

Escape From the Suburbs

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Some 400 Youth With A Mission (YWAM) teens had just settled in at the Blood-N-Fire ministries warehouse in Atlanta's inner city. It was a perfect place for them to sleep and use as a launching site for ministry activities that were planned for the 1996 Olympic Games being held in the city.

Blood-N-Fire founder David VanCronkhite had worked out the details with YWAM leaders to accommodate the large ministry team. Now one unhappy parent was jeopardizing the entire operation.

The mother—concerned about what she believed were unsafe living conditions—went straight to a local TV station with her complaint, rather than talking with YWAM delegates or VanCronkhite. Soon, nightly news reports were airing misinformation about Blood-N-Fire.

Prompted by calls from the reporter, an assortment of city officials visited the Blood-N-Fire premises to inspect it for compliance with building codes. They found the ministry to be in noncompliance in areas of electrical, plumbing, sewer and roofing requirements. Just one week into their four-week stay, the YWAM youth had to be relocated.

VanCronkhite told Charisma his ministry always strives to

follow building codes, and, in fact, YWAM had funded some construction projects before the youths' arrival to do just that. Sometimes, however, it's a difficult balancing act to meet all legal requirements without neglecting what God has called you to do, he says.

"The issue is, it takes a lot of money and a lot of time [to follow codes], and people on the street are hurting," he notes. "Even a leaky roof is better than no roof."

16 Bags of Groceries

Though VanCronkhite believes the TV reports were slanted and hurtful, when he looks back on the incident he can see that God's hand was in it all the way. Many churches and individual donors, instead of castigating Blood-N-Fire, offered help to bring the building up to code. In the final analysis, the critical news reports resulted in more than \$1 million in services, products and cash donations to make needed repairs, VanCronkhite says.

Now there's a better facility for the 120 to 150 people who gather nightly in the Blood-N-Fire warehouse, which doubles as the church sanctuary.

"It was the best thing that could have happened to us," he says of the news reports.

Arguably, the best thing that happened to VanCronkhite—where ministry is concerned—was when he walked away from a business career that afforded him a BMW, Porsche, Mercedes convertible, and regular cruises and exotic vacations. He was an affluent, born-again businessman. His wife, Janice, was a professional

tennis player and instructor whose students included actors Clint Eastwood and Gene Hackman.

Having made an extremely successful career for himself as president and CEO of a computer systems company, VanCronkhite was offered a job in 1993 that would have given him a huge boost in his already healthy six-figure salary. He and Janice were wealthy and generous, but God had a higher calling for them.

VanCronkhite says God gave him a choice: be blessed by accepting the job offer or go for greater blessing by leaving corporate life entirely and working full time with the poor. He chose the latter, walking away from business success many others only dream of.

VanCronkhite had become a Christian in 1971 during a Christian seminar in Dallas. His work with the poor initially began when Johnny Crist, pastor of Atlanta Vineyard Fellowship, took VanCronkhite and two others to Atlanta's inner city to give away 16 bags of groceries to those in need.

Today, it's as if God has multiplied that early effort the way He did the loaves and fishes of John 6. The "multiplication" has come in a variety of ways—property, domestic and international ministry extensions, favor with vital local businesses, and relationships with local pastors and congregations.

To start, in 1994 Blood-N-Fire purchased an entire city block—a site close to the state capitol that included the present warehouse and another building now used as a ministry center. Crist was VanCronkhite's pastor at the time. He says

he was wanting to involve his congregation in ministry to the poor and was seeking a leader to do that with him. VanCronkhite stepped forward and was a natural for it, he says.

Week after week, the men gave donated groceries from the back of Crist's van. Before long they were serving hot meals and holding Bible studies in areas around downtown. Since those days, ministry extensions have sprouted in 16 U.S. cities and in France, England, South Africa and Costa Rica.

Crist says it's easy for churches to get caught up in programs and seminars instead of reaching out to people.

"There isn't going to be any ministry in the church unless there's going to be ministry to the poor," he says. "Unless the church touches the heart of the poor, I think we're just playing a nice religious game."

While Blood-N-Fire was maturing as a ministry, VanCronkhite was learning that the homeless have profound needs beyond food, clothing and shelter.

"It's not the food; it's not the clothes; it's not the job; it's the relationship. For whatever reason, someone who is homeless has lost all relationship," he says. "There's nobody to call."

'Intense Relationship'

Following God's leading to pursue relationships instead of a church-growth program has cost the church some members,

VanCronkhite says. The ministry took two radical turns—the Sunday service was halted, and the poor were invited to live inside the church building.

VanCronkhite's budget shrank as suburbanites, who didn't buy in to the new vision, left the church. Monthly tithe income plummeted from \$40,000 or more to about \$3,000, he says.

Deciding to voluntarily end the Sunday service is hardly a typical move for a pastor, but VanCronkhite is hardly the typical pastor.

He made the decision, he says, after God showed him a vision of a beautiful painting at an art gallery, one that many people paid money to admire. He believes God said this painting was the "cash cow" of the gallery, just like a Sunday service is for a church.

