

Bringing the Light of Hope Against Spreading Darkness

For nearly 28 years, the Los Angeles Dream Center has helped transform ministry around the world through its example of 24/7 compassion ministry in one of America's worst areas. Hundreds of thousands—more likely, millions—of people have been profoundly affected by receiving assistance at its iconic hospital-by-the-highway campus or by serving there on a visiting church team.

“When I started, I didn't expect to last even one year,” co-founder Matthew Barnett says, sirens occasionally blaring in the background as he speaks. “My dad was trying to find somebody permanent and couldn't, so I was kind of the caretaker for the first year until he could find somebody.”

Tommy Barnett never did find a replacement, and then-20-year-old Matthew—who grew up in the Phoenix suburbs—became point man for building a new kind of church in downtown Los Angeles.

“The time that changed my life was when I did a prayer walk around the city and came back and said, ‘God, I'm feeling so much pressure week to week to accomplish this and that. I come from a great family of ministry,’” Matthew recalls. “I took a deep breath and said, ‘I'm just going to give my life to this city, help as many people as possible and go with whatever avenues You open up.’”

He calls that decision “the most liberating experience of my life.

“I committed myself to longevity at age 20, and that set me free from the pressure of five-year goals, 10-year goals, ‘What's my legacy going to be as far as ministry?’” he says. “It broke my life down to loving the journey. When you give yourself to the finish line, you don't get discouraged by the

bumps along the way. You know you have time for God to move in different areas.”

Longevity and consistency, he says, have been the greatest victory, far more than what people view as ministry success.

The story of the Dream Center’s founding is well-loved:

- How Tommy was searching for someone to help lead a church he wanted to plant in LA when a Phoenix church member challenged him to embrace his own message, “there’s a miracle in your house”—by sending his son Matthew.
- How in 1994, Matthew took the helm of a small Filipino Assemblies of God church in downtown LA, put his desk on the sidewalk and bought grocery items with his own money to give to local families.
- How the ministry took a huge leap of faith in buying the former Queen of Angels Hospital along Highway 101, converting it into a massive hotel for the hurting.

Today, the LA Dream Center (whose original formal name was “Los Angeles International Church) feeds 30,000 people a week on campus and through mobile trucks in 40-plus neighborhood locations.

The campus itself houses 900 full-time residents in its drug and rehabilitation program, homeless shelter, homeless veterans shelter, domestic violence shelter, human trafficking wing, family homeless shelter and more. All programs are based on a one-year stay, and all Dream Center operations are part of the Assemblies of God, while the nearby Angelus Temple, which functions as an extension of the ministry, belongs to the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.

“It takes \$900,000 a month to operate, and it’s a miracle because we put \$49 million into the Dream Center and it’s debt-free and completely finished, inside and out,” Tommy, 84, says. The patriarch of the Barnett family still preaches

several times a week in churches across America, raising significant funds for the LA ministry.

"All of this I would never have fathomed when I was a young man," he says.

The Barnetts didn't intend to build a large, generation-defining compassion ministry. They just wanted to build a church. But before they could do that, they say, they had to build the people.

"We knew we had to get them away from gangs, drugs, pimps, traffickers," Tommy says. "So we had 16 houses around Bethel Temple [the original church], and we put a mother and father in each. Matthew said, 'Dad, we need a bigger place.' That's when we found the Queen of Angels Hospital."

The hospital's 1,400 rooms and 400,000 square feet were finally finished some six years ago. "It has grown and multiplied faster than we can keep track of and has more impact than we fathomed," Matthew says. "Every floor is done and looks first class. It took us forever to do."

Their example of "downward mobility"—the ministry's term for serving the least of society—has spawned more than 200 other Dream Centers worldwide, which coordinate in a loose relational network that involves regular online and in-person meetings. More importantly, thousands of mostly young people travel to the LA Dream Center to volunteer every year, taking the flame of that vision back to their churches and neighborhoods.

"I always felt that having teams would be part of it," Matthew says. "When people came out and served, they were liberated by how simple it was to impact your community. ... It wasn't coming here and being intimidated and overwhelmed. It was, 'If these guys can do it, we can do it.' That's exactly what we wanted them to feel when they went back to their cities."

Because the Dream Center models many expressions of outreach—residential housing, tutoring programs, a food program and more—most churches can relate to some aspect of the work.

“It allowed people to go home and attack the one area of need of their city,” Matthew says. “We encourage them that they don’t have to do the whole thing. Just try to find the one big need in your city and go for it.”

