

# RAISING RESPONSIBLE YOUTH IN TROUBLED TIMES

## THE PROMISE AND CHALLENGE OF CHURCH INVOLVEMENT: A BOSTON PERSPECTIVE

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Boston has experienced a reduction in violent crime over the last several years that some have termed miraculous. Between 1994 and 1996, the number of gunshot wounds in Boston declined by 47%.<sup>1</sup> From about 1995 to early 1998 there were no gun related murders of juveniles in Boston. Previously, there had been dozens of such murders. Violent crimes involving firearms dropped from 1,354 in 1990 to 516 in 1997.<sup>2</sup> Demographic trends, i.e., the decrease in the crime-prone teenage and young adult populations, improved economic conditions, the decline of crack cocaine use, and improved law enforcement, are clearly factors in these declines in violent crime. An additional and critical factor, however, is the specifically targeted efforts of Boston churches, in cooperation with community policing, social agencies, parents, community leaders, and the court system. Churches have proven to be highly effective as they collaborate with other community organizations and institutions with specific goals such as crime prevention, reducing gang involvement and violence, drug abuse prevention, and improving school quality and opportunities. The challenge now is engage the many churches which are not yet fully involved so that they too can contribute to meeting the needs of urban youth.

My perspective on youth ministry is that of an urban African American pastor and physician who has lived in inner-city Boston for more than twenty-seven years. As an urban resident and pastor of an urban church, I see all of the statistics reflected in the names and faces and communities which are in crisis. These are communities where the sound of gunfire is no longer startling, where children identify street corners by the names of friends and acquaintances who were shot or killed there. This is a community where there are a growing number of households struggling to make ends meet, with parents, often single mothers, striving to hold themselves and their families together while they try to raise boys who will not become fodder on the killing fields called urban streets, and daughters who will not grow old before their time. This is a community where children face high death rates, low expectations and a future that is cloudy at best. In this community, America's underworld, all the grim statistics about the fate of children in America are mirrored and multiplied. This is the land where every day:

- 13 children are murdered
- 62 children are wounded by guns
- 280 are arrested for crimes of violence
- 2,756 teenagers drop out of school
- 2,400 babies are born into poverty.<sup>3</sup>

Many of these children are the descendants of men and women who came out of the hell of slavery, passed into the fire of Jim Crow segregation, yet still managed to enter this century with strong backs, discipline, a thirst for literacy, deep religious faith, and hope in the face of

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<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Weapon Injury Report newsletter, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Rosencrance, "Crime is Down," The Boston Tab, 15 Sept. 1998, 13.

<sup>3</sup> "One Day in the Life of American Children," Wash., DC.: Children's Defense Fund (25 E St., NW, 20001). 1998.

monumental adversity. These were men and women who knew all too well the oppressive force of racism—its denigration of their very humanity, its denial of the most basic of opportunities, and its detailed program of daily humiliation and abnegation. These were men and women who paid a heavy price, yet managed to hold families and communities together and mount movements for social justice, as if to declare to the forces of evil, "In your face."

The tragedy is that many of our children, the descendants of these women and men, will almost certainly reach the end of this century in an economically, politically, and spiritually inferior position to their ancestors, who entered the century in the shadow of formal slavery. This will be their fate, not simply because of a society that is uncaring, but because no one in the church ever reached out to them and taught them the spiritual, historical, and intellectual truths they needed to survive and thrive. Without that knowledge they are unable to interpret the present moment or see a more rational future through the eyes of faith. Lacking the hope that sustained their forebears, they are experiencing what Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson has called "social death." But unlike the social death of formal slavery, this new social death is fundamentally spiritual-rooted in the destruction of faith and hope.

### **Facing Real Urban Problems**

Boston is recognized as an academic, medical and high technology mecca; it is one of the oldest and most historic sections of the United States; and it is one of our most ethnically, culturally and racially diverse cities. A recent survey done by the Emmanuel Gospel Center found church services being conducted in 33 different languages.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, Boston has a richness of resources, matched by few urban centers in this country, and perhaps worldwide.

