

Mission Birmingham as a Study in Interracial Ministry Partnership
A Case Study Prepared by Fletcher Comer and Kervin Jones

Slice of Life

My best friend since college is a white guy. Paul and I are as close as two people can be. When my marriage fell through just one day before the event, it was Paul who came to console me. Through many crises and triumphs Paul and his wife Sondra have always been there. And I like to think that I have always been there for them. All I have to do is call Sondra and tell her that I am stopping by and she will make me liver and onions that taste almost as good as my mother's. I am beneficiary of his second house - with an invitation to use it any time. Paul has provided for me a place to escape from the pressures of ministry by providing and maintaining a second home. I use it almost as much as he does.

Through the years, Paul has never understood the pains of racism that I face. In fact, he feels that not only are opportunities equal for African-Americans but because of laws, things are tilted slightly in our favor. We have never learned to communicate to each other our different points of view. We have been able to go on with life, remain close reliable friends, help and support each other, all the while avoiding this one issue. At least, until the last five years...

Paul began developing a friendship with his distant cousin, Mike. Mike is an arrogant bigot in my opinion. He has used the "N" word in my presence more than once. Because of that, I always call before dropping by to see Paul and Sondra. If I do drop in and Mike is there, I will not stay. I will not attend an event hosted by Paul if Mike is invited. Needless to say, this is causing a strain on Paul's and my friendship. This is because we never learned to speak the same language. We just avoid the "touchy" subjects. We should have worked through this challenge and learned to speak the same language early in our friendship. If we'd done this,

most likely, these problems would not exist today. Although some of my most enjoyable times have been with Paul and he has affected my life in a very positive way, communication problems that we have avoided still exist. The same thing is true for any inter-racial group. As they say, “You can pay me now or pay me later.”

Background Information

Birmingham is the largest metropolitan area in the state of Alabama. The city is known for the civil rights movement, violence, fire hoses, attack dogs, voter rights, and its early history as an iron and steel manufacturing center. During the turbulent times of the civil rights movement, one of the first overtures (these authors think it was a sincere overture) of white pastors reaching out to black pastors was an editorial published on a Good Friday in the *Birmingham Post Herald*. Although this overture for reconciliation from the white pastors was sincere, most black pastors experienced it as another means, where white pastors were seeking to control the agenda of African-Americans. Martin Luther King responded to the editorial in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and explained why we couldn’t wait for civil rights, why we couldn’t wait another day, why it had to be now, why we had to move, why we had to march, why we had to protest.

During this time of protest, white pastors, by and large, had three categories in which they could stand. They could be for civil rights, against civil rights, or stand to the side and not do anything. While this was all going on, there emerged a fourth category of thinking. People in this category were called the sympathizers. They were pastors, all men and community leaders, who tacitly, or even openly, supported civil rights and the civil rights movement - although they did not get actively involved in the marches or the civil rights “movement” itself. They were

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African-American young man, mentoring him and talking to him with the hopes of his congregation becoming bi-racial one day. Barker, also in the face of opposition, welcomed a young lady, an African-American, into his congregation.

Along with those two things, Frank Barker (and probably other pastors, too) was actively networking with other leaders in the city through prayer meetings, food, and fellowship, trying to bring unity into the city. Two people on whom Frank had influence at the time were Gerald Austin and Chuck Singletary. Chuck Singletary had experienced two prayer summits, one in Georgia and one in Tuscaloosa, and used Frank's networking influence to plan and conduct Birmingham's first prayer summit in 1998. From the civil rights movement up until this time, there was not an intentional city-wide reconciliation movement in Birmingham. Such existed only in pockets across the community.

With this first prayer summit, men came aside, leaders and pastors, to seek God's will for their city and for their ministries. A lot of leaders and pastors in Birmingham felt the need for reconciliation but they didn't know how to 'walk' it out. They didn't know how to fulfill the vision that God placed in their heart. After coming together at the first prayer summit, praying and seeking God, several of the participants, a group of pastors, met together and said, "We can't let this go, we can't let this unity, this energy that's been born here at the prayer summit go." Neither Frank Barker nor Chuck Singletary was involved in that meeting. Harry Walls and Rick Ousley lead the pastors in formulating a plan to capture what God had begun during that first prayer summit. This was the birth of Mission Birmingham.

