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## Practicing Presence: How the Local Church Should Target Poverty of Solidarity with Their Neighborhood's Youth

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PRACTICING PRESENCE: HOW THE LOCAL CHURCH SHOULD TARGET POVERTY  
OF SOLIDARITY WITH THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD'S YOUTH

A Senior Paper

Presented to

Dr. Nathan French, Theology Department

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by

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## INTRODUCTION

A high school student attends a youth group at a local church in his neglected neighborhood. He participates in Bible studies, youth group events, and experiences an altar-call moment to accept Christ into his heart. The church was there to help him live like Christ and grow spiritually. He gets to know God at an early age through the church; however, as he graduates high school, the connection with the church starts to dwindle. One day, he finds himself in jail, still struggling with his life's physical, mental, and social factors. This is the true story of Nick, a young man who was a regular attendee of the local church youth group and had his own spiritual connection with God yet found himself in the Cook County Correctional Center.<sup>1</sup>

It can be easy to blame the events of Nick's life on him, his parents, or even the church, but the issue is not who is to blame. Rather the problem is that while the church targeted his spiritual life, they neglected to address the other factors impacting Nick's life. There was no consistent presence from the church in his life. He came to know God, but had little to no guidance, support, and accountability as he grew. Jonathan Brooks, who has a personal relationship with Nick, states "We cannot have people believe that Jesus, who is God in human flesh and knows what we endure, would only be concerned with saving their souls." He claims that when entering into long-term relationships with one another, or practicing presence, there are other factors to consider other than spiritual health.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Brooks, *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 79-80.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

According to the United States Census Bureau, in 2021 there were 37.9 million people in poverty in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> Nearly 1 in 7, children, more than 10 million, under 18 lived in poverty in 2019. Since May 2020 it has been reported that 2.5 million children have fallen into poverty.<sup>4</sup> While the numbers of those in poverty are drastic already, these rates are measured based on only a few kinds of poverty, not all of them. These numbers are based on economic and physical factors, but there are other kinds of poverty that impact youth. Other places of poverty include lacks of spiritual, intellectual, affection, human will, civic involvement, and solidarity parts of life.<sup>5</sup>

There are several effects of poverty on society and youth are the most vulnerable to them. In an article titled “Enduring Poverty and the Conditions of Childhood: Lifecourse and Intergenerational Poverty Transmissions” the authors claim that the urgency to address poverty in children and youth is partly centered in how vulnerable young people are to the long lasting impacts of poverty.<sup>6</sup> There is nearly one billion children that are multi-dimensionally<sup>7</sup> poor worldwide with nearly 356 million children living in extreme<sup>8</sup> poverty. To put that into perspective, that is approximately three million children per day living in some form of poverty for how many days there are in one year. Children and youth are more likely to live in poverty than adults and the effects on their development hold much greater consequences.<sup>9</sup> Some of the

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<sup>3</sup> “Poverty in the United States: 2021,” United States Census Bureau, accessed November 7, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2022/demo/p60-277.html>.

<sup>4</sup> “Child Poverty,” The State of America’s Children 2021, Children’s Defense Fund, accessed November 7, 2022, <https://www.childrensdefense.org/state-of-americas-children/soac-2021-child-poverty/>.

<sup>5</sup> Kerry Loescher, “Eight Kinds of Poverty,” Class notes from CHRM 307 Urban Outreach Ministries, Oral Roberts University, September 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Caroline Harper, Rachel Marcus, and Karen Moore, “Enduring Poverty and the Conditions of Childhood: Lifecourse and Intergenerational Poverty Transmissions,” *World Development* 31, no. 3 (March 2003): 535, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X0300010X>.

<sup>7</sup> Multi-dimensionally poor is characterized as being without access to education, health, housing, nutrition, sanitation, or water.

<sup>8</sup> Extreme poverty is characterized by the forcing to survive on less than \$1.90 a day.

<sup>9</sup> “Child Poverty,” United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/social-policy/child-poverty>.

daily impacts of poverty on children are the obvious hunger, instability, insecurity, and illness, but the other affects include obesity, behavior issues, lack of academic achievement, and difficulties in social and emotional development. Factors like increased stress on both parents and children, lack of stability, neighborhood conditions, and enrichment opportunities like libraries or parks can have negative outcomes for children facing poverty. These factors and their implications can follow youth well into adulthood and have life-long effects if they are not addressed.<sup>10</sup>

For the sake of this paper, the main type of poverty that will be addressed is poverty of solidarity. This form of poverty is characterized by lack of support network that goes beyond family relationships. Every person needs a close group of people to depend on.<sup>11</sup> While youth like Nick have more than one aspect of poverty affecting their lives, it is the lack of healthy support that hinders them from moving out of poverty. Nick is only one teenager in one community in America that is struggling with poverty. Would he have ended up in jail if he had gotten the support he needed? If the church was not just concerned with his spiritual life and addressed the support he needed, would it have made a difference? Should the relationships between youth and the local church be more than what the church does in a building? Should the local church be concerned with the “whole” of the youth in their community? The key question at hand and that will be discussed in this paper is how should the local church target poverty of solidarity with their neighborhood’s youth?

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<sup>10</sup> Leshia Haynie, “Childhood Poverty, Living Below the Line,” American Psychological Association, accessed November 13, 2022, [https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/indicator/2014/06/childhood-poverty#:~:text=Children%20living%20in%20poverty%20experience,difficulties%20\(Malhomes%2C%202012\).](https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/indicator/2014/06/childhood-poverty#:~:text=Children%20living%20in%20poverty%20experience,difficulties%20(Malhomes%2C%202012).)

<sup>11</sup> Loescher, “Eight Kinds.”



## **Why Is This Issue Important in The Life of The Church Now?**

Yes, there is a problem, but why is this issue important in the life of the Church now? First, majority of people decide to become Christian between the ages of 4-14. The issue is that as youth move into being young adults (19-25) they likely leave the church. One study showed that 69% of 17 year olds attended church, but that percentage declined as they got older. By the point they were in their 20s, 1 in 3 were attending church regularly. When asked the reasons why they stopped attending church the main reason was moving to college at 34%. The next two main reasons were “church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical” at 32% and “I didn’t feel connected to people in my church” at 29%. The research reveals that there did not seem to be anything about the experience with the church or the faith foundation that enabled them to continue or seek out a connection after graduating high school.<sup>12</sup> On the other age spectrum, people who attend church are more likely to be 65 or older. Congregations and their leaders are growing older.<sup>13</sup> What this creates is a “dying” church. As young people leave and older people stay the congregation ages and sadly dies off, making it harder to continue to grow and thrive. The church is in some ways struggling to support youth as they grow and as a result there are people like Nick, who despite having a connection with God as a youth in the local church lost connection as he graduated high school.

Second, it is a commandment of God to care and love one’s neighbor and that is not defined by age. The church is called to participate in God’s mission on the earth and that includes reaching the youth of their neighborhood. Jeremiah 29:7: “But seek the welfare of the

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<sup>12</sup> Aaron Earls, “Most Teenagers Drop Out of Church When They Become Young Adults,” Lifeway Research, January 15, 2019, <https://research.lifeway.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/#:~:text=The%20dropout%20rate%20for%20young,they%20were%20attending%20church%20regularly.>

<sup>13</sup> Aaron Earls, “22 Vital Stats for Ministry in 2022,” January 5, 2022, [https://research.lifeway.com/2022/01/05/22-vital-stats-for-ministry-in-2022/.](https://research.lifeway.com/2022/01/05/22-vital-stats-for-ministry-in-2022/)

city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” Seeking the welfare of communities is something that should be done well and for the glory of God. If Christians have been commanded to “love your neighbor” (Mark 12:31) then that must include loving neighborhoods well. Local churches have been sent to their communities and in that caring for the welfare of everyone. So why should that not include the youth in the community? Third, the efforts made may not be as helpful as many have believed. One of the principles that will be discussed in this paper is that of toxic charity and how sometimes, though with good intentions, giving is much more harmful than it is helpful. What if the efforts that are being made by local churches are not as helpful as they seem? What if the actions of local outreach is more effective when it is centered in partnership and reciprocity rather than church giving?

### **Thesis**

Many local churches have neglected practicing presence, targeting poverty cycles, and building support networks in the youth and families of the communities they are located in. Local churches should target poverty of solidarity in their community’s youth through action that is incarnational, non-toxic, involves participation of youth, meets both physical and spiritual needs, and includes mentorship. “Local churches” refers to the operating Christian churches within a specific area or neighborhood. The simple definition of a neighborhood is “the place where you live and sleep – it could be your block or the square mile where you live. It may or may not have a name.”<sup>14</sup> Within the limits of this paper, the main usage of the words “neighborhood” and “community” will be in reference to those specific areas characterized by impoverishment, poverty, inner-city, and urban contexts. More specifically, the neighborhoods

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<sup>14</sup> Don Everts, *The Hopeful Neighborhood: What Happens When Christians Pursue the Common Good* (Downers Grove: IntVarsity Press, 2020), 7.

and local churches in the United States. Lastly, “youth” will refer to middle school and high school students typically within the ages of 11 to 18.