National Partners

One of the many organizations to team up with the Dream Center vision is the Association of Related Churches, a church planting and equipping organization. ARC co-founder Dino Rizzo is also outreach pastor at Church of the Highlands, which counts 23 campuses across Alabama and tens of thousands of congregants. While planting a church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in the mid-1990s, he heard about the Barnetts’ new ministry in Los Angeles and was among the first to send a team of pastors to visit the newly purchased hospital campus.

“They came back saying, ‘Wow, we have seen this at another level,’” Rizzo says. “We started giving, and we started going. It gave us a model to better serve.”

Today, Church of the Highlands operates three Dream Centers, and ARC encourages churches to “open some expression of a Dream Center,” Rizzo says. “You may not buy a hospital, but you can open a food pantry, open a clothes closet. Many churches buy a truck and trailer and go to the neighborhoods.”

That’s exactly what Church of the Highlands does with five “mobile Dream Centers” built to provide a stage, haul food and create a hub for Bible clubs and other neighborhood events. The influential megachurch also bought a historic firehouse in downtown Birmingham and turned it into the Birmingham Dream Center, which distributes food, offers classes and more.

“A Dream Center gives you a hub,” Rizzo says. “You can do programming there or go into the community.”

The church recently opened its third Dream Center, this one in Auburn. Rizzo and others value the diversity of each center’s approach, with ministry areas ranging from serving widows and single moms to after-school programs to food distribution and more. One church bought a shower truck for street people to use, and many Dream Centers have become disaster response specialists.

“To me, a Dream Center changes the way you bring Christ to the community,” Rizzo says. “It gives you a resource, a tangible tool that is ongoing. A lot of times it starts with an event. Then it’s, ‘Let’s do that every month, then every week,’ then, ‘Let’s open a Dream Center where we can sustain ministry.’”

The Decline of LA

Since the Dream Center was founded nearly three decades ago, LA has undergone a profound transformation—for the worse. Visitors who haven’t seen the city in a few years are often staggered by the ubiquity of tent encampments, semipermanent makeshift shelters made of tarps and other found materials, lining highways and city streets by the hundreds. Some parts of town resemble craft fairs or alpine base camps, dotted with countless colorful, perhaps-donated domed tents.

But these camps—home to addicts, runaways, prostitutes, dealers and the mentally ill—are riddled with filth. LA has essentially decriminalized homelessness, removing enforceable rules against squatting anywhere in the city. Once-attractive beach communities like Venice are now no-go zones because of the detritus of destructive lifestyles. Encampments have even mushroomed in once-pleasant neighborhoods in the San Fernando Valley and elsewhere, where tents are now pitched permanently beside fast-food restaurants, in parks and on public sidewalks.

"All of the rhetoric, promises, plans and budgeting cannot obscure the shameful reality of this crisis—that year after year, there are more homeless Angelenos, and year after year, more homeless Angelenos die on the streets," U.S. District Court Judge David O. Carter reported one year ago, according to a major news network. His report stated that California's homeless population has steadily risen since 2007, with the sharpest increase of 24.3% from 2018 to 2020.

In 2020, Gov. Gavin Newsom called California's homeless problem "a disgrace." Homelessness "became normalized," he said. "Concentrated in skid rows and tent cities in big urban centers. Now it's no longer isolated. In fact, some of the most troubling increases have occurred in rural areas, in small towns and remote parts of our state. No place is immune. No person untouched."

More than 1,300 homeless people die on the streets of LA County each year, 165 in January 2021 alone—a 75.5% increase compared to January 2020, according to Carter's report, which added that "A recent report by the Economic Roundtable projects that the homelessness rate among working age adults in LA will increase by 86% by 2023 due to pandemic-related job losses."

Matthew, who married five years into his assignment in LA and has raised a family there, says, "I don't even recognize the city anymore, to be honest. So much heartache and pain." But the Dream Center offers active hope and restoration wherever possible.

"We have a very good reputation with all the judges because they know the results," Matthew says. "They advocate for the Dream Center's one-year program. It's pretty cool to see how much favor we have with them."

As bad as the drug epidemic is, the basic problem is a lack of fathers, he says.

“We have a four-minute testimony every service, and 9 of 10 start the same way,” he says, then quotes: “‘When my parents went through a divorce, I ended up using drugs.’ The deterioration of the family is in direct proportion to all we’re seeing.”

