



ONE HOUSE MANY BEAMS

FROM BUSES TO BASKETBALL, ONE CLEVELAND CONGREGATION FOSTERS COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

by **Lauren Burch**

In a Cleveland neighborhood with no train tracks, a brass train whistle blows every Saturday morning without fail. The sound signals the arrival of the Heaventrain bus in the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA)—one of the oldest public housing systems in the United States—sending children rushing onto the sidewalks, ready for church.

When the bus stops, Heaventrain volunteers waste no time. Some welcome half of the children inside the bus for a Bible story and singing while the rest play games like hula-hoop outside. As soon as the session finishes, volunteers feed the kids a healthy lunch and the groups switch places. With only 30 minutes for each service—there are five stops and as many as 15 services to hold each Saturday—Heaventrain provides a loving environment to learn about Jesus to hundreds of children in the CMHA this way.

Beyond Giveaways

Heaventrain is a program of Lighthouse, Inc., a Nazarene compassionate ministry center in Cleveland, Ohio, USA. When it began, Heaventrain was the church's main point of contact with the CMHA community, but Lighthouse now has programs that partner throughout this urban area.

Lighthouse provides for basic needs like food and clothing to CMHA residents. Using their networks in places such as the local schools, they work together with the community to make sure the right resources get to those most in need. Annually, they give away 1,200 winter coats to students in three schools.

Many children in the neighborhood receive free breakfast and lunch at school throughout the school year. Summers pose a challenge to families who are already doing all they can to feed their children. In response, Lighthouse offers free breakfast and lunch every weekday during the summer—a program that has won them a reputation for excellence. Their dedication to serving healthy, well-made food has earned them the Children's Hunger Alliance award for Ohio's Best Food Services Agency of the Year.

But Lighthouse director Andy Batten says that the ministry is not simply about giving stuff away. "We want to meet physical needs," Batten said "We want to show that we care. But we do that to earn

the right to have a relationship—not as an end in itself." Ministries such as Lighthouse's tutoring and after-school sports programs bring the relational, spiritual, and physical aspects of ministry together. They are geared toward fostering discipleship, building relationships, and meeting needs. This holistic ministry model—rooted in the strengths and gifts of the local community—is a philosophy of ministry Lighthouse has developed over time.

The Need for a Lighthouse

In 1990, Pastor Phil Batten of Wilo-Lake Church of the Nazarene in Eastlake, Ohio, saw the poverty in the surrounding community and decided to act. He began spending time with the residents of the CMHA—located about 20 miles (32 kilometers) from the church—and saw the depth of people's need for physical and spiritual nourishment.

The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.
Proverbs 22:2





CLEVELAND, OHIO, USA

Total population: 396,615
Population under 20: 28%
People living below the poverty level: 31%
Median income for workers: US \$21,859
Statistics taken from the U.S. Census Bureau.



“There are things about the kingdom you can’t learn by being the Levite or priest walking on the other side of the street.”

—Andy Balten

He decided to try out the weekly ministry to children that would later become Heaventrain. On the first Saturday, 470 children came to talk with the visitors, play, and hear the gospel. After one year, the ministry started reaching around 800 children on a weekly basis through the volunteer and financial support of more than 70 Nazarene congregations in the North Central Ohio district. Now, the Heaventrain bus, with a mural depicting heaven covering its sides, hosts around 1,100 children each Saturday and feeds as many as 1,300 children each week.

In 2005, Prits son, Andy, and his wife quit their jobs and moved back to the Cleveland area. Prit had been sick, so Andy volunteered to take on his father’s role as Lighthouse director for one year. During those 12 months, Andy says they found a “sweet spot” in ministry that he knew was important as Lighthouse’s relationships were deepening in the community. Andy started to identify ministry leaders from among the residents there. Those at Lighthouse realized they could serve even more effectively by inviting community members to help plan and implement projects.

Soon, it was clear to Andy that he wanted to continue to do the work God was calling him to in Cleveland.

In preparation, Andy pursued nonprofit and community development training. He also surrounded himself with people who ran successful ministries and who he respected as much as he does his dad.

“Next thing I knew, stuff was just kind of happening,” Andy said. “There wasn’t a plan. It was just being obedient to the doors God opened.”

Community Building Community

Under Andy’s leadership, Lighthouse started to use an assets-based community development approach to compassionate ministry. This philosophy of ministry recognizes that when a community works together to address its own needs, using resources it has available, growth and development are more sustainable. While short-term volunteers are helpful, they only provide a temporary solution to a permanent problem.

