



Background

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APPOINTMENTS AND CROSS-RACIAL APPOINTMENTS TO CHURCHES IN THE CITY: A REVIEW OF SOME CLEAR AND PRESENT REALITIES

(This month's issue is a reprint of an article written by Rev. Dr. Eugene A. Blair, District Superintendent, Crossroads District, Detroit Conference.)

The year 1968 was pivotal for The United Methodist Church and our urban communities. This was the year The UMC was formed by merger and the year many of our urban centers began to truly disintegrate. The year 1968 marked shifts and realities that we must take into account today when it comes to clergy appointments in urban communities or cross-racial appointments in the same communities. These shifts also have a direct bearing on supervision of clergy and urban churches by district superintendents. Here are a couple of challenges from my experience in the Detroit Annual Conference.

First, we in the church must own the world we have created in our urban centers. We must acknowledge and repent of white flight and de facto segregation in our communities and churches. The reality for many urban churches is this: the whites fled years ago when people of color moved into the community. They still drive in to "their" church on Sunday mornings for worship and drive back out to where they live, work, shop, and raise their families. Today they lament the lack of children, youth, or a future because of the absence of whites.

This is not news. But in order for us to move ministry forward in these situations, those who fled have to take *re-ownership* of this reality. Robert D. Lupton in his book, *Return Flight: Community Development*

Through Re-Neighboring Our Cities, suggests that we even have to move back into the city to save the city and ourselves. We cannot say the crime, unemployment, drugs, crowding, or low property values are due to those who moved in a generation ago. This reality is here because those of us with incomes, jobs, values, resources, a tax base, and social responsibility chose to remove ourselves from the community but kept the church the same. Usually this meant an all-white church surrounded by people of color.

Secondly, the challenge today is to appoint clergy to these settings who understand the history and reality of these truths. Finding a white pastor who has the heart for the city is often a tough assignment. They are few and far flung. Add to this the difficulty of appointing a person of color to a church that still wants a pastor who looks like them. Those pastors of color who can do this ministry and have a heart for this special ministry are also few and far flung. Worse, too often our practice is to wait until all resources of the particular church are gone and the white membership is sparse, with a building that is in total disrepair before we appoint an appropriate, usually black, pastor. We then lament or praise that pastor based on how well he or she saved the church from closing.

Third, an obvious challenge is the failure to do evangelistic ministry and to be the Christian community with those at the foot of the church steps in the first place. We have failed for years to reach out to people suffering in our urban communities surrounded by violence, poverty, need, urban pollution, and diversity.

In the Crossroads District, this is exacerbated by the contentious relations between unions and General Motors, the unions and people of color, and the flight of whites from the city core. Ultimately, General Motors left Flint and took tens of thousands of jobs with it. Often, those at the foot of the steps of the churches have decided a long time ago that they are not welcome in these churches, no matter how hard we work at it. Even for churches that have transitioned and are now predominantly African-American, the stigma of the building stays with them.

This leads to the fourth challenge: many who fled the city have reduced vital ministry to returning there only to “do good.” There is no real life-changing ministry when we just want to do good and feel good. Doing good without vital discipleship and intentional evangelism is short-lived and only allows us to feel good for the moment. The church has to be invested in people and ministry that changes lives. Do good, yes. But the good we do must be from a heart of love and concern for those at the margins. Given that, suburban churches with a heart for ministry can be invaluable partners with our churches in the city.

New Approaches to Old Challenges

What do we do next and how do we approach these ministries? Over the past 40 years we have spent countless hours and thousands of dollars on seminars, workshops, courses, and conventions on ministries to these communities. Conferences and judicatories can only point to a handful of stories and ministries that have bridged the breach and stood in the gap. Perhaps we need to re-group and re-think on a more local level. Here are some questions that might lead to some new ideas.

First, where are the leaders?

It might be helpful to boldly ask clergy and lay people in a more direct way, “*Who is gifted and interested in this ministry?*” If we can identify these leaders, perhaps we can use our resources more directly to mentor, train, encourage, support, and deploy them in key places. The appointment system might be challenged to develop a leadership training and succession plan

for key urban churches that includes persons with vital urban leadership and pastoral abilities. Perhaps a full-time elder is not the way to go. We should look for part-time or full-time local pastors, lay speakers, and lay leaders who have the capacity for pastoral ministry and find ways to assign them to churches in need.

Second, what churches can make it?

Not all churches are going to be here in the future in these urban settings. Many are gone today that were once vital and thriving. So we need to ask which churches have the spiritual and moral capacity to become viable disciple-making stations and ministry posts. We need to identify churches that are willing to look at models other than a full-time elder for their pastoral leader. These churches need to be approached, encouraged, re-trained, and supported in this effort. We cannot save all our congregations that have been floundering since 1968. But we can ask, “Where do we have the best chance for a turn-around with the best leader?” Triage is going to be necessary.

Right now, we let churches go on as long as they have money and resources. If they can afford a full-time pastor, we give them one. We have no plan for other models. We cannot sit by and watch churches simply die a painful and ugly death due to the lack of a viable plan of action. We must reclaim words like *vital*, *merger*, and *closure* that leave a heritage and legacy for new ministry.

If churches want to have a future, surely they will be sharing a pastoral leader in many new and varied ways. Perhaps a conference or district staff person could also pastor one of these vital congregations, thus sharing expenses and spreading resources, and creating a learning center.

Third, where are some real-life models?

There are some success stories out there in our urban communities. United Methodists are doing some extremely fine work of ministry in some of the most difficult situations in America. But we have to tell the story. We need to help one another find those stories, engage that expertise, and use those successful models and ideas. In Flint for example, we have Court Street

United Methodist Church, organized in the 1800s, which for the first time in many years experienced a growth in new members. Asbury United Methodist Church on the east side of Flint has a new and bold plan for reaching college students in its community. The next step for these congregations may be to become teaching churches to share their experiences and learn from others.

Finally, what is the plan for the city?

Each district superintendent and district leaders need a vision and a plan. We cannot wait for someone else to hand it to us. Not to have a plan is to continue the course to nowhere resulting in painful church closures and disillusioned members and lay people. We can no longer simply manage the decline and hope for the best. The church expects more from its leaders, no matter how painful the decisions are to be made. In the Crossroads District, we are in our second year of our Holy Boldness Urban Academy. Many churches have been encouraged and challenged to find new ways of being in ministry in the city of Flint. They are reporting that for the first time in years they sense that things can be better and that things can change. It is not a perfect plan, but we have a plan.

A great deal has happened in the church and our cities since 1968. We know what to do and have been trained on how to do it. It is time to put all of this knowledge to work. The Great Commission and the Great Commandment are clear about our mission. We need to have local people gather for prayer and visioning and move and make local decisions and

tough choices about the urban center where they are in ministry. And yes, we have to use those words no one likes: new churches in old places, new services and second sites, mergers and closures.

My reading tells me our best urban planners know that the rebuilding of the urban core is vital to America's future. Those who have fled must come back in some way or form. Caring for the urban core is a global effort. Diverse people living side by side, educating their children, providing an economic base, and securing community and human services is a worthy goal for us all. I submit a moral and spiritual vitality is essential to such a vision. Clearly, the church has a central role in making this happen by modeling the beloved community and providing a caring Christian church. I hope we will think about this together.

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