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The Church as Community Asset

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Introduction: The Church as Preview

A recent guest preacher at my church told us about a dire conflict in his marriage. It centered on the "preview controversy." You know, the old argument that occurs when you get the video home from Blockbuster, and you have to decide whether or not to watch the previews. The guest preacher said that he represented the pro-preview perspective; he wants to watch all the previews, so he knows what the coming attractions are. His wife represents the anti-preview faction; she thinks they are a waste of time. She's got other things to do, phone calls to make, letters to write, and just wants to be called in when the screen says "And now for our feature presentation." The preacher went on to argue that his perspective was a decidedly more Biblical one. And I'd have to agree.

You see, the Bible is all about previews of coming attractions. The "feature film" is the kingdom of God in all its glory, beauty, and wholeness. And there are previews of it all throughout the Old Testament. Throughout the OT, we get prophetic glimpses into what life in the feature film will be like. In Psalm 46:9, for example, God says one day he will make wars cease to the ends of the earth: He will break the bow and shatter the spear. Psalm 72 gives a preview of life under the reign of King Jesus, the King whom God will endow with justice:

He will judge the people in righteousness, the afflicted ones with justice. The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness; He will defend the afflicted and save the children of the needy. (Verses 2-4)

Or consider the preview presented in Isaiah 32: 1-5...

See, a King will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice. Each man will be like a shelter from the wind and refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land. Then the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed and the ears of those who hear will listen. The mind of the rash will know and understand, and the stammering tongue will be fluent and clear. No longer will the fool be called noble nor the scoundrel be highly respected.

So many previews...of the time that is to come when the swords will be beat into plowshares; when the child will play safely at the viper's nest, when the lion will lie down with the lamb, when every man will rest secure under his own vine and fig tree, when the desert will blossom with crocus, when the burning sand will become a pool, when the mute tongue shall be loosed and the lame leap like a deer.

The consummation of the Kingdom of God is going to be awesome and glorious. And it has already begun to break in. We know that from the lips of Jesus Himself. After all, Jesus announced his public ministry in the Temple in Luke 4. He took up the scroll of Isaiah, he picked out a preview passage from Isaiah 61:1-2, He read it — "The Spirit of the lord is on me because he has annointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" — and then He said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus was saying: "The feature film has begun." The Kingdom has broken in to this world. Here's how Matthews summed up Jesus' work in chapter 9:35: "Jesus went through all the towns and

villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the Kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. John the Baptist had told the people this was going to happen — He went around saying "The Kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt. 3:1) And Jesus interpreted His miracles in this Kingdom language. In Luke 11, Jesus casts out a demon in a suffering man, and the Pharisees are critical of it and accuse him of being in sync with Beelzebub. But Jesus responds in verse 20, "If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you."

You see, when Jesus was performing His miracles, He was doing more than just healing individual sufferers. He was reaching into the future, full Kingdom of God, and He was pulling a foretaste of it into the present. It's as if He was announcing, "In the feature film, there will be no blindness ... and so I give sight to the blind beggar Bartameas. In the feature film, there will be no leprosy ... so I touch the lepers and make them clean. In the feature film, there will be no death ... and so I raise my friend Lazarus from the grave."

The Kingdom of God has begun; Jesus inaugurated it. It is now. But it is also, "not yet." We wait and long in our still-broken world for its full consummation. But while we wait, it is the task of the Church — Christ's Body — to continue to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom, and to witness to it. God is continuing to break the Kingdom into this world; He is building His kingdom. And we participate in that work and we announce it to others — we point out where it's breaking in. And we witness to it. That is, in the Church we are to be citizens of the Kingdom of God, looking different than citizens of the kingdom of this world. Inside of our churches we are to be a reflection of the coming Kingdom, and we are to be doing the work of the Kingdom — a work of justice, of love, of healing, of hope & transformation. And it is when we are announcing and witnessing to the Kingdom of God on earth, that we are indeed a vital community asset. Because the more the community looks like the Kingdom of God -- the more the norms, and forms, of the Kingdom of God are expressed and made visible and concrete in the community — the more the community is transformed to look like the feature film; the more the community experiences life and wholeness and beauty and joy and justice.

