

**Can We Do Urban? Well, We Certainly Have!**  
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There is a point along the Schuylkill Expressway where the view eastward is a striking panorama of the Manayunk neighborhood of Philadelphia. The holiday road “over the river ...” taken by my family on Thanksgiving passed by this way. Every year, I would ask Dad some question or other about the place and the people. Every year, he expressed no knowledge of or little interest in the place. Fast forward from childhood to 1988 and you would find Carolyn and I beginning our marriage and a three-year stay in Roxborough at the top of the hill, one block from Manayunk. Our location was one block as well from one of several locations used by the Roxborough MBC mission thirty years previously.

Born in Germantown and living in West Philadelphia for college, my connection to Roxborough was nevertheless a calling. While working for Biblical Seminary, I continued my association with the Plymouth Brethren in Sellersville. Summers found me working PB camps in NH and PA. It was through this camp work that I received a “Macedonian call” to come and help the saints in Philly – a call I thought would be for the long-term. However, on Father’s Day 1989, I received another call from Dan Ziegler, Director of Church Extension (and my new uncle-in-law). We attended with Carolyn’s parents, Clyde and Carol Snyder, services in Edison, NJ at a renewed BFC church planting effort – now the Christ Community Church in Piscataway.

After services, we went onto Staten Island, NY, to check out the work there which was soon to need a pastor. The work, I would learn, had an interesting



history. Serving the gospel on the north shore of the island since 1937, it had been led by a number of men well known to the BFC community – including Reichenbach, Riggall, Smock, Ziegler, and Upton. For many of those years, it was a typical NYC blue-collar community. Commuting to Manhattan via the Staten Island Ferry or working locally, it was a strongly interconnected neighborhood. But times had changed, the area was more diverse and mobile. The original congregation and their families had moved to New Jersey, PA, or more recently developed parts of the Island. The church needed a new pastor and a new start.

At the start, we were encouraged. The BFC Conference had been willing to try a restart; the members of conference had been very welcoming. As a denomination, the BFC had a good track record of urban work. Philadelphia had been home to four works in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the shortest run being more than twenty years. There were important city continuing works in Allentown, Reading, Lancaster, etc. There were indications that not everyone considered supporting the Staten Island work to be a good idea. These hints, I ignored.

Before we get any further into the Staten Island story, let's have a math moment for perspective. 57% of the world population lives in major cities as of 2022. The United Nations predicts that 68% will be the number by 2050. Here's the math question: if the majority of the world peoples live in cities and if "God so loved the world ..." then how much concern should the Body of Christ have for that part of the world for which the Savior died that happens to live in its cities? If the numbers matter, and obviously I think they do, what reason can we have to not be involved in urban church planting along with the witness of the urban church?

Over the thirty-two years of my participation in BFC community, I have given much thought to the questions surrounding our success or lack thereof as a denomination in urban works. Leaving aside the bias of individuals against "living in the city" and similar prejudices, what can we objectively say based on the Staten Island story about our ability or inability to reach the city? Can we with a clear conscience let others do it who are "better equipped?"

History can tell us much about the issue at hand. Periods of urban flight are a regular part of our American story. Sometime the exodus is economically based;

sometimes it is cultural. It takes a church fellowship with vision and motivation to see these changes coming and respond. When there is a shift in the population, we can run to someplace where there are more people like us. Or, we can stand together as a denomination to make the existing church a mission outpost to the new arrivals. Sometimes, we can do both. In the BFC, we have done mostly the former.

Moving on. There are factors in the longevity of a local congregation neither shifting economics nor population shifts are controlling. Factors which can be addressed; where practices and altitudes can be changed. As I seek to share some thoughts in this regard, I must honestly admit to the use of unrecorded oral histories. I beg your indulgence.

In former days, decisions that greatly affected the health and future of a work were made by powerful leaders. Considerations of a practical nature surely played a part, but individual bias also played a part. This is undoubtedly true in many groups. We will not attempt to belabor the point. One story will suffice.