Background Information for Frank Edward Stone, Jr.

Frank Stone was born the first child of six to his parents, who in the early 50s moved from Milan, Tennessee, to Indianapolis, Indiana, where they lived in a racially changing

Master of Ministry degree in Pastoral Studies. Ultimately, he took a position at his alma mater as the Student Services Director and Professor, teaching core courses in practical theology.

While there as an employee, he attended a multi-racial conference workshop that challenged him to begin thinking about a full-time pastorate position.

In July of 1999, Frank moved to pastor the New Covenant Church in the west end of Birmingham with his wife, Mare, and youngest son, Frank III. Early in his pastorate, he attended one of the Mission Birmingham's events, but was not overly excited. He reports he learned of Mission Birmingham by word of mouth, but did not go at first. "When I did attend, I was not interested in being a part. There was so much turmoil. People had issues, black, and white. People could not see beyond their past wounds. I'd come from a different place in the North. We needed to move forward. Those who had issues were still apart, and as we talked together, I was able to move forward with them, knowing that the issues were still present and needed to be addressed."

During the second year of Frank Stone's pastorate at the New Covenant Church, he received the opportunity to train at the DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This program trains urban ministry leaders in cities around the country to be better equipped for effectiveness in ministering to youth in their communities. The training led him to identify a personal mission and vision statement that challenged him to reconsider his lifelong goals and ministry targets. He started to develop a community corporation and began to pursue a revitalization plan that had been developed for the local community. Working through the church that he was pastoring, he helped the community accomplish goals of revitalization and economic development in cooperation with other community and business leadership.

Frank became more

Working together with Mission Birmingham, Frank took on a combined leadership strategy to collectively impact the west side of Birmingham over the next few years in the target areas of spiritual development, housing, education, crime, leadership, and drug recovery. The goal is to effectively impact each of these areas through application of the gospel and by partnering with area pastors to bring together the necessary resources and effect mutually agreed upon target strategies. The hope is that these efforts will bring about a positive impact on area residents and current community structures that will enable them to enact positive changes in their immediate and surrounding residential area.

History of Mission Birmingham and Its Context to Churches in Birmingham

During the '60s when there was much racial tension in Birmingham, Briarwood Presbyterian Church started trying to bridge some gaps and reach out to African-American congregations. This adventure was begun by empowering a young man by the name of Gerald Austin, who at the time was in the Marine Corps, getting ready to go to college, and wanting to come under the care of the presbytery. At this time, Briarwood was still a part of Presbyterian Church of the United States (PCUS). The Presbytery had a camp, which they were able to rent to run a camp for African-American children because there wasn't one available to them. The camp continued the next year and a second African-American was hired to work with them.

When Gerald was asked by Frank Barker what could be done to impact the African-American community, Gerald laughed and said "the best thing to do is not to try to get them into the white congregation because it's too dead." The effort was made to partner with another congregation, Sardis Baptist Church in the western part of Birmingham near Birmingham Southern College. That partnership was effective, and one of the first programs was a new

Center for Urban Mission was established out of the New City Church. A number of people from many different congregations, white congregations from over the mountain and African-American congregations, came together to establish the Center for Urban Mission and to work on their projects. The key focus at this time was to build relationships through prayer, sharing of stories, eating, the breaking of bread, and

many of the pastors, including Chuck Singletary. Together they were able to prepare the second city-wide prayer summit for Birmingham. The second year, eighty-five pastors and other para-church leaders attended a four-day summit at Shocco Springs, a Baptist conference center in nearby Talladega County. This event was life changing for many, and when the conference ended, several pastors came together to establish Mission Birmingham.