And so I want to talk about three ways in which the Church's proclamation of, and witness to, the Kingdom of God can express itself practically such that the Church becomes a vital community asset.

The Visiting Church is a Community Asset

First, the Church proclaims and witnesses to the Kingdom of God, and thus is a community asset, **when it visits the poor and needy**. James 1:27 is a probably a verse you all have memorized: "Religion that God our father consider pure and faultless is this: that you visit widows and orphans in their distress and keep yourself unstained by the world." The problem with familiar verses is that they can lose their punch. And this verse is incredibly rich, if we understand the depth and power that is associated with the Biblical definition of "visiting." I did a word study over a few weeks on this little word, "visit," and was blown away. I wish we had time to discuss all that I discovered about the word visit, but we don't so I'll just say that visit means a lot more than bringing a plate of cookies to nursing home. In Biblical language, "visit" connotes the idea of imparting life. There are two key scriptures from whence I derive this meaning — 1 Samuel 2:21 and Luke 7:16.

(1) 1 Sam. 2:21 reads, "And the Lord visited Hannah, she conceived and gave birth to three sons and two daughters." Hannah was a barren woman. And she desperately wanted children. You remember the story — she and her husband go up to Shiloh to make their annual sacrifice, and while she's there she prays fervently for a child. And God is gracious to her and gives her a son, Samuel. She then fulfills the vow she had made to God, that she would dedicate her son to Him. And so when little Samuel is weaned, they take him to Shiloh and leave him there. But God, in His graciousness, wanted to do even more for Hannah. And so He "visits" her, and the result is that this barren woman bears five more children. The visitation of God has brought new life!

(2) The second scripture that captures this idea of "visiting as the impartation of life" is Luke 7:16. Jesus and the disciples have come to the town of Nain and a large crowd is following them. And as they come into the city, there's a funeral procession going on and dead boy is being carried out. He's followed by his mourning mother, whom we are told is a widow — and that this was her only son. And Jesus sees this mother and His heart goes out to her and He says, "Don't cry." And then He walks up to the coffin and touches it and says in a loud voice, "Young man, I say to you, get up." And the coffin opens, and the boy sits up and begins to talk. And, not surprisingly, the scriptures record that the crowd was "filled with awe." And you know what they began shouting? "Surely God has visited us! Surely God has visited us!" How did they know that God had visited them? Because Jesus had imparted life to the dead.

And Jesus still has the power to impart new life into dead hearts and barren souls. And He does it through his church -- churches like Victory Christian Fellowship, a small black Pentecostal church located in the Gilpin Court public housing development. Now Gilpin Court is the kind of neighborhood that looks — based on human eyesight — to be barren. It's the kind of neighborhood that, to our great shame, we in the Church often overlook or ignore. But there are people in these neighborhoods that need to be raised to new life. There are people in these neighborhoods that are barren, and they need to be made fruitful. And so Victory Christian Fellowship -- and a number of other churches partnering with them through a ministry called "Strategies to Elevate People," are imparting life to residents of this community.

Some years ago, there was a barren woman that lived in Gilpin Court. Her name was Sheila Anderson. She wasn't barren in the sense that she couldn't have kids — in fact she has three — she was barren in her soul. Sheila Anderson was hopelessly addicted to crack. The kind of addiction that makes you crazy. The kind of addiction that led her to sell her kids' beds literally out from under them. The kind of addiction that led her to sell her own body for sex in the backs of abandoned cars, so she could earn \$10 for a rock of crack. When Sheila talks about those times, she talks about the emptiness inside of her, the void she felt inside of her that she was just trying to fill up with drugs.

But God visited Sheila Anderson — actually in lots of ways. He visited her through a television evangelist. She was in a house with a bunch of other crack heads and there was TV blaring. And the evangelist on it was shouting out, "Are you miserable? Has your life hit rock bottom?" And Sheila found herself drawn to the TV. And the evangelist started talking about how Jesus could come into your life and make big changes. And so Sheila put her hands on the TV screen and she repeated the sinner's prayer after the evangelist.

