



Sometimes it takes a trip away from home to see your own world anew. In January, several members of this year's Mission Bootcamp traveled to Cincinnati to get an eye-opening glimpse of the

Queen City in all her majesty and ignobility in order help us understand and serve our downtown better. A couple people joined us for the trip, including an African-American friend who had spent a few years living in many of the areas we visited. He served as an invaluable tour guide. Saturday morning, our motley crew jumped into a 15-passenger van and headed north.

We made a stop in Covington, KY, shared breakfast and made new friends at a racial reconciliation gathering held in an African-American Catholic church. Ironically, we crossed the bridge into Cincinnati and made our way into a neighborhood that has had its share of racial and ethnic tension.

Over-the-Rhine, was originally home to nineteenth-century German immigrants, but in more recent years, it has held the distinction as Cincinnati's most notorious ghetto. Just north of the downtown, OTR's streets are lined with historic buildings, many in disrepair and decay. Everyday, hundreds of homeless huddle in tired bands in Washington Park. Across from the park, the grand Music Hall callously glares down at its unwanted neighbors. We visited the lively Findlay Market, where a diverse crowd from all over the city came to purchase fresh meats and organic vegetables. Just a few blocks away, a grocery store, replete with an armed police officer perched on a guard-tower-like platform, sells low quality groceries at a high price to the city's poorest citizens. From discrimination against the Germans during the World Wars, through the influx of Appalachian refugees looking for work after the Great Depression, through the racial tensions as African-Americans displaced by a road project resettled in the neighborhood and the devastating riot in 2001 in response to a police shooting, Over-the-Rhine's story is one of social conflict.

We spent Saturday afternoon learning from a couple of former architecture students who have been involved in a community engagement program. They moved in, befriended many of the homeless and poor, and are working to provide affordable housing. Their efforts, however, are being confounded by a new influx of people into the neighborhood. With its proximity to downtown and plethora of architecturally fascinating, yet inexpensive, buildings, Over-the-Rhine is experiencing a rapid transformation. Buildings that stood abandoned and decrepit for decades are being rehabbed and painted bright colors. High-end retail stores and art galleries are replacing tobacco shops and day-labor agencies. Professionals are moving into expensive luxury condos where subsidized apartments once housed the cities poor. As the property values rise, lower income residents are priced out of the neighborhood. Many move to surrounding communities.

We had the chance to visit several of these neighborhoods. Westwood United Methodist Church hosted us Saturday night and, in the morning, we took a tour of a ministry they began two years ago to reach out to their changing surroundings. We visited another neighborhood that has declined significantly over the years and spoke with a Christian leader who, along with family and friends, is trying to make a difference in the lives of his neighbors.

For two days, our little group sojourned together, witnessing some pretty raw city dynamics, being profoundly challenged by Christian leaders and observing many parallels between Cincinnati and our own city. We ate together, laughed together, cried together, and slept on the same hard floor. During the ride home, we wrestled with all that we had seen and learned. There seemed to be such irreconcilable conflict in the city. As we pondered the reconciling message of Christ and the hope it offers in the midst of a complex, conflict-ridden world, I looked around the van and saw a miracle. This unlikely group of travelers had bonded as friends despite our many significant differences. We arrived back in Lexington exhausted but hopeful. We now see our own city and each other with new eyes. Like Cincinnati, our city is a city in flux, filled with conflict and paradox, yet pregnant with the hope found only in Christ Jesus.



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the beat

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birth pains

As a woman with child and about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pain, so were we in your presence, O LORD. We were with child, we writhed in pain, but we gave birth to wind. We have not brought salvation to the earth; we have not given birth to people of the world. (Isaiah 26: 17-18)

John came back from the Bootcamp trip to Cincinnati excited about the experiences and conversations they had, but also with an uneasy heart. One of the people they spoke with was someone we have long respected as an example for urban ministry. During this conversation, this person honestly revealed that after years and years of serving in the city, he has come to the conclusion that there isn't anything redeemable about it. At best, we are simply called to love it, even if it's unlovable. John insisted that the gospel of redemption and transformation had to have validity in the city. This other person insisted that the reality he has seen is that real, long term transformation rarely happens. They reached an impasse, both wanting to live as faithful Christians in the city, seeing the real brokenness, and wanting to trust Christ in the midst of it.



Before giving birth to Luke, I had no context for the kind of "birth pains" scripture speaks of. All I could imagine was the most intense horrible pain possible. In my preparation for childbirth, I discovered that the hardest part of labor is called transition. It's between early contractions and pushing. It's the time of so much pain that many women want to give up. When my time had come, and I was in transition, at every contraction I said, "I can't do this. I can't do this." John reassured me that, yes, I could. It's easy to get cynical in ministry (in the city and otherwise). If we look at what our hands can do, it is often just "birth to wind," not anything lasting. When we lose hope of any significant transformation of the world, of any birth of light into darkness, I think we are in transition, so to speak. It is a most helpless and painful feeling to be in transition, and we stand in the presence of God in sincere labor pains. "I can't do this" is our honest plea.

Then something miraculous happens. Labor pains turn into delivery. I remember that exact moment. The pain that comes with pushing is very different than that of transition. In transition, you can feel almost helpless. During the pushing of delivery, you feel empowered. You can work against the pushing (ultimately impossible). You can passively try to let your body do all the work. Or, you can work with pain, becoming a part of the birthing process. I believe that is our role in God's birthing of the Kingdom, to work with Him, to become empowered by His Spirit that is pushing the Kingdom forth, and to experience new life no matter how painful the process is.

In John 16:20-22, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."

From the very moment Luke was born, I was speechless at this beautiful little new life, and I couldn't believe that he could have possibly come from me. That's what the birth of the Kingdom must look like. Through the seemingly most impossible situations will come beautiful new life, a new creation. That is the hope we have and the hope we have seen through a life born in a manger, reborn from a cross. So, while in ministry, when difficulty or cynicism starts shouting, "I can't do this," we must remember that this is how new life always starts. We stand before God, in our birth pains of transition, and say, "how long until deliverance?" knowing that the time of birth will come.

contact us!

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Please contact us if you would like to be added to our monthly e-mail prayer letter.



PULSE
points

Luke Oliver Heinz
born November 2, 2009
at 8:59 PM
7 pounds 5 ounces
20.5 inches long