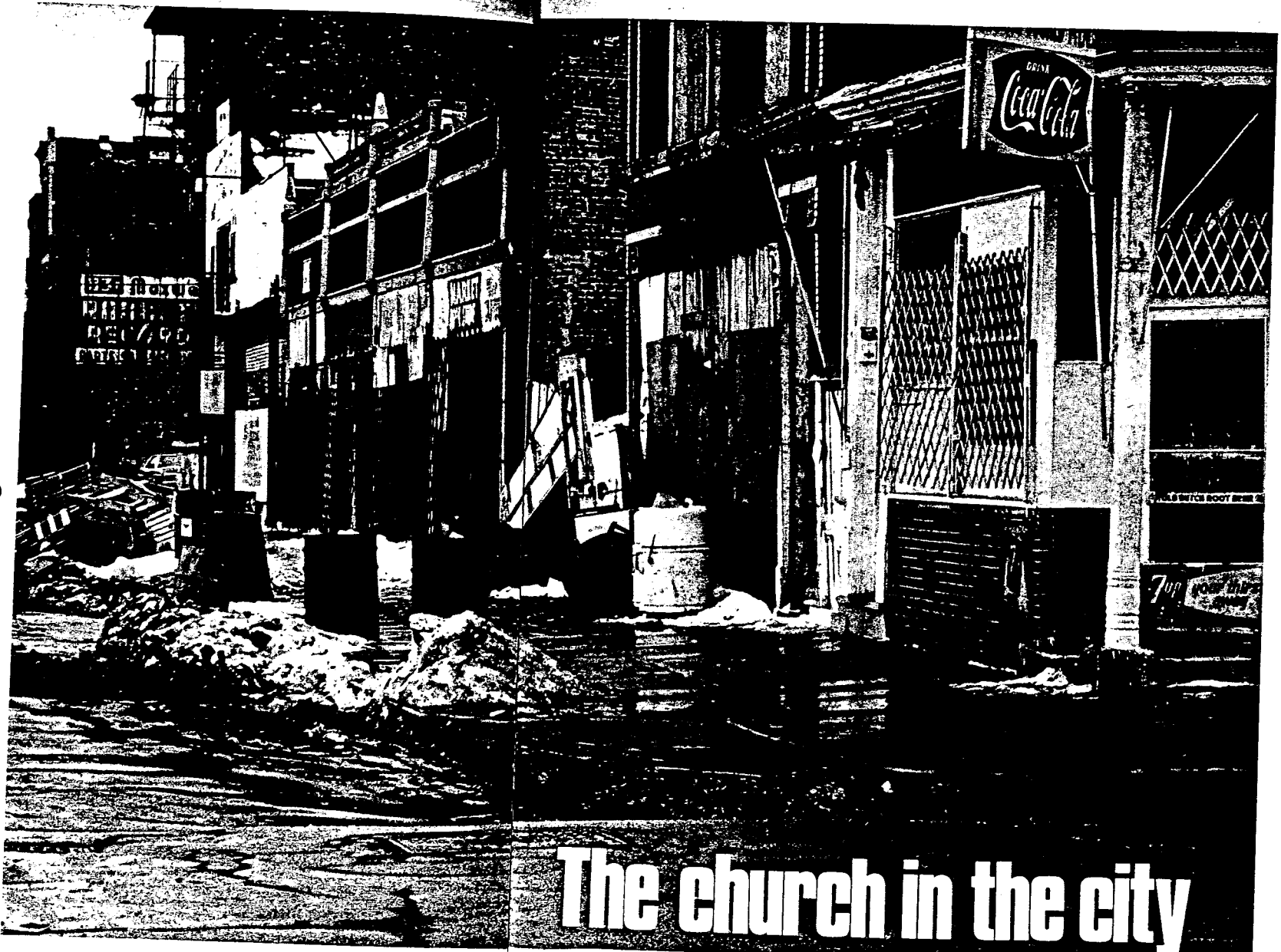


*Sojourners*  
April, 1975

## A dialogue with seven Chicago Christians

We have all heard the many biblical and theological mandates issued to bring a Christian presence to the city. We thought it would be helpful to us all to draw from the experience of some pastors and youth leaders that have been in the city, seeking to be ministers of the gospel in the urban context of Chicago. In this dialogue, they share out of that experience, their commitments, their hopes, their fears, their failures and frustrations, their vision for the church in the city. Our group of urban Christians included Bill Bentley, pastor of Calvary Bible Church and president of the National Black Evangelical Association; Clarence Hilliard, a pastor of Circle Church; Bill Leslie, pastor of LaSalle Street Church; Bud Ipema, Great Lakes Regional Training Director for Young Life; Ray Bakke, pastor of Fairfield Avenue Baptist Church; Ron Behm, pastor of South Shore Bible Church and director of City Churches Intern Ministries and Vorley Sangster, Chicago Central Director for Young Life.

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# The church in the city

**Post American:** What is at stake in the church being in the city?

**Bill Bentley:** I think the city itself is at stake. Historically the city has been the focus of socio-economic, political and even religious activity. So I say the city is at stake, and I think that's most crucial, because as goes the city, so goes the nation. There is almost no indication statistically or otherwise that in the foreseeable future it is going to be significantly different from what it is now. Therefore, the present Christian presence in the city is absolutely crucial.

**Bill Leslie:** I think that not only is the city at stake, but the gospel is at stake. I don't think that we can preach the gospel with integrity much longer and be heard if we escape and ignore the city or write the city off almost as if the gospel won't work there. I read recently that someone said there were three cultures that Christianity really hadn't penetrated: one was the Hindu culture, the other was Muslim culture, and the third was the culture of our modern cities. The person apart from Christ can tell authenticity when he sees it, and more and more people are going to feel that they can't embrace the gospel if it only works in a greenhouse.

