

Moving Beyond the Community's Ingrown Barriers

A Case Study Prepared By Frank Stone

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WITH A VIEW TOWARD CHANGE...

Moving! That cataclysmic event that makes grown men weep, women moan and children afraid happens at least once in their lives. Why does this event cause all of these seismic eruptions in so large of a swath of our population. The answer is easy; its because this event is always attached to the word “CHANGE!” Whenever the term move or change appears it seems to always have an ominous effect upon the recipients. After all isn't moving a natural process that everyone needs to go through in his or her life?

When we reach our years of puberty, it's all that we can talk about! This statement seems to always come out of the child's mouth that can't wait to be free of the constrictions that have been placed upon them by their mean, pre-historic parents who are stuck in the stone-age and just can't seem to keep up with the times. It's the same with the moving day that sends us off to our first year of school on the campus of our local college. Or perhaps the day that we move to a far away state to begin our careers towards learning how to earn a living on our own.

Perhaps it's our enlistment into the military that brings this term moving or change into our life's experiences. Whatever the reasons as to why moving or change shows up, it's constant companions are fear or dread. This is because of the unknown stigma accompanying the move or change and specifically how they can impact our lives! Whatever the reason or the reaction human beings don't like change and it's proven out over and over again throughout the annals of history.

This is especially true when we are not the precipitator of the move or change! Change is easy when it's our idea. We seem to relish in the fact that something new is coming down the line and we're giddy with excitement at the possibilities of the new things that are awaiting us just over the horizons. But when the suggested move or change is forced upon us, this is a horse of a different color. Our enthusiasm is dampened because we're not in control of our circumstances but we're seemingly compelled to make the transitions commanded us as if the compulsion comes from outside ourselves vs. being the child of our own conception.

This is what's going on in the main context from which we are writing this chapter of this book! There is something afoot in the eternal Kingdom Plan of our heavenly Master. It's not something whose results we can completely fathom especially as it has regarding the overall impact on His individual, chosen peoples lives. But we know collectively that the order to move or change must come in order for His eternal purposes to be completely accomplished in time and space as well as in eternity. This recounting of the events that follow will review some of these expected changes that can occur when our God begins to work in the lives of men or women who can impact a rural community for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Some of them you'll recognize because you've experienced them. Some of them will be foreign to you just because they are specific to the area and people that He wants to impact. But all of them will be recognizable in that we all have had some common experiences in some shape, form or fashion with the mechanism of change. Because like moving, change is something common to the human experience. Let's begin first with a

significant change that our Creator introduces in the lives of His new Kingdom people, the community called the Church of Jesus Christ.

ONCE UPON A TIME...

In the most famous book in the entire world there is a significant story about a king who wanted to connect His constituents and move them toward change for them to be able to connect them with a visionary plan of reaching a whole world with the new message that explained his Kingdom agenda. No longer was he just explicitly looking to attract Jewish believers but he was “doing a new thing” by adopting Gentile converts into a covenant relationship with Him that would be eternal in nature. He gave two new illuminations on this subject and they are portrayed by two of his most diverse members of this new group. The first statement was by a converted Gentile doctor (Luke) and the other by a charismatic converted Jewish leader by the name of Saul, who eventually became the Apostle Paul. Following are the Scriptures that they recorded in their books scripted through the power of the Holy Spirit:

Acts 1:1-8

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. 3 To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. 4 Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 6 So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; **8 but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.**" (Emphases mine) (NASU)

Ephesians 2:8-22

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

11 Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Un-circumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands--
 12 remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, 15 by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, 16 and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. 17 AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; 18 for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. (NASU)

Summarizing these two passages is very easy when we consider the intent of the King who gave them to His two representatives at different times in biblical history. The issues that needed to be clarified for his constituents that were responsible for continuing His heavenly commission for his earthly counterparts are as follows:

