

When Business Aims for Miracles

Minneapolis-St. Paul business professionals are some of the inner city's most effective "social entrepreneurs." by TODD SVANOE

WHILE SOME social ministry leaders are tapping government funds, Minnesota evangelicals are blazing a different trail: the business world, which they find richer not only in funds but in skills and leadership. These faith leaders are combining biblical piety, corporate funding, and a "just do it" business manner to produce a civic witness for Christ on a scale beyond what their seminaries prepared them for—all free of government bureaucracy and church-board stalemates.

General Mills, for example, was so compelled by Bethel Seminary graduate Alfred Babington-Johnson's vision for healing a broken African-American community that it offered funding and 100 volunteers to help create an award-winning soul-food manufacturer and packing company in north Minneapolis. Stairstep Initiative's Siyeza Inc. employs 80 people (and expects to hire more than 175 at its peak capacity), 80 percent of them from poor neighborhoods. The \$4.3 million investment, created through an alliance of 49 black investors, General Mills, and US Bancorp, produced a \$94,000 return at only 10 percent of factory capacity last year.

Based on projections and new contracts, debt will be eliminated in less than five years, after which workers will have an opportunity for a stake in ownership. Siyeza's mission is to demonstrate God's friendship to disfranchised people, Babington-Johnson says.

"God does not just say he loves us, he shows it, and so must we," he says. "Our desire is that the manifestation of God's power in this community-building work translates into *What must I do to be saved?* But for many that won't happen until they hold stock papers in their hands."

CRACK ALLEY TO THRIVING CENTER

"Historically, urban ministries got mad at the rich. Now, we're partnering with them," says veteran youth pastor Art Erickson, who started Urban Ventures Leadership Foundation in 1993 with retired banker Ralph Bruins. Their goal: create a Christian community development corporation as a catalyst for joining faith and business resources to help inner-city kids succeed—an area in which the church had floundered. In only eight years, through alliances with busi-

nesses like General Mills, Honeywell, Edina Realty, and ADC Broadband, Urban Ventures has transformed an abandoned city strip in south central Minneapolis formerly known as "Crack Alley" into the thriving center now called "the Opportunity Zone."

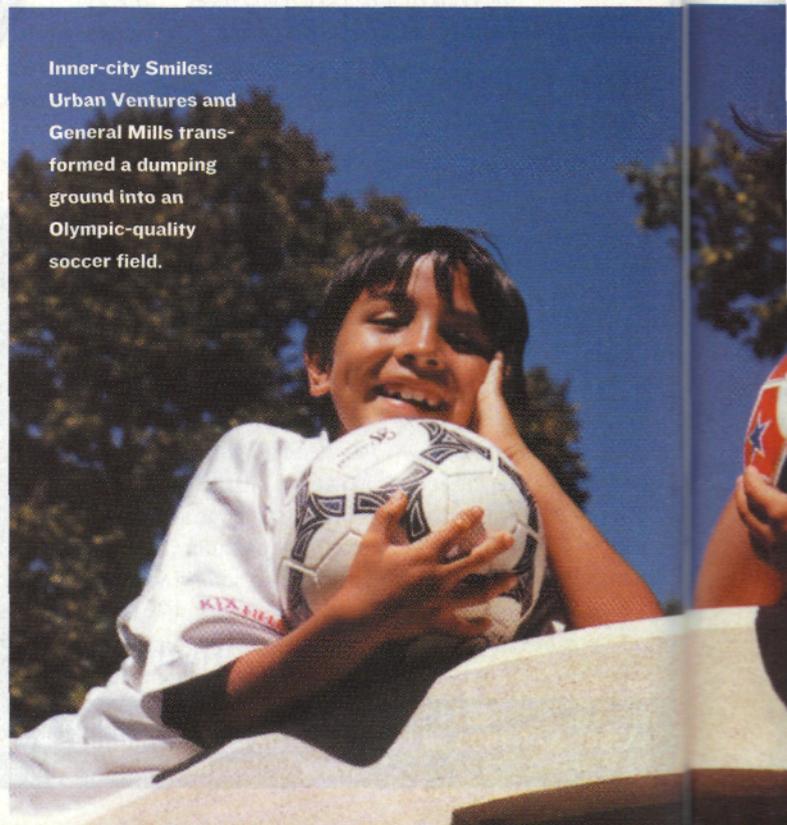
The avenue, once pocked with porn shops and crack houses and crawling with prostitutes, now offers youth sports, an Olympic-quality soccer field, computer and family education, a jobs agency, an evangelical church and Bible studies, emergency finances, and an outlet with free food, clothes, and furniture.