**Bud Ipema:** I hear young people in the city streets saying that the gospel has lost its authenticity, asking in anger and depression, "How can you call yourselves Christian if everytime we expand into your community you disappear." But more than that I hear black people in the inner city where it has been black for a long time saying: "Show us your Jesus; show how he is going to effect the quality of our lives." So it seems to me that if the church is going to retain its integrity it's going to have to begin dealing with structures that oppress and produce lack of quality in people's lives.

**Clarence Hilliard:** I think even suburbia itself, its survival, depends on the survival of the city. What happens in the city reaches the suburbs eventually. There is no problem that we've had in the city that won't eventually have gone out into the suburbs. The flow is from the city out, not the other way around. So in a real sense, when you talk about the survival of the nation and everything else, it's tied to the survival of the city.

**Ray Bakke:** One thing the city speaks to me about is the fact that in the whole global village, there are now 125 cities of a million or more people.

But I see the typical church's response to the city to be withdrawing persons and institutions and coming back in with impersonal kinds of ministries and programs, crusades and happenings, and that bothers me. That tells us more about our technology than about our gospel.

**Verley Sangster:** In terms of sheer numbers, I know that 75% of the population lives within the city, and in spite of the problems, it seems to me that the church really doesn't have a choice but to return.

**Bill Leslie:** For a long time our church was made up predominantly of single people and of students. Many of these have married and have stayed in the city and a number of them have bought homes, or are committed to staying. But now that some of their children are getting to be six and seven, we've just lost three families to Evanston, and a couple of more to Oak Park (Chicago suburbs).

A combination of factors are involved, the schools being the predominant one. So on one hand we have people staying in our church; on the other hand we have people moving. And I'm very disturbed, though I understand the move. It's a very devastating thing, because you develop what I would call a stained glass window witness, where you can drive in on the weekend, and hold meetings, as over against Christian presence.

**Post American:** You're talking about people who want to be in the city, but then they face things like the crime question and the school question, and all of a sudden they feel they can't stay in the city. Now the difference of course is that they have the option to move out, but the people around them in the city don't. Now how can we come to grips with that? We can't say, as has often been said, that people make that move out of their lack of caring, because many of them do care.