## SCHOLARLY SECTION

### Poverty of Solidarity and Youth

The focus of this paper is concerned with poverty of solidarity and how to target it in the lives of neighborhood youth. Solidarity refers “to a kind of connection to other people, to other members of a group, large or small.” It is directly related to communality, friendship principles, and that of brotherhood. It must include reciprocity and assumption of shared membership.<sup>15</sup> *World Youth Alliance* describes solidarity as “not merely an empty statement of alliance with good intentions — it is about empathizing in the deepest sense with our fellow human beings and allowing this empathy to be manifested into tangible action.” When one chooses to become “desensitized” to the suffering of others, they forsake the innate solidarity within every person.<sup>16</sup> It is entering into the brokenness with others in such a way that suffering, and pain is shared and people bear it together. Kurt Rietema states, “Solidarity is not just a feeling but it is concrete action with and on the behalf of marginalized people. It must be a feeling, but it must move into action for it to be solidarity.”<sup>17</sup> The creation of solidarity takes someone who understands the value of community, partnership, and reciprocity. What sets the local church apart from government agencies and non-faith advocacy-based organizations is the understanding of where the desire for solidarity roots in. Brooks as he reflects on Matthew 22:39-40<sup>18</sup> writes, “So what

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<sup>15</sup> Arto Laitinen and Anne Birgitta Pessi, eds, *Solidarity: Theory and Practice*, (Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books, 2014), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Kara Media, “How Solidarity Can Most Effectively Alleviate Poverty,” World Youth Alliance, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://www.wya.net/op-ed/how-solidarity-can-most-effectively-alleviate-poverty/>.

<sup>17</sup> Kurt Rietema, Senior Director of Youthfront Neighborhood, interview by author, October 25, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 22:39-40 in the NRSV states, “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” More in depth reflection on the passage along with others will be discussed later on.

do we desire for ourselves? We desire for God to love us and be present with us. We also desire our friends to be around for us in difficult times and for strangers to at least be in *solidarity*<sup>19</sup> with us. What we desire for ourselves we should desire for others. That's why all the law and prophets hang on those two commandments... This now seems like common sense to me, but I did not understand what it meant to be present with others until I understood the significance of God being present with us."<sup>20</sup>

One of the major effects on youth in poverty is the social relationships that children and youth have with their families, friends, society, etc. "Social relations mediate the points of interface between the individual and wider community and can be critical in facilitating or hindering mobility out of poverty."<sup>21</sup> In a journal article outlining community psychology and its role in Christian community development, a "sense of community" is the identification of belonging to a group. It consists of "membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection." The predictive implications of this would result in increased quality of community life consisting of well-being, social climate, friendships, neighboring, participation, and empowerment.<sup>22</sup> If solidarity is centered in the building of mutual supportive relationships, social ties, and sense of community, then it could be the key to unlocking the ways to prevent intergenerational poverty in youth. Without healthy social relationships then the impacts of poverty will likely increase.

The phrase "poverty of solidarity" is in reference to the lack of a support network, lack of the sense of community, and lack of social development. The effects from poverty of solidarity

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<sup>19</sup> Italicized for emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> Brooks, *Church Forsaken*, 59.

<sup>21</sup> Harper, Marcus, and Moore, "Enduring Poverty and the Conditions of Childhood."

<sup>22</sup> Sara M. Perisho Eccleston and Douglas D. Perkins, "The Role of Community Psychology in Christian Community Development," *Journal of Community Psychology* 47, no. 2 (March 2019): 293. doi:10.1002/jcop.22121.

on youth could be characterized by the engagement in substance abuse and unhealthy sexual interactions. While outlining these effects from the lack of social ties and support in youth, a journal article on supporting homeless youth states, “Access to social support has been associated with better physical and mental health outcomes... support has also been found to protect at-risk youth from becoming homeless.” It also describes how supporting youth could be an important role in the transition for youth to remain out of homelessness (poverty).<sup>23</sup>

### **An Opportunity for The Local Church**

The local church has an opportunity to bring unity to broken neighborhoods, not just in the effort to alleviate poverty, but in full intent to see radical and sustaining transformation in their community’s youth. The church has an opportunity to enter the lives of youth and be the support they need to step out of generational cycles of poverty. In the book *Making Neighborhoods Whole: A Handbook for Christian Community Development*, Wayne and Perkins challenge local churches to view themselves as creators of villages. The parish concept or model is based on the understanding that churches are to care and love on those in their “parish,” which would be the neighborhood or community they are located in. According to Wayne and Perkins, churches should look at themselves not as “a collection of individuals but a one body” characterized by love for all parts of the body.<sup>24</sup> Another way to describe the parish model is rooted in the African proverb, “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” Today, there is not much function of village principles in communities, but villages and urban communities once

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<sup>23</sup> Kayla La Haye et al., “Who Is Supporting Homeless Youth? Predictors of Support in Personal Networks,” *Journal of Research on Adolescence (Wiley-Blackwell)* 22, no. 4 (December 2012): 604, [doi:10.1111/j.1532-7795.2012.00806.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2012.00806.x).

<sup>24</sup> The authors use 1 Corinthians 12:26, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” in reference to how the church should love on their neighborhoods. More consideration on this passage is given in the biblical section.

functioned in ways that everyone looked out for each other. In the past, “If a child was headed in the wrong direction, neighbors made sure the parents found out about it.”<sup>25</sup>

A contributing factor in the lack of parish models or “village” like communities is what is known as the NIMBY effect (“Not in my back yard”). This effect is when people do not feel or understand their responsibility to the communities, they live in. As a result, many churches end up as “commuter-friendly” rather than “community-friendly.” Wayne and Perkins write, “The local church has the opportunity to become a village, to be a place of supportive community to people from birth all the way to adulthood.”<sup>26</sup> In another book written by John Perkins he describes how the people of God are the ones with solutions that are different than any other approach. He states, “The best that God’s people have to offer is relationships with the poor that reflect the kind of careful, quality attention we have in our own families. This is the high quality of relationships offered by a people seeking to ‘love their neighbor as they love themselves.’”<sup>27</sup>

### **Incarnational Ministry**

When discussing the word incarnation, it is typically in reference to the Incarnation<sup>28</sup> of Jesus Christ, which is the act of Jesus coming “in flesh” and living among humanity.<sup>29</sup> From Christ’s example of how He lived and did ministry is where the phrase “incarnational ministry” emanates for Christians and churches today. Through Christ, God enters human reality including the social and political realities centered with the poor and marginalized. Gordon writes, I am inclined to say that all effective ministry, regardless of context, must be incarnational. This is the

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<sup>25</sup> Wayne Gordon and John M. Perkins, *Making Neighborhoods Whole: A Handbook for Christian Community Development* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 124.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> John Perkins, *Beyond Charity: The Call to Christian Community Development* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 28.

<sup>28</sup> The word Incarnation means “enfleshment” or “embodiment in flesh” that is typically in reference to Jesus.

<sup>29</sup> For the sake of this paper, only incarnation in reference to ministry will be discussed.

linchpin for all effective kingdom ministry—especially in vulnerable neighborhoods.”<sup>30</sup> Brooks describes his experience in local church ministry within an inner-city neighborhood and he writes, “When we become incarnational representations in our neighborhoods, it changes our communities, households, and cities, which in turn changes the world.”<sup>31</sup> He also notes in his book that often times local churches are the “afterthought” of community transformation. The “weight of kingdom work” has been lifted off of the local church and onto non-profit and parachurch organizations.<sup>32</sup>

Brooks, whose experience with reaching neighborhood youth will be used as an example later on, poses the question, “Do we really believe God is pleased when we focus on spiritual needs to the neglect of the physical, mental, and social needs of our neighborhoods?” God cares about our whole person – mental, physical, and spiritual, that is why the local church should care too.<sup>33</sup> It is more than a spiritual presence that is combined with the giving away of canned goods as though that is all the local church can do. It is about “doing life” with the youth inside and outside of the church. When a local church is placed in a community it is called by God to those living in the neighborhood around it. Not just in supplying needs, but as a support network, for that is truly the heart of incarnational ministry. Thurman Williams writes, “As Jesus’ ministry is comprehensive, including both proclamation and tangible deeds of mercy and justice, so likewise the church should be engaged in ministries of both word and deed.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Gordon and Perkins, *Making Neighborhoods Whole*, 166.

<sup>31</sup> Brooks, *Church Forsaken*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 79-82.

<sup>34</sup> Gordon and Perkins, *Making Neighborhoods Whole*, 127-131.

