

The Power of Proximity: Moving Beyond Awareness to Action
 Available July 25, 2017
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Proximate to the Pain of the Poor

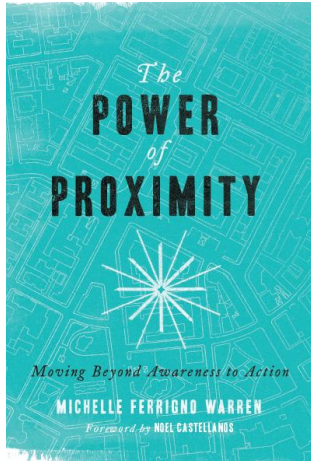
We can see evidence of injustice all around us, whether in continuing incidents of racial inequality or in the systemic forces that disenfranchise people and perpetuate poverty. But in an age of hashtag and armchair activism, merely raising awareness about injustice is not enough.

Michelle Ferrigno Warren knows what is needed. She and her family have chosen to live in communities where they are “proximate to the pain of the poor.” This makes all the difference in facing and overcoming injustice. When we build relationships where we live, we discover the complexities of standing with the vulnerable and the commitment needed for long-term change. In *The Power of Proximity*, Warren addresses how deep engagement results in the following:

- Proximity to the poor changes those who become proximate.
- Proximity to the poor compels an active response from the person who becomes proximate.
- Proximity to the poor is an active engagement of the injustice of the poor. It moves you toward a shared action to eradicate it.

Warren says, “To be a Christian and to be aware of injustice is not enough. As Christ-followers we are compelled to engage at a deeply personal and inconvenient level. You cannot eradicate injustice in your spare time. The church needs to get serious about injustice and engage it in an active way. Talking about injustice – even good theologically based discussion – is not enough to do anything of substance. You cannot fix a problem you don’t understand. You will never understand it from a distance.”

Noel Castellanos, president of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), said, “I’m grateful that Michelle has shared her struggles, her convictions, and her wisdom in *The Power of Proximity*. My prayer to God is that he will use this book to help us overcome our own fears and insecurities – to express our faith in Jesus Christ by walking in close proximity to the poor as an expression of our love for him.”



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“The Power of Proximity urges us to overcome our fears and courageously cross the deep dividing lines within our society. We are challenged not only to get close to those who are hurting on the Jericho road, but to transform the whole road!”

— Shawn Casselberry,
executive director, Mission Year

Relocating to Poverty and Injustice

More than twenty years ago I chose to leave the community in which I was born and live in close proximity to the poor as an expression of justice. I don't think I realized then what I was doing. I just thought living alongside those with whom I worked and worshiped was better than driving in a few times a week to get my “job” done. Over time I have grown to understand my life's choices better. I wanted ours to be a shared way of life.

This idea of becoming proximate to the poor was not unique to my husband and me. John Perkins, a pastor from Jackson, Mississippi, along with an amazing group of radical Christians, had been doing it for more than a decade before us. Dr. Perkins called living in proximity to the poor “relocation.” This philosophy was shared by a number of Christians who not only served communities by relocating but lived out an additional seven principles that today we know as Christian community development (CCD).

The amazing thing is that it wasn't until six years after my husband, David, and I began to talk and then live our life alongside the poor that we learned of John Perkins, the CCD principles, and the association of people who practiced those principles. It turns out that proximity to the poor was not a philosophy; it was a movement of the Spirit, who continues to reconcile the world to himself and people to one another. My story is simply one that confirms his transformational work in the hearts of those who follow him — a movement that continues today.

The recent surge of millennials engaging in justice work around the globe is outstanding. While traveling around the country, talking to and meeting with young people about injustice and the response of the church, I hear a similar question over and over again: “What can I do to engage injustice and make real, lasting change?” These young people sincerely want to make an impact on the brokenness they see in the world around them.

The first few times I was asked how to engage injustice and make a difference, I would talk about what I had studied and how I had landed where I am today. But the more I heard these young people's questions, the more I realized they were ready to bring about change in the world now. They were not naive to pain and injustice like I had been years ago when I was considering church work among the urban poor. These vibrant young people were aware of the world's problems at a deep level. They were ready to take their awareness — learned in school, from social media, on short-term mission trips, and through international travel — to a more substantive level. They were serious about change and wanted to know how to pivot to their next move so they could do the most good.

I also realized that it wasn't just a few people who were thinking about these things. Requests to connect, to talk about the future, became a constant stream. Young people

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Krista Clayton, broadcast and online publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kclayton@ivpress.com
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Michelle Ferrigno Warren is the advocacy and strategic engagement director for the Christian Community Development Association. She is an immigration, education, and human service policy specialist and an adjunct faculty member at Denver Seminary. She has worked in Christian community development for over twenty years, is part of the national Evangelical Immigration Table, consults for the National Immigration Forum, and is a founding staff member of Open Door Ministries. She earned her bachelor's degree from Cedarville University and her master's in public administration from the University of Colorado.

