

Don't warm the bench.
Get Your Game On!

John Blake

Kids everywhere love basketball-especially city kids. There is little time to talk or explain, just play. You learn as you go and you learn quickly that respect is everything on the court.

To really play the game and earn respect, you've got to take the ball "inside" (not play on the perimeter). Whether or not you can slam it, you need to "take it to the rack" (the basket). If you play inside you will get knocked around, bruised and fouled. But the hoop is the focus of the game. It is also called the goal.

Ministry is much like the game of basketball. Are you really in the game? Do you have a goal? Christians are notorious for playing out on the perimeter. Only a few take the ball inside.

Why take the "ball" inside?

A Look at the Facts

Look at the statistics. Ray Bakke reminds us in *A Heart for the City*, "The frontier of missions has shifted to the cities. The greatest number of unreached people is no longer geographically distant but rather culturally distant. You must realize that the nations of the world are coming to the city." The 2000 U.S. Census revealed: 80% of the country's population lives in metro/urban areas.

Look at the trends. Everything from music to fashion, language and politics is dominated by urban trends, says Bob Bufford of Leadership Networks. Sociologists, market analysis and government officials pay close attention to what happens in urban America. What happens there will influence what happens everywhere.

Look at the task. There is no easy, painless or inexpensive way to minister in the city today. Urban ministry is nearly always cross-cultural and calls us beyond our comfort zones into uncharted territory. But city ministry is critical! D.L. Moody said, "Water runs downhill, and the highest hills are the great cities. If we can stir them, we shall stir the whole country."

To practice obedience to the Word of God and participate in contemporary missions, we must go inside the city. We must cross the street with the changeless Gospel.

Where is the Church in regard to this mission field? Do our methods, ideas, and attitudes really impact today's urban kids? Do they produce devoted disciples for Christ? In *Dare to Love the Ghetto*, Keith Phillips tells about one particular church, "They took five or ten black boys from the inner-city for a week of camping experience, stuffed them full of the gospel, meticulously recorded each decision and then pitched them back into the ghetto with these words of comfort: God bless you! We'll send follow-up materials by mail. Hope everything works out."

Long-Term Workers Needed

The city desperately needs long-term workers who are willing to lay down their lives for the children. Many city kids are confused about religion, yet they hunger to know the truth.

Evangelism is the first priority, but discipleship is critical in the inner city. The bridge that will cross the gap from city kids to Christ is building relationships that are biblically based upon equality, grace, trust and longevity. Our attitude must be in concert with the Spirit of God and the Word of God.

Dr. John Perkins states, "There can be no reconciliation without equality." God's people can never fall into the sin of partiality and be effective as God's ministers. The city and its people must be seen as equals and they must be valued.

It is in the heat of urban ministry that some of the most creative, energetic, entrepreneurial ministries pioneer paths for the church of tomorrow. A few examples include:

- Church-based, after-school summer day camp and other special programs held at the local church facility or a neighbourhood site every weekday.
- A 15-year commitment to raise-up and disciple indigenous leaders
- "Boot camp" training and qualification of urban workers
- "Bridge teams" working three years to jump-start ministry in a city
- A program to disciple and empower preteens.

This column will focus on the extremely urgent need to evangelize and disciple city kids and how to do it biblically from contemporary models. It will challenge your theology and your way of ministry. It will emphasize that the spiritual battle rages everywhere but the front lines are in the inner cities and the battle is extreme everyday. I'll see you on "the inside" next time.