Doing Justice in Our Cities

Lessons in Public Policy from America's Heartland

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Introduction

In the time I have served as mayor of Springfield, Ohio, there has been one question that I have not wanted to hear: "Is mayor a full-time job?" Perhaps I should just say "yes"; some weeks that is close to true. But I usually say "no." So begins a string of questions that I doubt helps my credibility with the questioner. "What is your full-time job?" "I am a college professor." Now there is one big step out of reality to the average questioner. "What do you teach?" "I teach religion." I take another big step away from reality for most people. "What kind of religion do you teach?" "I teach social ethics." Usually that ends the conversation and my credibility as a practical politician. So I hate to hear that first question: "Is mayor a full-time job?"

The only time I can remember wearing a tuxedo for anything other than a wedding was for the original dedication of the Springfield Inn. Among other things, that tells you something about just how much of a social animal I am. That dedication marked the culmination of a lot of hard work by a number of people to bring a downtown hotel back to Springfield. At the reception before the dinner, Richard Kuss invited Clara and me to join his table for dinner. Dick Kuss is the former CEO of Springfield's Bonded Oil, which became Emro Marketing and is now Speedway/SuperAmerica—owners and operators of gas stations. Dick is one of the truly nicest persons I have ever known, but I have learned that his genuine niceness is usually joined to a practical purpose. Later when we gathered around Dick's table for dinner, we were introduced to the then-president of the Credit Life Insurance Company. Sent down from the parent company in Chicago, this young man on the rise and his wife had decided to live in Dublin, Ohio, an exclusive suburb of Columbus. Dick was looking for ways to connect them more to Springfield. We had not been settled very long before this young man, who could help or hurt Springfield, turned to me and asked, "Is mayor a full-time job?" "No." "What is your full-time job?" "I am a

college professor." "What do you teach?" "I teach religion." "What kind of religion do you teach?" "I teach social ethics." I doubt that this is what Dick had in mind for this conversation.

"Well, tell me, Mayor, what do you think are the three most important ethical issues facing America today?" Now there was a new twist, but not one that was likely to work out well. Should I be honest or try to bend the conversation to the reasons that Springfield was such a good place for an insurance company to do business? Rightly or wrongly, I thought I felt Dick Kuss squirming across the table. I am usually too candid, and I certainly was that night. "The issue that worries me the most is the increasing number of children who are growing up poor. They are not getting the education they need to be employed as adults at wages high enough for them to support a family in the new job market that requires more education all the time." That response ended that conversation as the young insurance executive decided to talk to others about more comfortable topics. The Springfield banker sitting next to me wanted to talk more about poor children, and we had a very good conversation. I am sure that this was not what Dick hoped would happen that evening. A year or so later Credit Life Insurance closed its Springfield operation and moved the jobs that remained to Chicago. I count it an act of grace that Dick has still supported me over the years, and we have done some good things together.

Yes, I am a professor of social ethics in the Religion Department of Wittenberg University and the mayor of Springfield, Ohio. Springfield is a very typical city of the industrial Midwest, with all of the problems of race, poverty, crime, older neighborhoods, and suburbanization. That is why *Newsweek* chose to focus its entire fiftieth anniversary issue on Springfield.[1] They could study the status of the American Dream in all of America through Springfield because we were so typical. For the same reason, major media like the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* or CNN choose Springfield and Clark County as the place to find out what is happening in the industrial heartland during presidential campaigns. When the British paper *The Guardian* decided to run a contest to see which of its readers could write the best letters to influence American voters in 2004, they chose Springfield and Clark County residents. Being typical is not necessarily good. It means that Springfield has all of the problems common to contemporary American cities: violent crime, drug abuse, poverty, troubled family lives, and loss of well-paying jobs. Yet we can take a certain pride in being typical. *Newsweek* found here "that stubborn American grit in adversity"[2] that refuses to give up on the dream of a better life. On the plus side, Springfield's size (approximately sixty-five thousand) provides a manageable microcosm of cities much larger. We in the Urban Studies Program at Wittenberg claim that Springfield is an ideal place to study cities because it is a real city but also is small enough to get our minds around. We actually believe that claim. As the director of the Urban Studies Program at Wittenberg, I have participated in a significant amount of research and analysis of Springfield based upon theories about U.S. cities generally. Springfield fits those theories all too well.

