

DON'T DESPISE OUR YOUTH

**RENEWING HOPE FOR
URBAN YOUTH MINISTRY**

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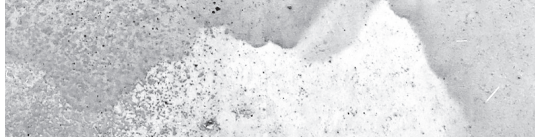
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1

A CULTURAL DISCLAIMER

CULTURE AND CONTEXT ARE extremely important factors for consideration in ministry. These ideals are meant to guide our understanding of how to carry out ministry in our churches. Sometimes culture can be shocking and difficult to receive by those on the outside of the particular culture, but as God calls us to serve in particular contexts, awareness of those cultural contexts is an important part of that work.

In this book, I will be addressing issues that are deeply cultural and contextual to life and ministry in urban low-income and African American communities and its impact on adolescents living within them. Most of what I will share will narrow in on my personal experience and is not meant to give an exhaustive look at the elements of urban and African American life. Although much of the content will address some of the darkest issues in these communities, it is important to understand that this is not a full and complete picture of Black communities.

Some of the content of this book may be disturbing and seemingly too graphic, but for those serving churches in urban poor communities, it paints a realistic picture of the tough challenges people face on a regular basis. The majority of mainstream resources for youth ministry have avoided vivid descriptions of some of the dark issues faced in urban poor

communities. Perhaps this is because most of the books written are not seeing and experiencing what those in this context are. But many serving in this context are experiencing very dark situations and need to know that there is hope for navigating them. The stories in this book are all real and true, and youth workers across the United States are dealing with similar scenarios all the time. Therefore, my aim is to press into the uncharted waters to give hope and help youth workers to understand and navigate the ministry to which God has called them.

This work will focus on some of the prevalent elements of urban inner-city culture such as extreme promiscuity, drug abuse, gang activities, crime, and poverty, that often create inhumane acts of desperation for survival. Issues like these are not easy to address in a Christian book, but the reality is there are countless teenage believers facing all of this and more in their communities. This is the very reason why troubling issues like these should be addressed in Christian books. Often the cordiality and niceness of American Christian culture clashes with the realness of God's work and our Christian witness in the rest of the world. Issues such as drugs, violence, sex, and real-life stories of struggle will get a lot of attention in the pages to follow.

However, I want to be very clear again, that these are not the only elements in our urban communities. There are many productive families with structure and youth who operate in academic excellence; youth who are gifted artistically, academically, and in service. Community businesses that are owned by families in the community and countless organizations provide opportunities for families to thrive in the community. Many of the youth operating in these situations are not as difficult to shepherd as others. Because youth workers in the urban poor setting are also dealing with teenagers who are wrestling with issues of intense

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challenge, the majority of this book will share relevant stories of transformation and discuss factors germane to some of the darkest issues that youth workers have to engage. Youth workers are more in need of hope and guidance in serving youth who are functioning in the darkest places than those who are on the right track, though these youth have their struggles as well.

I also want to be clear that many of the challenging issues addressed in this work also affect White, suburban, and rural contexts and will hopefully be helpful to practitioners beyond the urban setting. Although they may manifest in different ways in the suburbs or countryside, I believe the way they are addressed in this book would be helpful to the other contexts as well. Young people in the United States are dealing with disastrous issues that we need to be equipped to assist them with.

Furthermore, our silence is not of assistance to them. I was raised in an impoverished, violent, and harsh environment just like countless other youth today. There are unique challenges in this context that need to be noted and addressed vividly. Not only was I raised in such a dark culture, but I have done ministry with youth within this culture for over thirty years.

There are many congregations and youth ministers serving on the front lines of inner-city conflict and trauma. These populations have been referred to as “traumatogenic” communities. That is descriptive of the community’s state of “living with constant pressure of violence, poverty, drugs, death, and powerlessness as a daily walk of life.”¹ There are youth ministers in need of help to address the unique challenges that many resources on youth ministry fail to understand and are ill equipped to handle. For this reason, the transparency and descriptive dialogue in this work is necessary. This book at times goes in depth to highlight urban contextual issues because teenagers are

heavily engaged in or exposed to them in major cities around the country.