1. The salvation of "ALL" believers (whether Jews or Gentiles) was centered in God's grace being the catalyst for this activity and no one could claim being responsible in any form or fashion for their personal salvation.
2. Each believer (whether Jew or Gentile) was saved through God working out his or her predestined salvation experience in his or her individual lives. The goal in saving each of us was to move us toward a "good work prepared beforehand so we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10d)
3. He was expanding His gospel mandate that once only included Jewish converts during his earthly ministry to now include others that were from the surrounding Gentile nations that even extended unto the ends of the earth. (John 4:22; 10:14-16; 17:20-21; Matt. 28:16-20)
4. This statement was a commanded action to be carried out by his current (and future) disciples not as an optional activity that could be obeyed by some and rejected by others of his followers. It was a direct command that needed to be undertaken not only by those who received the commandment directly but also by all of those who were added to "the Body" (I Cor. 12:13) after Acts 2 through the evangelistic activities of his predecessors.
5. Therefore, as a result of the making of these two bodies into one entity, one of the works that we are called to participate in is the preaching and teaching of the peace that is now available to those who are a part of this new *reconciled* group. (Italics mine; Eph. 2:11-22)
6. Even though we did not cite the passage in Ephesians 3 above, this missionary shift was so important to God that he placed Paul as the fulltime Apostle that would carry out the major endeavors that would be included in this strategic process of bringing the message of reconciliation to this "new community of believers" (Ephesians 3:1-12).

This strategic process, even though presented by the title under the guise of a fairy tale, its obvious that the above stated scriptural objectives commanded by our King was intended to bring about some significant movement or changes in the recipients individual and communal lives. These passages are a part of the actual process by which God has ordained all of his people to operate. This is for the sanctity and the future continuance of constructing his Kingdom community here on earth as it is in heaven based upon his Kingdom program (Matt. 16:13-20).

There is however, another plot afoot that is seeking to thwart this Kingdom plan of our King. It's this author's overall opinion that the reason why this effort is being stymied is because of our joint human condition which is summarized in the quoted passage below:

[10] As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; [11] there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. [12] All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."* [13] "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit."* "The poison of vipers is on their lips."* [14] "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."* [15] "Their feet are swift to shed blood; [16] ruin and misery mark their ways, [17] and the way of peace they do not know."* [18] "There is no fear of God before their eyes."* (Rom 3:10-18 NIV)

These observations pertain to the condition of every man, woman or child born into this world, whether they are unbelievers or those who have become believers. It's obvious that this is not a popular position in today's culture! Especially when so many experts have surmised that there is no single cause for the lack of personal or community adaptations to reconciling this event called change in our lives. But I do believe that making significant deep changes is possible especially in the area stated by the author in the passages above. It's this author's hope that the following expanded comments will begin to aid each reader of this chapter to begin to move on toward successful interactions with others that will allow each of us to agree on the operational principles

that will alleviate what's preventing each of us moving toward the Creator's intended plan for unity in the communal body of Christ.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In order to properly introduce our suggested need for starting this journey toward community reconciliation, I must go back one year ago when I was chosen to participate in a program developed and designed by the Resource Center for Pastoral Excellence¹ of Samford University. Its assignment was to work with a group of pairing partners of pastors. The assignment given to my group was to investigate the possible community transformation practices and principles involved in two distinct communities. Our goal was to investigate how a combined group of pastors from differing denominations could overcome the inherent barriers that existed among them to successfully bring about community development and revitalization using restorative biblical community principles. One community that was investigated is located in the heart of an urban area in Birmingham Alabama. It is the largest of the ninety-nine communities in this area. The community's name is Arlington West End Neighborhood (AWENA) and the group that was impacting this area was Mission Birmingham (their story is located elsewhere in this book). Rev. Fletcher Comer and Rev. Kervin Jones were given the assignment to review and report on this group's activities and their results.

The other assignment for our group was to investigate the activities of the Greensboro Pastoral group, which was located in the rural area of Hale County in a small

¹ Kristen Curtis, *Pastoral Excellence Partnering Pairs Program* (Birmingham AL: Samford University, 2003), 1.

town named Greensboro. I was responsible for working on reporting on the activities of the composite pastors and churches that made up the Hale county pastoral group.

The Greensboro area is one that is richly steeped in Alabama state history as well as its prestigious civil rights history. The development of the Greensboro area into a city is attached directly to the development of the city of Birmingham in Alabama history. The wealthy land owners who invested their capital into developing the major city of Birmingham as the “leading steel producing center of the south” also made it possible for close relatives who lived in the North to use their investment in ownership of land owned in the southeast corridor to begin to be developed for the increase of their familial control of the land in all of Alabama. Of course, the Indians who inhabited this land area had to be dealt with first. They were either moved further west or removed to reservations in Florida so that the surrounding land might be developed in to plantations for increasing the family production of crops like cotton, peanuts and various other commodities.

