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# GENTRIFICATION:

## The Good News and the Bad News

*Wayne L. Gordon*

### Introduction: The Enemy Among Us?

**G**entrification. A dreaded word to many of us in urban ministry and a major issue. But why? Is gentrification really so bad?

I am writing this chapter from the perspective of a Christian community developer and a pastor. Christian community development is a philosophy of ministry among the poor that works to help people lift themselves out of poverty. The roots of Christian community development stem from John Perkins and his three R's, which are relocation (living in the community of need), reconciliation, and redistribution. Christian community development has evolved into eight principles, the three R's plus five others: being church based, empowerment, holistic approach, leadership development, and listening to the community.<sup>1</sup>

### GENTRIFICATION: A WORKING DEFINITION

Gentrification is practically understood as the process by which middle-income professionals buy and restore homes in depressed communities. It's the return of the gentry, the landowners, to a community. In Chicago we have often watched gentrification with pain and disillusionment. We have watched buildings being purchased by people we never expected to be interested in Lawndale, a largely African-American community on the West Side of Chicago, including new business owners, outside developers, and speculators. These speculators seem

to be coming into poor neighborhoods for the sole purpose of making money.

Gentrification is driven by the market forces in real estate development. Real estate developers have great vision when they see vacant lots and abandoned buildings in the same communities often targeted by those of us doing Christian community development in urban ministry. It is in these underserved and under-resourced neighborhoods that new opportunities arise for developers to come and grow. It appears that only the real estate developers have the understanding and knowledge to redevelop and to rebuild many of the poor communities.

It is surprising that many of us doing Christian community development actually use some of the same jargon as outside developers. Our scriptural text comes from Isaiah 58:12, the theme verse for the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA): “Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.” Rebuild, raise up, repair, restore: these are the buzz words most of us use in our ministry in under-resourced communities. As we live and work in poor neighborhoods, it has always been our goal to rebuild our communities and to restore the streets where people live, walk, and play.

In many ways gentrification is the secular response to dilapidated neighborhoods. Yet when we as urban workers see outsiders coming in and making profits at the expense of our community and neighbors, we often become outraged. It is through these eyes that I would like to discuss gentrification in this chapter. Let those of us doing urban ministry rework our understanding of gentrification using the philosophy of Christian community development. Let us rethink gentrification together and look at how we can use this powerful force within the context of our philosophy of ministry.

## **SIGNS OF GENTRIFICATION**

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We know that gentrification is coming to our neighborhood when we see billboards that say, “We buy ugly houses,” when there is new interest in vacant land and abandoned buildings, when a new business such as a Starbucks starts up, and grocery stores move in and begin to operate. When after years of neglect there seems to be new attention given to our community by local government officials and the business community. New fire stations, police stations, public transportation improvements—these all are signs that something is about to happen. The market forces of real estate developers have now seen our neighborhoods as viable workplaces where money can be made.

It may very well be that public policy of rebuilding neglected communities makes good sense for increasing the tax base and for reducing crime, gang

activity, decaying buildings, and more. Not only is this a sign of gentrification but it actually serves as a catalyst for gentrification. The reality is that the community changes but the people in the neighborhood don't; they are simply displaced and the problems just move to another community. Gentrification is very different in different cities and communities; I will be speaking from the perspective of my experience in Lawndale on Chicago's West Side.

## **THE LAWDALE STORY**

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When Lawndale Community Church began in 1978, we had almost no services within our community. We could not even buy a pair of shoes in North Lawndale; there were no McDonald's restaurants in our community, no chain grocery stores, no restaurants in which to sit down and eat with our families. It was a barren place lacking many of the services that a healthy community has.

Part of the mission of Lawndale Community Church has been to redeem the Lawndale Community; we have sought to bring Christian holistic revitalization to the lives and environment of our residents through economic empowerment, housing improvement, educational enrichment, quality affordable health care, and Christian discipleship.<sup>2</sup> These are at the very heart and soul of Lawndale Community Church's mission. We started Lawndale Christian Health Center to serve the health care needs of the people of our neighborhood. We also established Lawndale Christian Development Corporation to provide housing and encourage economic development and to help restore our community to a healthy, stable, and sustainable neighborhood. We have worked hard not to do this in isolation but always within the context of our community. One of the key components of Christian community development is listening to the community. It was the residents who dreamed most of the ideas and the desires for our neighborhood.

We have envisioned a future where Christian values undergird the attitudes and actions of our community residents. We see the future when existing residents are empowered to live in harmony and security; when vacant lots and abandoned buildings are converted into new and affordable homes and rehabbed apartments; when the majority of homes are owner occupied; when high school and even college graduations are expectations; when job skills and employment opportunities abound; when all people have quality, affordable health care; and when Jesus Christ is seen as Lord. This is the vision of what we would like to see happen in our inner-city communities.