But Boston also has real urban problems. A recent report by the Boston Persistent Poverty Project took note of four revolutions—technological, economic, demographic, and political—that are having an impact on our neighborhoods, our city, and our society as a whole.

Technologically and economically we are in an era of new winners and new losers. The winners are those with the education and/or experience to get the increasingly high-skills jobs available in the growing service and finance sectors. The losers are those who would have filled the 24,000 manufacturing jobs that were lost during the 1980s. These jobs that might well have been filled by residents of Boston neighborhoods like East Boston and Roxbury where 40% of adults lack a high school diploma. At a time when Boston continues to have one of the highest costs of living in the nation, the percentage of people living below the poverty line in the state of Massachusetts has increased from 9.7% in 1994 to 12.2% in 1997.<sup>5</sup>

Demographically, Boston continues to have a population that is stable in number at about 570,000 people, but increasingly diverse and mobile. More than a quarter of the population moved into the city between 1985 and 1990 and of those new residents, one in four was a member of a newcomer immigrant group. Both Hispanic and Asian populations have nearly doubled and there is an increasingly rich mixture of people from nations like Cambodia, Vietnam, Korea, Laos, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, the West Indies, Cape Verde, Brazil, Ireland and Russia. This rich stew of immigrants has not arrived without strains on housing, education and social services, and those strains are reflected in social tensions which have erupted into violence.

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<sup>4</sup> Rudy Mitchell, "A Portrait of Boston's Churches," in *Christianity in Boston* edited by Douglas Hall, Rudy Mitchell and Jeff Bass (Boston: Emmanuel Gospel Center, 1993), p. B-9.

<sup>5</sup> The Boston Globe, 9 Sept. 1998, B 1&3.

Finally, Boston's families are showing all the same strains shown by national statistics. Fully 43% of all children in Boston under the age of 18 live in a single parent family. Nearly two-thirds of all children do not have a parent at home full time. In this community, like many throughout America and around the world, families are coming apart at the seams under the pressures of deindustrialization, unemployment, depersonalization, discrimination, capital flight, the triumph of consumer culture, the rise of materialism, the decline of an ethic of responsibility and sacrifice, the ravages of drugs, and our collective inclination to invest less and less in those on the margins.

### **The Importance of Church Involvement in the Lives of Urban Youth**

Several studies have demonstrated the importance of church involvement in determining whether urban youth make it through the maze of problems mentioned above. Richard Freeman found that the most important factor which correlated with success of inner city youth was church-going. While his research did not reveal a simple cause and effect relationship, it did reveal a uniquely strong relationship between church-going and success at escaping the cycle of urban poverty and problems.<sup>6</sup> Kaye Cooks, professor of psychology at Gordon College, recently completed research interviews with non-churched and churched adolescent urban teenage girls. She found that adolescents who were involved in the church experienced less stress, had more stable families, and were more responsible for themselves and others. She concluded that "the church serves multiple functions in the lives of inner-city youth. As measured by the Youth Constructions of Church Roles Survey, the church provides youth a mentor, multiple means of self-regulation, an identity, a community to which to belong, a God who cares, and something to do."<sup>7</sup> What has been clear to many participant observers for years is also being substantiated in more formal scholarly studies.

### **The Church's Response to the Needs of Urban Youth**

While churches have the ability to make a difference in the lives of urban youth, not enough churches are getting involved, and the ones that do are hampered by a lack of support and resources.

A recent study by the Emmanuel Gospel Center found a small number of churches doing significant youth ministry, but many more churches staying on the sidelines. Studies done in other parts of this country bear out Emmanuel's findings. For example, there have been several revealing surveys of African American youth and churches by Richard Freeman, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, and by Andrew Billingsley and his colleagues. They discovered that, for a host of reasons, many churches are not connecting with a new generation of youth, and especially those who are in the at-risk category. Many churches are not connecting with one another; and they are not connecting with community agencies in the kinds of partnerships that produce measurable outcomes for young people. Freeman found in a survey of over 2,000 inner city black youth by the National Bureau of Economic Research, that only 34% reported going to church once a month or more, 27% reported going several times a year, and 40% reported never going to church at all. Lincoln and Mamiya in a survey of 1,800 churches (*The Black Church in*

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<sup>6</sup> Richard B. Freeman, "Who Escapes? The Relation of Church-going and Other Background Factors to the Socio-Economic Performance of Black Male Youths from Inner City Poverty Tracts," (Paper presented at the Conference on Inner City Black Youth Unemployment, Cambridge, Mass., 1983). Freeman, a professor at Harvard University, did this research under the auspices of the National Bureau of Economic Research.