I bring a particular perspective to these urban studies analyses. I learned the practice of religious social ethics from the Ethics and Society Field of the University of Chicago Divinity School between 1968 and 1973. Specifically, I learned how to recognize issues of injustice in our social order, to identify alternative perspectives on those issues of injustice, to analyze how those perspectives arose out of different assumptions about human meaning, and to propose ways of expanding justice that adequately take account of human meaning.[3] What does that sentence actually mean? I hope two examples help. In my book on poverty and welfare, I described the issue of poverty in the United States; looked at four very different positions on poverty and welfare; examined how each of these positions understood the principles of individuality, community, worth, motivation, and hope; developed theologically grounded views of each of these five principles; and then laid out guidelines for welfare reform based upon these views. In a course on racism that I have taught at Wittenberg since 1977, we examine the history of race in the United States and the tension between racial identity and self-determination (e.g., Malcolm X) and integration into an interracial society (e.g., Martin Luther King) that has been a constant in attempts to address it. We try to understand how each approach is rooted in fundamental aspects of what it means to be human and then think about what sort of society would try to make both possible. I guess it was inevitable that I would analyze my experience in city government in a similar way.

Finally, I assume that the drive to think about injustice and how to overcome it arises from faith. Specifically, I am a Christian for whom public action is a central aspect of my faith. For me, the struggle for social justice is not just a way to express my faith, but it is also a place to find my faith and test it. So I heard the call I received asking whether I would be willing to serve on the Springfield City Commission as fundamentally a call from God to consider a new way to live my faith. This lies at the core of who I am and what I do. I will ask the reader to think about this faith issue a lot more after I have described the injustice that is metropolitan America today and analyzed some alternative ways of looking at it.

In the weeks following the 2004 presidential election, a map of the United States appeared in *USA Today* and was circulated among conservative talk shows that showed all of the counties that had voted for George W. Bush in red and all of the counties that had voted for John Kerry in blue. There were a lot of red and some dots of blue surrounded by red, suggesting that the United States had turned red—that is, Republican. Some scholars at the University of Michigan circulated some maps that suggested otherwise.[4] In one map they simply changed the size of the red and blue areas to reflect the population of the counties. The amount of red and blue was now about as equal as the election was. They then produced a map that had shades of purple that identified counties that only leaned red or blue with size adjusted for population. The result was a map that was mostly shades of purple. Whatever the original map may say about our politics, it was profoundly anticity. In it cities became just small blue dots in a red ocean.

This is not a strictly partisan matter. Most Democratic strategists believe that most statewide and national elections are now won and lost in the suburbs, so they are reluctant to draw attention to urban issues. They certainly do not want their candidates to be too closely identified with cities and their problems. When President Bush announced his budget in February 2005, this anticity bias became even clearer. The cuts in federal programs came down most heavily upon cities already suffering from a loss of jobs and population. What we saw so starkly visible in the television reports from New Orleans immediately after Hurricane Katrina was the neglect of our cities. Nearly any American city that gave a simple order to its citizens to evacuate would produce similar pictures. Those without resources would be left behind. This neglect was made even more tragic by the fact that so many of us had ignored the problem for so long as to believe that it did not exist. Once upon a time, cities were seen as the birthplaces of civilization and democracy; now they are seen as centers of crime and deterioration. I believe that the tendency to withdraw from cities and let them decline is a profoundly destructive force in our society. I also consider it a fundamental ethical issue for our citizens and a critical religious issue for people of faith.

In the first section of this book, I tell the story about how I got into urban politics in Springfield and how that career has introduced me to the challenge of urban life at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This section will include a heavy dose of our guru, David Rusk, who helped us think about our situation and what to do about it. Along the way and in parts 2 and 3 also, I try to add two sorts of reflections upon the narrative. I indicate where I think our experience raises ethical and religious issues and how events in Springfield are typical of American cities. This narrative section describes the dynamics of my engagement in public life in Springfield, Ohio, and in the process describes the issue of justice central to contemporary urban life in the United States. The division between cities and their suburbs starves city governments and distributes opportunity for their citizens in ways that are fundamentally unjust.

In the second part of the book, I analyze the ethical landscape of actors within American cities and explore my own religious and theological resources for thinking about justice in cities. These reflections arise out of the context established in the first section of the book; that context raises the questions about which I reflect. In the process, I identify and illustrate a variety of ways of looking at cities. Then, I seek to bring aspects of my religious experience and theological analysis that speak to the questions posed by my experience to bear on central issues facing cities. Along the way, I argue for real diversity not as a currently popular slogan but as the fundamental human value appropriate to guide action to address metropolitan justice. Diversity is the challenge and the gift that cities offer us today.

In the third and final part of the book, I explore where we need to go if we are to answer that challenge and receive that gift. The outside game of dispersing poverty and sharing revenue on a metropolitan basis is essential, and Springfield has pursued it strongly in recent years. I also describe the inside-game efforts

that we are in the midst of now to retain and attract middle- and upper-income residents.[5] This attempt to project into the future is informed by the ethical, religious, and theological reflections in the second part of the book that in turn arise out of the context described in the first part of the book.