Slavery soon became a major part of the cash flow for this area and brought in a substantial amount of capital for this region as well as a split of some of the family members when the Civil War broke out. When the war ended and many of the vast plantations were broken up, some of the slaves were able to claim their “forty acres and a mule” and eventually owned vast amounts of these plantations were secured by them and their growing families. This allowed a whole new dynamic to be developed within the Hale County area that allowed many black families to prosper then and even unto today. This and other issues are a part of the continued discussions among citizen’s of this area today and perhaps if diagnosed properly is the root of a lot of the underground issues that

many folk in this area face today. This will be developed more fully in a later section of this chapter.

With the above brief historical background fresh in our minds, I'd like to direct the rest of the comments in this section to the aforementioned co-laborers on this project, Rev. Fletcher Comer and Rev. Kervin Jones. In order to get to know the Greensboro Pastoral Fellowship and the surrounding community area, I first had to get to know these Pastoral Excellence Pairs partners, so that I might gain access to the privileged information that can only be deciphered if you are born and bred Alabamian especially if you are privileged to be from around this specific area of Hale County. There is a statement that I learned early from both of these men that caused me some perplexity from the beginning of our relationship development. They both told me time and time again if you are one who is seeking inside information from locals around this area, you are really at a loss to gain this! The phrase that rings in my ear is: "If you have to ask, then you don't need to know!"

Fletcher and Kervin, since they were born and raised in this area knew full well what the implications of this phrase were for the area residents. Anyone who needed to know what was going on in the insider world of Greensboro already knew what they needed to know to operate in this "closed system" and if you had to ask then the question itself already denied you access to the privileged insider secrets that would allow you to become entrenched in what's really going on in this part of the world!

This was the most exciting part of this entire venture. I got to know men who were completely different than I was because of our racial, cultural and upbringing but yet still in so many ways just the same because of our human condition and our common

shared experiences. They never really gave me “ALL” of the insider information but they did reveal enough to allow me the privilege of seeing their world in a different light than I could ever have without their friendship and openness of allowing me to share in their world.

Rev. Fletcher Comer is a dedicated pastor and family man whose childhood was somewhat troubled but through our Lord’s grace he persevered through some early challenges with a premature birth, personal family issues and through involvement with the St. Luke’s Episcopal Church found a “family” that not only loved him but nurtured him in the things of God. Several key individuals in this church poured their lives into his by teaching him to love God and eventually led him to salvation in Christ. He met his lovely wife Judith, “a perfectly good Methodist”, as he describes her in his testimony while they were in college and they were married and enjoyed participating on the debate team together. While he was here that he got a chance to serve as rector that he began to feel a call to the ministry.

It was then that he found himself enlisted in the service and while functioning as a layreader for Episcopal service men, he read the entire twelve-volume set of the Interpreter’s Bible Commentary and he felt more called to be a priest. He finished his regular army service as a special project officer for the Commanding General at Fort Polk and his comptroller. It was here that he was offered a Regular Army commission as a Captain that God gave him a choice between two wonderful professional callings. He knew that he was being called to the ordained ministry.

God taught him to pray as he was looking to choose an English seminary and participating in a prayer fellowship and he met a lovely couple who were from

Mississippi who were called to minister to local blacks by helping them to improve their lives. Out of their faithful service the Karatana Christian Community was formed that led people to living “a common discipline for the healing of men and nations.” They lived as core members of this organization and were blessed by the ministry and the fellowship experienced there.

This couple was blessed with three sons of their own and the Lord led them to adopt a Black American Korean Buddhist. She was a full Korean Christian, who was fed by a local congregation and introduced to Christ and developed her faith. Their family accepted her as a foreign missionary to them! She led them to a deeper understanding of what civil rights and prophetic justice was as a common theme in God’s Word and allowed them to recognize how much there was that needed to be done in both of these areas. He pastored for seven years in the Greensboro area and is currently serving as a rector in Heflin while his lovely wife Judith pursues her seminary degree in Sewanee, Tennessee.

Rev. Kervin Jones comes from an extremely large family and lived in the Greensboro area all of his life. He experienced all of the racial strife and stigma that went along with being an African-American who lived in a small town that was and is significantly impacted by racial tension (seen, unseen and protected by the prevailing culture of Alabama at the time: “separate but equal!” This has left quite a “scar” on his soul as well as the life of this man. He has learned to live, tolerate and even survive in this arena but it still leaves its mark of wondering if this condition will ever really change and allow “one who has brown skin” to be free to be himself and a integral part of this society.

