A MANDATE FOR ACTION: THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY WITH URBAN BLACK YOUTH

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Abstract

Black youth in urban America experience difficult challenges and multiple stressors in a continuing climate of racism, reduced life options, and hopelessness that threaten their optimal development. The article claims that, like the historical Black church, current congregations have an inescapable responsibility te provide ministries with and on behalf of these youth to assure their hope-bearing, life-giving present and future. Building on results of the 2009-2011 Vision Quest Study of youth ministry leadership in Black congregations and endeavors of the Youth Hope-Builders Academy at Interdenominational Theological Center, the article presents detailed descriptions of three dominant priorities, called the three C's of urban youth ministry, for congregations and youth ministry leaders to undertake including (1) Context: Know the community context in which Black youth exist; (2) Critical Content: Identify and develop critical content that is relevant to contextual realities; and (3) Connection: Reach out to and connect with youth by being real with them so that they will want te reach back.

Introduction

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Black churches are challenged to provide ministries that address head on the critical realities and concerns of urban Black teens so these young people will both survive and thrive. This article makes the claim that, like the historical Black Church, congregations today bear critical responsibility to care and advocate for, support, and guide young people amidst the un-abating climate of racism; and they must do so in our twenty-first century ever widening technologized and media-connected world.[2] Happily, results of the Vision Quest Research Project of Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) show positive efforts of a number of congregations.[3] However, the gravity of issues facing our youth requires both continuing and more extensive efforts. Action is sorely needed that responds to the situation of disproportionate numbers of youth in urban areas in abject poverty,

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[2]The helping, guiding, advocating, and sustaining role of the historic Black churoh in the lives of youth amidst racially motivated injustices is documented beginning at the turn of the century and thereafter in the writings of: W.E.B. DuBois, ed., *The Negro Church,* Report of a Social Study made under the direction of Atlanta University, together with the Proceedings of the Eighth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, held at Atlanta University, May 26, 1903 (Atlanta, GA: The Atlanta University Press, 1903; Walnut Creek, CA: Altimira Press, 1903 (2003); Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933); and C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

[3]The 2009-2011 Lilly Endowment, Inc. funded project, Vision Quest: A Study of Efforts, Challenges, and Needs of Youth Ministry Leaders in Black Congregations," included a survey of 833 churches across the country and denominations. The results showed programs of promise and the incorporation of best ministry practices in churches of all sizes. Examples from the study appear in: Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, Sandra L Barnes, and Karma D. Johnson, *Youth Ministry in the Black Church: Centered in Hope* Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2013), 149-176.

homelessness, youth detention or incarceration, family disruption, violent environments, health challenges, incomplete educational attainment, limited employment options, and the presence of hopelessness.[4]

In the crucible of these realities, our youth torm views of the self and life and either act on them for good or ill. Burvive and thrive? Choose in or out of a gang? Relinquish life and embrace dying? These three questions point to real decision options many youth take and act on. It is true, of course, that many Black youth have hope and exhibit resiliency or their ability to cope, carry on their lives and achieve much in spite of disruptive factors and adversity. Moreover, religious beliefs and activities tend to contribute to positive life engagement.[5] Yet, we are also cautioned that the impact of multiple stressors on youth is cumulative. That is, "children who appear resilient in the short torm may not be so in the longer term, whereas children who seem more vulnerable initially sometimes grow in competence and resourcefulness."[6] The church's acceptance of responsibility means taking real action not simply to build and sustain

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[4]Bollard and his colleagues highlighted the prevalence of hopelessness particularly among inner-city youth stemming form disruptive factors, witnessing violence, traumatic stress, and worry. See: John M. Bollard, Brad E. Liam and Cecelia M. Formuchello, "The Origins of Hopelessness Among Inner-City African American Adolescents," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 36, Nos. 3-4, December 2005:293-305 (301-302).

[5]See: Ibid.

[6]See: Jo Boyden and Gillian Mann, "Children's Risk, Resilience, and Coping in Extreme Situations," 3-25 in Michael Ungar, ed., *Handbook for Working with Children and Youth: Pathways to Resilience Across Cultures and Contexts* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 18.

resilience but, in fact, to do all that can be done to address the difficult realities of urban teens, convey God's hope, and assure young people's hope-bearing, life-giving present and future.

Youth ministry leaders are up-front in saying that carrying out the task for which responsibility must be taken is not easy! In the three-year Vision Quest Study of youth ministry for which I was a principal investigator and on which the book, *Ministry With Black Youth: Centered in Hope* is based,[7] leaders in 833 Black churches across the country and across denominations participated. Although the study revealed the presence of strong youth ministries with successful outcomes, there was evidence of numbers of churches struggling and failing to offer programs of promise amidst declining membership, aging facilities, and insufficient resources. In actuality, leaders freely told stories of both trial and triumph, pathos and promise. They confessed to deep struggles to overcome, at times, what seemed like overwhelming odds in carrying out the kind of youth ministry that is sorely needed. One leader simply said: "This ministry takes energy that's sometimes in short demand! It takes patience that's sometimes absent. I just have to cry out sometimes, 'Help me Holy Ghost!'"[8] Another leader remarked: "Getting it done–well, outreach and support don't happen like they should. And the truth is that I'm a volunteer. . . Really, I don't know what to do."[9]

Yet, for the most part, leaders were in youth ministry because they were called to it and wanted to make a

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[7] Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, Sandra L. Barnes, and Karma D. Johnson, *Youth Ministry in the Black Church: Centered in Hope* (Valley Forge: Judson, 2013).

[8] Ibid, 48.

[9] Ibid. xviii.

difference in the lives of young people. Their prevailing message was framed in terms of their intent to help young people see hope where it is either called into question or doesn't exist, claim hope where it presently exists, build on hope that is already being put into action, and envision or re-envision their putting hope in action on their journey forward. Their emphasis on engendering hope is akin to what Shawn Ginwright calls "radical healing." This effort involves our knowing, reaching out to, developing up-close relationships with, and engaging youth in actions where they can see and act on hope-filled change God desires for their own and others' lives.[10] Vision Quest Study leaders conveyed that the realities of life in this current century demand determined congregational and leadership efforts. Among the results of the study, three dominant priorities, called the "three C's" for congregations and youth ministry leaders will be the focus in this article:

- *Context:* Know the community context in which Black youth exist.

- *Critical Content:* Identify and develop critical content that is relevant to the context and the needs of Black teens.

- *Connection:* Reach out and connect with youth by being real with them so that they will want to reach back.

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[10]See Shawn **A**. Ginwright, *Black Youth Rising: Activism and Radical Healing in Urban America* (**New** York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 2010), 22.