Now she didn't change the very next day. But a little seed of life had been planted into her barren soul and within a few weeks, she found herself just getting tired of getting high. Tired of hanging out with the crack heads. Tired of not having her kids because they'd been taken away from her because she was so messed up. And she started praying for Jesus to give her power to resist the cravings for crack. She showed up on the doorstep of Victory Christian Fellowship, and they didn't shun her as the crack head and prostitute they knew her to be. Instead, like Jesus, they welcomed her. And God visited Sheila through that church. They loved her and they believed in her and they gave her the courage to dream and to believe that she could bear fruit.

You see, visiting-as-imparting-life is first about bringing the dead to life, and then about bringing the barren to fruitfulness. "Visiting" — life-imparting — churches, look at broken people like Sheila Anderson and call them seedlings of righteousness that can be grown up by God's power into oaks of righteousness.

You see, God has a pattern for transforming broken people and broken places. It is revealed simply in Isaiah chapter 61. Let me read the early part of the chapter:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good

news to the poor...to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of His splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities...Isaiah 61:1, 3-4

These verses show that God's pattern has two parts. First, God moves into the lives of broken people. He did this most clearly through the sending of Jesus. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus was God's anointed One to bring redemption and healing; to comfort those who mourn and bind up the brokenhearted. Through the ministry of Jesus, broken people are renewed and restored. That's the first part of the pattern. The second part is that the broken people who are now transformed people become themselves transformers; God uses them to restore their broken communities. Think of what Isaiah 61 tells us about the people whom God meets, heals, and transforms. It says that they will be "oaks of righteousness" who will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated.

The Church has the opportunity to participate in this pattern as we minister among the poor. We are the Body of Christ, and God calls us to move into the lives of the poor, believing that His power can transform them into "oaks of righteousness" whom He can use to advance His Kingdom in the "places long devastated." When Sheila Anderson stood on the doorstep of Victory Christian Fellowship in Richmond, VA seven years ago, she didn't look like an "oak of righteousness." She didn't even look like a seedling of righteousness, at least to the human eye. But life-impacting ministries look at Sheila Andersons and say: "There's a resurrected twig on our doorstep — a dead woman revived to life by God's spirit. Let's water her. Let's fertilize her. Let's weed her. Let's tend her and nurture her and love her and grow her because God can make her an oak of righteousness that He will use to transform our community. And that's what He's done with Sheila Anderson. Victory Christian and the STEP ministry poured Jesus and the Bible into Sheila; they poured in counseling and computer training and life skills classes and budgeting and GED tutors and mentors and prayer partners; and Sheila took in all this food and nurture and she's grown. Her pastor now refers to her as a "pillar" of the church. She's been to college, she's working, she's recently bought her first home, and she's a street evangelist throughout Gilpin Court every week and she's bringing people into the church and she's bringing people into the STEP ministry — she's actually a class leader for the STEP ministry's job training program, mentoring new women who come into the program.

There are "visiting," life-impacting churches out there. Many are the ones right on the frontlines of the inner-city. Victory Christian Fellowship is visiting individuals in Gilpin Court and raising up oaks of righteousness to become community leaders like Sheila Anderson. New City Fellowship in Birmingham, AL has done the same thing in the Metropolitan Gardens housing project in inner-city Birmingham. Several years ago the church, through its urban ministry arm called the Center for Urban Missions (CUM), began a leadership development program in the community. They accept 7 individuals, mainly parents of kids in their after-school tutoring program who showed some promise of potential leadership ability. And for two years, the church pastor and an elder poured their lives into these 7 folks — 6 women and one man. The group met twice-weekly for Bible study and "staff meetings." Each individual on the Community Leadership Team (CLT) received a modest stipend (\$5000/year) from the ministry to be in charge of various aspects of CUM — one woman oversaw the tutoring program, another oversaw the family support dinners that happened weekly, another worked with the creative arts program, and all were heavily involved in various aspects of CUM's multifaceted, 8-week summer youth daycamp. Each individual on the CLT had to sign a personal goals contract that outlined specific goals they wanted to accomplish — spiritually, educationally, and economically — and each had to be committed to becoming independent of welfare in 5 years (this was prior to national welfare reforms). And through personal one-on-one discipleship with the church elder, through their on-the-job experience in having responsibility over programs, and peer mentoring of one another in the group, 6 out of 7 of these folks achieved their goals. They are growing in Christ, they've completed high school and some have completed collegiate work, and they are leaders in the

community — working with the local principals, working with the police, working with the tenants assoc, helping to transform Metropolitan Gardens into a safer, more livable place with construction activities for kids, and real educational opportunities for teens.