He's extremely intelligent and a great thinker who has a holistic worldview that no matter what the situation or circumstance, he has insight that brings the "real truth" out of the situation. He reminds me of Nathaniel in the Gospel of John when he responds to Phillip who tells him of finding "*him*" (italics mine) of whom Moses in the law and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph, to which he glibly responded and said unto him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" This statement fits Kervin to a tee. You can always be sure that if you are bold enough to ask the question, he is blunt enough to give you his perspective, withholding nothing. You can always be sure that you'll hear the truth when speaking with this godly man.

He taught me much of what I've learned about African-American history both in Alabama as well as the Greensboro area (along with Fletcher) so that I could get a firsthand view of what growing up in this area was like and also how politics, ancestry, white privilege, being black and how these concepts impact the culture and the world then and in the 21st century context. For this I am grateful as it has forged within me a desire to know more but also to keep my mouth shut until I know most of the facts. It's also taught me not to come to preemptive conclusions before hearing the whole matter.

One learning that helped me connect with current circumstances impacting Greensboro was its place in the Civil Rights movement activities after the Civil war. The writer of "To Kill a Mocking Bird" steeped her novel in the setting and events that were happening at this specific time period. One chart that helped me tremendously (even though I'm not including it in this paper, it can be found at the website:

<http://library.thinkquest.org/12111/SG/SG5.html>)

HISTORY OF THE GREENSBORO GROUP

The Greensboro area group was made up of eight to twelve local pastors who had been gathering for prayer for their congregations and community while partnering on various projects to stimulate cross-congregational and community growth. This group has been meeting for approximately ten years. This partnering pairs group consisted of two of the aforementioned local pastors from the Greensboro area, Kervin Jones, a Church of God (Anderson) preacher, and Fletcher Comer, an Episcopalian pastor on assignment in Greensboro. I was assigned to evaluate their group as to the effectiveness of their volunteer organization to impact their respective areas. This would be done by highlighting some of their community's great advantages while identifying some of the possible barriers that might exist which could prevent this group from increasing its ability to impact individuals personally for deeper relationship growth while reaching their surrounding community for the Kingdom of God.

The group had developed a great nucleus of a faithful multi-racial, multi-denominational, multi-talented pastors from the area. They met weekly at the neighborhood office center for the Episcopalian church that was owned and operated by Fletcher's denomination. Later, this developed into a weekly gathering at the local hospital where they would share over lunch and make various hospital calls to members or patients that were in need of spiritual counseling.

They also participated in several joint projects like community feeding projects sponsored by their area's senator and the Christian Service Mission out of Birmingham.

Many families' needs were met through this endeavor. They also held a yearly Easter joint afternoon service at one of the groups' church. This involved the host pastor putting together the program and one of the other pastors delivering the message. This has been extremely successful and enriching for the group as well as their members who participate in this endeavor. Unfortunately, some in the surrounding community have attempted to tear down the great things that have come out of the above cooperative activities. More will be written of this in the next section.

There were some telltale signs of area cultural dynamics that became evident during the time of this group. A number of Samford students were assigned to interview pastors from this group along with some of the area's long time residents who wanted to participate in "telling their stories." The interviews revealed some interesting tidbits about the Greensboro area as well the dynamics that are part of this cultural setting. Some selected observations are as follows: (1) a strong allegiance first to the state and then to the common birthplace of area residents was evident in all conversations with all interviewees. It was obvious that there is an inherent pride involved when either the state or the Greensboro area is discussed. In fact when an opportunity to address something non-flattering about either of these two entities, it seemed that each constituent immediately diverted the conversation to a more positive area so that the past might be relegated to the past vs. laying the issues out on the table so that different perspectives might be shared and at least discussed; (2) the interviewees' knowledge of the history of their state and surrounding area was astounding. It seems as though knowing one's personal as well as his or her area history was an area requirement for all residents! All who commented in this area as they responded to the survey questions provided enough

fascinating material to make a worthy contribution to a history of the area. Even more keenly noticeable was the fact that when it came to the interviewee's own family history it was evident that he or she had spent much time rehearsing the intricacies of their own family tree accompanied by all of the sideline stories that make them worth listening to and repeating to generation after generation. There was an obvious pride that exuded from each of them when they talked about their legacy in state and area history; (3) the visit to the area Safe House was another interesting glitch of history that must be recorded with the excitement that it elicited in my heart. Greensboro was very much involved in the Civil Rights movement and has a significant place in the history of this tumultuous time. When this "house" was toured, several key events were discussed that are little known by the average history buff who has not intricately investigated this area's contribution to this historical movement. I was astounded to learn that when the Ku Klux Klan sought to cause a disruption in church activities when Dr. Martin Luther King visited the area, there was a network of people that kept their "ears to the ground" to protect Dr. King. They were successful stealing Dr. King away to this safe house and would have done whatever necessary to keep him safe and alive while he was in the immediate location. Especially this author will never forget the pictures and oral stories that accompanied this tour.