## Four Elements

In the afterword of *Making Neighborhoods Whole: A Handbook for Christian Community Development*, Noel Castellanos lays out four elements that should be included in incarnational ministries based on the guidelines and principles of the Christian Community Development Association.<sup>35</sup> The first element is *proximity*. When reflecting on Jesus' example, his incarnation meant that he drew near to the suffering and sins of humanity. Proximity means that one is close to the neighbors that one desires to love and in this one will have "kingdom impact in under resourced communities."<sup>36</sup> Another perspective on proximity is that it is not a philosophy, but a movement of the Spirit as God reconciles the world to himself and to one another. According to Michelle Warren, "The most profound move you can make to address pain and injustice is to become proximate to it...Proximity to the poor is powerful."<sup>37</sup> In fact, the word "neighbor" in its simplest definition in the Bible means "one who is near."<sup>38</sup> The second element is *relationship*. Loving people was at the foundation of everything Jesus did in his ministry. He viewed those he did ministry with as friends and brothers/sisters. In incarnational ministry, the principle of relationship means shifting the view of our neighbors as "targets of ministry" to them being viewed as brothers, sisters, and friends. As relationships grow, one begins to have the right to speak into other people's lives. The love, care, and concern for neighbors through relationships brings transformation.<sup>39</sup> Bruce J. Nicholls claims that the gospel is about relationships, so "until they accept the integrity of the evangelist as a person the poor will not begin to put their trust in his savior." Interpersonal relationships have to be established in mutual respect in order for

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<sup>35</sup> Otherwise referred to as the CCDA.

<sup>36</sup> Gordon and Perkins, *Making Neighborhoods Whole*, 167.

<sup>37</sup> Michelle Warren, *Power of Proximity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 7-8.

<sup>38</sup> Everett E. Harrison, *Romans-Galatians* (EBC 11; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 200.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon and Perkins, *Making Neighborhoods Whole*, 167.



sharing the good news to the poor to be effective.<sup>40</sup> Perkins suggests that “solid ministry” will grow through “solid relationships,” which the church provides an opportunity to develop.<sup>41</sup>

The third element is *humility*. When one moves into an under resourced area there is often the excitement and charge that one will fix and save everyone, but that is not the case. To be incarnational means to have the humility of Christ, which is key in ministering to others. The fourth and final element is *solidarity*. “When we live in a neighborhood, the problems of the people in that community are no longer their problems; they become our problems too.” In his ministry, Jesus was not afraid to enter the pain and suffering of those he met. Jesus listened and empathized with them. In solidarity, “we must do no less.”<sup>42</sup> For the local church to include these four elements in their efforts in reaching youth would be following the pattern of Jesus. Today, missions and outreach is the main way in which local churches do this, but what if the efforts of most churches is more toxic than a healthy benefit to the growth of the community.

### **Stepping Away from The Typical View of Outreach**

#### **Working “With” Versus Working “For”**

There is a difference between working “with” and working “for” the community. Working “for” the community denotes a personal gain focus. Samuel Wells describes working “for” the community as, “Where I do things and they make your life better. I do them because thereby I’m financially rewarded, I receive public esteem, I enjoy exercising my skills, I delight to alleviate your need or hardship, I seek your good opinion and gratitude; perhaps all of the above... It assumes that the advantaged have abundance... By contrast, the ‘needy’ are defined

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<sup>40</sup> Bruce Nicholls, *Sharing the Good News with the Poor: A Reader for Concerned Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), page 6-7.

<sup>41</sup> Gordon and Perkins, *Making Neighborhoods Whole*, 122.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

by their deficit; if they have capacities, these are seldom noticed or harnessed.”<sup>43</sup> The issue with this view for the local church is that it is valued as the gift to the community, but there is no regard to the gifts of those living in the community. This model is a needs-based approach in which the deficiencies measured determine what should be done for the community. Outreach programs in this approach typically reflect “an incomplete picture of the community.” This also creates an unbalanced dependency where community members become “customers” and the local church becomes the “seller.” Due to the lack of reciprocity, the needs-based approach neglects “to empower the community by not providing an opportunity to develop relationships of trust and mutual cooperation between people.”<sup>44</sup> There is no solidarity.

One of the concepts within the likeness of this model is what is known as *toxic charity*. Robert Lupton has written two books, based on experience, on the concept of toxic charity and how to step away from it. He argues that often times what seems to be worthy efforts are actually hurting more than helping, because they are destroying personal initiative. Even in the local church efforts to engage in missions can be ineffective, especially if there is no consideration in the mission field in their own backyard. He states, “When we do for those in need what they have the capacity to do for themselves, we disempower them.”<sup>45</sup> Perkins also addresses the issue of toxic charity as he states, “Christian charity should never be discouraged, and there will always be a place for acts of sharing and kindness, but charity is only a beginning point, not the final strategy or solution.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2017), 10.

<sup>44</sup> Pedro R. Payne, *Youth Violence Prevention Through Asset-Based Community Development* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2006), 25-27.

<sup>45</sup> Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 4-6.

<sup>46</sup> Perkins, *Beyond Charity*, 23.

While the previous approach to outreach ministry for many churches was needs-based, there is another way that could be proven to be more effective. Instead of a working “for” model, consider a working “with” model. Working “with” a community involves the local church seeing its mission as a partnership with the community. Colón writes, “It (*the church*) incarnates itself in that community, discovers from the community the burning issues, brings the ministry of the church out into the community... the unique needs of the community help mold the avenues through which this church will conduct its heaven-sent mission.”<sup>47</sup> This model is based on building relationships with community members and is centered in the networks and partnerships created, *or in other words is rooted in solidarity*. While energy is gained through problem-solving like the working “for” model, the power is concentrated not in those who are “experts” but rather in coalitions, collectives, and partnerships across barriers of division.<sup>48</sup> This model consists of asset-based community development. An asset-based model claims that the most effective way to help communities develop involves the local residents as committed to investing in the resources of their neighborhood.<sup>49</sup> Considering the working “with” model, the role of the community as participants, not just receivers, in the process creates reciprocity and results in solidarity.

Many people look at youth in the sense of being too young, too far gone, and only see their neglected needs; however, youth are just as much of a gift to the community as the local church claims to be. David Driskell discusses his experience in working with youth and states, “Too often, when interviewing young people, one gets the response: *No one listens to me. The politicians don’t care. Nobody Cares*. It is precisely this impression that can be changed through

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<sup>47</sup> Gaspar F. Colón, “Incarnational Community-Based Ministry: A Leadership Model for Community Transformation,” *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*, 6 no. 2 (Fall 2012): 12.

<sup>48</sup> Wells, *Incarnational Ministry: Being With The Church*, 10.

<sup>49</sup> Payne, *Youth Violence Prevention*, 27.

careful methods designed specifically for working with young people.”<sup>50</sup> Payne says that due to negative stereotyping, a lot of youth in communities tend to be seen as “incompetent individuals who will wreak havoc on the established society.”<sup>51</sup> Despite this negative view, it is important for the church to begin to value youth as significant contributors to neighborhoods they live in. Driskell says, “They should be active and valued partners in efforts towards positive community change.”<sup>52</sup> Mawethu Msebi claims that for there to be sustainability in the community development process, local churches should engage youth in the foundational planning stages.<sup>53</sup> Michael Mata, along with this, states, “A community development approach to youth ministry engages youth as active contributors in the welfare of their community.”<sup>54</sup> Other scholars like Kenneth Jones and Daniel Perkins claim that strengthening relationships between youth and adults may be the successful strategy to address issues within a community and provide a learning process for both parties. The thing that is holding back this process is that adults perceive youth as the ones in need of assistance rather than youth being community assets.<sup>55</sup>

In a neighborhood called Argentine in Kansas City, Kansas a Christian organization called Youthfront Neighborhood is working with the youth and families in their community in several ways and has put the asset-based model into practice. One of their programs is called ImagineX and intends to be “Youth ventures that create solutions to the biggest social challenges

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<sup>50</sup> David Driskell, *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 4.

<sup>51</sup> Payne, *Youth Violence Prevention*, 35.

<sup>52</sup> Driskell, *Creating Better Cities*, 22.

<sup>53</sup> Mawethu Msebi, “The Importance of Christian Youth Ministry Involvement in Community Development in the Mayibuye Community,” *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies*, 8 no. 2 (2022): 44. <https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.2022824>.

<sup>54</sup> Michael A. Mata, “A Community Development Approach to Youth Ministry,” Urban Youth Workers Institute, last modified January 23, 2010, <https://uywi.org/a-community-development-approach-to-youth-ministry/>.

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth R. Jones and Daniel F. Perkins, “Youth and Adult Perceptions of Their Relationships Within Community-Based Youth Programs,” *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work*, 24 (2012): 240. [https://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1010&context=cld\\_facpub](https://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1010&context=cld_facpub).

facing their schools and communities.” Various youth from the neighborhood join in and through facilitated sessions, “youth imagine what it looks like when heaven comes to earth” and as a result they discover passions and pains, become change makers, and design innovative solutions to problems they notice in their community.<sup>56</sup> Out of ImagineX, youth have created solutions that target issues like bringing portable pools to under resourced communities so kids can learn to swim; mobile activities that make use of the often abandoned neighborhood parks and brings kids together in the summer; and creating fun ways to target mental health. One of the innovative ideas that has become a big part of what Youthfront Neighborhood does is Snack Shack KC, which is a safe place for youth to hang out, enjoy treats, do homework, and have fun.<sup>57</sup> In an interview with the Senior Director of YF Neighborhood, Kurt Rietema talked about how they desire to help youth and people in their community imagine what it looks like when heaven comes to earth, even in the midst of brokenness. He mentions how youth are longing to be loved and are looking for models and heroes. He explains that the opportunity they have in their community is to tell a different story, the story of heaven on earth, and be the example of Christ. To show youth new heroes and be worthy models of a good way. “We are not trying to be good people so that they might hear a good message we have to say, but being a certain kind of people because that is who Jesus is to them.”<sup>58</sup> Their service to the youth in their community has been to build relationships in solidarity that help them to see a good way of life different from the one they have been living. To see that heaven is not some far off reality for a “one day” moment, but rather a reality that is on earth and can be experienced now.

