



The GUM Letter

Reflections on Congregational Witness in an Urban Context

Fall 2005 – Volume 1, Number 1

Welcome to our first issue.

On behalf of Grace Urban Ministries (GUM), we want to thank you for taking interest in our work in San Francisco. After existing for over seven years, we are pleased to finally present our first "newsletter-type" publication, which we have named "The GUM Letter." As implied by the tag-line you see above, this letter will not so much focus on what we do in ministry but, rather, how we think about ministry. We believe strongly that reflection and action must always be held together in healthy tension. Therefore, while each issue will provide brief ministry updates, the primary purpose of the letter is to share with you our ongoing musings on gospel, church and urban mission. We hope you'll enjoy it!

Ministry Updates

Thanks to a recent grant from the San Francisco Foundation, we will be developing and formalizing our after-school, on-the-job training program called Youth Externships for PRYSM (YEP) which will enable youth to build upon the job skills they acquired during our summer PRYSM venue. Among the companies they'll work at this Fall (through Spring) are Chen Design Associates, GUM, Dayspring Technologies, and Fenwick & West. Also, we will be exploring new economic development & legal service approaches in the coming year in connection with our adult ministries, Kaleo & Grace Learning Partners, in light of growing social and economic challenges facing the immigrant poor in San Francisco.

Want to receive The GUM Letter regularly? Contact us and we will add you to our mailing list. Include your email address if you are willing to accept it in Adobe Acrobat format.

Grace Urban Ministries, Inc.

3265 16th Street
San Francisco, CA 94103-3323
(415) 703-6094 (voice) 864-1543 (fax)
inquiries@gum.org (email) www.gum.org (website)

An Eschatological Bottom Line *by Craig Wong*

Bringing the gospel to bear on results-driven culture and Christian ministry.

"Grace Urban Ministries (GUM), Inc. was established by Grace Fellowship Community Church to bear witness to the just and compassionate reign of Jesus Christ by joining and serving the vulnerable of San Francisco."

- GUM Articles of Incorporation

A Stanford student once had opportunity to float our mission statement among her MBA cohorts as part of a class assignment. The professor was quick to offer this judgment: "GUM's mission statement is so wide, you can drive a truck through it!" With similar fervor, an executive director of a prominent Christian nonprofit in Southern California asserted, "Oh no, your mission statement is way too general. What exactly is your nonprofit going to do? What specifically is GUM striving to accomplish?" I remember panicking, in knee-jerk fashion, at the force of her inquiry. What she was pressing for was our bottom line, that concrete imperative that all organizations, with any validity, must be able to articulate with pristine clarity.

Of course, the term "bottom line" is as old as business itself, referring to the last line of the ledger statements that all firms hope is inked in black rather than red. Because capitalism as a viable economic system (moral or not) presupposes accumulation, Americans generally accept the pursuit of profit as a necessary given. Nonetheless, the profit-motive over the years has received growing criticism in the face of rising costs, over-paid CEOs, Enron-type scandals, and the dehumanization of services, particularly in the healthcare sector.

Such critique has prompted the notion of the "double bottom line" which espouses the need for social responsibility to conjoin with economic success. Large corporations engage with a "triple bottom line," particularly multinationals that are held accountable for the environmental sensitivity of their Third World operations. Movement toward genuine and purposeful societal engagement on the part of corporations is irrefutably positive.

More often than not, however, corporate charitable activity, from employee giving programs to large-scale humanitarian efforts, is driven by the economic bottom-line. Today's CEOs recognize that the appearance of social callousness is bad for business. In the end, the logically inconsistent multiple bottom-line always boils down to that singular question "Is there a return on my investment?" →

While measuring and ensuring returns on investment is business-as-usual, the level of sophistication employed ratchets up every year. Advanced information systems and Ivy League minds work in concert to monitor, predict, and report business performance on a quarterly basis. Furthermore, billions of dollars are spent each year in consulting fees for systems analysis, organizational audits, and leadership seminars to bolster the bottom line. Massive financial resources, cutting-edge technology, and a managerial intelligentsia combine to create the alluring professional culture of high-powered, results-driven pragmatism.