LEADERSHIP EXHIBITED

The exhibition of effective leadership was obviously a part of the above accomplishments by the Greensboro Pastors' Group and capitalized on by this unique group of pastors. No activities like the ones mentioned above could have happened unless there was a single or joint effort of collaboration in order to secure the cooperation to pull off these community endeavors. However, there were obvious gaps that began to appear when certain events began to occur to change the core make-up of the original group.

There was a change in the core leadership dynamic of the group. The group originally formed from the friendship that developed between Pastor Comer and Pastor Jones. They agreed upon intentionally lowering the barriers that could exist (and possibly destroy a relationship at its outset) to pursue getting to know each other on a personal, multi-cultural and professional level. This required many hours of communicating about every aspect of their differing views on church polity, theology, and cultural and racial issues. They were committed to share their personal views on these issues and not let them become roadblocks to the expansion of their growing relationship. As they progressed through this maze of dynamics, it became obvious to them that they needed to share their successes as well as their frustrations with a wider group of men if they could find some that were interested in this process. This is where the start of the Greensboro pastoral fellowship took off. All of the successes identified in this case study came as a result of them being able to duplicate what they experienced personally by expanding this dialogue to include group participation in this journey.

When they were progressing nicely, the call came to Judith, Fletcher's wife, to accept the mantle of preparing for her own ministerial journey by applying and being accepted by Sewanee Seminary in Tennessee. Of course, Fletcher wanted to support his wife in this pursuit, so they switched roles (she supported him by caring for the children and the household while he attended seminary early in his career). This move caused a ripple in the pastoral group. Fletcher's skill in purpose and program development caused a void to show up in this relationship development of the entire group dynamic. Even though he was in contact with Kervin regularly, the group's desire to meet seemed to wane and they fast became "challenged" on their scheduled weekly meetings.

One of the dynamics that allowed this to occur (our Pastoral Excellence triad discovered) was that in every struggling cross-cultural group there must be a communication channel that deciphers the coded way we often communicate with one another so that it might be translated to the entire group in words and feelings for the others to be able to feel the impact of information being shared. This is probably a poor example, if one is not an avid television viewer of reruns from the sixties, but it reminds me of the dialogue that used to appear on popular 70's sitcom, Sanford and Son. The scene that would invariably come to mind is an episode that required the local police officers to be called into service would always require Fred or Lamont to attempt to decipher what the Caucasian police officer was trying to relay to them in his common police jargon. This required them to turn and look to the black officer for his translation of the communication into the common dialogue of the local community. This normally brought about a quick nod of the head by both Fred and Lamont that the translation was

effective and they understood even though the original words were perplexing when spoken by the original speaker.

This same thing happens when we attempt to speak across racial, cultural, educational and/or spiritual lines! There seems to be a need for someone to come alongside to act as an “interpreter” of attempted communication patterns so that they can be effectively delivered, interpreted and received. A missiologist would call this Contextualization. A husband or wife talking with one another or parent speaking to a child would require this type of communication, translation. Note what happens when a parent gives the simple command, “Go upstairs and clean up your room,” to their child. We, who are or have been parents, have witnessed how this command has been mistranslated in the ears, the hearing and the performance of our children. There are all sorts of translations that come from this simple dialogue because of the grid that these words must pass through before they accomplish their assigned purpose.

If we expand upon this illustration and add the complexity that exists when different cultures, racial groups, religious individuals or a diverse leadership group begins to communicate out of their own cultural experiences we can only imagine how many meaningful conversations are thwarted because the “interpreter” is missing to contextualize the intended delivered message.

God’s desire is for each of us to learn how to be contextual communicators! This is why His first commandment given to his Apostles was to make disciples...of all “nations” or people groups. This required a clarifying statement be added in Acts 1:8 of what this process would look like if they implemented this in time and space. They were given the process by which they were to accomplish this task. They were to start in

Jerusalem, then proceed to Judea, then to Samaria and on to the uttermost parts of the earth. The mention of these geographical locations can only bring to mind not only language barriers but also cultural, religious and ethnic roadblocks that would not just go away but the Gospel message must be contextualized so that everyone hearing the truth might have an opportunity to understand it.

