

A CASE STUDY IN COOPERATIVE EVANGELISM THE FRESNO MODEL

***FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER EVANGELISM ROUNDTABLE
“TOWARD COLLABORATIVE EVANGELIZATION”***

October 4-5, 2002

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Introduction: Setting the Context

Fresno has popped up on radar screens across America as a place where God is actively engaged through his people. Many think that Fresno is out on the cutting edge in several areas, but for we who pour our lives into the city every day, we know that we have a long way to go.

Where is and what makes up the city of Fresno? Fresno lies in the heart of the State of California in what is called the Great Central Valley, which is the breadbasket of America. This fertile, 400 mile long valley is rich in agriculture, but poor economically and is relatively isolated from the wealthier San Francisco Bay and Los Angeles areas.

Fresno experienced an enormous influx of Latino and South East Asian refugees through the 1980's and 1990's; all who were scrambling to learn the language, culture, and find employment. This influx brought to the valley the richness of ethnic diversity, but also many challenges, among them the rise in crime with 125 active youth gangs. In 1993, Fresno became the highest Crime City per capita in every category except murder. That year, Fresno was also dubbed the car theft capital of the world. The outcome of the Rodney King trial added fire to the existing crisis in the city and brought us to the edge of a potential explosion of rage across the community. H. P. Spees, the CEO of One by One Leadership recalls, “in the early 1990's, Fresno was losing its soul.”

Genesis of a Movement and the Theology of Prayer

It was out of this feeling of growing desperation in the late 1980's that Alan Doswald and Gordon Donoho began pulling pastors together for monthly prayer that led to a year-long prayer gathering of churches on the first Sunday night of each month. In 1991, we invited the Prayer Renewal Team to lead the pastors through four days of prayer and worship. Forty-five pastors spent four days getting acquainted with each other, praying, fellowshiping and weeping over the brokenness of the city. That prayer retreat has continued over the last decade with the pastors and missional leaders meeting for a three-day retreat twice each year. In 1996, the pastors began to meet weekly for prayer in Fresno. Now in the city of Clovis, pastors have their own weekly prayer times. These weekly pastors' prayer gatherings have been a catalyst for prayer, decision-making and healing.

“If my people who are called by My name shall humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and will heal their land.” II Chronicles 7: 14

Prayer became the foundational block on which all future processes and collaboration among pastors, congregations, and the broader community was built.

Theology of Place

In 1992, a group of ten men traveled to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to visit the Pittsburgh Leadership Foundation staff and hear their story. These ten men included the Fresno Chief of Police, an educator, pastors from the Caucasian and African-American community and three faith-based, non-profit leaders. We learned many good things from the visit, but the best was the “Theology of Place”.

“ And seek the peace of the city where I have sent you... and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its peace (prosperity) you will have peace.”

Jeremiah 29:7

“Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it (this city); I will heal my people and let them enjoy abundant peace and security... Then this city will bring me renown joy, praise and honor before all nations on earth that hear of the good things I do for it, and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide it.”
Jeremiah 33:6,9

Planting your feet in one geographical area and pouring your life into the people and community contributes to a level of commitment and ownership that motivates passion and the desire to create and sustain a movement to real, sustainable spiritual and social healing. In 1965, two Fresno Pastors stood in one of their driveways and said to each other, “Let’s take this city for God and let no one separate us.” Thirty-six years later, Pastor G.L. Johnson, Assembly of God, and Bufe Karraker, a Baptist, were pastors of the two largest congregations in Fresno, if not the valley. Over the thirty-six years, they had become the gatekeepers of the soul of the city.

The “Theology of Place” became the commitment of several other communities of faith leaders who have, over the last twenty years, greatly influenced and impacted the spiritual and social health of the city and valley. Perseverance by this leadership is a key ingredient in the spiritual and social health (Isaiah 58: 3-12) of Fresno.

Theology of Social Engagement

In 1992, twelve leaders from the pastoral, civic and missional agency community gathered to discuss the spiritual and social crisis in the community. The questions asked were, “What can we do as a faith community?” and “How can we impact the community from the Mayor’s Office to the homeless on the street?” Dr. John Perkins, founder and President of Christian Community Development Association and the City of Fresno Chief of Police were asked to join us in our discussion. The Chief of Police challenged us to put clergy in every police car on a Friday and Saturday night in order to experience the pain of the city first-hand. This led to the formation of what came to be known as the NoName Fellowship (NNF). This monthly gathering draws men

and women of faith from every sector of city life. The meetings focus on the issues that are pressing in on the soul of the city. This gathering of faith leaders was birthed out of the prayer movement and the crisis in our city.

The NNF has become a dynamic catalyst for exposing critical city and community issues, exchanging dialogue around them and then embracing a solution or solutions to solve them. In 1993, the NNF played a major role in helping pass the largest school bond measure in California history. The voters had rejected the bond measure twice before. The NNF leaders took a video to the congregations and challenged them to pass the bond measure for the sake of the children. It passed by seventy-five percent. The Christian community had acted and made a difference in the lives of thousands of children. The NNF repeated the process in 2001, and passed another school bond measure. The NNF has become a safe place for elected and appointed city and county officials and community leaders to be affirmed and prayed for. This very simple process of providing a safe space has empowered the community leaders to verbally speak out regarding their personal faith in Jesus Christ in the public space and influence their decisions. The NNF has just completed its tenth year and has birthed NoNames in other Central Valley cities, addressing the spiritual and social crises of their cities.