Indeed, leaders in all segments of society have been captured by the allure of the sophisticated methodologies that have proliferated out of the corporate sector's bottom-line mentality. A striking example of this was the Pentagon's recent proposal to establish a futures market allowing investors to bet on the probability of coups, assassinations, terrorist acts, and other world events, using profit motive to surface political intelligence that would aid our ability to act preemptively in securing our borders and global interests.

Closer to home for GUM, however, has been the growing transfer of bottom-line techniques from the corporate to the philanthropic sector, over the past decade. The lines have blurred between the two, producing such syncretic notions as "venture philanthropy," "virtuous capital," and "social enterprise." With this has come a more aggressive, top-down posture in relation to on-the-ground efforts that the philanthropic entity funds.

This "managing partner relationship" typically involves the implementation of multi-year plans, proprietary data-gathering systems, and a results-centered accountability structure. Joint planning sessions are facilitated, with emphasis on innovation, strategic re-tooling, and knowledge acquisition from existing "best practices" with an eye, of course, on becoming one. This movement has given rise to a new breed of charitable-sector consulting firms and management intermediaries positioned to help nonprofits deliver social impact with greatest bang-for-the buck.

Such infusion of bottom-line mentality among nonprofits and traditional foundations has produced interesting cultural clashes and inevitable compromises in mission. Some simply buy in. Among them are Christian enterprises that appear to embrace corporate-sector acumen in near-revivalist fashion, touting it as the next wave of the Spirit upon His Church.

Wired with a results-oriented personality myself, I am not unsympathetic to those enamored with the latest tools to get the job done better. Many creative processes and instruments developed in business can, and do, make a legitimate contribution in helping nonprofits evaluate and improve the quality of their services. Understand that, in critiquing the corporate culture's impact on the Church, I am not condoning sloppiness or a carefree, come-what-may attitude in ministry. Christian integrity would indeed insist that we be reflective and purposeful about how we meet the needs of those we serve.

Such integrity should also inform our relationship with donors. That a foundation does not share our Christian world-view does not lessen our responsibility to account for the use and results of their investment. Tools exist to improve the way organizations do this. My over-arching concern, however, has more to do with ends, rather than means. Taking its cues from the business world, Christian ministries are becoming increasingly pre-occupied with making measurable impact, and coveting all the bells and whistles that make that possible.

“Impact speaks of what we can do. Witness points to that which only God can do.”

I argue, therefore, that the reason why people have difficulty with GUM's mission statement is that "bearing witness" is not nearly as attractive as "impact." Impact speaks of what *we* can do. Witness points to that which only *God* can do. Impact assumes that the world, if we try hard enough, is fixable. Witness recognizes an unfixable, sinful world and embodies hope by living under the reign of the sin-defeating King until he returns. Impact is the most we can hope for among victims of injustice, while witness stands in repudiation of the very powers and principalities that create that injustice.

There is no question that Christians are called to serve. The issue at hand is where our confidence lies *when* we serve. To put our confidence in worldly paradigms to fulfill our missional purpose in the world is to ascribe to vastly reductionist interpretations of the human condition. This leads to strategies antithetical to the gospel, which demands far more than an annual report with an impressive list of commendable deeds. God's methodology is far more peculiar, seeking character over impact, generosity over efficiency, authenticity over image, humility over public recognition, faith over speculation, and grace over performance. ❖

Doing God's Work through Homework *by Jenelle Denson & Amy Hong*

A reflection on the incarnational nature of gospel-centered, congregation-based ministry.

Being at Grace Educational Mentors (GEMs) during the school year is a joy. We love seeing so many adults come together to care for these kids, hanging out with them, helping them through their homework. It is amazing to see kids shed the tough exterior and self-protective attitudes at the door. They are safe here and there is consistency. GEMs is a place where kids can come into a church building and be loved. But is this really enough? Shouldn't we be talking to them about the gospel? How can the kids learn about Jesus if we only help them with their homework? How can the gospel be proclaimed by simply tutoring? That we ask these questions reveals our limited view of how God works through the life of His people.

