

'Doing life together': Des Moines church rethinks poverty

by *Daniel Sunne* (Photo: *Des Moines Register*)

For 25 years, Phil Herman fought gang growth in the Chicago metro through social work. Caring for troubled kids from poor families, Phil learned firsthand the traps good-intentioned Christians fall into when helping the poor. Now Pastor Herman is guiding a church plant in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Des Moines, as they operate a thrift store, a preschool, a six-week summer program, and even rental housing for low-income neighbors.

"I'd come from poverty, and I was going to continue to work in poverty," Pastor Herman told The FAMiLY LEDER.

After 25 years in Chicago doing full-time social work and part-time ministry, he returned to Iowa, realizing he could do both. Originally taking an associate pastor position at Fellowship Community Church in Norwalk, he felt drawn to leave the growing suburb and minister in the poorer areas of Des Moines.

"When I started exploring the north side of Des Moines, it was very similar to what I experienced in Chicago," he said. "It felt like coming home."

When Pastor Herman approached the Evangelical Free Church of America Central District about starting a church plant in the Highland Park neighborhood, he had no idea they had been looking for someone to do exactly that for four years.

Highland Park Community Church started by building relationships with families through programs at Madison

Elementary School. True Bible Baptist Church and Pastor Rod Bradley partnered with the new plant, both in reaching out to the school and by allowing them to use their building on Saturday evenings. This partnership continues, as the churches work together on youth programs, remodel True Bible Baptist Church's building together, and even share periodic joint services.

Still a church plant, Highland Park Community Church has an aggressive, ambitious vision for community outreach.

"How can we provide services to the community that meet a need, but still point people back to the Church," Pastor Herman asks. "We're supposed to be the light in the darkness."

Their first of four objectives the church targets is economic development that recognizes the dignity of the church's neighbors. Highland Park Community Church operates the Renew Resale Shop, a thrift store that expects its patrons to pay reasonable prices for quality donated items. Patrons can work at the store helping with needed tasks to earn in-store credit. By requiring patrons purchase or earn products, patrons leave with dignity and a sense of accomplishment. The church can also support its other ministries from resources brought in by the store, rather than the other way around.

"This is a place where the community feels welcome," Herman said. "The staff of Renew Resale spend a lot of time listening and praying with people. That's not normally the case with a thrift store."

Obria Clinic, a women's health service with clinics around Iowa, is also partnering with Highland Park Community Church and will be opening a clinic in partnership with Renew Resale Shop, pointing once more to the comprehensive vision for care for their community.

Highland Park Community Church's second objective area is educational enrichment and youth development. In partnership

with other local churches, the church hosts afterschool programs at local elementary and middle schools and is working to expand programming both in the schools where programming is already offered and to the local high school. Further, the six-week "Summer Adventure Camp" provides educational and Christian teaching to elementary students, offering a safe, productive, and fun option for students.

Preparations are also well under way for a third objective, the Precious Beginnings Children Center.

"There is a desperate need for safe and quality places for children's care," Herman said. "We want to provide here the safety and quality that a kid in West Des Moines or Ankeny has."

Their final objective emerges when you listen to Pastor Herman speaks passionately about the injustice he observes in rental housing in his neighborhood: "The Old Testament prophets speak long on this – that it is wrong to take advantage of the poor."

[A February Des Moines Register article](#) describes housing provided by one notorious Des Moines landlord who had only 17 of 45 inspected rental properties pass code inspections. Desperate residents are afraid to report landlord violations without the money to find better housing, many even lacking the legal protection of a lease.

Highland Park Community Church now owns two properties and has one rent-to-own contract. The church plans to have 5 properties by Christmas. Pastor Herman hopes to set an example as well as provide affordable housing for desperate families in the Highland Park neighborhood.

Pastor Herman believes the lessons he learned from Chicago and the examples set by pastors like Wayne Gordon and Raleigh Washington in Chicago are important for his new home in Des Moines.

“I do believe that Des Moines is behind in their understanding of how to help people in poverty,” Herman told The FAMiLY LEADER. “I think Des Moines has a lot of good intentions, but good intentions aren’t necessarily biblical; we can do things that make us feel good that God doesn’t want us to do. I’ve seen a better way.”

Unlike most organizations, Highland Park Community Church expects recipients to pay back into its anti-poverty programs. As well as helping support the church’s ministries, Pastor Herman believes this model better follows biblical examples of charity and avoids the lack of accountability that often grows up around well-intentioned Christian giving. The church’s summer program charges a small fee, the Renew Resale Shop gives nothing away, and housing costs are fair, but not free. If someone can’t pay, they are either expected to pay when they are able or to provide volunteer work.

Citing a lesson learned giving away free products in Chicago, Pastor Herman states that in giving free gifts, “Gratitude turns into expectation, which turns into dependency.”

Motivated by the mission to share the love of Christ with its neighbors, Highland Park Community Church’s members continue their work Des Moines. Pastor Herman is driven by his love for his neighbors: “The attitude we’re trying to foster is, ‘We’re going to do life together.’”