How do we, on the one hand, recognize these as real problems and not just phony issues, and on the other hand deal with them in a way that we aren't somehow taking advantage of solutions that we have available to us because of the privileges of our color and class—solutions that the people we are trying to serve don't have access to?

**Ron Behm:** One response is the creation of alternative schools through the churches in the community. Though it may come out of our

need, it can be seen more as a ministry to the community. I realize someone may say we need to get in and work with the school that's there. I think that's another possibility. The local school situation could be improved, and that would help our own kids too. Or we could even go to the alternative school route, which I think is a tremendous ministry.

**Bill Bentley:** I can see the viability and the necessity of that approach as a part of a total outreach. I see a danger if Christians in mass flock to this alternative which won't leave the public school systems any better.

We are committed to wherever we live that our child will go to school there and even our black friends tell

**"I think that not only is the city at stake, but the gospel is at stake . . ."**

us we're crazy. We are committed to that because we feel that there are many kids going to school who don't have the alternative of going to Evanston or Oak Park. So I would put the heavier emphasis upon penetrating the public school, getting in there and taking the knocks along with everybody else, and working towards solving the problems from the inside.

I'm not under any illusions that this is going to be grand and successful. It's going to be a long overhaul pull. The schools didn't get in the shape they are in overnight, and we're not going to get them out of overnight.

I'm saying that what is possible for some cannot be for all, and somewhere along the line somebody is going to have to become a part of it. I'm just as much concerned about the danger to my wife in this neighborhood as anybody is in any other neighborhood. And my wife is in

danger. We're in danger. And I'm very much concerned about it. It is very real.

But I think again of the countless numbers of people who can't move and while we don't want to throw bricks and sit in judgment on those who do, we want to remember that the vast majority of people probably won't be able to move. We're going to have to give an awful lot of time and consideration to create approaches to problems that are for those who can't leave the city, and who don't have the options we have.

**Clarence Hilliard:** At Circle, we have had some people move into the city. If people are going to move back into the city, education is a serious problem that has got to be addressed. We have

just an individual, concerned parent.

There are a number of examples of that. In Mississippi that's the strategy of John Perkins—in health care and in education and other areas—by creating models not to withdraw from concern from those dominant structures, but in fact to be a model and a powerful witness to them for the change of those structures.

**Ray Bakke:** I see a number of schools popping up in churches, racially motivated and offering fear and indoctrination, rather than education. In our part of the city there will be four Christian schools in about four blocks—a Catholic, a Lutheran, a Freechurch, and a Baptist school—all of which are going to have funding and staffs in one of the neediest areas

about a situation where the life support and the life services are not viable in the city. So the Christians are there, but because those things are not viable, people either leave or opt for a model that they have access to because of their class or color, but that the people around them don't have access to. Whether building models or affecting the larger structures or both, somehow we have to be making life support more viable by our presence in the city.

When that's talked about, people speak of the role of the family in terms of providing support. Now I think that the family is very important. But I also think that the overwhelming non-viability of life in the city means that to be there we're going to have to find



Bakke



Behm



Bentley

thought about, not as an either/or, not either private or public, but both/and. You have got to do something in terms of the private school for the immediate, and you have got to begin working on the public school also. It seems that if you have a private school going, you've got some leverage with the public school system that you don't have otherwise. Doors open, if you've got the tools, and that's very crucial if you are going to deal with that public school.

**Post American:** Sometimes the creation of an alternative school is not just a withdrawal from concern about the public system, but in fact holds forth the power of a model to itself be a catalyst to change that system. It can sometimes be much more powerful when you are working from a base that is doing the job better than the institution is doing the job, because then you have a base that can speak to the problems as more than

of all of Chicago. All of them are going to be running around the country in their various groups raising money, and talking about the impoverished Chicago school system. And none of the schools is talking to each other—only about each other.

