Making Neighborhoods Whole

A Handbook for Christian Community Development

by Wayne Gordon & John M Perkins

Reviewed by Brent Lyons-Lee

Shane Claiborne says in his foreword that this book is like the “Greatest Hits” album of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA). The opening chapter gives some background to the two main authors lives and how they were destined to come together to form the CCDA. They point out how different their stories and backgrounds are with Perkins recalling beatings at the hands of white racist police. Gordon (or “Coach”) had a fairly ordinary upbringing with an extraordinary call to minister to the African American community.

Perkins shared his vision for Christian community development in 1989 in front of 140 people gathered for the inaugural conference at the church that Coach had planted in a very needy area of Chicago in the mid-70s. Perkins believed that forming an association would enable people in urban ministry environments to support one another. Coach was appointed as the President of CCDA at this inaugural meeting and Perkins selected as Chairman.

CCDA had 10 years of growth before taking a huge financial loss at their conference in New York. They expected 3500 people and less than half that number showed up. New York proved to be too expensive for attendees to get accommodation. This meant cutting hours and pay for staff members. CCDA had relied heavily on their conferences for their financial viability. In 2003 CCDA decided to create a business plan appointed Gordon Murphy as the first CEO, who was tasked with creating a strategic plan that would set up CCDA’s future beyond a year to year conference.

Murphy is described on page 42 as a “white guy from the suburbs who had no intention of relocating or running an urban ministry”. Interestingly the authors point out that Murphy was committed to helping CCDA succeed as a ministry and also as a financial entity, and that this is something a concept that all practitioners should recognise. I (Brent) have been involved in Christian Community Development ministry for over 10 years and can account for the very real tensions involved between ‘field worker/practitioners’ and ‘administration/fundraisers’ in these organisations.

Perkins and Coach revisit these eight key components of community development for the majority of the book and have invited practitioners to give real examples.

1. Relocation
2. Reconciliation
3. Redistribution
4. Leadership Development
5. Listening to the Community
6. Church-Based Development
7. A Whole Systems Approach to Ministry
8. Empowerment

The first 3 concepts or the ‘three R’s’ have been promoted by Perkins for many years. CCDA have incorporated the other 5 concepts subsequently. I think it’s fair to say that intercession is at the heart of this movement. CCDA would encourage incarnation to places that call us away from a ‘safe’ existence, or as Claiborne (who wrote the forward) would say, to the ‘abandoned places of empire’. They spend some time developing the nuances of incarnation in the chapter on relocation.

The authors point out that moving to poor neighbourhood isn’t the way of ministry, but a way of ministry. However they are clear that geographical relocation would be considered ‘best practice’.

The other key notion in community development work is empowerment. According to the authors, “empowering in the context of Christian community development is ultimately about releasing the power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individuals and in their neighbourhoods and communities” (p.152). The Holy Spirit as ‘empowerer’ frees practitioners from the potential pitfalls of self-congratulations found in any ministry, but in particular rural urban ministry, and to be present as ‘grounded healers’. The CCDA are convicted to develop indigenous leaders as best model for empowerment and avoiding dependency.

Overall this book is a good ‘refresher’ read for those already practising community development principles in their ministry. It also gives great biblical references for those more sceptical evangelicals who aren’t convinced by this approach to ministry. The authors point out that these principles can work in a broader context than ‘urban ministry, and explain that they do some work in a rural locations close by to the major city where the annual CCDA conference takes place. I’d like to see this fleshed out a little more here in Australia. We are facing not only a church attendance crisis in rural locations, but many people who would be categorised as ‘poor’ are being forced to move to rural locations because basic life costs are cheaper. I think Christian community development is necessary beyond ‘urban’ places.