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90. URBAN MINISTRY:

"My Visions of a New Jerusalem"

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Henry K. Yordon (b. 1926) is a Congregational Christian/UCC minister educated at Wesleyan University and Yale Divinity School. After serving churches in Waterbury and Southbury, Connecticut (1949–62), since 1962 Yordon spent over forty years as pastor at First Congregational UCC, Norwalk, Connecticut. His commitment to urban ministry illustrates the longstanding work of many United Church of Christ pastors who call the church to actively engage the challenges of urban life driven by the biblical vision of "a New Jerusalem."

My Visions of a New Jerusalem

An urban pastor explains why he believes his parish begins at the pulpit — and extends all the way to city hall

How few of us gathered to protest the governor's paltry proposal for aid to welfare recipients! It used to be the clergy would turn out en masse on behalf of welfare parents. A welfare rally at the capitol was a festive occasion. It was an opportunity to swap tall tales of picketing and protest with priests and ministers from all across the state. This year we had an auxiliary bishop, an elderly black Baptist preacher, the director of a Christian community action program, and myself. Where have all the clergy gone?

SOURCE: Henry K. Yordon, "My Visions of a New Jerusalem," *The Other Side* (July 1979): 38–41.

Many of my fellow ministers have gone from picketing to pastoral counseling. They've hung out the shingle and are practicing transactional analysis for a goodly fee. Others are busily engaged in various strategies for restructuring the congregation. Some are involved in frantic evangelistic efforts.

I am not about to change my way of ministering. It may have been a long drive to the capitol for naught. But I am glad I went and wore my preacher's gown to stand before the governor's door on behalf of the poor. For twenty-eight years this has been the nature of my ministry.

I am a minister who feels called to preach from the pulpit and to administer the sacraments. But I'm called to more than that. I'm also called to be in and out of the mayor's office. I'm called down to the redevelopment agency. I'm called to caucus in a housing project apartment. And I'm called to the press conference on welfare benefits. Yes, I'm called to pray in the sick room and to evangelize at the gas pump. But I am also called to protest from the city hall steps on behalf of black police officers, to picket for a Fair Rent Commission, and to speak a word of encouragement to despairing legal service attorneys. I believe this is all part of my work as a minister in my city.

My flock includes not only those who confess Christ but also all who deny or ignore him. I work at my preaching. For me the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday morning is the most glorious of all the week. The gospel is proclaimed. I visit. I counsel. I pray with a small lay group in the parish hall on Tuesday morning. I hold a Bible study on Wednesday evening, and I meet with a little group around the Lord's table on Thursday noon. None of this is incidental to my ministry. However, I know I am also about the work of ministering when I leave a mid-week service for city hall to protest the closing of a bilingual school.

I believe church politics is more than settling a dispute between the youth group and the ladies' aid. Our worship commission doesn't need the pastor to help decide which choir will sing on the third Sunday. The deacons don't need me to help plan for visiting the sick, developing the confirmation curriculum, or working out the communion schedule. I am needed at the Board of Realtors banquet to inform them of their ministry in this community. You should have seen the heads snap up from the fruit cup when I told them they were ministers. Most think they are in it for the profit. I told them God has a different plan. They are called to welcome Christ in the stranger and to make room for the homeless poor. Perhaps few of the Realtors are Christians. But this invitation to serve may prove to be the seed sown in fertile ground.

When asked to pray over a party given by our city's Community Action Agency, I preached a bit. Everybody was there. Day-care workers, numbers runners, the mayor, state officials, representatives from the Chamber of Commerce and the union halls. They were black and white, Hispanic and Greek. Some work in alcohol rehabilitation and some do pre-trial intervention. Some belong to the League of Women Voters and some to NAACP. I told the party about John's vision in Revelation 7:9 of those "from all nations, and peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne, and before the lamb." I told them we looked a bit like John's vision. We looked as it will look at the Great Banquet.

Then I prayed that our city will be transformed into New Jerusalem. We have the ingredients. Nearly one fifth of us are black. Almost as many are Hispanic. For a time we even had a Costa Rican consulate. It's a stone's throw from Roodner Court Housing Project into exclusive Wilson Point. Some of us ride the commuter train to Wall Street. Others walk around the corner to work at the slipper shop. On a Sunday afternoon in June at Veterans Park, West Indians play cricket and black all-stars hit the hoop. We have soccer in Spanish and Greek. Everybody lives here.

Many consider it faithfully evangelical to pray that a heroin addict on South Main Street become a new creature. But they think it faithlessly activist for a minister to pray that the city take on some semblance of "the city which is to come"! Is it in the Spirit to lay on hands for a back to be straightened or eyes to be opened? Then what about joining hands with hospital workers on a picket line to pray for just and equitable wages? Is that not more than "meddling in politics"?

We are told to ask. I ask. At a kitchen table, I pray for the gifts of the Spirit to help a troubled marriage find new life. The night of a raucous hearing on sex education in our schools, I pray for healing and reconciliation. During angry debates over a holiday for Martin Luther King's birthday, I pray. And I pray believing.

Some might call my parish ugly. But since I "have been born anew to a living hope," that hope has opened the eyes of my heart. I see in this city signs of the kingdom. I see in this city the possibilities of New Jerusalem. A soul is saved, a life is changed, the church rejoices. When I came here in 1962, I wondered if this genteel, rather white Congregational church could possibly take on the whole complexion of the city. Could we ever look like that gathering around the throne? Two years ago on Easter our sexton came to me and said, "I think we are becoming what you want. At the eleven o'clock service I couldn't tell if we were a white church going on black or a black church going on white." If I have not proven

to be much of an evangelist, the Lord has used me to gather anew a wide diversity of the saints.

Now I know my boasting is in vain. We don't build the kingdom. We don't pray down New Jerusalem. Jesus said, "It is my Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." New Jerusalem is the gift of God. Nothing is really going to happen until the day of the Lord. All I discern is but a foretaste of "the city to come." But God is going to give us the city. God will transform this old town into New Jerusalem. And we've got to act on that faith.

I think I know the reason most of my fellow ministers no longer show up on behalf of welfare parents. It's because they thought we were the ones to transform society and build the city. Apparently they grew tired of having to go back to the capitol year after year. They lost their faith in God's promise. "The poor you will always have with you," Jesus quotes. He is reminding us to keep knocking at the governor's door until the kingdom comes.

My divinity school assistant said, "Before this is over I think I'm going to wind up in jail." I told him, "Now you are getting the message." We live in enemy-occupied territory, not neutral ground. As long as no effort is made to proclaim the gospel throughout the city, the devil may even come to church and make a substantial contribution. But when signs of community appear in a deteriorating neighborhood, the beast is roused. His bulldozer engines roar.

The developers, the planners, the financiers gather with glorious ideas. They want to eliminate Greek and Spanish soccer, West Indian cricket, and downtown basketball from Veterans Park. They intend to transform it into an exclusive multi-million dollar cultural center and convention hall. I will have to cancel Bible class. Can't send a deacon. Have to go challenge the beast myself. I have a sermon to deliver at that public hearing. For I have been called to minister to the entirety of this city. I have been called to act in faith throughout the town, expecting a new Jerusalem.