I feel that the tension to run and establish private schools really shows how professional and middle class we are when it comes right down to it. I think that we may even be allowing or requiring the school system to compensate for what we aren't doing at home. Maybe this says we ought to give serious attention to the lifestyle we have as pastors, to family, to disciplines we have, and how we keep ourselves alive as families. But I'm not sure that investing huge sums of money and bureaucratic involvement and setting up rival schools is the way. **Post American:** Whether we decide for building models or working in the present structures, we are talking

more support than just in our own families. Even a strong nuclear family in the city has real problems in survival because of the overwhelming nature of the problems that are being faced.

Are we not talking about the church somehow learning to become more of a support group, a community in some sense? Will the church in the city have to learn more about being a community than the suburban church does, because the issues of survival are somehow just greater and more intense in the city? I'm not restricting community to the communal living forms, but if the church in the city is going to make life more viable, it has to become more and more of a community to support each other and its mission.

**Clarence Hilliard:** That's a key concept for the church in the city, I think. The very pressures of the city make it something we cannot escape. 9

Churches in other locations might feel that they can (though they really can't either), but their situation probably makes it easy for them to miss the need for becoming a community. The problems in the city are so great, the forces of evil are so institutionalized, that if we are going to have any kind of effect we are going to have to learn how to institutionalize good, to build our corporate strength.

We need to be dealing very seriously about what it means to be the body of Christ. What is a person committing themselves to when they enter the body, and what does the body commit itself to that person? Somehow we must make a commitment so that no one person can fall without all of us falling. I think that



Hilliard

was the commitment of the church in Acts.

I also think it is something we have got to develop beyond a single, local church. As believers in the city, we've got to begin to feel each other and our relationships to each other. Somehow we've got to learn that when one takes a stand we all stand together, and if there is an act against one, it's against all of us. If we can ever develop that kind of viability, its a new day, a new day in the city, it's a new day for the church, it's a new day for the kingdom.

Our people in the Austin area, some of them have been robbed, all of them scared. But I agree with what someone said earlier, we can't afford to take those options which are open to us, but are not open to other people.

People must begin to see that the body of Christ makes a difference, but an independent group of people off by themselves won't make it. That's why

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so many people are struggling over the question of educational needs, because they are fighting it alone.

We need to break out of that rugged individualism, which is not a biblical concept at all. Somehow economically, even though we may not move into a commune system, we've got to be committed to each other economically. When you get down to it, that is where it is going to lie. Are we willing to really stand with each other?

Post American: There's a question that really hits at the heart of our experience of trying to build a community. We are just coming to feel that we are engaged in spiritual warfare, intense spiritual warfare with tremendous concentrated corporate power, that the enemies we are



Ipema

fighting are incredible in terms of their concentrated power. And there is just no way that we are going to be able to be engaged in spiritual warfare with those kinds of institutions and powers individually. We have got to develop corporate strength and power to meet corporate power.

Now it's true that our understanding of power is of a whole different kind, the power of the Spirit over against the power of the world. The Spirit in the book of Acts is corporate power. It's the gathered people who are filled and empowered by God's Spirit and who are to be engaged in that kind of spiritual warfare. We're viewing the building of community not as some kind of an esoteric new fad that now all of us have to be into, but it's really the whole basis of our ability to survive and be involved in that kind of warfare, with that kind of corporate power.

Bill Leslie: Maybe I can just speak from our experience about what you've just talked about. Our church is a church with a lot of gifted people. They came in and we were in a very needy area, one of the most needy in Chicago. So our whole idea was: everybody discover your gift and get out there, which we did, but without the community.

Now all of a sudden everybody was all alone. Everybody kept saying "I can't take it." We recruited a lot of inner city teachers who came in and we have about four left; about fifteen or twenty social workers have all given up; the people that have been involved in our various ministries all have felt very very isolated. So we're taking whatever time it is going to take



Leslie

us to build community. We've just placed a moratorium until we can go back and get the kind of community that will give them the support and the resources to stay there. I think that is where the strength of the church in the city lies.

Bud Ipema: In Young Life, we are meeting a hundred to a hundred and fifty thousand kids at their junior and senior high school age, and at least half of them are coming out of the middle or upper strata of middle class America. Their parents are in the ins of the corporate structures at this point. They have the power.