His solution? “Positive peer pressure.”

“People can change,” Matthew says. “When they come to Dream Center and see 120 people wanting to do things with their lives, they get swept up in that system rather than going to a gym or city services where everyone’s trying to get social services.”

Expanded Influence

In recent years, those ministering in California—especially in LA County—have experienced what Matthew calls “psychological fatigue.” But for the Dream Center, COVID became a time of expanded influence.

“During the height of the lockdowns, social workers were calling, asking us to visit kids in the projects because they weren’t allowed to,” Matthew says.

To get kids out of isolation when schools were shut down, the Dream Center improvised a school in the parking lot, where up to 120 kids eagerly gathered to attend their various online schools. (See sidebar “A Vision to Restore Childhood.”) This allowed their parents to work or look for jobs while their kids received help with homework and two meals a day.

Churches, too, kept coming.

“We were shocked at how many teams wanted to come serve during COVID,” Matthew says, mentioning Rob Ketterling’s River Valley Church (Assemblies of God) in Burnsville, Minnesota, which sent a team every two weeks during the lockdowns.

“His church really helped sustain our tutoring program for

kids,” Matthew adds.

The Dream Center team also created “a carousel of drive-thru feeding” for 380 days in a row, 11 hours a day without break, later featured in a full-color photograph in the *Los Angeles Times*. Matthew participated personally on 360 of those days, helping to serve a staggering 5 million meals before the team returned to a regular kitchen schedule.

“For me, ministry had started at a desk on a sidewalk greeting moms in a neighborhood, and now all these years later it goes back to the sidewalks again, handing out food and emergency relief,” he says.

The innovative approach during COVID lockdowns “took us all to a brand-new level,” Matthew says. But along the way, he often wanted to quit. His self-cure during difficult times is to break the vision down to 24 hours and say, “God, let me be faithful for just one more day.”

“That’s really helped me,” he says. “When you do that, you find new mercy the next day. You get new energy. God recharges you.”

One unrelenting pressure is finances. At times Matthew has done outlandish things to raise major support—such as accepting a challenge to run seven marathons on seven continents in seven days, which ravaged his body but raised \$1.2 million. The effort echoed Tommy’s Dream Center fundraising run from Phoenix to Los Angeles in the late 1990s.

“Those are redefining moments where God says, ‘Reach as deep as you can,’” Matthew says. “As a leader, you have to do that to get where you’re going.”

Team Ministry

The Dream Center runs on group effort. Its 100-person paid staff is loyal, long-term—and young. Most have been with the

ministry a decade or more, and a quarter of the staff are in their 20s. In its network beyond campus, the Dream Center is also more relational than structural.

"We want to keep it about friendships, knowing the leaders and their personalities," Matthew says. Many Dream Centers started with passion and built systems along the way.

"We have matured a lot in our delivery of empowering Dream Centers, but it was born of my dad's wild spirit: 'Go out and start one!'" Matthew says. "I'd rather catch up to the infrastructure later than stop the passion and wildfire."

Twenty-eight years later, the entrepreneurial spirit and the balance between spontaneity and order remain strong. The campus recently opened two more floors to homeless families, and the one-year men's recovery program is constantly full because of exploding drug abuse. The Dream Center is also seeing a delayed wave of post-pandemic suffering.

"I think the free money ran out and addiction took a toll on them, or people picked up new habits and didn't think they were having a problem and are discovering they do," Matthew says.

But he's dreaming bigger than ever. He wants to establish "One more big Dream Center facility in LA somewhere," he says. "Some great, monumental building like this in a different part of the city. I feel that's somewhere down the pipeline, and miracles will allow that to happen as well."

Nearer-term goals include opening a recovery program for teenagers to meet the pressing demand.

"We have a lot of kids in desperation," Matthew says. "My heart is in this next generation of teenagers. I'm seeing so much trauma. The next five years is all about youth."

He believes the turmoil of recent years has upset churches'

stability—for the better.

“The COVID era changed a lot,” he says. “Pastors have become bold in their vision, with a ‘nothing to lose’ mentality. Most that I talk to have lost a lot of foundational people and picked up new people. For a lot of leaders, it’s liberating. That’s an opportunity for their church to go a new direction.”

Recommitting to the mission, even three decades later, is true success.

“There’s something about giving your life to something,” Matthew says. “You’re always wanting to advance and go for it, but you relax in it because you know you have time to learn, grow and see miracles.”

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