That explanation of the flow of this book sounded a lot more theoretical than I intended. I understand general principles best by seeing real examples of them. So I shall season this entire discussion with very specific examples from my experience, mostly with the place and people I know and love: Springfield, Ohio. I do this in part out of the conviction that lived experiences are the reality those principles must help us understand and shape. However, I continually point out how those Springfield illustrations are typical of what other cities face and of more general ethical and religious issues. Welcome to my world of urban politics as an ethical and religious challenge. I hope that I can help make it your world, too.

PART ONE
LIVED EXPERIENCE

Chapter 1

The Call

A Professor Becomes a Politician

"I guess you know why I am calling." It was September 1988. On the other end of the line was Wes Babian, the minister of First Baptist Church. I had no clue why Wes was calling. "Tim Ayers asked me to see if you might be interested in serving on the city commission." Now there was a good question I had never asked myself. "I honestly do not know, but I am willing to think about it. Let me talk to Clara and get back to you," I told Wes. Tim Ayers was the mayor of Springfield, Ohio, in 1988. He had spoken about the city at First Baptist Church as a part of our Lenten series. As is my tendency, I was outspoken about something or other and attracted Tim's attention. Jack Blackburn had recently resigned from the Springfield City Commission—only the most recent loss to a city government in crisis. The city commission had to appoint a replacement, and various members were looking for candidates. To understand my ultimate answer to Tim, it may help you to know more about both Springfield and about me.

WHO IS SPRINGFIELD?

Someone new to Springfield quickly learns that this is a city whose past hangs heavily over its present. A permanent settlement was established at Springfield,

Ohio, in 1799.[1] By 1818, it became the county seat for the newly created Clark County. In the 1830s, the national road (now U.S. 40) extended to Springfield and for a time literally ended in Springfield. However, the city's heyday was between the Civil War and the Great Depression. Even now I am reminded quite often that at one time Springfield was home to the second-largest factory complex in the world. Only the Krupp factories in Germany were larger than the East Street Shops in Springfield. They were but a part of what made Springfield the farm implement capital of America. The owner of the East Street Works went broke in 1887. Other farm implement companies continued and in time were absorbed into International Harvester. Magazines published by one farm implement company evolved into the Crowell Publishing Company. By 1880, *Farm and Fireside* was very successful. *Woman's Home Companion* was acquired and also became very popular. In time, Crowell-Collier also acquired the *American* and *Collier's*. Add a number of smaller manufacturers to the farm implement and publishing giants, and you have a bustling midwestern industrial city. By 1920, Springfield bragged that it was "the best 60,000-resident city in the western hemisphere."[2]

The East Street Works burned down in 1902. As part of an antitrust agreement, International Harvester discontinued production of farm implements in Springfield, leaving behind its truck production.[3] A much smaller International Truck and Engine remains today the best-paying large manufacturer in the area. Crowell-Collier closed suddenly just before Christmas in 1956. In the 1970s and 1980s, people still talked about this event as though it had happened the week before. For many, it was the beginning of the decline of Springfield.

Developments outside the city limits also affected the city. In the 1960s, International Harvester built a large new assembly plant north of Springfield. Other industries moved out, leaving behind many vacant old factory buildings along the railroad tracks on the east and west sides. The opening of the Upper Valley Mall to the west of town in 1971 helped speed up the decline of downtown Springfield. Local voters approved an increase in the municipal income tax to 2 percent in return for a phase-out of property taxes for city government. Part of the additional tax revenue was used to acquire land in the core block of the city, to demolish the structures that were there, and to build a new city hall and other new buildings. By 1977, when I interviewed for a job at Wittenberg University, Springfield had the look of a worn, old industrial city with a hole in the ground downtown where the garage under city hall was to be built. Later we learned that locals loved to talk about the glorious past, usually as a part of criticizing their present and fearing their future.

During the spring of 1977, we came for a few days to find a new home. After looking at homes on the Northside for a day, we saw some homes in the multiple listing book on the Eastside, Westside, and especially the Southside of town that looked like what we wanted at a price we could manage. With some exceptions, north is where people with more money live and south is where those with less money live—which means that African Americans and poor whites, many with roots somewhere in Appalachia, are concentrated on the Southside. The largely

white, blue-collar Eastside and Westside are left out of this too-simple north-south equation, and they do feel left out.

Our real estate agent suggested that we drive around the neighborhoods the next day before we picked up keys for the houses. In retrospect, it is clear that he wanted us to see that the southside homes were in racially mixed neighborhoods. We got the keys and have loved the house at 1613 Wittenberg Boulevard West ever since. We had no idea how dramatically we had just located ourselves in Springfield, Ohio. North is north, and south is south. Almost by accident, we had taken our stand on one side of that dividing line. As I became active in citywide school issues, I found that Northsiders were constantly surprised by Southside anger. We Southsiders were not. This kind of racial and economic geography makes Springfield a very typical American city with its full share of income and racial divisions.