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<sup>56</sup> “ImagineX,” Youthfront, accessed March 8, 2023, <https://youthfront.com/imagine-x-social-entrepreneurs/>.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Rietema, interview.

## **Other Example Ministries and What They Have Learned**

The following two examples are Christian ministries working in under-resourced communities in the United States. Their focus has been on Christian community development, local church outreach, and working with youth. Their experience, what they do, and the lessons they have learned along the way will speak volumes to how the local church should be active in creating solidarity with their neighborhoods youth.

### **Urban Youth Impact**

The first example ministry is that of the Christian ministry Urban Youth Impact whose goal is “to love, equip and empower inner-city youth and their parents to fulfill their God-given purpose.” Their work is concentrated in the inner-city of the Tamarind Avenue community in West Palm Beach, Florida. The youth in this inner-city community are described to have grown up “amid drugs, dysfunctional families, and violent crime.”<sup>59</sup> It is revealed that majority of the youth in the community have traumatic childhoods. Their family life is very dysfunctional including things like verbal and physical abuse, absentee parent(s), substance abuse, custody battles, etc. Out of the 13 participants that were analyzed, 84% (11 of 13) reported having an absent or negative father. It is noted that there was a clear downward spiral of dysfunction in the natural support network of family for these youth.<sup>60</sup> After conducting research and outlining practical recommendations on how youth were being transformed by Urban Youth Impact’s efforts, the researchers noticed that what was bringing about the process of transformation in the youth was “Experiences of Unexpected Pathways.” EUPs are events that are experiential,

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<sup>59</sup> E. Lowdermilk and J. Brunache, “Experiencing Unexpected Pathways: A Grounded Theory Study of the Surprising Transformation of Inner-City Youth,” *Social Work & Christianity* 40, no. 3 (2013): 322-323. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=swh&AN=86226&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 330-331.

unexpected, and present new pathways of life. They “demonstrate to the person a pathway or horizon beyond what they thought was possible.”<sup>61</sup>

As a result of the research conducted, there were several recommendations given to Urban Youth Impact to help improve the work they are doing in the transformation of youth in their community. What they have learned is that having good, trained mentors in place is of great importance in the process of bringing about unexpected pathways for youth. Several youth noted that when they encountered someone who became a mentor to them, it gave them a sense of hope and that person showed them a new way of life that they never thought was possible.<sup>62</sup> While on the conversation about mentorship, in an interview with Marie Quinten, the Communications and Development Coordinator at The Street School<sup>63</sup> in Tulsa, Oklahoma, she noted that one thing she wish she saw more of from the local church for the youth in the school is that they would be more involved in the lives of the youth as mentors. She noted that what a lot of the youth from street school need are good mentors. While she was thankful that the church right across the street gave generous monetary donations every year, she wish they would do more.<sup>64</sup> A suggestion for Urban Youth Impact was to train mentors. Other implications that were given were supporting existing programs that bring about EUPs, evaluate and develop programs on whether they are tangibly bringing transformation, assess young people for “low-hope” and

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 333.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 333-339.

<sup>63</sup> The Street School is an alternate education school for high school students. Their goal is to provide their students with both the academic and emotional skills needed to become productive citizens and achieve their potential. They have a dropout prevention and intervention program, therapy and counseling for their students, internships, and community service learning. The Street School, “About Us,” accessed March 13, 2023, <https://www.streetschool.org/about>.

<sup>64</sup> Marie Quinton, Communications and Development Coordinator at The Street School, interview by author, February 14, 2022.

focus on training mentors for them, consider more spiritual growth opportunities, and find more ways to retain males as they grow out of being a teenager.<sup>65</sup>

The youth of the Tamarind community were given a better future filled with positive opportunities, because someone or something showed them what life could be like outside of the pain and suffering, they knew. Fernando Arzola Jr., as he examined youth ministry in an urban context, writes, “It must also be engaged in the personal and social transformation of urban youth – whether or not they accept Christ.”<sup>66</sup> Solidarity in the Christian faith is more than walking with youth to the point of salvation, it also means walking with them in every step of their life, because that is what Jesus would do.

### **Canaan Missionary Baptist Church**

Jonathan Brooks is the lead Pastor at Canaan Missionary Baptist Church in the West Englewood community in Chicago. Before becoming the lead pastor, Brooks spent time working with the youth. He spent his time volunteering with the church’s afterschool and summer education program (Diamond Academy) and began with seven or eight dedicated youth during the youth group meetings. When Brooks began to, out of necessity, plan a lot of games, pizza nights, lock-ins, homework and Bible study nights, etc. he began to see how the growing friendships contributed to the overall growth of the youth group. Brooks writes, “This connection of students from the church and the community, although unintentional, was the key to the growth of Canaan’s youth ministry.” Next thing he knew, the youth group grew to nearly sixty students in attendance weekly.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Lowdermilk, “Experiencing Unexpected Pathways,” 345-346.

<sup>66</sup> Fernando Arzola Jr., *Toward a Prophetic Youth Ministry: Theory and Praxis in Urban Context* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 28.

<sup>67</sup> Brooks, *Church Forsaken*, 20-21.



Soon after becoming the head pastor of Canaan, an event happened that changed the way Brooks viewed ministry to the youth in the local community. One Sunday as he began his sermon, he noticed Dionte standing outside the church, a young man who had been a part of the youth group for several years, when all of a sudden, a group of guys began to beat him violently. The situation only escalated as men from the church came to Dionte's side.<sup>68</sup> In a conversation with Dionte, Brooks was amazed as Dionte began to thank the church and said that "it was the church people in they'suits and ties on the steps holding it down, and they [his friends] can't believe it!"<sup>69</sup> Dionte began to tell Brooks that he wanted to bring his family to church because they needed a positive environment, and it was clear there was a connection with the church that began that day. It was not the Bible studies, sermons, youth group events, or that someone told him he needed Jesus because he was a sinner. It was the people who were willing to lay down their lives for him. Brooks writes, "What finally connected was the truth that when things got crazy and he needed help, the church was there for him."<sup>69</sup>

For Dionte, he needed someone who would lay down their life and walk with him through all the pain and suffering. He needed someone committed to solidarity that would be there for him. It was more than youth group programs; it was that the church was committed to being *with* him. The church was present, whether he would come to Christ or not. A question that is necessary to ask here: if the local church was completely removed from the community, would it be missed? Presence is a principle to be practiced and the local church will get nowhere with the youth in their community until they begin to take it seriously.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 31-32.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 34-36.

## BIBLICAL SECTION

Now that scholarly work has been considered, it is important to always go back to the foundation of the Bible. Nicholls writes, “To sustain a ministry of sharing good news with the poor demands a strong biblical foundation and Christ-centered motivation. As with all missionary work we need to have a strong sense of God’s call to this most difficult of all tasks... Unless we are motivated by God himself, we will find the task too hard, too depressing, and too stressful.” The biblical understanding of the mission of the church, love for neighbor, solidarity, and youth will be considered.

### Mission of God and His Church

One of the most important biblical understandings when it comes to the topic at hand is knowing the mission of the church, which is directly aligned with God’s mission on the earth. All throughout scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, the *missio dei*, the mission of God, is clear.<sup>70</sup> *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, describes mission as “not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation. ‘Mission’ means ‘sending,’ and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God’s action in human history.” One can see God’s mission throughout all of scripture. From the call of Israel to it unfolding in the history of God’s people in the Old Testament. Then at the climax is the incarnation of Jesus and his ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. Followed by the sending of the Holy Spirit to empower the church to be God’s witnesses to all nations. It is continued today with the worldwide witness from the Church.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Missio dei* is a term used by many scholars to refer to the mission of God. This mission is that in Christ, God declared he loved us. His mission is what will be discussed in this section.

<sup>71</sup> Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publications, 1998), 4.

