



Art and Transformation: Using Art in Mission and Ministry

In my first lecture I discussed the importance of arts as a redemptive vehicle in reconciliation. In this lecture I want to begin by focusing on how others are using the arts in mission and ministry. Before proceeding with some case study illustrations of the arts in their transformative roles, let me clarify some of the language I will be using.

Transformation is the intentional process of bringing about change in the world—a change in which people, communities, and their systems are economically, socially, politically, and spiritually renewed, given new vision and power of capacity to live a life in harmony with God, themselves, one another, and their environment.

In our view there are three basic levels of social change or transformation: personal empowerment and responsibility, community revitalization and renewal, and societal transformation. Each of these levels of transformation is *holistic* and *integrated*. By *holistic* we mean the transformation of all aspects of personal and community life, including psychological, physical, spiritual, economic, political, and socio-cultural dimensions of life.

In the first level of social change, the ultimate goal is for a person to change both attitude and behavior. Transformation of individuals reveals itself as people transcend their circumstances through renewed minds and deepened spirits. There is new vision, and thus new meaning, for one's life, accompanied by a greater awareness of God in that life. This awareness manifests itself as having hope, showing love for one's neighbor (putting them first), and understanding one's relation to others and to community.

In the second level, the goal is to develop strong and healthy communities—communities that include whole functioning families and that provide effective cultural, spiritual or religious, financial and commercial institutions that meet the needs of the community and provide sources of work, income, housing, and cultural expression. We include here creating effective “church” communities. While I might have included an example in this lecture of the

arts in holistic community development, I have chosen to relate an example of renewal of a church community, given the example's direct relevance to working with today's urban youth.

In the third level, the goal is the renewing of social systems to be just—the bringing about of fair and equitable treatment of all citizens through policy change and what we know as social justice; and the realization of a better quality of life in relation to others. This involves changes in political, economic, technological, and social systems created by people for the governance of a society.

The three levels and the various aspects of life are interrelated in an ecology of transformation. That is, by changing one aspect, all levels are changed to different degrees. For example, the innovation of rap, which began as a prophetic artistic expression (*individual*) and which drew from black preaching and political rhetoric, led to hip-hop culture in urban communities (*community*) and eventually impacted our U.S. and international culture (*societal*) with new styles of dress, language, music, and changed or reinforced values of youth. It is a one-billion-dollar industry, though now considered far from its origins in both message and values.

Expressive arts encompass all forms of expressive and aesthetic culture used within formal (that is, concerts, worship services, museums, and galleries—often called the fine arts) and informal (street, home, community—often called the community arts) contexts.

While all creative work is potentially transforming in some way, not all transforming work is redemptive. Redemptive work brings people and communities into a right relationship with God, each other, and their environment. Truly transforming work must be redemptive in nature.

Three Abridged Case Studies

Now let's examine three condensed case studies of arts-in-action that bridge various barriers. The first is an illustration of transformation at the personal level, bridging internal psychological barriers; the second is a case study involving societal change bridging racial and political differences. This is followed by an example of community transformation, with a focus on the church, bridging church-community, cultural, class, racial, and generational barriers.

Personal Transformation—Perfecto!

His head was bowed over the white ivory keys in silence. His mother, standing next to him ready to sing, was sadly still. I could hear every member of the congregation holding their breath, a breath that hitched the moment the wrong note was played. Our only question now was, “What would he do next?”

Thirteen-year-old Diego was playing in his first piano recital before a neighborhood church crowd, having recently begun taking lessons at the church-sponsored community center Saturday arts program. He walked to the piano with pride and anticipation. He was to play the first verse of the piece by himself. He did it—perfecto! He began the second verse, this time with his mother singing... Oh no! A wrong note. Silence. His mother leaned over to whisper in his ear. We all waited and prayed that he would begin again. “Keep going,” we wished to ourselves. “Or start over. But just don’t quit!” The mother whispered again, and yet again to the frozen boy. We hoped and prayed. The keys sounded softly; then stronger. Mother began to sing again with him. The whole congregation joined in singing the third verse. Now and again the piano skipped, but eventually came in again. Everyone stood and applauded, attempting to convey that he should feel the triumph. He did not. Emotional beyond consolation, Diego left the piano bench with a lowered head, a defeated heart, and tears in his eyes. He took his seat and hid his head between his knees.

