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Judiciary Leadership and the Urban Challenge: A Wesleyan District Makes the Move

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**JUDICATORY LEADERSHIP AND THE URBAN CHALLENGE:
A WESLEYAN DISTRICT MAKES THE MOVE**

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Richard E. Meeks

abstract

Detroit, Michigan, finds itself listed in the “top ten” of our nation’s dead or dying cities. After a forty year absence, God is calling the Wesleyan Church back into this great city. This denomination’s East Michigan District is leading the way. The thrust of urban ministry is gaining momentum as church leaders commit to reaching the cities. Judicatory leaders must understand the challenges that come with the opportunities. Richard chronicles the East Michigan District’s journey and shares their experience and learning to assist others in making the move into church planting in a major city’s urban environment.

If the church is serious about fulfilling the Great Commission in our day, we must go to the cities. The city is no longer optional in our evangelism strategy. Our concern for the great cities of our nation must take us beyond an occasional service project at the local mission. Failing to reach the cities is to fail Christ and the mission of His kingdom.

If population trends are an accurate indicator, we need to pay attention. According to the United States Department of Transportation, as reported on the Federal Highway Administration website (www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/census),

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almost sixty percent of our nation's population lives in urban areas with a population over 200,000. It is further determined that another ten percent of the people live in cities whose population is between 50,000 and 199,999. As our total population continues to grow, the reality remains that a vast majority of people will be living in urban centers. This trend is showing no sign of reversing. From now on, we will be more urban than rural.

Jesus was very clear when He said that the good news—the gospel—is for the world (Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; Acts 1). If you look at the global picture, you see that most of the people of the world are living in the cities. If you look at the United States, it is very safe to say that the world is coming to us in our cities. In his book, *Street Signs: A New Dimension in Urban Ministry*, Ray Bakke draws this conclusion: “Missions is no longer across the ocean and geographically distant; it is across the street and is culturally distant, in our cities and in cities on all six continents. In reality we have moved from a world of about 200 nations to a new world of some 400 world-class cities.”¹

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I would agree with Greg Lillestrand, Director of Community Ministries for Campus Crusade for Christ, who wrote this email to a friend, “I believe the missional challenge of the twenty-first century is the city. It is the new ‘10/40’ window of this generation and fundamentally it is a different challenge than impacting the unreached in the remote places of the world.”²

A reading through Acts teaches us that Paul’s missionary journeys took him to the major cities of his time. This was not accidental. As the East Michigan District of the Wesleyan Church, we are convinced that we must strategically and intentionally do the same in our region.

our call to the great city and urban ministry

We began our journey in 2008. At that time, the total Michigan state population was slightly over 10 million people. During that same period, 5.6 million of those people lived within the thirteen counties that comprise the East Michigan District. There has been an exodus from Michigan over the past few years. However, the scenario has not changed. While the district is geographically small, compared to the enormity of the state’s size, it is amazing that approximately 56% of the state’s entire population lives there.

¹ Bakke, Ray and Jon Sharpe. *Street Signs: A New Dimension in Urban Ministry*. (Birmingham: New Hope, 2006), 84.

² Swanson, Eric and Sam Williams. *To Transform a City: Whole Church, Whole Gospel, Whole City*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 36–37.

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The three largest counties in the state, accounting for almost 4 million people, are located in the East Michigan District. Yet there is a shortage of Wesleyan churches in these heavily populated areas. All totaled, there are eight Wesleyan churches serving these four counties. This means only 23 percent of our district's churches are where 71 percent of the people live. When one compares the combined total of our congregations to the total number of unreached people in this region, the seriousness of the situation is evident.

Dig deeper, and there is more to the story. The East Michigan District encompasses the largest city in Michigan, which is also the eleventh largest city in the United States—Detroit. It is home to almost one million people. This great city represents sixteen percent of the entire population of our district. As of 2008, there was no Wesleyan church in Detroit.

The Wesleyan church had a presence in this city. Several years ago, we simply numbered our churches. The East Michigan District had Detroit First, Detroit Second, and Detroit Third, along with others. It was very easy to track our churches. Forty years ago, a “perfect storm” of circumstances hit the city and left us with no churches in Detroit.

