

NEW YORK CITY: JESUS IN THE BIG APPLE

BY KIRK NOONAN

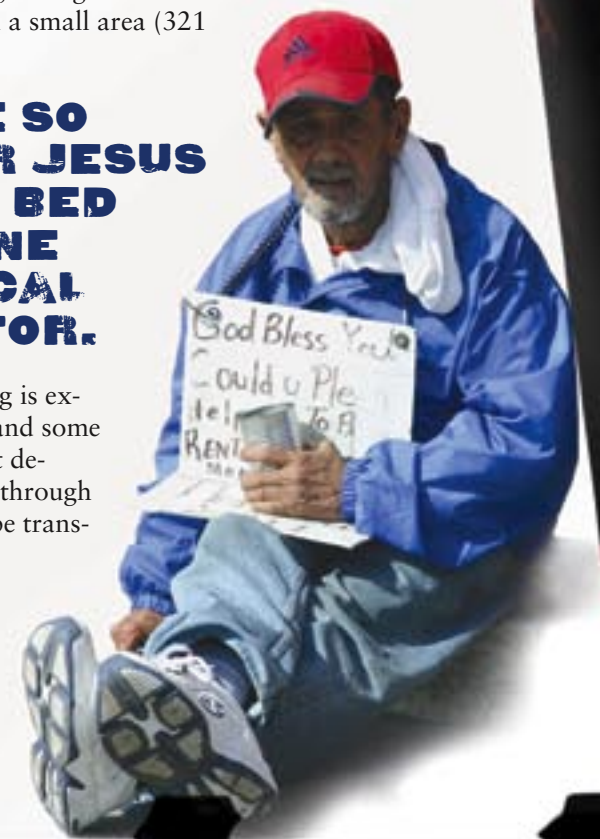
Home to more than 8 million residents, New York City is the most populous city in the United States. It's also one of the safest, with the lowest crime rate of all big cities. At night the "Big Apple" glitters and beckons residents and visitors to partake in its many activities. By day the metropolis is an international hub of finance, fashion and entertainment.

Cultural and economic opportunities abound. Because of it, immigrants flock here annually to start new lives. With so many people in such a small area (321 square miles) ministry opportunities are numerous.

"IN NEW YORK THERE ARE SO MANY PEOPLE HUNGRY FOR JESUS YOU NEVER HAVE TO GO TO BED WITHOUT LEADING SOMEONE TO CHRIST," SAYS ONE LOCAL ASSEMBLIES OF GOD PASTOR.

Even so, ministering in the city is not easy. The cost of living is expensive, available property for ministry expansion is limited and some people are hostile to the gospel. The Assemblies of God is not deterred. Missionaries, pastors and laypeople are learning that through prayer, networking and church planting New York City can be transformed.

Recently, *Today's Pentecostal Evangel* visited the city to collect stories and pictures that highlight ministry efforts and underscore the massive need for Jesus in the Big Apple.



BROKEN ADDICTIONS

Dave Batty lopes across the Brooklyn Teen Challenge center's courtyard in his Birkenstocks. He's tall and lanky. Intelligence and gentleness seem to orbit around him. It's hard to believe such a man could have an impact on those who claw their way off the mean streets of New York and come to Teen Challenge in search of help. But somehow the country boy from Wisconsin touches the most hopeless lives.

"The city's drug problem is not going away," says Batty, 57, executive director of the center. "That's one reason New York is such a tremendous mission field."

David Wilkerson started Teen Challenge in this neighborhood — then a ghetto — in 1958. In the decades since then, the ministry has grown and now oper-

ates in more than 90 countries. Even more impressive are the tens of thousands of people who have completed the program,



Dave Batty

accepted Christ as Savior and been set free from life-controlling addictions.

"Desperation brought me here," says Todd Hardy, 46. "I was a

functional addict as I worked for a Fortune 500 company. But my addiction crept into my work-week and took over my life."