The Church announces and witnesses to the Kingdom of God, and thus becomes a community asset, when it visits the poor and needy, and imparts life, and does indigenous leadership development to grow up oaks of righteousness.

Foolish Investments Make the Church a Community Asset

But there's a second way the Church becomes a community asset. The Church proclaims and witnesses to the Kingdom of God, and thus becomes a community asset, **when it makes strategically foolish investments.**

God calls His people to make foolish investments. The best example of this comes from Jeremiah 32. In Jer. 32, God issues a very strange command to Jeremiah. He tells Jeremiah to buy a field in Anathoth. And it totally bewilders Jeremiah. God has given him such a strange command! God has told him to purchase a field in Anathoth, a village on the northern outskirts of Jerusalem. Jeremiah is to buy this land, and studiously execute all the legal protocols accompanying the purchase — such as having the deed signed and duly witnessed — and then to seal up the deed and "place it in a clay jar so that [it] will last a long time" (verse 14). He faithfully obeys, but he doesn't understand what in the world God is doing. For the Babylonians have laid siege to Jerusalem, and Anathoth is behind enemy lines! "Why is God asking me to make such a foolish real estate investment?" Jeremiah wonders. For it appears foolish indeed. Who spends money to buy property you cannot access, property that lies in the enemy's territory?

Jeremiah obeys, but can't help asking God for an explanation of His strange decree. God answers Jeremiah in verses 27-44. God reminds Jeremiah that He has brought upon Israel the judgment He had warned them about: the Babylonians have invaded and conquered. But God wants His people also to know that the time of judgment will not last forever. It will be limited. God promises to redeem Israel from her oppressors. He foretells the day when feasts and weddings will sound again in the fields of Anathoth and across Judea when He restores the fortunes of His wayward children. Simply put, God is asking Jeremiah to make a publicly noticeable investment in a place that others have given up as lost. By doing so, Jeremiah makes tangible God's future promise to reclaim and restore.

God is still in the reclamation business. He is still calling His followers to "foolish" investments. Impoverished neighborhoods in our cities are also behind enemy lines; Satan has a grip on them through drugs, crime, violence, abuse, and despair. But God has not forsaken this territory, and neither should the Church. God wants His Kingdom to break into the Anathoths of our land, and He has plans to do it. He loves to do it, and invites His church to participate in it.

And so the Church becomes a community asset by pointing to the Anathoths and saying: We're going to invest there; We're going to announce that the Kingdom of God is going break in there; We the Body of Christ filled with His powerful spirit are going to reach into the future feature film and bring a piece of it back into the present there. We're going to tangibly invest our resources there, behind enemy lines - foolishly in the eyes of the world — to show the world that God loves the Anathoths, they are not "god-forsaken places."

These foolish investments take all kinds of forms. Our church is partnering with the residents of Blue Ridge Commons on Prospect Ave. We lease two adjacent townhomes in this low-income housing development, and we've renovated them into the Abundant Life Family Center. And in every thing we do in the Center we try to be a preview of the feature film. Through our ministries, healing is happening, education is happening, spiritual renewal is happening, economic empowerment is happening, racial reconciliation is happening. The Kingdom of God is the future banquet of Baskin Robbins 31-flavors of ice cream, and the Abundant Life Family Center is a little

taster spoon; people get a foretaste of the Kingdom.