God's mission is for his people to know and glorify him. His intention from the beginning has always been to reconcile his people back to him and that his name will be known to all nations, in all languages, and in all tribes. Justin Schell, with The Lausanne Movement, discusses the mission of God in light of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Beginning in Genesis 1, in which God creates the heavens, the earth, and human beings, God has destined his creation to fill the earth. After creating Adam and Eve, God tells them in Genesis 1:28: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth."<sup>72</sup> Schell notes here that as they fill the earth, the glory of God fills the earth too.<sup>73</sup> There is an emphasis on *all nations* throughout the Old Testament when it comes God's mission.<sup>74</sup> Moving through the rest of the Old Testament, there is example after example about God's mission for his name and glory be known amongst the whole world.<sup>75</sup>

Looking at the New Testament, one can see God's mission continue. It begins in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1, in which a connection is made between Abraham and Jesus.<sup>76</sup> From the very beginning of the New Testament there is an instant link with the Old Testament. Craig Keener, in his commentary on Matthew, writes, "Not only this opening verse but the structure of the genealogy evokes Israel's history; following narratives further identify Jesus with Israel as its representative, the epitome of its history (e.g., 2:15; 4:2). Jesus is thus the heir of Abraham par excellence, who can communicate Abraham's promised blessings to his people."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> This same statement by God is said in Genesis 9 to Noah after the flood. Genesis 9:1 says: "God blessed Noah, and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.'" The same concept of spreading throughout all the earth is repeated in Genesis 11 and 12.

<sup>73</sup> Justin Schell, "The Mission of God," Class notes from CHRM 335 Intro to Evangelism, Oral Roberts University, September 2021.

<sup>74</sup> Genesis 26:4; 28:14.

<sup>75</sup> Examples include: Exodus 9:16, 12:37-38; Joshua 2:10-11; 1 Samuel 17:45-46; 1 Kings 8:41-43; Psalm 67:1-2, 46:10; Daniel 3:29-30; and Isaiah 49:6.

<sup>76</sup> Matthew 1:1.

<sup>77</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publication, 1999), 74.

Matthew, along with the other three gospels, reveal Jesus' birth, ministry, and death at the cross to be at the climax of God's mission for his people.<sup>78</sup> Jesus' ministry serves as the example of the heart of God's mission on earth. Several examples in Jesus' ministry that shows his heart to heal, restore, and bring good news to everyone include: the Centurion's servant healed (Matthew 8:5-11), the blind and lame being healed in the court of the Gentiles (Matthew 21:12-14), demon possessed man set free (Mark 5), the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), the leper cleansed (Luke 5:12-16), etc.

God's mission did not end at Jesus thousands of years ago. It is still active in the world today and will continue until the end. In fact, Matthew 24:14 states, "And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come." Keener claims that the commission of discipling all nations must be completed before the end will come. Along with this, he claims that Jesus is not saying in verse 14 that every person will be converted, but rather that the fullness of God's kingdom will not come until every nation has the opportunity to either accept or reject him.<sup>79</sup> R. T. France notes this as well as he states, "In particular, this passage [Matthew 24:9-14] does not speak of worldwide evangelization as the cause of the "end,"<sup>80</sup> but as a necessary preliminary."<sup>81</sup> In the end, there will be every nation and people in the kingdom of God. Revelation 7:9 states, "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the lamb."

A question to consider regarding Revelation 7:9, is how did they get there? If there are places in the world that are unreached with the gospel, then how will every nation (ethnic/people

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<sup>78</sup> Luke 4:42-43.

<sup>79</sup> Keener, *A Commentary on The Gospel of Matthew*, 572.

<sup>80</sup> The "end" discussed here is also referred to as the Parousia. The Parousia refers to the second coming of Christ.

<sup>81</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT 1; Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publication, 2007), 908-909.

group) be represented? Well, scripture does not shy away from showing a believer's role in God's mission to gather every person together. Every believer is commissioned. One of the most common commissioning passages in scripture is what is known as the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"<sup>82</sup> Just as Jesus lives out the participation in God's mission, he then sends his disciples (all believers) to do the same. Several scholars have pointed out that this passage resembles the commissioning narratives seen in the Old Testament, notably in the stories of Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Joshua, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc. These are moments in scripture in which God sends out his servants to fulfill his purposes on the earth.<sup>83</sup>

In the cultural context of the word "nations"<sup>84</sup> throughout scripture, differs from the modern day conception of the word. Today, a "nation" is defined by its political borders, but that is not the case for "nations" in the Bible. Instead of political borders, nations were defined by ethnicity/people groups. The words used in reference to nations in the Old Testament denote "a people who possess a common kinship, a social and political group, and simply a people."<sup>85</sup> The *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* states, "In a much more positive context, the nations are

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<sup>82</sup> Other commissioning passages include: Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; John 20:21; and Acts 1:8.

<sup>83</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1109.

<sup>84</sup> The Hebrew word most often used in the Old Testament is *goy* (common noun form), which occurs 550 times, in its primary meaning is "nation" or "people." The Greek form most often used in the New Testament is *ethnos*, which also indicates Gentile people groups as well as Jewish ones. It is where the English word *ethnic* originates.

<sup>85</sup> Timothy W. Whitaker, "The Nations in the Bible," February 18, 2021, <https://providencemag.com/2021/02/the-nations-bible/>.

designated as the object of Christian missionary endeavor, that they might become baptized disciples of Christ (cf. Matt. 28:19).”<sup>86</sup>

It is clear that God has a mission to gather every people group together and to send out his servants to reach them so that his name will be known and glorified, but what does all of this mean for the local church? Jesse C. Fletcher writes, “The mission is not first the church’s; it is God’s, and the church is the result of God’s mission. But the church born of that mission quickly discovers that it in turn exists for mission.”<sup>87</sup> Everything that the local church does should be centered in God’s heart for his people. Reflecting on four specific passages in the New Testament (John 20:19-21; Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 24:46-48; Acts 1:6-8), Ed Stetzer applies these verses to the mission of the local church. He states, “It is not about us! It is about Jesus saying, ‘As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you’ to ‘Go and make disciples of all different kinds of people’ with a message of ‘repentance and forgiveness of sin’ as a people who have ‘received the Holy Spirit.’ We are missionaries. Your church is intended to be God’s missionary church. The question is this: Are we being good missionaries?”<sup>88</sup>

### **Love Your Neighbor**

As discussed, there are several instances in which Jesus and the writers of the New Testament call Christians to action. One of those instances is the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37:

<sup>25</sup> An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup> He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” <sup>27</sup> He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>28</sup> And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will

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<sup>86</sup> Stephen D. Renn, *Expository Dictionary Bible Words: Word Studies for Key English Bible Words Based on The Hebrew and Greek Texts* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 665-666.

<sup>87</sup> Jesse C. Fletcher, *The Mission of the Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 7.

<sup>88</sup> Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking The Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 26.

live.”<sup>29</sup> But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”<sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead.<sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.<sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.<sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion.<sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.<sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.’<sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”<sup>37</sup> He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

This parable serves as an example as to what it means to be a “neighbor” in line with God’s commandment to love “your neighbor as yourself” (v. 27). In the beginning verses (10:25-27), as “an expert in the law” questions Jesus on how to inherit eternal life, Jesus questions this expert on what is written in the law. Verse 27, the man’s response to Jesus, is what Michael Wolter notes as a combination of Deuteronomy 6:4-9<sup>89</sup> and Leviticus 19:18<sup>90</sup> in which sums up all the law.<sup>91</sup> Similar to Luke, Matthew also writes concerning loving God and neighbor.<sup>92</sup> Like in Luke, the discussion in Matthew 22:34-40 is brought on by “an expert in the law” (v. 35) and the response, though made by Jesus and not the expert this time, consists of the same two passages: Deuteronomy 6:4-6 and Leviticus 19:18. Matthew 22:34-40<sup>93</sup> states:

<sup>34</sup> When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, <sup>35</sup> and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup> “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” <sup>37</sup> He said to him,

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<sup>89</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4-9: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

<sup>90</sup> Leviticus 19:18: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

<sup>91</sup> Michael Wolter, *The Gospel According to Luke : Volume II (Luke 9:51-24)* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017), 72-73.

<sup>92</sup> This is also present in Mark 12 and John 13. The emphasis of it being in all four gospels is important to note. Clearly this was important to Jesus and the early church.

<sup>93</sup> The same commandments that Jesus talks about in Matthew 22 is repeated in Mark 12:31 and Luke 10:27.

