



The GUM Letter

Reflections on Congregational Witness in an Urban Context

Winter-Spring 2004 – Volume 2, Issue 1

A budding micro-enterprise?

Within the context of our Friday evening hospitality ministry called Kaleo, we seek to provide support and resources to working adults who struggle to make ends meet in the harshly challenging economic environment of San Francisco. The artistic talents of a recently immigrated Chinese family of Kaleo has stirred our imagination for an art-based business that could provide supplemental income for them, as well as others in similar financial situations. Toward this end, we are bringing this family together with artistic congregation members and the professional services of Chen Design Associates, to develop a set of Chinese calligraphy-based greeting cards in time for Christmas as a pilot project. More to come!

An immigration issues forum

In partnership with Manos Unidas and the Mission Community Council, GUM hosted a faith-based leaders forum in an attempt to bring congregations and community service providers together to raise awareness of the issues and challenges facing the immigrant poor of our city, and to get educated on the current immigration-related bills being considered at both the state and national level. In all, there were over 25 organizations present in an event that served to facilitate a rare networking opportunity between faith-based groups and secular agencies in the neighborhood. This event was made possible by a grant from the San Francisco Foundation.

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GUM as Parachurch Organization *by Craig Wong*

Seeking the bodily integrity of the gospel in the church-parachurch relationship.

What does it mean to be a “parachurch organization?” Indeed, the term is a typically a loaded one among many pastors, in the same way that “local church” often stirs up a sense of frustration among many *parachurch* leaders. A more fair-minded perspective, however, would recognize the term as being, in and of itself, relatively neutral. It is simply used to describe one half of a particular institutional relationship. More specifically, a parachurch is an organizational entity that works *alongside* a local congregation, ostensibly in pursuit of a common mission. “There is no continuation of the Christian movement within history without institutional forms and patterns,” says Darrell Guder, in his book *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*. “Whether or not the missional church is an institution is, therefore, not really a question to be debated. The question, rather, is whether its institutions support and serve its missionary vocation...to incarnate the gospel of God’s reign in the world.”

“Whereas the gospel redeems and assembles sinners together in joined lives of worship and service, our entrepreneurial and efficiency-driven culture divides the living Church into compartments.”

Several years ago, at the youth workers’ break-out session of a national urban ministry conference, I listened with interest to a rant delivered by a youth leader about the ineptness and irrelevance of the local church. “I’ve tried hard to give the church a chance,” he exclaimed, “but it’s just dead, man, it doesn’t do anything. That’s why I’m with [a parachurch ministry] now. I mean, the Spirit of God is really at work here.” Later that day, a Christian community developer reflected on his sabbatical travels in Europe where he researched the historical role of Christian congregations in social and economic transformation. “I’ve decided that I need to let the local church off the hook,” he declared. “It really comes down to inspired individuals and their parachurch organizations when it comes to making a difference in restoring and developing poor communities.” According to him, the local church is supportive at best, but ultimately not critical to significant forms of Christian social action. *(continued next page)*

The conclusions these two Christians have made are simply reflective of the division of the American Church into “congregational” and “missional” entities which promote structural separation between worship and service. Guder reflects on this phenomenon as a manifestation of gospel reductionism, where the missional task of the Church is packaged as a subset of, rather than exists fundamental to, the Church’s identity and purpose. Whereas the gospel redeems and assembles sinners together in joined lives of worship and service, our entrepreneurial and efficiency-driven culture divides the living Church into compartments, as demonstrated in the proliferation of specialized parachurch organizations over the past few decades.

Such specialization has included youth ministry, community development, hunger advocacy, leadership training and even Christian marriage and manhood. When such mission-specific parachurches operate in effective isolation from worshipping congregations, the gospel inevitably narrows in definition (for example, “racial reconciliation *is* the gospel”) and is then reduced to the measurable, manageable and marketable. Faithful rhythms of worship and reflection are

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replaced by “life-changing” conferences and “how-to” seminars. A corporately expressed life of hospitality and service is replaced by volunteerism subject to one’s personal preference and convenience. Incarnation gives way to the programmatic.

Once again, however, the problem lies not in the existence of structure but rather, in the *purpose* of that structure. If parachurches exist to *incarnate* the mission of the Church, then how it concretely cooperates with local congregations becomes vitally important. The degree to which mutual distrust, competition over people and resources, and adversarial-ism prevails in the church-parachurch relationship reveals that we have lost sight of our purpose. While we would agree that divisiveness and competition are not among the fruits of the Spirit, it appears that the American Church remains more committed to structures that promote productivity over *unity*, which biblically speaking, is central to our gospel witness in the world.

As a parachurch organization, it is our joyous privilege and responsibility to develop ministry that purposefully serves the local congregation in ways that builds her missional, *incarnational* presence in the city.

