

## Review: The Community of Hope Ministries

The Community of Hope Ministries is a Montgomery, Alabama, based ministry targeting apartment and multi-housing communities. It is run by Neal Hughes and the Montgomery Baptist Association, which is part of the Alabama and Southern Baptist Conventions. It is designed to be a church planting missions project based on a cell-church model, and has been granted mission status by the Baptist missions board.

Some definitions will help clarify this review.

- Multi-Housing: Either apartments, community associations, gated communities, condominiums, town homes, or federally funded housing projects. (Basically where you do not own or control all aspects of your housing, or where they share facilities with other people.) Another example might be trailer parks.
- Cell-Church: Churches based on small groups of believers who come together to worship and minister to one another, as well as evangelize the community.

The ministry model is based on the early church and current work in third world areas. The plan can be simplified into several basic steps: 1. Find a target area, 2. Pray for it, 3. Enter and to find a point of entry into the community, 4. establish a small group, 5. build other small groups, 6. form a congregation from the established groups. This is based on the Wesleyan model. The model has groups of 12 who are divided into groups of three. When six groups are available, there are enough people for a church (72 believers.)

Currently, the ministry is in its third year, and is just beginning to wean the newly formed groups from the missionaries who planted them. This change is causing the group some difficulty, because they did not carefully plan their exit strategy, and because it has taken longer than expected to train leaders from within the

areas they are evangelizing. However, they have had much success. They have recently had one group join into a local church fellowship, and have other groups that are getting ready to divide and continue growing.

Since I have already done an extensive review of this group and their ministry in another paper, I had several major questions that I wanted to answer while on this trip. I will dedicate the rest of this review to those questions and the answers that I was able to find.

#### Questions:

- Does this ministry produce Christians?
- What do the converts know about Jesus?
- Do the converts have a Christian view of morals and ethics?
- Who is responsible for their spiritual development?
- How does their model relate to Christ's model for bringing people into the church?
- How does the ministry ensure continuity?
- How does the ministry ensure sound teaching and doctrine?
- Does the parent group recognize problems in their model and can they address them?

- Does this ministry produce Christians?

This is a very difficult question to answer. However, there seem to be some good indications that it does. There are a number of people in the group who testify to the work of God in their personal lives. There are people who have been released from the bondage of sin, and have chosen to become both active in spreading their faith and in the life of the church. Still, most of the people being ministered to are new Christians, and so have much development before them.

- What do the converts know about Jesus?

I was not able to get a complete answer to this question. From the group that I participated in, it was apparent that there were several members

who did not yet understand Jesus and his message. One was inclined towards a prosperity gospel and another to an apparently over-active belief in angels. However, several other members of the group appeared to have a solid understanding of the Gospel, and of Biblical Christianity and to some extent were able to address the concerns and errors of their peers.

- Do the converts have a Christian view of morals and ethics?

We were lucky to end up in a discussion about ethics during our meeting. Since the question at hand was about money, it provided a very interesting view of their beliefs since the group was composed of very poor people.

Several of the members demonstrated a clear understanding (without prompting) of the Christian view of the situation in question (a situation where too much money was returned at a cash register), but had personal misgivings about how they would handle it. Others were quick to rationalize their preferred method of dealing with a chance to get cash quickly.

It was obvious that at least one member of the group was under conviction for their actions in the past, and others in the group showed a firm but graceful response.

- Who is responsible for their spiritual development?

The spiritual development of members of the cell churches lies primarily with the point man (area leader) and the leadership of the cell-group. To assist with spiritual development, each week's lesson is provided to the leaders of the group by the main church. This material would be the key to ensuring that proper spiritual material was covered. However, there is little control over how the groups are actually lead – this would require

more in-depth monitoring after the initial group of missionaries is removed from the small group setting.

The point-man – the person responsible for a given work, becomes much like a pastor, and is expected to receive some training, though I do not know how much their church requires.

All the material and in all our conversations made it clear that Neal feels that this responsibility is his, and he appears to take it seriously. He appears to have a pastor's heart, and demonstrates this in his relationship with both the workers and his congregation.

- How does their model relate to Christ's model for bringing people into the church?

The material highlights the early church model – where a preacher would enter an area, find a place to stay, teach and build a church community at a person's house. The church during the apostolic period and indeed up until the conversion of Constantine did not have buildings, and grew at a much faster rate than it has done since.

As to the approach, it is also similar; it is based on interpersonal relationships. People will bring their friends into the group through the changes in their lives and their friendships. From there, the believer becomes responsible to and for their friends. The community will be responsible for meeting the needs of the people both spiritually and practically.

The biggest problem with this approach is that they will not have access to the larger resources of the institutional church, especially in terms of the presence of more mature believers and more structured theology.

- How does the ministry ensure continuity?

This may be one of the biggest problems in the program. Since it is currently small groups – single cells, there is a big problem if either the person of peace (the person who provides the in-road with the community,) or the point person leaves. In fact this happened to one of their groups, and they lost contact with them for a long time. Then, while trying to re-establish a work in the community, they found that the group had continued under other leadership.

In a larger context – areas where multiple groups had been established, this would not be as large a problem, since it becomes like a conventional church, but one that does not have a building.

Another area of continuity problem is in their ministry to children. Only the missionaries are currently doing this work. They do not currently have a plan to transition it to people in the community. This, they admit will be a big problem in the short-term, but they expect to have people in the community step forward to do the work at a later time.

