

Neighborhood presence: Innovative urban ministry

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [March 11, 2008](#) issue

Of course, the city isn't gentrifying everywhere. Some struggling sectors, such as Chicago's Lawndale neighborhood, are still seeking modest development in the form of stores, restaurants and decent housing.

For decades a group of countercultural Christians has been developing innovative ministries in Lawndale. Lawndale Community Church was started in 1975, led by Wayne Gordon, a Wheaton College graduate who had moved to the area and started a Bible study in his home. His book *Real Hope in Chicago* (Zondervan) tells about the shattered windows and stolen cars of those early days. The struggles of living and working in the neighborhood tested his family's idealism.

Today, Lawndale Community Church not only features charismatic worship—including a hip-hop service—but sponsors a legal aid clinic, a health clinic and a day care center. One of Lawndale's most impressive ministries is the Lawndale Community Development Corporation, which advocates for and builds low-income housing. LCDC has received awards from the Ford and Gates foundations and millions of dollars in grants from the city of Chicago. It has secured a pizza parlor and a grocery store for the neighborhood.

One danger in such an expanding ministry is that it can become more of a bureaucratized organization than a church. Lawndale has not lost its original churchly vision. Staff members participate in weekly Bible studies and monthly worship services. Most attend Sunday services at Lawndale Church. "We're not able to say directly 'We're doing this in the name of Jesus Christ,'" said Kim Jackson, executive director of LCDC. "But we *do* believe these works are what we're called to as an extension of Lawndale Church."

The churches in Lawndale seem as numerous as the liquor stores. Some of them occupy fabulous old buildings, architectural gems abandoned by synagogues or mainline churches and now inhabited by Baptists or Pentecostals. Jackson gives me

an exact number: 180 churches are in the neighborhood. “With all those people worshipping the same God, the neighborhood shouldn’t look like it does. It’s sad we can’t come together to make an impact for the kingdom.” She’s quick to point out that Lawndale works with many of these churches, and that many of the others lack full-time leaders.

Speculators have bought vacant lots and buildings in the area with an eye to rehabbing them and selling them. But this activity has not helped the neighborhood, says Jackson. It’s only produced “more absentee landlords.” And many of these developers have lost their investments in the current mortgage crisis. Jackson says she would welcome gentrification if it took the form of a developer purchasing one of Lawndale’s 1,000 abandoned lots to build new housing stock. But she would rather see Lawndale’s existing housing stock rehabbed with the sort of help that LCDC provides.

In a crisis particular to Lawndale, a developer named Lawndale Restoration created 1,200 subsidized apartments but was found to be mismanaging the properties—the buildings were poorly built and overrun by roaches and rats. Lawndale Restoration defaulted on its government-backed mortgage—the second-largest foreclosure in the history of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. Hundreds of families had to find housing elsewhere. Many left the neighborhood. The local school enrollment dropped from 800 to 600.

LCDC responded by buying some of those foreclosed units and rehabbing them; it offers some for rent, others for sale. LCDC has rehabbed more homes in the past three years than in all the previous 19.

LCDC makes some 40 percent of its budget from the sale of properties at affordable prices. The rest of its budget comes from corporate sponsors and private foundations. Jackson says LCDC’s entrepreneurial spirit is all the more important with the drop in federal, state and local resources for affordable housing. In the long run, Jackson is optimistic that government funding will return. “It has to come back. It’s government’s responsibility to provide housing.” But the needs are growing faster than the provision.

When I ask what the Lawndale neighborhood would be like without the church and its various ministries, Jackson at first says that “there are lots of organizations working together here.” But eventually she grants, “It would be like a Third World country.”