The problem seems to be as we start seeing this vision begin to happen, others also see this and jump in with a different purpose and with seemingly unlimited

resources. Then panic begins to come over us as we watch outsiders buying and selling property and new housing being developed by outsiders with no community connection. We name the force of gentrification as a negative option for us, instead of embracing it as a means to help us. We cannot do all the development in a large community like Lawndale. With fifty thousand residents, a small church is clearly unable to bring about the kinds of systemic change that is needed for our neighborhoods to be sustainable and see the quality of life improved.

Many inner-city neighborhoods have become poor by such things as white flight, years of neglect, deteriorating rental properties, abandoned buildings, and vacant lots. People like Glen and Lonni Kehrein, Thomas and Tracy Worthy, Richard and Stephanie Townsell, Ted and Shelly Travis, Jim and KJ Swearingen, Noel and Marianne Castellanos, Anne and me, and many others have moved into these under-resourced communities and made huge impacts. It is through Christian community development and relocated urban ministers that many of these positive changes have begun.

## **HARNESSING GENTRIFICATION**

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Bob Lupton from Atlanta has encouraged us in CCDA to harness the forces of gentrification for justice and for the good of our community.<sup>3</sup> Bob has helped us to rethink gentrification and how we might come alongside some of the secular market forces that are working to change our communities. One of the distinctives of Christian community development is our philosophy of living in the community in which we serve. In the truest sense of the word this is gentrification. We, from the outside, have been relocating and moving into poor communities all across the urban landscape for more than thirty years. We normally see this as good, with many inner-city neighborhoods benefiting around the country from like-minded urban ministry people who have moved into the communities and raised their families.

In Lawndale for the first twenty years of our church presence, no one was developing any housing except Lawndale Community Church, mostly through Lawndale Christian Development Corporation and one other nonprofit housing group. It was after our gaining momentum and beginning to focus on housing with scale that others took notice. Actually we became a victim of our own success. As we were successful in building new houses, the market forces noticed us and began to work in our neighborhood. Simultaneously came rebuilding of the old Sears & Roebuck headquarters in the northern part of Lawndale.

More than twenty years after Sears closed its headquarters in Lawndale, it contracted the Shaw Company to come in and tear down the existing buildings

and build new housing. Nearly four hundred units of rental and owner-occupied housing was built. This brought national and local attention to our community. Lawndale Community Church was providing housing on the southern edges of Lawndale and the Shaw Company was developing housing on the northern edge of Lawndale.

Others began to see the opportunity and potential for development. Lawndale has a large number of vacant lots, including more than one thousand owned by the city, and dozens of abandoned buildings ready to be developed. A ministry such as ours cannot buy all the property. One hundred million dollars would not be enough for us to prevent gentrification ourselves. Therefore the key question becomes, How do we use the gentrification process for our mission and the good of our community? Let us first look at gentrification in general.

### **What to Do**

So how can we embrace the forces of gentrification when they come into our community? First of all, in the Church it is very important for us to remember the very essence of who we are as the body of Christ. We need to ask ourselves, Why did we come to our communities in the first place? Proverbs 31:8–9 says, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and the needy.” It is our mission to speak up for the poor and the hurting people of our communities. The Great Commandment is to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:34–37). One of the negative outcomes of gentrification often is that the poor are displaced. This has created a new phenomenon in our landscape of poverty by moving it to the outer parts of our cities. The suburbanization of poverty is taking place all over America. We are called to speak up for the rights of the poor and build a strategy that might help the disenfranchised people of our communities and not allow them to just be the pawns of gentrification. This is where our heart, mission, and actions come together as Christian community developers.

As the Church it is important for us to do what we should do best: pray, fast, and seek God as Nehemiah did when he heard of the walls of Jerusalem lying in ruins (Neh. 1:4–11). It is imperative for us to get involved in the community, to investigate what is happening. For those of us living in inner-city neighborhoods, it is essential that we stay put and encourage those in our church and ministries to stay in the community if possible. This is not the time to sell our houses and move to the suburbs, but to stay as the local stakeholders, possibly even using this opportunity to start a local business. When we in Lawndale saw these forces coming we took six weeks to pray, fast, and talk on a weekly basis in the evenings



through what was happening in our neighborhood. We invited Bob Lupton to come and talk about gentrification and how we might work alongside this new economic force for the betterment of our community. Clearly the most important thing for us is not to panic but to trust God and continue doing Christian community development.

Gentrification often brings a vicious cycle to the poor. With the inflated property values of more desirable property, higher taxes often push working-class people out of ownership. Speculators buy and flip properties with absolutely no regard for the community; their only goal is to make a quick dollar. Instead of being alarmed we must creatively embrace these market forces and begin to find new partnerships and new ways to do ministry.