- *Racial Tensions and Social Unrest* During the 1960s, the riots were so terrible in Detroit, that the government brought in the National Guard to curb the violence, restore order, and police the city. This situation entrenched existing bitterness and prejudice between people.
- *Political Posturing and Relocation* It was at this time that the mayor of Detroit publicly declared an ethnic restructuring of sorts. The city's boundaries were clearly defined, with Eight Mile Road being the northern edge. The African-Americans already living in the city were urged to remain within those boundaries, and those living outside were encouraged to move into the city. The white population living in the city was almost forced to go north of Eight Mile Road. This virtually isolated the city and created a Grand Canyon-like divide between the suburbanites and urbanites.
- *Denominational Merger* In 1968, the Wesleyan Church was formed through the merger of two denominations. This resulted in some severe sorting and sifting at the local church level as new churches and districts were formed. Our churches in East Michigan were primarily white. The merger realignment added to the storm that was raging in the city. The churches in the city had merged, relocated to the suburbs, or simply closed. When the storm had passed, there were no Wesleyan churches in Detroit.

The Wesleyans in East Michigan became a rural and suburban church, with our hearts turned away from the city. In many minds, it was for several good

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reasons. For the next forty years, the East Michigan District would live with this
immense hole in our district, a symbol of the big hole in us. That is unacceptable!

our steps into the city

The journey is often as important as the destination. That was, and remains, true for us as individuals, as local churches, and as a district. It was obvious that God had to do a deep work in us if He wanted to do a new and different work through us. Getting us back into the city was not going to be a quick fix.

1. *Partnership with an existing inner city ministry* In 2005, the East Michigan District became a ministry partner with an inner city mission. Under the leadership of Pastor Steve Adams (Romulus, MI), six of our Wesleyan churches began a rotation to provide meals and services for the ministry on a weekly basis. We also hosted annual block parties for the kids and families of the neighborhood. Pastor Henry Covington of *I Am My Brother's Keeper* became our man of peace in Detroit. He was very instrumental in bringing East Michigan back to the city. It was our work with *I Am My Brother's Keeper* that inspired and educated us. Through Henry, we were able to see the need, get some experience, build some relationships, and catch the vision. We shared with him, and he opened his hands and heart to use his connections to bless and share with us. We learned the essence of true compassion and the dynamics of *compassion ministry* in an urban environment. God continues to use this partnership to help us learn the city and establish a network for future ministry.
2. *The Leader's Change of Heart* I was unsettled by the placement of our churches. Disturbed by the big hole in our district, I began to pray for the great city of Detroit. It was a prayer of repentance and desperation. This situation was not right. It was not right for us to be absent. The reasons we were absent was not right. My prayers had a clarity and conviction: "We have to go where the people are, and the largest concentration of lost people is in the city!" Here is what I knew: a) Something had to change—I could not, and would not, stand before Jesus Christ and say that the church/district, under my leadership, did nothing to reach Detroit; b) Reaching Detroit would require someone different than us—God would have to send an African-American (preferably a Detroiter) to us if we were to go into the city.

In conjunction with the prayer efforts, God used Jonah's story to grip my heart. Just as God gave Jonah a second call to Nineveh, so the East

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Michigan District was getting a fresh call back to Detroit. I was struck by the opening lines, “The word of the Lord came to Jonah—‘Go to the great city of Nineveh.’ But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.” (Jonah 1:1–3) I heard the Spirit say, “Richard, your church walked out. You ran away.” I reminded God of the perfect storm and the pressures that forced the Wesleyan Church out. The Holy Spirit kept pressing in. As I read God’s final question to Jonah, my conviction was so great I fell to my knees in tears. “The Lord said (to Jonah), ‘You have been concerned about [yourself] but Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left. Should I not be concerned about that great city?’” (Jonah 4:10–11) In that moment, God broke my heart for the broken city of Detroit!

One of the first things I did was move my prayer time for the city—to the city. I would ask pastors who knew Detroit to drive me through the city. We would pray together. We would serve people together. As the District Superintendent, I began taking key district leaders into the city with me. I began with the governing board of our district. I scheduled one of our board’s meetings in Detroit. This included a special prayer time and a guided van tour through the city. We began to catch the vision of what God could do and how He was calling us to join Him. Weeks later, I took our District’s Evangelism and Church Growth Team into the city. This is the team that oversees the starting of new works and churches for our district. Following were prayer tours with some of our district’s pastors. Dr. Jo Anne Lyon, our denomination’s General Superintendent, was given a brief tour of the city, and we showed her the property we were considering for our Urban Ministry Center. Every district gathering and meeting featured something about our call to the city and our obedience to go. We prayed together. We cried together. We dreamed together. The question became: How can we not go to Detroit? We must go!

