

Living the Dream—God's Way

I can remember being 20 years old, coming to Los Angeles with the goal of having a 24/7 church that would serve the local community's needs. I knew it wouldn't be easy. But I had no idea of the challenges ahead.

Coming from such a large church—Phoenix First Assembly of God, led by my father, Tommy Barnett—it was a bit of an adjustment to have just a few people show up to some of our earliest services. Feeling defeated after an especially difficult night, I walked through the neighborhood, listening for the voice of God.

That night, I saw people caught up in drug addiction, homelessness and prostitution. Just walking around, I could sense the turmoil and oppression. In that moment, God told me these broken people were my congregation—that my ministry was and would not be confined to a church building. Instead, this ministry would reach beyond walls and throughout the neighborhood.

That night—and finding that calling—was a life-defining moment for me.

Church on the Blocks

I knew our church had more potential than just a Sunday morning service. As we began to see the needs present themselves, this ministry God had called me to began to take shape. I would sit at my desk on the sidewalk, offering to help the neighborhood in any way I could.

At the same time, we began knocking on doors. Beginning with one block, we just started asking how we could serve. We gave people food, cleaned their house, provided fellowship and prayer, and became a constant presence of servitude in the neighborhood.

Now, 18 years later, our ministry, the Los Angeles Dream Center, reaches hundreds of blocks every Saturday with an army of volunteers. We are known widely as a refuge for anyone needing help, feeding thousands every week at the Center. We have a fleet of food trucks that deliver food throughout Los Angeles and a mobile medical truck that provides free health care to those without access. We have refuges for homeless families and victims of human trafficking.

And to this day, we have established each and every one of our 200 ministries by fulfilling a need that presented itself.

In the early days of our ministry, I met a man who wanted to make a change in his life. So we gave him a place to stay in one of the couple of houses the church owned. We also prayed for and mentored him until he transformed into a completely new person. I had no idea that meeting with him would be the beginning of a rehabilitation program for the Dream Center; it was simply a need that presented itself while serving the community.

We began small, with one block and one person needing recovery. We now have a complete discipleship program that graduates hundreds of transformed lives every year.

We did the same thing with our teenage discipleship program by establishing a fully accredited high school and residential facility. Now, the courts refer people to our program as an alternative to jail time.

What an amazing testimony of the redemptive power of Jesus Christ! The house of the Lord is giving broken young people a chance to redefine their identity and reclaim their future. This is what happens when you serve your community—amazing doors that you could never have imagined swing wide open.

As a church, our goal is to show Jesus Christ's love to the community in real and powerful ways. Every person we meet presents a unique opportunity to make a connection, nurture a

talent or lead someone to the gospel. We've learned we must live our lives searching for opportunities to serve because often, people can relate to something that shows them the power of Christ's love in a tangible way. Our church has found our calling through the mentality of "loving out loud."

We want to be an unrelenting source of inspiration and encouragement. No matter how far someone has fallen, we want to say to him or her, "You're still valuable. We're not giving up on you." I fully believe this spirit of radical generosity cultivated through our faith in Jesus has been the source of our growth. And I continue to see an amazing release of God's favor and blessing on those who live with this mentality.

Group Effort

Since the beginning, collaboration has been a source of help and encouragement. We have a handful of partners who started with us in 1994, believing in our vision of community transformation. None are more special than Joyce Meyer Ministries. We have always considered our missions to be along the same path. The amazing work her ministry does to provide outreach and salvation to the world has inspired us to work through any challenges—and, like her, see the world not as it is, but how it could be if we would only have faith and put forth the effort.

Specifically, we are working together to rescue victims of human trafficking, providing shelter and rehabilitation. By now, we all know this unfathomable injustice exists in every country—including the United States—and we are sickened by it.

Still, I see many people—including church leaders—turn a blind eye. They don't dare to believe anything can be done to slay such a tragic and expanding behemoth. The faith of Joyce and her ministry is standing firm against this injustice and providing a solution. We are working together to show that we do not have to accept this evil, and that there is a solution.

Time and again, I've seen the spirit of radical generosity work this way: It keeps growing, and it will transform your life, your church. Once you think you've solved a problem, more issues will follow, as will new strength and resources to combat them.

In the 18 years of the Dream Center's existence, I have seen unbelievable provision that can only be explained as miraculous. We are still living with and carrying out the same mission we began with 18 years ago when I moved to the city: to engage and serve the Los Angeles community with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I always tell leaders: Find a need and fill it; find a hurt and heal it. When we serve the people around us, we become representatives of Christ's love, and the world sees and senses something different in our lives and in our hearts.

In my role at the Dream Center, I have the privilege of daily witnessing the impact on people as they see the joy that radiates from our volunteers and our residents. They ask why someone would go to such trouble to feed someone, to care for someone or to keep trying when they are rejected.

It is a revolutionary lifestyle in which people get to see, touch, hear and taste the love of God. We serve those around us relentlessly, and as a result we are transforming the community. As the body of Jesus Christ who loved and served us with His life, this is our purpose.

*The founder and senior pastor of the Los Angeles Dream Center, **Matthew Barnett** is also the best-selling author of The Church That Never Sleeps and The Cause Within You. The church he started in September 1994 has grown from 39 members to reaching more than 30,000 people each week in the Dream Center's 40 services and nearly 200 ministries today.*