Since enrolling in the program, Hardy says, he has found peace and joy. "Teen Challenge is putting me back together through the teachings of Christ," he says.

Hardy's story is remarkable, but not unusual for those who stick with the program.

"Our priority is to lead people to Jesus Christ," says Batty, revealing the cornerstone of the program.

For more than a year, students learn to live disciplined lives. They attend classes covering such topics as anger, temptation, and healing for damaged emotions.

Though the program is unconventional by secular standards, it works. Teen Challenge boasts an 80 percent cure rate among those who complete the program.

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LITTLE RUSSIA BY THE SEA

The doorway wedged between a pizza joint and a dentist's office in Brooklyn's New Brighton Beach area — also known as Little Russia by the Sea — leads to a thin flight of stairs that serve as the entrance for Hope of Israel Messianic Congregation, which



Don Geraci

is made up mostly of Russian Jews who have accepted Christ as their Messiah.

Crammed shoulder to shoulder in the tiny sanctuary, nearly 100 people worship in Russian. "God is doing wonderful things here," says Jan Berkman, senior pastor who was born in Rwanda and educated in Moscow.

To make congregants feel more comfortable, Bibles include Russian and Hebrew text and have a picture of a menorah on them. The idea is to provide a safe and familiar place to worship, which is important because life is not easy for Jews who convert to Christianity.

"They are oftentimes ostracized, criticized and excluded from Brooklyn's Jewish community for converting to Christianity," says Don Geraci, a nationally appointed AG missionary to Jews who carries a shofar in a red velvet bag slung over his shoulder. "But the good news is making an impact in Brooklyn's Jewish community."

Geraci has been partnering with Berkman, who is pursuing affiliation with the AG.

The church offers computer, language and citizenship classes for local Russian Jews as a form

of evangelism in its Russian Community Life Center.

A few blocks from the church, a billboard mocking Jews who believed in Jesus used to hang on the side of a building that was on the boardwalk.



Jan Berkman

Geraci stood before the sign, blew his shofar, yelled in Russian that what the sign said was false, then prayed God would remove it. A week later, the building burnt down, destroying the sign. Geraci and Berkman are not content — they're now praying for a revival among the Jewish people in New York City.

STRONGER TOGETHER

"One church cannot survive alone," says Nam Soo Kim, pastor of Full Gospel New York Church in Flushing. "We can't establish churches in the city without support."

Kim knows this to be true. In 1974, Glad Tidings Tabernacle (pastored then by Stanley Berg) opened its doors to Kim and the congregation he pastored. As the years passed, Kim's congregation thrived with Glad Tidings Tabernacle's friendship and support. Today, more than 4,000 people attend Full Gospel New York Church, which after several decades of saving and sacrifice was able to purchase its own building.

"Churches have to work together," says Kim. "It makes a big difference."

Using that philosophy as their basis, Kim and his leadership team plan on partnering with church planters from the New York, New

Jersey, Korean and Spanish Eastern districts to plant 100 churches in New York in the next five years.



Nam Soo Kim

"It's exciting to plant a church," says Pete Richardson, founding pastor of Grace Church, which was planted at Full Gospel New York

Church this past March.

Richardson, a career pastor, says the need for more churches in New

York is great. It is estimated more than 125 languages are represented in the city.

"If we hand people Bibles and tracts in English it does no good because many of them don't know English," says Richardson. "Evangelism in the city has to be multilingual and multicultural. But we have to plant more churches if we want to win more souls."

Kim agrees.

"This city is beautiful, but it's dark spiritually," he says. "If Christians ignore the city, who is going to save it?"

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WORLD OUTREACH CHURCH

On a street corner in Manhattan's East Village, Samuel J. Moore, a 24-year-old church planter from North Carolina, passes out tracts and bottles of water. He engages people in conversations about spirituality.

Though he dresses the part of a hip, urban dweller with a trucker's cap, designer jeans, T-shirt, cowboy boots and sports jacket, he is a pastor at heart.

