

**Dr. Amy L. Sherman**  
**on Charlottesville Abundant Life Ministries**

Theology and Community Building Workgroup Meeting  
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(Please note that this is a rough transcript of  
Dr. Sherman's informal remarks)

**Introduction**

I'm going to attempt to do something fairly ambitious this morning. I've been asked to tell you about Abundant Life Ministries, update you on the President's faith-based initiative and my Charitable Choice research, discuss the ideas in my book, and think through with you about how bedrock truths of our shared Christian faith shape the work we do in distressed urban communities. So it's a tall order. Some of this I may just speak on informally once we get over to the Abundant Life Family Center later today. And some of it will probably just get all jumbled together this morning, so thank you in advance for your patience.

**Mission**

We've been recently tinkering with the mission and vision statements at Charlottesville Abundant Life Ministries (CALM) because I think our theological thinking about ministry has been developing over the past couple years in deeper and richer ways. And we want that to speak into what we're doing. We've been talking a great deal at Trinity in the last few years about the gospel and about the Kingdom. And we've been captured by a glorious understanding about the Kingdom that I think was best articulated by Jeff White – who's a friend of Mark Gornik's and a pastor in our denomination. Jeff was our missions conference speaker a few years back and he began one of his talks by admitting to a conflict in his marriage. It centered on the "preview controversy." You know, the old argument that occurs when you get the video home from Blockbuster, and you have to decide whether or not to watch the previews. The guest preacher said that he represented the pro-preview perspective; he wants to watch all the previews, so he knows what the coming attractions are. His wife represents the anti-preview faction; she thinks they are a waste of time. She's got other things to do, phone calls to make, letters to write, and just wants to be called in when the screen says "And now for our feature presentation." The

preacher went on to argue that his perspective was a decidedly more Biblical one. And I'd have to agree.

You see, the Bible is all about previews of coming attractions. The "feature film" is the kingdom of God in all its glory, beauty, and wholeness. And there are previews of it all throughout the Old Testament. Throughout the OT, we get prophetic glimpses into what life in the feature film will be like. In Psalm 46:9, for example, God says one day he will make wars cease to the ends of the earth: He will break the bow and shatter the spear. Psalm 72 gives a preview of life under the reign of King Jesus, the King whom God will endow with justice:

He will judge the people in righteousness, the afflicted ones with justice. The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness; He will defend the afflicted and save the children of the needy. (Verses 2-4)

Or consider the preview presented in Isaiah 32: 1-5...

See, a King will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice. Each man will be like a shelter from the wind and refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land. Then the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed and the ears of those who hear will listen. The mind of the rash will know and understand, and the stammering tongue will be fluent and clear. No longer will the fool be called noble nor the scoundrel be highly respected.

So many previews...of the time that is to come when the swords will be beat into plowshares; when the child will play safely at the viper's nest, when the lion will lie down with the lamb, when every man will rest secure under his own vine and fig tree, when the desert will blossom with crocus, when the burning sand will become a pool, when the mute tongue shall be loosed and the lame leap like a deer.

The consummation of the Kingdom of God is going to be awesome and glorious. And it has already begun to break in. We know that from the lips of Jesus Himself. After all, Jesus announced his public ministry in the Temple in Luke 4. He took up the scroll of Isaiah, he picked out a preview passage from Isaiah 61:1-2, He read it — "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" — and then He said, "*Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*" Jesus was saying: "The feature film has begun." The Kingdom has broken in to this world. Here's how Matthew summed up Jesus' work in chapter 9:35: "Jesus went through all

the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, *preaching the good news of the Kingdom* and healing every disease and sickness. John the Baptist had told the people this was going to happen — He went around in funny clothes saying, “The Kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Mt. 3:1) And Jesus interpreted His miracles in this Kingdom language. In Luke 11, Jesus casts out a demon in a suffering man, and the Pharisees are critical of it and accuse him of being in sync with Beelzebub. But Jesus responds in verse 20, “If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you.”