The Community Context of Urban Youth Ministry

If congregations are to plan relevant, hope-centered ministries with and on behalf of urban Black teens, then it is important to take into full consideration the community context of these youth. In one sense, leaders may rightly say that awareness already exists because of all that is personally seen or experienced in urban neighborhoods. However, the challenge to church leaders is to form a specific perspectival awareness that has to do with acknowledging contextual realities and committing to set and act on a direction forward with purposeful, life-giving, life-enhancing, life-sustaining youth ministry. Activating perspectival awareness is further to uncover keys to how and why youth see themselves and act on life and its meaning in particular ways. It is also to point church leaders in the direction of identifying obstacles to ministry, on the one hand, and important opportunities on the other hand. In short, the intent is to bring to the forefront influential contextual clues to what is needed to shape and implement ministry with urban Black youth. The following will include some statements about the nature of the urban context; Black youths' interactions with public agencies; impact of technology and consumerism on youth; and the impact of urbanity on Black youths' physical and emotional selves, and resilience.

The Urban Context: An Overview

A geographic area is commonly classified as urban by virtue of the greater density of population or people per square mile, residential buildings, and commercial and other nonresidential entities, compared to the typically less dense

suburban and rural areas.[11] Actually, the Census data, cur own eyes and experiences tell us that a key indicator of Black urbanity is the population density cf the Black population in a geographic area. Even though urban areas, most often referred to as densely populated areas from cities to metropolitan areas vary both in size and in racial-ethnic makeup, overall, Black people make up a sizable percentage of residents in numerous urban areas. According to the most recently confirmed population data by race (2010), more than half of the population is Black/African American in twenty-four cities in this country. In sixty (60) more cities, the Black population percentage is between thirty percent and forty-nine percent.[12]

Yet, of particular concern in focusing on youth ministry is the hypersegregation of Black people in larger as well as less populated urban areas or cities. Hypersegregation, refers to the clustering of Black people in particular geographic regions of cities. This pattern, also called American apartheid is comprised of people who, because of their financial exigency, have little to no opportunity to escape.[13] The poverty of these neighborhoods cannot be denied. Nor can young people's daily existence in climates of

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[11]See: United States Census Newsroom, "Growth in Urban Population Outpaces Rest of Nation, Census Bureau Reports," Monday, March 26, 2012. Retrieved May 13, 2014 (www.census.gov/2010census/news/releases/operations/cb12-50.html)

[12]These data are based on the population statistics found both in: United States Census Bureau, "State & County QuickFacts". Retrieved May 14, 2014 (http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/09/0952000.html)

[13]The nature the American Apartheid constructed by a system of hypersegregation is presented in: Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

decaying housing and other environmental hazards; residential transiency and homelessness; lack of legitimate jobs and limited pathways to gainful employment; gang activity; drug and human trafficking; incarcerated family members most often the males or one's own incarceration; personal or family health crises; violence perpetrated by and on youth, death due to violence; and overall threats to safety at home, in the community, and at school.

Black Youth and Public Agencies: Interactions and Outcomes

Being aware of existing harsh contextual realities is, of course, only part of the picture. Black teens' interactions with public agencies, most notably the schools and law enforcement agencies are central to an understanding of the nature of urban living for them and provide important indicators for relevant youth ministry initiatives.

Black Youth and the Schools. Several points may be made regarding Black teens' interactions with schools. First, although we may applaud the figures in a 2014 report showing some increase in high school graduation rates of Black youth after a period of severe decreased educational attainment levels, a disproportionate number who do not finish high school continues. Moreover, diminished student outcomes is impacted by young people's adverse experiences in understaffed, underfinanced inner city schools where there is a disproportionately high rate of teacher absence and turnover.[14] Data show that youths' interrupted graduation or

[14]See: America's Promise Alliance, *Don't Call Them Dropouts: Understanding the Experiences of Young People Who Leave High School Before Graduation,* A Report (Boston, MA: Tufts University, America's Promise Alliance and Center for Promise, 2014), 18; Raegen Miller, "Teacher Absence as a Leading Indicator of Student Achievement."

failure to complete high school is informed, in fact, by an interconnected complex of issues: ones found within the school environment and those in the lives of youth such as their decreased motivation for school, family responsibilities that prevent attendance, failure in academic achievement, and mental impairment including identified Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) emerging from ongoing stressors and exposure to and experiences of violence.[15] To use the words of Richard Curwin in his book, *Meeting Students Where They Live,* "Just getting to school, let along graduating can present a challenge."[16]

Second, a crisis exists particularly in low income urban areas that are called the school-to-prison pipeline cycle that begins as early as pre-school when African American children are expelled from school at three to five times the rate of their white, Latino, and Asian American peers. This disproportionate rate of suspensions and expulsions continues through high school with Black youth being referred to law enforcement and arrested for what is termed minor offenses. They are typically returned to already difficult home and community circumstances, stigmatized, often angry and

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Washingfon, DC: Center for American Progress, November 2012. Retrieved September 3, 2014 (www.files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED536904.pdf); and Janice Joseph, *Black Youths Delinquency, and Juvenile Justice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), 22-25.C:\Users\Guest\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\XZSYCO7Q\(http:\www

[15]The nature and prevalence of PTSD is described in: Eboni Morris, "Youth Violence: Implications for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Urban Youth," An Issue Report from the National Urban League Policy Institute (Washington, DC: National Urban League Policy Institute, n.d.). Retrieved September 3, 2014 (www.research.policyarchive.org/17613.pdf)

[16]Richard L. Curwin, *Meeting Students Where They Live* (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2010), 18.

depressed, and with decreased motivation to stay in school.[17] This current school-to-prison pipeline has replaced prior failures of schools to facilitate a process whereby Black youngsters, especially those who don't enter college, can see and access opportunities leading from school-to-work.[18]

A 2013 Report further points to the likelihood that youth without a high school diploma "are more likely to go to jail than to find a job . . . thereby instilling more poverty on them and future families with children they form. In fact, data show that "twenty-five percent of African Americans who grew up in the past three decades have had at least one parent locked up during their childhood; and that parent was typically without a high school diploma."[19] The reality is that youth who grow up in families where one parent is incarcerated is more likely to be educationally deficient, impoverished, and emotionally strained; and they are at greater risk of anger, depression and aggressive behavior that lead to further incarceration.[20]

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[17]Evidence of the school-to-prison pipeline and serious implications of it are reviewed by Carla Armurao, "Fact Sheet: How Bad Is the School-to-Prison Pipeline?" Episode 6: Education Under Arrest, Tavis Smiley Reports, Tavis Smiley on PBS, March 26, 2013. Retrieved May 14, 2014 (www.pbs.org/wnet/,,,/school-to-prison-pipeline-fact-sheet/). Also see: NAACP, LDF (Legal Defense Fund). "Education/School: School to Prison Pipeline." Retrieved May 14, 2014 (http://www.naacpldf.org/case/school-prison-pipeline)

[18]See: William Julius Wilson, "The Plight of the Inner-City Black Male," 31-48 in Douglas J. Besharov, ed., *America's Disconnected Youth: Toward a Preventive Strategy* (Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America, Inc. [CWLA] Press, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1999), 45-47.