A paradigm could be offered that might exist for the Greensboro pastoral group. It seems that a new leader needs to be established in order for the group to continue down the path that was revealed to Fletcher and shared with Kervin and then passed on to the other members of the group. It is possible for any event to be group-led but at sometime in the process, it seems a necessity for one person to step forward when things seem to get bogged down, who can get the group motivated and moving toward agreed upon targets.

But this is where the process hit a snag. It is difficult to change interpreters in the middle of any process unless the replacement can speak the same language and dialect as the original spokesperson. In my observation, Kervin would have been the obvious choice to be this new “interpreter” but this would require years of stereotyping and culturalization to be abandoned and the development of a new dynamic that would allow a group of pastors to be led by one of them that was from a different ethnic and cultural group.

If you add to this the ever-changing focus of busy pastors’ schedules and one can imagine how easy it is to let other “pressing issues” be promoted to the top slot in one’s daily schedule. However, in the estimation of this author, if endeavors like these are going to be successful by any measurement over the long haul, a Herculean conscious

effort must be developed and infused by the Spirit, bathed in prayer and pursued with passion if the desired results are to be accomplished.

STRENGTHS/SERIOUS REALITIES/CHALLENGES LEFT

This section begins by considering the strengths exhibited by the Greensboro Pastor's Group and then continues with observations of serious realities and the challenges that may be faced by this group. These observations may not be obvious to the core leadership group because they represent a 'normal' operating pattern. To an outsider they seem to stand out as barriers that prevent the group from moving to a deeper level of a true reconciled relationship.

Let's begin with the group's areas of strengths. It's obvious that there is a centralized attempt to build relationships among participants through prayer. Since this fellowship was born out of the effective prayer efforts of the Tuscaloosa Prayer Summit, it's obvious that the group has attempted to keep this discipline as a central focus. The prayer summit impacted Kervin Jones at a very difficult time in his ministry career. Out of it, he received clarity as to what his continued ministry would be and how he need to get to know others in a closer way so that reconciliation might be the center of their relationships and activities. It was obvious after attending their group's prayer meeting for the first time, they had lived up to their joint commitment to Lord.

There was a strong group relationship that led to some growing one-on-one relationships. This was obvious with Kervin and Fletcher as well as with several other members of the group and Fletcher. This should be expanded upon as this group continues to move toward accomplishing their common goals.

There was also an initial enthusiastic and “charismatic” leadership displayed by Fletcher and then by Kervin after Fletcher was reassigned to Sewanee. Fletcher’s insight, wisdom and influence on the group were obvious, likely because he had learned to decipher and communicate in a common way as to be able to present ideas that might have been rejected by the group if they came from someone else. He had learned to contextualize the message of change in such a way that others could not only see it but were willing to work toward helping implement change for the benefit of the group and the immediate area.

The group was also experience driven. As a result, they began to share their personal struggles in the realms of pastoral challenges and ministry endeavors. Many persons are aware that a pastor walks a lonely path as he or she goes about doing the work of the church and the community. This group became a sounding board that could be used to bounce feelings and problems off of one another so that they could receive encouragement and gain strength to continue in ministry. This is a strength that needs to be retained and built upon so that the group might flourish in future endeavors.

The group has a strong sense of community through their identification with being long time area residents. This awareness of their common history and family connections provides each of them a platform that still connects them today. As an area that was the center for slave trading and cotton growth, quite a few of these residents find themselves linked historically through connections that bind them culturally and/or seminally because of past activities by their ancestors. This brings with it a common awareness for the area’s way of life and its background that can either be a platform for the continuation of it or at least lead to them having a respectful discussion as to what the real issues are

that prevent them from partnering to make changes that can positively impact area residents.

As we shift our focus to a more testy area, readers should note that what follows are comments that were extracted from personal observations. They come as a summary of the many experiences I've had in the last year spending time in the Greensboro area, speaking with residents (especially my Pastoral Excellence Pair teammates), reading the transcribed interviews from selected area interviewees and perhaps a pinch of my perception of reality. They are to be taken as such when each reader is developing his or her own strategies for moving closer to eradicating his or her community's debilitating internal barriers.