<sup>7</sup> Kaye V. Cook, "The Church's Role in the Resilience of Inner-City Youth" (Wenham, Mass.: Gordon College, 1998), 30-31.

*the African American Experience*) discovered that less than 10% were involved with health agencies, food programs, substance abuse treatment efforts, employment, and violence prevention, the first issues at the top of the list for intervention in the community crisis. Billingsley, in a more tightly focused survey of 635 northern African American churches, found only one third offered any kind of program for young people who were not members of their church and only 4% were targeted for youth at high risk for delinquency, crime and violence. Furthermore, the rate of interdenominational community outreach was 6% and the rate of interracial cooperation was 7%.

## **Avoid the Blame Game**

Too often the response to this crisis has been a sense of hopelessness and a willingness to blame somebody, anybody, for this mess. Adults spend incredible amounts of energy and time declaring that someone else is to blame. Parents blame schools, schools blame families, and families blame community leaders. Community leaders blame the police who blame the courts. Courts blame the political leaders who blame the religious leaders who blame the business leaders. Everybody blames the media. And the academic experts blame everybody and make a fortune analyzing the whole awful mess. And while we go round and round on this carousel of blame and accusation, our communities and our children go straight to hell.

Somehow we must get beyond the blame game and the sterile either/or debate that makes this crisis either as some conservatives would have it the simple result of a decline in personal and family values or as some liberals would have it the simple result of larger social and political forces. We must acknowledge that there are forces at work both at the personal, family and community level, and at the political, policy and macroeconomic level; that both personal decision and public policies play a role in making our communities safer and stronger. We must move to an emphasis on what I like to call the '3 R's' of community and spiritual revitalization: renewal, responsibility, and reconnection—renewal of our faith in the fact that we *can* make a difference in every aspect of the lives of our youth, their families, and their communities; a willingness to take full responsibility for our respective roles in meeting the needs of our youth, and a commitment to reconnecting and working in collaboration with other individuals and institutions.

## **Building Systems of Support**

This process is not easy and certainly was not easy for us as we began our work with Ten Point. First, we had to ask ourselves some of the following hard and probing questions:

- Who will go beyond analyzing and lamenting the demise of poor communities and help to rebuild those communities with all the courage and sacrifice devoted to earlier movements for freedom and justice? If previous generations were willing to confront murderous Klansmen, why are we, as believers, unwilling to confront our own violent children?
- Who will come down from the high mountain of sermons and public speeches to work consistently on the streets, with the schools, and in the jails? Are we willing to do as a matter of love, what we ask society to do as a matter of justice?
- Who can be trusted with the monies given to economic development plans, mission programs and social service programs supposedly committed to serving the needs of the poor? Will we, as believers, commit as cold, hard cash to building and maintaining lives, and especially young lives, as we do to building and maintaining buildings?

- Who can speak to men, young and old, about loving and respecting women and children? Has the flagrant failure to address this issue had anything to do with infidelity and sexism in the largely male leadership circles?
- Who will claim violent, drug-dealing, and/or addicted youth as their own? Who will reach out to young men and women with their hats to the back, their pants down real low, and their guns not far away? What does our faith mean in the age of fear? If the God whom we say we serve is not able to protect us in the highways and the byways where young men and women lie broken and bleeding, of what use is that God and this faith to a generation of youth struggling to survive?