In my time in Staten Island and Brooklyn, we invited some of the old guard to come and speak. The last one was Jansen Hartman, who formerly served with the Gospel Heralds in our first Brooklyn mission. It turned out to be a very special visit as his first and last pulpit turned out to be in a MCB/BFC Brooklyn church. It was special for us as well. Brother Hartman confirmed many things that I had been told by S.I. elder Ralph Cole.

As Hartman tells it, the mission was quite successful – there were testimonies of salvation and restoration. At times, the worship space reached capacity. It was a pleasant memory for him personally as it was there that he met Ruth, his “Brooklyn rose.” The meeting house is now a pizzeria in what is still a pleasant neighborhood. The church family was concerned that the regular replacement/turnover of Heralds was a problem for inviting friends and family. You might find yourself inviting someone to hear Brother X and finding an unknown Brother Y had the platform.

The leadership was not willing to establish the church and appoint a regular pastor. In an act of rebellion, most of the church family decided to find a home in other gospel preaching churches. The remaining congregation was referred to our mission in

Glendale, Queens. It was thought that the Glendale meeting was more promising. Brother Hartman was not sure why, but it only lasted another couple of years anyway. Does anyone remember either of these meeting places?

*Staten Island, 1938-99*

The north end of Staten Island was a busy place spiritually in 1937. The specific neighborhood was Port Richmond. Today the street is called Port Richmond Avenue, then it was just the upper end of Richmond Avenue. Before the War, the neighborhood was just beginning to be developed. There was a lot of space on the avenue – space enough for two summer-long gospel tent meetings. One was conducted by the Full Gospel Assembly and the other by the Gospel Heralds. Neither group was familiar to the neighborhood. There was curiosity if not interest. Port Richmond was home to a Roman Catholic church and a Methodist church. No one expected holy rollers and Mennonites.

Brother Cole and his teenage friends decided to check it out, if only for the music. They choose the Full Gospel. That first night Ralph responded to a gospel invitation. After several nights in the tent, he knew both the reality of his salvation and that he did not see himself remaining with the Pentecostals. So he tried out the other tent and never left his new church family.

Before the end of the summer, his parents joined in – the elder Mr. Cole and his wife were looking to leave the



modernism of their Methodist church.

The tent was supplied by the generosity of a sister in our Elizabeth work. Friends of hers were interested in bring the MBC to Staten Island. So successful were those tent meetings that the Heralds acquired, with the help of a local business man, a hall with living accommodations above the meeting room. When we lived on S.I., the original meeting room was a trophy shop. Brother Hartman told me that the Elizabeth, NJ effort struggled throughout its eighteen year history. It closed in 1948.

Things were moving quickly for the Gospel Heralds. In the first year, they were able to purchase with congregational commitment a building on Taylor Street in the neighborhood of West New Brighton (locals never use the “New”). The building had been a catholic mission; which had also owned the adjacent house for the nuns. BFCSI later bought the same building for a Christian education facility. There seems to have been some creative financing because of the success of the work. In their first year, the mission was budgeted under the Gospel Herald Society; the next year, they were assigned to the budget under the Bethlehem District. Both budgets were in the charge of Presiding Elder Gehman.

The newly purchased church building had lain vacant for some time until a businessman bought it during the Depression. He created “rooms” with chicken wire where he stored furniture bought at sheriff sale auctions. At some point, a loading dock was added to the side of the building. When the MBC purchased it, the warehouse had been out of service for some time. The men of the church strengthened the



structure with new foundation to ceiling supports. In order to do this, they excavated the basement by hand. The finished project left about two thirds of the basement space with a dirt floor. Despite its limitations, it was used for children's Sunday School classes. Pastor Smock had a shuffleboard court created for the teens as I discovered on my first trip to the furnace.