These items or areas that we need to move away from are not always visible to the groups with which we are working. Often, the lack of discovery of key issues that are impacting us specifically is attached to our own lack of obedience to the prescribed process for change. Please note the following illustration from a David Jeremiah's *Turning Point* devotional which describes why personal and group movements are so difficult:

Osmosis and Inertia

*I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. **Philippians 3:14***

Consider a couple of concepts from the world of science: Osmosis is the gradual transfer of fluid from one side of a membrane to another until there are equal amounts on both sides. Inertia is the tendency of a body at rest to remain at rest, to resist acceleration, to remain in the same line of movement unless acted on by a stronger force.

In layman's terms, osmosis is the gradual, unconscious, hit-or-miss process of absorption like learning French by living in France for twenty years. Inertia is resistance to movement or change like preferring the status quo. Spiritually speaking, too many people try to grow spiritually through osmosis and without overcoming inertia. Over a lifetime you might grow a little spiritually by attending church services on Sunday assuming you overcome inertia by getting out of bed. But true spiritual growth only happens intentionally by planning and moving. If you don't decide to

grow spiritually, the likelihood is that you won't. But you can grow spiritually if you will set goals in important areas and then achieve them.

No one grows spiritually by osmosis or without overcoming the resistance to change.

You cannot propel yourself forward by patting yourself on the back.

Unknown

It has been my personal and group experience that most of the time the lack of movement toward positive change is rooted in my own choice to procrastinate rather than a matter of the impossibility of making change in our current reality. In my estimation one serious reality that must be addressed by the Greensboro group is the current existence of a "Limited Group Vision." When individuals or groups begin to rely on S.O.P.'s (Standard Operating Procedures) then a lack of creative thinking becomes the status quo and inertia becomes the preferred model of activity. These standard practices are the prescribed way of doing things but they are not always the best for individual and group dynamic growth. In fact, most innovative discoveries of models for change come from one individual beginning to think about what's being done in an "outside the box" way. This can lead to new approaches of solving age-old issues.

This brings us to another noted serious reality the fact that the group lacks the desperately needed element of innovative enthusiastic leadership! When I asked the group the question of where they see the group progressing in the near and far term, the responses were varied but they mostly agreed they would continue to work on their current activities in order to strengthen their area community impact. This was the safe answer (and maybe it was the one provided by the collective group because I was an "outsider" that was giving the perception of trying to come in and change the way "we" do what "we" do) If this was so, and I'm not asserting or denying its reality, this explains

on an even deeper level why a new leader is necessary. In all major shifts in the Scriptures, God always chose one man (or woman, in the case of Deborah or Lydia, the seller of purple) to implant his vision and then he or she was required to pass this on to the rest of his people for implementation. This does not mean that the group does not get to contribute ideas about how or what things can be implemented. What it does is set the standard as to what the group's values must be in order for the individual or group to accomplish their prescribed God-given vision changes.

This gap normally leads to community division, which often leads to a limited "leaderless" vision that only further entraps the individual and/or group participants into further activities also becoming entrapped in inertia. Everyone knows that something needs to change but no one seems to be called to take on the challenge of hearing from God what "that" needs to be and how it needs to be implemented in the group dynamics to accomplish overall group goals. Today the group is somewhat "stuck" at the place of putting on yearly events without any real glimpse of long-range goals that could be established to bring about seismic, exhilarating new possibilities.

One of the reasons why this shift may not be happening is because of the group's propensity to avoid any defined lack of leadership structure. There does not seem to be a prescribed process in existence by which the group can designate a "new charismatic leader" and formally crown him or her with the task or charge of identifying what God is saying to the group. This would hopefully include how these new changes should be implemented and what the targeted goals would be for operational improvements that would lead to the group accomplishing their mission and vision goals.

By the way, this last statement might reveal more than anything about the current group operational patterns. I have yet to hear from the group collectively what their stated group mission and vision goals really are. Because this organizational gap has not been clearly defined, that would lead to a lack of group pastoral vision for combining resources, and even the stretched resources brought to bear by trying to involve many pastors who are also bi-vocational in their ministry roles. This leaves the latter group challenged to be involved in a meaningful way because of the existence of continued community division. This exists because there is a lack of clearly stated group and community development goals.

This leads to a formation of “loose” networks” which can be debilitating for the group because no plan has been developed to overcome the lack of resources that are needed in order to engage the group in taking on activities that could lead to church, personal and community goals being accomplished. This reminds me of the bureaucracy that torments our capitalistic governmental system. The term democracy supposedly sets the required targets that all government agencies are supposed to be pursuing but it seems that each of them operates independently from the other as they pursue their area’s selected goals detached from all the other entities’ planned activities. This eventually becomes so debilitating that it leads to further ineffectiveness and eventual demise. No organization that remains leaderless can hope to effectively establish and/or accomplish even loosely stated activity goals.