The arrival of the Copelands did not turn Springfield around. In fact, things grew worse in the late 1970s and especially in the 1980s. A very ugly strike at International Harvester in 1979 tore the city apart.[4] The most positive news was defensive. In 1982, Springfield won a battle with Fort Wayne, Indiana, to be the primary location where International Harvester assembled International Harvester trucks.[5] Springfield's status as an extremely typical city led *Newsweek* to choose it as the hometown the magazine analyzed for its fiftieth anniversary issue in 1983. Some locals preferred to think that Springfield was chosen as a model city. However, *Newsweek* made clear that it liked Springfield for its problems as much as its successes. *Newsweek*'s story was about a community and five particular families enduring hard times. Their writers summarized, "There is a deep undercurrent of apprehension in Springfield's view of the future . . . exacerbated by a mistrust in the honesty and the competence of government."[6] *Newsweek* concluded that the American Dream had survived in Springfield, but they seemed a bit surprised that it had.

If anything, city government fared even worse than the city itself. The core problem was money. The economic decline of the city meant less revenue for city government. The inflation and recessions that hit the entire country were hardest on the industrial Midwest and especially on cities just like Springfield. The largest single blow was the loss of federal revenue-sharing funds in the early 1980s, $2 million that Springfield had put right in the middle of its general fund to pay fire and police salaries. These financial problems led city government to desperate measures that only seemed to make things worse. Voters raised the income tax to 2.5 percent for three years. When that increase came up for renewal, city government threatened to turn off two-thirds of the streetlights if it failed. It did fail, and the lights went out. In an effort to shift costs, city government contracted with a private hauler to pick up trash and voted to add the cost plus a little extra revenue for the city's general fund to city utility (water and sewer) bills. Frank Lightle, a community activist who later served with me on the city commission, led a petition drive to force a referendum that outlawed adding the cost to the utility bills without a vote of the people. The referendum

won, and city government discontinued picking up the garbage. These cuts in city services were mirrored in most other cities, especially manufacturing cities faced with declining tax bases.

Core Renewal, established when the income tax was increased to 2 percent in 1976, used primarily federal funds to acquire land, demolish old structures, and make the land available for new projects. In time, the downtown Springfield Inn, a new Family YMCA, a large insurance office building, a downtown campus for the local community college, a new library, and a major performing arts center would be built, along with the new city hall. At the same time, streetlights were turned off, trash pickup was discontinued, and other city services deteriorated. Only some of the money could have been spent on the neighborhoods, but residents could not understand how the city could afford all this downtown development while its neighborhoods were visibly deteriorating.

All of this turmoil took its toll on city government itself. Over one five-year period, Springfield had four different city managers. Some city commissioners quit before their terms were completed, and most served only one term. Given the difficulties and stresses of the job, it became increasingly difficult to find people willing to serve on the city commission for just twenty-five hundred dollars a year. There was no light at the end of the tunnel. Springfield fell into a downward cycle in which city government threatened the citizens with some dire consequence if they did not vote for something, the citizens voted no, and then city government imposed the pain. City government bounced from crisis to crisis, employee morale was at rock bottom, and the citizens were mad. By 1989, the city government faced a $1.7 million deficit in its general fund. A new city manager, Matt Kridler, had frozen all new hiring. I asked Frank Lightle, who also was our neighbor and friend, whether I should apply for the vacant seat. He suggested I should do so only if I could handle a lot of heat.

Ironically, I was raised in Silvis, in northwest Illinois, where the farm implement industry went after it left Springfield, Ohio. Most of the boys who graduated with me in 1961 from United Township High School in East Moline went directly to work for John Deere or International Harvester making combines, tractors, corn pickers, and manure spreaders primarily for America's breadbasket. As a child, I rode the bus with my mom to downtown Moline to shop at Sears and Penney's and Woolworth's and the New York Store—just as people did in Springfield, Ohio. Most of the people I grew up among were blue-collar with some poor folks mixed in. My parents did not complete high school because of family difficulties, but unlike most of my fellow graduates from United Township High School, I went off to college. Then came seminary and graduate school. By the time I received my PhD, I had participated briefly in the civil rights movement, been introduced to process theology, joined the campaign of Robert Kennedy in Indiana, written a dissertation on poverty and welfare, and worked for a statewide religious consortium on governmental affairs. However, when we moved to Springfield in 1977 so I could teach at Wittenberg University, it felt like I was back home.

