

Opportunities to Affect: In Reading Groups

By: Jo Ann Sharkey

Theirs is the Kingdom: Celebrating the Gospel in Urban America

Robert D. Lupton

Before you read:

Theirs is the Kingdom: Celebrating the Gospel in Urban America by Robert D. Lupton is a collection of reflections on life in urban America. Although this brief book compiles Lupton's personal experiences as well as stories from friends, co-workers and people in his community, it reads at times like a novel, a devotional, and even a how-to manual for making changes in your life.

Readers will find it difficult once they have turned the final page of Lupton's last chapter, "Snowflakes and Sunsets," simply to sit still. These stories invite change, not only in our communities and in our churches, but in our hearts and souls, as well. *Theirs is the Kingdom* is the story of one family who gave up their comfortable life in suburban America and who kept giving up that life even after the desire to return to the familiar comforts of home became even more pressing in an unfamiliar and often hostile environment. The Luptons continued to give up comfort in small ways; evidence of this is demonstrated by the story of a clean chair given over to an unclean neighbor to sit on in "Please Sit in My Chair." Comfort was sacrificed in large ways too, such as the story of a new car that was generously given and happily received, and then thoughtfully, painfully, and finally joyfully returned in "The Appearance of Evil."

Lupton's collection of stories brings his readers into the lives of those living in poverty in urban America. He does not guilt his readers into sacrifice or charity. Instead, his book is about celebration, as the title suggests. One of the greatest problems we have in ministering to urban America is the way we make divisions between us and them, the haves and the have-nots. With his

move to an impoverished neighborhood in Atlanta, Lupton attempts to break down this barrier. His story, "We Belong to Each Other," illustrates how we believe, or at least we act as though we believe, that we are more blessed by God when we are the givers and not the receivers. We cling to a pervasive attitude that those who have possessions to give must be more blessed by God than those who have nothing and must receive. If you find yourself guilty when reading this story, Lupton does not judge. Instead, he challenges you to do something to bring justice, righteousness, and the love of Christ to those who do not know it.

For Group Reflection and Discussion:

- Which story in *Theirs is the Kingdom* made the strongest impression on you? Why? Did you see yourself in any of the stories?
- "Kurt" tells the story of a man who manipulates and lies to receive sympathy, a listening ear, and two dollars for bus fare. However, the money is spent on alcohol and Kurt disappears. His story could be a model for the excuses we make not to give. Lupton's response to Kurt and those like him is this:

I can see the conditions I place on my own giving, my own subtle forms of manipulation. I am confronted with my pride that requires others to conform to my image. I see my need to control, to meter out love in exchange for the response I desire. I will opt to be manipulated in person. For somewhere concealed in these painful interactions are the key to my own freedom. (42)

Can you identify with Lupton's final response to Kurt? Do you agree with him?

- In “The Referral Game,” Lupton discusses the easy manner with which we are able to shuffle those we don’t want to touch and help around the system until they are no longer our responsibility. He explains that this is an “attractive game for churches” because we can pass along the responsibility we have to the “hungry, naked, and homeless” to someone else and we never really have to feed them, clothe them, shelter them, or even touch them (43). Caring becomes someone else’s job. How has your church responded to the needs of the impoverished in your community? Do you actually interact with those in need? How do you as an individual interact with those in need? Do you take responsibility for those who are needy or do you refer them to someone else?
- In “A Dream Deferred,” Lupton shares the story of a shop owner who dreamed for 15 years of bringing healthy, fair-priced food to his community. He had contacted Lupton four years earlier only to be dismissed quickly. What can we learn from this story regarding partnerships, persistency, and humility?
- In the story entitled, “From Whence Come Wars and Fighting Among You,” Lupton identifies love as the characteristic of Christians that should unite us. Unfortunately, however, love is too often lacking in our personal relationships and in our church’s presence to the unchurched world. How different would our community look if we actually followed Christ’s command to love?
- What does “downward mobility” mean to you? Is this a positive phrase or a negative one? Does it go against the American ideal of success and accomplishment? How do we reinforce the idea that “upward mobility” equals success, even in our churches?
- In his story, “Up and Out,” Lupton writes about how the successful members of the inner-city urban community are the ones who escape. There are practical, understandable reasons to leave the community. Discuss why people leave and how this impacts those who are left behind. Will this pattern ever change? Should it?

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next month:

In *Blue Hole Back Home*, Joy Jordan Lake tells the story of Farsanna, a Sri Lankan girl who moves to the Appalachian Mountains. The narrator recounts how her town is changed by the arrival of a Muslim family to their small, xenophobic community.