More work was done before it could be occupied. A parsonage apartment was build in the front three quarters of the second floor which had been the catholic sanctuary. It was necessary as well to lower the roof. Why all this detail? The work that was done was extensive and the laborers were the members of the new congregation. Clearly, this work was not a drag on MBC resources. Fifty years later, BFCSI would need repairs and updating. Thanks to all churches and individuals who helped. The congregation at that time was smaller and less equipped for the tasks that needed doing. In the first year of our time there, Sunbury, Spring City, and Harleysville all helped.

One result was a half-court basketball court that was a big part of our outreach. Even the police appreciated the open church yard and court as the community had little to offer the energies of youth. There was a price to be paid; bouncing basketballs are not the most welcome wake-up call on a Saturday morning. The fence in front of the church was one of the first things to go. It was not unnoticed on the block where one individual noted that they always thought the fence meant they were unwelcome.

The little church on Taylor Street had quite an impact in those early years before the fence. When we arrived many still remembered the early years and some of their leaders. However, Pastor R. H. Kline was best remembered of the older generation for his visibility on Castleton Avenue, the Main Street of West Brighton. Pastor Smock was remembered by locals for his children's work that made the priest nervous about his grip on the next generation. They remembered our early scandal, too.

Godly men can sometimes fall prey to practicality and common sense. When the local fellowship was clearly ready to be a church – based on size and ability to purchase a property – they were clearly ready for a designated pastor. Beside the help received from Heralds stationed in Elizabeth, there were those who lived above the mission in Staten Island, namely George Watson and R.C. Reichenbach. Brother Reichenbach

had preceded Watson in the faith and had later helped to disciple him in the Gospel Heralds. However, Brother Watson was older and better yet, married. So, Watson was appointed.

Without dredging up the past too much, Watson and the congregation did not hit it off too well. There were complaints almost immediately (the nature of which is only known to those involved). It got so bad that the men of the church, feeling ignored by GH leadership, formed a plan. On the regular Watson family day for shopping and errands, they changed the locks! When the Watson's returned, they were confronted with their things and his walking papers, so to speak.

When word got to Gospel Herald President W.G. Gehman, he acted swiftly to move beyond the struggle and get things back on track. Conveniently, Reichenbach had received permission to rectify his inadequacies in regard to the pastorate – he was about to be married. Alberta Reichenbach told us jokingly that R.C. married her under false pretenses. She was marrying a man assigned to Trenton, NJ. In the lobby before the wedding the president had taken R.C. aside and informed him of the appointment change. He asked when he had to report, Gehman said tomorrow for morning worship. After some negotiation, they agreed on the midweek prayer meeting. R.C. shared the news as they walked the aisle – the new Mr. and Mrs.

Another story from this time, and I must apologize for not having the picture, concerned the mission's first baptism conducted before the move to Taylor Street. On that Lord's Day, the congregation with the baptism candidates walked down Richmond Avenue to the Arthur Kill opposite Bayonne. As they passed the Catholic church when the Mass was letting out, their neighbors inquired about the reason for the "parade". Having never seen a Protestant baptism, they asked if they could join in and they did! A newspaper photographer saw a photo opp and followed. The man's picture had full coverage the next day and the editor, a Christian man, called to complain. The water was filthy, it made the church look bad, he complained. So, for a few years, he regularly dispatched a bus when needed to take the small congregation to Midland Beach, a recreational spot on the other side of S.I.

Pastor Reichenbach visited us in '92 and was very encouraging. He enjoyed meeting Pastor Celso of the Filipino church that was then using our sanctuary for an

evening service in the hopes of planting their own church. Years later at Annual Conference, he would confide in me that he thought the church should have moved to a “better” part of the island long ago. Later in that same conference, he rose to criticize Church Extension for allowing us to continue to struggle. This was odd as I had given him in our private conversation a report of the confidence I had for the future of the work. Both of us were wrong, but for different reasons.

Over the years, Staten Island Bible Fellowship Church moved on. Like all urban churches they knew the fluctuations of city ministry. In earlier days before the advent of the suburb, this up and down circle was not so common. Our Lord grants continuation to various larger churches and we are thankful. It is normal, however, for the smaller urban church to always be moving forward and then backward on a regular basis. Why?

