

“What if we possessed the sensitivity to see that society’s problems do affect all of us in one way or another and that we are to bear one another’s burdens for the common good of all?”^[1]

What’s in a name?

Community development is understood as the act or process of making visible or manifesting (i.e. developing) a unified body of individuals or people with common interests living in a particular area (i.e. community).^[2] What strikes me about the definition of community is that “people” are the qualifying factor. In order to address a community then, one must address the people who comprise the community. I intend to show in this paper that because we are created in the image of a relational, triune God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit in perfect communion) we are by our very nature relational beings in need of a relational approach to community development. This is radical because it deeply affects the way we treat one another. Until we recognize our universal connection to one another and understand that one’s struggle is all of our struggle, community development will be in vain, falling short of bearing witness to a Christ who has entered into every single person’s story, and desires to reconcile us all to himself. I will express my model of community development as one that is relationally ontological, compassionate in motive, and reconciling in practice.

This model must be rooted in Christ’s kingdom community, the church, which is rooted in our communal, triune God. I agree that, “nothing other than the community of God’s people is capable of affirming the dignity of the poor and enabling them to meet their own needs.”^[3] It is only in relationship with our creator that we can understand our dignity and worth. Just as civil rights and community development leader Dr. John M. Perkins’ model was derived from experience and not theory, in the same way will my model be shaped and developed.^[4] Additionally, my model will encourage shared resources and solidarity among local churches.

Commodity or community?

This issue became personal to me when I started wrestling with the idea of community development while I was in Central America for six months. I predominantly thought of community development as building houses, starting businesses, and finding clean drinking water for the poor in the slums or third world countries. People were sort of an after-thought, or mere inhabitants that would then use or inhabit these community development efforts. I thought of economics and business plans being implemented on the dusty, destitute roads of impoverished villages. Thus, I could not see how community development could be a part of my “calling” as a Christian. I’m not a businessperson. I’m not good with numbers. How then, could I help develop a community?

This is the first problem I believe we run into in community development work. Poverty has long been understood as “a lack of resources”. Therefore, “early models of development emphasized per capita income, progress, transfer of resources and increase in the level of income.”^[5] Development was measured by economic growth, productivity, raised income, and

access to public services. While these are all valid ways to measure economic poverty, it is not sufficient in bearing witness holistically to Christ in community. The frustrating thing about a relational approach to community development is that it cannot be measured in metrics.

When we seek after measurable metrics, we commodify people instead of valuing people for who they are. They are our brothers and sisters in humanity and in Christ. As Christians, we claim that we are called to love the least of these, but we will not know how to do that until we understand that we all-- poor, rich, black, white, male, female--have inherent dignity, created equally in the image of the triune God. Until then, people will be treated simply as a pair of hands that can pump a well, use a cash register, or write a business plan. Community development will end up being commodity development.

True community development does not isolate churches from one another, but rather solidifies them along with the broader community in a common vision of compassion towards the poor. We will uphold Nouwen's sentiment that true community is people whom you least enjoy being around. Just as the kingdom of God will be a diverse celebration, we will work to have diverse unity among churches to bring about true transformation. We need each other for our different gifts, backgrounds, and struggles. "God invites us to collaborate in the Trinitarian mission and encourages us to become partners with one another, and encourages churches to become partners together as well."^[6] It is necessary to develop communities in solidarity with other communities. "It is not biblical...for particular communities of the visible, organized church to exist in isolation from one another. Particularity is not exclusivity."^[7] 1 Peter 2:9-10 depicts a worldwide, multicultural fellowship of witness.

My model of community development will start by engaging a particular community. We will enter into their story and experience their burdens. Along with this mutuality, we will build relationships and trust, spend time with them, and then practically serve, empower and educate them by partnering with various organizations, schools and churches in the area. It will be a dynamic, organic ministry because that is the nature of relationships. Dr. John M. Perkins' 3 R's (relocation-living among the poor, reconciliation- to each other and to Christ, and redistribution- a just distribution of resources) will provide a solid framework from which we will implement our model.

"The aim of the church is not simply to make a given culture more just or more caring, but to shape a people into an alternative way of life. The church is a social reality that continually engages in the practices that cultivate a people of truth, peace, wholeness, and holiness."^[8] And we can only do this because of the One who has ultimately transformed and shaped us.