Prospect Avenue, where we are located, was recently dubbed by our local newspapers "the most dangerous street in Charlottesville." And there are several townhomes along Prospect that are for sale and have been for sale forever. And so we are beginning to dream in our church about creating investment pools through which church members could buy up these townhomes. In some cases, church members may relocate in them. Our exec dir of Abundant Life relocated into the community 4 years ago and I have just sold my house and am attempting to purchase the vacant right next to his house and build a modular home on it. But we have been advised by inner-city ministers in our denomination to go slow in terms of relocating too many white folks into the neighborhood. We've been advised that we need to make further progress in indigenous community leadership development — further progress in growing our oaks of righteousness — before too many more whites move in. (The idea being that if too many church folks come in they will be perceived as running everything, and we want the residents themselves to be raised up in leadership first.) So, we are talking about owning these townhomes and being Kingdom witnesses simply by being just and kind landlords. And if our church members could become landlords over 5 or 6 townhomes right in the midst of the worst part of Prospect Ave; if as landlords we'd do a better job screening our applicants, and enforcing rules, and fixing up the homes and yards so they are attractive, and demanding better city services and police protection, we believe we can make a significant difference. There's an X-rated horror movie now playing on Prospect Avenue — you got your sex, drugs, gangs, prostitution, murders, violence. It's time for a new preview of the feature film of God's Kingdom of shalom to start playing.

There's a glorious preview playing now in the Villages of East Lake in Atlanta, GA. In the 1960s, the East Lake Meadows Federal Housing Project — some 650 small, low-rise apartments — was crammed onto 55 acres of land five miles east of downtown Atlanta and right next to the East Lake Golf Club, home of famous amateur golfer Bobby Jones. Within the next two decades, East Lake was transformed into "Little Vietnam" — a shooting gallery filled with crack cocaine, long-term welfare dependency, and hopelessness — and the golf course died. As resident Eva Davis once put it, "There's no peace of mind here. There's no safety. There's no recreation — you're afraid for your children to go out and play. And this environment is all they see, all they know. This is what they're growing up into."

All that's changed now. The East Lake Community Foundation, founded by a Christian philanthropist, is an ambitious partnership between churches, major corporations, and the federal department of Housing and Urban Development. The Foundation has demolished the housing project and begun building "The Villages of East Lake" -- a community of over 540 quality mixed-income townhomes and garden apartments (50 percent are market-rate rent, 50 percent are subsidized public housing). Bobby Jones' golf course has been completely renovated; crime has decreased 58 percent; 400+ teens from the neighborhood have been employed at the golf course, many earning college scholarships; East Lake has enjoyed the highest home resale price appreciation in the entire 17 county metro Atlanta area; a new charter school and a state-of-the-art YMCA are under construction; the East Lake Golf Academy is ministering to over 115 kids after school through tutoring, mentoring, and sports programs; and Christian "community chaplains" have settled in "The Villages" to serve as bridge builders between the low-income and middle-class residents.

I've been to East Lake. It's even better than a little taster spoon. It's more like a taster scoop. It's a glorious preview of the Kingdom of God. Black and white, rich and poor, living together in community. A community with safer streets and neighborhood block parties and better schools so that poor children won't always be poor, and job training helping the public housing residents move from welfare to work.

And some of you may say: "Our church can't do all that! We can't be a taster scoop; we don't even have the resources or people to be a taster spoon." Well then I challenge you: Be a taster toothpick! What might that look like practically? I'll give you a few examples.

In Minneapolis through the Kids Care program, churches are each sponsoring one poor woman who wants to start a home-day care business in her community. Most of these are welfare-to-work women who love kids and who complete under the supervision of their caseworkers all the necessary training and certification to become licensed home daycare providers. A church sponsors the woman when she's ready to begin business — and the sponsorship can be as minimal as providing her about \$200 for the necessary start-up equipment she needs — smoke alarms, high chairs, age-appropriate toys, car seats, etc. — or as involved as having someone with bookkeeping skills help her set up good financial record-keeping systems or someone with preschool teaching knowledge share curriculum and learning games ideas or a team from the church to come and visit the daycare once a week or once a month with a special enrichment program — story and crafts time, puppet shows, etc. This program enables the church volunteers to develop a face-to-face relationship with one poor woman while setting her on the path to economic security — and providing a number of quality, reasonable-cost daycare slots to other low-income working women.

In Montgomery, AL churches are participating in a program called "Adopt-A-Caseworker." As the name suggests, churches agree to support one DSS social worker with her caseload. The case worker can call upon her sponsoring church when she has a client with special needs that other programs can fill — perhaps that's furniture for furnishing a new apartment or tutoring for a son or respite care for a caregiver in the family providing a lot of help for a disabled family member.

