

A Culture of Generosity

Creating a place where rich and poor share the same values.

Leadership interviews cross-cultural pastor Mark Jobe | posted 4/11/2005

For Mark Jobe, *pastor* is synonymous with *bridge builder*. Leading New Life Community Church in Chicago over the past 20 years, Jobe bridged racial, ethnic, and cultural barriers. He believes New Life's calling is to be a church of "blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, CEOs, and street people."

As the church presses toward that goal, it has expanded to eight locations across the city, conducts services in multiple languages, and has effectively drawn many of Chicago's diverse people together. But Jobe has discovered it is the barrier between rich and poor that is most difficult to span. They have very different values, many unbiblical.

Jobe is featured in the Spring 2005 issue of *Leadership*. For this online extra, we asked Jobe how he creates unity between the well-to-do and the down-and-out.

Your church life has been intentional about bridging ethnic barriers, but you've said economic barriers are even harder to span. Why?

In the city there are very wealthy people and very poor people, and the financial cultural divide is a huge one. The wealthier can perceive the poor as lazy because they don't understand the complicated factors that keep many people in poverty. Many think the poor could get out of their circumstances if they pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and made something of themselves. But they don't understand how difficult it can be to escape a culture of poverty.

On the other hand, the poor can look at those with money as snobs who've had life served on a silver platter. We need to make sure both groups are valued. We want to build real connections so both rich and poor feel part of the same church and believe in the same vision.

How do you help those trapped in poverty connect with the church without creating a climate of dependency?

We've been very careful about not creating a needy mentality. We believe you can have needs but not be needy. With so many people in the city raised with a needy mentality, our goal is to break them out of that. Kids grow up in the projects where not a single adult has a job. They often have no male role models other than drug dealers and gang members. And kids leave eighth grade still unable to read. This all creates a mentality of neediness.

One of the best ways to break that cycle is to focus on being generous. The moment we believe that we must always receive, that is the moment we dig ourselves into the trap of neediness.

How have you created a culture of generosity in your congregations?

We've tried to teach and model a very different set of values from the very beginning. When the church launched in 1986, we only had a dozen people. I slept on a mattress on the floor of a borrowed apartment, and lived on \$8,000 a year. As a church we had significant needs, but we chose to be generous. Some people were flabbergasted when I presented the idea of giving away ten percent of our budget. There were tons of economic needs all around us, but we wanted to set an example of having needs without being needy.

So you elevated as more important something other than your own need.

Yes. We tell everyone that the culture may be saying one thing—it's all about money—but within the church we are creating another culture.

The value of education is another example. We promote and celebrate education. In the city finishing high school is seen as optional, so we confront that mentality by publicly celebrating the achievement of graduates. We bring high school and even middle school graduates in front of the church and give them a certificate.

At our last graduation service, we also recognized adults who were continuing their education. Some had earned their Ph.D. and others their GED.

How have people responded when you try to break them out of a needy mentality?

I recall one couple that lived in the projects and started coming to church. They wanted to become members, and I said to the husband, "No. You're in sin right now, and that needs to be cleared up before you become a member." He was unemployed and had repeatedly ignored job opportunities the church had found for him. I told him, "You're a healthy young man who needs to provide for your family. The Bible is clear that if you don't provide for your family, you're worse than a non-believer."

The wife was furious with me and kicked me out of the apartment, slamming the door in my face. She was so used to the culture of the projects where none of the men worked that she didn't think it was right for her husband gone eight hours a day at a job. But today he's got a job, they've moved out of the projects, they own their home, and they've sent the kids to college.

They were so used to the culture of neediness that exists in the projects, but a direct assault of biblical truth changed them.

Mark Jobe is pastor of New Life Community Church in Chicago. He is interviewed in the Spring 2005 issue of Leadership journal.

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