

# Church in the City

By Warren Bird

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Although they are different New York City churches with very different audiences, Redeemer Presbyterian and Infinity NY Church are part of the same multiplication equation with a product of continuous Kingdom growth.

For all the wonders of New York City, the South Bronx still has a long way to go. As the country's poorest congressional district, it is home to gang leaders, pimps and others—like Tyrone—whose main interest is simply finding a way to survive.

As a teenager, Tyrone found his identity in a gang named the Neighborhood Gangsters, and his future, like that of so many of his peers, seemed to be a dead-end street. Then one week, he went with a relative to Friday Night Live, a monthly, large-scale outreach hosted by a new, youth-oriented church named Infinity. Tyrone liked the hip-hop music, even though the words were about God. After the music, the pastor, Dimas Salaberrios—who had grown up a few miles away in Jamaica, Queens—spoke with relevance and passion about Jesus Christ.

Tyrone put his faith in Christ that night, but was still uncertain about his future. Quitting a gang could mean a death sentence, but he didn't have to explain this to Salaberrios, who already understood the problem. Salaberrios boldly contacted the gang's leader, asking that Tyrone's family not be punished because of his decision. Today, Tyrone serves on Infinity's security team, is disciplined through a fellowship group and is being groomed for leadership by Salaberrios.

Tyrone's story is common for Infinity, which began four years ago through Bible studies and community building, and formally launched in November 2006.

"Our No. 1 goal and priority is to get Christ into kids' lives," says Salaberrios. He also believes that God has used Infinity's presence to reduce the murder rate to almost zero in the Bronx River Projects—a complex of nine high-rise towers which is home to almost 20,000 people as well as the new church.

Infinity's story of success, however, can't be told without also telling the story of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, located less than 10 miles away in Manhattan. Launched 18 years ago, Redeemer is now spiritual home to 5,000 of the city's young professionals.

The two churches, although reaching very different audiences, are part of the same multiplication equation, the product of which is continuous Kingdom growth.

## COMMON DENOMINATORS

Starting a new church in New York City, home to 8 million religiously diverse people, may sound implausible, but Redeemer's Founding Pastor Tim Keller was undaunted. Within a year, Redeemer grew from 50 to more than 400 people. By the four-year mark, attendance swelled to some 1,000 people, and a typical weekend now draws 5,000 people—many previously unchurched—to Redeemer's three Manhattan locations.

In an overwhelmingly secular community, Redeemer's unique worship settings—including jazz and classical music—diverse makeup and Keller's intellectual preaching style have all resonated among the area's mostly non-Christian young professionals. In fact about 15% of attendees in any given year don't yet identify themselves as followers of Christ.

"Growth in itself though is not a goal for the church—evangelism is," says Keller. That's why Redeemer became a multiplying church.

"We know the only way to increase the number and percentage of Christians in a city is to plant thousands of new churches, and the only way to change the culture is to increase the number of churches engaged in it," Keller explains.

So in 1994, Redeemer planted its first two churches, one in Greenwich Village (lower Manhattan) and another in the suburbs, both affiliated with its Presbyterian Church in America denomination. In the 13 years since, Redeemer has planted more than 100 churches—the majority non-Presbyterian—directly or in partnership with other churches, in New York City and other cities.

Enter Infinity. Thirty-three-year-old Salaberrios had fully committed his life to Christ when he was 21—a year after Redeemer planted its first two churches—and began to hold evangelistic rallies for hundreds of kids through Youth for Christ in New York City (YFC; [yfc.net](http://yfc.net)). But he noticed that when young people accepted Christ, local churches didn't receive them as they were. Street manners, tattoos and baggy clothing were considered unacceptable "Sunday best."

"I kept thinking to myself, 'What are we going to do with all these kids who are coming to Christ?' " Salaberrios relates. "Romans 2:29 talks about circumcision of the heart. It's not about changing a dress code, but making church relevant."

Church, culture, relevancy and contextualization—Salaberrios and Keller were speaking the same language, even though their target groups were unmistakably different.

In 2000, Salaberrios heard Keller speak on church planting at a Christian Community Development Association conference. As Keller shared his desire to plant 100 churches in New York City, Salaberrios became intrigued. The two met, and Salaberrios asked Keller if he was interested in planting a church focused on ministering to young people.

Salaberrios knew his background made him relevant to the Bronx's youth, but forming a spiritual community wouldn't be possible without training and financial backing—above and beyond what he was receiving as YFC's New York City director, a position he still holds. Keller said he'd gladly provide for these needs.

## THE EQUATION

To begin the partnership, Salaberrios met with Keller regularly to fully understand Redeemer's Gospel-centered DNA, then completed 10 months of both formal and informal training at Redeemer's Church Planting Center (RCPC).

"The training was challenging and intense, but it prepared me to do ministry in the city in ways I'd never imagined," says Salaberrios. "Keller has the most Kingdom-minded vision I've ever encountered. Redeemer looks way beyond itself. It's not about Redeemer benefiting, so much as God's Kingdom." And Salaberrios began to learn how to weave this mindset into the threads of the church he was envisioning.

Started in 2000, RCPC assists church planters like Salaberrios through ongoing coaching and supervision during the planting process. Some planters also receive funding, often on a diminishing scale for one to four years; 40% of RCPC's funding comes from Redeemer, mainly through specialized campaigns, and the rest from foundations and individuals.

