

Reflections

on Paul Ryan's listening tour

I wanted him to see that we can progress past the ideological logjam to effectively address poverty

By Robert L. Woodson Sr.

When I received the call from one of Paul Ryan's aides just six weeks before the close of the 2012 presidential campaign, I admit that I was suspicious. I was asked if I would assemble a group of community and faith-based leaders to meet with Paul at Cleveland State University in Ohio in early October.

It was obvious that candidate Mitt Romney's remark about 47% of Americans was fatal to his presidential campaign and doomed any chance for him to attract minority votes. I wondered if this was just a last-ditch effort by his running mate to counter the perception that Republicans were not concerned about the poor. While I would meet with any politician, left or right, who I believed was earnestly seeking to help the underserved constituents that my Center

for Neighborhood Enterprise was created to serve, I would never allow those committed leaders to be used in a political strategy.

My suspicion about the request was tempered by the fact that Paul, before he was first elected to Congress in 1998, had served as a staffer to Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas and as an aide to U.S. Rep. Jack Kemp — who was authentically committed in his work to empower public housing residents to manage their properties and revitalize their neighborhoods, despite criticism from the establishment in his own party. In addition, my oldest son, Rob, had worked on the Hill and knew of Paul and never had anything but good things to say about him. All indicators were telling me that Paul Ryan was, in the words of the old

gangster movies, a “standup guy,” in contrast to others who came to me only when they were in trouble on the race or poverty front.

So I assembled a list of 20 effective community and faith-based leaders from around the state and submitted it to Paul’s campaign staff to be cleared by the Secret Service. In a short time, I received an urgent call from a harried staffer who announced, “Bob, five of the people whose names you sent had criminal records!”

I replied that I was shocked — because I thought all of them had criminal records. When the matter was brought to Paul’s attention he replied simply, “If Bob trusts them, then so do I.”

My decision to bring the leaders to meet with Paul was validated when, at the beginning of our first hour-long roundtable discussion, he insisted that no press be allowed because, in his words, he didn’t want anyone to feel that they were being used. Weeks after the end of his vice presidential campaign, Paul Ryan sent hand-written notes to each of the 20 participants personally thanking them for sharing their stories and a brief part of their lives with him.

Sometime after that first meeting, Paul shared a life-changing moment with a reporter: A man who had served 13 years in prison and was now a pastor had lifted his tattooed arms, placed his hands on Ryan and prayed for him. This encounter was the reason that Paul Ryan asked if I would take him on a “listening and learning” tour to meet other faith-based neighborhood healers throughout the country. As before, Paul assured me that he would not permit any press to cover the site visits so that the focus would be exclusively on the activities of the hosting organizations.

My goal in arranging these visits was to move beyond the traditional conservative and liberal understanding of how to address the needs of the poor. I concur with former education secretary Bill

Bennett, who said, “When liberals look at the poor, they see a sea of victims. When conservatives look at the poor, they see a sea of aliens.” These conflicting views have resulted in a polarized debate in which one side demands more government spending on poverty programs and

the other less funding and greater restrictions on government assistance.

I wanted Paul to see that we can create a way to progress past this ideological logjam to effectively address poverty. A first step would be to understand that it is necessary to stop generalizing about the poor and begin to disaggregate them in three categories.

The first category consists of people whose character is intact but need temporary assistance until they can gain their footing and move on. The second group is made up of people who want to do the best for their families but have determined that, given the disincentives for work and marriage built into our welfare system, it is best for them to remain on the welfare rolls. The last category is made up of people who are engaged in self-destructive behavior such as drug and alcohol addiction. Giving aid to this group without any requirements or restrictions simply rewards the self-destructive behavior that has spawned disorder, violence and cultural disintegration in our nation’s inner cities.

This tragic waste of lives cannot be halted through increased funding or through top-down mandates to change behavior and establish compliance with

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social norms. There is a critical need, instead, for the interventions that bring about cultural and social transformation before self-sufficiency can be learned.

This is where the crucial, unique and indispensable role of the people Paul Ryan was meeting came into play. In neighborhood after neighborhood, he was talking with men and women who provided oases of excellence in the midst of devastated communities. Against the odds, some had led successful lives and equipped their children to do so as well. Others had found the strength to halt the disintegration of their lives and reclaim their futures. Most inspiring of all, they have committed themselves to help others do the same.

These are the extraordinary leaders Paul Ryan met on his journey over this past year. They have generated health and wholeness in the midst of the most crime-ridden, drug-infested, socially and economically isolated neighborhoods in the nation. Just as the human body is oriented toward healing and sends the strongest antibodies to the most afflicted areas, the power of these dedicated neighborhood healers is the greatest in these most disadvantaged communities.

Throughout his journey through Washington, D.C., Cleveland, Indianapolis, New Jersey, Milwaukee and San Antonio, Paul Ryan has witnessed unforgettable transformations. He has met men and women who have reclaimed their lives after 20 years lost in addiction. He has seen a church-based project ignore the excuses of an entrenched foster care bureaucracy to place more than 250 children in loving, permanent adoptive homes. He has seen individuals who have returned from serving lengthy prison sentences to become responsible spouses, parents and even successful entrepreneurs, and he has met once-violent young offenders who now serve as ambassadors of peace in their schools.

All of these transformations were possible through

the unwavering commitment of individuals who have sometimes offered encouragement and other times provided the necessary “kick in the pants.” They alone have the power to reach and change the hearts of others because, by example, they have earned their trust and respect.

These neighborhood healers are not anomalies; they are present in every city Paul has visited. The next and critical step is to develop innovative and creative ways to provide resources, funding and technical assistance



At a poverty-directed “listening and learning” tour stop in San Antonio, Ryan and other participants engage in an impromptu prayer.

to support their efforts so that these antibodies can serve as a virtual immune system that can restore the health of our communities and the wholeness of our society.

The American people, tired of partisan gladiator combat, will gain inspiration and enthusiasm through this effort. Jack Kemp once said, “The leader who serves his nation first serves his party best.” Paul Ryan, I believe, wants to do just that. ■

Community activist Robert L. Woodson Sr. founded the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise in 1981. He is the author of A Summons to Life and The Triumphs of Joseph: How Community Healers Are Reviving Our Streets and Neighborhoods. His honors include a MacArthur Fellowship “genius grant” in 1990 and a Presidential Citizens Medal in 2008.