[19]RT Question More, February 20, 2013. Retrieved May 14, 2014 (http://rt.com/usa/incarceration-african-black-prison-606)

[20]An added fact is that not simply do incarcerated parents, most

Black Youth and Law Enforcement. A contentious relationship between Black youth and law enforcement is not new. Longstanding distrust of law enforcement officers and agencies by Black youth and adults alike evolve from numerous instances over the years when the lawful application of rights and protections for all were called in question when they failed to be applied to Black people. Janice Joseph's seminal work on Black youth and juvenile justice nearly two decades ago highlights data showing the disproportionate arrest and incarceration rate of Black youths compared to other groups; greater likelihood of being harassed, physically assaulted, or killed by law enforcement officers; and heightened risk of discriminatory decision-making in juvenile court processes.[21] These findings persist today! The reality is as well that young people are not always cognizant of their legal rights and their protections under the Constitution and are at risk of having these rights infringed upon in situations of stopping, searches and seizures, interrogations, arrests, and court proceedings.[22]

The tragic cases of Michael Brown in Missouri, Trayvon

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often fathers, tend not to have completed high school, but the father absence, in particular, tends to have a negative effect on youths and their risk for incarceration. In fact, one study carried out by Harper and McLanahan shows that "youths who never had a father in the household had the highest incarceration rates." Cynthia C. Harper and Sara S. McLanahan, "Pather Absence and Youth Incarceration," *Journal of Research on Adolescence,* 14(3), 2004:369-397 (384-386).

[21]Janice Joseph opens with the 1989 report of findings of racism in the juvenile justice system by the National Coalition of State Juvenile Justice Advisory Groups. She provides added data on the difficult nature of relationships between Black youth and law enforcement in her chapter on "Police and Black Youths" and on the discriminatory practices in juvenile court decision-making in her chapter on "Black Youths and Juvenile Court" in: Janice Joseph, *Black Youths, Delinquency, and Juvenile Justice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), vii. 71-89, 91-102.

[22]Ibid. 73-74.

Martin in Florida, Eric Garner in New York, and others are reminders that the law enforcement system has not yet been freed from longstanding deeply ingrained injustices in the nation's structures and institutions.[23] In the words of two writers, "they are lived realities that literally cost too many young Black people their lives. There is much work to do."[24]

Impact of Technology and Consumerism

High-tech and consumer cultures are superimposed on person-to-person, face-to-face realities of urban life and exert immense influence on youth. Even though there is a digital divide that limits access to high-tech connections in lower socio-economic areas, they still exist to some degree; and where they exist, these media offer young people alternative communities, mostly peer-oriented and provide substitutes for none-existent, troubling, failed, or violent in-person relationships. They also bring youth into contact with "other forms of violence, behaviors and attitudes that have the power to shape their views and choices of how to live."[25] Human-trafficking is often accomplished on-line and has become big business with Atlanta, Georgia becoming the national hub for this activity. It poses very real dangers for youth who live on the streets or are approached or accosted while moving about

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[23]The perspective on the ongoing presence of racial disparities and gross injustices evidenced by the cases of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner and others is presented in the report of Jon C. Rogowski and Cathy J. Cohen, "The Policing of Black Communities and Young People of Color," Democracy Remised: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics, A Series on Black and Latino Youth Political Engagement, August 15, 2014. Retrieved September 10, 2014 (http://www.blackyouthproject.com/files/2014/08/ferguson.pdf).

[24]Ibid. 6.

[25]Wimberly, et. al., *Youth Ministry in the Black Church*, 143.

the community.

The advertisements of consumer culture are easily accessed on TV. From this medium, urban youth find diversion and entertainment. At the same time, these media draw them into the values of and fantasies about material existence that, for them, is in short demand. TV, movies, videos, CDs also expose youth to prominent sports, film, and music personalities whose lives and messages about relationships offer values and patterns of existence they seek to embrace. Youth also see the admiration that is given these personalities. These personalities become images of the high point of the social hierarchy and the admiration toward which they aspire. For them, money, fame, and influence become symbolic of love and, therefore, if they can only be like these personalities, then they will be loved. Yet, fulfillment of this yearning most often gets short-circuited.[26] An important point here is that the addition of high-tech and consumer cultures to the contextual realities of Black youth contributes to their formation of a tightly woven and interconnected racialized, technologized, and commercialized tri-identity.

Physical and Emotional Realities of Urban Teens

Like other young people, urban Black teens are in a stage of personal development. But, for Black teens, navigating this developmental period takes place at the

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[26]Alain de Botton writes about the impulse behind the desire of persons "to rise in the social hierarchy may be rooted not so much in the material goods than can be accrued or the power that can be wielded as a consequence o high status. Money, fame, and influence may be valued more as tokens–and means to –love rather than ends in themselves." See Alain de Botton, *Status Anxiety* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 6.

intersection of their race/ethnicity and the multiple contextual realities of their lives like those already described. Even though there are urban Black youth who enjoy good health, have positive self-esteem, exhibit hope-ful attitudes, and avoid health- and life-negating behavior, overall, youth in urban areas are still burdened with disproportionate rates of illness, mental distress, and death. Brief attention will be given here to four specific health risks followed by some mention of the impact of the urban environmental stressors on youths' mental well-being.

Physical Health. First, there continues to be a disproportionate number of births among Black teens, even though birthrates have decreased across all geographic areas socio-economic and racial groups. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) indicates that low educational attainment levels and family income, lessened opportunities for positive youth involvement, neighborhood segregation, and neighborhood physical deterioration are all contributing factors to this continuing situation.[27]

Second, obesity constitutes a severe health risk among Black youth. Although reports are showing a drop in obesity rates of Black youth, the data still show troubling disparities. Nearly a quarter of Back adolescents aged 12-19 are obese; and the percentage rises to nearly 30% for girls in this age category.[28] The impact of poverty on youth is often shown in

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[27]See CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), "Teen Birth Rates Drop, But Disparities Persist, 2014." Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. Retrieved August 26, 2014. (http://www.cdc.gov/features/dsteenpregnancy/).

[28]Leadership for Healthy Communities, "Overweight and Obesity Among African-American Youth," Fact Sheet 2010. Princeton, NJ: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Retrieved May 12, 2014 (www.cahperd.org/.../28168-686161.overweightobesityafricanameryouth.pdf).

Black youths' poor nutrition; and obesity emerging from poor nutrition contributes to poor school performance; emotional, social and potentially chronic and serious lifelong illnesses.

The reality is that inner city areas have been labeled "food deserts" because residents tend to live distances away from supermarkets or large grocery stores, thereby making accessibility to healthy food difficult. With more than a quarter of Black families in a situation of food insecurity because of insufficient income, affordable food is also inaccessible to many. The economic and physical inaccessibility to healthy foods has a direct impact on obesity.[29] This situation is complicated by further inaccessibility to healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables in school vending machines, stores and snack bars. Moreover, there are fewer opportunities for physical activity because of the scarcity of parks, pools, green spaces or beaches.