### **Our Key Initiatives**

After several months of study and discussion concerning gentrification the people of Lawndale Community Church decided to focus on several key initiatives to work creatively with the forces of gentrification. First, we would encourage home ownership by church members and other community residents. We would increase our production of affordable housing and rehab more abandoned buildings. We did this through the Canaan homes program at Lawndale Christian Development Corporation, helping working-class people own their own homes.

Second, we partnered with a local group, United Power for Action and Justice (the local Industrial Areas Foundation) in Chicago, to build new homes in our community. This was called the Ezra homes program and we built more than one hundred new affordable homes for existing residents of our community.

Third, Lawndale Community Church, in an effort to help our members own a home, began a down-payment assistance program. Anyone who was active in Lawndale Community Church would have their down payment matched dollar for dollar up to three thousand dollars. My wife Anne's uncle had passed away and left our church some money. We creatively put twenty-five thousand of that into a down-payment assistance fund. Oh how shortsighted we were—twenty-five thousand was not nearly enough. More than thirty-five people from our church took part in this program. We spent more than one hundred thousand dollars matching money so first-time home buyers in our church could buy a home.

It was exciting as others were gentrifying our neighborhood to see local people take control of their own destiny and buy their own homes. Everyone was required to take home ownership classes, which helped people to understand what it means to own a home and to gain important skills of ownership. These classes helped people understand taxes, down payments, closing costs, and other vital information of owning a home. We are pleased that of the more than 150

new homes in our community affiliated with our ministry, there have only been six foreclosures.

A fourth strategy that proved to be very significant was to increase affordable rental housing in our neighborhood. Lawndale Christian Development Corporation has developed more than three hundred units of rental housing and has its own property management company to manage these. We are now developing more than one hundred units of affordable rental housing that will be completed within the next two years.

Fifth, we began to improve the area by helping and supporting community-owned businesses. This became a major goal of Lawndale Community Church, and we have been making it a priority. We opened Lou Malnati's Pizzeria in 1995 and it continues to be a beacon of light in our community. Since that time we have established and helped several local businesses that are striving to compete in the marketplace: a barbecue restaurant, a fence business, a landscaping business, several contracting businesses, an interior decorator, and an event planner. These are all new businesses that have been established by people in our local church. As a church we have helped all of them in different ways, from buying buildings for them to operate from to giving small grants that help people start their business.

Sixth, we have kept a close watch on all of the real estate movement in the community. By signing up with a local Realtor, I receive a listing daily of all the new housing and land that comes up for sale. This includes a description of the property, the address, and the asking price.

## **Partnership**

A central aspect in making a difference when neighborhoods are being gentrified is to partner with other groups. Lawndale Community Church partnered with United Power for Action and Justice with the goal of building more than three hundred homes in North Lawndale. Earlier we partnered with twenty-five other churches in the Westside Isaiah plan to build more than two hundred affordable houses for ownership. We have recently gathered ten churches to partner with us to build forty units of affordable rental housing on the land where Dr. Martin Luther King and his family lived here in Lawndale. We also partnered with Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) in a recent development called Fountain View where thirteen of the fifty units were sold to CHA. Former CHA residents have moved into our community and now live alongside more stable families.

Real estate developers can be good partners. A real estate developer at one of our partner churches came and walked the neighborhood with us, helping us immensely. He saw many things that as urban ministers we were unaware of, and his expertise helped us make more informed decisions. We cannot live and work

in isolation; we do not have the ability or the skills to do development on a large scale. Partnering helps us to be more effective.

As the faith community, get involved in the neighborhood, and as often as possible join block clubs and attend community meetings. Encourage your church members to participate when the city hosts hearings regarding new opportunities for development. As a ministry be a part of the neighborhood and participate with the people as new initiatives come to the area. It is important to be considered a friend and partner in the community. To be a good neighbor.

Lawndale Christian Development Corporation has partnered with the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and the McArthur foundation for a program called New Communities. We are the lead agency and with our neighbors are looking at our community and striving to plan for the future. More than three hundred community residents in the last five years have participated in dreaming and planning for the future of our neighborhood. We put together a plan of what we hope to see Lawndale look like in ten years. This has been done by community residents, not outsiders. We named this plan “Faith Rewarded.” Instead of lamenting about how others are developing our community, we took the bull by the horns and made our own plan, realizing that we could build upon the assets of the people and our community that were already present.

### **Difficulties and Struggles**

This has not been an easy process for us here in Lawndale. We have met many obstacles along the way, some of which have been very discouraging to us. Community residents have protested with signs and called us names, using racial slurs because of what we have done. We have been accused of selling out to developers when we have partnered with them. We use the community workforce as much as possible and also keep the neighborhood people well informed about developments, but our motives are sometimes questioned. The emotional pain of this is difficult to express.