Enthusiastic business veterans sit over maps and catered lunches in a boardroom planning their next move: the \$16 million Colin Powell Youth Leadership Center. "I've never been involved in anything so good and pure in all my life," says Dave Bigler, former senior vice president of marketing at Principal Financial Group.

Bigler led a committee that hosted a luncheon last sum-

Marketplace

Inner-city Smiles:
Urban Ventures and
General Mills trans-
formed a dumping
ground into an
Olympic-quality
soccer field.



mer in which Erickson and Powell appealed to more than 1,000 Minneapolis business leaders to partner with faith leaders to revitalize urban neighborhoods.

Philip Styrlund, vice president of sales at ADC, says of Urban Ventures, "They get things done here. They have a focus."

Urban Ventures' leaders are neither shy nor retiring: corporate funders on a tour of Urban Ventures are immediately shown walls of professionally mounted photos in what could be called a Gallery of Outcomes. They are told exactly what part they could play in Urban Ventures' unfolding strategic plan. Styrlund finds this approach not only businesslike but also Christlike.

"Jesus was passionate and revolutionary," he says. "He was humble, but he did not act small."

Churches often lack the shrewdness to accomplish the grand missions to which God calls them, Styrlund says. Business professionals, on the other hand, are proving to be like long-lost siblings and partners in mission.

SKILLS WORTH MORE THAN GOLD

Could relationships between faith and business communities change the landscape of social welfare in America? That depends, says former businessman Floyd Beecham, pastor of Faith Tabernacle Gospel Church and president of Urban Hope Ministries, which offers crisis counseling and referrals in the inner city.

Those who see financing as the primary benefit of business professionals are stuck in old Great Society thinking, Beecham says. The harder commodities to come by are people's time and talent.

"Of the 10 churches that partner with us, half of them throw money at us," he says. "But we need lawyers, bankers,

financial planners, and people with professional expertise."

Beecham found this help from the Twin Cities Urban Reconciliation Network (TURN), which matches graduates of its urban ministry training with business veterans. A pilot group of volunteers from a large suburban church includes an accountant, two attorneys, a fundraiser, two former vice presidents, a human-resources manager, and a strategic planner.

"A huge disconnect between those with tremendous resources and those with tremendous vision hinders the viability of the church in our generation," says Art Treadwell, pastor of Christ Temple and CEO of Exodus Community Development Company.

Community development partnerships bring a witness to the world that has been lost because of "the absence of miracles," says Treadwell, whose multimillion dollar projects, partially funded by the St. Paul Companies, have produced 135 units of affordable housing and mental-health services since 1991.

From the plagues of Egypt to the walls of Jericho to Paul's quaking prison to Jesus' many healings, God both said and showed he was Lord, Treadwell notes.

"Big physical changes get people's attention," he says. "I see hope in the boldness of Christian businessmen and women who have begun to bridge this separation in concrete ways."

SMALL-R REDEMPTION

Urban Ventures' Erickson says that during his 35 years of youth ministry he has seen 63 urban churches abandon their posts in Minneapolis and move to greener pastures. Some merely lost members when their employers relocated to the suburbs. But others, he says, lacked the business savvy to adjust to changing markets.

"We have to know what our market, product, and outcomes are," says Erickson, unabashedly using the language of business to speak about ministry. "In this case the products are people with values and behaviors."

The citywide Soul Liberation Festival, created by Erickson in 1973, was his laboratory for learning some important lessons about reaching urban people.

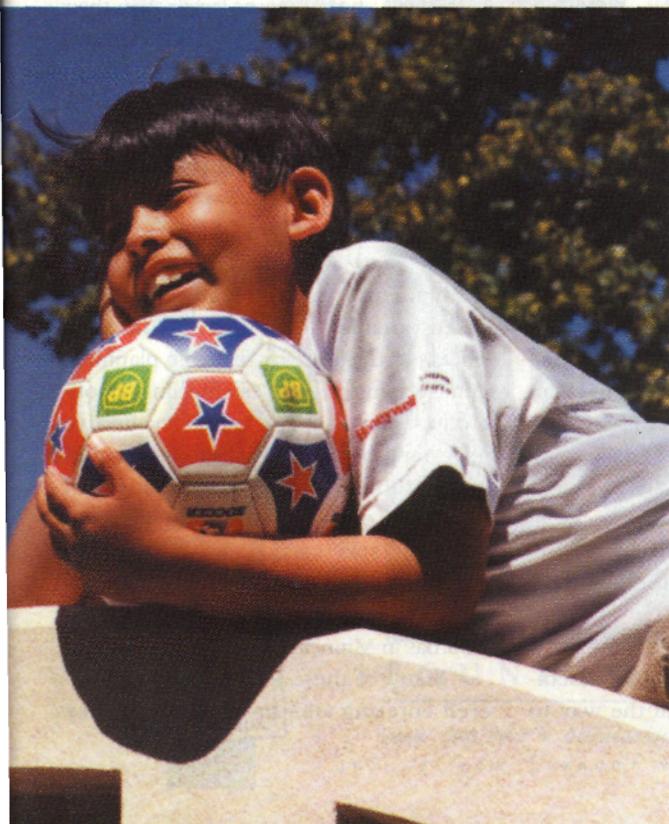
The festival still draws thousands to south Minneapolis to hear the nation's top evangelists and Christian musicians on the blacktop outside of Park Avenue United Methodist



Art Erickson



Soul Food: Siyeza Inc.'s mission is to bring disfranchised people to God.