- How does the ministry ensure sound teaching and doctrine?

There are several security measures. The materials are planned and require approval of alternate plans if the leaders do not want to use the material provided. The material is in turn designed by trained ministers. Also, the larger groupings of cell groups – the field churches – would provide teaching that is the basis of the material discussed in the groups. This means that the people are provided an opportunity to receive regular teaching.

A second measure of security is that the groups are to use a structured method of teaching, where there is no teacher. If this plan were followed, then the people in the group would, in theory, provide control against non-

scriptural teaching. The format is for the people in the group to answer these questions:

1. What do you like best about this scripture passage?
  2. What is most convicting to you?
  3. What do you not understand?
  4. What did you learn about God?
  5. How can you apply this scripture to your life today?
- Does the parent group recognize problems in their model and can they address them?

To a large extent, it appears that they do. During our discussions, Neal actually brought up the stories of the group that they “lost” and about some issues with the group leaders. One of the biggest issues that they have with the leaders is that many of them are trained and much more knowledgeable than the people in their groups. This creates a dependency, and sets a bad model. (They provide answers and may fall into a “preaching” role during the small group meetings. While this helps the people grow, it prevents them from learning how to deal with questions when the missionary is no longer present. It also stunts the development of other leaders in the group.)

Another problem that Neal presented was a failing in their “exit” strategy. The plan suggests that the missionaries enter an area, bring a fellowship (one group of 12) into existence, and then, as soon as they are ready, moves on to build other groups or moves into another area and begins a new work there. Instead, the missionaries have remained in the fellowships, and have not moved on. They are now attached to the people and the people are dependent on them. They have found that it is harder than expected to find leaders, and get people in the community trained and mentored.

Neal presented several ideas and tentative strategies as to how they can succeed in moving forward with the ministry model, and show that they are at least aware of the issues. In a discussion with one of the missionaries, it also became apparent that he understood the challenges facing both his people and the larger organization. I have good hope that their structure and leadership will be able over time to improve on both the program and find solutions to their problems.

#### Conclusions:

This is a very interesting ministry, and challenges the way we usually do church and missions within our country. It has been designed to address the issues with house churches, providing a framework that has more accountability and structure in both doctrine and leadership. It has been built using the cell-church model that is currently very effective in the mission field in multi-housing areas, and is suited to rapid growth and church planting. The ministry's focus on church planting suggests that they do not want to do away with traditional church, just re-define how it is done so as to allow it to grow. It also provides a unique opportunity to enter low-income areas where there is neither the availability of transportation to a church nor a church location. Finally, it is something that does not require a high level of financial support at any point during the work, so finances can be directed at developing materials and meeting the needs of the people in the communities.

There are many other aspects of the work that I have not mentioned. The larger ministry is involved in what we would term "compassionate ministries" and provides furniture, medical, social services and support to their communities. The program itself is targeted at neighborhood transformation, and has already shown results. In one of the communities, there were six murders the year before they entered, and have not been any since they established their core group. Indeed, you can see the difference between their street and those around them. There are plans to build a house for women where they can be mentored and sheltered. There are also many dreams for ways to do more work

in the community, but it is focused on spreading the gospel, not just meeting physical and financial needs.

The model will not, however, work directly in our communities. Many of the groups are meeting outside – under trees or in the circles at the end of streets. This is possible in their more temperate climate, but could not be used here in KC. We would need to find locations for meetings, like houses, community rooms at complexes, or even storefronts for the services and for children’s work. We would also need to carefully consider the importance of education for the leadership. We need people to serve, but also need to ensure that our historical emphasis on education in the ministry is preserved.

There are also significant differences in their denominational church structure that allow this ministry in their design. They are operating at something that is roughly a district level, being funded centrally by the church (to the extent that they are funded that is – God has provided most of their facilities and needs through donations.) They do not have to worry about territorial issues at this time since they are working in the inner city – and do not have local churches in or near most of the areas where they are ministering. Finally, they do not have as much restriction in what they are able to do as we would in our church. It appears therefore, that we would be implementing this as a more divided and church based ministry then as a district ministry.

Further, in the Community of Hope’s model, they have built a single umbrella church ministry that covers all the individual groups. Since we are looking at building this from within the local churches, we have a different source of people. Instead of a gathering of missionaries, we have people from within the local congregations who will need more vision casting, support, and mentoring then the leadership of their group. Also, we will need to work between churches for providing services and resources. (The Community of Hope has instead become the central service provider.)

There are also differences because of the socio-economic status of the areas they are ministering to. They are ministering to the lowest segments of society, in the inner city. While we have communities like this in the Kansas City

area, (including Argentine and areas of Missouri) we also have very wealthy areas, and there will need to be some change in approach for these people. The Community of Hope will be facing some of these challenges as they start some of their first works in the “outer city.” They have not yet completely determined how they will deal with them, or even what they are. It will be interesting to follow up with them on this point.

Still, many things are the same. Jesus is the same, and all people need Him to fill the void in their lives. The method of ministry may change, but the message does not. For example, the work in the outer city may be less based on community and more on work relationships, or may require more polished materials. Yet the method of Bible study and small groups will work – it has been proposed and used by many of our churches. Now it is our responsibility to turn these groups outwards if we have them, and if not, find ways to build them both for the spiritual development of our own people and the salvation of their neighbors.