Follow Michelle on Twitter:
@mcfwarren.

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consistently asked, “What should I be studying? What internships should I line up? I want to advocate for justice as a Christian. I feel so passionate about ___. What should be my next steps? How do I do what you’re doing?”

This book is an attempt to answer the questions I’ve heard more broadly than is possible in those one-on-one coffee meetings or walks I’ve taken this past decade with so many young adults. If you are anything like these young people I’ve met, I know you also want to do something with all the injustice you’ve learned about. You want to know what to do next. And my advice to you is the same as it has been to them. The most profound move you can make to address pain and injustice is to become proximate to it.

Proximity to anything gives you a front-row seat to what’s happening. This is why tickets near the front of a sports stadium or concert venue are so expensive and valuable. You have the best view from the front and the experience is far more personal. Up close there is little debate about what’s actually happening in front of you. And you know what? Becoming proximate to the poor, those impacted most by injustice, is the most radical, transformative thing you can do to affect it. Proximity to the poor is powerful.

Not everyone has a front-row seat. The front row is a privilege, an opportunity to see what’s really going on and to allow those factors to penetrate your heart and mind, bringing you to a place where you can participate in the transformation. People in the back can benefit from your perspective because they aren’t there.

Learning about pain and injustice from a book or a short experience may tug at the strings of your heart, but it offers a very limited view. Certainly that faraway view can fan the flames of God’s heart for justice embedded in yours and give you a vision of yourself helping to alleviate it. Studying theology, sociology, anthropology, or policy is also a great way to build your foundation as a person so you can better interact with the issues. But these actions are still limited. They keep you on the back of the bus away from the action.

In contrast, proximity to injustice transforms your view of the bigger world and the people moving about in it. Most importantly, it transforms you in all the ways that are necessary to help you take part in God’s process of redeeming and rebuilding what is broken.

It is from this privileged seat, this place of proximity to staggering pain, injustice, and brokenness, that I invite you to join me. Journey with me, not only with a little of my story and transformed perspective, but also with my thoughts on how I believe the church should more deeply engage this justice narrative moving from awareness to action. Let’s lean in, with eyes wide open, and learn to embrace the power of proximity.

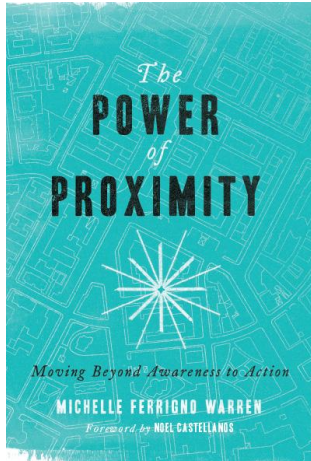
– Adapted from the introduction

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“Beckons Us to Join the Pilgrimage to Walk Alongside the Vulnerable”

“I’m grateful that Michelle has shared her struggles, her convictions, and her wisdom in *The Power of Proximity*. My prayer to God is that he will use this book to help us overcome our own fears and insecurities – to express our faith in Jesus Christ by walking in close proximity to the poor as an expression of our love for him.”

– **from the foreword by Noel Castellanos**, president, CCDA

“At a time when the people of these United States of America are clearly so divided, Michelle Warren’s book *The Power of Proximity* has captured the crux of the matter: the church cannot effectively address the ills of poverty and racial injustice based on its limited knowledge and awareness of these issues. While frequent mission activities in urban neighborhoods are helpful, they are no substitute for living among the poor and gaining the unique insight of being up close. Using the very familiar story of the good Samaritan coming to the aid of a man beaten up and left for dead, Ms. Warren uses her family’s experience of living in an urban community to make a very compelling statement. That statement is at the heart of what the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) has advocated all along: those who want to help break the vicious cycles of poverty and racial injustice must be willing to walk among (and in the shoes of) the people who are broken and be willing to be broken themselves. It’s a powerful book!”

– **John Perkins**, cofounder, Christian Community Development Association, founder, John & Vera Mae Perkins Foundation for Reconciliation, Justice & Christian Community Development

“In Jesus, God leaves all the comforts of heaven, puts on skin, and moves into a broken world – born a refugee, wandering as a homeless rabbi, executed as a criminal. In this book, Michelle Warren dares us to follow the suffering Christ by leaning into the suffering of our world. She calls us not to conform to the patterns of this world, which might otherwise convince us to move out of Jesus’s neighborhood and avoid the streets of Jericho, where people still get beat up.”