Well, for one thing, the gospel works. Men and women are saved and transformed by divine grace and their lives go in a new direction. With this change comes the kind of progress that creates new options for them. Any urban pastor will tell you of those who decide to go to Bible college or seminary and never return. Others will be drawn to build for themselves a place in urban ministry – division occurs. And then there is the reality of culture shifts. Where my wife works currently in Philadelphia, the neighborhood was once made up of well-to-do Irish and Jewish families. When various Asian groups began to move in, the older community moved away. Churches cannot avoid being affected by these shifts. If there is, however, denominational support, a church can find a new connection with the community around it. It may need to be truly a mission and not a church plant, but there is a great need for such gospel outreaches.

Someone may ask, what value do you see in the history of the Staten Island church? Well, in the days of Daniel Ziegler’s ministry, the church reached capacity – for their evening service! Brother Ziegler delayed his departure for Church Extension and hoped to have Staten Island as a base for his new position of Director. The Board did not concur. There was another missed opportunity when they nearly purchased the former Port Richmond Methodist church. This was opposed only by the leading layman.

Finally, after a brief interim, there followed the longest pastorate of BFCSI under Byron G. Upton. The 80’s were years of stability and valuable progress, especially in



children's work in the talent hands of Emma Bowne. Annually, there was a Sunday School parade through the neighborhood – it was a big thing. One year, Pastor Upton, the parade's grand marshal made it into the Staten Island Advance. His preaching was appreciated, but the fluctuations of the time kept people coming and going. Pastor Upton served, by the way, for a time as the Secretary of Annual Conference.

Following two years of pulpit supply and ministry assistance from Barnabas Marshall, a Nigerian citizen who had come to the U.S. for Bible school training, Carolyn and I began our time on the Island. Our interaction with the BFC was interesting in many ways. We had financial support from several churches and practical support from others for which we are indeed thankful to the Lord. We also heard many odd questions, like: How long does the drive take you? (Longer than from NYC) Staten Island, is that really an island? And my favorite: So, how close to New York City is Staten Island, I mean, how far is the drive to the city?

Ah well ... so once it was our turn to try, and once it was clear we had to try without making too many changes, we prayed for a season for divine insight. We decided to work on children's ministry as that had been our joint gift in the past, both BFCSI and the Ritters. Through of a series of events one could easy call miracles, God confirmed this choice and in the second half of the club year we began with Cubbies. Why Cubbies? Because we had two of them already, one girl, one boy (our son).

The next year we started Sparks (K-2). It nearly failed until I learned my mistake – never run an urban children program on a Saturday morning. The children have largely been nannied by TV and videos till they drop on Friday night. We switched to Friday for the next year. At that point, the Filipino Baptist church got Awana Leadership Training and augmented our group with children from the church plant. What a blessing to serve side by side with these godly men (yes, they were all men). The learning ethic of their culture challenged our group and sections complete jumped ahead. The next year, our friends were on their own leaving us with an established club to which grades 3-6 were added.

In the years to follow, the club grew to an average of 50+ in attendance with 100+ on the roll. We had nine regular leaders, four from BFCSI and five from various and larger churches that had no comparable youth work. Its influence was felt in the community

and at the local public school, P.S.19. The principal of the school called a care giver to ask about the 180 turn of a student. The care giver said, "Talk to Pastor Ralph about what they teach in the Friday night program." She never called. Another child said, after a counseling session, that he could undergo a necessary procedure because he did for God and Pastor Ralph.

Many summers the Awana program was reinforced by the assistance of partnering BFC churches, Bethel BFC Emmaus being the most frequent helpers. Most were of a courageous sort. One of our first outings, the CE Building was recently cleared of renters and looking pretty barren. There weren't even interior lights. Conveniently, the VBS theme that year was western. The main room was setup with various western settings. Deb Schoen bravely taught her whole period without ever letting the children know how much she wanted to scream. Her participant in the back row, who seemed quite interested in the lesson, was a sweet little gray mouse.

