

GOD HAS LEFT THE BUILDING



Bringing the Church to His People

Rev. Dr. Robert M. Waterman

With Diana Braithwaite and Kate Stephenson

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*For my mother, Pearlie Mae Julious,
whose love gives me faith in a better future;*

*and to my Bedford-Stuyvesant community
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PREFACE

After six months of serving as pastor of Antioch Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, I relocated from upstate and settled into my new residence around the corner. I awoke after my first night in my new home filled with joy and praise as I prepared for church. Because I now lived so close to the church, I was able to walk to service. People waved and spoke to me as I passed; I had come to know many people in the community. But it became apparent that most of the people weren't walking my way on Sunday mornings. This observation did not sit well with my spirit.

I'd started my daily ritual of walking the four-block radius around the church when I first came to Antioch. While getting exercise, I would stop and speak with every person I encountered. I had questions, the two most pressing being "Do you go to church?" and "If not, why?" The answers varied, but there was one main reason—the church is full of hypocrites claiming to be better than others. My neighbors expressed difficulty in understanding what in the world was going on during church services and in communicating with church people. And to my utter surprise, many revealed an underlying feeling of not being good enough. *Not good enough for Christ!* The more that I reflected on these answers, the more I realized the dangerous divide between the church and the community.

Now, as a full-fledged member of the community, I was beginning to see firsthand the neighborhood's lack of interest in and involvement with not just Antioch, but the Church in general. My moment of true conviction came when I happened upon the neighborhood children

happily playing on Antioch's steps. It occurred to me that, without positive change, those steps could be the closest those children would ever come to attending. I knew then that the church had to do something. What was already being done was not making an indelible impact on the lives who *need* the church nor creating positive change in neighbors' attitudes. I felt, as a minister, it was my personal responsibility to forge a connection between those who were in the church and those who were not. When you think about it, the majority of people who actually need Christ reside beyond the physical walls of the church. The church must be a vital resource to the whole community. If not that, then what is our purpose?

INTRODUCTION: THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

I've always believed that if a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing right and well. As a minister, I believe it is my job not only to answer the call of God with sincerity, but to responsibly educate myself about the call. I want my congregation to benefit from both the passion of a called preacher and the knowledge of a learned teacher. To that end, in 2006, I was enrolled in the Theological School at Drew University, starting the final step towards my PhD—the dissertation.

Antioch Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, is my church home, and I am what you might call “new blood.” I've made it my mission to change for Christ, to bring new initiatives to Antioch and to challenge those already established for the better. But as I looked around the community surrounding Antioch, I began to realize that while we were changing on the inside, nothing was progressing on the outside.

The Lord put it upon me to say something, but moreover, to do something! The idea crystallized the more I researched for my dissertation. The Lord continued to speak to me, to point me towards resources, towards books, towards people who could educate me on how to reach out—how to fulfill the Great Commission that Christ bestowed upon His disciples in the final moments of His life. And as in many crisis situations, I turned to my family for help. In August 2006, I came to my Antioch family congregation with a question: *Whom do we serve?*

In response, by November we had formed the Community Outreach Lay Committee (COLC) to answer that

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question and the larger call of Jesus. Through intensive research and invaluable discussions, the innovative idea of Canticles, the Antioch Gospel Lounge, began to emerge, and the COLC took hold of the monumental responsibility of bringing the vision to life. The Lounge seeks to overcome the barriers between Antioch and the community at large—to provide a neutral yet nourishing environment to promote the Word of God through thought, word and deed.

In developing the Lounge, we realized that our mission is unique only insofar as demographics and subculture, that this breakdown between church and community is a citywide, statewide, nationwide, and perhaps worldwide problem. I recognize that one program will not heal all the wounds of the world; however, much can be learned from Antioch's process in creating Canticles. The Lounge itself is an effective outreach paradigm that can translate across denominations, genders, age groups, and cultures.

The development of the Lounge has not only impacted the community; it has also greatly transformed our congregation from mere members to devoted disciples—effective, empowered evangelists filled with the Holy Spirit, fulfilling Christ's charge to go out and teach the nations.