At that time, one of the pastors, Harry Walls, along with Rick Ousley, wrote the initial Mission Statement, Covenant for Pastors, and documents for the original bylaws. He, and others, were able to bring together many of the pastors from the prayer summit to approve these documents and officially begin Mission Birmingham. The original vision, mission, values, and covenant for pastors remain intact:

Mission Birmingham

Our Vision: Community Transformation.

Our Mission: The whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole city.

Our Values: Utter dependency on God, Relationships expressing trust and respect, Pastorally led, Intentional Strategic Planning, Great Commission Completion, Engage the Whole Church.

A Covenant for Pastors

“May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me,” John 17:23.

We are a living covenant of pastors among the one body of Christ in Birmingham, Alabama. We have no agenda apart from Christ being exalted in our city. Therefore, we declare by faith:

We covenant as one, to be passionate in prayer for the salvation and sanctification of our city.

We covenant as one, to be united in our diversity; unlimited in our devotion, unwavering in our dedication to glorify God.

We covenant as one, to offer accountable relationships; to guard and guide one another in ministry integrity.

We covena

- ! Participate in Pastor Prayer Clusters (each man commits to praying with at least one other pastor, with a view to building an effective cluster)
- ! Cry for Birmingham
- ! Attend Prayer Summit
- ! Participate and lead in Mission Birmingham major events
- ! Be Responsible to others on Servant Leadership Team
- ! Recruit by influence
- ! Cast vision of community transformation and Mission Birmingham in local congregation and beyond
- ! Share Resources with All
- ! Financially support Mission Birmingham
- ! Share human and logistical resources with others as God directs

Responsibilities of Advisory Team Members

- ! Encourage and Exemplify Mission Birmingham Values
- ! Sign Mission Birmingham's "A Covenant for Pastors"
- ! Attend at least one "Cry for Birmingham" annually
- ! Shepherd the Truth and Kingdom Principles within Mission Birmingham
- ! Agree with "This We Believe"
- ! Provide and Build Leadership for Mission Birmingham
- ! Attend Annual Meeting
- ! Support vision, events and initiatives
- ! Share Resources with All

Mission Statement:

The mission of the Westside Communities is to empower our communities to transform our people and organizations by equipping them through effective partnerships to accomplish their individual visions (for the Kingdom of God).

Vision Statement:

The Westside Communities is a team that will use their committed members' resources to team up with partners for strat

tables. If Frank Stone assumes the position of Community Transformation Team Facilitator, his job description would be to direct the day-to-day operation of community initiatives, church participation, and pastoral partnerships. He would work closely with the Church Transformation Team Facilitator, City Transformation Team Facilitator, and members of the Servant Leadership Team for Mission Birmingham. His specific responsibilities would include:

General

Understand and articulate the vision, mission and goals of Mission Birmingham.

Sign and exemplify Mission Birmingham's "A Covenant for Pastors."

Agree with "This We Believe" – Mission Birmingham's statement of the Gospel.

Coordinate and communicate with staff Facilitators.

Community Ministry

Facilitate all day-to-day operation for the Westside Community Team working for with Team leader.

Facilitate all community initiatives and activities for all of Mission Birmingham's approved events, partnerships, and initiatives.

Recruit and mobilize churches and organizations to all approved community initiatives.

Build strategic bridges with community, church and city leaders for community impact through services, initiatives, resources and partnerships.

Build alliances among churches and the business community for the purpose of positive community impact.

Connect with Partners to see Transformational impact in their communities.

Coach and serve the church community with workshops, resources and partnerships

Administration

Facilitate the Bookkeeping for Mission Birmingham

Maintain Personal Support base.

Serious Realities/Challenges

Mission Birmingham was born out of the energy of the Birmingham Prayer Summit where multi-racial, multi-denominational pastors came together to seek the will of God for Birmingham. Their desire was to live out the unity that Christ prayed for in John 17, or as they phrased it, “the whole Gospel to the whole city through the whole church.” We previously described Mission Birmingham – what it is and its history – and now we’re going to talk about serious realities that face Mission Birmingham.

