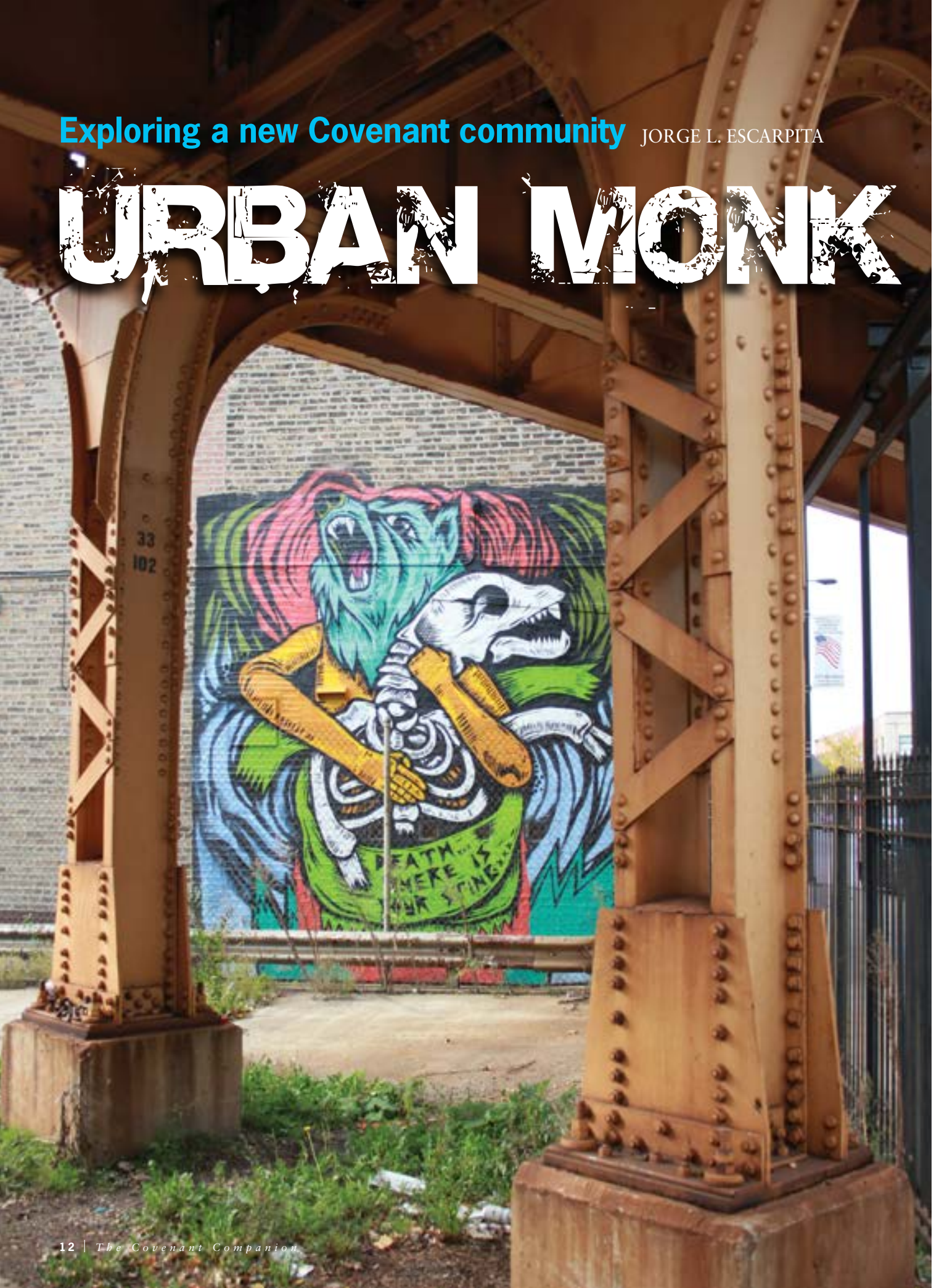


Exploring a new Covenant community JORGE L. ESCARPITA

URBAN MONIK



Who would have thought that returning to the urban heart of Chicago would feel like arriving on foreign land? I had grown up in the city, and I still held vivid images from my childhood of Logan Square, Humboldt Park, and Bucktown. Our family had moved a few miles away when I was fifteen. As an adult I'd been living in the near suburbs and I'd served as a youth pastor just outside the city. Now after sixteen years, I was returning.