“The lasting impact is much greater ... with residents as the lead,” Andy said.

To help OMHA residents start taking the lead, Lighthouse began conducting what Andy calls neighborhood circles. These circles begin with asset mapping—creating a list of neighborhood talents, interests, and dreams—among people with whom Andy and Lighthouse volunteers have built relationships.

“At any point that’s natural—not forced—we ask them questions like what they’re interested in, what their dreams are,” Andy said.

Then, Lighthouse links neighbors who are interested in the same things. For example, if one resident has gardening skills and another group of residents wants to start a community garden, Lighthouse provides the bridge between these people—something that doesn’t always happen on its own. When Lighthouse surveyed the neighborhood, they found that only four percent of the people with whom they spoke knew someone they could call for help during a time of crisis, and 84 percent did not know any of their neighbors. Bringing people together has since become a central part of Lighthouse’s mission.

When a group of neighbors are interested in the same dream for their community, Lighthouse provides dinner for them once a week for three weeks. The goal is to create space and support for people to get to know each other and to plan positive activities in their community. By letting residents take the lead from the beginning, Lighthouse simply equips people to accomplish their dreams in ways that use their own talents.

Consistency With Youth

Andy admits that locally-driven ministry takes time and energy and that sometimes transformation in a community is years in the making. Lighthouse’s tutoring and basketball ministries have been just part of the church’s long-term goal to see young people thriving and reaching their potential—a goal that requires consistency.

At 8:30 a.m. every Monday through Thursday, Lighthouse tutoring coordinators arrive at education centers throughout the area. For the next six hours, these volunteers give individual help to students who struggle academically in a city with one of the country’s worst high school graduation rates—less than 50 percent—such individualized attention makes a difference.

At East Tech, a local high school, the average freshman reads at fourth-grade level or below. Lighthouse’s goal is to improve academic competencies by two grade levels in each student annually, so that freshmen reading at a fourth-grade level will be at grade level by the time they are seniors, giving them the opportunity to graduate and attend college.

When Jimmy, a young man in the OMHA community, was a junior in high school, he had a 1.18 grade point average and was considering dropping out of school. But Andy managed to get Jimmy into the tutoring program and let him play on Lighthouse’s after-school basketball team. At the time, Jimmy’s grades were too low to qualify him for the school team.

Within a year, Jimmy brought his grade point average up to 3.38 and was a star member of his school’s basketball team. The fall, Jimmy began playing basketball for Ohio Christian University. According to Andy, Jimmy’s success is the fruit of a lot of trial and error in Lighthouse’s program—a process Andy believes is a part of effective, incarnational ministry.

Raising Up Youth

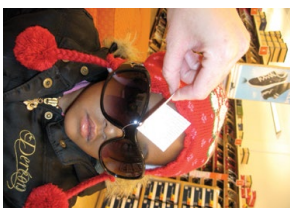
Over the past years, hundreds of Nazarene youth groups have spent countless weeks volunteering with Lighthouse. They witness a lot of beauty and a lot of tragedy, and few go home unchanged. As a result, many have decided to become pastors, youth pastors, or missionaries.

“They come and have their world crushed,” Andy said. “It’s almost a sanctification experience where something challenges them, and they’ve never the same.”

Raising up young people ready to serve—both inside and outside of Cleveland—is what Lighthouse is all about. Andy knows the health of the community and the church depends on it, so they provide opportunities for youth to become leaders while equipping them to lead well.

In some ways, that is Andy’s story of growing up with children in the OMHA and now living and leading there as an adult.

“I was made to do this,” Andy said. “There are things about the kingdom you can’t learn by being the Levite or priest walking on the other side of the street. This is how Jesus lived his life. That’s why I stay.” ■



LEARN

Get to know your neighbors and your neighborhood. Talk with each other about how your gifts and resources can create positive changes in your community and the communities around you. Learn more about how Lighthouse, Inc. does this at urbanlighthouse.org.

PRAY

When G. K. Chesterton was asked to write an essay entitled, “What is wrong with the world?,” he responded with two powerful words: “I am.” Whether intentionally or unintentionally, directly or indirectly, most of us are part of the reason that children are suffering in our neighborhoods and around the world. Pray for God’s forgiveness and that God would show you how to make the world a better place for children and young people.*

SHARE

Volunteer with a child-focused compassionate ministry in your neighborhood. If you are in the United States or Canada, visit nonprofits.nazarenes.org to find a compassionate ministry center near you.

**Taken from viva.org.*