Even after wrestling with these questions, we had to wrestle with the problem of institutional inertia. As a pastor, I understand all too well how easily one can be paralyzed by fear, the internal needs of our institutions, and real ignorance about where to start and how to get started. Furthermore, the last few years have taught me that the same problems that I face in the church, others face in the courts, the police departments, the schools, the political system and the private sector. Many people stay where they are most comfortable—pastors in their pulpits, members in their pews, police in their cruisers, judges on their benches, probation officers behind their desks, teachers and principals in their buildings, business people in their offices, academics at their conferences, politicians in their chambers, parents in their homes and jobs—and the kids stay in the streets.

Nevertheless, we must still work to rebuild systems of support that include all the relevant institutions that have an impact on our community from senators to streetworkers, and from presidents to police officers and pastors. And the church should be a central, not marginal, player in that network. That means that there will have to be movement out of the places where we are and toward people where they are, and there will have to be movement toward each other, not just in conferences and meetings, but in the forging of the day-to-day relationships between ourselves that can make a real difference for our youth.

### **The Ten Point Coalition**

One such effort to build those relationships in Boston is the Ten Point Coalition. In 1992, after gang members disrupted a funeral, a number of innercity pastors decided that it was less important to assign blame than it was to figure out their own responsibility and the responsibility of others toward a generation of young people. They decided to listen and learn from the young people and it was that listening and learning that led to the Ten Point Plan and Coalition.

The Ten Point Coalition is an ecumenical group of Christian clergy and lay leaders working to mobilize the greater Boston community, and especially the Christian local church community around issues affecting black and Latino youth—especially those at-risk for violence, drug abuse, and other destructive behaviors. We have sought to reach out to all our youth, but especially those who are considered to be highly "at-risk"—that is, those who are involved in youth gangs which are themselves involved in violence and/or drug use and distribution; those who are repeat offenders; those who have a history of violent behavior involving assault and/or use of weapons, esp. guns; and those who are drug dealers.

In its final form the **Ten Point Plan** called upon churches, church agencies, and the academic theological community to:

1. Establish 4-5 church clusters which would adopt and evangelize youth gangs
2. Commission missionaries to serve as advocates and ombudsmen for Black and Latino juveniles in local courts
3. Commission youth evangelists, who were prepared to address educational and economic needs, to do street level work with drug dealers
4. Develop concrete and specific partnerships with local schools
5. Build spiritual, human resource and material linkages between downtown and suburban churches and inner-city churches and ministries
6. Initiate and support neighborhood crime watches
7. Develop partnerships between churches and community health centers that would, e.g., facilitate pastoral counseling for families and individuals under stress or offer abstinence-oriented prevention programs
8. Establish Christian sisterhoods and brotherhoods as a rational alternative to violent gang life
9. Establish in our churches rape crisis drop-in centers, services for battered women, and counseling for abusive men
10. Develop a Church-based, God-centered Black and Latino history curriculum, with an additional focus on the struggles of women and poor people

Implementing this program required that we first came together to pray—hard, long, and collectively. Urban and suburban pastors and lay people, young and old, cried out to God on behalf of the city, in small gatherings and large rallies, in the daytime, evening, and sometimes all night. There were prayer vigils, prayer walks, cornerside prayer and preaching crusades.

Then we had to learn how to work with one another. This meant forming a twelve church steering committee and learning how to collaborate. Those early collaborative efforts included:

- "Take Back the Street" Crusade – a week-long series of street services along with neighborhood cleanup, support for a local neighborhood crime watch, and dialogue with local drug dealers – Norfolk and Whitman Sts., (Dorchester, MA) – Summer, 1991
- Boston Public School Headmaster's Meeting – June, 1992
- Police Tribunal – first neighborhood-based public hearings to monitor police misconduct in Boston – November, 1992
- Police and Youth Leadership Awards Ceremony – first citywide neighborhood-based annual award ceremony to celebrate exemplary police and youth leaders – April, 1993

- Father's Day March – first church-based mobilization of Black Christian men around issue of defending Black youth – June 20, 1993
- Participant, Mayor's Summit on Violence (Boston, MA) – Sept., 1993
- Youth Panel Organizer, National Mentoring Institute – Harvard University (Cambridge, MA) – Oct., 1993
- Citywide Clergy Against Violence – ecumenical and interfaith mediation of disturbance at South Boston High School – May, 1993 to present
- Roman Catholic-Protestant dialogue – Spring, 1992 to present
- Jewish-Christian dialogue – Fall, 1992 to present