There is just not enough money to do all the developments that our community has been dreaming. It is easy to get discouraged when we see outside developers come into our community with apparently unending resources and money oozing out of their pocketbooks.

The recent housing crisis has also affected all of us. Lawndale Christian Development Corporation has fifty lots that we hope to build on, but it is becoming harder for us to maintain the lots and to pay the taxes just to keep them. Gangs and violence have increased in the last five years. We have a long way to go until our neighborhood is what we dream of. Christian community development is not an easy task, but it is one that we feel called to complete.

## **Now the Good News**

It is imperative for us not to see gentrification as the enemy but to embrace it. A new study that has just come out by the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Colorado at Boulder, and Duke University examined more than 1,500 neighborhoods across the United States. They used the census data from 1990 and 2000 and found some amazing things. One thing that's clear is that African-American high school graduates were less likely to move out of a gentrifying neighborhood than they were to move out of a similar neighborhood that did not gentrify.

As urban ministers we have been working hard to improve the quality and value of education. If we are going to redevelop our communities for the very people we have been serving, then gentrification helps us to keep them from leaving to a greater extent than an ungentrified neighborhood. Other signs show how gentrification is helping and not hurting. Our neighborhood in the height of its population in 1960 had more than 120,000 people. The 2000 census showed we were under 50,000 people. This means that we have the capacity to bring in 50,000 new neighbors. These new neighbors can be from various races and ethnic backgrounds. They can come alongside our existing community residents without displacing the residents. Our goal is and always has been community development and housing improvement without displacement. We continue to work hard at that goal.

At Lawndale Community Church we have helped more than 150 young people go away to college and graduate with the exciting aspect of seventy-five of them moving back into our community here on the West Side. These are the future leaders, coming back to their community, and they want it to be a place where they can raise their families. Studies have also shown that many neighborhoods are being gentrified by middle-class African-Americans and middle-class Hispanics moving into neighborhoods within cities. This is a very positive thing as they come alongside many of the people left behind in our neighborhoods.

Lawndale has proved to be a stubborn and reluctant partner with the forces of gentrification and developers coming. When we have developed new houses we have sought to build them in a way that gentrifiers would not be attracted to them. The new Ezra homes are very affordable with no basements, smaller square footage, less brick, and fewer amenities to keep prices low. We have fought hard against those gentrifying forces that displace people. We have come alongside people at risk of eviction, striving to help them to be able to stay and to continue to own their homes. On the other hand, sometimes we have seen a family that has owned its own home in our community and paid off the mortgage choose to sell it for several times the initial investment, reaping the benefit of a new market demand. This gives residents flexibility to pick a new community or invest again

in their own neighborhood. Our vision has been for stable, sustainable communities. When we see these improvements come, we embrace the development.

With the recent housing crisis, gentrification in Lawndale has come to an abrupt halt. Now we see not a continued string of openings but a cycle of closings. Starbucks, the ten-screen movie theater, two chain grocery stores, video stores, and banks have closed their doors and left our community again. For many this has brought disillusionment and a new loss of hope. Concurrently the Chicago Housing Authority has been tearing down high-rise public housing buildings and displacing the poor. This brings new people with federal Section 8 vouchers, which provide people with affordable rents through subsidies based on income, flowing to our community. More poor people have been moving into Lawndale.

The Zechariah 8 community is still the dream of Christian community development, where old men walk with canes and young children play in the city street; and where God dwells and is honored in the city. We continue to work, long, and pray for this in our communities.

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## **CONCLUSION: CONTINUING TO LOVE**

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As CCDA'ers and urban workers we do not think of ourselves as gentrifiers, but when you boil it down, that is what we have been doing for a decade. We have principles that hopefully have helped us to treat the poor with dignity and help them to dream their own future and destiny. It is our prayer and hope that our representation of dealing with gentrification will encourage you. Dream and think creatively as gentrification comes to your community. We at Lawndale Community Church are committed to our neighborhood and to the people of our community. We are ready and willing to embrace our new neighbors, to love them into the Kingdom and help them find a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We are called to love all of our neighbors, no matter what their race, ethnic background, or religious affiliation might be. We have a new window of opportunity to buy more property, to establish new businesses, to build more affordable houses, and to help more people buy their own home. These people become the stakeholders of our neighborhood.

We here at Lawndale Community Church will continue to love God and continue to love our neighbors here in our neighborhood. We will walk beside all people in our community, and as Tom Skinner has taught us, we will “continue to continue” loving God and loving our neighbor.

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

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1. Has gentrification come to the neighborhood of your ministry or church?  
How has it hurt the community, and how has it helped?
2. How can you protect the poor of your community from displacement?
3. How can you help community residents purchase homes in your community?