Theology of Unity and Collaborative Evangelism

The third ingredient leading to collaborative evangelism and social health is unity (Philippians 2:1-4) among the leadership. Members of the Central Valley Billy Graham Crusade Advance Team said after being in Fresno for eleven months, “the pastors and missional leaders in Fresno were the most unified leadership group of any crusade city that they had experienced in the last twenty years.”

Many people both religious and secular credit the church community with playing a major part in Fresno's recovery. Built on the foundation of prayer laid in previous years, Christ-following leaders emerged to make a difference in the city and surrounding community.

What has contributed to this unity?

1. Pastoral and missional leaders weekly prayer meeting lead by Pastor G.L. Johnson and annual prayer retreats lead by the local Episcopal Bishop and a diverse community prayer team. The prayer retreats are in their eleventh year and the weekly prayer is in its sixth year.
2. In 1998, we began to focus on gathering pastors together by geographical regions of the city. The purpose of the Pastors' Cluster was fourfold. The first objective was to help pastors meet each other, as many pastors never took time to meet anyone outside their church or denomination. Secondly, caring relationships would be developed through monthly fellowship. Thirdly, pastors were encouraged to begin praying for each other's needs and struggles. Sometimes that simply meant praying for the pastor down the street by name so that their congregation would see the care and unity among pastors. The final objective was to move towards some type of collaborative engagement that would focus on the spiritual and social issues of that region of the city. For example: ten congregations that make up the Southeast Fresno Pastors' Cluster began holding a Harvest Festival outreach on Halloween. Over the last five years, that event, which has been held in the parking lot of one of the churches, has grown to over 5,000 children and parents attending, with 425 decisions for Christ registered in 2001. This has provided such a safe place for children and parents on

Halloween that the Police Department and City Council co-supported the event and contributed \$6,500.00 last year.

This collaborative movement, added to prayer and the NNF, provided for an easy development of the Central Valley Billy Graham Executive and Working Committees. This resulted in 12,000 people being trained in the Christian Life and Witness Course and over 15,000 individuals responding to the Lord at Dr. Graham's altar call.

Today, we have eight Pastors' Clusters meeting monthly. A local pastor facilitates each one. These cluster leaders are negotiating with the local Triple-A Baseball Owner, at his request, to hold a citywide Good Friday evening service in the 13,000-seat baseball stadium.

3. Unity has also been experienced among the missional agency leaders through the monthly CityBuilders Roundtable. This gathering of missional agency leaders provides them with a good time of fellowship, prayer, sharing needs and capacity-building training. This has almost eliminated any competitive spirit among the leaders and their organizations. The "bond of unity" is demonstrated in the hugs, laughter and caring spirit expressed at the roundtable by the missional leaders.

4. Youth Pastors Network

Youth pastors meet monthly for fellowship and to collaborate around reaching teens for Christ. These youth pastors, working with Youth for Christ staff, are reaching almost every middle and high school campus in the Fresno and Clovis School Districts. "Pray around the Flag Pole" originated in Fresno out of this network of youth leaders working together. It was this youth leader network that united to draw 65,000 in

attendance at the Saturday youth service during the Central Valley Billy Graham Crusade in October 2001.

5. ARM'S Camp is a collaborative effort between Youth for Christ, the Fresno County Juvenile Hall and Elkhorn Bootcamp for incarcerated youth. Twenty-five youth at a time are taken to the mountains for three, three-day camps per year with guards and faith-based mentors. Over the last four years, 240 youth have attended the camps. Ninety-nine percent made decisions for Christ by the end of the camp with less than one percent of the 240 returning to incarceration. That is sixty-nine percent less than the regular non-camp youth.

This collaborative spirit among the ethnically and denominationally diverse Christian leadership, contributed to the coming of Promise Keepers in 1997 and 1998 to overflow crowds in the 40,000-seat Fresno State University football stadium, the Chosen Women event in 1998, and the Central Valley Billy Graham Crusade on 2001. Dr. Graham's crusade set stadium records with a four-night total of over 200,000 people in attendance.

Now, coming out of the Crusade of one year ago is the Central Valley Impact (CVI) seeded by funding from the crusade. CVI facilitates the ongoing work of several committees that came out of the crusade experience. For example, the Men's Committee is facilitating informational meetings, materials and consultation to congregations who want to build strong and active men's movements. They also provide an annual Men's Retreat for smaller congregations who cannot do their own. This retreat is drawing 350 men from twenty different congregations in only its third year. The Women's Committee will host a Women's Conference in 2004 with Anne Graham Lotz. The Love-in Action Committee has organized dozens of congregations in the valley to provide 10,000 Christmas shoe boxes to children of farm workers and others living

below the poverty level in the valley. This collaborative expression all leads to opportunities for evangelism.

Conclusion

Though much progress has been made relative to racial, denominational, and gender reconciliation, as well as collaboration around issues facing our community and mutual respect, much work still remains. There are still significant barriers to bridge between Catholic and Protestant communities, evangelical and mainline churches, and the broader inter-faith communities.

Christ-followers, committed to sharing their faith with others in ways that lead to personal transformation are critical to a healthy community and the Valley's future. Disciples of Jesus, working out racial reconciliation, economic equity in their own lives, relationships, businesses and other spheres of influence, will be the determining factor in tipping the balance toward a preferred future for all people in the Fresno community and Central California.