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PART I

**UNCOMMON
COURAGE**



1

ADVOCACY IS NOT ENOUGH

Show me a hero, and I'll write you a tragedy.

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

SHOW ME A HERO by Lisa Belkin highlights a low-income housing fight in Yonkers, New York, during the 1980s not unlike conflicts that continue to happen throughout the nation. Yonkers, like many cities, was racially segregated, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the federal government teamed up to try to bring change. Together they filed a lawsuit against Yonkers with the goal of integrating the city's institutions, such as the housing system, and they won a court order that the city desegregate.

Yonkers had followed the pattern of many cities, limiting public housing to a small section of the city, resulting in the isolation of its poor residents. Those who benefited from this illegal practice decided not to let four decades of segregation go quietly into the

night; they fought the court order fiercely. When the inevitable happened and low-income housing was built on the historically white side of town, ugliness ensued, reminiscent of the civil rights clashes of the 1960s.

The hero of this story is the young mayor, Nick Wasicsko, who at twenty-eight became a rising star when he unexpectedly won the mayoral race in the middle of the conflict. The campaign promise that swept him to victory was his pledge to appeal the desegregation order. When he came into office in 1987, promising to fight the housing mandate, he realized there was no way to keep his campaign promise, and he became an advocate of integrated housing. The decision was somewhere between a political expediency—the city budget was going to crash if he didn't go along with the order—and an authentic change of heart.

Predictably, there were dire consequences. Wasicsko was bullied and threatened, and he was eventually voted out. He bounced back and returned as a councilman in the 1990s, but he killed himself in 1993 at the age of thirty-four.

Is advocacy a vicious cycle that dooms a person in the end? It certainly can seem that way. In 2020 we're *still* fighting battles concerning fair housing. As people of God who have an eternal perspective, we definitely should play a role in helping to solve justice issues such as these.

You may not have heard the name Howard Thurman before, yet if you haven't, I would bet you unknowingly know of his work. He was called Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s personal theologian, as Dr. King based much of his work in Thurman's teachings. Thurman's most famous work was a book titled *Jesus and the Disinherited*. If you have never read it, I highly encourage you to do so.

Oftentimes this work is situated in liberation theology, yet I don't agree. Although we can sift elements of that genre from its

pages, I would categorize his insights more in the realm of providing a spirituality that is liberating. He says repeatedly in the book that he is exploring “what the teachings of Jesus have to say to those who stand at a moment in history with their backs against the wall . . . the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed.”

In other words, he imagined how people on the margins of society could remain human despite the “three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited”—fear, hypocrisy, and hatred. His advice was to abandon the pursuit of these things as answers to their situation and honor God. In the chapter titled “Jesus—An Interpretation” he frames holiness as the key to survival:

In the midst of this psychological climate Jesus began his teaching and his ministry. His words were directed to the House of Israel, a minority within the Greco-Roman world, smarting under the loss of status, freedom, and autonomy, haunted by the dream of the restoration of a lost glory and a former greatness. His message focused on the urgency of a radical change in the inner attitude of the people. . . . Again and again he came back to the inner life of the individual. With increasing insight and startling accuracy he placed his finger on the “inward center” as the crucial arena where the issues would determine the destiny of his people.¹

Thurman clearly believed that a mindset followed by behaviors that demonstrated being people of God was critical. However, there is more to the story. If we look at the original 1935 essay “Good News for the Underprivileged” on which the book was based, he makes it clear that the disinherited being the people of God goes beyond just personal salvation. He stresses a transformation of society in order to move to a new day where the oppression ends.

THE CHURCH NEEDS WILLING WORKERS

I hope to stand on the shoulders of Thurman. This book is for people who believe in the power of the local church to make a difference in the lives of the urban poor. Many who fight for justice for the poor come from Christian backgrounds. However, the American church has two main problems when it comes to addressing justice for the poor. The first is philosophical: too many Christians treat the poor as charitable goodwill projects instead of as people among whom the church can be God's witnesses. Charity and witness are not mutually exclusive.