How does the gospel change our lives? As Robert Webber and Rodney Clapp in *People of the Truth* write, "When Christians worship, they are shaped by the Christian story. They become a corporate body formed in the image of Christ, called to heed the truth and live in a divided world as a sign of the future kingdom." The church is that place where we practice and experience life transformed by the gospel. As we live this out at GEMs, children can glimpse the kingdom of God and their true human identity as intended by Him.

School makes a claim on our children's identity, just as our occupations make claims on ours. Told by middle school that they are the answer to the world's future, our youth are pressured to perform, to measure up to unwieldy expectations to be considered valuable and successful. A couple of years ago we received a letter from a teacher asking us why we didn't kick her student out of our program. This teacher described her student as lazy, uncooperative and essentially unworthy of support. She saw no hope for his future and wrote him off. What he, and other children like him, need to know is that God not only sees things very differently, but also pursues us relentlessly.

Kids will come to know this when they are cared for as if this were true. They need adults in their lives they don't have to constantly prove themselves to. They need models to show them there is an alternative to the way the world views life, and that this is good news. It is not enough for them to know about the gospel as if it were yet another piece of information to remember and be tested on. They need to *experience* the gospel, in the mundane yet significant struggles of life, like their homework. Our commitment to them

communicates that they are precious and loved, whether or not they pass every subject at school.

Why do we have a hard time seeing that relating with children around something simple like homework is modeling the gospel? It is when we are cared for in the basic stuff of life that we know we are loved. A child who can't read clearly experiences the love of God when an adult patiently reads with them and doesn't make them feel ashamed or stupid. When they don't understand fractions and someone gently works through math problems with them day after day, God's gentleness and persistence is revealed. For some reason, we fail to see that the act of tutoring is both relational *and* proclamational.

"It is when we are cared for in the basic stuff of life that we know that we are loved."

As we are embodying the love of Christ for them, children will naturally ask questions about what they see and hear, whether it's about our actions or announcements about upcoming events or the banners they see in the sanctuary. We will then have the perfect opportunity to have a conversation about the gospel at a time when they are receptive to hearing about it. Because their tutors have traveled with them, they will hear the gospel from people they trust.

As the kids grow up and move on we can believe that God has worked in their lives during their time with us. Not because we threw scripture at them or maneuvered conversations toward Christian principles, but because we accompanied them through difficult times. We shared our lives with them and allowed them to taste the fruit of the gospel in us. We can know that we surrounded them with the love of Christ and no one can help but be changed by that. ✚

GEMs is an after-school tutoring program serving over 40 kids (from 1st through 12th grade), primarily from the local schools along the 16th Street Corridor of San Francisco's Mission District, and staffed by congregation members of Grace Fellowship Community Church. For more information, you may contact the program director, Jenelle Denson at (415) 703-6094 or jdenson@gum.org or program associate, Amy Hong at ahong@gum.org.

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IN THIS ISSUE ♦ *An Eschatological Bottom Line* ♦ *Doing God's Work through Homework*

The GUM Letter is a seasonal publication of Grace Urban Ministries (GUM), Inc., an ecclesio-centered 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation serving children, youth and families in San Francisco, seeking to bear witness to the just and compassionate reign of Jesus Christ. GUM works in partnership with the local congregation to serve communities that face significant social and economic adversity. Such service includes after-school tutoring, youth job-training, dental health screening, adult education, technical assistance, and other activities that engage the complex challenges unique to the vulnerable of the San Francisco Bay Area. Whether you wish to get further acquainted, receive our mailings, converse about church-centered ministry, or explore funding or ministry partnership, we hope to hear from you. Contact Craig Wong or Pam Chao at (415) 703-6094, email to inquiries@gum.org, or write to the address above.

*We at GUM thank you for
all of your support and prayers!*

Craig Wong, Executive Director, Pam Chao, Associate Director, Jenelle Denson, Program Director, Amy Hong Program Associate, Margaret Low, Administrative Staff, Dick Huey, Board Chair, Galen Hong, Board Treasurer, John Talbott, Board Secretary, Cindy Jew, Board Member, Marilyn Paik, Legal Counsel.