You see, when Jesus was performing His miracles, He was doing more than just healing individual sufferers. He was reaching into the future, full Kingdom of God, and He was yanking a foretaste of it into the present. It’s as if He were announcing, “In the feature film, there will be no blindness ... and so I give sight to the blind beggar Bartameas. In the feature film, there will be no leprosy ... so I touch the lepers and make them clean. In the feature film, there will be no death ... and so I say to you Lazarus: ‘Up from the grave!’”

The Kingdom of God has begun; Jesus inaugurated it. It is *now*. But it is also, “not yet.” We wait and long in our still-broken world for its full consummation. But while we wait, it is the task of the Church — Christ’s Body — to continue to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom, and to witness to it, to serve as foretastes of it. God is continuing to break the Kingdom into this world; He is building His Kingdom. And we participate in that work and we announce it to others — we point out where it’s breaking in. And we witness to it. That is, in the Church we are to be citizens of the Kingdom of God, looking different than citizens of the kingdom of this world. Inside of our churches we are to be a reflection of the coming Kingdom, and we are to be doing the work of the Kingdom — a work of justice, of love, of healing, of hope & transformation. We are called to give people foretastes of the coming Kingdom.

Thus at Abundant Life, we’ve reshaped our vision document to say that we want to “Express God’s glory in a community reflecting the values of God’s Kingdom.” We want to do things in the neighborhood that help people experience a foretaste of the Kingdom. We know the content of that Kingdom – peace, safety, security, belonging, sufficiency, meaning, wholeness, community, unity amidst diversity, absence of suffering etc. So, when I think of the central theological underpinning for the ministry I think Kingdom.

## **Philosophy of Ministry**

I can tell you more about the history of CALM when we get to the Abundant Life Family Center; for now, let me just explain that in 1994 the church leadership produced a vision document called Prayer with an Eye for the Harvest. It included long-range goals for the congregation. Including: forming a partnership with an urban community with the long-range goal of establishing a Christian community development center and planting a multi-ethnic church. At that time, I had just begun the research for *Restorers of Hope* and was having opportunity to learn about models of church-based urban ministry, so I volunteered to help get this new initiative started. We formed an Urban Ministry Team of church leaders – a couple elders, John Hall the sr. pastor, myself, Rebecca Goodwin. We did a lot of things – read good books together like John Perkins’ stuff, attended the Baltimore CCDA, prayed a lot. I’d bring back ideas from models I’d visited; we talked about admin and legal issues – would this ministry be an arm of the church or a separate 501(c)3 of what. But probably most substantial thing we did was draft a philosophy of ministry document with ten points. (Hand out the Philosophy of Ministry document.) This is different than a mission statement. Mission talks about WHAT you’re going to do. The Philosophy of Ministry document talks about HOW we were going to do whatever it was that God would call us to do.

You can see here what our core values are. There’s a big emphasis on relationships, not commodities. Big emphasis on holistic ministry and remaining Christ-centered. Big emphasis on permanent change, the hand-up not hand-out thing. There’s a focus on incarnational ministry – see #8, we knew we needed a permanent physical presence in the community. And then #9&10, showing our focus on indigenous community leadership development.

I was very much helped by my research and site visits and interviews with veteran CCDA ministries in developing this 10-point document. But a lot of this is just straight out of scriptural reflection as well. Jesus is of course a model of incarnational, holistic ministry. There’s this attention to the physical and the spiritual; there’s attention to relationships. The Good Samaritan is a risk-taker, gets up close and personal with the wounded traveler, and doesn’t toss canned goods and a religious tract at the guy from the opposite side of the street. So, our study of God’s heart for the poor as revealed in scripture informed very much this document.