3. *Exposure to Effective Inner City Works* A meeting was scheduled with “Coach” Wayne Gordon. Wayne is the pastor of Chicago’s Lawndale Community Church and founder of the Christian Community Development Association. Our District Board provided the funds to invite five other people to participate in the trip to Chicago. Our team was given a full behind-the-scenes tour of Lawndale’s ministry. We spent time with Coach and were introduced to John Perkins. We caught a glimpse of what could be. It was there that God confirmed His call on our district.

While we were convinced of our call to Detroit, it was not an easy decision. This was the biggest missional risk we have ever taken. There was much at stake. There were many unanswered questions. Here were some of the issues we needed to resolve.

- *Our Urban Ministry Church Planting Model* This was not only a pioneer work for us, but also for our denomination. We had no internal models for the ministry to which we were called. Our work would become the model. Our concerns were compounded by the sense that urban ministry feels so upside down, when compared to starting a new church in suburbia. This is especially true with property and its importance in establishing trustworthiness and commitment in the city. In starting suburban churches, we can be mobile while the congregation grows and gathers resources for property. In the city, investing in property demonstrates a desire for “permanence” which gives the ministry credibility in the community. It was property, then people.
- *Our Funding and Stewardship* We have invested a sizable portion of our district’s financial resources in this endeavor. In addition, many of our district churches are investing financially in this new ministry. We are projecting to spend more money to start our urban ministry in Detroit than we have spent on any previous church planting effort.
- *Our System and Structure* The most often asked question is, “Will we actually have an established church, or will it be a mission?” We are trying to determine how the Wesleyan structure is best applied in the development of a church in an urban environment. We do not see ourselves operating a “mission” in Detroit.
- *Our Church’s Sustainability* This is a major concern in our economically challenging times. We are committed to having an urban ministry that is self-supporting and self-sustaining. We are confident the church will effectively reach lost people in the city, and disciples will be made. We need to create funding streams to ensure long-term viability.

It became clear we would never be able to adequately answer all the questions. We knew we would have to simply step out in faith and trust God to help us learn along the way. In January 2010, the District Board approved two critical pieces of our Urban Ministry strategy: a) launching of the Transforming Church of Detroit with an appointed church planting pastor; b) forming an affiliate non-profit corporation known as the East Michigan Christian Community Development

Meeks: *Judicatory Leadership and the Urban Challenge: A Wesleyan District Association (E-MI CCDA)*. We assigned a director to this non-profit. Our urban ministry model would merge church planting with Christian community development.

wesleyan transforming church of detroit

This church was birthed with the vision that it would be *The Church Without Walls*. There are incredible needs in the city of Detroit. With great need is great opportunity. The pastor and the director of E-MI CCDA began building a network of relationships and partnerships within the city.

The other churches in the East Michigan District began to hear the call and rally to the cause. They would supply much of the funding and many of the volunteers for the initial ministry efforts of the Transforming Church of Detroit. These ministries included:

- Organized thirteen food distributions in five separate locations in Northwest Detroit
- Distributed 489,700 lbs. of food to 7,224 families
- Prepared and served 3,590 meals—cooked onsite for those at the events
- Organized 2,530 volunteers for a cumulative total of 14,180 hours of service

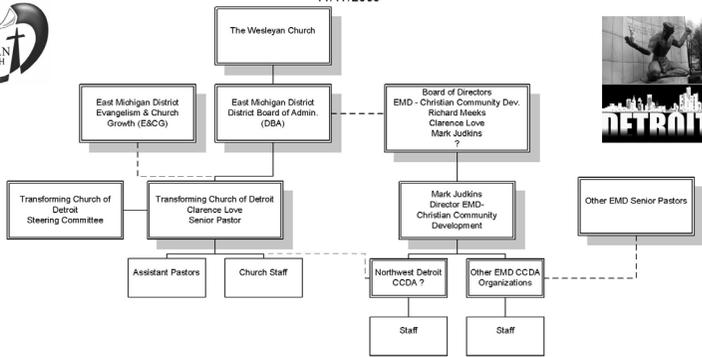
The church was able to gather the contact information of every family served through the food distributions. A simple survey was provided to the people to help us assess the needs and priorities of the neighborhoods.

In the spring of 2010, the church began meeting twice a week in rented facilities. They had their first baptism service four months later. We soon discovered that denominational affiliation is important in Detroit. Again, we were surprised by another difference between urban ministry and church planting in suburbia. Therefore we changed the church's name to the Wesleyan Transforming Church of Detroit. In December of 2010, the district purchased a building that will house the church and the community development association. We are strategically and intentionally located in the most densely populated zip code in Detroit.