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Church, where Erickson led youth for 25 years.

To all appearances, the festival has been a youth pastor's dream. But dysfunctional families in blighted neighborhoods often stunt the personal spiritual growth of individual believers—or, as Erickson says, "There is a big difference between saved souls and changed lives."

Faced with systemic problems, many ministers just preach louder, Erickson jokes, while businesses do research and development with a problem-solving mentality. One of his goals in starting Urban Ventures with Bruins was to help Christian community leaders address problems in a holistic way.

"When you save a prostitute, you've created a new problem," says Erickson. "Now she's out of a job. She still has rent to pay and children to feed."

Bruins says a deeper look at the needs of a regenerate ex-prostitute might reveal she is listed at a local job bank—but most of the jobs are in the suburbs.

"At our local job bank, I was told that of the last 150 applicants, only five had driver's licenses," says Bruins, who oversees economic development at Urban Ventures. "And that doesn't mean those had cars."

Salvation through Christ is important, Erickson says, "but God cares about areas of common grace as well as saving grace—redemption with a small r as well as a big R," in areas such as jobs, food, education, housing, and a clean and safe neighborhood.

Neglecting these areas can render ministries ineffective, and addressing them requires resources beyond the capacity of the average church. "We need new community development corporations run by followers of Jesus Christ," says Erickson, who as a boy was influenced by watching his father, a chemist, inventor, and businessman, at work.

"Dad would take an idea, develop a model, create a product and an assembly line that produced it, all the way to



Mobile Home: The St. Paul Companies, Dain Rauscher, and evangelical leaders work together to solve the Twin Cities' housing crisis.

shipping, billing, and monitoring outcomes," he says. "I carried that mentality into ministry."

Pastors and other leaders with "tremendous ministry skills, full of the zeal of the Lord and willing to sacrifice to make their missions work," often have dreams larger than their job descriptions, and ministry visions that take them beyond their church walls, says Joy Skjeggstad of TURN.

Yet their visions are often too expansive for a church board to support or for an offering plate to sustain.

Skjeggstad, who has spent two years studying and training leaders of faith-based organizations, says she has seen leaders struggle with "strategic planning, grant-writing, legally establishing a non-profit, staffing [and] setting up an effective governing board." She created an eight-week training program for leaders of faith-based organizations called "Vision to Reality," sponsored by TURN/Vision Twin Cities and the Center for Nonprofit Management at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis.

"Many of these leaders have considered entering MBA programs, but they



Alfred Babington Johnson

want to integrate the biblical faith component," she says.

FROM DOUGHNUT TO BISMARCK

Famous Dave's Restaurants has also carried its business acumen into ministry. Founder Dave Anderson, a Native American and an evangelical, works with Gordon and Sheila Thayer in their street ministry to the estimated 55 percent of Twin City Natives who are alcoholics.

Delivered from alcoholism by the power of Christ themselves, the Thayers evangelize and help Native Americans adapt to urban life. They recently built an apartment complex for Native Americans recovering from alcoholism.

Revenues from Famous Dave's, which grosses \$70 million annually, are also earmarked to start a new "boot camp" for Native American youth. This will include training in physical fitness, life skills, and business (focusing on how to create wealth), Anderson says.

Gordon Thayer also directs the American Indian Housing and Community

Development Corporation, funded by the St. Paul Companies and Dain Rauscher. Full-time medical care and case managers helped 100 homeless alcoholics last year, and 15 people who had made up to 75 detox or emergency room hospital visits per year made significant changes in their lives.

Erickson says that when business owners return to the inner city, they have an opportunity to act redemptively. They can begin to "reweave what has been unraveled" in the last 35 years as people with skills and resources have vacated metropolitan areas all over the nation.

"What this has produced is a metropolitan doughnut, with a hole in the inside. What we're seeking is an English muffin, or better yet, a Bismarck, with the goodie in the middle. And it can happen like that," he says, snapping his fingers, "if business folks join us at the table." 

Todd Svano (*storycraft1@yahoo.com*) is an urban reporter who covers effective faith-based ministries around the nation.



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