Because we were committed to broadening the base of churches working to reach and save our youth, we had to help train those who were willing to enter into new areas of ministry. To that end we have developed a formal workshop for pastors and lay people entitled "Ministry to the Marginal." This workshop provides an historical, sociological, and theological approach to reaching and ministering to the needs of at-risk urban youth—especially adolescent gang members and drug dealers. This workshop and others were also offered at a community conference called "Resurrecting Our Future" in September, 1995.

Recognizing that people need to learn how to reach out in a practical setting, the Coalition sponsored a Friday night street ministry, beginning in May of 1992. This ministry offered an opportunity for pastors and lay people to be trained in working in an urban setting (Dorchester and Cambridge) with at-risk youth. Over 30 pastors and lay leaders were involved in this training.

Participants meet at 9:30 PM. The first half-hour was spent in prayer and orientation for the night's activities. Participants then move onto the streets for ministry including:

- Street corner evangelism/discussion with gang members and drug dealers
- Counseling / discipleship for youth
- Participation in mediation efforts between warring gangs
- Provision of assistance / referral for jobs, housing, education, drug treatment, etc.
- Neighborhood tours led by at-risk youth from the neighborhood
- Support of existing street ministries to the homeless
- Participation in neighborhood crime watches and patrols

- Patrols at sites, e.g., churches or street corners, which have been plagued by high levels of criminal activity (drug dealing, prostitution, etc.)
- Meetings with youth agency workers—streetworkers, community center workers, police youth officers, patrol officers, et. al.,—on their beats

Night activities generally ended by 1:00 AM, followed by a concluding hour of prayer and debriefing. We also met during daytime hours with probation officers, judges, police supervisors, youth workers, etc. Participants were encouraged to develop at least two relationships on an ongoing basis with at-risk youth in their local areas. Those relationships and their progress were reviewed and discussed.

Over the past seven years, members of the Ten Point Coalition have seen churches work with one another and with police and probation officers and politicians to clean up neighborhoods, form crime watches, enter into dialogue with public schools, point out abuses of police power, and publicly celebrate the hard work of police who really serve the communities in which they work. We've seen churches establish programs that address all of the ten points in the Plan. And all of this has been possible because pastors and members of these churches were willing to stop playing the blame game and move beyond the barriers of denomination, religious differences and turf.

We've seen the success of Boston Freedom Summer '94, '95, and '96, a collaborative effort to deploy and work with over 400 middle, high school, college, and graduate students in the two most violent precincts in the city of Boston. Those students participated in projects dealing with math and science literacy, court advocacy and alternative sentencing, street ministry, voter education and registration, health and healing, and project documentation and evaluation. The support came not only from Christian churches but from the Jewish Community Relations Council, the Archdiocese of Boston, the private sector and individual contributors.

We've seen the success of the Summer of Opportunity Program, a collaboration between the Boston Police Department, the John Hancock Company, and a host of community organizations and churches. I'm convinced that one reason this program works so well is that we don't ask John Hancock to do what it does not do well, and that is recruit and provide community support for at-risk kids. What it *can* do is provide jobs and mentors, and what churches and community-based organizations and the Gang Unit can do is provide kids and the support those kids need when they leave the halls of John Hancock.

We're studying the Fatherhood Program, a collaboration between the Probation Department and churches in the vital task of helping probationers become the fathers they want to and need to be. We hold the training sessions and the graduation services in our churches.

We know the difference that it makes when the mediation efforts of local churches are aided by the police and the probation officers. It can really make a difference in the willingness of gang members to participate in and stick with the agreement worked out through mediation, either because they don't want the static from their probation officer or because they appreciate the community service credit that they get for their contribution to preserving the peace of their community.