As I peruse the limited choices this group has, if it genuinely desires to overcome the inertia that plagues them it seems imperative that a “charismatic leader” be identified. With this need addressed, the group is then free to develop a strategic plan that will allow

the group to accomplish its God-given mandate for Greensboro churches and their community.

According to the 2000 Census results, there are several challenges that the Greensboro area pastors and residents are facing. Some in Greensboro have observed that the issues increasingly impacting the area negatively are: (1) the prison that has done business in this area for years and is probably the second leading employer in the area; (2) the increase in drug trafficking by “outsiders” (children of relatives that live in the area and have been sent here to “straighten themselves out”) negatively influencing the younger and middle age population who reside in the area to be involved in usage of the products that they are selling; (3) a lack of business development that decreases that amount of viable jobs that can pay persons a livable wage; (4) a decline in the population in the 22 to 25 age bracket because college graduates are relocating to other areas and not coming back home after they receive their diploma; and (5) the constant influence by some to maintain the status quo for the sake to history and continuation of “the way of life” established by the ancestors of the area’s long-standing residents.

These issues will either drive the pastoral group to get more involved resolving some of these serious realities and challenges or to maintain the status quo and continue to prohibit “progress”. The reason the term progress is in quotes is there seems to be an undercurrent with some of the residents in this area that growth is actually not good for Greensboro! Change is seen as a courier of doom rather than creating potential for good things that could stabilize the area and further develop future growth.

The Greensboro pastoral group can accomplish great things, in my estimation, by either utilizing their strengths and developing new skills (or at least identifying a new

charismatic leader that has some of these skills) who can lead the group to begin to address some of these issues. They could also partner with others to help the community resolve the issues that currently are crippling the growth of the Greensboro area.

Participants in the pastoral group currently do some things to make a dent in a couple of areas. One pastor is involved ministering to current and released prisoners to make sure that they are transitioning back into society in a meaningful way. The group as a whole runs a summer camp for hundreds of youth at two area schools (soon to be one), working with community partners to shore up learning gaps for students that did not do very well in the previous school year.

Any mission and/or vision set by the pastoral group should be designed to address some of these collective issues. Such an intentional approach would greatly affect the direction of any program, vision or mission that this pastor's group might choose to pursue by providing direction and measurable goals. Such would also aid them in tracking their outcomes to determine if the programs are being effective in addressing and augmenting the target population that they are seeking to influence.

CONCLUSIONS

Two principles plagued me from the outset of this project. They both are taken from a leadership seminar that I attended some fifteen years ago called, “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” by Steven Covey.

The first principle of highly effective people was to “begin with the end in mind” and the second one was “put the big rocks in first.” I will not take the time to recount everything that has to do with these two teaching principles but a summarized warning that comes from these seminar points is that in order for an individual or organization to be successful in any endeavor in life there must be thought given at the place of beginning. Planning of any project should include by envisioning what the expected end will be for the project. Then there can be designed a practical plan that will allow for the accomplishment of goals and measurement of results to ensure the project has reached the planned and expected outcome.

The second step that one must take is to make sure the he or she has “put the big rocks in first.” This is accomplished by arranging their lives to first include the valued activities that are most important and will keep a person grounded in who they are rather than being caught up in what they are trying to achieve. The list must include in order: (1) one’s relationship with their Creator; (2) putting the priority of their family above all other relationships; (3) the provision of maintaining a balanced involvement with friends and hobbies; and, (4) developing a viable plan that will allow them implement the above

items appropriately in order to accomplish their life purpose while being involved in working for a living.

Having had the opportunity to participate in this project has allowed me to live by the above principles, especially the third, and they have added a deeper appreciation in my life for learning how to develop relationships by not looking for opportunities to change people to fit who I think they ought to be. Learning how to accept persons as God and their culture have made them is a daily challenge and goal. This allows me to learn to appreciate their uniqueness and expand our relationship by adding to my knowledge base as to how to deepen our personal relationship rather than setting parameters as to how we can just get along with one another.

It is a hopeful desire of mine that I find some way of making myself available to continue to work with this group in order to aid them in implementing their chosen path for their pastoral leadership group. This is my desire not because I want to be accepted as an outsider but in order that I might see some of the “justice issues” addressed that I believe could greatly impact this area and its future development. This project has truly been an “eye-opener” for this author and my hope is that this is only the beginning of new interactions to come in our entwined futures.