

Bringing Hope to Urban America

A CONVERSATION WITH
MARCUS L. ARRINGTON

After nearly 18 years of working as an inner-city school teacher and principal, Marcus L. Arrington, Ed.D, succeeded Walter Harvey in 2020 as senior pastor of Parklawn Assembly of God in Milwaukee. Arrington and his team are committed to reaching people with the gospel, as well as meeting physical needs by serving and advocating for the community. He is the author of three books, including When Hope Finds a Home: The Influence of Caring Adults in the Lives of Urban, African American Youth.

What are some challenges and needs in today's inner cities?

Most are evident and commonly discussed, such

as rampant poverty, violent crime, economic disparity, inadequate housing, poor healthcare, and low education. Much of it is cyclical, systemic and influenced by both overt and covert racial fault lines.

Further, many issues plaguing urban contexts are exacerbated by rigid bureaucracy led by individuals who are usually not close enough to the issues to fully understand the gravity and magnitude of the associated suffering.

As a former educator in a large public school system, I frequently came face-to-face with these harsh realities. And worse, I observed the evidence of the deleterious effects of the conflation of these issues in the faces and in the voices of the children I served.

Lawlessness is growing in urban settings.

Darkness is no longer in corners and crevices. It's spreading widely and rapidly. The greatest issue is the need for the gospel of the Kingdom.

Why should suburban and rural churches pay attention to what is happening in the cities?

First and foremost, God is concerned about people in the cities. He wishes that none would perish (2 Peter 3:9) and wants all to know the truth (1 Timothy 2:3-4). Jesus came to offer abundant life (John 10:10).

Second, the affairs of cities impact suburban and rural areas. Paying attention to, and lending support in, urban environments could be preemptive in some ways.

Further, according to Titus 3:14, believers should "provide for urgent needs." Urban centers are full of urgent needs. Suburban and rural ministries can lift the arms of urban ministries by helping them with projects, sharing resources, and perhaps even offering free training to help urban ministries provide opportunities for their leaders and members to build their capacity for greater impact.

How can urban churches build stronger connections with members of the community?

Prayer and fasting should precede any action. We need the Holy Spirit to guide us and make us aware of what God is saying about the communities we have the opportunity to strengthen and serve.

Next, I recommend doing your homework. This includes seeking out community leaders who are already engaged in community work and listening to residents. They know the history. They have the stories. They often have amazing ideas but lack resources for implementation.

Additionally, I recommend partnering with organizations or ministries who are already doing great work. Too often we try to reinvent the wheel. Or we assume that newfound zeal will produce new programs when the reality is someone may already be doing the work. They may simply need more funding or volunteers.

Schools are often great spaces for community

connection and aid because they function as hubs for neighborhoods. Ministries can adopt schools and begin to assist the school leader and his or her team in the fulfillment of their vision.

As justice issues gain increased national attention, how do church leaders navigate these conversations while keeping Jesus at the center?

These matters are so politicized, and politics are rooted in self-interest. So, there has to be an emptying of self and a willingness to engage discussions about matters that may not directly affect us.

The fact is the Church, the *ekklesia*, has to speak the mind of Christ. That's how Jesus is kept at the center. I know it's cliché, but what would Jesus do?

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A big misconception is that justice and Jesus are incompatible. Loving the Lord and loving people go hand in hand. Love manifests in actions. Jesus loved deeply, and His actions attested to His love. Jesus met needs, whether natural or physical.

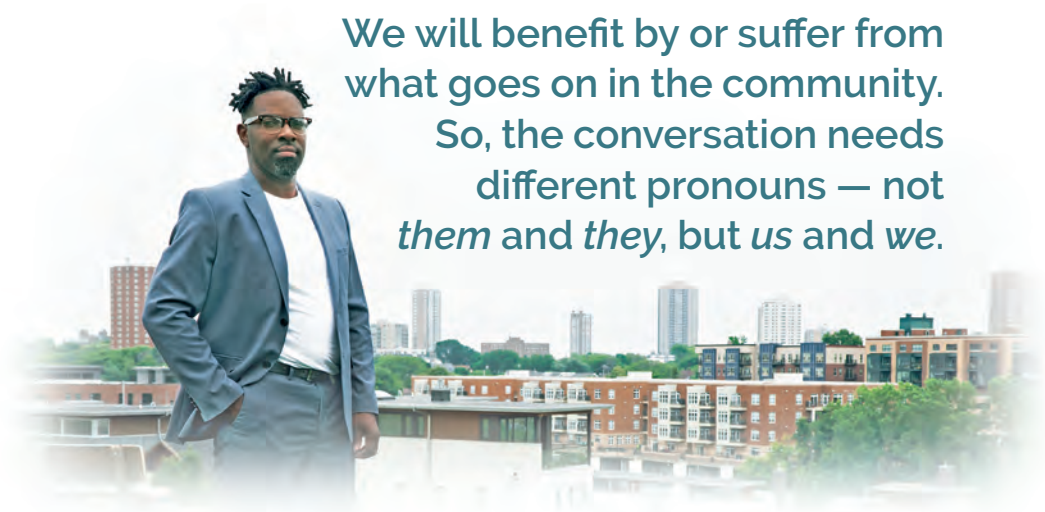
Further, the teaching of Jesus will prompt leaders to be concerned about social issues such as racism. When Jesus concluded the Parable of the Good Samaritan, He asked the religious leader which of the three men was a neighbor to the man who was attacked on the Jericho Road.

The man replied, "The one who had mercy on him" (Luke 10:37).

Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

How can pastors get people involved in serving the community and bringing about change?

Pastors should help their congregants understand that the only way to truly become relevant to the community is to get involved. Otherwise,



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the church is just another building that neighbors avoid and ignore. Pastors should emphasize and celebrate the Great Commission because the gospel transforms lives and communities.

Pastors would also do well to consider Jeremiah 29:7: “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” We will benefit by or suffer from what goes on in the community. So, the conversation needs different pronouns — not *them* and *they*, but *us* and *we*.

Proverbs 11:11 states that “upright citizens are good for a city and make it prosper” (NLT). Our faith overcomes the world (1 John 5:4). Therefore, pastors should celebrate the agency of the righteous. With God’s help, anything is possible.

What challenges should church leaders anticipate when attempting to mobilize congregations for stronger community engagement?

Leaders must anticipate the fear factor. Congregants will fear the unknown. The what-ifs ring loud. This can cause some to become paralyzed rather than being solution-minded.

Another challenge could be mindset. Some people prefer the old wine over the new (Luke 5:39). Some members are content with an internal focus.

New beginnings require new learning.

Lastly, a challenge may be winning the trust of the community. Lack of engagement breeds suspicion. Godly intentions notwithstanding, it may take a while, but the prospect of a transformed, healthy neighborhood is too good to bypass.

What Scriptures inspire you as you pursue restorative work in your urban context?

I think of Habakkuk, who cried out to God because of all the violence and corruption he witnessed in his context. After the first complaint, the Lord assures Habakkuk He’s working behind the scenes, despite the way things look: “For I am going to do something in your own days that you would not believe, even if you were told” (1:5).

After his second complaint, Habakkuk positions himself in his watchtower in anticipation. In response, the Lord tells Habakkuk to “write the vision.”

In many cases, where there is deep agony and frustration over suffering, there is also deep care and love. I believe the Lord gives vision to those who cry out on behalf of their cities and are willing to wait for His revelation.

I also love Nehemiah, particularly Chapters 1 through 6. Nehemiah didn’t have to care or get involved, but he did. As a result, Jerusalem received new life.