Poverty is a condition people live in that needs to be addressed from a godly perspective. In this book, we'll engage hard truths about poor neighborhoods and explore pathways to ministry in those places.

Christ said, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). He didn't say he would build a food pantry, a tutoring program, or a community development enterprise. He added, "And the gates of Hades will not overcome it." I am all for good works, but I believe the witness of the church is an undervalued and overlooked asset when it comes to urban poverty.

A healthy church is a holy place, because holiness lies at the heart of the Christian faith. The apostle Peter wrote, "It is written, 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:16). We're instructed to be like God—holy in everything we do. Holiness displays the character of God; it means being set apart for service to God. As we do this, we have the privilege of influencing situations for God's glory. A key understanding that many miss when ministering to those who are marginalized is that *holiness is the way to victory*.

Many mistakenly think that the pursuit of holiness happens only on a personal level. But the church is also to pursue holiness socially through God-created institutions. This is where advocacy

comes in. Social institutions are permanent and complicated structures formed to meet basic human needs. They are powerful, they endure for generations, and they influence many lives. The church is one of those institutions, sociologically speaking. Pursuing holiness on the institutional level means seeking the common good of a community.

What is *the common good*? It is the answer to two questions. What do those who have put their faith in Christ have in common with those who have not? And what can the local church do to make the world a better place for them? The local church ought to understand differences and act on commonalities. God wants all neighborhoods to flourish, and they can't if institutions don't function well.

The second problem—closely related to the first—is theological. Or more accurately, I should say a lack thereof. What I am about to write may trigger a “Boomer alert” moment, but hear me out. Besides, I am not of the Boomer generation but of Gen X—you know, the generation no one cares about! The point is I am old enough to detect a subtle shift.

When I started off in urban ministry in 1991, I believe a huge problem was many had good theology but didn't live it out well among the urban poor. I've noticed we've come full circle. Today I see people doing a lot of advocacy in and for poor neighborhoods, but their actions have little to no theology behind them. When this is the case, the local church becomes an afterthought. If we say we are Christian, this cannot be. There is no way around the fact that the Bible makes it clear: the local church is the hope of the world, regardless of where it is located. I'll state my case for this later in the book.

UNDERSTANDING THE HOOD

When academicians study institutional dysfunction, they flock to the hood. A hood, as I define it, is a place where a large percentage

of the residents have inadequate financial resources. Traditionally the word *hood* referred to certain inner-city neighborhoods, but in today's gentrifying world, a hood can also be in a suburb. Ironically the challenges in these neighborhoods mirror those in rural areas.

Hoods don't just happen. Policies and practices make it tough for groups of people to leave their neighborhoods and/or to make them better. These policies and practices grow out of underlying issues of race and class. The sociological term for this is *racialization*.

A racialized society is a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships. It is one that allocates different economic, political, social, and psychological rewards to groups along racial lines.² Typically when whites move out of a neighborhood at a high rate, so does access to financial resources and a good quality of life. The neighborhood is doomed to fail, mainly because it isn't given a fair shake. The mostly black and brown people left behind are seen as projects rather than as people. And the prevailing thought is that if they would get their act together, they could escape that hellhole. People drive through such neighborhoods as quickly as possible, and they certainly don't want to be caught there at night. Hoods are city or suburban quarantine areas for high poverty.

In April 2001 Timothy Thomas, a nineteen-year-old African American with a history of nonviolent misdemeanors, was shot and killed by a Cincinnati police officer. It was Ferguson *before* Ferguson. His death caused outrage, riots, and civil disobedience, resulting in millions of dollars of damage.³ In the middle of it all, right in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, where the shooting occurred, my wife and I planted a church called River of Life. At that time, Over-the-Rhine was the second most violent neighborhood in the country.

I no longer serve as pastor of River of Life, and two decades later the church has become a beacon of hope, exhibiting what God can do when people from all walks work together for the advancement of the kingdom in the hood.

