

Dream Center Co-Founder Says 'Spirit of the Age' Can't Hold Him Back From COVID Ministry

A city marked by record-high crime, unemployment, homelessness and shuttered schools, Los Angeles needs restored vision, hope and dreams so its people can recover from COVID-19. The Dream Center, founded by father and son Pastors Tommy and Matthew Barnett, is lifting spirits and bodies by housing, feeding and educating people in unprecedented numbers.

The Dream Center has served 2 million meals and housed hundreds of people during 300 days of pandemic, 20% unemployment and a hundredfold increase in crime the first month of 2021. In the midst of seemingly hopeless conditions, the Dream Center's parking lot is doubling as a classroom, offering free tutoring, internet access and recreation for students, and it is expanding the transitional housing floor on the L.A. campus.

Sadly, the city's homeless population will triple this year and will peak in 2023, according to Matthew Barnett, who also leads Angelus Temple, the church of the Dream Center.

"We need a vision," Barnett tells *foxlacom*.

"We need a beautiful vision of what could be done. You know there's a Scripture in the Bible that says when people have no vision, they have no restraint. And that's why I believe crime went up by 100-plus percent in January because, when people lose hope, they have no self-control."

In 27 years, Barnett says he's never seen greater needs, comparing conditions in Los Angeles, where COVID stay-at-home

orders lifted only in February, to the desperation of the Great Depression era.

“It is right here on our doorstep in levels never seen before,” he says, calling it a spiritual crisis. “I mean people have lost hope. I think our politicians, in the midst of saying all the things you can’t do, need to start talking about some of the things we can do—like getting kids back into school,” says Barnett, who has authored an op-ed column detailing the crisis.

Barnett remembers when children in the Dream Center drive-thru food line expressed excitement over the start of school. Now, he says, many voice fears they’ll never return.

“It’s a little scary when you get to the place where we’re not finding solutions and solving problems, and even at times taking risk for the children, stepping out and helping,” says Barnett who, despite a preexisting lung condition that nearly ended his life, has manned the Dream Center food line for 300 days during the pandemic.

What makes America great is serving others, he says. “I think there needs to be a sense of great sacrifice in all of us that says it might be a little bit difficult, it might be a little bit challenging, but we need to get ourselves out of the seats and into the streets and make a difference.”

Barnett says the Dream Center will feed and house people as long as there are needs, which he thinks will last for years, and as financial support for its mission continues. “This is Great Depression-era. I’ve never seen anything like it. Three hours every day feeding people. Anything people can do to help would be a great blessing,” he says.

At one time, blood clots threatened Barnett’s life, so he considers seriously comments about taking dangerous risks, “but at some point—after a year later—there needs to be a level of sacrifice for people who need help and that are in

need.

"I think all of us are willing to do that at some level and be as safe as possible while you're doing it," says Barnett, who wears a mask to protect from COVID.

"I'm masked up," Barnett says. "I'm not one of those guys who says don't wear. I'll wear five masks. I'll wear an army suit. I'll wear a storm-trooper costume. I'll do whatever I've got to do. I'll be as safe as possible, but I'm going to go forward, make a difference and not be held back by the spirit of this age that says do nothing, accomplish nothing, wait till a better day," he says.

In an op-ed, Barnett writes that evening newscasts and questions of Washington politicians focus too much on "outlandish" statements by members of Congress and broadcast hosts.

"But a mother in Los Angeles, struggling to pay rent, looking for work, all while trying to find a stable internet connection so her three children can participate in remote learning, doesn't have the time or the energy to follow this drama," Barnett writes here:

The shallow debates that I watch unfold on television—and then soon after on social media—are not the discussions struggling families need right now. They don't need people with power and platforms to focus their energy on each other; they need them to focus their energy on finding commonsense solutions to the economic barriers that prohibit them from affording a roof over their head or putting meals on the table.

Families in Los Angeles, the city I call home, are hungry, tired, stressed and longing for life to return to some sense of normalcy.

LA County's unemployment has been the highest of anywhere in

the state (over 20% at times), and is always among the highest in the nation, because much of our economy is driven by the service industry. Folks here can't just simply do their job from a Zoom call all day long. Some residents are even forgoing basic necessities like food and clothing, and others are going into debt simply to afford their monthly rent.

Homelessness is already a terrible phenomenon affecting Los Angeles and, yet, thanks to the economic impact of the extended lock downs, it's expected to triple this year and peak in 2023.

The debates about how to help average Americans overcome these hurdles are the ones that need to unfold in the halls of Congress and on the airwaves. People in my city and across the country are pleading for less drama and more solutions. They're looking for adults who will detox from cable news spectacles and fight for their communities.

At the Dream Center, we're doing our best to listen to our neighbors and understand their needs.

While our county officials still can't seem to find a way to safely restore in-person learning—as other communities have proven is possible—we decided to try to fill the gap by transforming our parking lot into a safe space where kids can come for free tutoring, computer and internet access and recreation. It also gives their parents a much-needed reprieve.

When adults engage in schoolyard drama, folks with real problems just start tuning out the leaders they're supposed to be able to trust; and that trust gap within our institutions just continues to widen.

Instead, families are looking for anyone with a winning message, and action steps that give them tangible hope.

Nobody wins when we're busy fighting each other. So let's not argue to try and score points. Let's just focus on solving problems. {eo}

Steve Rees is a former general assignment reporter who, with one other journalist, first wrote about the national men's movement Promise Keepers from his home in Colorado. Rees and Promise Keepers Founder Bill McCartney attended the Boulder Vineyard. Today Rees writes in his free time.

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