After the recital ended, Diego walked quickly to leave the sanctuary. I caught him as he rounded the isle with his mother and teacher close behind trying also to catch him. Standing in his path, I lowered my face to see his. Cupping his chin in my hand, I raised his head so that his eyes could see mine.

“Diego, don’t you dare be embarrassed or walk with your head down. You were the best of everyone tonight because of what you learned. You were very courageous. When you made a mistake, you learned how to continue on afterward. What a wonderful success.”

I repeated all these words again to make sure he heard me. His ever-so-slight smile and the now loosening muscles in his face let me know that it was not necessary to repeat them a third time. Nodding heads from teacher and mother reinforced this truth.

I could see Diego from a distance now, a hop in his step, engaging with the other kids, his self-esteem restored. His mother found me and waited by my side while I ended a conversation with another acquaintance.

“I wanted to thank you for what you said to Diego just now. It’s always better when it comes from someone other than me. He would not have been able to do that three months ago. He would have just crumbled. He’s been working in therapy on this very thing. He’s a perfectionist, and when he makes a mistake, he falls apart. This is the first time he’s recovered like that.”¹

Diego and King Saul share a common remedy—music. In Saul’s case, the biblical passage implies that it was the inherent properties of the music that would bring healing to his recurring depression. The medium itself acts on the person, the brain, and the heart to bring about health. In Diego’s case it is his own engagement in the process of playing that allows him to overcome his psychological and personality issues.

“Do we know that it’s the music that makes the difference in your clients’ healing?” we asked Janelle, a licensed music therapist practicing in Philadelphia and the coordinator of BuildaBridge International’s Community Arts Programs.

“We don’t always know,” she replied. “But it’s the relationship. That’s what I tell the volunteer teachers. The music and the art are the vehicles to reach kids and their families; the vehicle to establish the healing relationship, particularly with those clients who are nonverbal.” The music is the bridge’s construction material, the teacher and student are the builders, and the relationship is the bridge.

In both these cases, the art experience provided the environment for transformation to take place. In the next example we’ll look at how a piece of art helped bring about, in a small but significant way, societal transformation.

Societal Transformation—Black Jesus

In his excellent book *Christianity, Art and Transformation* South African John W. de Gruchy tells the story of the remarkable journey of a painting.² During the apartheid years of South Africa, many Americans were oblivious to the struggle for racial equality in that country. Those in South Africa knew that to have America’s support could be instrumental in changing power and bringing about justice and equality.

Though his intention may have never been to bring international attention, but to paint the Crucifixion for his context, Cape Town artist Ronald Harold would impact the outcome of apartheid. In 1962, at the time of the famous Rivonia Trial when Nelson Mandela was convicted of treason and sentenced to Robben Island, Harold painted a black Christ being crucified. The

painting was first hung in St. Luke's Anglican Church, in Salt River. What made this picture interesting, and offensive to some, was that the black Christ was the image of Chief Albert Lutuli and the soldier piercing his side was Prime Minister Verwoerd.

When the Dutch Reformed Church became aware of the painting, they lodged an official complaint with the government censorship board because it "offended religious convictions." Soon it was shown on CBS television in the United States, and it not only raised *critical awareness* here, but even more so with the South African government. While the government tried to confiscate the painting, it was secretly smuggled to London where it was sold to raise money for the opposition movement, a strategy that was supportive of the *working out* of political transformation. Years later, after apartheid ended, there was to be a special celebration in Cape Town featuring *Art and Apartheid*. Though he didn't have the painting at the time, Harold located the painting in London and returned it to South Africa where it now *celebrates*³ significance at the National Gallery and provides a memory of the past.