I felt called to come home, largely because I knew many people who had left and were staying away. Yet at the same time many newcomers were discovering the city. If they were finding ways to live in this community, why couldn't native Chicagoans? Why did so many of us feel as if the only option was to move to the suburbs?

In coming back, I found a mosaic of ethnicities, social statuses, and backgrounds. My old neighborhood looked better on the surface. But instead of transformative community development, I discovered shallow gentrification. Many newcomers had moved in to take advantage of better housing prices. Yet that meant longtime residents were no longer able to afford their rent. One resident, Jaime, told me, "We've lived here over thirty years, but increasingly we cannot keep up with the higher prices."

The visual difference between the new and old residences is striking: one business looks like a shiny nickel, its neighbor a faded penny. One home is left the same while the one next-door is completely rehabbed. "Our neighborhood has gotten much prettier hasn't it?" one neighbor commented—before he had to move out of his apartment when the bakery shop where he worked was forced to close. Of course not all the new residents fared better financially. Some certainly

didn't. Yet the fiscal disparity between these groups meant they did not interact with each other much, if at all.

So we planted Cross Fellowship, a church in an area that has been both uplifted and damaged by gentrification. There were more new businesses but fewer old ones.

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developing relationships with individuals.

Soon we were attracting our target age group. Yet we quickly discovered

that while they were moving into the big fertile city of opportunity, the same city also contained stones, weeds, and tares that they struggled



Jorge Escarpita, pastor of Cross Fellowship Covenant Church. Opposite page: a mural by Joseph Sentrock Perez, painted on the side of Urban Monk.

There was less crime but fewer opportunities for long-term residents, many of whom still felt impoverished. They weren't qualified for the new jobs in the community, and their homes just seemed to continue to deteriorate. Amid all this change people were longing for genuine community, but it was increasingly difficult to find.

Our journey started with our desire to reach multiethnic young families, as well as singles, college students, and graduates. We began to gather to worship in neighborhood public libraries, community centers, schools, conference rooms—any place that would open their doors to us. We were going to the community wells in hopes of

to navigate. It was both a friend and foe. New residents often found themselves forced to go back to the places they had come from, even when those places were full of painful memories. Chicago's hospitality was sometimes warmly present and other times frigidly absent. Our hearts were being broken. People were interested in trusting Jesus, but they were being choked in this new community.

During this time, we invited a good friend to visit our new church and make an initial assessment. Jeffrey Garner is pastor of San Francisco

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Joseph Sentrock Perez works on a painting at Urban Monk

Lighthouse in what we felt was a similar urban context. One of the poignant questions he challenged us with was, “What is your community’s big need?” We reflected.

A young man graduated from Loyola University with a degree in economics, only to discover that inner-city life was overwhelmingly expensive. He was an only child who had been raised by a single parent, and he had embarked on the journey to college hoping to better his life. He wanted to serve Christ, but the cares of this world seemed to constantly impede him. A family in our community housed him for a while, but his transitional needs were simply more than they could offer. Starving for the security of housing and a constant community of believers, he sorrowfully returned home to St. Louis.

Another young woman who had received a full scholarship to John Marshall Law School commented after one of our services, “I was so excited to come to Chicago from Florida, but I simply don’t know how long I will last. Why does all the equality look so good on paper but the reality doesn’t match?” She explained that her classmates and teachers were cordial enough at school, but they rebuffed any attempts she made to share life beyond that.

Hers was an all-too-common experience. In academic or professional circles individuals seemed to glimpse community, but when the workday ended, colleagues and potential friends scattered for home.

Joseph “Sentrock” Perez, an artist from Phoenix, Arizona, came to study at Columbia College and is attending Cross Fellowship. Chicago had offered him an educational opportunity, but he felt stymied in his work when he was not permitted to use one of his



artistic signatures—a crown—because of gang associations with that symbol in the city.

