



# URBAN CURRENT

## Bodies in the lagoon

**B**ody found in the Humboldt Park Lagoon,” read the headline from a little over a year ago. Another one from a few years back, “Man’s body found in Humboldt Lagoon.” These are just a couple stories I’ve snagged and saved. I’m sure I missed a few. Humboldt Park Lagoon, not to mention the surrounding square of green in the middle of some of Chicago’s most desperate neighborhoods, has long been the battleground of 100 plus gangs.

For more than a generation, Humboldt Park and the surrounding area which goes by the same name, has been synonymous with the worst American cities can serve up; the usual menu of stick-ups, muggings, rapes, and general mayhem. Back in the day, driving through the park to various places, I would see dog packs of eight or nine animals roaming, foraging, threatening. Suffice to say, the park and its environs continue to live up to a grim reputation (Google Humboldt Park shooting).

I was convicted 12 years ago that we had messed up Jesus’ idea of believer’s baptism. We have privatized what Jesus meant to be public domain. We know baptism is to be the public declaration of Jesus’ lordship and attachment to His local body, but in reality we’ve taken the route of convenience. We schedule baptism in hidden, walled, sequestered pools, often in front of the smallest audience of the week. At any rate, I concluded that we were not maximizing water baptism by making it as public as possible. I thought it would be great to take baptism to the Humboldt Park Lagoon. I’m always looking for ways to get out of the church building walls anyway. What church activity needs to be in public more than baptism?

Decades ago, the lagoon was refitted to

make it an urban beach. A sorry beach it is, I have to tell you. Nonetheless, it gives us a great place to bear witness to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the lives of transformed urbanites. A gentle hillside overlooks the brown puddle. Between the bottom of the hill and the edge of the water is a huge weeping willow tree. The crowd seated on the slope looks across the lagoon at the dramatic downtown Chicago skyline. It’s an unbelievable setting. A beautiful blend of nature and man’s ingenuity.

The last Sunday in August, we take Sunday Nite Live 10 blocks straight south to our local Jordan River! A few years back we started noticing that every time we were there, not too far away a large crowd of a couple hundred urban rowdies was gathered. Come to find out, it was the annual picnic of one of the local street gangs. This, along with ball games, picnickers, strollers, always a few winos, is what surrounds us as we praise, preach, testify, and baptize.

One of our first candidates was a young man who grew up just a couple blocks from the park. He is now a regional director for FEMA. Our custom is to have people give their testimony of faith in Christ before they are baptized. A couple of years ago a young lady stepped to the mic and said, “Last year when you were here for this service I was right over there, hiding behind that tree. I had been at Armitage as a child and professed Christ as Savior, but strayed. A year ago tonight, you surprised me when you came for the baptism because you caught me drunk in the park.” Moments later we immersed her in the murky water.

Another year, two of those being baptized were the daughter of a Korean doctor and

a young Puerto Rican girl whose dad abandoned her. Then there’s the Polish girl one of our people met in the subway and brought to Christ. There was the gangbanger who had been in prison for a double murder. I remember the older gentleman who was won by the aforementioned Korean doctor. When the doctor found him in his nursing home bed, he couldn’t get out of bed. After sharing a powerful story of Christ’s saving healing power, this newborn oldster walked to the lagoon’s edge and into the water. Or there’s the American Indian, a slave of alcohol so long, who stood looking at his children on the shore. They surely never thought their dad would change. But Christ.... An African-American TV news reporter who came to do a story at Armitage got saved, and became one of the station’s news anchors, came up out of the waters dripping and smiling.

So this is one of the highlights of our year. We get to baptize some of our disciples under a summer sky, against the backdrop of a world-class skyline, surrounded by real estate from which blood cries out.

To date, without the help of police, we have lifted almost 100 bodies out of Humboldt Park Lagoon. Live ones. Regenerated. Delivered. Transformed. “...buried with Him...raised to walk in newness of life.”

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