

Urban Strategies Team

The Urban Strategies team continues to function as a cross-Conference, Area-wide team. Its principal focus is on resourcing and developing urban leaders and congregations for Christian ministry and community involvement. A year ago we brought a proposal to Annual Conference, calling for a congregation by congregation comprehensive review and assessment of the status of urban ministry in the NCNY Annual Conference, beginning with the Syracuse City churches. By God's grace, that proposal was approved, and the comprehensive ministry review has begun, led by District Superintendent David Underwood, and guided by Paragraph 213 of *The Book of Discipline* (2004). We are grateful, also, for the leadership of the Rev. Lauren Swanson (Director of Congregational Development) and the Rev. Leon VanWie (chair of the Congregational Development Ministry Area) in pulling together a team of Conference agencies and leaders to be part of the study process. We look forward not just to the results of the study itself, but, even more, to the new directions for urban ministry, mission and congregational life that will surely be sparked by the study.

But we have not remained idle, waiting for the study to be completed. Throughout the past year, we have found a variety of ways to be both supportive of existing urban ministries (leaders and congregations) and committed to exploring new models of ministry. To that end, we have held two "urban pray-ins"—one in Rochester (at West Avenue UMC) and one in Syracuse (at University UMC). With the strong support of Bishop Fisher, and led by members of the host congregation, these pray-ins brought together persons from across both Annual Conferences for the express purpose of praying for that congregation (its pastor, its leaders and members, its ministries) and its surrounding community. These have not been weak-kneed times of prayer! Moved by the Spirit, these have been ardent and urgent times of prayer, literally moving from the sanctuary out into the streets around the church. We look forward to continuing these pray-ins on a regular basis (alternating between the two Annual Conferences), believing that all of our planning for the future must be rooted in Christ's vision and power.

A second major event this year was a three day "Urban Traveling Seminar," held in February 2008. Building on the training provided by the original Holy Boldness / Urban Academy, this Traveling Seminar brought 10 persons together for a fast-paced look at cutting-edge urban congregations/ministries in Camden, NJ; Baltimore, MD; and Alexandria, VA. Highlights of the seminar included:

A presentation by and conversation with two seminary professors who specialize in urban ministry (Dr. Fred Smith – Wesley Theological Seminary; Dr. Ronald Peters – Pittsburgh Theological Seminary). Dr. Smith and Dr. Peters provided a theological framework for understanding and assessing urban ministry, plus a summary of core values of urban congregations.

BETHEL UMC, CAMDEN – A weekday alternative school for 80 teenage dropouts from a failing public education system. With a shoestring budget, minimal staffing and no formal credentials or certification, this program prepares students for early admission to Camden County (community) College.

ASBURY UMC, CAMDEN – A dual-language congregation with worship services in both Spanish and English. Featured ministries include a full-service immigration center/clinic and a new weekly meal for homeless, poor and working poor in the neighborhood.

PARKSIDE UMC, CAMDEN – An African-American congregation with strong lay ministry, lay leadership development, men's ministry, a Sunday morning worship service for homeless and indigent persons (followed by breakfast), and a second Sunday morning worship service that incorporates dance and video. Another hallmark of this church is its commitment to and connections with the community around it.

RESPOND, INC., CAMDEN – A large, multi-purpose, multi-site, multi-million dollar not-for-profit human service agency, founded over 40 years ago with UM church assistance.

CAMDEN COMMUNITY HOUSES – An intentional Christian community of mostly young (post-college) adults, who share housing, spiritual practices, a commitment to Gospel simplicity, and a desire to serve neighbors day to day as the heart of Christian life and ministry.

NEW LIFE UMC, BALTIMORE – A 12 year old congregational re-start. Once a white congregation in a white neighborhood, New Life is now an African American congregation, serving a largely African American neighborhood. It features extensive and innovative collaboration with the community, with local community groups and leaders, and with government agencies. A "family life center" in the church is home to a variety of city social service providers.

CENTENNIAL-CAROLINE UMC, BALTIMORE – A 200+ year old church that values both its past and its future, with worship that is fully multi-generational and fully reflective of the congregation's African American culture. Like New Life UMC, Centennial-Caroline has received government funding for its main community ministry—a halfway home for 10-12 male teenagers, housed in the church's former parsonage, and led by one of the church's members.

RISING HOPE UMC, ALEXANDRIA – A 12 year old new church start with a primary focus on the poor. (Over 70% of its members/constituents are or have been homeless.) Through its worship, educational offerings, food and clothing center, and advocacy work, the church serves the spiritual and practical needs of the poor and at-risk, in a spirit of loving welcome and empowerment. As a result, the congregation is as diverse as one can imagine, in terms of language, nationality, ethnicity, education, employment, economic level, religious background, family make-up, etc. Initial and ongoing funding comes from other UMC's in the District.

While the lessons from this "traveling seminar" are still being synthesized, participants agreed on two things. First, that each of these ministries is marked by great passion, deep commitment, and a clear sense of purpose . . . plus a fundamental belief that the church exists not for itself but to serve others in the manner of Jesus. And second, that this style of experiential learning is definitely worth doing again.

A third piece of our work is our "investment program"—our investing in urban leaders and congregations that demonstrate vitality, creativity and a willingness to step out in new ways. On an individual level, that means providing scholarship assistance for three persons to attend SCUPE's 2008 Congress on Urban Ministry (April 15-18 in Chicago). With over 50 workshops and a variety of name speakers, this is one of the preeminent urban ministry events in the country. On a congregational level, we are putting the finishing touches on an urban seed money grant program, which is designed to affirm and encourage churches that initiate new forms of ministry. We look forward to introducing this grant program at the 2008 Annual Conference session. A third and final part of our investment in leadership development will come at the end of 2008, when a small team of NCNY urban leaders will gather with similar teams from all the other NEJ Annual Conferences, as part of a jurisdiction-wide urban network, with a goal of providing ongoing, grassroots "best practices" urban ministry training.

In closing, we are excited by what is stirring in urban ministry in the Annual Conference (and the NY West Area). We are deeply grateful for the ongoing support and inspiration given by Bishop Violet Fisher . . . and we will strive to remain faithful to her vision and call. We look forward to the possibilities of new connections with urban brothers and sisters in our neighboring Conferences of Troy and Wyoming.

Craig French