One prevalent issue in urban youth ministry is drug abuse and drug dealing. Drugs are a part of the culture of youth in low-income and urban Black communities. The average youth pastor in this context serves multiple youth who are addicted to alcohol, drugs, and illegal sources of income. There are youth who struggle with low self-esteem due to the perceived struggle associated with escaping their environment. Drug and alcohol addiction, along with racial discrimination and the effects of White supremacy and systemic racism, affects how many of these teenagers see their worth as well. Poverty is a real issue. There are teens dealing with homelessness, parents on drugs, and the feeling of having to be on the wrong side of the law in order to survive.

Another prevalent issue in urban youth ministry is gangs. Many young men and women are frequently falling victim to gang affiliation, violence, and death. Gang members and territories surround churches in the inner city. Many of the teenagers in our congregations are members of these gangs or strongly considering it. Only those who have been authentic gang members know what it is really like to be a part of a gang. Those on the outside only see the glitz and glamor, never knowing the whole story until they are in too deep. This is why it is helpful to paint the real picture to help deter other young people who are considering taking that route.

Although this book provides a vivid description of life for communities of color and the experience of low-income areas, it is also useful for churches and youth ministries outside of the urban inner-city context. There is overlap from some of the urban issues that affect areas outside of the inner city. So much of what is suggested to address them will be useful for all

A Cultural Disclaimer

distinct ministry contexts who are dealing with these challenges. Also, the biblical principles are practical to utilize for any church, youth leader, parent, or person who works with youth.

However, one important reason to use this book as a resource is to help those who feel called to serve in the urban low-income context to grasp a picture of what it is like along with timeless principles that can be helpful to that work. Many suburban churches that border inner-city areas may feel ill equipped to do ministry in these areas, but this book makes it clear that ministry in the hood is not about color but culture. Just as these churches outside of the Black community can do mission in foreign areas, their help, resources, prayer, and work can benefit the kingdom of God in urban communities and build relationships and comradery with other ministries that may not ethnically and/or culturally look like theirs. Hopefully, this work will be an encouragement for suburban and rural ministries to join God's mission in the inner city.

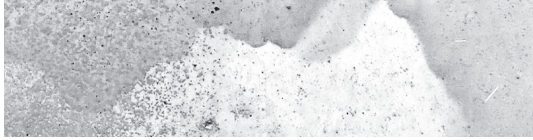
To be genuine and paint a realistic picture of what youth of color are feeling and facing throughout the inner cities of the United States, I will be sharing real-life stories about my personal seasons of life as a youth. From my experiences as a youth on the streets of Chicago to becoming a youth participating in ministry to my years of service as an urban youth pastor and ultimately a lead pastor of a local church in the inner city of Chicago, the difference maker was the church. The stories of youth I have served over the years and examples of the impact of youth ministry are all key to helping the church see and value youth ministry in our congregations. I will endeavor to provide authentic verifiable truth from the culture for the readers.

This means I will mention some people and characters I had experiences with by name, but for the safety and security of

some, I will use aliases. Gangs will be mentioned by their real names and sometimes by their street sets or territories. This is necessary for those serving within this culture to have verifiable details to give credibility to the storyteller and is better received by those functioning within the context. We overcome Satan by the blood of Christ but also by the word of our testimony. If God can deliver young people from heavy addiction, gang involvement, crime, and promiscuous lifestyles, then young people who are struggling with these addictions can find hope for themselves by hearing these real-life stories.

I ask of the reader not to come to quick judgment about the aim of these personal stories and endeavor to see the depths to which God delivers young people from the power of sin. Please understand that the real-life stories and issues described in this work are but a raw reflection of the lives that many teenagers are living in our inner cities. Those who have been able to overcome it are doing the youth of today a disservice by concealing their testimonies and depriving youth of knowing the miracles God has done. Youth on drugs need to know that God can deliver them, youth in gangs need to know that God can bring them out safely, youth struggling to live for God need to know that they can have swag and still love and serve God.

Most importantly for me, I want to make it clear to the readers that I do not share these intimate and vividly detailed stories for any glory or attention to myself, but because there are youth and youth leaders whose attention I would like to draw to the hope found in Christ alone. Regardless of how despondent their situations may seem, God is the author and finisher of our faith. My aim is to help you read this from a real-life perspective and see God's power to address your real-life situations.