So when I hung up from that phone call from Wes Babian inquiring about whether I would be interested in serving on the Springfield City Commission, I was ready. I had explored some jobs elsewhere, some seriously, but none had worked out for all of us. It seemed likely that I was going to be staying at Wittenberg the rest of my career, but I was restless for a change of pace. Our children Scott and Karen had graduated from high school and were out of the house for now. I knew that Springfield was in real trouble, but I felt it was time that I began acting upon all this knowledge and those principles I had developed. I thought I brought to the task some unusual qualifications. I was well educated but had never cut off my working-class roots. I was committed to social justice but had practiced the capacity to understand and appreciate differences of opinion. I worked at a bastion of Northside Springfield, Wittenberg University, but we had lived and raised our children on the Southside.

ANSWERING THE CALL

Clara thought this was a great opportunity and urged me to apply. I applied, was appointed, and sworn in. My adventure in urban politics had begun. For me, this political adventure was also an ethical and religious test. When I came forward to the strains of "Just as I Am" to confess my faith and join First Christian Church as an early teenager, mine was a faith of relationships with family and church. However, I knew that faith led my parents to take responsibility not just for us but for the community. From the beginning, that faith included the least of these as well as the important people. I came to believe that this faith required justice for all as well as love for those I knew. That concept became a principle for action for me through my puny participation in the civil rights movement which taught me to take responsibility for creating greater justice and to believe that my action could make a difference. I brought that religious faith with me when I began my life as an urban politician.

GETTING STARTED

When I joined the Springfield City Commission in 1988, the relationship between the commission and the voters was so toxic that my first job was to establish an identity separate from the sitting commission without irritating the other commissioners so much that they would not work with me. To do that, I chose two issues to oppose: tax abatement and downtown development. If it had not been these two, I would have had to find others. Luckily those issues appealed to the alienated voters, and I thought I was actually right to take the stances I had staked out.

For me, tax abatement was an easy call. In 1988, the practice of Springfield city government was to offer to abate 100 percent of the property taxes for ten

years for businesses building new facilities or remodeling or expanding old ones. At that time, the only property taxes the city collected were sent to the state of Ohio for police and firefighter pensions. Most of the city's revenue came from the municipal income tax, which state law did not allow it to abate at that time. While property taxes supported a large number of taxing bodies, by far the largest portion (around 80 percent) went to the public schools. Springfield's practice meant that the schools received no taxes on most construction and new equipment for its first ten years on the tax rolls.

What bothered me most was the effect on schools. I believed, and still believe, that the quality of public education was a key to Springfield's success or failure. Part of the reason people settle in a town is the quality of its schools; the number-one reason they move out of a city is schools. This issue was particularly important in Springfield. The educational level of our population was lower than most comparable cities in Ohio, even the old industrial ones, and we had a high dropout rate. This problem was personal for the individuals with less education, but it was also a major economic problem for our community. Employers who needed an educated workforce, which increasingly means those that pay good wages, might not choose to locate in Springfield or might move to a community with better-educated workers.

The city staff and my fellow commissioners honestly believed that abating these property taxes was in the long-term best interests of everyone, including the schools. Otherwise, the prevailing thinking went, new businesses might well choose to locate somewhere else that offered better tax breaks. Our schools, so people thought, would gain the taxes from these businesses in ten years. In the meantime, there would be spin-off expansion in the tax base as other businesses did business with those receiving the tax breaks and the workers holding the new jobs bought houses. Some truth underlies all of these arguments. The trick in luring new business is to give away as little as possible without losing the prospect, and knowing exactly where that point was is difficult. In this case, I could not help but suspect that it was just too easy for negotiators for the city to give away the school taxes.

I voted against the first tax abatement that came up and lost 4-1. In principle, I oppose all tax abatement. I think businesses should decide on economic grounds where to locate—not on the basis of which community is most willing to hurt its schools. I do not think that the state of Ohio should allow tax abatement, and I think that the federal government should provide significant incentives to all states that do not allow it. I have made this clear to my state and federal representatives more than once, to no avail. Having made my point, I met with staff to create some alternative policy recognizing that other communities would continue to offer abatements. The new policy had two primary features: (1) except in unusual situations, the city would offer to abate no more than 50 percent of the property tax for no more than five years, and (2) the Board of Education would be presented with each deal and allowed to comment upon it. The new policy was adopted and has been city policy since.

This first encounter with legislating said something about politics, but it also represented a fundamental issue facing city governments, especially ones that are not doing very well economically. Because jobs are so important to the health of the community, cities are under pressure to provide incentives (usually including tax breaks) that may attract or keep business, often at the cost of services to citizens. The businesses themselves may need those very services in the long run, in this case an educated workforce. At some point, politics is always the art of the possible. Holding out for pure principles is central to the role of a prophet but threatens to make a politician irrelevant. On the other hand, compromise uninformed by principle is not likely to produce much positive change. Urban politicians constantly must be looking for the proper balance between compromise and principle.

