

## Struggles for Land Rights - Work of the Spirit

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The biggest pastoral issue of our time! 1.4 billion slum-dwellers dispossessed of their land across the globe! Twice dispossessed!! In their village! In the city!

I remember the blood splattered on the walls, as marines and bulldozers destroyed our slum in Manila. People stood in front of their shacks, vainly putting up a barricade. Believers stood with them. Believers went with them as they loaded their timbers onto trucks. Believers rebuilt their houses with them in the midst of the dirt, the lack of water, the despair at the new "relocation area", nine miles from city jobs. The life of a slum pastor is to stand with the people in the midst of dispossession and as Christ's representative, to seek to bring justice on their behalf. *Incarnation! Solidarity!* Step one.

But I wondered, could the confrontation have been prevented? Jesus calls us to be *both* evangelists *and* peacemakers. The priest in the community before me had been wiser organizing the people prior to an earlier confrontation, so when President Marcos' bulldozers came, they lay in front of them! He called the newspapers! Then called the mayor, telling him the reporters and cameras were there! He advised the police chief to avoid bloodshed, "the mayor was coming!" Of course, the mayor, arriving and seeing the newscasters, spoke, "We must settle this peacefully though discussions"!! The people, in the end, got half the land. Step two. The *wise leadership of a trained community organizer*, with a theological foundation standing with the poor against injustice. It was clear who Jesus was, and where he stood!

But struggle is messy! A friend and hero, Rainer Chu, has rescued five communities as an attorney. He speaks not just of the dangers of violence, but the impact on one's marriage and mental health and spirituality. In the midst of struggle comes the depth of the knowledge of God! This third step we call *justice spirituality*.

The fourth step is *community organizing* and *advocacy* around issues. Some need to hang out with governmental officials, attending the conferences of social workers and academics, to earn a reputation and be able to make the calls when needed, as did the priest above.

THE fifth step is *advocacy with knowledge*. Research is essential. Each week, I SKYPE to workers in 8 cities globally. I listen amazed, at each involveMENT in land rights issues in their cities in India, Africa, Latin America... Each city is at a different stage in the progression towards justice, *towards the Biblical goal of every family in their city owning a home*. They have to diagram the systems for gaining land tenure. There are often 40-80 steps. Don't be frustrated!! Which offices must issue which certificates? and what information do they need? And how long does it take? And who in those offices will help and how to avoid those who will seek a bribe?

The sixth step is someone becoming expert in the governmental and private *housing schemes*. That person needs a banking mind, because the financing is critical. This helps the community in step seven - setting its goals in terms of *savings groups and processes*. This is

even more messy. Poor people aren't nice people. Just because you serve, doesn't mean you are loved!! Jealousy, envy, disputes are part of daily life in the slums. So, step eight - *build leaders of godly character with a soft heart but a rhinoceros skin.*

The ninth level is *larger-scale contracts* between community organizations, banks and housing programs. Slum leaders become business experts. In an open society, such as the Philippines, this is feasible. In India though, the commitment of the Indian government to slum upgrades of the 1990's has faltered, so year by year, progressions have become more difficult. In Nairobi, rich men suddenly bought public land behind closed doors, even as the community was nearly succeeding. In Bangkok, suddenly, the housing co-op money disappeared!

Step ten. This is so difficult!! Let's give up!

Alternative step ten! The Spirit of God hovered over the waters, structuring the earth out of chaos as our home. We walk under the Holy Spirit's mantle into these dangerous places! Isn't this Pentecost's mandate! Isn't this Christianity! What else can we do? Stay the course!

For a course and resource material on land rights see [www.urbanleaders.org/655LandRights](http://www.urbanleaders.org/655LandRights)