. The other discov-

ery was that there was no faith-based presence, and very few social services.

While discussion first centered on a building (in this case, an abandoned strip club building!), the emphasis soon shifted to personnel, rather than place. An Anglo bi-lingual clergyman, Owen Ross, was appointed to the Bachman Lake Foundry Church. His office? A pick-up truck and a cell phone!

Today, Owen lives in the neighborhood. He is building relationships with community leaders, meeting with directors of non-profit organizations, creating a coalition of United Methodist churches in his district who want to be a part of this ministry. Using the asset-based community development model, he is seeking to build a church with the people of the community, who will make decisions about a place of worship and the kinds of ministries that will be offered.

In another part of Dallas, conversations began about the opportunity for a partnership between our conference and St. Luke's "Community" United Methodist Church. St. Luke's had recently purchased a large church facility (formerly East Grand Baptist Church) in its neighborhood to provide overflow space for weekday programs. Both buildings are located in predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods.

Two pastors were identified to begin work on what has become known as East Grand Foundry Church: Edlen Cowley, an African-American pastor; and Javier Escalera, a Hispanic pastor. The East Grand building is currently undergoing renovations that will make the Foundry vision complete—worship space for a multi-cultural Saturday night service and a Spanish language Sunday morning service, dormitories for Volunteers in Mission teams and other groups, and a variety of social services that will be designed as “empowerment ministries.” The East Grand Foundry Church hopes to model ministries that provide teaching and training opportunities for others, thus “empowering” them to do similar ministries in their own locations.

One of these empowerment ministry sites is targeted for the original St. Luke’s “Community” UMC building, located in a nearby neighborhood that is predominantly African-American. Part of the Foundry vision is to re-claim that building for a United Methodist presence in the neighborhood.

Our vision is one that is still fluid and forming. But we are learning a great deal in the process that will inform us about

future ministry. To date, some of these learning include:

Urban areas are multi-cultural and our churches need to reflect this diversity. At the East Grand Foundry Church, the pastors are ethnically diverse and bilingual. They meet regularly for support and accountability, and view themselves as a team. Multi-cultural churches will require multi-cultural leadership. This means we must address many of the issues of ordination and itinerancy that our Boards of Ordained Ministries and Cabinets currently struggle with.

Faith communities need to be created “of the people, for the people, by the people.” Too often our emphasis has been on maintaining buildings and traditions. The Bachman Lake Foundry Church model focuses on a leader who lives in the neighborhood he serves, and builds relationships with the people of the community. The persons of this community will make decisions about location and kinds of ministries. The new motto for starting faith communities has become “leadership, not land; people, not property!”

Transformation is contagious! As the vision has emerged, many of our United Methodist churches in the conference have come forward to be a part of it. They have stepped up to be partners, offering prayers and resources. The Foundry Churches have already provided a bridge for persons in suburban and rural areas of our conference to be connected to people in the inner city, thus breaking down the racial and economic barriers that divide them.

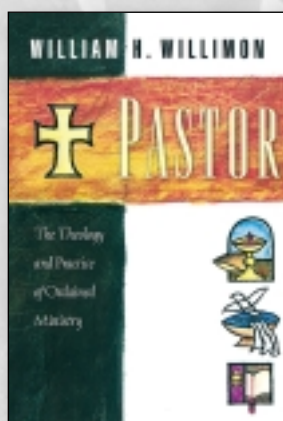
From 18th century London to 21st century Dallas is a long leap, but our models for ministry are still based on the need all people have for the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Somehow, I think John Wesley would agree! □



Mary Brooke Casad is Director of Mission in the North Texas Conference.

Put Your Call to Action

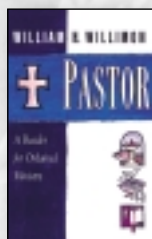
Resources to Help You Hone Your Pastoring Skills



Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry, by William H. Willimon. Ordained ministry is a vocation to which we are called, not a profession that we choose. To answer that call is to open yourself to heartache and sometimes hardship; yet, it is also to make yourself available to deep and profound joy as well. Willimon draws on the stories of great teachers of the Christian tradition to demonstrate that, while much about Christian ministry has changed, its core concerns—

preaching the word, caring for souls, leading congregations in the sacramental life—remains the same.

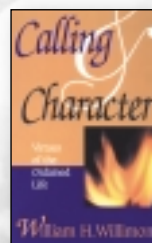
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Pastor: A Reader for Ordained Ministry, by William H. Willimon. Brings together the best voices from 20 centuries of Christian pastors and leaders and explores what they have to say on the tasks and roles of ministry.

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