The issue of downtown development was less clear. The 1980s was a time of downward spiral in Springfield, leaving us with no garbage collection, two-thirds of our streetlights turned off, and a visible decline in basic services. In the midst of this crisis, Springfield was proceeding with an ambitious redevelopment of the downtown, including—as mentioned earlier—plans for a new city hall, a new Family YMCA, a new library, a performing arts center, a new bus garage, and a hotel. Some of my colleagues shared my doubts that a downtown hotel could succeed, but they had promised to support it. However, the project would have required federal grant money, money that I felt could have been better spent on the city's neighborhoods. I felt that if it was a good project, it should not have required so much public investment. I decided to vote against spending any more federal grant money on the hotel, explaining that I supported downtown redevelopment and hoped that the Springfield Inn succeeded but that, given the conditions in our neighborhoods, we should not spend the money they needed on the hotel.

In retrospect, I am not sure that I was right about the substance of those votes. The Springfield Inn—now totally remodeled as a Courtyard by Marriott—has been fairly successful as a business and greatly successful as a community meeting place. The total amount of money that could have been spent on the neighborhoods probably would not have made much difference. However, the symbolic politics of these votes was on target. They cast me in the role of the defender of the average people at a time when they felt under siege. Finally, someone was standing up for them. A year later when I was in an election contest with several avowed advocates of putting the neighborhoods first, my credentials already were set in the public's mind. Luckily, I never had a direct showdown with the hotel's supporters. The other four commissioners kept voting yes, and I never criticized the project itself. A few years later as mayor, I helped cut the ribbon at the grand opening of the Springfield Inn. Talk about having your cake and eating it, too.

Again, my experience is common for urban politicians. Downtowns everywhere have suffered from the development of regional and super malls out in the suburbs. Downtowns are never likely to be what they once were, except in a very

few cities, but downtowns can either be rallying points for civic pride or symbols of a community's decline. At the same time, the vast majority of cities find it difficult to maintain the quality of basic services to their residential neighborhoods. Downtowns and neighborhoods both need more help than most cities can afford. As I was to learn more and more over time, our choices are seldom clear and almost never without significant trade-offs, what economists call opportunity costs. We often think ethics is simply about choosing between right and wrong. Sometimes it is. More often it is about choosing between the better of two goods or the lesser of two evils. Such choices require judgment and faith, but that is true for all of life, not just urban politics.

STOPPING THE BLEEDING

How is budget cutting an ethical issue? I would argue that it is the most important ethical issue in government. Revenue represents the time and effort of taxpayers taken away from them in order to buy some public goods. Expenditures are a statement about what we hold to be important. Since local governments are not able to run deficits in their operating budgets, a deficit forces hard choices. As we sat around the commissioners' table in 1988 and 1989, our discussion centered upon just how important a particular service was compared to other services. Is a worker in the forestry department more or less important than a police officer? That question is never put to most citizens. They want the tree trimmed in front of their house, and they want police response when they call 911.

So how does a city commissioner decide? One way would be to try to find out what the taxpayers want and do it. That is one approach to democracy; our representatives merely reflect our wishes and thus our values. As we convened around that budget table in 1989, any or all of us may at times have taken the popularity of services into account. However, we also believed that we were elected by the people to make the hard decisions and that we had access to a lot more information than the average citizen. Our primary concern was what we thought were the most important services. We hated to eliminate foresters, but we believed police protection was more important. The bases upon which you and I decide what is most important are our ethical principles, and they finally are grounded in our most fundamental life commitments: our faith. For me, I tried to protect programs that met basic needs or primarily served people with fewer resources. A program that served primarily affluent people was suspect in my mind. The trouble was that there was not much luxury in the Springfield budget that had not already been cut out by 1988. It also did not do any good to cut a program that was either essentially free, because it broke even, or that produced income even though it was a relative luxury, such as our golf courses. Most cities for at least the past twenty years have been faced with budget cutting. While these budget decisions receive little media attention, they are the most fundamental choices city governments make.

One step in the downward spiral of the Springfield of the 1980s was the turning off of two-thirds of the streetlights. The lights on major streets and near intersections were left on, but the rest were turned off to save electricity. Streetlights are not as important as some other matters, but lights that are dark are very visible. The dark lights took on symbolic significance far beyond their real importance, the most obvious indication that Springfield was a failure. How could city government convince citizens it could do anything else if it could not even turn the lights on again? So Matt Kridler, the city manager, approached our local utility, Ohio Edison, with a problem. We needed to turn our streetlights back on, but we had very little money. Matt argued that turning on the streetlights in Springfield would stimulate economic development and thus increase business for the utility over time. The result was an agreement that was not perfect, but it was a pretty good deal. We doubted that citizens cared about the specifics as long as the lights were lit. The deal was approved, and Ohio Edison began to reconnect our lights.