In Birmingham’s history, another ecumenical group of pastors came together to try and solve the disunity and the confusion in Birmingham. That was on April 12, 1963. Eight white religious leaders, six pastors, a Catholic priest and a Jewish rabbi, all white, published a letter in the Birmingham Post Herald encouraging Dr. King and the civil rights movement to wait, basically, on civil rights and try to achieve civil rights at a more peaceful, controlled pace.

On April 16, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. responded on behalf of the African-American pastors in the city as to why African-Americans couldn’t and shouldn’t have to wait for civil rights. As a result, the pastors never came together racially for civil rights. The white pastors never understood the African-Americans’ need for civil rights in the city or the language of the civil rights pastors. They never took the time to try to understand the language. Nor did the black pastors, whether rightly or not rightly so, understand the white pastors’ overture. They never realized that many of the white pastors were doing what they thought was absolutely right,

encouraging black pastors to take a more moderate lead. In short, the pastors never spoke the same language, although they said the same things, and said they wanted to achieve the same things. They never spoke the same language; therefore, the pastors never really spoke to each other. They spoke at each other.

Consequently, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed shortly thereafter and, as most students of the civil rights movement know, the little girls were killed. It was reported that about eight hundred white pastors attended the funeral, marching down the street in that funeral procession. Although they participated in that joint worship and jointly condemned the violence that killed the girls, the pastors in the city never came together. They never saw the need for civil rights or the need to slow down and wait on civil rights. If Mission Birmingham is to be successful in its mission and truly make a difference in the ongoing efforts for reconciliation, the pastors are going to have to get to know each other empathetically, and learn to speak the same language.

It is significant that when the races were first created, one of the things that God did was to confuse the languages. And on the day of Pentecost when the Church was born, the one thing that God did was cause everyone to hear the gospel in his or her own language. Today, as it was in Genesis 11 and in Birmingham in 1963, the people do not understand each other and disunity has occurred. The same language needs to be spoken.

I [Kervin Jones] had the opportunity to attend two of Birmingham's prayer summits, actually one and a half of Birmingham's prayer summits. At the first prayer summit I attended the worship was beautiful; the spirit of unity was great. Yet I felt that there was something going on, and that somehow I was missing something. During this prayer summit, I got to know several of the guys.... Actually, I *met* several of the guys. I didn't get to know them, really.

And Frank Stone, being my partner in writing this section of the book, suggested to me several people that I needed to interview. I interviewed several of the people that were suggested and from each interview I felt there was something missing, without anyone coming right out and saying it. There was this undertone or undercurrent, really, flowing through the interview that pretty much stated, “There’s something else that you need to know or that I would like to say. I would like to give a reason.” but no one was saying it.

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Also, African-Americans need to realize that although there may be some paternalistic ideas and actions, or seemingly so, among their white counterparts from the over-the-mountain churches, it's not all there. I think we just read, perhaps, something into actions that may not really be there. In just observing some conversation, however, I think there's some paternalism in the group, and some perceived paternalism that is not there. We are our fathers' children and we have picked up some habits and some ideas from our fathers that perhaps should not be there.

I discovered in the interviews that there are some questions about leadership or breathing new life into the leadership. How is leadership shared? How is leadership changed? And do the same few pastors control Mission Birmingham? Can an outsider come in? Can a new pastor come to town and assume a leadership position in Mission Birmingham without first having "paid his dues"? How well are new ideas received into Mission Birmingham? Has there been any significant turnover in leadership in Mission Birmingham? Do the past leaders influence what goes on in the goals and direction of Mission Birmingham even though they don't sit in a seat of authority and power? These are all things that Mission Birmingham needs to address.

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of fellow ministers. Though it's addressed now, the projects and activities they're involved in may seem more important than the pious part of it, where they seek the face of God. Indeed, the mission that was formed out of piety continues to exist and participants demand that worshipping and seeking the face of God remain a significant part of Mission Birmingham.

