

THE CORNERSTONE MISSION OUTREACH TO NEW YORK CITY

On the morning of Saturday the 12th of June, 2010, a team of eight lowans began the long trek from Sanborn, to Omaha, to Chicago, and, finally, to the hustle and chaos of New York City. Our group consisted of Pastor Dan Donovan, Lance and Arlene Van Beek, Mark Uittenbogaard, Sue Gonnerman, Jason Diekevers, Daniel Hofland, and Tierney Erwin, all members of Cornerstone URC in Sanborn.

Pastor Paul Murphy (of Messiah's Reformed Fellowship in New York City) and their summer intern, Sam Perez, picked us up at the airport and escorted us, along with our piles of luggage, to the Salisbury Hotel in midtown Manhattan. After a delicious suppertime introduction to genuine New York style pizza, and a brief overview of the upcoming week's schedule, our hosts bid us farewell for the evening. Part of our group stayed at the hotel to rest up after a long day of travel, while the rest of us ventured out to explore Times Square – monument to consumerism and mankind's desperate frivolity.

We spent much of the Lord's day worshiping and fellowshiping together with the members of Messiah's Reformed Fellowship (MeRF). What a blessing and encouragement, to sit under faithful preaching and teaching in the heart of a city so full of lost souls, and to worship together with our brothers and sisters in the Lord. In spite of our diverse backgrounds and dissimilar lifestyles, it was a great comfort to see how thoroughly encompassing is our bond in Christ. We concluded the day (in spite of some rain) with a barbecue and more fellowship at the home of one of MeRF's members.

Monday morning dawned early, and we met for devotions around 7:15. Uprooted from the heart of Dutch farm country and transplanted into the collision of worlds that is New York City, I think we were all at least a little (maybe a lot) apprehensive about our first day of work. We prayed for wisdom, though, and entrusted the day's work to the Lord – then took off on the subway (a very familiar thing by the end of the week) to get started. One book table was set up on a sidewalk in midtown Manhattan, manned by three group members (more on the book tables later). Stationed on various street corners, the rest of us handed out MeRF postcards to anyone who would take them, with barely time to shout "Christian church!" before the masses had hurried by. Later in the morning, we put the postcards away, moved to the financial district, and handed out fliers instead, advertising the church's Tuesday afternoon Bible study near Wall Street. This work was quite impersonal and could be discouraging, but it helped get the word out about the church – and there's no telling how or when God will use even these little seeds in the lives of the souls He is calling out of darkness.

After lunch we found an open street corner and set up another book table (for a new total of two). A team of three could usually manage a book table pretty efficiently, with one primary "advertiser" standing or walking amongst the passersby, calling out and directing them to the books; and two others waiting at the table, ready to strike up a conversation with anyone who was willing. In some ways, it takes a certain kind of person to walk up and start discussing their faith, or lack thereof, with a total stranger; and of those who did stop, what a myriad of worldviews we encountered! Christians (either nominal or apparently sincere), agnostics, atheists, Muslims, Buddhists – just to name a few. Many wanted nothing to do with the cross; some scoffed and rolled their eyes; others were openly angry and even hostile. Yet in amongst all the apathy and opposition, there were those, too, whose hearts seemed softer, who were lost and broken and hurting, who seemed genuinely interested in what we had to say about the gospel and the hope it so freely offers. There are conversations, faces, and names that each of us, I think, will pray for and remember for a long time.

Monday evening wrapped up with an adventure in Chinatown, led by Pastor Murphy's daughter, Shannon, wherein we sheltered lowans got the genuine Chinese experience, complete with chopsticks and bubble tea. Ask one of the group members sometime; it was unique.

Tuesday began much as Monday had, with the table work and flier distribution breaking off around noon in order for our group to attend Pastor Murphy's Wall Street Bible study. This study focuses on the application of biblical principles to finances, economics, and other related areas of life. We were delighted to welcome four or five new visitors who came in response to fliers they

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had received in the past two days, and to hear that Pastor Murphy had received emails from a couple of others with whom we had made contact. After the Bible study, most of our group spent some time touring Ground Zero before meeting back up at a soup kitchen where we were scheduled to work. This was an eye-opening experience for many of us, and those especially who served by waiting on tables came away with some interesting stories, illustrating well the pros and cons of this sort of ministry.

On Wednesday our work was focused mainly on the two book tables, as well as the distribution of stacks of MeRF postcards to as many merchants and businesses as would accept them. After lunch, most of the group took some time to ride the Staten Island ferry, where they saw the Statue of Liberty from a distance, among other things. On this day and throughout the week, the Murphy children and a couple of other church members joined us in our work, as they were able. It was a great blessing to be able to learn and witness alongside these brothers and sisters in Christ.

Thursday brought more table work for many in our group, and a new task for a few of us: door to door evangelism in the Projects. This was a sobering experience in some regards, as we witnessed firsthand the squalor and hopelessness in which so many live, and contrasted this with the ease and prosperity of our own lives. Yet, as Pastor Murphy pointed out to us as we worked, there is a difference between relative poverty and absolute poverty. In spite of their low standing in our own country, New York's city housing provides its residents with cable television, and many of them own working vehicles; in most third world nations, these would be wealthy men. The most desperate darkness in these people's lives is not financial, but spiritual – and it is to pierce this darkness that the light of the gospel goes forth among them. We were challenged persistently by closed doors and language barriers; but even there we were able to have a few good conversations with people who seemed genuinely interested in the church, and even met some Christians who encouraged us in our work. That evening we were able to attend Pastor Murphy's second weekly Bible study, whose current focus is on the book of James. We again rejoiced to welcome a visitor to the study, who had received a flier earlier in the week, and were encouraged by her positive response to the lesson.

Our entire group teamed up on Friday morning to complete our work in the Projects. The day was hot and humid, and though we were encouraged again by a smattering of thoughtful conversations, I think we were all glad to be finished by lunchtime. Since it was our last day in the city, we were given the afternoon free. Some of us visited the South Street Seaport, Central Park, and a few other places, while others returned to the hotel for some much needed rest and relaxation. We finished the day, and the week, with a wonderful evening of food and fellowship with the Murphy family at their home.

The next day, in a backwards replay of the previous Saturday, Sam and Pastor Murphy brought us and our luggage to the airport and, after saying our goodbyes, we began the journey from New York City, to Chicago, to Omaha, and finally to our homes in and around Sanborn, Iowa. I think I can safely say that our time in New York was a tremendous blessing to each of the people in our group; and we continue to pray that God will use that time and experience not only in our own lives, but also in those whose lives were touched, however briefly, however slightly, by His work through us in the city. However, it is my sincere hope and prayer that it will not end there – that each of us will take what we learned in New York and let it embolden us to continue witnessing to the power of our risen Savior even here at home. There are people in Iowa who are just as lost as those we talked with in Manhattan, and the gospel is just as mighty to save here as it is there. May it be our heartfelt desire and passion to become, ever more thoroughly, our Lord's willing and humble servants, eager to find opportunities to shine the light of salvation into a dark and dying world.

Soli Deo Gloria.