By election day of 1989, I had established myself as an independent voice on the city commission, the new city manager had stopped the bleeding in the city budget, and the streetlights were about to shine again. That made it a good time for me to run. But a revolution was brewing.

THE REVOLUTION

Adopted in 1913, the charter of the city of Springfield established the city manager form of government and called for the election to four-year terms of five city commissioners running citywide without party label. This was intended to keep politics out of city government. As far as I know, at no time since the adoption of that charter had there been more than one Democrat or more than one person who lived on the Southside of Springfield on the city commission. Over that time, the Eastside and Westside were represented even less than the Southside. Republicans from the Northside, the more affluent part of Springfield, ran city government for seventy-five years. By the 1980s, there was broad support for the need to assure that all parts of the city were represented on the commission. However, an attempt to revise the charter to establish wards also included a major increase in compensation for city commissioners, so it failed.

The election was close, but in the end I was elected to the commission with the most votes and named mayor by my fellow commissioners. I had a good team with me on the commission, including two other Democrats who lived within blocks of each other on the Southside of town. What we three shared was a commitment to improving the lives of average people in the blue-collar and low-income neighborhoods of Springfield. From the outside, this was either a breath of fresh air that brought new hope or a scary new world of uncertainty. All agreed that it promised to be different.

I arrived early for the swearing-in ceremony on January 2, 1990, wearing the last suit my dad bought before he died. The City Hall Forum was soon full,

mostly of family and supporters of the three new commissioners. I could not help but think how proud my parents would have been to have been there. The hour before the actual meeting was filled with music—classical music from a Wittenberg group; bluegrass from four women, including a mother of one of Clara's former students; and a gospel group from Dale Henry's church. They sang our desire to be the city commission of all of Springfield's people. A new day had begun for the city. As I stood with Clara, my hand upraised to repeat the oaths given by a municipal court judge, reality began to hit home. In a little over one year I had gone from a somewhat bored college professor looking for something worth doing to a college professor who was also the mayor of a struggling old industrial city. Now I certainly had enough to do, and I was convinced it was worth doing. Almost as soon as we were sworn in we needed to replace outgoing mayor Tim Ayers, who decided to move to Columbus. We quickly appointed Nora Parker to that seat.

The new commission was an interesting group. The only Republican and Northsider on the council was Faye Flack. The other four of us all were Democrats who lived on the Southside, but what a delightful mix. Faye supported business interests but was committed to equal rights. Frank Lightle was the hero of the Appalachian community. Dale Henry had good contacts in the African American community. Nora Parker was a government teacher at South High School and a longtime political activist for the Springfield Education Association. And then there was me, with one foot in Wittenberg and one in our Southside neighborhood. All five of us were connected to different constituencies, but all were committed to bridging the antagonism between city government and the citizens.

All cities have the problem of whether their elected body represents the entire community and especially whether it represents those parts of the community not usually represented. Often this concern is seen as a trade-off with having an elected body that is able to see the big picture instead of the particular concerns of the special constituencies. This problem affects all elected bodies, but cities are often seen as either dominated by a narrow elite or torn apart by parochial interests. The tension is real. People, especially disadvantaged groups, need to be represented, but the common interest also needs to be represented. This commission met both of these needs quite well for Springfield.

SYMBOLIC CHANGES

Rightly or wrongly, many citizens of Springfield believed that a lot of deals involving city government in 1990 were made behind closed doors. Ohio had an Open Meetings Act that allowed a majority of us to meet in private only for certain purposes, such as personnel, pending litigation, property purchases and sales, or labor negotiations. In Ohio, statutory cities are ruled by the state laws on municipalities, while a charter city has its own local constitution that it follows unless it contradicts state or federal laws. Springfield is a charter city, giving

us more freedom in how we operate, so we did not have to follow the Open Meetings Act. However, the new commission decided that it would be a good symbol of our openness to the public if we asked the voters to include the provisions of the state's Open Meeting Act in the charter of the city of Springfield. We voted to put that on the ballot for May 1990, and it passed. This move was mostly symbolic, but symbols can be powerful.

At the same time, Springfield was wrestling with the underlying issues of jobs, tax base, and basic services that are fundamental to city government. I always felt that the symbolic issues were less significant. Yet the media picked up on the symbolic and generally ignored or gave just passing attention to the fundamentals. Television cameras appeared for discussions of curfews or gun control but never showed up for budget adoption. Part of it was complexity. The city budget was big and complicated. A city commissioner or a reporter had to spend a lot of time and ask a lot of questions to understand it. Only the newspaper reporter tried; the radio and television people could not spend the time it took. Part of it was attention span. Retaining jobs and bringing new ones to town would provide a lot more jobs than some short-term city jobs program, but this approach took time. The broadcast media did not have the time to wait. Perhaps the citizens themselves also could not or would not take the time to understand the complicated or wait for results.