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’<sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment.<sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Carl A. Clark in writing an article focusing on the second commandment in the Matthew passage (v. 39), argues that Jesus’ inclusion of the second commandment reflects the Pharisees’ neglect of it. They were excellent, even to the point of legalistic manners, at the first commandment, but neglected “that man’s proper relationship to God *necessitates* also a proper relationship with his fellow man.”<sup>94</sup> Elton Trueblood notes that to focus more on the first commandment and leave out the second, is heresy. While to focus more on the second and not observe the first leads to “superficial secularism” or “mere philanthropy.”<sup>95</sup> With both Clark and Trueblood in mind, take a look at 1 John 4:7-21, in which affirms that love for God, who is love (vv. 7 and 16), is directly related to love for one’s neighbor (vv. 7-12, 16, 19-21). This is especially seen in vv. 20-21: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: *those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*”

Now, onto the rest of the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10. In verse 29, the “expert” has a follow-up question for Jesus regarding who his neighbor is and thus, the parable begins in the next verse. Jesus uses the example of how the robbed man is treated by three different individuals, putting emphasis on the Samaritan who is the only one to stop and help the beaten man on the street. The end result of the parable is seen in verses 36-37 in which it is

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<sup>94</sup> Carl A. Clark, “Which Is the Neglected Commandment?: The Neglected Commandment: I.” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 3, no. 1 (October 1, 1960): 61.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=33h&AN=33453&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>95</sup> Elton Trueblood, *Confronting Christ* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 126.



revealed that the true “neighbor” is the one who showed mercy. Here in verse 37 is where the first question at hand in verses 25-29 is given practical application. Mensah argues that Jesus is conveying a “redefinition of neighbor” to include the Gentiles. Those who have compassion and act on it with mercy, whether the person be Jew or Gentile, are true neighbors.<sup>96</sup> Carroll has a similar perspective and argues that the reframing happening in the parable removes the boundaries and one can now love both neighbor and enemy.<sup>97</sup>

Clark also writes concerning how the early church showed concern for care and love towards one’s neighbor and it reflected in their community. In using Acts 1:14<sup>98</sup>, Clark claims, “This has become a symbol of genuine Christian community in the early church. The Christians were meeting together for worship and service... a unanimity of spirit that is built definitely upon Christ’s second commandment, ‘Thou shalt love they neighbor as thyself’ (Matt. 22:39).”<sup>99</sup> Taking a look at several other New Testament examples in scripture, it is clear that Jesus and the early church took “love your neighbor” seriously. Jesus tells his disciples in John 13:34-35: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples*, if you have love for one another.”<sup>100</sup> A few chapters later, John 15:12-14 states: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” The parable of the good Samaritan ends with Jesus saying in verse 37: “Go and do likewise.” There is a call to

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<sup>96</sup> Augustine Mensah, “The ‘Neighbor’ in The Parable of The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37),” *Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology* 9 no. 2 (2019), 57-58.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAI5IE220430000770&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>97</sup> John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 246.

<sup>98</sup> Acts 1:14 – look at different translations “in one accord”

<sup>99</sup> Clark, “Which is The Neglected Commandment,” 62.

<sup>100</sup> Italicized for emphasis.

action being made by Jesus. Clark notes, “The Second Commandment leaves no place for spectators.” He argues that the only way the local community can be a hospitable environment to the gospel is the church’s task in fulfilling the second commandment.<sup>101</sup>

It does not end with the gospels though; Paul writes on loving and caring for our neighbor throughout his letters. In Romans 13:8-10 Paul writes: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” Tremper Longman and David Garland make note that Paul here is following Jesus’ teachings on how love fulfills the law. They see that to be Christian, then, is to be both free from the law and yet in love fulfill the law.<sup>102</sup> Along with this fulfillment of the law is the way in which Paul connects the relationship between the rest of the commandments and that of the command to love in Lev. 19:18.<sup>103</sup> Paul builds on this in 1 Corinthians 13 as he writes on how love is a gift, and everything means nothing if there is no love. It is clear that God’s mission is to send out his servants to love him and love his people. So, for the local church the mission is rooted in God’s mission, meaning it should be all about loving God and loving people. The question that should be asked then, is not why, but how does one (or the local church) love their neighbor well?

### **Solidarity**

The discussion on solidarity would not be complete if there was no understanding of what it means biblically.<sup>104</sup> In the Old Testament there was solidarity both at the human and divine

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<sup>101</sup> Clark, “Which is The Neglected Commandment, 72-73.

<sup>102</sup> Harrison, *Romans-Galatians*, EBC, 199-201.

<sup>103</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to The Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publication, 1996), 817.

<sup>104</sup> Refer back to the previous section on solidarity to refresh on the social science definitions.

levels. According to G.W. Grogan, solidarity can be seen in social aspects within kinship, marriage, common residence, common occupation, etc. in the Old Testament. It was evident in family life directly, but also extended even farther. “Brother” referred to any male relative, a member of the same tribe or nation, or simply another person.<sup>105</sup> The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* details “brother” as a term in reference both to “congregation” and the twelve tribes of Israel.<sup>106</sup> Within Judaism, “brother” denoted physical relationships and figurative ones, such as the brotherhood established within covenantal fellowship. When looking at the Qumran texts, “brother” is designated in relationships “between members of the community.”<sup>107</sup> This brotherhood and solidarity was deeply reflected in the covenant God made with his people. Grogan argues, “Israel's relation to Yahweh was not based on natural kinship as in some ancient ethnic mythologies, but on a covenant he initiated. Israel's consciousness of national solidarity became firmly based on its corporate covenant with Yahweh.” Their sense of brotherhood or in other words solidarity was rooted in their shared identity as God’s people, which would become an open invitation to the Gentiles through Christ.<sup>108</sup> The New Testament, then, opens this conversation up even further as God’s people are called to unity.

In the New Testament there is a call to unity and reflection on how through Christ, both Jew and Gentile have become one. Paul writes in several of his letters about unity, harmony, and one body in Christ. For example, Ephesians 2:11-22<sup>109</sup>:

<sup>11</sup> So then, remember that at one time you gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— <sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and

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<sup>105</sup> G.W. Grogan, “The Old Testament Concept of Solidarity in Hebrews,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 49, no. 1 (1998): 161, <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30332>.

<sup>106</sup> Psalm 22:22-23.

<sup>107</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, “Brother, Brotherhood,” ABD 1: 782-783.

<sup>108</sup> Isaiah 2:2-5; 26:5-8; 56:3-8; 60:3-5; Matthew 8:11; Acts 10:45; 11:1; 14:27; 28:28; Romans 3:29; 9:24; 11:25-26; Galatians 3:8, 14.

<sup>109</sup> Italicized for emphasis.

without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and *has broken down the dividing wall*, that is, the hostility between us, <sup>15</sup> abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> *and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross*, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup> *So he came and proclaimed peace* to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, <sup>18</sup> *for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father*. <sup>19</sup> So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are *fellow* citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone; <sup>21</sup> in him the whole structure is *joined together* and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are built *together* spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Thomas B. Slater comments on this passage: “This section strongly emphasizes unity within the Christian community. This unity cuts across traditional ethnic forms of identification.” It destroys the old barriers between people and affirms unity without breaking national identity.<sup>110</sup> The solidarity discussed here is only through Jesus and his actions on the cross. In living in harmony through the Son, God is glorified in one voice (Romans 15:5-6). Consistently in the New Testament there is the emphasis on being *one* together, especially in discussions about unity. Later on in Ephesians, Paul writes concerning putting effort to maintain unity with one another as there is “one body and one Spirit” (Eph. 4:1-6).<sup>111</sup> Slater argues that while other scholars have noted this passage as evidence that the Church is the expression of God’s unity, he supports that it is better to say, “God’s oneness is *best* exemplified in the unity of the Church for the book of Ephesians.”<sup>112</sup>

The concept of one body is also emphasized in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. Paul writes in verses 12-13: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the

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<sup>110</sup> Thomas B. Slater, *Ephesians*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smith & Helwys Publishing, 2016), 67.

<sup>111</sup> Unity is a clear concern and emphasis in the New Testament. Other passages in reference to unity include: Matthew 18:19-20; Philippians 2:2; 1 Peter 3:8; and Galatians 5:13-15.

<sup>112</sup> Slater, *Ephesians*, 109.

body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” The passage continues with the description of how the body cannot do certain things without certain parts of the body, which is the same when it comes to people in community. A community is stronger when all parts are united in the function of the whole. That is what solidarity does. It connects one another in a deeper sense of empathy that results in action towards the common good. Verse 26 emphasizes this deep movement in stating: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” B. J. Oropeza comments on this verse saying, “The latter especially embarks on what it is to be a caring community that empathizes with others. To be one body is to stand in unity with every body part.”<sup>113</sup>

Connecting these verses to building the bridge of solidarity with youth, it consists of three things. First, it consist of being in harmony and unity with them. It does not matter where they come from (nationally, family descent, background, etc.), the Church consists of young people too. It is clear that God calls us to live in unity with one another and youth are no exception. Psalm 133:1: “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred<sup>114</sup> live together in unity!” Second, it consists of valuing them as members of the body. Youth have gifts and roles in the body too. To exclude them, would be like saying to the ear they do not belong to the body because they are not an eye (1 Cor. 12:16). To look down on youth as weaker, would be like the eye saying to the hand there is no need for them (1 Cor. 12:20-21). In fact, 1 Corinthians says weaker body parts should be even more honored (vv. 22-25). Third, it consists of joining them in

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<sup>113</sup> B. J. Oropeza, *1 Corinthians*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017), 100.

<sup>114</sup> “Kindred” means a member of the same family or a relative (brother). Through Jesus all have been invited into the family of God. All are called brothers and sisters because all are members of the family of Christ.

suffering and rejoicing. When youth suffer, join them in their suffering. When youth rejoice, join them in their rejoicing. They need someone who will be with them through it all, not someone who thinks they are too “mighty” to meet them where they are at.