As was noted earlier, the East Michigan District's strategy for starting urban churches is to marry church planting with Christian community development. We will transform neighborhoods as we are able to transform individuals, families, and systems. Wesleyan Transforming Church of Detroit is our first of many churches in Detroit and other urban environments.

This organization (see illustration above) is designed to eventually serve all the churches in the East Michigan District. This will be done by allowing each participating church to form its own CCDA Chapter under the larger umbrella

11/17/2009



E-MI CCDA (EAST MICHIGAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION)

East Michigan Christian Community Development Association is a faith-based, non-profit corporation that helps people empower themselves to transform their neighborhoods by providing access to developmental services not readily available.

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organization. The first CCDA Chapter will be the one connected to Wesleyan Transforming Church of Detroit. The following factors are the driving force behind partnering Wesleyan Transforming Church—and all our urban ministries—with the E-MI CCDA.

- *Effectiveness* Conversion is important, but it is not the end result. Our goal is transformation of people and neighborhoods. That means we need to get beyond improving the conditions of the neighborhoods and strengthen the neighborhood’s capacity to care for itself. It is the difference between enablement and empowerment. Christian community development provides opportunities for the church to help transformed people find affordable housing, be employed, educate their children, and become leaders in their communities.
- *Sustainability* Urban ministry is a marathon not a sprint. It takes time to earn trust and establish relationships. Perhaps the biggest fear keeping many church leaders from going into the city is resourcing the ministry for long-term viability. The E-MI CCDA allows the church to access funding and programs for community-based initiatives that might otherwise be refused.
- *Multiplication* We believe that what happens in Detroit can ripple into other cities and be multiplied in other urban environments. We are not content to establish one church. It is our goal that Wesleyan Transforming Church be a multiplying church—out of which will come many other churches in many other locations. The combination of a local church with a CCDA Chapter improves our church multiplication efforts.

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A critical component in establishing an urban ministry is the bridge-building work of Suburban/Urban Partnerships. In our situation, we cannot launch a new urban ministry without the help of our suburban and rural churches. We must get them involved. Here is where the E-MI CCDA has tremendously helped us. We have discovered there are four levels of Suburban-Urban bridge-building in urban ministry.

1. *Suburbanites minister TO the people in the city.* This is entry-level urban ministry. It is the scenario in which a group of people from suburbia commute into the city to serve the people there. This happens through a *mission* or similar ministry. When they are done, the suburbanites return home feeling good about their experience.
2. *Suburbanites minister FOR the people in the city.* As the suburbanites commit to regularly serving the same ministry with the same people in the city, they begin to build relationships. Eventually, the suburbanites begin connecting dots for the people in the city to help them take advantage of viable opportunities.
3. *Suburbanites minister WITH the people of the city.* As trust is established and relationships are built, the time comes when the urbanites and the suburbanites are ministering together. The urbanites have been helped to the point they are able and willing to contribute to the cause of helping others. They find themselves serving alongside the persons who helped them.
4. *Suburbanites minister AMONG the people of the city.* You can influence people from a distance; you will only impact them as you are close. There is only so much good a person can do by commuting. As God grips a person's heart, there are those individuals who will pull up roots in suburbia and move into the city. They are now serving among the people of the city and feeling right at home!

Once we get the urban ministry established, we will have people in the city at all four levels of participation. Our long-term goal is to have urban missionaries relocating to the city, living in the communities we are reaching to make disciples and empower their neighbors.

our lessons in urban ministry (based on our limited experience)

It is a massive understatement to say this has been a learning experience. We knew it was going to be hard—it has been harder than we imagined. The challenges have been many and some were unexpected. We have been pleasantly surprised at the

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progress we have made in one year. Yet, there is so much work God still wants done in the city. Above all, we are learning dependence on God. Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the mighty hand of God. Our most powerful position is on our knees in prayer. This ministry was birthed in prayer, and it is continually bathed in prayer. If you are not willing to pray, do not go! We have also learned other valuable lessons.