This book has grown out of my doctoral dissertation entitled *Expanding the Culture of the Church Beyond Its Walls: Effective Outreach for the 21st Century*, which documents my journey with the Community Outreach Lay Committee in developing the transformative outreach project called Canticles. This outreach paradigm is born out of my deep-seated desire to demolish the barriers that exist between the church and those who do not yet

INTRODUCTION

have a relationship with God, and to assist the church in overcoming the apprehensions associated with breaking new ground.

The Lounge is only one example of how to reach the masses in this challenging era of instantly gratifying multimedia multiplicity. Therefore, specific information about its construction has been saved for the latter part of the book. In Part I, we open with general discussion on what it means to be Christian, what outreach is, and how we can all go about being disciples of Jesus, breaking down barriers and erecting bridges of understanding. Then in Part II, we move into specific conversation about how to go about creating an innovative plan for outreach. We answer the question of how you get started with a program and how you keep the program going. Lastly, Part III is an in-depth examination of the journey, relaying all of our mistakes and problems, detailing our moments of enlightenment and success, and sharing our hopes and goals for the future.

The book is outlined and structured with the intention of encouraging and assisting other Christian leaders and innovators to join us in thinking outside the box—to develop creative opportunities for reaching and engaging those in need both within and beyond the church. As you read, take heart: you can bring transformative outreach to your community. My personal investment of time and resources in this project has been one of the greatest accomplishments in my life. I pray this book brings you hope and inspiration to step out on faith, because God has truly left the building!

DEFINITIONS

PLACING THE WORDS IN PERSPECTIVE

First, I would like to set up a few definitions of words we will be returning and referring to often throughout our exploration of outreach to clarify what I mean by them:

God — The Christian Church receives God through His Word, the Bible, and understands God as three beings in one—God the Source, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. God the Source of life who reigns from heaven is the maker of all creation, including Adam and Eve, the first of humankind. God the Son, who revealed Himself to us as Jesus Christ of Nazareth, is accepted as the greatest prophet in many religions; Christians believe that He has conquered death so that we may all enter the kingdom of heaven through His merciful will. God the Holy Spirit is the essence of God that lives within and among all of us who believe and seek the face of the Source.

Church — The Church represents the body of Christ as a living, breathing, moving organism that performs His works. The Church is organized around similar beliefs about God, the Bible, and the responsibility of human beings to each other and to all of God's creation.

Christians — Believers in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Using the above understanding of the Church positions Christians as essential organs of the anatomy of the

DEFINITIONS

Church. The Church can only perform His works through the vital efforts of Christians who are required to function as proactive disciples, adhering to and spreading the teachings of Jesus.

Churched — Those Christians who consistently and religiously attend church services to seek community and fellowship with the other members of the body of Christ, and to build a closer relationship with God.

Unchurched — Those who have not yet received Jesus as their Lord and Savior or those who have a relationship with God but not with the Church body.

Evangelism — The spreading of the good news of Jesus in an effort to bring all people to the knowledge of God and the salvation of Jesus Christ.

Outreach — Cultivating healthy, effectual members of the body of Christ requires the Church to use the strategic approach known as outreach. It is the process of reaching out, touching and motivating the uninitiated and those uninspired to join the church to give Jesus a chance.

Faith — As defined by the Bible, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, [and] the evidence of things unseen” (Hebrews 11:1). Faith is trusting in something that you cannot see, but can understand and feel within your heart to be real.

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Faith Walk — Also known as a walk of or in faith; sometimes one is said to “step out on faith.” It is the daily struggle towards the path that God wills for you, in faithful obedience, even in times where we don’t understand or see the path clearly. It is the active seeking of God in the daily activities of our lives and the action of belief.

Witness — To bear witness is to testify, to tell, to acknowledge, to provide evidence of God and His works within people’s lives.

PART I: THE GREAT COMMISSION

Understanding the Call of Christ

Matthew 28:16-20

Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Mark 16:15

And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.

Luke 24:45-49

And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high."