It can be concluded that after spending time with all these gathered, these are all Godly men who seek to do the will of God. If these men do not learn to communicate with each other, however, their intent and purposes will fail. It is interesting to note from a Biblical standpoint, that when God first created the races at the Tower of Babel, scattering the nations and people, they all began to speak with different tongues. They spoke different languages and failed to understand each other. Then on the day of Pentecost, when God, when Christ, when the Church was born here in the world, everyone spoke with new tongues as God allowed them to speak a language all could understand. So I think these men, and we Christians, if we're going to be one, need to learn to speak the same language through the power of God. That's the only way. The only way they're going to accomplish this is to continue praying together around the foot of the cross and get to know each other.

There is a significant portion of the Christian community that is being excluded from participating in Mission Birmingham and in the prayer summits. That is women. I think they need to figure out how to allow a more inclusive spirit toward involvement of females who are pastors, other ministry staff persons, and para-church ministry workers. So, if Mission Birmingham could do that, they could set the example for others also.

Leadership Exhibited with Focus on Strengths and Challenges

The most important original strength of Mission Birmingham was the piety of the original clergy and the way in which they began in prayer for the city and for one another. This strength continues specifically through quarterly gatherings of pastors to pray over Birmingham and several small groups of pastors praying for one another. This strength has waned as board members have changed, organizational structure has developed, and demands on many of the senior pastors' schedules have grown. There is a current effort to reestablish, at a minimum, dyads of prayer among board members and other pastors that are part of Mission Birmingham. Especially in the West End, there has been a revival among leaders to pray for one another and their community in Birmingham.

It was the strong charismatic leadership of Frank Barker, Chuck Singletary, Harry Walls and others that brought the original group of pastors to the prayer summits and kept the pastors together in their focus to claim Birmingham for Jesus Christ. As people like Frank Barker have retired and others have taken on more areas of responsibilities in their churches and community life, the mantle of charismatic, energetic leadership has waned.

Mission Birmingham has always had strong leadership in the positions of officers on the advisory board and the Servant Leadership Team. This strength has recently become problematic in that many new pastors who are a part of Mission Birmingham are frustrated that they are not able to take on greater roles of leadership in the Servant Leadership Team and as officers. There are still a select few whose voices carry greater weight than other voices wanting to be heard.

Stewardship has been a strength of Mission Birmingham from the beginning in at least two different ways. The funding of the normal operation of Mission Birmingham is made

possible through the direct giving of forty-two pastors, black and white, who make up this organization. Many of these pastors have creative skills and have used them to apply for a variety of grants to fund programmatic sides of the work of Mission Birmingham. Also, individuals, congregations, and business leaders have been encouraged to contribute to the ongoing program work of Mission Birmingham.

One of the emerging leadership strengths, in work like that of the West End, has been the personal story telling that is creating a trust between members of the West End Working Group. Frank Stone has described that a learning to breathe together is happening through prayer, fellowship, and the sharing of meals together.

One of the serious leadership challenges is finding ways to rekindle the original piety in Mission Birmingham as the organization has become more programmatic. Individual congregations partner with mission projects in which they are comfortable, leaving program heads frustrated with a lack of uniformity of support among that the member pastors lead.

The so called 'elephant in the room', as far as leadership is concerned, is that as the programmatic side of Mission Birmingham has increased, the pastors working in the inner city feel support from the over the mountain white congregations, yet this support harkens back to past years and brings back old feelings of being marginalized. Congregations give, but not out of their first priority and first fruits.

At the same time, those who have the greatest voice of decision making in Mission Birmingham are the very pastors of these white congregations in the suburbs. There is a feeling of paternalism experienced by the pastors working in the urban areas, coming from the stronger or more influential sized congregations and their white pastors. This continues to highlight the

As these conclusions are presented to the leadership of Mission Birmingham, the Greensboro Ministers' Fellowship, and the Tuscaloosa Prayer Network, we hope that these three groups will participate in a four day event similar in format to the annual prayer summit. The first two days could be spent in prayer and praise and the second two days spent in dialog with each other, dealing with the hard topics and better learning to speak the same language.