While Harold's goal may not have been to help transform his society, but merely to comment on it, his Crucifixion, a prophetic piece of art, became a part of the movement and the working out of South Africa's political transformation. A goal of justice and equality in society is to see the aesthetic expressions of all cultures valued and recognized by the government. A key indicator of the success of this goal is the increased number, space, and recognition given to art of all cultures in public places. Has redemptive transformation occurred? Is South Africa moving toward the NU JERUZ? Certainly this is one indication that it is.

Community Transformation—Rap and the Reality of the NU JERUZ

"Agh! Agh! ChiAgh Agh!" The street was in the church, if one would call it a church. Many pastors wouldn't, and several complain on a monthly basis. But one could not mistake the symbols of Hip-Hop culture as turntables turned, rappers rapped, and B-boys break danced in a "sanctuary" that rocked more like a ghetto city street club on Saturday night than a Thursday night youth church service in northern Tampa. But make no mistake about it, Pastor Tommy Kyllonen (a.k.a. Urban D) is serious about reaching multicultural youth addicted to hip-hop, marginalized by the traditional church, and in need of a "relationship with Christ." The sign for Crossover (the name of

the church) is a colorful graffiti painting of the name amplified by a parked van bearing another graffiti rendering of “Jesus Saves.”

The front of the church “stage” is a full-wall graffiti mural with a contextualized salvation theme, and if you don’t look closely, you’ll miss the rejoicing angel in heaven that’s break dancing with a head-spin move. The back-center floor area is a polished hardwood square specifically for break dance rejoicing. And two graffiti painted vans sit outside in the gravel parking area ready for runs through the community to transport the young worshipers to and from in style.

We walked into Crossover Church and were introduced to “Urban D,” “Z,” “Spec,” “Nice,” and “Fat Daddy.” What were they saying? “Show your neighbor some love and say wuz up!” (that is, greet your neighbor). “Yo, hook us up. Get us off.” (like the two thieves would have said to Jesus on the cross).

These were the unfamiliar words and sounds to some very familiar worship traditions and Scripture that Pastor Tommy was explaining in the style and lingo of the hip-hop crowd sitting in front of him for the now regular, standing-room-only, hip-hop youth service held every Thursday night at Crossover Church in Tampa, Florida. With the sound turned down, you might have thought you’d walked into a concert by the rap group NAS. The typical “wave your hands in the air” and “jumpin’ straight up” movements of hip-hop artists and fans was going on. But with the sound turned up, it was just a different kind of praise.

An hour before, Pastor Tommy was holding his first “new members” class for this growing church that is responding to and reaching unchurched and Christian young people growing up in the MTV-BET world. Pastor Tommy is educating a spiritually uneducated audience by contextualizing the gospel. He’s keeping it simple and keeping it “real.”

“I want these young people to have a relationship with Christ.” The lean and youthful Pastor Tommy shared with conviction. “I want to reach people who would not attend other churches or who might not be accepted. I want to do it in the language of the culture, the hip-hop culture.”

Letters and e-mails come every month from traditional churches. Their pastors tell him and the other leaders of Crossover to stop what they’re doing. (Note the status barrier being illustrated here by traditional churches.) But he was letting the newest recruits know: “We are a real church, not a club! We follow the Bible.” And everything that followed—the Thursday service, the Communion observance, the interviews with his staff and congregation—

proved it. The gospel is expressed and taught through the music of the city, its dance, and art forms, all without compromising the message of truth or the walk of the leaders.

And it is working as well, as he brings some critical awareness to the church that is failing this particular segment of the community. From just a few young people to several hundred now, Pastor Tommy and a multiethnic leadership crew serve this small church nestled in a lazy residential section of Tampa. They bring youth from all over the city into a community that nurtures, loves, and encourages them into a community of believers, providing a haven of the kingdom for those lost in an urban world of drugs, violence, and dysfunctional families. The church has recently begun to confront the social issues raised by the youth, AIDS, child molestation, and abortion.