I see my mission as meeting those kids with a Christ who is not only the spiritual giver of salvation on an individual level, but the Christ who gets involved in the structures, and calling those kids to commitment to Christ which means vocational commitment in the various structures

where they have ready entrance, where they have the opening, because those positions get passed from father to son. We all need the bridge between the urban and the suburban church.

Post American: I'd like to explore that for a bit, because that strikes me as a very, very important question. To me, we're talking about more than just available resources and about getting to the people who have power and are in the institutions. We're talking about something that is much more basic than that.

Somehow the meaning of the gospel seems different outside of this window than it does in Wheaton Illinois. It's just different. We've got to begin talking about not just creating con-



Sangster

ditions of resources and power from there to here, or somewhere else to here, but actually that there is a whole lot of evangelism that has to go on in the churches about what the gospel means.

It's not that we need to make our power and resources available to the poor, but that the gospel is a message unlike any other. It's a message of downward mobility in the identification with the cause of the poor and oppressed. Everything else is a message of upward mobility. But as people hear the gospel and respond to it, at that point they must begin a plunge downward and begin to relinquish the world's notion of security and power and real resources.

I think we need to say more than you need to put your resources and use your power on behalf of things that are in new directions, but that our lives themselves need to be

redirected. Our understanding of what the gospel means has to be changed in the process. It is a discipling task,—an evangelistic task. I'm concerned that we are really going as far as the gospel would have us go, and not settling for something that is less than that.

Because I think that each of us has had our understanding of what the gospel means changed by being in the city. I've learned more about the meaning of the gospel being in the city that I did in seminary for two years, just being in the city and experiencing that every single day. How do we begin to communicate a whole different gospel out of that experience? Bill Bentley: I was thinking of the early church. When the church found the

**"I have come to believe in the necessity of the church and what the church is supposed to do and mean for people in the city."**

world in array against it, it took the world on. It went out to penetrate and to change it. There are such things as structures of evil which we can only respond to in that way. The fact of the matter is that the church went out and outlived everybody else.

We talk as though our problems are new. We talk as though the vale of life, since the Vietnam War, is nil. But so it was the case with the New Testament world. Life didn't have very much value. The same kinds of problems that human being have always been faced with we are faced with too, and we act as though they are brand new.

The early church went out and determined that it was going to outlive the world. And it did. That's how it won it. It didn't win it by running from it. It didn't win it by trying to reform it. It went out and tried to change it by its new way of life. Now in some way or another we need to recapture that

kind of vision and let that energize whatever strategies we develop, because without that we will be merely posing counter strategies to other strategies and there is no end to that. I think what we really need to do is to recapture the kind of a vision that we can do all things through Christ. And I think we need not to be daunted by the enormity of things that we see.

Ray Bakke: We're talking about two centuries of the early church, arduously on the street, unknown very often, anonymous disciples, with a whole gamut of strategies, consciously or otherwise. I think frankly that we've got to think longrange, in hundreds of years. We've got to think of the gospel as more than just immediate in its effect. We have got to allow the second and third and fourth generations to work with us.

We have got to have faith, to see that it isn't going to be done right today, that we're not going to change Chicago structurally or politically or economically just today. And that is not a cop-out. I don't intend it to be. It's a faith statement. It's a statement that God works in history. He uses clay vessels. We've got to be content sometimes to pour the gospel into the life of one person if that's where we are, and not necessarily to feel inundated by the presence of 3 1/2 million in this city.

Bill Bentley: Ruth and I were talking today when we were coming home. She picked me up at work and we saw the dope addicts all over the streets, and we were just saying that we're here, and we've been here, and we've made no significant impact upon the people, and yet we have to have faith that our efforts are not going in vain. As she said, the biggest thing that we can really count on is the friendliness of the people. They all stop to talk and share, and they'll promise to come to church which we don't ask them to do. But the friendliness represents some kind of change, though not all we want to see.