We've seen the success of gang prevention efforts spearheaded by a local pastors and laypeople working with the police in the public and parochial schools. We continue to be blessed by the efforts of programs like the Youth Ministry Development Program (a collaboration between Emmanuel Gospel Center and Ten Point to put 20 full time youth pastors in churches and on the

streets over the next ten years), the Black Ministerial Alliance Afterschool Initiative, Success by Six, One to One, Boston Urban Youth Foundation, Bruce Wall Ministries, the Urban League Employment Resource Center, and over 700 camperships provided by the officers of the Boston Police Department.

We have much to be grateful for and many models to work with. And we can say that wherever there have been successes, perhaps the major factor has been a renewal in our faith and hope, a willingness to take responsibility, and a commitment to reconnecting and working collaboratively.

### **The Boston Model: Church and Community Partnership**

Throughout the city of Boston and throughout this region we have made a great start. People from around the country come to see, and call to inquire about what's going on here, whether it be Boston's streetworker program, community policing efforts, summer jobs programs, or church coalition efforts. But there is much more to be done, more family support and surrogate family structures to be built, more mentors to be found, more community watches to be organized, more jobs, mediation services and alternative sentencing options to be developed. We need more data about what is happening and what is effective. We need more dialogue about the appropriate mix of interventional and preventive approaches. There is more advocacy to be done whether it be before principals deciding to expel a student or give him another chance, or before an employer trying to decide whether to give a probationer a job, or before state and federal legislatures that must choose between the short-term political gain of budget cuts and the long-term social disaster of a generation denied the resources it needs.

Almost seven years ago, in the city of Boston, a group of young men, who had come to pay their respects to a friend shot through the head at a party, went berserk when they spotted a member of a rival gang at the funeral. In the ensuing melee, the supposed intruder was chased around the church, stabbed several times and shot at—while funeral-goers were injured stampeding for the single available exit. In the aftermath of that terrible event, 300 clergy showed up at that church to express their outrage and pledge their support. Hundreds of ministers were involved in the press conferences that were held, the pastoral epistles that were written, the high-flown preaching oratory that was dispensed in every possible direction, and the meetings that were held. But when it was time to do what the Bible says in Matthew 18:15, only four or five preachers could be found. The Bible says, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault..." Those young men sinned greatly against the church and the community, but only a few would go to them. I am not sure whether that was because the preachers did not believe the Bible or did not believe that those young men were their children.

Only a few went—to discover that there were young men who wanted to apologize for what happened and to explain the brutal realities they faced every day. Only a few went—to talk with the young men still wrestling with their grief over the death of their friend and willing to discuss whether they should kill two members of the other gang to settle the score before calling a truce. Only a few went—and though the numbers have increased, too few are still going.

The numbers are too few. Hence, thirty years after the March on Washington—thirty years after Martin Luther King declared, "I have a dream,"—we find ourselves in the middle of a nightmare. Where do we go from here? The choice is ours. We can curse the darkness or we can allow new light to shine through us. We can be the bearers of bad news or what MLK called "the drum majors for justice." We can be those paralyzed by fear or those who are energized by a faith in God and in one another. We can be those who cynically believe that there is no use in trying or we can proclaim in the words of the poet, James Russell Lowell:

*Though the cause of Evil prosper / Yet the truth alone is strong;  
Truth forever on the scaffold / Wrong forever on the throne-  
Yet that scaffold sways the future / And beyond the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow / Keeping watch above His own.*

God is watching us and it is not from a distance. God is watching and waiting for us to choose, knowing full well that choosing the course of progress, the course of hope, the course of reconciliation will take vision, faith, and hard work. To a tune sung by slaves in the 19th century and with words sung by freedom fighters in the 20th century, we must declare as we stand on the threshold of the 21st century:

*Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around, turn me around, turn me around,  
Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around,  
I'm gonna keep on a walkin', keep on a talkin', walkin' up the freedom trail.*

This is the faith we must take into our homes, our neighborhoods, our schools, our churches, our courts, and anywhere we might have an opportunity to minister to those who have been broken by life. This is the faith that must sustain us through the difficult days ahead. For if, as the people of Christ, we choose this course in faith, we shall be more than overcomers.