I share this snapshot for your assurance. In 2013 I wrote a personal mission statement that I have structured my life around: I have been put on this earth to chase hard after God, love my family, and invest in those who invest in the poor. I wrote this book as a small part of living out my personal mission. I live that personal mission out in my current position as president/CEO of World Impact. World Impact empowers urban leaders and partners with local churches to reach their cities with the gospel. We are committed to bringing hope to the hood. Our dream is a healthy church for every impoverished community.

THE UNCOMMON CHURCH MODEL

I'm often asked, "What's the biggest need of impoverished neighborhoods?"

I reply, "Healthy local churches."

"Not food, clothing, or housing?"

"No, none of those."

My experience is that when healthy churches exist in the hood, they become major players advocating for raising the quality of life there, which includes things like food, clothing, and housing. And due to the challenges, we can never have enough church leaders and workers.

In my three decades of urban ministry, I've seen the following story play out countless times: A person goes in to do good works in the hood. Time passes, and he or she gets frustrated because the residents don't "act right"—that is, upper-middle-class standards aren't met in response to the help given. The

relationship goes sideways, and all involved are embittered by the experience. Contrast that with how suburban populations are treated. They are rarely viewed as objects, and personhood is automatically granted to them; no deficit must be overcome to be considered a person.

To do good works, we must support the common good of the community. The goal is to build enough goodwill to form healthy relationships and to share the gospel, leading to the assimilation of people into a church. That's always the finish line in suburban contexts, yet rarely is it the finish line in the hood. Good works, advocacy, and goodwill are helpful; but what about the good news of the gospel?

There's nothing easy about doing church in the hood, and advocacy driven by a biblically based desire to demonstrate God's love is needed to transform lives and communities. Some disagree with mixing the social sciences with theology due to a concern that secular social science knowledge will override proper biblical knowledge. But I don't think the Bible divides the revelation of knowledge into either/or categories. Scripture makes it clear that *all* truthful knowledge comes from God.

The social sciences (sociology, psychology, and so on) are avenues for studying God's general revelation of creation. The mountains we see, the amazing bodies we possess, and science itself are all evidence of a creator. This type of revelation is available to everyone, regardless of whether they believe in God or not. God's gift to all human beings is the ability to wake up and realize through nature, history, and human experience that there is something bigger than them operating in this world. The apostle Paul wrote, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that

people are without excuse” (Romans 1:20). Special revelation is the knowledge gained through the study of God through the Scriptures (theology).

Continuously improving our knowledge of the special revelation of God (the Bible) should be a key part of our lives. Paul stated that as his goal when he wrote, “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Philippians 3:10). I would hope this is the goal of every believer.

A biblical worldview acknowledges that all truth comes from God, so there should be no conflict between good theology and truthful social science. In any Sociology 101 class, we learn that five institutions serve as the building blocks of any society:

- ✦ family—the space to procreate and pass along values, attitudes, and beliefs about life
- ✦ government—a system to preserve order, which takes the form of formal or informal laws, punishments, provision for those in need, etc.
- ✦ education—skill-set development for becoming a productive a member of whatever society one belongs to
- ✦ economics—the production, consumption, and distribution of material goods and services
- ✦ religion (spirituality)—ways to answer the unanswerable, involving moral questions and life purpose, such as who I am, why I exist, and how I treat others

God put these five building blocks into place through general revelation. Therefore societies expect religious institutions to have a response to the challenges they face. What are the challenges faced by the hood? Regardless of whether the hood is in New York or Nairobi, I believe they all share concerns about the following:

- * economic development
- * public safety
- * financial resources
- * infrastructure
- * education
- * housing
- * environment
- * demographics
- * technology
- * health care

The church in the hood must construct itself to be able to address these concerns. It must be a neighborhood anchor. It can do so by playing three critical roles, as shown in figure 1.