But in the vision, VanCronkhite saw that a far more beautiful painting was underneath. To get to it required stripping off the first painting. God told him the first painting was the Sunday service, but the layer underneath was something far more valuable—building "intense relationships."

The Sunday morning service has been reinstated, but the church isn't centered around it. "It's not about Sunday morning—it's about what we are doing during the week," VanCronkhite says.

The idea of "ministry" too often doesn't leave room for relationship, he adds. "'I've got people to save'; 'I've got prophecies to give'; 'I've got prayers for people to pray'; 'I just don't really have time'—our gifts steal us away from the one thing people come back for—relationship," he points out.

Though tithes and offerings are rebounding, God is restoring Blood-N-Fire's finances through significant favor with local businesses. Chick-fil-A President Dan Cathy and real estate investor Archie Crenshaw are among members of the board, which is chaired by Crenshaw's daughter, Cissy Watson, a highly successful real estate developer. Watson and other Blood-N-Fire board members are hands-on, VanCronkhite says, often helping out on-site.

Chick-fil-A outfitted the ministry with a mobile kitchen—a \$250,000 vehicle for street outreaches. It replaces a small Bunsen burner the ministry once used. The company also sank thousands of dollars into renovating the kitchen in the ministry building.

Cathy, a committed Christian, wants to instill a social consciousness into Chick-fil-A operators. He takes new operators on a tour of Atlanta that goes from the board offices on the 26th floor of the Coca-Cola building straight to the ministry site of Blood-N-Fire.

"There's a higher purpose than seeing how many Chick-fil-A sandwiches we can sell," Cathy says. Board members appreciate the food and shelter Blood-N-Fire provides, but it's the relationship-building that really counts, they say.

Losing the American Dream

VanCronkhite uses a "group of 12" model to bring about intimate relationship, noting that Jesus spent three years investing in His 12 disciples rather than in the crowds that followed Him. He knows his approach may not be for all.

"Who am I to criticize another pastor or another church? I just want to go after the revelation that God has given me, this thing of intense relationship, this thing of 12," he says.

Larry Tomczak, pastor of Christ the King church in Atlanta, calls VanCronkhite "a pioneer in what he's done and what he's doing."

"With reckless abandon he's obeying God," he says.

Tomczak's church in north Atlanta routinely connects with inner-city ministry at Blood-N-Fire. Like Crist, Tomczak believes ministry to the poor is essential for the church.

"If we're going to recapture a viable testimony today to this world, we have to extend ourselves more to the poor and the needy," he says.

David and Janice VanCronkhite knew the American Dream well, but now they believe Christians must make a choice. "There's this competition for the kingdom of God, and it's called the American Dream," VanCronkhite says. "And they're in conflict with one another because they both demand 100 percent commitment."

As they have sought God's dream instead, the VanCronkhites are seeing God rebuild broken lives.

Keith Steppe is one. He was hooked on crack and had a \$1,000-a-day habit. One night in Columbia, South Carolina, he was desperate and at the point of suicide. He decided that before

he killed himself he would call a friend.

His friend picked him up and drove him to a Blood-N-Fire meeting in Atlanta the same night, where God miraculously delivered him from drugs and alcohol. Today Steppe and his wife are missionaries in Capetown, South Africa.

Jerome Herring says he was a “functioning drug addict” who lived a violent life. One night after a fight during which he was pistol-whipped, he was arrested by the Holy Spirit who prevented him from retaliating against his attacker. Herring routinely “strong-armed” men, he says, but he was unable to strike back.

He found his way to a hospital for treatment, where someone told him about Blood-N-Fire. He’s been faithful at Blood-N-Fire for two years as a member of VanCronkhite’s group of 12.

Constance Taylor was a prostitute who feared her pimp would kill her. Local police officers referred her to Blood-N-Fire, she says. Now she works in patient care at a local Christian hospital that serves low-income and homeless people.

“The fear is gone now. This is my safe haven,” she says of Blood-N-Fire.

Real Community Development

The ministry takes in homeless people and admits them into a process that involves escalating stages of commitment, each stage leading to deeper personal relationship. At the first level, one gets food and shelter for up to 10 days. No drug or

alcohol use is allowed.

At the end of this, they have to make a choice: either enter a 31-day program, in which they get 24/7 discipleship, or return to the streets. If a person is serious about following God, they usually find freedom from drug and alcohol dependencies during the first two stages, Blood-N-Fire director of training Leann Pearson says.

“Addiction is really just a manifestation of what’s going on in your heart,” she says. The third phase is a five-month program in which practical topics are emphasized and, as Pearson says, “The talk becomes the walk.”

The last stage is to become employed, often at jobs with church-related businesses. “Our hope is to restore them back to the community,” Pearson says.

Restoring broken lives is often easier with favor from the government. As illustrated by Blood-N-Fire’s own struggle to bring its building up to code while enduring misguided public opinion, ministries that reach out to the poor will at times contend with local governments whose legal power can help or harm. It’s not always easy to “render unto Caesar” while giving to God.

But whether he enjoys government favor or not, VanCronkhite will continue his mission. In his book, there is no purer gospel than serving others.