“Wait a minute, maybe this new Logan Square is not so different from the gang area I grew up with,” I thought. As kids we were told not to cross Pulaski, Division, Kimball, or North Avenue, yet we went to the same schools, played in the same Little League, and attended the same parish with those neighbors. Now I saw diverse people living together in the same community, yet they too had no real interaction with each other. Certain restaurants, art shows, or pubs are closed to many of our residents.

I bought and hung Joseph’s painting titled *The City Stole My Crown* in my office as a reminder of our visitors living among us.

We began to recognize the big need around us for housing and genuine community. This realization made me uncomfortable. Frankly at that point I had been hoping we would discover an issue that was “easy.” Maybe a broad cause where we could simply send our money. How much simpler it would be to pass out some meals on Saturday, feel good, and call it a day. I had to admit that I’d been looking for a fabricated homelessness—not the real thing.

But housing? A community center? It seemed all too daunting.

After a year and a half of wandering in the wilderness of Chicago’s homes, libraries, and cultural centers, our congregation had finally found a permanent gathering space at a former bar on West Armitage. Now we asked, how could a new church plant address our community’s need?

I am convinced that a good way to bring *doing justice* into an everyday context is to constantly ask this question: “Do I want my community to have what I have and live the way I do?” Whatever is good for me should be good for my neighbor. So we started to ask what it would look like if our small community renovated a space the way we would if we lived in it. What if we were able to subsidize this housing, reflecting each individual’s income? Moreover, what if we offered not just housing but a community center as well?

The answer came in what we now call the “Urban Monk.” We rehabbed the vacant and dilapidated space that was our new home. The pub on the first floor became a common area, which has slowly morphed into an art gallery. An apartment on the second floor became housing and shared space, and the basement became a

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kids' area. The Urban Monk is now a center to engage and love our neighbors and its visitors, a place to be formed as disciples in community.

The space has become our main place of worship for Sunday gatherings. We also try to meet Thursday evenings and wrestle with God, theology, and the world in a frank and open forum.

The renovations were completed last spring. Since then, we have

engage a non-Christian community better than our church's name of Cross Fellowship.

At first people just found out about our space through word of mouth. Recently, though, we began to advertise to our community. A flier invited anyone with community engagement and development in mind to set up an appointment so we could share our vision for the space, hear their story, and investigate how they might intersect. We feel passionately that the communal space should be opened to the community and not for Cross Fellowship members only.

Now we have three "urban monks" living in our space—each of whom was in need. We encourage long-term living there. A legal assistant who works downtown is a member of the Cross Fellowship community and was looking to move into the city from the outer suburbs.

One of our members met Joseph at a concert. He had just moved to the area and needed a place to live. Joseph is now one of our monks, and he ended up painting a mural on the side of our space.

A barista and DJ wanted to move to Chicago to participate in the Cross Fellowship community, but the cost of living expenses would have been prohibitive for him. When we heard of his need we offered him a room.

One college student wept when talking about the hospitality she experienced with us. Another commented, "I can't describe the love and welcome that was so tangible—a brief but beautiful moment of peace." Others thanked us for introducing them to discipleship beyond curriculum and for the gift of friendship.

Although the building is leased by Cross Fellowship, we like to think of it as a contemplative community center where we happen to meet for



The apartment at Urban Monk

worship, not "our church building." It's a center to be and make disciples in community, or as we like to call it "along the way"—in life together. We hope to continue and expand this work.

Since our inception, our congregation's mission has been discipleship, community, and growing disciple communities. We have a vision to plant multiple disciple community centers, grow them to around forty members to be led by pastors who might be called to grow, not necessarily to plant (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). We don't need to replicate our community, but rather help grow organic ones that reflect their own neighborhoods and their needs.

It was a difficult decision for me to return to minister in an urban setting. Fear and anxiety were constant companions—alongside faith and hope. But I have learned to love Logan Square again more than ever, and I am trying to take every opportunity I get to embrace this life. ■



The City Stole My Crown

sponsored a showing for a community artist, commissioned a community mural, housed a fundraising bicyclist who was trying to raise awareness of abused women in DR Congo, and opened it up to birthday gatherings, break-dance practice, and more.

Our hope was to promote contemplative disciple living in an urban setting. Originally we called our space the "Abbey," and our people were calling themselves "urban monks," but we discovered multiple locations already in existence that were called "Abbey," so we chose Urban Monk. We wanted a name for our space that would