"The vision of Redeemer's Church Planting Center is to ignite and fuel a city-focused, Gospel-centered, values-driven church planting movement in New York, in cooperation with the wider Christian church," says Terry Gyger, the center's director and Redeemer's executive pastor from 1999–2006. "We also want to assist national leaders and denominations to plant resource churches in the global centers of the world."

The center's outcome has been partnerships on three levels: churches in its denomination (PCA); a network of denominations (currently 14 denominations work with Redeemer); independent churches and individual church planters. RCPC also started a Fellows Program offering internships for four future church planters in New York City.

"Studies show that newer churches attract new groups unfamiliar or untouched by the Gospel about six to 10 times better and faster than older churches," says Gyger, citing Donald Anderson McGavran's book *Church Growth* (Abingdon).

Confident in this goal, Redeemer is continually taking its planting efforts far beyond the New York metro area—to Los Angeles and Boston and globally in London, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brazil's Sao Paulo and Hungary's Budapest, among other cities.

## THE PRODUCT

With Redeemer's backing, YFC's blessing and Keller's coaching, in 2003 Salaberrios began laying the groundwork for Infinity in South Bronx's Marble Hill neighborhood, where the local high school's graduation rate is an abysmal 7%, and gangs like the Bloods and the Crips roam. Since relocating a couple of miles to a community center in the Bronx River Projects and formally launching in 2006, Infinity has grown to 200 weekly attendees.

Striving to reach 5,000 of the city's young men, many in situations like Tyrone's, Salaberrios has initiated regular prayer walks through his community. "According to 1 Timothy 2:9, we need to be people of prayer," he says. "So, I ask the men I'm discipling to meet me early. We pray as we walk the neighborhood. When we see prostitutes, drug dealers and others, we pray for them and minister to them."

Infinity's success is testament to Redeemer's "inside-out" planting strategy.

"We did not want to be a congregation for ourselves, but also for our friends who do not yet believe in Christ," says Keller. "We wanted to be not just a ministry for ourselves, but also for the peace and benefit of the entire city."

And thanks to the power of Kingdom multiplication, Redeemer and Infinity will continue to develop a heart to serve their city in very similar, and at the same time very different, ways.

Says Keller, "We want to be not just a single church, but a movement of the Gospel, serving all churches and planting new churches."

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## THE GENIUS OF CHURCH PLANTING

As a former seminary professor with a nine-year pastorate at a growing small-town Virginia congregation, Tim Keller founded Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan 18 years ago. Now 56, Keller has seen his congregation grow from 50 to 5,000, but perhaps even more significant, they have grown God's Kingdom by planting more than 100 churches. Here, he shares about the vision and heart necessary to multiply.

**Q:** What was your vision for New York City when you planted Redeemer, and how has it changed?

**A:** From the very beginning, Redeemer had a vision to be a church for New York City, rather than just another church in New York City. Underneath this is the belief that there is no better place for Christians to live, work, serve and spend their lives and resources than in the city. The missionary strategy of the early church was extremely urban-centric.

Take Paul in Acts 16, for example. He was called by God to reach Macedonia, so he automatically went to the largest city in the region. Over and over throughout history, we see Christian missionaries doing urban church planting in the largest city in the region and then leaving the area altogether because they knew that city had been reached. And this leads me into the other part of my vision—reproduction. I've always hoped that we do more than plant one church—that we become a church-planting movement.

Q: In 1994, you began this movement by planting two churches. What happened to Redeemer during this process?

A: The congregation already owned the vision of church planting, so it was not a big surprise for our members. Interestingly, within a few weeks of sending more than 100 of our people to start the two new congregations, our attendance regained what it had lost.

More interesting was the financial impact. We asked one of the families that we sent to one of those new churches to estimate how much they'd be giving financially to the plant during the first year. It was a sizeable amount. My first response was, I bet they weren't giving us that kind of money! But then I realized that's the genius of church planting: The new church was closer to their home, and because of that, they dug deeper to help reach their community. That experience re-energized me. After that, our rhetoric spoke of church planting as "routine" in order for people to grow as disciples.

Q: Some argue that planting new churches harms or deters from the ministry of existing churches. Do you think Redeemer has hindered any New York City churches?

A: No, planting lots of new churches is one of the best ways to renew existing churches. New churches tend to bring new ideas and innovative leaders. When existing church leaders see success in different, creative

approaches, they're much more likely to find the courage to try it themselves.

Q: So, how do you measure the success of your church plants?

A: We ask three things. First, are the churches reproducing? We figure that among all our aligned churches, if in any given year 10% are planting, then that means the movement is doubling every seven years!

Second, do they have the Gospel DNA—the balance of word and deed? And lastly, is the city around those churches improving and do the people sense that the churches are a boon to their neighborhood?

Q: In 2005, you led Redeemer through a Vision Campaign with three goals: to revisit and remember the church's initial vision; to create a strategy for the next part of the church's journey; and to renew commitment, both in time and money. What was your congregation's response?

A: I announced that we'd be giving millions to church planting, and that they would not directly benefit from any of it. But because church planting has been part of our consciousness from the beginning—we're not here for ourselves, but to start other churches—they responded well. They are very excited about benevolence, and like the idea that their financial gifts benefit people far beyond our walls.

We firmly believe that nothing else—not crusades, outreach programs, parachurch ministries, megachurches, consulting nor church renewal processes—will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive and exponential church planting.