John 20:21

So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you."

Acts 1:8

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

1: A CHRISTIAN'S ROLE IN OUTREACH

Outreach is more than just Prayers for the People, Wednesday night Bible study, or Sunday school. Just as Bill Gates isn't a billionaire by accident, neither do people come to know Christ without effort. A way of following Jesus' example, outreach is the drive to minister to the immediate needs of the surrounding community, while proclaiming the good news of Christ's reign and the salvation of His people. The Bible provides examples of Jesus' travels throughout the lands, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the new kingdom. But Jesus did more than just talk. Christ is a healer who touched people where they were, relieving them of ailments and afflictions both physical and spiritual. He provided, and through the Gospels of the Bible continues to provide, the guidance we all need to come into lives of prosperity.

In all things we must look to God for examples. Before embarking on an outreach plan, we must understand the directions of Jesus. The New Testament provides regular instruction regarding God's expected behavior for the church. Before ascending into heaven, Christ left a special charge for His people that can be found in each of the four Gospels of Mark, Luke, John and Matthew. But because of its detailed and instructional language, many turn to Matthew 28:19-20, which speaks the charge thusly:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

CHAPTER ONE

This declaration to Go, Teach and Baptize has become known as the Great Commission. Understanding and effectively communicating the Great Commission is the foundation of any successful outreach program. This is tantamount to warm-up exercises for the church body. Without this basic understanding of Jesus' will for us as Christians we are lost. Webster's New World Dictionary defines "commission" as (1) an authorization to perform certain duties or tasks, or to take on certain powers, (2) authority to act on behalf of another, (3) an entrusting, as of power, authority, etc., to a person or body. Christians are authorized and entrusted to perform the duties and tasks of God on behalf of Jesus. Christians are compelled to embrace responsibility and shift from the concept of self to that of all. My belief that each Christian is given the power to act on Christ's behalf leads me to question our actions. *What are we doing?* Are we really hypocrites, as the unchurched see us? Does the Church body truly embrace its duty to evangelize actively by witnessing to others? My research produced a resounding "NO!" to this question.

Statistics can be sticky, but numbers don't lie. When I polled my own Antioch congregation in 2006, I found that although 95 percent felt outreach was important, only 35 percent really felt they understood what outreach is. 65 percent—more than six out of ten people—had no idea what outreach is or should be. They were completely in the dark! How can we as Christians bring anyone to the light if we are stumbling in the dark ourselves? Somebody find me the light switch!

Aha! The light went on. It was an illuminating experience to find that not only did my congregation not understand outreach but an overwhelming majority felt

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that it was my sole responsibility as pastor to evangelize. By their thinking, the pastor was the only minister in the house who should reach out to extend the Words of God. It was a revelation.

If only one person in a congregation is reaching out to the unchurched, how many can be helped? If that one person is already a fulltime shepherd of an established flock, how many lost sheep can he go out to find without losing more?

Within my own congregation, the message of the Great Commission had been lost.

For far too long, churches have focused the majority of their efforts on church membership, seeking to ensure that the saved continue to reserve their tickets into heaven. But pastors should not be positioned as paid professionals who evangelize to or *in place* of their members. The real job of a pastor is to equip members for ministry and hold them accountable as servants of God. The goal is for each of us to be ministers of the good Word—to be Christian is to walk in faith while helping and connecting with the unchurched. At some point, Christians must be encouraged to become disciples, seeking out and helping the unsaved. If not, what is our point? Jesus did not come to save the few, but the many.

KEY POINTS: CHAPTER 1

✓ As an extension of the Great Commission, the text of which is filled with verbs, outreach is more than prayer—it's action!

✓ Only through effort do people come to Christ.

✓ The Great Commission authorizes and demands that each one teach one—that we all become ambassadors for Christ.

2: WHAT IS MODERN OUTREACH?

