

HEALING THE CITY

Jesus In The City Fellowship works with those with hard-core addictions and a history of burned bridges.

IMF Senior Pastor Michael Angelo Pilla started his career as a goldsmith and jewelry designer with a storefront on Grand Avenue in St. Paul, MN. His jewelry earned several awards and has been featured in Harrods, Saks 5th Avenue, and *Vogue Magazine*. That was 1979-1994.

In September, 1992, Michael received his call to ministry. After a year (which God allowed to be “very painful”), Michael surrendered the company to God, downsized, and went to Bible College at North Heights Lutheran. He then earned a master’s degree at Bethel Seminary and another at Master’s International University of Divinity. He’s currently completing a doctorate in apologetics. In 1996, he was sent into the city as a missionary and pastor, leading him to plant Jesus In The City Fellowship (JICF), a recovery church and outreach ministry with the vision to bring mental, emotional, physical and spiritual healing to people in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

It’s often extremely slow, taking 3–5 years alone to get someone sober. But just as he did in the jewelry industry, Michael’s continually forging creative ways to reach suffering humanity.

One such gem is Christmas In The City, where JICF adopts families in need from October through January.

Individual and business sponsors help, including Bachman’s Floral Gift & Garden, who donate Christmas trees and warehouse facilities to help logistically provide families with food, gifts and the gospel. Christmas In The City “plops us right in their living rooms,” Pilla says, one of the places that’s hardest to penetrate. This creates opportunities to build personal relationships in one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the country.

Doors are opening. “People we’ve adopted for Christmas In The City keep coming [to church and other ministry events].... We’re not trying to recruit church members. We’re building up the kingdom.”

Hands Across The City, another JICF ministry, bridges the gap between churches of denominations, uniting them in common ministry to reach families in the area. The program hosts events such as an annual multi-church block party along Lake Street, a place where sex and drug trafficking are at an all-time high. Or partnering with Fishing for Life to host open-invitation Bible studies at Cabela’s (outfitter) or a fishing retreat with fellowship, fish, and (this year) special guest Ron Lindner, one of the brothers behind Lindy tackle brand.

Whatever the program, mentoring is at the heart of everything JICF does. “We meet people where they’re at,” connecting them with someone mature in their walk with God. Mentors immerse these men and women in Scripture and help them know who they are in Jesus Christ.

Mentor-mentee relationships are vulnerable to a lot of hardship and heartbreak. When someone’s had a 30-year addiction, then cleans up, they often revert to who they were developmentally before the addiction. The result? Forty-something

twelve-year-olds. “I become a father to a lot of these guys,” Pilla says, which isn’t always easy. “If you’re the authority figure and bearer of news that isn’t sitting well with them, and they have authority issues...it can get ugly.”

A big part of mentoring is education, too. Even though many are only at a sixth-grade reading level, Pilla has a heart to raise up leaders, and one ambitious goal: “Pouring into these guys constantly so they get to a point where they can preach the Word.”

He recently started Urban Ministry Theological Institute (UMTI), providing both biblical education and ministry experience. Unlike most seminaries, UMTI can take the time needed to bring its students up to college-level study habits. “We’re demanding a lot out of people who have never had anything demanded of them before.”

“Future ministry in the inner city is a great opportunity,” Pilla says. JICF has the cultural and emotional understanding to deal with addiction and urban church planting and can impart that knowledge to its students. Its location and experiences make it poised to reach urban communities for Christ.

Michael plans to continue building up the Urban Ministry Theological Institute, investing in those who have so radically experienced God’s healing power, and training them so they in turn can heal others. All in this broken, beautiful city.



Rev. Michael Angelo Pilla has been an IMF Ordained Minister since 1997. Contact him at michaelangelo@pclink.com. Learn more about JICF at jesusinthecityfellowship.org.