Not concerned about hair color, ethnicity (Tommy himself is a Philadelphia Greek married to a New York Puerto Rican), social class, or denomination, Crossover shares the concerns of a growing number of Christians in the United States: how do we reach those who the church has neglected, society has marginalized, and Satan has trampled?

“Urban D” is Tommy Kyllonyn’s nationally known recording name. But at Crossover and in the neighborhood, the young people and their parents hug him and know him as Pastor Tommy. At either place, though, his message is the same. Tommy is no lightweight. He’s authentic and comes not only with the credibility of knowing and living the hip-hop culture but with a solid biblical and theological background. Kyllonen is a college graduate with a concentration in youth ministry. But much of Tommy’s preparation for his unconventional church and pastoring came as a white boy growing up in his rough Philadelphia environment.

We learned from Tommy that hip-hop is spiritual. It is a spiritual language infused with the language of the street but containing the meaning of the gospel. He is making worship relevant to an audience that found no meaning in the traditional church. And he has a leadership style that incorporates the arts and artists in every possible medium to celebrate renewal.

Constructing the Bridge with the Arts: Challenges and Principles for a NU JERUZ

The arts are a way to bring about the NU JERUZ, and they gain in effectiveness when they are a part of a holistic approach to meeting people’s needs. The goal is not to just cross the boundaries or “understand” or “appreciate” or

“value” diversity. We must move toward sustained relationship in pursuit of God’s kingdom on earth, and we must cross our own internal barriers to do so. The artists themselves cross/bridge their own internal barriers of self, ego, pride, status, and power and find God in themselves through the process of art-making with others when that art-making is motivated by an agape love.

The challenge to the church is to build true multiethnic communities. And I don’t mean allowing our buildings to be used by other non-English, non-like-us congregations to worship at a different time than the main congregation.

The church has a particular mandate for, and power to accomplish, reconciliation. As stated succinctly by Manuel Ortiz, “The church’s task is neither to destroy nor to maintain ethnic identities but to replace them with a new identity in Christ that is more fundamental than earthly identities.”⁴ This is the advantage that faith has over the secular programs that aim at racial reconciliation. There is in fact another existing community in the fullest meaning of the word—shared values, shared history, shared goals, and shared identity—to which people from diverse backgrounds show allegiance. “Whether a person likes it or not, the same act that reconciles one to God simultaneously introduces the person into a community where people find their identity in Jesus Christ rather than in their race, culture, social class, or sex, and are consequently reconciled to one another. The unifier is Jesus Christ and the unifying principle is the ‘Gospel’”⁵

To Ortiz, there is both a qualitative and quantitative dimension of the multiethnic church. In the quantitative definition there must be a significant number of people from different ethnicities, not a “smattering of one culture or another.”⁶ The qualitative dimension has to do not only with the life and organization of the church but also with its commitment to matters of reconciliation and justice. Ortiz offers some basic principles for establishing what he calls “Building a New Humanity.”⁷

Ortiz lists five important principles for developing the New Humanity (1 Corinthians 12:13).

1. Declare in written form the biblical position of the church on this matter of unity in diversity.
2. Develop a mission statement that will assist the church in its focus to do ministry that is effectual in the context of a multi-ethnic community.

3. Develop a philosophy of ministry that will put the mission statement into action.
4. Involve multiethnic leaders in the process.
5. Be deliberate in determining how to resolve conflicts.

The ultimate goal of a multicultural church is not multiculturalism for its own sake (quantitative) but a genuine community in which all seek justice, peace, and reconciliation in structure, ministry, and worship toward the common goal of the NU JERUZ.

Based upon our research, we suggest some principles used by multicultural congregations in both their working out and their celebrating reconciliation.