### **Youth in the Bible**

There are a couple things to consider about youth that is gained in scripture. First, what can be seen in the gospels with how Jesus approaches children? In Mark 10:13-16, as children are being brought to Jesus, his disciples are rebuking and speaking sternly to those who are bringing them. Jesus’ response to his disciples was to let the children come, “for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” He then proceeds to say that one should receive the kingdom of God like a child (v. 15). This same concept is also in Matthew 18:1-5, when Jesus’ disciples ask who the greatest in the kingdom is. Jesus’ response is once again “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (vv. 3-4). This would have been very contradictive of the culture at the time. In the ancient world, children had the lowest status in society.<sup>115</sup> Remember in 1 Corinthians 12:22-25, where Paul says that the weakest should be honored and the least respectable should be treated with even greater respect – that includes the youth that were seen as lowest. This is how Jesus saw the youth of his day: honorable.

### **David, Jeremiah, Mary, and The Boy with Two Fish and Five Loaves**

Second thing to consider in scripture is the youth that were present and used by God to fulfill his purposes. In the Old Testament there are a few places where God uses youth for his purposes, but one of the most prominent people is David when he defeats Goliath in 1 Samuel

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<sup>115</sup> John Barton and John Muddiman, eds. *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), 907.

17. There are two references to David's possible age within the passage. Verse 33: "Saul said to David, 'You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him, for you are *just a boy*, and he has been a warrior from his youth.'"<sup>116</sup> Then again in verse 42: "When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was *only a youth*, ruddy and handsome in appearance." David is described as a boy and person of youth. The word used here could be referring to anyone between the ages from birth to adolescent, but he was most likely a teenager between the ages of 16-19.<sup>117</sup> It is known that David had to be younger than 20 based on how David was not in the army serving like his brothers. Men had to be 20 years and older in order to serve in battle (Numbers 1:3) and David was not serving, so he had to be younger than 20. This likely puts him as an older teenager at the time of Goliath's defeat. Both Saul and Goliath doubted David for his age, but little did they know that though he was small, he was mighty. Youth have a lot more potential than what can be seen. Who knows, maybe in order to defeat the Goliaths in communities and neighborhoods, it takes looking for the Davids.

A second example of youth in the Old Testament is Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 1, God calls Jeremiah as a prophet, but in response Jeremiah doubts his ability due to his age. Verse 6: "Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for *I am only a boy*.'" Jeremiah went on to be a great prophet chosen and used by God. He was called at a young age and despite his own doubt because of it, God used Jeremiah for his purposes on the earth.

In the New Testament, one example is Mary the mother of Jesus. There is no certainty on how old Mary was when she gave birth to Jesus, but there is significance in how she was engaged to Joseph at the time the angel appeared to her. Luke 1:27: "to a virgin engaged to a

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<sup>116</sup> Italicized for emphasis.

<sup>117</sup> "How old was David When He \_\_\_?," Got Questions Ministries, accessed March 6, 2023, <https://www.gotquestions.org/how-old-was-David.html>.

man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary." Marriage customs to the ancient audience would likely put Joseph in his twenties and Mary in her teens at the time of their engagement.<sup>118</sup> Gaye Strathearn notes that though Mary's age is unknown, marriage contracts back then could be arranged before the woman even hit puberty.<sup>119</sup> The significance of Mary being chosen in general for such a task as giving birth to Jesus, the Son of God, is profound. Add in the likely age of being in her teens and it becomes even more prominent in its significance.

The second example in the New Testament is the boy with the five loaves and two fish in the feeding of the five thousand in John 6:1-14.<sup>120</sup> When Jesus is speaking to a crowd of five thousand plus people it becomes evident that the people are hungry and there is no food to feed them. When the disciples approach Jesus about the issue, Andrew comes up and says in verse 9: "There is *a boy* here who has five barley loaves and two fish." Jesus takes what the boy provided and multiplies it to have enough to feed everyone to the fullest and still had 12 baskets left over. The boy's name and age is not mentioned, but even in his young age as a boy, Jesus uses him. He uses what the boy had to give instead of turning it away. In the same way, value the gifts that youth have to offer. It could be the very thing God will use to do a miracle.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is a lot of variables in the scholar work as well as what is in the Bible. The question after all this research remains: how should the local church target poverty of solidarity with their community's youth? In considering all of the research, the necessary things

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<sup>118</sup> Philip F. Esler, "The Righteousness of Joseph: Interpreting Matt 1:18-25 in Light of Judean Legal Papyri," *New Testament Studies* 68 (2022): 328, doi:10.1017/S0028688521000321.

<sup>119</sup> Gaye Strathearn, "Mary The Mother of Jesus: Mary's Story is a Timeless Reminder of The Costs and Blessings of Discipleship," *Faculty Publications* 3520 (2019): 14, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/3520>.

<sup>120</sup> This story is referenced in Matthew, Mark, and Luke; however, the reference in John is the only one to include the little boy as the one to have the fish and loaves. That is why the John reference is being used here.



the Church must know in order to be successful in this includes evaluation, building relationships, create an action plan, include mentorship, develop resources for guardians, be a neighbor, and invite youth to the table.

### **Evaluation**

The first place to start before moving forward is evaluate the current status of the local church and their connection to the youth in their community. Questions to consider: what is the status of the youth attending the church? Is anything being done to reach the youth in the community both inside and outside the church? Is the church fulfilling and participating in the mission of God? If the church was to completely disappear from the community, would it be missed? Check in on the health of the church and what connection is being made with the youth within the community. The reason this evaluation process is important is because if eyes are never opened to the problem, then steps towards a solution can never be taken. Think of a life cycle for an organization. There is birth and out of growth comes stages of maturity until a decline leading to death. What prevents an organization from leveling off in their growth and turning towards a decline is evaluation procedures and processes, which brings continual growth rather than decline.<sup>121</sup> This is the same thing with ministry efforts of a local church. An idea is birthed, it grows, starts to level, there is evaluation, changes are made, and then further growth happens. The evaluation process with action prevents churches from settling into the mindset of “it has just always been this way” which is a killer of healthy growth.

### **Build Relationships and Listen**

Within all the research, the most common factor is the emphasis on relationships. Imagine living on a street with the same people for years and never even knowing their name.

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<sup>121</sup> Christopher Foster, “Objectives,” Class notes from CHRM 460 Church Administration, Oral Roberts University, October 2021.

Never knowing who they are yet living right next door to them. This is typically how Americans live and it has become how the local church often operates within their neighborhoods. They become nomads with no long-term investment in the relationships with those in their neighborhoods. What gets lost in the process of ministry with youth, is that ministry moves at the speed of relationships. Solid ministry grows out of solid relationships.<sup>122</sup> Research shows that healthy relationships and good support systems can help youth in their overall development, ability to step out of cycles of poverty, and have brighter outlooks on life. Relationships are also a keyway to love people as Jesus demonstrated.

Second step is to begin to build relationships with the youth in the neighborhood. This is not something that can only be done within the four walls of a church building. Remember Brooks' story of the youth that came to his youth group but needed more than just a church gathering. This will take stepping out and meeting youth where they are at. Perhaps, start with the local schools in the area or start developing after school programs that promote safe places and healthy relationships. Youth are longing to be heard and are looking for a place to belong. If they can trust that someone will genuinely listen and give them a place to belong, then they will likely keep investing in that relationship. One of the main reasons why youth join and remain in gangs is for the social relationships. The California Crime and Violence Prevention Center states, "A vulnerable child seeks love, protection and the acceptance of his or her peers. Youth, who lack parental guidance and support, or opportunities for positive involvement with their peers, often turn to a gang to meet these needs."<sup>123</sup> Imagine the impact on gang affiliation if the church

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<sup>122</sup> Gordon and Perkins, *Making Neighborhoods Whole*, 122.

<sup>123</sup> California Crime and Violence Prevention Center, "Why Youth Join Gangs," Tarrant Cares, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://tarrant.tx.networkofcare.org/kids/library/article.aspx?id=1814>.

serve with youth to develop the healthy relationships, support, and a place to belong that they need.

Listen and learn about them from their passions and desires to their pains and struggles. Before any action can be made, one should know enough that the actions developed is what youth and the community needs. One way to do this is through research as well as simply listening to the youth living in the community. As relationships are made and trust is built, ask questions. This is going to take time. A teenager is not going to walk up to someone one day and spill out all of their issues and whole life story. It will take the slow process of trust. If ministry is done as an outsider, then there will be little breakthrough; however, submitting to the slow process of becoming an insider will likely bring effective results.

In a documentary about the transformation in several communities around the world, there are several common factors in each of the locations. Every ministry team spent time collecting information about the community and has intercessory prayer meetings long before more tangible action was taken. As a result, they saw greater effectiveness and transformation in their communities. This transformation took forms of greater unity, less violence and corruption, drug cartels ending, governments turning to be on the side of the church, and openness to the gospel.<sup>124</sup> Invest in listening and learning about the youth in the community. Find out what is really going on in the neighborhood. Do some research! Every community has similarities and differences, so the action plan taken will depend on the status of the community, the gifts present, and the issues at hand.

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<sup>124</sup> The Sentinel Group, "Transformations: A Documentary," Jojo Florendo, August 31, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MG-XBkCTDY&t=7s>.