But such a responsibility involves concrete discipline in how we relate to the congregations we effort to serve. We must continually reflect on our role as a servant of the Church, never assuming that we have “arrived” at what that means, or that we are doing that well. Also, as a servant organization, we are to willingly and purposefully honor and submit to the pastoral leadership of the local congregation and be led by their instruction and worship. Finally, we must always uphold the integrity and well-being of the congregation at all times, developing ministry not only in response to the needs of the neighborhood, but also with sensitivity to the sanctifying and timely work of God in and among His people.

Some Things to Chew On *by Dick Huey* *Our board chairman reflects on GUM’s past year.*

What has GUM been up to this past year, and what is it up to these days? What do we do, and why do we do it? This article reflects on the oversight work of our board of directors, that meets and works together to help our ministries, and by extension the congregation of Grace Fellowship Community Church (GFCC), remain faithful to the purposes of the gospel. The following three examples illustrate how we think the gospel sheds light on our developments, relationships and activities.

Last year, we brought before GFCC the opportunity to purchase a multi-unit residential building on Church Street. Our goal was to provide long-term affordable housing, with emphasis on two main purposes, that is, to provide long-term stability for the Church to be a missional presence in San Francisco (during a time when housing costs are driving people away), and to enable new ways for the Church to think about housing and the sharing of resources for the common good.

Learning to work together

While this opportunity did not come to fruition, there were several lessons learned. First of all, there is need for congregational leadership’s evaluation of the priority of financial investment in common ministry-worship space versus the specific housing needs of a few, particularly in light of the tremendous housing costs in San Francisco. Secondly, we learned that despite the high costs associated with the project, the congregation at hand was prepared to be very generous, helping us envision what ↗

Some Things to Chew On continued

could be possible, in the event that similar opportunities should arise in the future. Lastly, we learned the value of pooling together our collective resources and expertise as a board, thereby strengthening our sense of team, ownership and leadership.

Our New Orleans Experience

Another team-building experience came in November when we joined our executive director, Craig Wong, and our pastoral overseer, Doug Lee, at the annual Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) conference in New Orleans. By going as a team, we were able to experience worship, plenary messages, and workshops together. This gave our board glimpses at other Christian nonprofit organizations and what worked well, and not so well, for them. For example, we observed the American Church's ten-

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dency toward worldly results-driven activism. We were also made aware of the degree to which fragmentation occurs among funding sources, volunteers, participants and congregations. In many situations, nonprofit boards fell out of sync, over time, with their associated congregations, ending up without a common heartbeat. When the ministry nonprofit and congregation drifted apart from each other, what resulted was a ministry characterized more by heroic individualism rather than the life of a community. Thus, the bulk of the testimonies shared at the conference were that of individuals or parachurches, rather than those of local congregations.

Aware of these pitfalls in our own situation at home, having learned many ministry lessons the hard way ourselves, it was encouraging to support Craig and Doug as they led a workshop on "connecting congregation and community development." Drawing the tie between worship and mission, and providing a biblical basis for understanding the congregation's relationship to the work of ministry, this workshop reflected the theology and ministry values that we hold as a board. In short, we have always sought a ministry that flows out of the worship and life of the congregation. As stewards of what God has been teaching us about the

gospel, Craig and Doug's workshop represented our responsibility to hold out what we learn to the larger Church community.

Conversely, we were greatly encouraged by the presence of hundreds of Christians committed to working for the well-being of impoverished communities throughout the nation. We were impressed with the deep passion and energy among brothers and sisters seeking to serve Jesus faithfully in their neighborhoods. We were grateful for the evidence of God's sovereignty and activity in, and among, His people.

Developing New Relationships at Home

Just as GUM is actively modeling church-centered ministry in its relationship to CCDA and its member organizations at a national level, Craig and Pam have been very active in building relationships locally. For example, we are very grateful for the deepening relationships with the Mission Community Council (MCC) and the congregation of Iglesia Presbiteriana de la Mision, or Mission Presbyterian Church.

The MCC is a collective body of neighborhood nonprofit organizations that meets to discuss common concerns, and facilitate networking between organizations. Mission Presbyterian Church is a long-time resident of the Mission, serving primarily Latino families. Like our congregation, it also has a non-profit ministry arm. Thus, in this Spanish-speaking parish, we have a congregation with whom we share a common structure, but most of all, a common heart.

What is significant about relating to these two groups? They both care about many things that should concern us, people that are truly on God's heart...the vulnerable in our midst. What we seek to bear witness to in these relationships is that Christ holds all things together and will renew all that is broken. We bear witness to God's intention to bring newness to the world *through His Church*.

Who we are becoming, and what we will continue to develop as GUM will hopefully reflect what we've been learning in our recent Colossians study, that Jesus is the linchpin that holds creation and kingdom together and that Jesus came to be the Head of the Church. We seek to exist as the ministry heartbeat of the local congregation, reflecting the growth and maturity of its members. Because ministry is a reflection of *God's* active concern for His creation, our work is measurable not by effectiveness but faithfulness, for our significance is found solely in *being His Church*. ✚

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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.