In many cities across the country, churches are also adopting local elementary schools through a ministry called "Kids Hope," founded by Virgil Gulker. Here the church serves as a vital community asset by providing prayer support to kids in an elementary school located within a few miles of the church — and providing church members who come into the school once per week for hour to tutor a child. The one-on-one relationship between the adult tutor and the student is very powerful for both, and is helping kids improve their school performance. The church also sponsors social events for the mentors, the kids, and the kids' families — so in some cases ministry begins to occur among parents. One creative thing the ministry does is get everyone in the church to come to a partnership celebration at the beginning of the ministry, during which the church members hold hands and form a gigantic circle around the school building, as though giving the school a hug. This often gets the press' attention, and it shows the watching world that the Church cares about the community and is loving the school in its neighborhood.

Exercising Authority Builds Community

There is a third way that churches can be vital community assets. The church announces and witnesses to the Kingdom of God, and thus becomes a vital community asset, when it exercises legitimate authority. Now this point is a complex one but it's very rich for us so I'll try my best to make it plain. I want to talk about the exercise of legitimate authority from two perspectives; first, a sociological perspective and second, a theological perspective.

So, first, the sociological. In a wonderfully insightful book titled, *The Lost City Discovering the Virtues of Community in the Chicago of the 1950s*, sociologist Alan Ehrenhalt describes the sense of community enjoyed in certain Chicago neighborhoods in the 1950s — a sense of community we have lost in our time. And one of his main points is summed up in this quote: "Stable relationships, civil classrooms, safe streets — the ingredients of what we call community — all come at a price. The price is ... rules and authorities who can enforce them." If you want true community, you must have credible, legitimate, moral authority. That was something city neighborhoods in Chicago in the 1950s had. What did it look like? Well, it was embodied authority. It looked like real people who had the trust and respect of the community. Ehrenhalt describes how moral authority was effectively exercised in one working-class community in Chicago, called St. Nick's parish, by the senior priest, Father Fennessy:

For decades Fennessy had walked the neighborhood day and night, dressed in a black cassock

that reached down to his shoe tops. He greeted people on their front stoops and handed out dimes to children.... "He glided around like a ghost," one child of the parish remembers. "He would appear everywhere. It was his personal fiefdom. He was in the playground, in the hallway, in class. He appeared on the playground, and the grab-ass would stop. He had that effect. He was the lord of the manor, and there was no mistaking who was in charge." Fennessy represented authority of the most natural and unaffected kind, based neither on persuasion nor coercion, but simply on the identity and credibility of the person exercising it.

Father Fennessy had what I call "being-there" authority. Church members who live in distressed communities (or work there seemingly "24-7-365") are frequent fixtures, known by residents. They are considered neighbors. They have earned the respect and trust of the community simply by being there. I'll give you an example. Prince Cousnard, who moved with his wife Sheila into Houston's distressed third ward in 1992, is a modern-day Father Fennessy. A former professional baseball player, Prince uses the power of sports to build discipling relationships with neighborhood kids. Neighborhood kids tromp through the Cousnards' home so often that the door handles wear out and the plumbing breaks down. But Prince's "being-there" availability has earned him moral authority; it has won him the ear of teens — who are even willing to listen to his old-fashioned ideas about dating. Girls involved in the ministry's programs know they have to bring their prom dates to Prince for a "screening." He sits the couple down in front of his battered desk, eyeballs the young man grimly, and informs him that his date is a "precious jewel of God" and that he'll hold the fellow personally responsible if he doesn't return her in exactly the same state as he finds her then -- i.e., not pregnant!

Let me give you another example of "being there" authority, this time from Boston. Perhaps some of you have heard of the 10-Point Coalition. This is a group of African-American pastors who have achieved credible moral authority among youth and gang members on the streets of inner-city Boston. The group is led by Rev. Eugene Rivers, who lives in the community and has established his church there. An article in Newsweek about Rev. Eugene Rivers related the following story about when Rivers first moved into the neighborhood:

Rivers sought out a local drug dealer and gangbanger named Selvin Brown --"a sassy, smartass, tough-talking, gunslinging mother shut your mouth," he says, not without some appreciation. Brown took the Reverend into crackhouses, introduced him to the neighborhood. And he gave Rivers, a Pentecostal, a lesson in why God was losing to gangs in the battle for the souls of inner-city kids. "Selvin explained to us, 'I'm there when Johnny goes out for a loaf of bread for Mama. I'm there, you're not. I win, you lose. It's all about being there'."

