

# HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY?

BY STEPHANIE DACOSTA

*“Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days and fasted, and prayed before the God of Heaven (Nehemiah 1:2-4).”*

**T**he heart of God for *Jerusalem*, his community and brethren, beat through Nehemiah’s passion to see the walls of the city rebuilt. God gave Nehemiah a burden for the city. He took a walk through Jerusalem’s streets at night to view what was “broken down” (Neh. 2:12-18). The church has much to learn from Nehemiah’s response to God’s call for the community.

Like Nehemiah, the church must take a close look at what is *broken*, walk through the streets and talk with residents. When Nehemiah *heard* from his brethren concerning the depravity in the city (Neh. 1:1-2) and *saw* its impact on lives, God stirred up compassion, vision, mission and purpose. He was not content to stay in the palace oblivious to the needs of his brethren.

The church has become desensitized to the needs of others. A heart softened by the cries echoing from the devastation one sees on a daily basis in the news, schools, neighborhoods and families should cause the church to weep before the Lord for rejuvenation in our communities. The heartbeat of the community does not cry out for large ministry buildings, grandstand events or short-term newsworthy acts of kindness. Communities filled with despair are groaning for change and transformation of lives. Nehemiah heard the cry of Jerusalem and set out to rebuild the walls. The church cannot meet the needs of the community with a palace mentality.

The church must open its doors and walk through its communities. Nehemiah said, “Ye see the distress we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned down with fire: come, and let us build up the wall.”

Come, church! Let us walk the streets together and gather the young girls who hunger and seek love from the inhabitants behind the alley gates. Teach them self-respect, give them job skills and clothe them with garments of honor and Christ's love. Grab the young men who are held by the bonds of the street and the way of the world and take them through a godly Rights of Passage Program. Give them a skill, a trade and hope. Instead of providing stained glass shelters for Sundays, comfort and provide shelters for seniors, widows, single parents, and pregnant teens who feel the loneliness and pains of life.

Church, what do you see out your window? Did you see the ex-convict who needs a job and guidance in rebuilding his home and life? Did you see those who are hungry and jobless? Did you see the children who need a good Christian and academic education? Is the Church a little apprehensive about pulling up the shade because we see the eyes of the mentally challenged and depressed looking back and individuals with AIDS looking for hope? We need a compassion transfusion. Nehemiah received a transfusion of God's will into his spirit and the people saw the "hand of God good upon him and they said, let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work" (Neh 2:18).

Strengthening our hands means working together. With one voice, one mind and unified physical labor, they went to the streets to rebuild. Standing next to each other and working together, people representing each tribe built and repaired the walls and set up the gates. They were stationed around the wall, behind the wall, and on the lower and higher parts of the wall. Families sat on the wall with their swords, spears and the word of God prepared to fight for their cities (Neh 4:13).

Church, we must pray for the compassion of Jesus. *When he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, the harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest* (Matt. 9:36-38). The community is one of the church's harvests.

How do we sow and reap in this type of harvest? For the church to make substantial strides in reaching our community, we must work together. The local assembly must join with its neighbors and pray, seeking God for His seeds of compassion, heart and direction for the neighborhood and surrounding area. Take a walk through the community and allow the Holy Spirit to guide you regarding the top three needs. Ask God for the plan.

Together with at least three other churches, start working on how to meet the first need. Remember it does not take a large building to minister to the community. Collaborate with a local recreation facility, rent a house, or contact apartment complexes with multipurpose rooms; network with a senior citizens home to offer life skills classes, job training, parenting classes and medical screenings. Many banks, colleges and hospitals have Community Outreach departments. Contact the director to inquire about services available to your neighborhood. Many of these organizations provide skilled individuals who are willing to offer free classes at your church or community outreach site. Talk to organizations that are trailblazers in this field for advice and assistance.

After Nehemiah and the people built the wall and restored the city, the Word of God was shared. *So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense and caused them to understand the reading*(Nehemiah 8:8). People hear better when they are not hungry, have a home and their children are in safe day cares and schools. Communities see the compassion and love of Christ through the church's actions. Like Nehemiah, let the "church" translate the love of God into everyday actions by stepping out of the palace into the city to rebuild the walls. †

*Stephanie DaCosta is director of Lights of the World, Inc., a 501(c)3 community outreach organization under the auspices of Bethel Deliverance International Church. She is also City Reach Coordinator for Operations Blessings International.*