But I think that process is still happening; both in terms of discovering new depths to the scriptures that under gird these concepts even more powerfully and in terms of discovering

things the scriptures teach that ought to lead to some additional principles being added to this ten-point list. An example of the former is what I call the Oaks of Righteousness theory. Is. 61:1-4 is the key...

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor...to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. *They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of His splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities...* (Isaiah 61:1, 3-4)

God's pattern for community renewal has two parts. First, God moves into the lives of broken people. He did this most clearly through the sending of Jesus. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus was God's anointed One to bring redemption and healing; to comfort those who mourn and to bind up the brokenhearted. Through the ministry of Jesus, broken people are renewed and restored. That's the first part of the pattern. The second part is that *the broken people who are now transformed people become themselves transformers; God uses them to restore their broken communities*. Think of what Isaiah 61 tells us about the people whom God meets, heals, and transforms. It says that they will be "oaks of righteousness" who will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated.

Now some of the neighbors among whom the church may minister -- those with a drug habit or a poor work history or little formal schooling, teen moms, the homeless -- may not appear on the surface to be "oaks of righteousness" (or even seedlings of righteousness!). Perhaps that's why non-Christians who work in lower income communities have limited goals for the beneficiaries of their services. These secular workers often are happy if their programs help a homeless man to get sober, get a job, secure an apartment, and become a law-abiding, tax-paying citizen. We Christians, through our ministries, want the same homeless man to do all that *and* to become a servant of others. We hope that God will save the man, and make him a new person who will walk the streets and reach out to other homeless people as one who has been there and, by God's grace, made it out. In our labors among hurting or destitute people, we envision them as individuals whom God can transform into *leaders* -- into "oaks of righteousness" who advance His Kingdom in marvelous ways.

This oaks of righteousness stuff just lifts points 9-10 in the Phil. of Ministry document to a new height. And we've been in a better position to move ahead on this once we hired Rydell

Payne (our African-American executive director); since as white single female I wasn't in a position to disciple black men in the neighborhood. So we've launched our Community Leadership Catalyst initiative and I can talk a little more about that later today when we're over at Abundant Life if one of you reminds me to.

An example of the second thing – of discovering things in scripture that further open our eyes to the priorities we should have in the ministry– has to do with what we're learning regarding God's heart for justice. Now, none of us went into CALM with a view that persistent poverty is rooted exclusively in personal factors – in individual behavior or moral-cultural factors. The view has always been and remains that persistent poverty is the result of many factors, both personal and structural. And I make that point in *Restorers of Hope* at a couple different places; it's definitely a both/and view. But as I'm sure you picked up in the book, I end up talking a lot more about the personal and describing what the different ministries are doing about the personal than I do about the structural. And I think Mark Gornik pointed that out in his review of my book in *Books & Culture*. And he's right to criticize me for leaning too heavily on one side. Now I think he and I still probably have a philosophical difference; we are both both/and people, but if you press me to the wall and force me to choose which is the more important, I'm going to say the personal, moral-cultural issues and I suspect Mark, if pushed to the wall, will opt for the structural.

The process I think I'm going through is just a process of trying to develop that Biblical and public policy perspective on the structural questions. I've recently come on board at the International Justice Mission as a Senior Fellow in their new Int'l Justice Institute and so have been really studying Gary Haughens' book, *Good News About Injustice*. And I think Gary has just helped me to see more of what the scriptures talk about, in the same way that, many years ago, some of Ron Sider's writings helped me see more clearly what the Bible revealed about God's heart for the poor.

