

The three Rs of urban mission: The New Song Community of Baltimore

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [July 31, 2002](#) issue

When I visited a Baltimore neighborhood called Sandtown in 1997, my most vivid impression was that of disturbing, jarring contrast. I remember a whole neighborhood of abandoned houses—each one an oversized skull, with empty darkness peering out of its broken doors and windows and mocking the life that had abandoned it. In the midst of these ruins, however, there was a street teeming with life. Houses had been repaired and painted with bright colors, neighbors were chatting, children were playing in the street. It was as if in this one place a resurrection of sorts had clothed the dry bones of urban death with the pulsating flesh of life. At the heart of this improbable transformation was a small company of Christians. They call themselves the New Song Community.

To Live in Peace (soon to be released by Eerdmans) tells the story of this community and offers a theological rationale for its mission in the inner city. Author Mark Gornik, responding to a call from God, was among the first to relocate to Sandtown. The book gives eloquent testimony to lives modeled on Christ's self-giving love and inspired by the Spirit of life, lives that here transform hopeless urban landscapes into sites of God's peace.

To read this book properly, jump straight to Chapter 5, "Singing a New Song." This, the story of Sandtown's gradual "resurrection," is the book's heart. Without it, the important theological and sociological reflections that precede and follow cannot be properly understood. Inspired by John Perkins's pioneering work in community development (his famous "three Rs": relocation, reconciliation, redistribution), Gornik and Allan Tibbles moved into the neighborhood armed with no "plans or programs," but only the conviction that "the church is God's reconciled community pursuing justice at the point of greatest suffering in the world."

They started by hanging around in the community until, in a testimony "to Sandtown's capacity for grace," they were welcomed. From then on, as Gornik puts

it, everything was not so much an effort of the few who relocated to Sandtown, but of the many who didn't abandon it "during hard times." First came a community church, then homes affordable for everyone, then drastic improvement of the local educational system and health care. Finally an effective employment strategy was put into place. Achievements are easy to enumerate, but every successful step required a miracle of courage and persistence.

I went away from the book moved and challenged in many ways. First is a *personal* challenge. Gornik and Tibbles chose not to pursue the comforts of ministry in middle-class environments. Instead, they relocated to a place of desolation and hopelessness. For Tibbles this was a special challenge: he is a quadriplegic, married and a father of two girls. What struck me was not just the sainthood of the two men, but how lightly they were wearing it, without effort or self-importance.

Second is an *ecclesial* challenge. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of service to the world, churches often succumb to the temptation to live primarily for themselves—to increase their numbers, improve their programs, add new buildings. For the New Song Community being the church means being for others, *with* others, especially the neediest. "The ministries of justice and reconciliation are not additions that flow out of the church," but are "constitutive of ecclesial life in union with Christ."

The third challenge concerns the *character of service*. All too often we help the needy in a way that humiliates them. Even talk about "empowerment" leaves a bitter taste of condescension. *To Live in Peace* is suffused with deep respect for the dignity of the needy. They are not the "others" for whom something must be done, even less the ignorant and unruly who must be disciplined. They are the family members who have fallen on hard times and must be encouraged and helped.

Fourth, the New Song Community *connects faith with life*. Gornik argues repeatedly against approaching the problem of the inner cities with blueprints derived from faith or informed by secular reasoning (although in the book he does a great deal of theological and sociological heavy-lifting). Instead, he suggests a twofold strategy: 1) keep focused on the vision toward which the community needs to move (shalom of God's new creation) and on the path on which it needs to walk (Christ's self-giving love), and 2) concentrate "upon faithfully doing thousands of little things right over a period of many years."

Finally, the book is a challenge to how we think about *faith-based initiatives*. Gornik knows that the church has significant and unique resources for addressing the needs of inner cities; his whole book is an explication of these resources. Yet he cautions that the current emphasis on faith-based initiatives overly personalizes poverty and social change and disregards both “the needs for infrastructure and capital” and the structural dimension of poverty. Gornik refuses to be caught in false alternatives—either attention to persons or to structures. Both need to be addressed if communities are to live in peace, and therefore both the church and the government have a role to play.

The Christian wisdom, commitment and courage inscribed in Gornik’s book and incarnate in the New Song Community are extraordinary. I hope we all will catch something of Gornik’s vision: “Guided by the conviction that Christ crucified creates room for the embrace of others and that the Spirit of the resurrected Christ brings new life,” the churches can and must serve “to advance the *shalom* of American inner cities.”