Be we have to have faith that the gospel does not return void; it won't go out and come back without accomplishing God's purposes, even though we don't see it. We want to be careful that that's not a cop-out too. But those are some of the kinds of real, practical obstacles that we run into here.

We have the problems of mobility; we have the projects behind us here which nobody significantly gets into. 11

The quality of life in the projects is unbelievable. The children who come to our church—it's absolutely unbelievable the things that they are exposed to, and at the early tender age that they are exposed to it. So it would be very easy to see yourself inundated by what's going on, but we have to have not only the short term, but the long term perspective also, and we just have to believe, in spite of what we see that some, that some good is going to come.

**Ron Behm:** I have come more to believe in the necessity of the church and what the church is supposed to do and mean for the people that live in the city. Just to give the meaning of life and the hope for life that the gospel is to people who live right here—that's an awful lot, just to be a pastor to the people. I'm sure that I have not discovered all of what that means for me or for anybody—to help the people of my church discover what the Christian life is for them and what it ought to be. Right there, you could take your whole time with only twenty or thirty people.

**Ray Bakke:** My feeling is that I've been a heavily task-oriented type person and feeling that the church should define its task, knowing its type of community and making contracts to become viable as an expeditionary force in the world, not primarily a fortress where people hide. That's my theology. But I've come to a part of the city where people are very traumatized and need a place to hide. They really need a place where they can come away from their problems. They need to be comforted. I've concluded that it's a real hard struggle to try to meet that with my theology of change and maximum participation.

**Bill Bentley:** Part of my problem and part of my fear is how the church here is to be transmitted from one generation to the other with the kind of commitment to get the job done. That's where I feel my greatest failure. We have raised a generation. Young people have gone on and now reared their own, and they have been bitten by the affluent syndrome. Their children are being put in private schools now. Those who teach are not putting their children in the schools in which they teach. And finally they just up and moved. They ran like everybody else. They ran from the neighborhood.

What is needed I would say is just a handful of people, maybe six or eight people, who would be willing to penetrate and saturate the neighborhood. It's really needed. The people are crying for it.

**Verley Sangster:** I was wondering about the statement on spiritual warfare. It seems that the clergy and the people that are out fighting the war are very much aware of it, but I was wondering just how many lay people are aware that we are engaged in warfare?

**Post American:** I'm hearing a lot of things that are tying together. More and more people are coming right back down to the place that we are talking about right now: that the most important thing, more important than our programs, as important as they are, is something called a discipling kind of ministry, that we are somehow trying to multiply people who are learning what it means to follow in simple obedience. That's building spiritual foundations; that's building something much more than our programs and our ideas.

In our neighborhood again, the people have seen program after program. Those people have been the subject of over a hundred theses for PhD candidates. SDS has been there. Model Cities has been there. Everybody has been there, and has used the people.

And yet in that neighborhood and in most neighborhoods, what there is not is a presence of a handful of people who are getting to feel that there is something fundamental to the gospel about being with the poor, not even for the benefit of the poor, but that we learn what the gospel means when we are with the poor, that somehow Jesus is more there, that in the suburbs Christ is there but somehow he is more diluted, that Jesus is with the poor and with those who suffer, and that we learn what it means to be a Christian when we learn to view the system from the vantage point of the victims of that system.

To me that is a discipleship issue, more than a political or educational project. It's a building of spiritual foundations among ourselves and that's a task that we need to learn how to do, a very pastoral task.

**Bill Bentley:** Maybe I need to do some rethinking in terms of the question of presence, because the people know we're here; there is no question about that. We are here.

One night when my wife was coming home, I was out of town. And she was coming about 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. She parked the car and a dope addict on the corner walked her to the door. "Preacher lady you shouldn't need to be out this late by yourself." And we never know how many things we've been saved from. But the idea is that people know we're here.

**Ray Bakke:** That's great Bill. Missionaries do this in Africa. They come home and people get tears in their eyes hearing stories about it. And the people say how courageous, and take huge offerings to send those missionaries over there. And you do it here and they say, "How stupid." "How could you risk your children's

**"... there is something fundamental to the gospel about being with the poor ..."**

life and future by living in that part of town?"