2

LIFE OR DEATH CIRCUMSTANCES

*Then our sons in their youth will be like
well-nurtured plants, and our daughters
will be like pillars carved to adorn a palace.*

PSALM 144:12

I WAS HIDING IN THE BASEMENT of a storefront building, along with my ride-or-die partner Besko (RIP). We had just gotten into an altercation at a party with some opposing gangsters who drew guns on us. We broke away and ran down a stairway in the back with no idea where we were going. Looking up at the top of the stairs, we saw the silhouette of the three men with guns attempting to murder us. They were walking hesitantly as they did not know the layout of the building or where it would lead them.

All of a sudden, they stopped and looked directly at us from the top of the stairs, but the darkness made it impossible to see

us. It is probably the scariest event I have ever experienced. We were looking each other in the eyes, but while we could see them they could not see us. Two of the men were known killers in our neighborhood whose names I will not mention, one of whom was just released from prison after doing five years for a juvenile murder. The basement was so pitch black dark that we couldn't even see our hands in front of our eyes, much less anything else around us. If we bumped into anything, we knew they would hear us and begin firing in our direction. As hard as it was, we stood still not knowing if they could see us, and eventually, they turned around and left the building.

We seized that window of escape, ran into the house upstairs, kicked down the locked door on a family who was smoking crack cocaine, and pushed our way through their front door to escape and save our lives. The next day when we sobered up, we laughed about our narrow escape and kept moving with our day. This was the kind of life we lived every single day back then. It was just another day in the hood for us. We learned to live and function in drama, trauma, and chaos so much that it became normal. Every single day, we did something that could put us in prison or the graveyard. We were teenage gang bangers with no sense of purpose or direction for our lives.

This is a current epidemic in the city of Chicago where gang banging has permeated urban culture, and the distress it causes goes for the most part unmentioned or addressed. Yet, by the grace of God, today I am a Christian and a pastor all because I was introduced to the gospel of Jesus Christ and disciplined into maturity as a young man. My transformation did not happen overnight. It happened through constant and persistent ministry from a local church that had unknowingly moved into our community in the middle of a war zone.

We jumped people on the premises and inside the church premises. We had shootouts right outside of their church and even shot up a car full of enemies right in front of their pastor. Crisis like this is still prevalent today and even more abundant in the Chicagoland area, but the gospel of Christ is still powerful enough to reach youth struggling with the wiles of urban life. Urban youth ministry is designed to focus on the deliverance of youth from the challenges of the world as they experience it.

THE STATE OF URBAN YOUTH MINISTRY

I'm sure many urban-centered pastors today would agree that one of the most challenging ministries in the church is youth ministry. Churches are struggling with the turnover rate of youth pastors. They wrestle with hiring someone who will stick with the youth for the long haul. Pastors are constantly hearing complaints from people in the congregation asking, "What are we going to do about the youth?" Most of the time those doing the complaining will not volunteer any time to work with the youth themselves, and the few who do volunteer are often not the right candidates with a heart for young people. This is why a significant amount of traditional Black churches do not have a youth ministry or a full-time youth pastor.

I currently serve as the senior pastor of Kingdom Covenant Church Chicago on the far south side of the city of Chicago. We are serving a traumatogenic community in the heart of an area where young people are experiencing challenges that are drawing negative national attention to our city. Among these issues are youth violence, crash-and-grab thefts, and riotous takeovers where youth gather by the hundreds in areas downtown, stopping traffic, randomly beating people up, robbing people, and destroying cars and property. The drug

epidemic among youth in the city of Chicago is also bringing national attention to the city. Opioid addiction, drinking “lean” (over-the-counter codeine), ecstasy pills, and more are causing overdose and deaths in mass numbers. Kingdom is a multi-generational church, but the young demographic in our congregation needs significant attention.

I have also noticed in multiple seminaries throughout the city that the most requested need in church hires is for youth pastors. The employment opportunity walls in Bible colleges and seminaries across the city are filled with churches requesting applicants for youth ministry positions. Not only are youth workers leaving youth ministry but youth themselves are leaving the church.