Third, 2010 Centers for Disease Control (CDC) data show that "an estimated forty-four percent of all new HIV infections occurred among adults and adolescents aged 13 years or older."[30] The rate of sexually transmitted diseases is also high. Of particular concern is the relationship between poverty, the risk for HIV infection, and limited access to high

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[29]See Cynthia L. Ogden; Margaret D. Carroll; Brian K. Kit; Katherine M. Flegel, "Prevalence of Childhood and Adult Obesity in the United States, 2009-2010," NCHS Data Brief, No. 82, January 2012. Retrieved September 13, 2014 (http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db82.pdf).; and Martha Adams Sulllivan and Robert S. Schachter, "Reports from the Field: A Toolkit for Fighting Poverty," Worse Than You Think: The Dimensions of Poverty in NYC (New York: National Association of Social Workers, New York City Chapter, 2014).

[30]See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2012, "HIV Surveillance Report." Retrieved May 13, 2014 (http://www/cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/statistics_surveillance_report_vol_22.pdf.)

quality health care, housing and HIV prevention education all of which are implicated in poor outcomes. Bome helpful news, though still needing improvement, is that seventy-five person of HIV-infected African-Americans aged 13 or older are linked to care, though less than half (48%) are retained in care, and only forty-six percent are prescribed antiretroviral therapy. and only thirty-five percent are virally suppressed. According to CDC, the reality is that "stigma, fear, discrimination, homophobia, and negative perceptions about HIV testing tend to place African Americans at higher risk and the tendency not to seek testing.[31]

Mental Health. In an important sense, Black youth form inescapable "racialized identities" that result from boundaries of living that are forced, enforced, and reinforced based on race and poverty. These identities are further ingrained by race-based inequities, the neglect of urban communities, violence and assaults to these youths' very being and personhood often by the very agencies that are supposed to protect them. "Racialized identities" inform how youth understand themselves, respond to, and act on their everyday lives.[32] A National Urban League Policy Institute Report, in particular, highlights the increased levels of sfress in youth due to poverty, racism, community neglect, traumatic events, and lack of resources. The result is seen in Black youths' added experiences of depression, grief, anger, aggression

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[31]The Body, HIV/AIDS Resource Center for African Americans, "HIV Among African Americans," From U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention," February 6, 2014. Retrieved May 13, 2014 (www.thebody.com/content/17002/hiv-among-african-americans.html).

[32]The term, "racialized identities" is presented by Nasir as a way of exploring identity and learning for African American students. See Na'ilah Suad Nasir, *Racialized Identities: Race and Achievement among African American Youth* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 4-7.

and mental health disorders such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).[33]

While violence and destructive behaviors are not condoned acts, it is still important to recognize that for some young people, anger borne of life's mayhem does become expressed in violent behaviors. It becomes for them a venting act that often has its basis in feelings of deep humiliation or shame for being Black and what blackness stands for. Deeply felt anger or resentment resulting in hostile responses on the one hand, and peaceful demonstrations on the other, are Black people's responses to racism or some form of gross injustice as in the cases of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner. Responses in these situations are the acts of both grief and anger over life "snatched away" and the realization that these lives should not have been cut short.[34] Lee Butler Jr. describes Black people's state of "being emotional 'ponds of still waters running deep'" that results from the trauma of life-defying forces. He maintains that a prevailing wider societal expectation of repression of emotion in the face of these forces is tantamount to "'swallowing' one's pride–one's true feelings–for the sake of survival" and that it eventuates in rage that "sometimes 'spills' over into acts of aggression and violence. This is evidenced in escalating urban violence, domestic violence, and sexual violence, as we

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[33]Eboni Morris, "Youth Violence: Implications for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Urban Youth, 6. Washington DC: National Urban League Policy Institute. Retrieved May 13, 2014 (http://www.research.policyarchive.org/17613.pdf).

[34]The impact of economic hardship, racism, and other realities of Black life on the high rate of completed grief of Black people is described in: Anna Laurie and Robert A. Neimeyer, "African Americans in Bereavement: Grief as a Function of Ethnicity," *Omega* 57(2):173-193, 2008 (187).

experience the resurgence of racial violence."[35]

The Presence of Resilience

Even amidst the difficult circumstances found especially in inner city urban areas, we must not assume an overall presence of dysfunctionality or discount the resilience and gifts of youth and expressions of hope and goodness of many of them. Moreover, it is the case that many parents as well as grandparents or other kin raising children care deeply about their young and what happens to them. In addition, they are often at a loss to know what to do or how to do it, and reach out for help. In our work with parents/guardians of youth participants in the Youth Hope-Builders Academy (YHBA) at Interdenominational Theological Center, which I direct, I have seen over and over again the expressed concern of parents/guardians and their ready attendance at events designed to provide guidance and helpful tools for living with and raising youth. In one instance, a mother was so intent on her son's getting to a YHBA congregation-based program that she purposely missed a medical clinic appointment in order to get him there on time, knowing the difficulty in getting another appointment. There are also numbers of young people, as well, who strive against all odds to be positive achievers and contributors to community, such as one of the young women in YHBA who saw her way ahead by playing basketball. Her achievement in this sport gave her courage to work harder. She became one of the leaders in her inner city high school.

We must also recognize that urban areas also include Black upwardly mobile and middle class neighborhoods of somewhat lesser density where there is greater support and

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[35]Lee H. Butler Jr., *Liberating Our Dignity, Saving our Souls: A New Theory of African American Identity Formation* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2006), 167.

access to opportunities for youth. Yet, in these situations, the adults' job security may be unstable. Family financial resources may be limited or dwindling; and real concerns about maintaining what they have achieved may bring about family fears, pressure and relational dissonance. Moreover, even in these neighborhoods, the threat of violence persists; and, like those in the poorest areas, youth navigate and are impacted by this reality. Regardless of the urban area, youth are also impacted by and frankly struggle with how to live, move, and have their being as adolescents amidst family issues and the family structures they are in, whether two-parent, single-parent, foster parent, adoptive parent, divorced parent, blended family, grandparent and other kin-headed homes. Regardless of the urban area, it is critical to remember that life's journey for Black youth is not easy.

Critical Content in Ministry with Urban Black Youth

Life is tough for urban youth! This reality presents to Black churches an unequaled and mandatory opportunity to act even as many of them struggle to hold onto membership and congregational viability. Responding to this mandate means taking seriously the contextual realities of youth and to center on what may be called preparatory content or a viewpoint about contextually responsive urban youth ministry that frames and guides specific pedagogical practices. In what follows, brief attention will be given to the nature of preparatory content followed by descriptions of pedagogical practices including curricular, liturgical, and collaborative practices that address concretely the everyday situations, interests and needs of urban youth.

