

Mural Communicates Reconciliation to Chicago Neighborhood

By Donna C. Fujimoto

The Uptown neighborhood of Chicago is a crowded urban setting where the skies are smudged with pollution, and pavements have stifled out most greenery except weeds and a few stunted trees. Is this a place where the message of God's care for humanity can be heard?

Brian Bakke, the Director of Community Ministries at Uptown Baptist Church, thought it was. In 1995, he had dreams of covering some of the concrete and graffiti with a colorful mural that would communicate God's love for the neighborhood's ethnically diverse and chronically poor people. And, he knew just the wall.

Unfortunately, the location was the side of a store covered with slogans, epithets directed toward police, and memorials to dead gang members. It reflected one of the neighborhood's key struggles: The area was caught up in a shooting war between gang members and police.

Bakke knew that painting over this wall without permission from gang members was like inviting them to shoot him. Because Bakke had come to know the gang members personally through playing basketball with them, he asked them if he and the teens from his church could do a mural over their "RIPs."

When the gangs said yes, Bakke approached the building's owner. The owner approved the project, asking only to see a design and proof of insurance.

In planning the design, Bakke and his team took their audience into consideration. "To an illiterate society and a video generation, the visual arts are a natural form of communication," he said. "The response is immediate and powerful. This is how

stained glass windows came into use by churches. Priests would point at a section of glass for the illiterate people to look at while he told them the story."

Bakke's team knew two verses they wanted to incorporate into the mural: Genesis 1:27-28, where God created male and female in his image, and Galatians 3:28, CBE's theme verse (see mural photo).

"It was incredibly important to me that we had the Genesis text, as the neighborhood teaches men to treat women like stray dogs," Bakke said. "I wanted the 'hood to read God's own Word — men and women are created in the very image of God and therefore deserved respect. I chose the Galatians text as I



Mural's Message: The mural includes the words of Galatians 3:28. "I know of no more complete way to say that all people are equally loved by Jesus," said mural designer Brian Bakke.

JOANNE NYSTROM JANSEN

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While the group had a starting point with the two verses, they were stymied on the actual design. But after the Uptown Baptist teens participated in a stained glass window tour under the guidance of gifted artist Gregory King, they felt inspired, and the project almost seemed to design itself.

The group envisioned the hand of God creating and populating the world. Next, they chose the image of a medieval mace shattering the globe to symbolize sin's destruction. Finally, they portrayed Jesus in many colors in the center of a rose window. This image symbolizes Jesus putting the shattered pieces of our sin-stained lives back into place like the shards of a mosaic.

All hues of people in the world come together to worship Jesus. Artistically, the colors are bright and beautiful. Theologically, they depict reconciliation between God and humankind, between all races, and between male and female.

There is also a panel depicting creation of land,

sea, plants and animals, all flowing out of the word “Logos” in the corner, as a fun way to spark discussion about God speaking the world into being. The final dimensions of the mural’s four panels are 18 feet high by 130 feet long.

The church did not have money for the project, but Bakke credits God with miraculously providing \$6,000 to cover the cost. Many people were involved in the Uptown mural project: Nine people designed the mural and over 50 people painted it.

During their work, a steady stream of people from the neighborhood approached the group to ask if they could help, or to ask about the design and its origins. Bakke personally shared Christ with over 300 people while the mural was in process.

From the time they started painting the design, all shootings stopped in the neighborhood. When it was finished, gang members put out the word that no one was to “tag” (paint graffiti on) the mural.

After six years of protecting the mural, the neighborhood was shocked one day to discover that this beautiful artwork and witness of reconciliation had been painted over. “We felt stomped on and violated,” said Bakke.

In November of 2000, Bakke’s team called a meeting between the church, the building owner and a local city official. They discovered that a new staff person had mistakenly granted permission to another group to paint a community service message over the mural.

After more discussions and the production of paperwork to cover the legal aspects of the situation, the team received permission to begin restoration the following August. Bakke said that moving on to the restoration phase was a huge spiritual battle for many people. For him, it was practical exercise in the theme of the mural itself — reconciliation.

The church still did not have a budget for the effort. Again, God met their need, Bakke said. They raised \$13,000 for the expense, and one of the city’s leading restorers helped them start the work. Bakke had to buy hundreds of pounds of bulk natural cotton so the restoring team could gently clean off the offending paint one brick at a time.

When the paint layer was finally removed, it was obvious that the mural would have to be repainted. Over 300 people were involved in this effort, including people from other churches.

“Everyone who saw us repainting the mural would come and speak deep blessing to us, as they had been upset by its being covered over and were so happy to see it restored,” Bakke said.

So many people wanted to hear the story that the restoration team declared Bakke their spokesperson so they could continue their work uninterrupted.



BRIAN BAKKE

Team Effort: Over 50 people painted the mural, which communicated a message of reconciliation to the neighborhood’s residents.

“The whole community was deeply blessed after learning the story — they either asked if they could help or they went away singing thanks to God,” said Bakke. “Even non-Christians had this response. It was overwhelming to all of us that worked on the wall.”

Now the mural stands renewed, like the neighborhood it belongs to.

Bakke believes that murals and gardens reduce crime in urban settings. He does not know of another shooting on the street since they finished the mural. Residents started a block club, picking up trash and planting trees there. “If a street wants these kinds of things to happen, then a mural is a great way to get there!” he said.

The character of Uptown has changed since the restoration project came to an end. It is now being gentrified, with its ethnic diversity disappearing and its poor residents being pushed out. But the mural on Sunnyside remains as a witness to the power of God to communicate a message of hope and reconciliation through the arts.

Donna C. Fujimoto has been married to Harry for 17 years. They work out of their home in California where they are co-parenting their children. Donna is a seminary graduate, writer, singer and artist.