As Dr. Perkins is doing in Mississippi and Shane Claiborne is doing with the Simple Way Community in Philadelphia, it is powerful to actually be there. One can then build relationships, eat with them, watch their children, tutor them, pray with them, sit with them, *be* with them. If this is not a possibility, no matter what community one is in, then how are they empowering and ministering to them as relational beings? If one is just passing out a program, a handout, or going in once a week to serve, then the community is not being handled as a relational community; they are being treated as a commodity that needs simply food, good health, and money. These things are necessities, but not in and of themselves sufficient for a holistic model.

We will model our work after the ministry of Christ, who entered into a community's struggle and life, and then transformed it both spiritually and physically. He related to communities in specific, tangible ways, and we seek to do the same, all the while pointing to his saving grace and truth. The end goal is ultimately to develop communities who will find their security and intimacy in this redeeming Christ. "The central thrust of Christian concern for the poor follows as a response to the love shown toward humans by God in the salvatory event of Jesus Christ."[\[9\]](#)

Loving outside the lines

Another element of a relational model of community development is that Christ's compassion is wasteful and unconstrained. "Wherever true Christian community is formed, compassion *happens* in the world."[\[10\]](#) Out of this Christian community will overflow God's grace and compassion. This goes against our cultural norms, so it sounds absurd if not viewed in relation to Christ's love for us. He pours love into our hearts (Romans 5:5), which then spills out into people's lives. This is not a deserving or allotted love, but a messy, generous, limitless love. The love of Christ never runs dry, and we will practice community development that runs full force in this abundant, fearless, confident love. This will empower us to take risks, dream big, and imagine outside the box of a limited love.

A relational productivity

In Jesus' model, productivity arose from relationality.[\[11\]](#) He says, "apart from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5b). Rather than metrics, we will measure our success by faithfulness, connection and depth. Authentic community is success in Christ's eyes. That is a radical, paradoxical reality of which we must adjust our eyes and hearts. Jesus' model is challenging because we live in a fragmented, disconnected, individualistic society. Yet, "failure to recognize myself as being a neighbor is failure to acknowledge my own, and my neighbor's humanity. The violation of this relationship is a violation of my own essential nature and that of my neighbor."[\[12\]](#) As Gary W. Deddo says, "our essential humanity will either be affirmed and honored, or denied and dishonored in these relationships." Furthermore, Deddo states, "Human problems and human flourishing cannot be addressed individualistically."[\[13\]](#) Our challenge is to transform this disconnected way of thinking into a shared burden, struggle and calling to engage the world with the reconciling blood of Christ.

A demonstration of His love

Saving souls cannot be an isolated event if one is to truly bear witness to a holistic Christ who addressed both spiritual and physical needs. Community development is a necessary, foundational step to sharing the blood and compassion of Christ with others. It is the way Christ engaged, thus it is the way, as his hands and feet here and now, we are to engage humanity. We are to participate in this burden.[\[14\]](#) As Brandon Rhodes expands, "The fullness of that Day is

coming. But we can receive, enter, and demonstrate it today; and I believe that is what we are called to do. It's what makes us "the church": becoming the change God will eventually make in the world." This Kingdom of God that Jesus is referencing is what we are called to live out best we can until Christ actualizes the fullness of the Kingdom.^[15]

"There is a profound difference between being a church *in* or *to* an urban neighborhood, and being a church *with* its neighborhood. When a church takes this third approach, that church incarnates itself in that community."^[16] Identification, respect and mutual instruction occurs.

To thrive in community is to die

What makes a community "thrive, sustain, and live freely and fully?" A thriving economy? Clean drinking water? Solid, safe housing? Political rest? These solutions in and of them selves are all necessary, beautiful and good. But they are by no means sufficient. I believe that Christ in his fullness, in his humanity, in his nature of engaging humanity and entering into our reality is what breathes life into a community. He is the compassionate Christ who calls us to enter into one another's pain and struggle just as he did. All of the components of Christ: his relation to humanity, his intimacy, his identification with our struggle and sin, his bloody compassion, are all the things that comprise his sufficiency. Without one of these elements, he would be lacking. Thus, our salvation would not be complete.