Preparatory Content

An emphasis on ministry with and on behalf of urban youth reflects the notion that these youth are God's "fearfully and wonderfully made" creations (Psalm 139:4) and God's gifts to the church and community. Affirming this truth means that, in the face of urban Black youths' identity- and life-negating circumstances, our congregations and leaders see these youth as part of our lives and us as part of theirs. We consider our churches and youth ministry as vital to the present and future lives of the youth, the church, and the world which all of us inhabit. Included in this view is an understanding of "village" functions or "patterns of communal solidarity, guidance, and support out of which can come [youths'] valued identity and hopeful life direction in the midst of racism and other triais and tribulations of Black life."[36]

Preparatory content is in fact, our churches' and leaders' passionate commitment to make possible youths' embrace of an unapologetic and unashamed identity and hopeful direction for their lives patterned after the model of Jesus Christ. Theologically, passionate commitment reflects the presence of the kind of compassion or empathy for others shown in the ministry and death of Jesus Christ. It points to congregational longing and willingness to put forth resources and strength to carry out informed, intelligent action based on knowledge or insights into the contextual realities of youth and buttressed by the biblical mandate that we are to clothe ourselves with compassion (Colossians 3:12) and that whatever we do to the least of these, we do to Jesus Christ

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[36]Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, ed., *Keep It Real: Working With Today's Black Youth* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), xviii.

(Matthew 25:40).[37]

A youth ministry leader in the Vision Quest Study stated it still another way: "If we're not reaching out and ministering to these young people; if we're not preparing these young kids with skills and gifts and talents that they can make a difference in the world, that they can somehow deal with the stuff they're going through, that they can go and be financially responsible, that they know they are somebody, then we've done them a disservice and we've done ourselves a disservice." This pastor went on to say, "However, it doesn't mean we bat a thousand all the time. What it does mean is that we try, leaning on God in the process." He continued, "There's a young man here that we've worked with, and worked with, and worked with and at the end of the day, he still chose the path he chose. He's been in and out of jail for the last 6 months. We helped that young man, encouraged that young man, worked with that young man, found out that he has a little baby now, and he has a criminal record now, and so much potential; but it is what it is. That little story just lets me know that, at the end of the day, these young people still belong to God and they still belong to us. It humbles you and brings you back to reality that we have his ministry to carry out.

The Vision Quest Study results and the ministry of the Youth Hope-Builders Academy (YHBA) of Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) affirm the essential nature of preparatory content and suggest an

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[37]A psychological view of compassion stresses empathic responsiveness or "the capacity to reconstruct the situation of another imaginatively and to respond to it emotionally in ways shaped by the meanings and vales of the culture." The nature and importance of compassion in pastoral practice is found in: J. Ezhanikatt, Q.L. Hand, and L. Skwerer, "Compassion," 206-207 in: Rodney J. Hunter, General Editor, *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling,* Expanded Edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005).

embrace of the following views:

Young people in the poorest urban areas and under the most difficult circumstances have strengths and show resilience while at the same time, they need and desire support and guidance from trusting others to move forward with them on their journey through adolescence to adulthood. th one instance, for example, a young man who was in a single parent home and who had never met his dad but craved an opportunity to make contact with him. His mom was able to make arrangements for him to travel out of state for a visit with him. During that visit, he continually felt left out–the word his mom said he used was "dissed" by his dad who had remarried and had a young child to whom he and his wife gave all the attention. The young man called his mom and simply said, "I'm coming home. He doesn't want me." His mom said that, even in the midst of being heart-broken, he decided that he wasn't going to sit around feeling sorry for himself. She said, "Do you know what he did?" He called his middle school mentee and told him, "Let's go shoot some hoops."

Young people desperately need to be welcomed or received as valuable human beings beyond what you think you see of them and what you think about where they live. They want and real sense of belonging with real people. A youth respondent in the Vision Quest study said, "No matter who you are, or where you come from, and no matter what others think of you, when you come into a church, you are welcomed with open arms; and they try to get you into the ministry as fast as possible. They want you to be there."[38] A group of youth in the Youth Hope-Builders Academy was asked: "What one thing would you say you want most from adults?" Their answer unanimously was: "Someone to tell us they love us and really mean it."

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[38]See Anne Wimberly, et.al., *Youth Ministry in the Black Church*, 119.

Young people experience overwhelming challenges on a daily basis that require not simply the stabilizing, listening, and guiding presence of caring others, but those who are willing to open the conversations with them about the tough stuff of life they are facing and who are knowledgeable about available resources that can assist them. In a Youth Hope-Builders Academy session on grief, the youth were asked how many of them had lost a friend or family members through death or some other reason. Everyone in the room raised their hand. The next question was, "Does anyone want to talk about it?" One by one, the stories came out, crying as they told about violent deaths of friends, deaths of loved ones from terminal illnesses, losses of fathers in the home who were in prison.

Young people need capable others who are willing to step out of their comfort zone to be with them in unfamiliar situations and places such as juvenile courts, detention centers, and jails. YHBA staff received the news of a youth who was to have a bail hearing after being arraigned on a felony charge. Her mother requested the presence of staff members. At the close of the hearing, one staff member describes her depth of feeling as she recalled her knowledge of the talented young woman and watching her come into the courtroom wearing an orange jumpsuit with legs and arms shackled. One staff member was asked by the youths' lawyer to take the stand as a character witness. She told of coming from the stand, catching the youths' eye and seeing the youth smile and mouth the words, "Thank you."

Young people have deep questions about who they are and the meaning and purpose of life. They also have numerous questions about God and faith in life. Their questions provide an opening for spiritual companionship and guidance. In a YHBA group mentoring session, one of the young men said that his mom told him that he wasn't going to amount to anything in his life because he was just like his dad. The male mentor who was assigned to him became an

ongoing guide for him.

Young people care deeply about their relationships with parents, family members, and peers and need tools to look at and reflect on these relationships and ways of negotiating them in positive ways. In a gender-based mentoring group session, one of the young women talked about her mother's illness. She wasn't sure what was wrong, but it seemed serious. This youth was having to care for her younger siblings. She was frightened at the thought of her mother's dying and bout what would happen to her and her siblings. Options for handling her situation came from the mentor as well as from her peers.

Young people have gifts and talents they want to share with others and they want others to see them and invite them to be shared. They also desire to make a difference in the lives of others. Time and time again, we saw the young participants in the Youth Hope-Builders Academy practice, practice, practice on a dance or step routine, a song they wrote, or a drama they created. They organized talent shows, used their gifts in worship, and shared them during times of recreation. They chose younger children to mentor and places to do community service, often in the very communities where they lived.

Youth want to be heard. Studies indicate both the invisibility and muteness of Black youth. The all too prevalent situation in both society at large and in the church is the failure to really see Black youth and rightfully give them voice to the end that they become active agents on their own and others' behalf.[39]

Youth crave more then connection. They desperately

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[39]The invisibility and muteness of Black youth is highlighted in: Gregory C. Ellison, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2013), 3-7.

need what Kenda Creasy Dean in her book, *OMG: A Youth Ministry Handbook,* calls communion. To use her words, "The intimacy young people seek is a deep and spiritual sense of belonging and being known–an intimacy enacted in the Christian practice of communion . . . When the church becomes a community of belonging, we embody 'communion'–one-with-ness in every form–that imperfectly but authentically becomes the body and blood of Christ as we remember him."[40]

Parents need to be a recipient of care and guidance. The common statement of parents of the Youth Hope-Builders Academy participants was: "We need a hope-builders academy for us."