Now none of this musing has really had any particular, discernible effect on the life of CALM. And I think we're just in the very baby steps stage in integrating this thinking. I'll share a quick anecdote. Several months ago, I gathered some of the key folks in CALM together to discuss what I think is one of the greatest obstacles of our long-term progress in the neighborhood, which is the issue of drug trafficking on the top of the hill. This will make more sense once we drive over to Abundant Life and see what I'm talking about. Anyway, the Center

is located down in BRC and there we are offering opportunities, building relationships, mentoring kids, providing an alternative to the streets, strengthening their academic skills, serving as a safe haven, bolstering families etc etc etc – a lot of the stuff I talk about in *Restorers* as regards transforming culture; renewing minds, and enlarging worlds. But we have these drug dealers hanging out on the top of the hill and our kids pass by them everyday. And the violence they stir up affects everyone. Property values are the lowest on Prospect Ave than any other street in the city; the local newspaper calls it the most dangerous street. And some of the residents in the duplexes on Prospect are inhabited by those engaged in the drug dealing or those who support it or approve it. Now there are also very decent, law-abiding folks there. But I thought, you know, we'll have a hard time really affecting permanent change in Prospect unless something is done about the drug dealing. And I thought, well, let's start a CDC and find out who owns these properties and basically attempt to acquire enough units and populate them with people who would not support the drug activity but would support the cops and over time the druggies would move on. I thought we could perhaps begin with the ministry of being good landlords – screening tenants, keeping the place in good repair, offering affordable rent, and then move into a home ownership program. Well I pitched this whole concept and to grossly simplify the response, it was “why don't we try to convert the drug dealers?” I'm not opposed to that! And at some level, I was touched by that response and the love it indicated – because I'd been seeing these drug dealers as the enemy -- kick em out – and they were looking at lost people, sinners who really need God. But some of the difference in perspective I think was rooted in this individual versus structural thing. I'm trying to ask questions about affordable housing and justice in landlord-tenant affairs and the ripple effects of home ownership and fighting crime & violence with an economic strategy etc. and the other folks just aren't going there with me yet.

## **Relocation**

All right. We've talked some now about the philosophy of ministry and the key theological underpinnings of our work and where we're strong and where we're weak in our thinking on these matters. Let me mention one other growing recognition that I think will eventually be impacting the ministry more and that's the issue of relocation. As you probably know, the basic CCDA model is high on relocation, or “re-neighboring” of neighborhoods. It's something several of us have been open to and a few of us have done but there needs to be more

of it. Again I can discuss this with you during Q&A over at the Center.

### **Ministry Description**

Let me just move now to describing the what of what we do; we've been talking about the why and the how. At present, we're running about a dozen programs. We do tutoring after-school; we have a weekly Bible Club. We have a boys mentoring initiative called GQ Club for Gentlemen of Quality. We have two teen girls clubs called LQ Clubs for discipleship. We have a teen ministry called the Teen Station for jr. high and sr. high guys. We have two Basketball teams that Kiess coaches. We've done two summers of a youth employment program. And although we don't do it currently, in the past we've run an intensive job-and-life skills training program for adults called JobKEYS. We also have a summer camp.

### **Strengths/Uniquenesses**

So we're up to a lot of things. And I want to put on my practitioners hat now intentionally – we've been talking about more heady things about scripture and theological concepts but I want to simply mention in kind of random order some things I think we're doing as a ministry that are strong and unique and just interesting.

\*Within our kids' programs, we do something called incentive-based programming. I got this from a ministry in Birmingham, AL. We have something called the Blue Ridge Economy that each kid is part of. They can earn Blue Bucks through the tutoring and Bible Club programs. These Blue Bucks get saved in their bank accounts. And monthly we have store day, where they can use their BB to buy novelties and treats made by the parents in the neighborhood who do baking for us. That's our discipline system for tutoring – you earn BB for good behavior and lose them for bad behavior. We also go on monthly field trips and the kids have to pay for them with BBs. So we're trying to get at that choices have consequences and there's a *predictable* system in which you can have some control over what happens to you. This choice earns you BBucks and that choice causes you to lose them. It's not a perfect system, but I think it's a healthy one in that it puts some responsibility on the kids themselves and is perhaps for some of them a more predictable environment than they may have at home, where a behavior might be chuckled at one day and punished the next.