**Bud Ipema:** I would like to call us back to structural change. If in fact we've deplored our folks moving out of a neighborhood, and we believe that an investment in a neighborhood is essential, we have to deal with those forces which keep that from happening. It's no accident. It's no simple materialistic choice of our people that have forced them out. A number of forces have produced that: the urban renewal, the absentee landlord, the lack of funds to be invested, redlining.

It seems to me that the church's responsibility is to do both: to have the presence of the pastoral duties of the church with the love of Christ, at the same time to get hold of the structures that oppress and destroy and to find whatever way we can to keep those evil forces in check, from acting against us.

**Post American:** If your groups are like

ours, most of what's good has come from learning from our failures. I'm sure that each group has different experiences. But have you had some of those kinds of experiences where you've reached some points of real bankruptcy in personal ways, and in spiritual ways as a church, and then have found some breakthroughs in a new release of the spirit among yourselves?

**Bill Leslie:** The first church I went to right out of seminary was a conservative baptist church which grew to about a thousand members in three years. I didn't know the city then. Then I went down to a little urban church with the idea that we would have two Sunday morning services. The people weren't where I was and I

a very traumatic thing for me, a very shattering thing, a complete reorientation of my values.

**Ray Bakke:** After I had finished all my seminary work I took this church where I am now, which is essentially Slavic, Spanish, and hillbilly, and decided that I could really bring that church some new resources: good theology, expertise in urban planning.

But that was a mistake. I hadn't learned to listen long enough, and I didn't realize how much I had threatened people by imposing structures on the pastorate. It was humbling to back off of that after a couple of years.

I thought the thing was structural too when I came. I thought we'd really have to get out and do structural

those little microcosms of hope without which we couldn't keep moving.

**Ron Behm:** I think there has to be a community of hope, too. I believe in the church now more than I did when I came out here from seminary. There is a community of hope where something is happening. That which is coming in the future is already here, not in its fullness, not in its perfection, but it's here. If it couldn't be seen in some way, or touched in some way, then it would be very difficult to go on.

I would like to see local congregations that have vitality and life and ministry and meaning for the people who are gathered there in the city. I'd like to see people gathered in



wasn't where the people were. The numbers went down. We got one of those transitional things in the neighborhood where everybody moved again. Our church has seen about five or six ethnic groups in 37 years.

The Sunday school went down, the money went down, everything went down. I can remember telling God that He had taken his spirit from us, that he had withdrawn from me.

Then a friend helped me to discover the great commission. The only imperative verb in the great commission is to make disciples. He suggested that maybe I had to rethink some of my values, in terms of buildings and size and all those things. Maybe the important thing was what was happening to the people who was one of the most liberating things. It got me out of running a three ring circus. I'm still learning and growing. It gave me a whole new perspective on who I was, and why I was here. But that was

I made a directory of 44 institutions in the neighborhood that we were going to change. I had my community surveys. Then I discovered that I had nobody in the church with an education over eighth grade, and they weren't about to challenge those institutions. There was no way to do that unless I did it myself. I began to see the futility of my running around and playing the symbolic prophet role and leaving my congregation back there working on survival. That again was a kind of failure, setting aside my own agenda, and coming up to people's needs. Hopefully we will combine the two at some point, but it's been constant negotiation and renegotiation of my role.

**Bud Ipema:** In spite of all the brokenness, the hope comes when a person meets the Lord and his whole life and whole family gets turned around because of the Lord, in spite of the negatives in which he lives. That's

very meaningful relationships to the Lord Jesus Christ and to one another, and just enjoying and celebrating and experiencing that, and also going out in service and doing what they can in the areas in which God has called them. That's the thing I'd love to see more and more of, and to realize more than it already is.

**Bill Leslie:** I think we need a rediscovery of a faith community. To be a really valid thing in the city, we need a new rediscovery of what it means to be the body of Christ and all that's involved in that, both locally and larger than that.