



## Saving the City

Since the early days of this nation, women of faith have been engaged in community building and empowerment as they sought to improve their own lives and those of their families and neighbors. Long before “faith-based initiatives” were the buzzwords of the day, women were working hard—mostly *without* government help—to fight for a more just society.

Sojourner Truth fought for racial equality. Eliza Shirley served the poor. Mother Jones crusaded for workers’ rights. Frances Willard worked for women’s suffrage and prison reform.

Across the country, women have established themselves as leaders in the community development field and acquired the skills to bring positive change to their cities through social welfare services, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and civic organizing for structural change. These have produced housing, created jobs, provided education, and, most importantly, offered hope for millions of people.

Indeed, history continues to point to faith-based organizations founded and/or directed by women working to “save the city.” Here are just a few:

**Way-Out Ministries** was founded in the South Bronx in 1969 by Rev. Anna Villafane. A residential drug treatment and counseling program for both men

and women, it at one time received government funds but at present operates strictly on private donations ([lightbringers.com/wayoutchurch.htm](http://lightbringers.com/wayoutchurch.htm)).

**Mujeres de Esperanza** is a ministry of Esperanza USA, one of the largest Latino faith-based organizations in the country. Launched in 2005, it uses funds from the government, private foundations, and individual citizens to fight sexual abuse, domestic violence, and lack of sexual education while addressing discrimination/oppression based on gender and race ([www.esperanza.us](http://www.esperanza.us)).

**Pastor Aimee Garcia Cortese** (along with her son Joseph Henry Cortese) established the Boden Center for the Performing Arts in the Bronx to expose an underprivileged community to the wonders of music and drama. Established with donations from individuals, it is currently seeking funds from a variety of arenas. A ministry of Crossroads Tabernacle, the center teaches neighborhood young people instrumental lessons, music theory, dance, drama, and video recording ([bodencenter.com](http://bodencenter.com)).

**The Reverend Cheryl Anthony** founded the Judah International Christian Center to facilitate the stability of her community through human and economic development, stabilization, and revitalization ([judahinternational.com](http://judahinternational.com)).

These women (whom I call “progressive Pentecostals”) have simultaneously

taken a vertical focus—seeking to be more like Jesus—and a horizontal focus—based on their ministry calling to serve those around them. They have been able to transform their communities through Jesus and his Word and also through government partnerships, advocacy, policy analysis, and community and clergy education.

Even without President Bush and the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, community development in collaboration with all those who dare to partner with women like these will continue its long and rich history. Women will persist in working as vessels of God to save our cities.

What these women have done is available to all women who call on the power of God. I challenge those of you with a heart for community ministry, a vision to transform culture, and an ability to engage the powers, to hear God and then move forward in faith. You are proclaimers of good news to the oppressed, comforters of the brokenhearted, rebuilders of our cities, and restorers of our hope. You are God’s oaks of righteousness, and he will display his glory through you (Isa. 61:4)! ■

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