Today's society is what many call a "postmodern" society. People are distrustful of old ideologies and theories that are big on impressive ceremony but lack meaning and practical importance. This way of thinking has caused a shift in many traditional institutions that, in turn, has had a major impact on Christianity as many rethink concepts of religion and the church. These changing attitudes have a profound effect on the interpretation of the Bible, the application of doctrine, the participation within houses of worship, and ultimately the reactions to and opinions about fellowship. Postmodernism affords us the opportunity to redefine the understanding and application of outreach for this modern age—to retool the language of the church in the native tongue of those who need it most, allowing the church to rededicate itself to the example of Christ.

In defining the idea of outreach, you are establishing a principle you can return to time and again during the process, anchoring modern disciples to the original message of the Great Commission. In clarifying the role of modern Christians we are also creating an opportunity to cast aside ineffectual paradigms born out of outmoded beliefs and misinterpretations of the message.

Matthew retells the message of Jesus using action verbs: Go, Teach, Baptize. These words demand action! God sent Jesus and Jesus sent the fellowship of the church. Jesus commissioned us to "Go ye therefore, and teach all the nations" (KJV)—but how are we to teach the nations, if we are waiting for them to arrive at the church? We have to venture out to locate and touch those in need where they are. Understanding our em-

CHAPTER TWO

ployment sets the stage for outreach strategies that “go beyond” the conventional limitations of the physical church. Old ideologies produced programs that required those in need to come to the church. Soup kitchens and clothing drives are two that come to mind. While these programs are necessary and meet the physical and material needs of the unchurched for a day, they are not the best solution for providing nourishment of the spirit and ushering people to productive, prosperous lives. Jesus not only spoke the Word but also met the needs of the people; the people came in multitudes as their needs were being met. The question that we as faithful Christians must revisit with regularity is, “Does the church truly meet the needs of the people?”

God uniquely designs His people. We are all gifted with different talents and skills. Likewise, He did not designate one particular method for all to fulfill their personal charge. Christ encourages us to find our own ways to bear witness to our own struggles and demonstrate the goodness of God. Understanding that we all must Go, Teach and Baptize but not in the same way, or in the same language, or at the same time, is a freeing concept. We each have our individual path to walk and special witness to bear, but God calls us all to the fore to speak for His people and to His purpose.

Creating an effective program that will bring change to the lives of the unchurched begins with understanding the true nature of outreach. The Bible refers to cities, villages, synagogues, the sea, mountains, a boat, a house, the marketplace and even the desert as places where Jesus spread His message. His example challenges us to venture beyond standard and customary practices, and inspires innovation. Jesus’ ministry was

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mainly outside the confines of tradition and church. Jesus was—is—radical!

The texts I read while developing my dissertation revealed that a vast majority of established outreach programs focus on attraction and retention. The ultimate goal of the programs is to get people in church seats to hear a message *about* God. But does this focus truly reflect outreach as put forth by Christ? Surely outreach must include inviting the unchurched masses into the church fold. However, Christ-focused outreach will extend far beyond the conventional and systematic efforts currently offered. Therefore, we cannot simply talk about Christ; we must be about Christ such that others can see His works through us and come to know Him for themselves!

Outreach requires up-to-date adjustments in order to stay ahead of modern-day needs. Just as billions are spent on marketing strategies by major corporations to keep their image and products fresh and relevant, the church must also employ PR for Christ. The church may not spend billions, but we must consider updating our methodologies, particularly if we are falling short in our obligations to bring the hungry to the abundant table of God. Over two thousand years ago, Jesus said to His disciples, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.” (Matthew 9:37-38). The harvest has continued to be plentiful, and He is still in need of laborers. Changing the cultural state of mind in longstanding institutions such as the Church is no easy task. Change is challenging, and there are many barriers that must be overcome in order for an outreach program to be effective.

KEY POINTS: CHAPTER 2

- ✓ Outreach:
 - means traveling beyond the church walls.
 - is not just about filling church seats.
- ✓ The only constant is change! God requires continual growth through change.
- ✓ God did not designate one particular method for all to fulfill their personal charge. Christ encourages His people to find their own individual way to witness.
- ✓ Jesus is a radical savior, so we must employ radical methods to attract His people.