

in your own backyard

A Tour of Inner-City Ministries with Apostle Jessie Bates

By Brenda Everman Wilcott

When you hear the words “mission field” where does your mind go? I must confess my mind tends to go across the borders of the United States to places like: Mexico, Africa, India, and China. Those, indeed, are mission fields in desperate need of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Fortunately, there are many ministries addressing those particular pieces of real estate. But what about our own back yard? What if you have the burning desire to serve Jesus as a missionary but no means with which to transport yourself or some one else over-seas?

Where we live, right here in Central Illinois, there is great need for souls to hear, see and feel the hope and love of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There are hungry kids, lost souls, and people in bondage right here. To be involved, all you need is a willing heart and a little time.

In praying and researching places to “plug in” right here in Central Illinois, the Lord led me to Apostle Jessie Bates at Ambassadors for Christ Ministries located at 1705 North Maple. Apostle Jessie is intimate with inner-city ministries and needs in Decatur, working in harmony with many agencies, because of his role with the Stop the Violence Project. Stop the Violence is a powerful, inner-city ministry specifically targeting neighborhoods where violent crimes take place. Stop



the Violence sets up a street festival for a few days in each of those targeted neighborhoods during fair weather, offering free games with free prizes, food, fun kid contests, free medical screenings, music, and preaching.

These festivals have led many to salvation and dramatic lifestyle changes. People have been set free from all kinds of addictions from drugs to sex. Targeted neighborhood crime statistics have dropped dramatically due to the presence of this ministry and others.

Apostle Jessie took me on a drive-through of the inner-city of Decatur, pointing out vital and vibrant ministries, active in meeting desperate needs right here, in our own backyard. Join me, won't you, for an inner-city tour of Decatur?

As we head out from Ambassadors for Christ International headquarters and Abundant Life Christian Center, the first ministry we drive by is Hands of Jesus. They actually minister to kids out of the old Blessingdale's building, but their main home is located at 244 West Leafland.

"God's Shelter of Love help people stand on their own feet by getting jobs and their own apartment." Apostle Jessie continues, "And of course Blessingdale's building is connected to God's Shelter of Love, at 929 North Union. So Hands of Jesus is here during the winter time, every Saturday. They are a very powerful, powerful ministry. They do a very awesome work with the youth here. Of course they just started here in the Old King's Orchard area. (During fair weather) They do what they call a

Sidewalk Sunday School, which they duplicated from Bill Wilson's ministry in New York City."

God's Shelter of Love is located right across the street from the new Good Samaritan Inn—another vibrant ministry in need of assistance—which is located at 920 N. Union. They feed hundreds of people six days a week.

Also in the Kings Orchard area is Grace United Methodist Church, 901 North Main Street, "where they have after school programs. You don't hear as much about them, but they are doing a good work here in inner city" says Apostle Jessie.

"We'll go by Water Street Mission," 958 N. Water. "There are definitely not enough places to house homeless men and these people house homeless men. I believe there are some people who can parole out of the prison system into Water Street Mission. I think Water Street Mission is mainly funded by Maranatha Assemblies of God. They are here in the middle of inner-city and doing a great, great work here."

Continuing up Water Street, Apostle Jessie says, "Close by is the Northeast Community Fund, at 825 N. Water. This is one of the most powerful ministries in Decatur, where people can go to get food, clothing and furniture and all kinds of necessary items. Jerry Pelz is the lead person for that ministry."

Jessie reflects, "Every inner city ministry is valuable. There's no ministry that's not valuable. And many times people think ministries duplicate one another, but the



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need is so great here in the inner-city, that even if you had several ministries duplicate one another, you still couldn't produce enough to supply the need."

There's another inner city ministry that's over-looked quite a bit, that helps people pay power bills and sometimes water bills and they assist people greatly and that's the First United Methodist Church, at 201 W North St. So this is a very, very vital ministry."

It's refreshing for me to know that instead of abandoning the ministry opportunities in the inner-city, some of the main churches have chosen to "bloom where they are planted" and reach out to the souls in their territory.

According to Apostle Jessie, the inner city is going through and having a really difficult time right now, because there's already an economic crunch and many of the people are already at the bottom of the totem pole. As a result, when things get difficult, it gets a lot more difficult for them.

One more vital ministry is the Salvation Army at 229 W. Main St, which is an enormous blessing to the city. They house individuals in their emergency shelter lodge and, of course, also serve food.

An additional important inner-city ministry right down town is Teen Challenge of Illinois at 151 West Prairie Ave (the old YMCA building). According to Apostle Jessie, "They've recently transitioned to adult women instead of teenage women. And this is a very, very instrumental place and I think the YMCA gave this building to them. And of course

now that building has been totally renovated inside with some work done outside. It's a very, very elegant place now for women to come. John Harper is the name of the leader of that ministry and I think his wife is Candy.