Rivers' 10-Point Coalition has gathered together clergy and laity who regularly patrol the streets of their neighborhoods, getting personally involved in the lives of troubled youth, being on-call at all times. All this being there grants them respect, and it has contributed to an unprecedented drop in youth crime in the city (in one 29-month stretch there was not a single gun-related youth homicide in Boston). I think we'd agree that churches that contribute to that kind of dramatic decline in crime are indeed assets to their communities.

So that's the sociological perspective. To achieve true community — to enjoy safe streets and civil interactions among people — credible moral authority must be exercised. And the church can exercise it, when it is there, win it wins the respect of people because of its visible, tangible commitment to the community.

But we can look at Father Fennessy in Chicago, and Prince Cousnard in Houston and Gene Rivers in Boston with theological eyeglasses on, as well as sociological eyeglasses. The theological eyeglasses I use come from the latter half of Isaiah 22. There, a transfer of authority takes place. God takes away authority from a man named Shebna and gives it to a man named Eliakim Let me read Isaiah 22:20-22, where God is speaking to Shebna from whom He is removing authority:

In that day, I will summon my servant, Eliakim son of Hilkiah. I will clothe him with your robe and fasten your sash around him, and hand your authority over to him. He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.

You see, God was displeased with the leadership that the man Shebna was exercising over Jerusalem. Shebna, who was #2 to the king, is described in verses 15-19 as worldly, arrogant, and self-indulgent. He would ride around in fancy chariots and was just a self-centered ruler in it for all the power and wealth that came with leadership; he wasn't a ruler caring for the physical or moral well-being of the people. Indeed, like the pharaohs of Egypt who spent enormous amounts of public money building lavish tombs for themselves so that their alleged greatness would be remembered long after their death, so Shebna was building some kind of extravagant grave for himself. And so God strips Shebna of his authority, and gives it to Eliakim, whom God calls "his servant." Eliakim must have had a richer spiritual life than Shebna; he knew God and God considered him "His servant." And so God granted Eliakim authority — power — to use in the interests of the people. God says "I will hand authority to him and he will be a father to those who live in Judah." He'll be a father, a provider, a protector. And the implication is that the community will be better place under the good rule of Eliakim than it is under the ungodly rule of Shebna. And so, theologically, we find a connection between rightful, godly authority and healthy community.

And those of you who were listening carefully when I read Isaiah 22:20-22 know what I'm going to say next. Eliakim is a preview; Eliakim is a Christ-figure. Indeed, Isaiah's description of Eliakim is almost word for word the same as a description John gives of us Christ in Rev. 3:7-8. "These are the words of Him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut and what he shuts no one can open."

Thus we see that when the Church exercises a godly authority, a moral authority made credible and legitimate by its Christ-like, incarnate, "being-there" character, then the Church is gives the community a foretaste of the beauty and wholeness and sense of community we will one day enjoy fully in the Kingdom of God under the rulership of the Lord Jesus.

Conclusion

The Church is indeed a community asset. Our view of this must be very big and very Biblical. A much smaller, less Biblically-informed view says that the church is a community asset when it lets AA use its facilities for meetings or the Red Cross use it for a blood drive. And the church is a community asset by performing those things. Or we say the church is a community asset when its budget includes line items that earmark money for community services like daycare scholarships or financial aid to those needing medical care. And the church is an asset to the community when it does those things. Or we can say the church is a community asset when it operates a soup kitchen or has a used clothing or food bank. And the church is an asset when it offers those services. But all those things — as good and right as they are — don't make much of a permanent impact. They don't bring about a lot of transformation. They are not rich, meaty previews of the coming attraction of the Kingdom of God in its fullness. Instead, it is when we are life-imparters among broken people; when we are foolish investors in distressed neighborhoods; when we are godly, servant-minded authorities in anarchic ghettos; that's when we are true assets in the community because it is these things that provide a foretaste of the Kingdom of God in all its beauty and splendor and wholeness.

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