Since entering the 2000s, research has shown a decline in church attendance among young adults who attended church as youth. It is stated in “*Youthworker Journal*, according to Lifeway Research, 70 percent of young people will drop out of church after high school, and only 35 percent will return to regular attendance.”¹ In 2023 we saw:

The next generation is often leaving the faith while under the supervision of parents who believe they’re passing on their religious values. In the early 1990s, no more than 16% of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders said religion was not important to them at all, according to the Monitoring the Future survey series. By the early 2000s, however, the percentage of high school seniors who completely dismissed the importance of religion to them personally began to increase dramatically.²

Why are so many churches struggling to find and keep youth pastors? Why are so many youth pastors leaving their positions

so quickly and frequently? Why are so many young people leaving the church? Why are so many former teens failing to find a place to fit in the adult ministry of the church after going through youth ministry? I am not sure about the answer to each of these questions, but I believe they are all connected to one thing: youth ministry today is not held to the value it deserves. I believe that many urban churches are despising youth and youth ministry, which is perpetuating the crisis that exists among urban youth today.

THE YOUTH MINISTRY CRISIS

I agree with many that there is a youth crisis of epidemic proportions, but I also believe the youth crisis is a symptom of the decline of youth ministry. There is a distinction between a youth crisis and a youth ministry crisis. Our contemporary youth crisis is about the catastrophe of the growing trauma and chaos youth are exposed to and affected by. Mass shootings, gang violence, hard illegal drugs, opioid addictions, overdoses, the victimization of young people to urban crimes, and prison recidivism are but a few of the issues for urban youth. These challenges create and contribute to their trauma and chaotic environment. In the past, many teens have found ways to live above the chaos and transcend the trauma. One of those channels supporting them was their local churches' youth ministry.

I am a living witness that a strong youth ministry is able to infiltrate the chaotic setting that youth in urban America live in. Youth ministry can liberate them from its traumatic impact on their lives. I know this because I was one of those youth and my life was forever transformed by the power of youth ministry. Through youth workers who treasured teenagers and valued the work of youth ministry, my life was invested in and

I received the guidance I needed. I grew up on the far south side of Chicago in the Roseland and Pullman communities, an area known on the streets and around the world as the Wild Wild Hundreds. This area is called wild because of the urban chaos that is perpetuated here. But churches in this area engaged the community, reached out, and raised youth in their churches, providing free and affordable resources to help youth get through their struggles without permanent mental and emotional damage.

Research suggests that only 7 percent of youth pastors stay in their position for more than seven years.³ I have experienced that in the average urban African American church that has a youth ministry, most youth pastors stay no longer than three years. It seems that youth ministers are more likely to look at their assignment as a necessary step to another coveted position rather than a serious call to raise up the next generation of the church. Our youth are in desperate need of churches and their leaders to understand the importance of youth ministry to end this crisis. But before we can value the need for robust youth ministry, we need to recognize how the existing crisis in urban youth ministry came to be.

THE GROWTH OF URBAN YOUTH MINISTRY

Youth ministry at one point in time was strong in cities across the country, but then there was a decline. The internal work of the church to develop young disciples is not the only struggle. The external work of the church to reach youth in the community is a struggle as well. There is a larger demographic of unchurched youth growing up in the urban context who are indifferent to the church, impressionable, and without a sense of direction and purpose. There is an immense population of

youth who did not grow up in church and are totally oblivious to worship, God, and the Bible.

In my experience these young people are easier to raise up as disciples of Christ than many of the teens being raised in the church, and they are more impactful in strengthening the faith of the youth who are the so called “church kids.” Perhaps this is because many young people growing up in the church are struggling with feeling alienated from their peers and desiring to fit in with those outside of the church. Some fall into the temptation of trying to identify with their unchurched peers and others backslide but continue to attend church out of family duty without real personal spiritual transformation.

I feel like these so called church kids may struggle with the shame of the stigma as well as familiarity with church, so discipleship often begins with working through some of the trouble and church hurts they have experienced and finding inspiration from other Christian youth living a faithful life in Christ. Finding a model in young people who have a good balance of faith maturity and teenage swagger is helpful to the discipleship process with youth growing up in the church. Sheep make sheep, which means that young Christians are helpful in making and developing more young Christians. This is why my philosophy and understanding of youth ministry is youth doing ministry.

Youth ministry must be more than adults ministering to youth; it has to be youth doing ministry. So called youth ministries that focus only on ministering to youth may be missing a fundamental game changer: instead of ministering to youth, raise up your youth to minister to each other. I will dive into this concept a bit more in chapter four, because youth ministry can be more effective when it is understood not as ministering to youth but as youth doing ministry.

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