Teen Challenge had closed at one time during their transition and they've just reopened here recently, in the last month or two and began to receive adult women into the facility. So, it's been refueled again. And that's a good thing. Because people with addictions, and that's who they deal with, women that have a drug addition, probably predominantly crack cocaine, some behavioral problems, but mostly stemming from drugs, I believe, is their ministry. So it's been very effective. They're not just local, but they're a national ministry."

Driving on toward the near East side of the inner-city, Jessie continues, "Keith Anderson is the lead person for Homework Hangout. He's doing a great work in Decatur with inner city youth. They've just bought the old St. James building, which I'm just ecstatic about, I know how Keith operates, and so I know that they're gonna be up to standard where ever he is. He has a real heart for inner city youth and for their education and for them to be able to learn. And they've recently also gotten into food and things like that to make sure that they're able to distribute different types of very nutritious meals to the people that go there, also. And so Keith Anderson is really doing a good, good work for the city...at Homework Hang Out."



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Close by is DOVE at 302 South Union, which used to be recognized as an agency who helped women who were victims of domestic violence but now is also involved in helping pay people's back rent. Jessie continues, "And I think they've obtained several grants, because there's so many homeless people in Illinois. They try to keep people from becoming homeless. They have accepted a role in paying back-rent for people that rent from landlords to be able to keep them in their home."

We drive back by the old St. James School building at 249 South Webster, as Jessie says, "This right here is the new Homework Hangout and they moved from over on Edward Street. So they've changed to a different side of the city."

"So, this is what they bought?" I enquire. "Yes they bought this old St. James building" says Jessie. "And the beauty about that is because the Decatur Public School District had come in there and of course spent thousands of dollars to upgrade that building...and so right behind them leaving, they were able to obtain this building. So this building's totally up to date, because you know how it is with the school district, you have to have everything up to code. really like this ministry right here. It's powerful, very, very powerful," adds Jessie.

Apostle Jessie continues, "We've got a lot of ministry in this area here. We (Stop the Violence Project festivals) go to Johns Hill School once or twice a year. We always go there. We also have a festival in South Side Park, called

Mueller Park. And that's the Stop the Violence Project festivals. You probably have more home owners right here. Crime has actually gone down in this area because it's been specifically targeted by ministries."

As we continued up Cantrell Street from Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, we passed by Grace House. Jessie explains, "I think it's predominantly supported by the Maranatha Assembly of God. They are doing an excellent work here, taking care of homeless women."

Jessie concludes, "I think we're living in a time right now, where if we give inner-city our attention we can bring our city out of some of the crime that's taking place here. What we've seen happen with the Stop the Violence Project, we've seen (in) the homicide rate across the board. Our target is gang and street violence; the homicide rate has been so extremely high for the last 4 or 5 years. We had 10 homicides. 10 dropped down to 6, 4, (then) 0 one year. And I think also now, last year was 2 gang and drug related homicides. This year as it stands right now, and this is April of course, and we have not had 1 homicide of any kind in the city of Decatur, and I don't know if that's a record or not, but I would imagine it would be some kind of a record.

So we're seeing the homicide rate diminish. And course, whenever you see homicide diminish, you see violent crimes, in general, diminish. But the most important thing to us is a life, especially young lives. And most of the homicides that are committed in Decatur, the street and



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gang related homicides are black on black homicides. And so it was a welcome relief to see that begin to diminish and we attribute that to the preaching of the Gospel.

We know that all ministries have contributed to it, but we're totally convinced that unless a man or woman has a heart change, then they are not gonna be able to change. And so that's what we work on. We work on the heart. We work on the inner man, to make sure that inner man comes into the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. And once He comes into their heart and becomes their Lord and their Savior, then we know that individual is going to be changed. Sometimes the change is not sudden, but gradually...that individual WILL change. And we feel like without that, there can be no positive change in an individual's life because there is nothing to base it on MORALLY. And unless a person can change their moral behavior, they're not going to be a changed individual."

God's Word says it best, Romans 12:2 "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will."

So, Jessie." I question, "What can our readers specifically do to help?"

"Well I think their prayers should always be for the lives of the young people. That they can pray for young people's lives to be changed, not just young men, but young women. There's such a great need there. And there's so many people that are hopeless because they don't know the way. So I would say pray for the young people in inner-city that God would get a hold of their hearts and change their hearts. I think that would be my number one prayer, if I had one, for the inner-city people, which I have a passion for.

Also if there was something else that they could do, it would be to support these inner-city ministries. There's a great cry going out now from the inner-city. If private donors will hear that cry, not just with your prayers, but let's put some legs to them. Support these inner-city ministries with your finances. Support these inner-city ministries with your time. Volunteer in these ministries to make sure that they're able to be successful. Many of those ministries are struggling because they don't have enough volunteers, and they don't have enough money to be able to pay staff personnel. So, they need your help. Trust the ministries that have been tried and stand true to what they believe in and have been called to do, give to the ministries as well as pray for them."

The words that well up in me (I've learned to trust that its the Lord!) are, "Not on our watch!" In other words, let's not lose our own inner city during our time on Earth. Our own back yard is our responsibility. Plug in. You might be surprised how easy and welcome your help will be!

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