In the same way, I believe that community development must mimic this incarnational engagement. Paul Farmer, a Harvard student committed to curing infectious disease in Haiti, expresses in the midst of witnessing and living amongst the poorest of the poor, "I know it sounds shallow, the opiate thing, needing to believe, palliating pain, but it didn't feel shallow. It was more profound than other sentiments I'd known, and I was taken with the idea that in an ostensibly godless world that worshiped money and power ...there was still a place to look for God, and that was in the suffering of the poor. You want to talk crucifixion? I'll show you crucifixion..." Living among the community is the most effective way to identify with and serve alongside a community.

We as the church must not simply serve a community, but serve with and among them. Otherwise, it is the rapture and retreat mentality, where one provides a handout, but has no need for the other. Just as a particular Christ entered into a particular community's world, we too, as Christ's kingdom community, are to do the same.

If there is nothing shared, no mutuality, then there is no true community with the other. This is important because Christ in his humanity did share, and he needed the sinners and poor in his midst. He ate with them, dwelled with them, and shared with them. However, this shared mutuality is manifested in regards to community development in different ways.

"As long as we avoid displacement, we will miss the compassionate life to which our Lord calls us." Yet displacement simply for the dramatic act of displacement from one's roots and familiarity is more "in the spirit of the American pioneers than in the spirit of Christ."^[17] I agree that displacement looks different to each person, and God calls each of us distinctly and uniquely. For many then, displacement to them may not mean physically entering into the slums of Calcutta in suit of Mother Theresa, or even moving in to low-income housing in the Lents neighborhood in Portland. We must be careful that what we do in the name of community

development is out of a humble calling from God. “As long as our primary concern in life is to be interesting and thus worthy of special attention, compassion cannot manifest itself.”^[18]

While meeting needs and empowering the community will be key parts of my model, this will be implemented in various ways. Some may feel called to move into the community. Others may not, but this will not be the sole qualifying factor for affective community development by my model. I do think ideally those we are helping are those we are living amongst, because that is how we best understand where they are coming from. We also see this in the way Jesus lived. There are various ways to help develop a community that does not necessitate living in physically close proximity with them, but limitations will undoubtedly occur if one is not fully immersed with the people. I believe we are all called to community development, but who we are called to, and which communities we are called to is unique. We must challenge ourselves. I agree with what Shane Claiborne said when he spoke at Mosaic Church in Portland, Oregon, “We do not make the gospel too hard. We make it too easy.” I do think we must challenge ourselves, think imaginatively and question why we are so comfortable, and how we are living is helping or hindering community development.

Compelled by beauty

Another key factor is being able to see the beauty in the mess rather than thinking we need to cover the mess up with beauty. We see that Martin Luther King, Jr. successfully captivated people with the beautiful vision of being judged by character rather than color. People are drawn to beauty and are sustained by beauty. My model will not seek to survive, or outlast other models, but rather will subsist off of serving the beautiful calling until death.

In the end, it will only be satisfaction in Christ that will sustain any community development effort. Our joy, fervor and stamina will only come from the flesh and blood of Christ, fueling us to love more radically, powerfully and imaginatively.

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[1] Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Division in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), p. 152.

[2] <http://www.merriam-webster.com/> accessed 4/21/09.

[3] Wayne L., Gordon. *CCDA Philosophy* (CCDA. 2008, accessed 21 April 2008): available from www.cdda.org; Internet.

[4] Gordon, (CCDA. 2008, accessed 21 April 2008).

[5] Jayakumar Christian, *God of the Empty Handed* (California: MARC, 1999), 20.

[6] Metzger, *Consuming Jesus*, p. 136.

[7] Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 248.

[8] Guder, *Missional Church*, p. 153.

[9] Robert Benne, "The Preferential Option for the Poor and American Public Policy," in *The Preferential Option for the Poor*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 53.

[10] Nouwen, Henri, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), p.57.

[11] See John 15

[12] Gary W. Deddo, "Neighbors in Racial Reconciliation" *Cultural Encounters* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2007):31.

[13] Deddo, "Neighbors in Racial Reconciliation", 32.

[14] Matthew 11:28,29

[15] Brandon Rhodes, "Writing with Both Hands" *Cultural Encounters* 4, No. 1 (Winter 2008):85.

[16] Robert C. Linthicum, *Empowering the Poor Community organizing among the city's 'rag, tag and bobtail'*. (California: MARC, 1991), 23.

[17] Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion* (New York: Doubleday), p. 69.

[18] Nouwen, McNeill and Morrison, *Compassion*, p. 67.