"I dreamed of going to Hollywood and being in entertainment," admits Moore. "But God had another plan. He wanted me to preach the gospel in New York."

When Moore arrived here two years ago he made quick work of networking with other pastors. The effort has paid off. Mark Gregori, pastor of Crossway Christian Center in the Bronx, has helped Moore

establish and grow his budding congregation that meets in the Empire State Building.



Samuel J. Moore

Though most who pass him today take his water and keep moving Moore says New Yorkers are receptive to the gospel — especially if Christians

come at them with a heart to serve.

"I come to people as a friend," says Moore. "God has opened up amazing doors."

One of Moore's volunteers hands a woman a bottle of water and tells her he is a follower of Christ before asking if she is.

"I'm spiritual," responds the woman before darting across the street.

Volunteers aren't deterred by such reactions. That's a good thing — as two people commit their lives to Christ during the outreach.

"We're doing this to let people know the love of God is free," says one volunteer.

Moore reaches down and grabs several more bottles of water.

"God is doing what He wants to do through us," he says. "He's reminding New Yorkers He loves them and this city."



COFFEEHOUSE FOR THE HOMELESS

In the basement of a church in Manhattan's East Village that will double as a sanctuary and a cafeteria tonight, several homeless men and women sing with a worship



Ruben

team at the Abounding Grace Ministries' coffeehouse. After a short sermon the men and women enjoy a warm meal and time of fellowship.

"Every Saturday night God's pres-

ence falls on this place," says Emilia Steele, 50, director of the outreach, which is under the direction of Abounding Grace Ministries (senior pastor Rick Del Rio).

Darryl, a tall, strapping homeless man, agrees.

"I can eat anyplace," he says patting his stomach. "But I come here for the Word."

Though the food fills stomachs, the Word is changing lives. Steele rattles off the names of several men who have accepted Christ as Savior at the coffeehouse.

When Ruben, 46, started coming here he had never heard he needed to ask Christ for forgiveness of sins and accept Him into his life to be saved. After several visits he became intrigued by the concept and began investigating the claims of Christianity. Eventually he committed his life to Christ.

"I've never really had joy in my life," he says. "This is the first time I've been happy inside."

The coffeehouse ministry is one of several that Abounding Grace Ministries does to reach those in need in Manhattan's Lower East Side. They also take to the streets with evangelism teams, run an after-school program, host basketball tournaments and challenge teenagers not only to accept Christ as Savior, but to be leaders.

"We focus on people the church has had a hard time relating to," says Del Rio. "It's all about loving people and being there for them. Our ministry is one of giving."

As the summer sky turns dark the guests prepare to leave. A few of them carry wrapped leftovers as if they were precious jewels. Before they get out the door most of them thank Steele or one of the other volunteers.

Though life on the street is uncertain, they know Saturday nights are for church, fellowship and a warm meal — it's one of the few things they can count on.

TRANSPLANTED

Mark Gregori, pastor of Crossway Christian Center in the Bronx, loves to network. For several years he's made it a priority to connect pastors in the Fellowship and across denominational lines. He also believes strongly in helping pastors establish ministries in the city. The goal in doing so, he says, is to build the body of Christ so that God's kingdom can be expanded.

"We help plant and revitalize churches," says Gregori.

To do that, he encourages pastors to share resources, mentor young pastors, look for creative ways to establish ministries and pray.

Thirty years ago Gregori came to New York with the support of Evangel Temple in Springfield, Mo.

(pastored then by David Reece Thomas).

Since coming to New York in



Mark Gregori

the mid-'70s, Gregori has seen his church thrive — mostly, he says, as a result of giving away resources and supporting other ministers.

"It's all about people, and people matter to God," he says.

Others agree.

"The climate has changed in the city," says Roger McPhail, 55, an AG pastor who leads New Hope church in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, and is one of the guiding forces behind a prayer and networking movement known as Mission New York. "We meet every month for prayer, inspiration and impartation. It's become a safe haven for pastors.