1. *Urban environments—and the idea of going there—will strike fear into the hearts of good Christian people.* Detroit is a very different place for outsiders. It can also be a dangerous place. There is a reason people choose to be suburban and rural residents. It is very difficult for some people to love the city, much less go there.
2. *God will break you to prepare you for a broken city!* I referred to this as our Jonah call. A broken city will test your character. Serving a broken city must become your calling—a matter of the heart. For us, this brokenness required repentance. We had to admit that we abandoned the city and that we were sorry it took us so long to get back. We also had to admit that we really did not know how to get back—we needed help. Only God knows what needs to break in a person before that person is ready to serve wholeheartedly.
3. *Take nothing for face value in the city.* Detroit has been closing public schools. As a result, the city has over a hundred of these buildings vacant. We understood it would be easy to get one of these buildings, especially with our community development plans. This was one of many misunderstandings. It appears everyone has an angle in the city. Skepticism easily creeps into people's hearts, and mistrust is high.
4. *Learn your city and don't be surprised, shocked, or stopped by its corruption.* We have committed to working within the city's political and economic systems. We see ourselves as a partner in serving the city. However, we had to make an important decision early in our process. As representatives of Jesus Christ—and a Wesleyan church—we had to stay away from anything that could bring our integrity into question. It can be very disheartening when we're not all playing by the same rules, not even all of us who claim the name of Jesus.
5. *Live in your city; urban ministry requires the relocation of some urban missionaries!* This was mentioned earlier, but it bears repeating. Commuting limits our opportunities and effectiveness. In Detroit, people don't trust outsiders. There is not a warm welcome for someone who says, "Tell me what I can do to improve your neighborhood." It is a different

Meeks: **Judicatory Leadership and the Urban Challenge: A Wesleyan District** story when the person asks, “What can we do together to help our neighborhood?”

6. *Breaking racial and socio-economic barriers is harder than you think—even for Christ-centered people!* Pride and prejudice are realities in people, and God needs to adjust our attitudes. Some may think people deserve to be where they are, and trying to help them is a waste of time. Some of us struggle with putting a box of free food into the trunk of a *nice* car. It’s amazing how captive we have become to our culture, and how difficult it is for some Christians to break free from it.
7. *Prepare for some misunderstandings on your way to a better understanding . . . this is pioneer work. Break Barriers and Build Bridges!* Our leadership team is a mixed bag of people. We are a mixture of ages, colors, educations, theological backgrounds, leadership styles, and expectations. It is a beautiful thing that requires a lot of care. No matter how much we communicate and think everything is clear, things get muddled, and there is misunderstanding. At one point, it felt like the team was about to implode—our differences almost got the best of us. At first we were a bit caught off guard. We are learning to deal with our misunderstandings. If they are handled properly, they help us achieve a better understanding of each other and our ministry together.
8. *Never underestimate the power of partnerships . . . and realize that partnerships require more than a handshake.* We can accomplish much more together than any one of us could ever hope to achieve alone. We need good partners. In turn, we must learn how to be a good partner. When we started, we mistakenly called people and organizations our partners, when in reality we simply had a conversation, shook hands, and agreed on some things. Partnerships are about contribution. Partnerships require all parties to work together toward a common objective where everyone is served. Partnerships are a win-win.
9. *Risk is worth the reward! When suburban churches partner and participate with urban churches, the benefit goes both ways.* It’s been amazing to see how our suburban churches have benefited from their work in Detroit. I think they went into it with the expectation to give and get nothing in return. By spending time in the city, our suburban churches are catching a renewed burden and vision for their communities. They are discovering they can apply some of the same ministry principles and practices in their neighborhoods with similar results.
10. *This is hard work and God is calling people—especially young people—to do*

His people, and they are opening themselves for ministry in the city. Our educational institutions are now offering courses in urban ministry, some with degree programs. We get calls and emails from people inquiring about ministry opportunities in Detroit. The Wesleyan Church has a well-defined structure for ministerial education and ordination, so we've been working within our system to find ways to assimilate non-Wesleyan pastor-leaders.

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11. *Missional Urban Ministry is Spiritual War!* It makes sense that when the kingdom of light is brought to bear on the kingdom of darkness, all hell breaks loose. For instance, the building we purchased was in foreclosure, and it sat empty for three years. It was undisturbed during that time. Once we signed the purchase agreement, and began our due diligence, it was vandalized twice. The second time our security guard was robbed at gunpoint. A third time, the thieves returned to finish their work and were caught. We have also battled physical problems and interpersonal issues.

We've learned to pray and trust God!

Only twice does Scripture record that Jesus wept. Once was when Jesus' heart was broken for the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). Great need presents great opportunity. Nowhere is that more true than in our cities.

Richard Meeks is currently the District Superintendent for the East Michigan District of the Wesleyan Church. He has over twenty-seven years of ministry experience, serving as a pastor and denominational leader. For the past ten years, he has also assisted church leaders as a coach and consultant in the area of church revitalization. Richard is a graduate of Indiana Wesleyan University. Richard and his wife, Crystal, reside in Grand Blanc, MI.