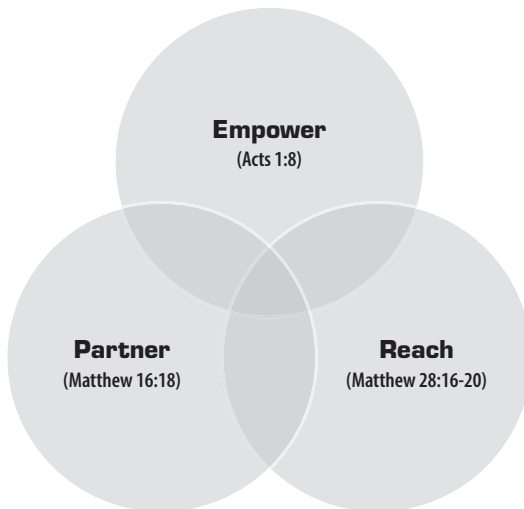


Figure 1. The church's roles in the hood

Empower. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). God made Jesus king over all creation. Jesus’ last act on earth was to give us the Holy Spirit to empower us. We are to go and do *whatever* needs to be done *wherever* it needs to be done. As we go, Jesus promises to be with us.

I know of nothing more empowering than making disciples. To empower someone is to help them do something. Who doesn’t need help navigating life? When people think about the hood, they greatly undervalue discipleship. I’m not talking about a need for a vibrant small-group program. If the program is any good, it’s just an excuse to disciple people. I’m talking about authentic relationships built over long periods. A healthy local congregation provides space for people to do life together in order to transcend the conditions they’re in.

Partner. “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18-19). Jesus made a remarkable statement here: one day Peter would be a leader in the church—based on his revelation that Jesus is Lord. Peter never forgot this, as he later wrote that Christ is the chief cornerstone and the church is to be a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:4-6). He then went on to explain how the church should behave in difficult times.

It’s clear that the church is expected to be engaged in the world around it. It can’t be silent, as the hood doesn’t just need something good to happen; it needs transformation. Through partnership, the local church plays a key role. Because of the way hoods are formed, the community must be built from the inside

out. When a congregation becomes an institutional partner with local businesses, schools, and so on, it becomes a church with no walls and a transformative influencer.

Reach. The church looks beyond itself to reach others.

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:16-20)

The church is to seek the common good of the neighborhood by being a compassion and justice center. Reaching the hood is two sides of one coin. *Evangelism* (transmission of the gospel message of the transformative power of following Christ) is the local church’s response on a personal level to issues of hood life. *Justice* (genuine pursuit for both peace among and respect toward individuals and people groups) is the local church’s contribution to the common good. Both, not one or the other, are needed.

AN OVERVIEW OF *UNCOMMON CHURCH*

This book lays out how to implement an uncommon church model. The first section focuses on what it means to be an uncommon church. I start by examining the wrong question: “What would Jesus do?” It’s wrong for two reasons: first, it makes the circumstances front and center instead of what God *said* about the circumstances, and second, Jesus already told us what he did, which is the focus of chapter three. It’s a brief look at how Christ

approached the condition of poverty. Our job is to learn, obey, and act upon his teaching.

Chapter four traces the special nature of the people of God, from the Garden of Eden to the formation of the church. In the Bible, the people of God have always been identified as those who are in God's empowering presence. In chapter five, I give some practical guidance on how to build a healthy congregation. This model has been tested all over the globe and is successful because it follows closely the model presented in the New Testament. It's also the blueprint I used when I church planted and pastored in the hood.

In part two, we transition toward what it means to work for the common good of the community. Chapter six addresses the unnecessary tension between evangelism and justice. Both are biblical concepts that work in unison. Chapter seven delves into some basics of how hoods were formed. Some hard truths are told, and the Bible teaches that the truth shall set us free. Chapter eight explores the philosophy of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), which was founded by John Perkins. It's the template of how a local church can do advocacy for the common good in poor neighborhoods. Chapter nine provides a few stories of people who are doing uncommon church. And in chapter ten you'll find my concluding comments.

One final word: don't expect to find all the answers to your questions in this book, as that's impossible. My goal is to be a guide on the side instead of a sage on a stage. I'm passing along the lessons the Lord has taught me; this book holds just one man's opinion. What I present is *a* model, not *the* model.

I liken this book to a coat. Try it on, and if it fits, it's yours. If it doesn't, take it off! My hope is that it will help you on your learning journey. God be with you as you work to transform your hood.

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