After we left for Brooklyn, we happened to stop by the old neighborhood for reasons I cannot remember. Treating our two to a stop at Burger King on the way to PA, we ran into one of the neighbors. I went over to say "hi" and engage in the normal pleasantries. As I was ready to leave, she asked, "Why did you leave us?" I thought my heart would break. Why indeed? Truthfully, avoiding all the belly button gazing, I made mistakes in the last year in understanding part of the local culture. I was unable to get help from the surrogate board because they did not understand what I had come to understand. We left hope someone else would come and salvage what was still good. Those to whom that effort would fall did not believe they could find some in the BFC to go to NYC.

So then, the question is why try to reach the city. Beyond the John 3:16 argument given above, there is a deeper, more here and now reason. "The fields are ripe to harvest" and because God is the owner of the field His laborers are called to the task. Is there evidence of harvest? Yes, there were some professions of faith, some baptisms, and other spiritual moments. However, recently I have been blessed with some assurances from the Lord that our labor for Him is not in vain.

First, youth from Staten Island and Brooklyn days have been reaching out to me, always on days when I was tempted to feel defeated. A brother and sister messaged me to find out how Pastor Ralph was doing and to share memories of the love and

concern that they felt from the church. Shanaya and Naquan are now in their 30's and attribute to God and their days with us their moral compass. Naturally, I have prayed ever since that they would find something more than a compass. Another young man called to say thank you. Often, he told me, he had been tempted to walk away from what was right. Then he was reminded of the teaching he received and made the right decision.

Even before these special contacts, I have kept a reminder on my office wall or desk. It is a picture of Steven. God gave us four weeks with Steven. I met him as a true street urchin, dirty, uncared for, and full of wonder for all things. When picking up children for Awana in his neighborhood, he asked if he could come, too. We went to the door where his family were squatting. His great grandmother, who spoke only Spanish, said he could come – or at least that is what he said she said.

In the program, he heard the gospel, but he also heard that he could get points for coming to Sunday School. “Can I come to Sunday School?” he asked nervously. “Sure. You can come,” I said, hoping to hide my amazement. On that Sunday, there he was on the steps where I picked up other children who did not show that day. For the Lord, he had taken a bath, slicked down his hair, and donned his finest Hawaiian shirt with the buttons done up wrong. He earned his uniform and handbook in the least possible time ... and then he was gone. The family has left no forwarding address. I believe because I know my God, that I will see him someday. For the Stevens of the world, we do what we do.

I have just finished being a long-term substitute in the second grade at LOGAN Hope Christian School where Carolyn is a regular teacher in the third grade. The school administrator dubbed our adjacent rooms, Ritterdom. A few weeks back, one of the students suddenly changed his level of attention in Bible Class. You could see in his face that wheels were turning rapidly. Later that day, Verokbot asked if he could do his homework reading in the Bible. I gave him permission and a Gospel of John. The next day, the boy next to him made the same request.

But Verokbot wanted more, he wanted a Bible of his own. Naturally, we got him one. I was not sure how to handle the gift. Would I start something that was not real in the classroom? Hearing a devotional on the leper that trust Christ to heal or not to heal,

he asked, "Can we ask God for anything?" I told him that we could ask anything and if it was for our good and His glory, the Lord would give it to us. Immediately, he bowed his head, closed his eyes folded his hand and prayed, "God give a Bible." As he kept praying in this way, I reached to a hidden place and laid the Bible on his desk. God was in the room! For as soon as the Bible was place on the desk, all the students began to say, "God has given you a Bible, God has given you a Bible." I was so glad that they saw spiritually and that they say it as God's doing.



This is why I am confident that we can take the mission wherever God sends us. Wherever we are, God is in the room. No matter what, He is at work. This why the one who hears the coveted "Well done, good and faithful servant", immediately removes his or her crown and places it at the feet of Jesus. The work is always His, we need only follow where He leads. May it ever be so in the Bible Fellowship Church.