– **Shane Claiborne**, author and activist

“At a time when it’s so easy to distance ourselves from those who are different from us or make us feel uncomfortable, Michelle reminds us in *The Power of Proximity* that it’s when we are close to the suffering and poor that we truly understand the heart of God. This book is an important reminder of the power of relationships to transform and deepen our understanding of a relational God who is working to redeem all things for his glory and



justice. Using her own life story as an example, Michelle shares key lessons learned from coming alongside marginalized communities and demonstrates how justice cannot become personal until you are proximate to it. I highly recommend this book as a primer on how to go beyond awareness to living a poured-out life that Jesus demands from his followers.”

– **Jenny Yang**, vice president of advocacy and policy, World Relief

“Warren offers us a theology of testimony – that is, a theology that grows out of lived life. This is an account of a journey into a richer understanding of God and the mission to which he calls his people. But a testimony is more than a retelling. *The Power of Proximity* beckons us to join the pilgrimage to walk alongside the vulnerable – a pilgrimage that will transform how we incarnate Christian faith.”

– **M. Daniel Carroll R. (Rodas)**, Blanchard Professor of Old Testament, Wheaton College, author, *Christians at the Border*

“Michelle Warren is a genuine and credible expert on this topic. She and her family have personally lived out the value of proximity, and her work with everyone from neighborhood stakeholders to senior politicians has demonstrated that there really is untapped power here. I encourage you to allow Michelle to guide you on a journey into a new perspective on the intersection of faith and social engagement.”

– **Daniel Hill**, senior pastor, River City Community Church, author of *White Awake*

“The great Holocaust writer and survivor Elie Wiesel says that we are most universal when we are most particular. Michelle Warren takes us through her individual and particular journey in a way that powerfully reveals the core of the call to all of us, wherever we come from, to love mercy and do justice. A wonderful book for young Christians – and for all Christians who have begun to authentically wrestle with the demands of whole-gospel discipleship.”

– **Alexia Salvatierra**, coauthor of *Faith-Rooted Organizing*

“Michelle Warren is a remarkable woman who, along with her husband and family, has lived among the poor for over two decades. They have learned so much from the people around them. Michelle weaves her story in touching and heartfelt ways that teach us all about the importance of proximity. I highly recommend *The Power of Proximity*.”

– **Wayne “Coach” Gordon**, pastor, Lawndale Community Church, president emeritus, Christian Community Development Association

“Michelle Warren is a faithful witness to the power of proximity. She writes like she lives – with great passion and purpose – and shows us the path to justice by sharing her own story



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with vulnerability and insight. *The Power of Proximity* urges us to overcome our fears and courageously cross the deep dividing lines within our society. We are challenged not only to get close to those who are hurting on the Jericho road, but to transform the whole road!"

– **Shawn Casselberry**, executive director, Mission Year

"We cannot effectively love our neighbors as ourselves, as Jesus commands us, unless we're in close proximity to them; we will never be good Samaritans if we avoid the Jericho road altogether. My friend Michelle Warren, who with her family has lived in close proximity to poor and vulnerable people for decades, offers this important challenge as to why awareness of injustice is not enough. I pray this superb book will transform how Christians serve and learn from their vulnerable neighbors."

– **Matthew Soerens**, US director of church mobilization, World Relief, coauthor of *Welcoming the Stranger*

"In an age of hashtag awareness and digital outrage, Michelle Warren invites us to embrace the power of the incarnation, to let our love for others and our passion for justice take on flesh and 'move into the neighborhood.' This is not a book, a collection of stories, or a set of principles; this is a life lived in self-giving love. So be warned: by entering these pages, you will become proximate to Michelle's story, and in doing so you will be powerfully challenged and personally transformed."

– **Glenn Packiam**, lead pastor, New Life Downtown, associate senior pastor, New Life Church, author of *Discover the Mystery of Faith*, *Lucky*, and *Secondhand Jesus*

"Michelle is one of our country's top organizers. She has a heart for people, a gift for organizing, and a commitment to marginalized communities. She is a voice we should be listening to today. I highly recommend her book to anyone who is interested in organizing and has a concern for people."

– **Leroy Barber**, director, The Voices Project, board chair, Missio Alliance

"In the spirit of John Perkins's call to 'relocation' in the 1980s, Michelle Warren's *The Power of Proximity* calls a new generation to defy the moving sidewalk that pushes us to seek out and settle down in communities of comfort. Instead she says, 'Lean in.' Michelle's life and words declare that the renewing of our minds requires the relocation of our bodies into the epic day-to-day struggles of ordinary people pushed to forgotten corners of our cities and towns. Here we experience the power of proximity to heal and transform our world."

– **Lisa Sharon Harper**, speaker, activist, author of *The Very Good Gospel*