"We're looking to get the church outside the walls," says McPhail. "We're here to see the city and society change."

STEPS OF GRACE

Some of them sleep under a sea of blankets, others panhandle, while a few smoke cigarettes and chat as if waiting for the bus. Within a block of this convention of homeless men are five-star hotels, trendy nightclubs and upscale stores. Well-dressed couples zip by ignoring those who ask for change.

"Can you help me out?" asks one of the homeless men.

No one does.

Suddenly, Dave Sanders, ministry leader for New York School of Urban Ministry, and his team of volunteers arrive. They carry sack lunches, socks and blankets. The volunteers are from an AG church in Pennsylvania and are eager to share the gospel.

"Anything in particular I can pray with you about?" asks Sanders, 27, of a thin homeless man.

"Just being out here," answers the man who identifies himself as

Joseph before adding quickly he is HIV-positive. A conversation about Joseph's needs ensues.

"Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior?" asks Sanders.

Joseph says he knows God, but doesn't go to church. "The Bible says," starts Sanders.

Joseph gives Sanders less than a minute of his attention before asking him for money. Sanders — not one to be derailed when someone's eternity is in the balance — sticks to his line of reasoning and recites Scripture verses to support what he's saying. The conversation ends with Sanders giving Joseph socks, a blanket and a sack lunch.



Dave Sanders

around the nation. "But I also let them know there is a merciful God who wants to forgive them."

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EXECUTIVE ORDERS

Sometimes a church is in the right place at the right time. As the World Trade Center fell on September 11, 2001, New Yorkers ran for their lives. Many of those fleeing passed The Primitive Christian Church on East Broadway.

There, pastors and laypeople offered water and comfort to shaken survivors. Leading the effort was Senior Pastor Marcos Rivera, a former Wall Street executive.

“Soon after the attacks we became a center of relief where resources were flowing in from throughout the world,” says Rivera.

Though they had never dealt

with such a devastating tragedy, Rivera, his staff and congregation embraced their unexpected new role. For almost four years the church shifted its ministry focus and expanded its reach by ministering to survivors and the ministers who helped them.

Last year, Rivera and his church were finally able to shift back to their original vision of reaching the Lower Manhattan community with the gospel. Plans to start a senior center and charter school — that were put on hold after 9/11 — are now afoot.

“God in His divine strategy provided this opportunity to respond to 9/11,” says Rivera, 53. “I now

see myself not only as the pastor of this church, but also of this community.”



Marcos Rivera

EDUCATE THEM

When most men turn 70 they embrace retirement. Not Robert Johansson, senior pastor of Evangel Church in Long Island City.

With the energy and determination of a 35-year-old man, Johansson has embarked on a building project that will nearly double the size of the church's high school. Making room for more students isn't a money-making proposition for Johansson; it's an eternal one.

Johansson says because of the decline in parental guidance the church must provide a godly alternative in a safe community for children and teens. He points to the Irish Catholics who fled the famine in Ireland in the mid-1800s and came to New York. When they arrived, he says, the priests asked if they could provide religious teaching in the public schools. Educators said no. In protest, the Irish Catho-

lics started their own schools.

“Just like the Children of Israel, the Irish educated their children so they would be strong in a society



Robert Johansson

that rejected their values,” says Johansson.

According to Johansson, the move paid off. Seventy-five years

after coming to America, he says, “the Irish Catholics were helping run the city.”

Because of the present social climate, says Johansson, the church cannot rely solely on the few hours it has with youth to train and disciple them. Johansson envisions thousands of students throughout the city being disciplined throughout the week in Christian schools where love, peace, safety and acceptance abound and Jesus' name is proclaimed.

“The education of the young and living in a community are essential to living a godly life,” he says. “Yes, it's the hardest and most expensive way to reach the city for Christ, but it's the best way.” **tpe**

KIRK NOONAN is associate editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.



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