The Hug. Congregations must “create a friendly space” for diversity and include those outside the sanctuary. The best example of this comes from A Place Called Hope in Miami, Florida. Here visitors and worshipers are met with full hugs and cheek kisses by four greeters varying in ethnic and faith persuasions as they enter the expansive converted worship center in a local strip shopping mall.

The Rap. The congregations we visited created a worship celebration that met the spiritual needs of the worshipers and the social needs of the community. For Urban D (Tommy Kyllonen) it is hip-hop for an urban-driven youth culture. For Tom Sullivan at Spirit of God Fellowship in South Holland, Illinois, it focuses on the needs of children more used to video games and television cartoons than an ancient liturgy. Many of these churches find themselves in changing neighborhoods and incarnationally find ways to celebrate renewal in the cultural and artistic language(s) of the community. They have chosen not to move out but to move on with the kingdom in their neighborhoods.

The Power and the Politic. Creative renewal begins with leadership. Unless the pastor and other church leaders have a vision, creativity, trust, and willingness to share power, creative worship cannot and will not take place. Part of this formula includes sharing ethnic power with a diverse group of ministers as at Arch Street United Methodist in Philadelphia, or as in our example above at A Place Called Hope. Located in a changing community with large Catholic and Jewish populations, this charismatic Pentecostal Florida congregation has enlisted ministers from these populations. Churches with diverse leadership model the kingdom in ways that words, statements, and policies cannot. Pastors who share their sermon time with other communicative art forms and congregations that are willing to adjust to a new ritual

may find true renewal in their worship experience. We have observed a leadership that is more egalitarian than authoritarian. Leaders of many of these worship experiences share their power by seeking involvement and delegating responsibility throughout the participating congregation.

The Creative. Congregations that seek to celebrate and experience renewal value the arts and artists as a gift of God in their midst. Their encouragement and nurture take a flexibility and openness often outside the bounds of traditional culture. While there are many artists who will give of their time freely, and we support volunteerism, many artists need to earn their living by playing gigs, especially since they live without health insurance and retirement policies. Congregations who may not have the benefit of significant financial resources for fancy technology and state-of-the-art equipment can still take care not only to provide a creative space for the artist but also to support them in other ways. One possible way of doing this would be to barter for time. Providing church space for a studio or enrolling the artist in the staff health care plan may speak more loudly than a weekly paycheck. And as we saw at Pastor Eric Elnes's Scottsdale Congregational United Church of Christ in Scottsdale, Arizona, even inviting non-Christian artists to experience worship is a way to witness and demonstrate the love of an inclusive God.

The Arts of the Community. In any church we attend, the first signs of a diverse congregation—the first things we look for—are the art on the wall and the songs listed in the bulletin. Truly diverse congregations have incorporated the aesthetic expressions of their diversity. The paintings, pictures, banners, songs, dramas, dances, and worship styles are symbols of culture. A congregation that is able to “blend” these into a patchwork of worship has made a major shift in its culture. The ability to release others is a major sign of openness and power sharing. And most of us have yet to arrive.

New Art for a NU JERUZ. We are waiting with anticipation for the emergence of new authentic arts expressions that are representative of a NU JERUZ.

There is a direct link between the worship of the church and its mission in the community. Like Isaiah who received his call out of a holy and aesthetic worship experience and moved into the world to do justice and walk humbly with God,⁸ the church, through the celebration of the cross and the victory it represents, sends the congregation to be in the world calling, ministering, and being the presence of Christ in the public square. But like the New Testament in gathering of the faithful when their voices communicated in every known language, so the church worship is renewed to celebrate the fruits of its labor

in a diverse world. Without the call there is no sending, without the sending there is no labor, without the labor there is no harvest, and without the harvest there is no celebration and renewal—only tradition bound by culture.⁹

In summary, successfully joining the ranks of the Agape artists and ministers means that you will possess:

- A call and a commandment from God
- A propensity for action
- An ability to draw empathy from your own personal pain and heartbreak
- A goal of redemption through incarnational relationship
- A willingness to make “out-of-pocket” sacrifices of personal resources of time and money
- A risky love and a compassion for the unloved, the forgotten, the rejected, and the excluded
- A spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness across ethnic and other boundaries
- An ability to show up faithfully
- An ability to know your limits and seek rejuvenation

A Challenge to Artists: Finding One’s *Eschaton*

God is speaking to us in our time. The questions we have to ask are, “What is my place in the journey of redemptive transformation, and what gift has God given me to bring about his kingdom in the present day?” As Albert Nolan suggests, the event that defines the present—our time in the NU JERUZ—is our *eschaton*.¹⁰ Our *eschaton* is a time of choice, when we are compelled to choose to act; it is the calling, the decision, the act of involving ourselves and our art in redemptive transformation.

Artists play a very special role in God’s plan for a NU JERUZ. It is the time of the arts being recognized as the gift of God—one of his creation tools for advancing the kingdom—not inside the four walls of the church for only vertical relationship and praise but for expressions of horizontal service to those in need. When you build relationships, boundaries are naturally crossed.

At a recent series of lectures at a center city church we presented this model as a way of challenging artists to become more involved with their art in transforming the world. Many artists see their art as a very personal and creative endeavor. Other artists live professional lives and have very little time for community activities, especially artists with growing families. The church too

has sometimes been more concerned with the end times than the present times, which allows us to be relieved of the social consequences of our “time” while feeling safe that we have been “saved.”

Artists have a unique opportunity to explore and enact a ministry that can impact the world—a world that is at our doorstep, on our street, and in our community. It is an opportunity to live the gospel through the sharing of our art in ways that bring critical awareness of the need for change; a sharing lived in our compassion for others; and a celebration of the victories of life as people and communities enter into the NU JERUZ. We as artists can answer the call of our eschaton through A.R.T.

Through its Community Arts Program and its Educational Safaris Program, BuildaBridge International provides opportunities for artists to serve communities and people in need in the tough places of the world, including urban cities in America. Our current call for artists of the Christian faith and those who would be part of what God is doing in the world is for work with street kids in Brazil, Costa Rica, and Philadelphia.¹¹

Let us weep until our tears turn into indignation, our indignation into determination, our determination into action, and our action into a better society where our children and generations to come can enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And the Tupac Shakurs need rebel no more and can turn their genius to things that are beautiful, lovely, and good—to the love and celebration of life: black and white, male and female, young and old.¹²

Notes

1. “Diego” is our name used to protect the identity of the young boy who played in the Ayuda Sabbath Arts School recital to end the school’s spring 2002 semester. The recitals, held twice a year, are an important part of the SAS program’s goals to celebrate incremental achievements of students, to give opportunities for public practice of social behaviors, and to provide affirmation of gifts and self-worth. The Ayuda SAS serves a multiethnic population of youth and families in the North Philadelphia section of the city.
2. John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).
3. The terms *critical awareness*, *working out*, and *celebration* refer to a three-stage change model and theory (The Arts in Redemptive Transformation, or A.R.T. Theory) developed by Vivian Nix-Early and J. Nathan Corbitt as a result of their research with artists.
4. Manuel Ortiz, *One New People: Models for Developing a Multiethnic Church* (InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 130.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

6. Ibid., p. 88.
7. Ibid., p. 130.
8. De Gruchy, p. 253.
9. Review a study of this in J. Nathan Corbitt, *The Sound of the Harvest: Music's Mission in Church and Culture* (Baker Book House, 1998).
10. Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 171.
11. We are always looking for youth groups interested in apprenticing as arts missionaries or interested in crossing cultural boundaries and bringing their faith to life through the arts through travel to work and learn with youth in other countries. Consult our Web site for more information (www.buildabridge.org).
12. Herbert Daughtry, "Who Will Weep for Tupac? A Pastor's Dilemma," *Sojourners* (March–April 1997): p. 36.