Pedagogical Practices

Respondents in the Vision Quest Study clearly said that ministry must help youth dig into and make sense out of the very real stories they live everyday, and give them handles on how faith connects with their present and future lives. Specifically, ministry must be relevant and hope-centered. Relevant and hope-centered ministry is undertaken with an intended impact on the youth. Ministry with urban youth is to be a transforming channel that contributes to their finding meaning in the midst of mayhem; forming character-building values, attitudes, skills, and positive identity; and developing, affirming or re-affirming resilient behaviors based on their understanding of the Christian faith. This means helping them find ways to address challenges, develop social and communication skills, access resources, and form a spirituality centered on hopeful living.[41]

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[40]Kenda Creasy Dean, ed.,*OMG: A Youth Ministry Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 73-74.

[41]Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, et.al., *Youth Ministry in the Black*

In order to achieve this goal, ministry must be holistic. Holistic ministry centers on every aspect of the lives of youth in urban areas. It addresses youths' personal, relational, spiritual, cultural, educational, vocational, and situational aspects of their lives. A youth ministry leader affirmed this view by saying: "My point is, if a young person can pray, preach, dance, speak in tongues, walk in the gifts of the spirit, but can't read, write, and do arithmetic, we are in trouble. Also today with obesity, if we don't offer an opportunity for these young people to work out, blow off some steam . . . , or if I got a young boy or a young girl that's growing up in a gang-infested arena and they don't know how or why to choose another way or to defend themselves, telling them to close their eyes and lift up their hands and pray is not enough . . . It we're not preparing these young kids to see and claim their gifts and talents and prepare them with skills they need to go and be responsible people, then we've done them and ourselves a disservice. . . Well, I'll say it this way–excellent youth ministry has to have a holistic perspective. It's got to cover every aspect of life. One without the other is no good."[42]

But, how do we carry it out? What critical content and action is involved that responds to the contextual realities of urban Black youth? Answers to the questions will be presented here in three categories including curricular content, liturgical content, and multidimensional intersectoral collaborative action.

Curricular Content. A key effort of the ITC-based Youth Hope-Builders Academy (YHBA) has been to develop interactive curricula that are designed to engage high school youth in exploring forthrightly issues they face, to guide them

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Church, 7-8.

[42]Excerpt from transcription of a taped interview of an inner city youth ministry pastor in Los Angeles, California. (Atlanta: Vision Quest: A Study of Efforts, Challenges, and Needs of Youth Ministry Leadership in Black Congregations, March 26, 2010).

in looking critically at them, and deciding on courses of action to take. Five curricula are carried out by congregations alone or in clusters as part of the YHBA Bridges Initiative that is designed to reach youth who are active in their congregations, youth who are in the margins of church life, and youth who live in the surrounding community, but have not been church participants.[43] Congregations who have carried out these curricula are located in Atlanta, Georgia; Tuskegee, Alabama; LaGrange, Georgia; Greenville/Greer, South Carolina; and Grand Rapids, Michigan. Congregations beginning the curricula are located in a different set of churches in Atlanta and in Newport News, Virginia.

One curriculum is entitled "Who am I and Why am I Here?" Focused on identity formation and vocational direction, it comes out of the understanding that identity is a necessary central emphasis in ministry with Black youth, especially because of painful and self-negating realities our youth face in daily life. Through this curricular focus, leaders seek to heighten Black youths' awareness and embrace of a positive sense of self or what Jacquelyn Grant calls a sense of somebodiness[44] and what Lee Butler describes as helping African Americans "move from emotional *self-hate* to relational *self-respect and mutual fulfillment*.[45] Specifically,

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[43]Congregations that have carried out these curricula are located in Atlanta, Georgia; Tuskegee, Alabama; LaGrange and Hogansville, Georgia; Greenville and Greer, South Carolina; Newport News, Virginia; and Grand Rapids, Michigan.

[44]The term, "somebodiness" is central to the youth ministry framework proposed in: Jacquelyn Grant, "A Theological Framework," 55-67 in Charles R. Foster and grant S. Shockley, eds., *Working With Black Youth: Opportunities for Christian Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989).

[45]Lee H. Butler Jr., *Liberating Our Dignity, Saving Our Souls: A*

the curriculum is directed toward helping youth overcome negative self-definitions emerging from their experiences of violence, castigation, and hurtful labels, attitudes and action in their homes, immediate surroundings, and wider society. Film, simulations, drama, music, open discussion, and reflection including on scripture are used for youth to explore how and who named them; uses, meanings and feelings about nicknames; critical exploration about the "N" Word; experiences, feelings about, and ways to deal with racism; Black history material and models; completion of a gifts inventory; and ways, places, and directions for honoring their gifts now and in the future.

A second curriculum centers on physical health and wholeness and is entitled "Loving Myself." Discussion charts, pictures, exercises, discussion, and decision sheets draw attention to the nature of and action needed in the areas of hygiene, diet and nutrition, exercise and nutrition, key illnesses among African Americans and what to avoid them or care for them including obesity, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV/AIDS. Added attention is given to substance abuse and human sexuality. The curriculum highlights the importance of youth becoming equipped with the knowledge to protect their bodies and make life-giving choices about their about their health.[46]

A third curriculum calls attention to emotional health and wholeness.[47] Entitled "Minding My Emotions: Emotionally Healthy Adolescents," this curriculum recognizes that Black

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New Theory of African American Identity Formation (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2006), 167.

[46]Casina Washington, "Loving Myself: Physical Health and Wholeness." (Atlanta, GA: Youth Hope-Builders Academy, 2012).

[47]Sarah Farmer, "Minding My Emotions: Emotionally Healthy Adolescents." (Atlanta, GA: Youth Hope-Builders Academy, 2012).

youth need and search for positive connectedness with peers and others; and "without opportunities to engage in a community as a valued member, they will either isolate themselves or join in communities that may be counterproductive to their emotional well-being."[48] The modules in the curriculum engage youth in looking critically at the multiple voices that impact how they view their bodies, their self-esteem, and their overall self-image. The curriculum further provides opportunities for youth to explore and express their reactions to loss in their lives. It is based on the recognition of multiple losses Black youth experience from the deaths of peers due to violence, the absence of or abandonment by parents, and other triggers for grief. The curriculum further builds on the view that, "ultimately, youth who learn how to cope with their grief have a greater chance of developing emotional strength, gaining a deeper appreciation for life, and strengthening bonds with others."[49]

The fourth concentrated curricular activity centers on conflict resolution and is entitled "Transforming Conflict."[50] Given the climate of violence in which Black youth live and the seeming escalation of violence by and against them, the curriculum engages youth forthrightly in approaches that provide conflict resolution skills they can use in their homes, schools, churches, and community. Through a combination

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[48]Sarah Farmer draws on the work of Michael J. Nakkula and Eric Toshalis, "Relational Identity and Relationship Development," *Understanding Youth: Adolescent Development for Educators* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2006), 79-98.

