Building communities from the inside out: Mobilizing for a "good enough" city

by Robert S. Bachelder in the August 2, 2000 issue

According to articles in the *New Yorker* and *Business Week*, churches are leading an urban renaissance. The media have celebrated the churches' role in prompting economic development in distressed areas as well as the social services that churches offer to low-income residents. Presidential candidates are supporting measures to increase charitable giving so that churches and other nonprofit organizations can enlarge their role.

But there are serious problems with this scenario. It is true that the resurgence of the voluntary sector's involvement has unleashed great energy and fostered some promising strategies for meeting social problems. But the prospects for sustained success are limited. We should remember that it was the limited effectiveness of church workers in the settlement house movement and other voluntary, local efforts in the 1880s that led to the large-scale government social programs of the 20th century.

As impressive as the churches' work is, its long-term success depends on commitments and policies at the state and national levels. While religious leaders have the attention of politicians and the media, they must advance a comprehensive agenda for urban change informed by the principle of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity is the principle that local organizations maintain those functions that they perform effectively. As the U.S. Roman Catholic bishops wrote in a 1986 pastoral letter: "Government should not replace or destroy smaller communities and individual initiative," but should "supplement their activity when the demands of justice exceed their capacities."

During the 1960s, many people thought that government policies would replace the initiative of local communities. But passive, disorganized neighborhoods proved

incapable of converting outside resources to productive use. At the cost of billions of “Great Society” dollars, we learned that neighborhoods as well as individuals must be motivated to help themselves.

Scholars, activists and foundation officials now believe that the key to revitalizing distressed neighborhoods is to rebuild the community’s social capital—its capacity and resources for cooperation and collaboration. As political scientist Robert Putnam argues, prosperity grows out of the trust, the relationships and the norms of reciprocity that exist within a community. The Equal Opportunity Division of the Rockefeller Foundation, for example, maintains that simply transferring income to the poor does not reduce poverty because it has no impact on the problem of social isolation. Individuals need personal relationships, networks and connections. When the Worcester Area Mission Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, cosponsored a program to help women move from welfare to work, the program included training for jobs as practical nurses and legal secretaries. But the key to success was linking each participant with a mentor, someone who had already made the transition from welfare to work.

John McKnight of Northwestern University says that “neighborhoods must rebuild themselves from the inside out” by mobilizing their own assets, including residents, churches, colleges and businesses. Whether by creating new collaborative structures or working through existing agencies such as local community development corporations, neighborhoods need to assume the central role in designing and implementing strategies for their own improvement.

To be successful, development efforts must be comprehensive, because social problems are interrelated. The comprehensive effort considers every aspect of community life: economic opportunity, physical development and infrastructure, public safety, and services and institutions. This does not mean, however, that a neighborhood should try to do everything at once. Instead, it should address one or two high-priority issues, thereby building local confidence and talents. At the same time, it must develop a broader vision and strategy. Successful neighborhood leaders call this blending of process and product “learn as you go,” and describe it as a spiral rather than as a straight line. Such initiatives transcend the divide that has existed since the ’60s between human service advocates who focus on people, and community development professionals who think about neighborhoods.

The church’s role in mobilizing neighborhood action is often overlooked. In Worcester, All Saints Episcopal Church, St. Andrews Roman Catholic Church, Worcester Interfaith and the Worcester Area Mission Society have played this role in four different neighborhoods. As neighbors gained greater control over their area, they saw a payoff in rebuilt housing, and in the number of children who left the streets for programs. Residents’ shared experiences and hope encouraged them to seek more progress. They saw that systems such as education and economics must operate in new ways in their communities. They learned that they needed government intervention to supplement their initiatives.

Some new and constructive responses are coming from local, state and national governments. Municipalities, for example, are now more open to partnerships with neighborhood groups. Realizing that strong inner-city neighborhoods are crucial to its regional economic and social health, Indianapolis shifted the focus of its redevelopment efforts from downtown to seven inner-city neighborhoods, and implemented a program to train community leaders and pay for neighborhood coordinators. At the national level, the Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community program awards block grants to foster local collaboration, and tax incentives to encourage private sector investment.

But we need a more comprehensive public agenda. Robert Halpern, an historian of neighborhood initiatives, observes that any local approach to poverty (no matter how well supported financially) is inherently limited because it cannot attend to the larger economic and political processes that help generate economic inequality.

The former mayor of Albuquerque, David Rusk, believes that inner cities will continue to deteriorate unless cities and their suburbs are politically connected, either through metropolitan government or through policies. His study of 320 metropolitan areas confirms that poverty and crime are much less likely to reach critical mass in politically integrated metropolitan areas. This approach breaks the impasses created when a concentration of poverty overwhelms individuals and exacerbates social chaos. Political integration can create opportunities in housing, jobs, schools and services.

Legislative measures are needed to achieve political integration. Poor neighborhoods need fair housing policies to encourage low- and moderate-income housing in all jurisdictions; fair employment and fair housing policies to ensure minority access to job and housing markets; and tax-sharing arrangements to offset

tax-based disparities between cities and suburbs.

We also need new policies at the national level. William Julius Wilson proposes several measures targeted at Americans who are experiencing declining incomes and job displacement. Changes would include a system of national performance standards in public schools, a national system fostering the transition from school-to-work, further expansion of the earned income tax credit, additional child care programs, and universal health insurance. Wilson hopes that such race-neutral proposals might become the basis for a new political coalition of groups pressing for economic and social reform.

Of course, any plan that implements concurrent strategies at different levels will be frustrated when the strategies conflict with each other. Improving economic opportunity for individuals and families, for example, does not necessarily lead to improving a neighborhood. Once residents gain training, resources and connections, many move to a better area, leaving behind the most distressed families and significantly increasing the challenge of renewing the neighborhood. Robert D. Yaro of the Regional Plan Association in New York City observes that inner cities are in trouble in part because of the country’s success in creating an African-American and Latino middle class. As members of these groups prosper, they head to the suburbs for the same things other Americans have sought: safe neighborhoods with good schools and services.

Some have suggested that we should skip the task of rebuilding social capital in inner-city neighborhoods by moving the poor to neighborhoods and suburbs where social capital already exists. But as Peter Edelman points out, such efforts would be doomed to failure even if they were coupled with an effective income maintenance system. It is the place-based social infrastructure, including social networks and institutions, that gives people sufficient security to think about getting out in the first place.

Churches should be realistic about the limits of what they can accomplish in the inner city. Perhaps their goal should be simply to build a city that creates conditions for social mobility like those that existed a century or so ago, before African-American workers encountered racism and segregation in the northern cities and began to feel imprisoned in inner-city neighborhoods. As Richard Wade reminds us, the cities of 80 to 100 years ago were more dirty, dilapidated and dangerous than those of today. But there was this major difference: these conditions were tolerable

to the immigrants because they considered them to be temporary. The neighborhoods were seen as staging areas for upward and outward mobility.

In a “good enough” city, the city that the churches seek to build, unskilled immigrants, single women with children and young adults would be able to secure a promising foothold. Bolstered by national and state policies, local initiatives would generate the necessary social capital, physical infrastructure and human development programs to help the neighborhood even as mobile residents move out. In a good enough city, social progress would be possible and meaningful, but the work of justice would never be finished. Moses and the Hebrews learned that they had to gather manna each morning, that they had to look to God each day. In a city where poor newcomers are always arriving and successful residents are leaving, the church must always be rebuilding community from the inside out, constantly replenishing the store of social capital, and creating human relationships and networks that work for the good of all.