I reluctantly reached the conclusion that while I must stay focused on fundamentals, I also needed to learn to play some symbolic politics. I do not think that any of the symbolic moves we made to communicate openness stood in the way of important business. People did seem to think we were more open, and the changes had not really caused any big problems. I had stumbled into what became a principle for me. If a symbolic act did not do any significant harm and seemed to respond to something people cared about, why not do it? It might give people a false sense that we were doing something about a problem when we were not, but even that might be at least therapeutic.

I believe that the changes we made in commission procedures did not really change much except the public's perception of us. However, that perception had to be changed for us to be able to move ahead with real problems. I guess I was becoming more political, but I made a mental note to myself to remember what was really important. I did not ever want to delude myself into thinking I was really doing much by passing legislation that was only symbolic. Urban politicians face this temptation since they are short on money and because the media, especially broadcast media, are focused on symbols. Symbols work in the short run, but reality tends to catch up over time with merely symbolic gestures.

FUNDAMENTAL REALITIES

All of us elected in 1989 had run on the basis of returning basic services to the community. Newly relit streetlights were a start, but safety and jobs were much

more fundamental. When I was named to the city commission in September 1988, the city was in the midst of a campaign to pass a property tax levy that would have provided operating funds for the city, including the safety forces. After a couple of failures, a group of citizens was able to pass a levy to increase the number of police on the street. This move allowed us not only to put more officers on the beat but also to initiate community-oriented policing aimed at putting the police in better contact with the people in our neighborhoods.

The local economy is central to everything a city tries to do. The transition away from heavy manufacturing by well-paid union workers that is centered in the Midwest and especially in Ohio already was under way in Springfield in 1988. It has accelerated since. In 1988, employment at the then–Navistar International was sixty-five hundred; the now–International Truck and Engine employs fewer than one thousand workers in Springfield. The jobs lost extend beyond International to its suppliers and to those people who sell goods and services to the International workers. This situation has forced a psychic shift from a solid blue-collar town to a town that has lost the center of its economy—leaving those at the top and those at the bottom, but a lot fewer in the middle.

The truth is that the primary driver of local employment was the strength of the national economy. When the national economy grows, businesses expand—some of them in Ohio and some in Springfield. Like all cities, we try to get more than our share. When the national economy contracts, local jobs are lost. Like all cities, we try to lose less than our share. Actually, Springfield held its own in Ohio in terms of the number of jobs. The trouble was that most of the new jobs did not pay as well as the ones that were lost. In our competitive economy and federal system, cities are forced to compete with other cities for jobs. This competition is not always fair and may undercut other important priorities, as we saw earlier in terms of tax abatements.

CHANGES

Over the years there were many changes to the city commission. While the Southside majority survived throughout these changes, I did not survive as mayor. In both 1994 and 1996, the commission tore itself apart over who should hold that post. I continued on the city commission, but both times others were elected mayor. These were difficult years for a number of reasons, but I tried to be a good loser. Between 1994 and 1998, my primary way of being a good loser was to shift the extra time I had given to being mayor into my own professional life. One result was a book, *And the Poor Get Welfare*,[7] that picked up on my dissertation work, updated it, and related it to President Bill Clinton's welfare reform proposals. The other result was the collaboration with David Rusk that resulted in Updating the Dream.

CITIES AS A MORAL ISSUE

So there you have the story of how I became an urban politician. Along the way in the story I have pointed out the extent to which the realities of Springfield are very typical of cities generally and especially of industrial cities and particularly those in the Midwest and Northeast regions of the United States. I have also identified a series of challenges such cities face these days. Fiscally, cities have less revenue and greater demand for services and must deal with the trade-off between preserving those basic services and attracting and keeping jobs and downtown redevelopment. Urban politicians must constantly struggle with how much time to spend with primarily symbolic efforts instead of trying to address fundamental problems. Most basically, cities must deal with the loss of manufacturing jobs, the drain caused by sprawl to the suburbs, and the serious divisions of race and income among their citizens.

The thesis of this book is that these are not just practical problems but taken together pose a fundamental issue of justice in our society. Our metropolitan areas are increasingly sorting out into neighborhoods that are homogeneous by race and income. Put directly, the way our metropolitan areas are organized is destroying the lives of far too many of our people, imposing dramatically different costs on different groups of our citizens and failing to provide communities that bring us together as people. I firmly believe that we will have great difficulty facing this injustice without coming to terms with our most fundamental commitments. This is finally a matter of faith. We shall return to this consideration of ethics, justice, and faith, but first we need to understand better the practical, unjust situation in which cities find themselves. In Springfield we did that through the process we called *Updating the Dream*.