[49]Sarah Farmer draws on Kevin Ann Oltjenbruns, "Positive Outcomes of Adolescents' Experience with Grief," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 6:1 (1991):43-53.

[50]Sarah Farmer, "Transforming Conflict: A Curriculum on Conflict Resolution with Adolescents." (Atlanta, GA: Youth Hope-Builders Academy, 2012).

of approaches such as writing, dialogue, drawing, acting, sharing, movement, and listening, youth explore the nature of conflict, psychological and spiritual dangers of anger and unforgiveness and ways of overcoming anger and dealing with unforgiveness, and actions that are designed to build personal agency to build a better and or just community and world.

The final curriculum is a guide for use by families called "Strengthening Family Roots."[51] This curriculum is grounded in the African-American understanding that "It takes a village to raise a child." It is based on the premise that a central role of the church is to be an active presence in the community, to be aware of family issues and needs, and to provide resource-rich programing opportunities to guide and support of healthy family relationships. Through tip sheets, open discussion, role plays, and decision sheets the curriculum sessions engage groups of parents and parents with youth. Attention is given to family communication practices, discipline, and rituals to build and maintain positive family values and bonding. Throughout this curriculum and all of the preceding ones, the Christian faith is integral to the activities and uses of scripture as reflection guides appear throughout.

Discussion with Black youth is also pertinent in light of reduced or lack of awareness on their part about legal rights when stopped by police, arrested, interrogated, and held. Added resources are drawn upon such as *Know Your Rights: A Guide to Young People's Rights in Juvenile Delinquency Court,* are often used by churches to convey this information.[52]

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[51]Casina Washington and Sarah Farmer, "Strengthening Family Roots." (Atlanta, GA: Youth Hope-Builders Academy, 2012).

[52]See Rashida Edmondson-Penny, *Know Your Rights: A Guide to Young People's Rights in Juvenile Delinquency Court* , A Gault at 40

Liturgical Content. Black worship that reaches urban youth offers a space where youth can "form a vital spiritual resilience and build self-esteem. Spiritual resilience has to do with youths' formation of a set of beliefs, attitudes, and values that make possible their ability to imagine and act on positive ways of living that are guided by the Christian faith. This kind of resilience informs youths' daily exercise of the Christian faith based on a spiritual center grounded in their understanding of the valued who and Whose they are."[53] But, churches promote it only insofar as they offer opportunities for youths' active participation that draw on their ideas, insights and knowledge in ways that foster their spiritual growth and views of themselves as leaders and not simply as passive unseen recipients of adults' activities. Moreover, self-esteem is promoted and protected when youth feel competent in areas that they themselves value such as artistic endeavors carried out in liturgical dance, stepping, mime, and spoken word. These artistic endeavors rightly build on Hip-hop culture and the rap music and dancing defining it that functioned as creative expressions of frustration and anger borne of life's harsh existence. The Vision Quest Study outcomes reveal that opportunities taking this and other forms occur in peer-oriented and intergenerational worship. Examples of best practices of youths' involvement in worship appear in the book, *Youth Ministry in the Black Church*.[54]

Club Holy Ghost (CHG), a Saturday night worship service in an AME church in urban Washington, D.C. is an

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Campaign Publication, supported by the National Juvenile Defender Center. Newly accessed May 10, 2014 (http://www.njdc.info/gaultat40/pdfs/kyr_booklet.pdf)

[53]Anne Streaty Wimberly, "Worship in the Lives of Black Adolescents: Builder of Resilience and Hope," *Liturgy* 29(1), 2014:23-33.

[54]Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, et. al., *Youth Ministry in the Black Church: Centered in Hope.*

example of peer-oriented worship. CHG is described as "an opportunity for Black youth to worship in a space that is created by and for them. They are responsible for the entire service and use technology common to their generation."[55] They have an informal dress code and ascribe to a ritual that is designed te meet youth at the point of their needs, realizing that "the Holy Ghost can be fully present in a youth-led service just as this presence is felt in an adult-led service."[56]

In an example of intergenerational worship, a Presbyterian church in an urban California neighborhood engages youth "as liturgists; as ushers either as a group or with adult ushers; . . . and as worship monitors who sit beside younger children to show them what is going on and to maintain appropriate behavior."[57] Moreover, youth in a Lutheran church in an urban Michigan area, provide leadership every Sunday during worship either in the form of a youth praise team, as worship leader, or as ushers. There is no separate youth church."[58] One pastor was adamant in saying that "the placement of youth in these capacities results from recognition of the gifts of the youth. . . It shows that youth are leaders today. We don't have to walt until tomorrow. You know, I think that has changed much of the dynamics of this church. And my hope is to increase their involvement."[59]

Is including youth in intergenerational worship always easy? The answer is a resounding "No." There is sometimes great reluctance on the part of established members to accept

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[55]Ibid. 154-155.

[56]Ibid.155.

[57]Ibid. 153.

[58]Ibid. 54.

[59]Ibid. 153.

"those youth" in the neighborhood. There are expressed fears of damage to the church, of burglaries, or statements that "this is, afterall, our church." However, there are occasions when "holy boldness" takes over and a youth ministry leader presses forward to transform "what was to what must be." This action took place in a church in an urban area in Tennessee when a leader, who had been a long-time church member, announced that she had begun a ministry with neighborhood kids and intended for them to be present in the life of the church, including worship. One part of her approach included preparatory work with the congregation through meetings in which she shared the nature of her ministry with youth, told the stories of the youth, described their typical dress, shared some songs they had learned and enjoyed, and invited the congregation's reflection on meanings of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The second part of her approach was to prepare the youth who, admittedly were not exactly thrilled about entering the church. She described the worship service and ultimately the willingness of the worshipers to hear and learn some of their songs. She spoke with them about the typical Sunday dress code of worship and asked them to discuss how much they were willing or able to do to accommodate this style. The youth opted for their usual very informal way of dressing based on what they said was "all they had." However, after much discussion, the young men agreed not to wear trousers at the hip-line level. At the appointed time for the neighborhood youth and the established members to come together during worship, the welcome was extended, a youth representative spoke, the youth ministry leader spoke, and together, they sang one of the youths' favorite songs. The comment of the youth ministry leader was: "At least this was a start."