Reaching people on the streets is not easy—especially when the government gets in the way.

Ministering to the poor is a “yardstick for spirituality” according to Tim Johns, who leads Rock International in Kansas City, Missouri. But obeying God while still obeying the law can be a challenge for Johns and others who help the poor in the inner city.

Johns told Charisma his ministry has come under “tremendous scrutiny” over an issue that has big financial implications: property-tax exemption.

“You have to build your wall with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other to fight off your enemy, and sometimes the enemy can be the system,” he says. “It can be the government.”

In 2000, Johns’ ministry purchased two properties from local Roman Catholic leaders who demonstrated their belief in the ministry’s work with the homeless by lending them most of the \$90,000 purchase price. City officials extended the tax exemption the Catholics had enjoyed, but by law the matter is revisited every year.

“Every year it’s an issue. It costs us tremendous time and emotional energy,” Johns says.

If city officials choose to, they can give added weight to a prime downtown location to assess the value of the properties at an exorbitant price, Johns says. If his properties are assessed high and the tax exemption is not granted one year, the ministry would lose these facilities, which currently house its offices.

"We're very vulnerable. We're living dollar to dollar, day to day. If at any time the city wants to bring a lawsuit in, we are sitting ducks," Johns says. "There's no way we can afford expensive attorney fees. We're doing good to keep the heat on."

Johns believes Christians have a golden opportunity to take advantage of President Bush's Faith-Based Initiatives and that doing so doesn't mean a ministry has to compromise its message.

"I think if someone steps up with real answers to real problems, then the government will defer," he says.

Mike Lynch, director of Blood-N-Fire in Minneapolis, says liberal government officials are often against ministry efforts by Christians.

"They have an awesome opportunity to uplift the arms of ministry, but they're so afraid of separation of church and state," he says.

One local Assemblies of God church built rooms in its basement to house homeless men, Lynch says, until local authorities enforced strict codes.

"It's really put a crunch on them because they've had to put about 10 guys back on the street," he says. "They were incredible rooms, giving these men pride and dignity, and the government came in and shut them down."

When churches choose to house the homeless, there can be problems with the government. An Episcopal church in El Cajon, California, also sought to house the homeless. The church is suing a local council that stopped a church plan to use portable classrooms as a temporary shelter, according to a report in The San Diego Union-Tribune.

“Telling them homeless people can’t live in tents on their property is no different than stepping into the building and telling them, ‘You’re not allowed to light candles,’” Scott Dreher, the attorney who filed the suit, told the newspaper.

Blood-N-Fire works with an organization called Hope for the City, which gives away \$15 million to \$20 million locally and \$70 million overseas—all these funds coming from local businesspersons, Lynch says.

Lynch is planning meetings with state senators so they can understand the ministry’s impact on the city. Although getting cooperation from the government has been difficult, the business community is pitching in, he says. They sometimes receive truckloads of clothes and other goods that they give to the needy.

“We’re freely given stuff, so we freely give it away,” Lynch says.

An Urban Ministry Martyr

John Bryant, a compassionate ministry volunteer, lost his life in the line of fire on Atlanta’s streets.

John Bryant was a quiet man who was a volunteer at Blood-N-Fire from the urban ministry's very first days. "J.B."—as he was known—took an early retirement package from BellSouth so he could invest in helping inner-city youth.

"His car was always full of kids," David VanCronkhite, who founded Blood-N-Fire, says.

One of the kids Bryant helped was Adrian Stackhouse, who later became the crack-addicted young man who showed up at Bryant's house on December 14, 1998, seeking \$10 for drugs. Bryant was an extremely generous man, but he refused to give even \$10 for drugs.

Later that night Bryant was found dead by a friend, Scott Thomas, from Blood-N-Fire. Police reports indicated he died after being struck in the head with a hammer.

"He was the closest person I've ever seen to walking out what Jesus walked," Thomas says of Bryant. "He spent his money and his time on people." Thomas recalled how if he and Bryant were on the highway late at night, Bryant would always stop to aid a motorist in distress.

Police and Blood-N-Fire members were fairly certain who committed the crime, but the case went cold. Thomas and others had to work through the rage they had for the young man who committed the act. A business client of Thomas' even offered to exact revenge.

"He flipped a phone number in front of me and says, 'It wouldn't cost much to kill him,'" Thomas says.

But as he prayed one night, God gave Thomas supernatural power to forgive the young man. A few months after the murder, Stackhouse showed up again at Blood-N-Fire and counseled with a church staff member. That same night, he went to the police and confessed to the crime, Thomas says.

Bryant's death has caused Thomas to focus on eternity and God's call to minister to the poor. "God says go into all the streets. He didn't say go if it doesn't hurt." Through regular phone contact, Thomas has offered spiritual support to the young man, who is now in prison.

"If I really want to retire well, I really ought to be taking care of my spirit. Christians just hold on to their life so tightly; it's just bizarre to me," Thomas says. "If God wants you dead, you're dead. If He didn't want J.B. dead that night, He could have done something.

"If you get down to the reality of being a Christian, your goal is to die, and your goal is to see Jesus."

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