This system also helped us get out of the Angel Tree business. Trinity, like lots of other



big white churches, had a history of doing big giveaway programs at the holidays. The problem with these is that they can demean the recipients -- the inner city parents feel lousy that they can't provide Christmas presents for their kids and have to get them from white suburbanites, etc. Our solution is the Christmas store. The church folks go out and buy stuff – and this stuff becomes the “inventory” for the “department store” that we convert the Abundant Life Family Center into. The kids get their Bbucks out the bank and can “buy” presents for themselves and their families at the Store.

\*Within youth ministries, one thing we've done in the past though I'm not sure we still do it is use the magazine *Voice of the Martyrs* for the reading component of Teen Station. I just felt it was important to help our teens develop a global perspective and particularly to understand their connection to Christians in other cultures. American Christianity has a lot of flaws and I think it's important that we position ourselves to learn from overseas' brothers and sisters. And their example of radical devotion is stirring – and you see that in *Voice of the Martyrs*. It's also healthy I think for the teens to realize that in many ways, they don't have it that bad! Understanding real persecution, real poverty etc is important for them to interpret their own life circumstances.

\*Within our adult ministries, I'm proud of what we try to do in terms of teaching financial stewardship. I think we've tried hard to teach about what might be called “true sufficiency.” Proverbs 30:8-9 says:

Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise I may have too much and disown you and say “Who is the Lord?” Or I may become poor and steal and so dishonor the name of my God.

Somehow as a Christian ministry we've got to be able to celebrate upward mobility while preaching against the dangers of Mammon. JobKEYS is aimed at helping people achieve upward mobility – and we think more money is a good thing. But as a distinctively Christian job training program, we have to teach the Biblical warnings about trusting too much in riches.

\*Generally, I think we've learned some good things about casting vision and recruiting volunteers. Lots of ministries recruit by need or duty. There are shortcomings in these approaches. They run the risk of creating a “white horse” volunteer -- the guy who thinks he's got all the resources and answers and can ride into the neighborhood on a white horse and solve “those poor people's” problems.. We recruit by emphasizing the need to get entangled, because

of the spiritual enrichments that accrue when we befriend someone different from ourselves, with different life experiences:

- gift of agitation (a greater personal sense of the brokenness of this world and a greater hunger for the return of Christ to “make all things new” (Rev 21)

- gift of dependency on Christ (because our new friends may face overwhelming situations and burdens – drug use, racism, attacks from drug dealers, fear of gangs, long-term unemployment, etc.) – that we know we don’t have the wherewithal to “fix” utilizing just our puny human strength, resources, or wisdom. We know we desperately need Jesus! And this heightens our dependency and makes our prayer life more frequent and more fervent.

- gift of invigorated worship (we learn new facets of God’s provision and care for those in circumstances far different from our own – we get an enlarged view of God and this invigorates our worship)

There’s also a practical thing we do in recruitment. We look not at congregations as collections of individuals but as Body. We try to see the corporate life of sub-congregations and encourage their involvement as a community. So, we invite whole Sunday school classes or home Bible study groups or the men’s fellowship – as groups – to get involved in the various ministries, rather than just asking individuals from within those groups to come and tutor or whatever.

## **Challenges**

Well, that’s probably enough bragging. Let me close with some comments on our weaknesses and the places of challenge for us:

- 1) Lack of an Inn (the Good Samaritan took the wounded traveler to an accessible place for nurture and recovery. Para-church ministries have to be connected to a local church that is geographically and culturally accessible to the “fruit” of their ministries. I.e., if through CALM we lead a neighbor to Christ, where can that neighbor be plugged into a local church for nurture and discipleship? Probably we will be planting a local, neighborhood-based church within the next five years).

- 2) Lack of curriculum that’s God-centered and multi-cultural (usually we can find only one or the other, not both).

3) Devising behavior/discipline policies that reflect grace, and go for the heart and aren't all about rules and legalism.