Multidimensional Collaborative Action. Compassionate congregational action with and on behalf of urban youth is

demanding of pastoral and other human resources as well as financial support. The formation of what is called *intersectoral collaborative action* provides a way of addressing limitations on a church's ability to carry out needed initiatives. *Intersectorial collaborative action* is an approach where different community sectors and organizations join together and share resources and responsibilities to achieve positive action in multiple critical areas in the lives of urban youth.[60]

Evidence of this approach documented in the 2003 Report of the Howard University Center for Urban Progress.[61] The report affirms churches' involvement as faith-based community institutions who served as collaborative partners with the federal government in serving and functioning as premier actors in very poor neighborhoods, "doing street level outreach, targeting the hot spot areas and violent youth."[62] In the manner similar to the integral rcle of the Christian faith in the YHBA curricula, faith was a central part of the work of participants in the faith-based initiatives. Three programs were summarized including the Boston Ten Point Coalition that was a program of "collaboration of law enforcement, church leaders, clergy . . . federal, state and municipal officials, the U.S. Attorney's Office, State Attorney's Office, the District Attorney's Office as well as the Department of

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[60]Intersectoral collaboration is a term typically used in community-based health programs and initiatives and comes out of the health sector's creating a comprehensive service approach by bringing together shared resources and responsibilities. See: Per Nilsen, "The Theory of Community-based Health and Safety Programs: A Critical Examination," *Injury Prevention*. 12(3):140-145, June 2006.

[61]The Howard University Center for Urban Progress, *Faith-Based Organizations and African American Youth Development* (Washington, DC: The Howard University Center for Urban Progress for the Lutheran Hour Ministries Community Connection Project, April 2003).

[62]Ibid.36.

Probation."[63] This collaborative effort resulted in the reduction of rates of violent youth crime in Boston. In a second National Faith-Based Initiative for High-Risk Youth, fifteen cities became demonstration sitos for creating partnerships among congregations from different faiths and denominations; and partnerships with the justice community, social service agencies, schools, and other community agencies. Through this collaborative effort, youth received mentoring, tutoring and homework assistance, employment readiness skills, life skills, recreation and cultural enrichment, and spiritual supports through religious music and encouragement of church attendance.[64] This effort took place in Bronx, Cleveland, Denver, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle, Brooklyn, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Baton Rouge, Detroit, Fresno, Tulsa, and Washington, D.C.

A third program called Youth Excellence Services (YES), sponsored by a Presbyterian Church provided tutoring, mentoring, recreation, arts/humanities activities and snacks for middle-school youth as means of decreasing unsupervised time after school, improving attendance and attitudes toward school and decreasing high-risk behaviors.[66]

In response to continuing violence perpetrated against and by Black youth, the Youth Hope-Builders Academy launched a "Stop the Violence, Raise Up the Peace" initiative beginning with a youth and family convocation on that theme followed by development of a Guide for use in congregations, and a youth action oriented Peace Action Council (PAC). The convocation was carried out through links with the broad-based community action organization called Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta (CBC), Christian and Muslim leaders, as well

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[63]Ibid.36.

[64]Ibid.37.

[65]Ibid.38.

as leaders from law enforcement agencies and a resource network focused on human trafficking.

The 2009-2011 Vision Quest Study of 833 churches across the U.B. and across denominations found that a significant percentage of Black churches developed specific kinds of programs often with other churches and/or agencies to target hot-spot issues. Critical attention was given to counseling (76.8%), mentoring (71.1%), programs addressing crime/violence (69.8%), sexuality (64.9%), and tutoring, literacy and job-training (51.9%).[66]

Connecting With Youth

Making connections with urban youth means that churches peel back the brick and mortar and intentionally see themselves as churches without walls. Doing this requires congregations to see themselves as part of the communities in which they exist in ways that the neighborhoods around them begin to see the congregations as their own. The book, *Youth Ministry in the Black Church* reminds us that "Black churches today have the shoulders of a powerful historic legacy to stand on; and they must build on the promise this legacy holds for today!"[67] There is evidence that congregations engage in some deep soul-searching as means to revising the vision of youth ministry. The pastor of an AME church was newly assigned to a congregation in a difficult urban area. The congregation had been at one time been a vital one with a thriving Christian education program and youth ministry. fts large educational unit was all but empty due to the relocation of members to suburban areas. New residents had moved in but the church had failed to reach

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[66]Wimberly, et. al., *Youth Ministry in the Black Church*, 151.

[67]Ibid. 194.

out to them. The pastor was determined to engage the congregation in a making connections effort. The following steps reflect ones undertaken by him and a visioning team. In another instance, a United Methodist church is in the process of taking similar steps as means of revising their vision for their overall ministry. In this church, a visioning team meets and is charged with leading the congregation in the steps:

- *Step One.* Look carefully at the congregational culture. Notice whether it is comprised on a recognizable group of people. Notice if there have been any changes in this group and consider why or why not. Consider how the congregational life connects with the youth in and outside it, how or whether the youth connect with it and why or why not.
- *Step Two.* Look carefully at where the church is located and who precisely lives around and near it. Walk or ride through the neighborhood and take note of the youth and other residents, the surroundings, the activities, the schools, recreational and other facilities. Overhear sounds, voices, conversations. Create occasions to speak with school officials, community leaders, law enforcement and others about community concerns and issues. Go in grocery stores, sit in restaurants in the area, and become aware of actions. Talk with residents. Consider how what is seen and heard influence what the congregation already does or might yet do.
- *Step Three.* Recall or discover the church's history, why it came into existence, past efforts to attract and maintain youth involvement. Discover the turning points and consider the changes in youth participation and why.
- *Step Four.* Review the church's member migration and members' attendance patterns. Consider what has prompted members to stay or leave as well as what, specifically, has retained youth or caused them to leave.
- *Step Five.* Openly share views toward churched and unchurched youth. Consider the needs of both groups and

how these views affect what is done or not done with and on behalf of youth in the congregation. Share openly what welcoming each of the groups of youth might look like and the extent to which this welcome is carried out.

- *Step Six*. Evaluate what takes place during worship. What attitudes exist about the inclusion of youth in worship or about separate youth worship experiences.. Consider efforts that have been taken to respond to the interests, attitudes, feelings, and requests of youth. Consider the extent to which efforts have been made to build understanding.
- *Step Seven*. Put together a "Making Connections" Chart which shows how the discoveries in the previous six steps are related. Consider the meaning of the statement: "The church is called to be the family of God as described in Paul's letter to the Corinthians found in the Chapter 12, verses 14-19. Weigh the options of what it may mean for the church's present and future ministry if the church is to be with and for the church in the community and for the youth in the community to be in the church. Form the church's vision of youth ministry based on the option.[68]

This result of the process undertaken in the AME church was a commitment to reach out to the numbers of youth in the neighborhood around the church. A new youth ministry leader has been hired alongside an Associate Pastor who is also help form a youth ministry team. This church has become one of the YHBA bridges and will carry out the curricula described earlier.

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[68]The process is a revision of the one found in: Wimberly, et. al., *Youth Ministry in the Black Church*, 195-198.

A Parting Word

Although it can be said that there has been much good action in ministries with and on behalf of Black youth in urban areas, the job is far from over. Very real and difficult issues remain that demand attention and will likely continue to do so into the foreseeable future. The message is that our churches must not give up! In light of the survival efforts faced by increasing numbers of congregations, the call to respond to the critical issues facing our youth must evoke a kind of holy boldness that brings new aliveness. The gravity of the situation of our youth also must spur our congre-gations to new or renewed forms of connection with neighborhoods and communities in need. The mandate for action remains before us!

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