### **Make An Action Plan**

Now that the understanding of the importance of intentional relationships and knowing the community, a more direct action plan can be laid out based on the research. It is important to note that specific programs will differ in specific communities and is dependent on the resources available; however, the concepts and applications remain true in almost every instance.

### **Be a Neighbor**

One of the simplest ways to start reaching youth and the community that can be practiced by any Christian as well as the local church is practice being a neighbor. Several scholars noted the value of practicing presence and proximity as well as how solidarity and incarnational ministry is of both word and deed. It is one thing to preach about the second greatest commandment to “love your neighbor”, Jesus’ teachings, and Paul with the early church, but it’s another thing to actually put it into action. Looking at the example of the good Samaritan in Luke 10, there are several aspects gleaned for what it looks like to be a neighbor. While the priest and the Levite were like nomads not seeing their neighbor in need, the Samaritan saw him and was moved with compassion (v. 33). In his compassion, the Samaritan acted. He did more than hand the hurting man some money and food. What the Samaritan did was pick him up, bandage his wounds, provide a safe place to recover, and cared for him. In the same way, the church should lift up their neighborhoods youth, help cleanse the wounds of pain in their life, and offer a safe place for them to heal and grow. Solidarity is compassion and empathy that must result in tangible action, not charity.

How, then, can the local church be a good neighbor to the youth in their community? To Robert Lupton its beyond giving money and free food as forms of handouts. It cannot be the form of doing things for others what they can do for themselves, rather, it is the motives that

bring about reciprocity.<sup>125</sup> To David Driskell it must be rid of every negative perspective, view, and stereotype towards youth.<sup>126</sup> Assuming things about a neighbor, about youth, only limits the extent of love shown to them. To Jonathan Brooks it is being present. Showing that the church is there for them, whether they accept Jesus or not.<sup>127</sup> To Kurt Rietema its showing them a different story, one that is heaven on earth, and being a model of the good way of life – one with Jesus.<sup>128</sup> To Jesus Christ it is laying down one’s life out of love for neighbor. It is a way of life lived on mission, for love fulfills the law and the prophets.

### **Mentorship**

One of the things that popped up within the research is mentorship. The need for youth to have good models and people who would do life with them. It’s the “with” way of ministry, in which instead of doing things for youth, its done with them. Instead of seeing them as targets for ministry, they are seen as friends and family that are welcomed to the table. The Urban Youth Impact is learning that one of the keyways youth experience a different hopeful pathway beyond their current circumstances is through someone who showed them. Someone who became a mentor to them and showed them a new way of life that they never thought possible.<sup>129</sup> Rietema discussed how their role with the youth in the Argentine community is to tell a different story, one that is good and hopeful.<sup>130</sup> Marie Quinten noted that the youth at The Street School need good role models and mentors. She even noted how she would like to see the church across the street become those mentors for them.<sup>131</sup> In a study conducted concerning the influence of adult relationships on child development ages 6-17, research showed “that having one or more caring

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<sup>125</sup> Lupton, *Toxic Charity*.

<sup>126</sup> Driskell, *Creating Better Cities*.

<sup>127</sup> Brooks, *Church Forsaken*.

<sup>128</sup> Rietema, interview.

<sup>129</sup> Lowdermilk, *Experiencing Unexpected Pathways*.

<sup>130</sup> Rietema, interview.

<sup>131</sup> Quinton, interview.

adults<sup>132</sup> in a child's life increases the likelihood that they will flourish and become productive adults themselves." The study's findings included that having a mentor-like relationship outside the home resulted in adolescents and children having less external behavior issues like bullying and less internal problems like depression.<sup>133</sup> This is where mentorship becomes an avenue in which the church can support youth in their community.

This could look like a number of things. Most churches have youth groups, which are important, valued, and can be very successful; however, when it comes to reaching the youth outside the church it might take a different approach or at least different tactics. Often times what occurs is that the work of youth ministry outside of a youth group meeting at a local church is put on non-profits who create programs that maybe a few church members volunteer for. This is not a bad thing as those non-profits are needed; however, the local church has a responsibility too. The church has a responsibility to love their neighbor as Jesus commands and this includes loving neighborhoods. This process, including partnering with the strengths and gifts of the community, means creating opportunities for the church to reach youth. An easy way would be to simply go and volunteer at that local non-profit or program for a couple hours one day but imagine how much more impactful it would be if the church was truly and consistently present. Think of all the possible opportunities the church is missing out on in their communities. The church right across from The Street School has the opportunity to be present in the lives of youth as mentors, not just money with no face, but it takes initiative and action. For instance, a summer program could be developed to help The Street School carry on their good work during a time

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<sup>132</sup> This caring adult could be parents, other relatives, neighbors, teachers, coaches, religious leaders, etc.

<sup>133</sup> David Murphey, et al., "Caring Adults: Important for Positive Child Well-being," *Child Trends* 54 (2013): 1. <https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/2013-54CaringAdults.pdf>.

where youth are most vulnerable to getting in trouble.<sup>134</sup> Or perhaps this would look more like a weekly lunch where trusted adults would spend time eating and building relationships with the youth in the school.<sup>135</sup>

For the Argentine community where Youthfront Neighborhood is at work, it looks like creating the ImagineX program, hosting an after school program, and running the Snack Shack KC as a safe place for kids and youth to hang out.<sup>136</sup> For the Canaan Missionary Baptist Church, where Jonathan Brooks resides as the lead pastor, it looks like an after school and summer program, hosting a Thanksgiving dinner with the community members, and taking small actions to help and show youth the church is there for them. Brooks mentions one of the teenagers that attended the church's youth group that ended up in jail and noted that he was one of many who knew God at an early age, but needed guidance, accountability, and support.<sup>137</sup> It can be as simple as hosting a back to school bash where families can buy school supplies at low costs<sup>138</sup> and have fun with other neighbors in the community to a summer program that brings in mentors for youth to mentorship programs similar to ImagineX. What the church does specifically in their community will depend on the nature of the community, the resources available, the strengths and gifts of neighbors, and their mission. This will take training adults to become those mentors

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<sup>134</sup> A hypothetical class project was created by author and two other colleagues built around this idea of a summer program with the students at The Street School. It would be a mentorship initiative that would be done by a local church in order to provide a safe and fun place for youth during the summer, while mentoring them into healthy ways of living. Mapping out the idea in just about every detail revealed how possible it can be for a local church to create an outreach program that sustained community development and mentorship with youth.

<sup>135</sup> Church3434, a local church in Tulsa, Oklahoma does this with a local elementary school near their church. Volunteers become "lunch buddies" for the day as an outreach opportunity to connect with kids and families in their community.

<sup>136</sup> Joe Gonzales, Youth pastor with Youthfront Neighborhood, interview by author, October 25, 2023.

<sup>137</sup> Brooks, *Church Forsaken*.

<sup>138</sup> Selling school supplies at a very low cost helps build the principle of reciprocity and can help prevent the damages to personal initiative and the onsets of toxic charity. This same principle can be applied to food pantries, clothing closets, Christmas gifts, etc.

needed for children. Perhaps, offer classes or training before doing a mentorship program. With this is also understanding training parents at home.

### **Guardian Resources**

Research shows that 96-100% of Protestant and Catholic Churches agree that the most positive influences on a child's spiritual formation is parents/family and the church. When looking at how those churches prioritize the ways they go about this, there is a different story being told. Despite having a 96% (Catholic) and 98% (Protestant) on the importance of parent/family influences on a child's formation, there was only 17% (Catholic) and 20% (Protestant) for training parents on having spiritual conversations. There was an even lower percentage on providing parent guides or any other resources to parents (15% and 10%).<sup>139</sup> If the argument is going to be made that spiritual formation starts in the home, then the church should provide resources to parents and families so that the good can take place. This is true not just in spiritual formation, but in aspects like adolescent development, stepping out of poverty, finances, etc. On average, parents will spend 75 times more hours with their kids than a church leader within one year.<sup>140</sup> Supporting youth also means supporting the guardians and families that raise them.

Taking the principles learned from the research, doing life with youth means doing life with their guardians and families too. Build relationships with parents and families as well. If they can trust someone with their kids, then they are more likely to allow their kids to be involved. Possible ways to support guardians might include guardian/parent nights that allows them to have fun, build relationships with other families, and learn more about caring for their

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<sup>139</sup> Barna Group, "Who Is Responsible for Children's Faith Formation?," *Barna*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/children-faith-formation/>.

<sup>140</sup> Nina Schmidgall, "Building Faith: Reaching the Next Generation of Families," National Association of Evangelicals, June 5, 2017, <https://www.nae.org/building-faith/>.



child. It could mean supporting guardians through food pantries, back to school bashes, Christmas shops, or clothing closets, so that physical needs are being met in the home. Something to note here is reciprocity. In this case, perhaps it looks like a Christmas shop that has low priced toys that families can buy, so that guardians can feel the pride of providing for their own children around Christmas. Finance classes or citizenship classes can also be way to better support guardians. Remember, an outsider is harder to trust and will likely have little breakthrough in speaking to an issue. This is why investing in neighborhoods long-term and building relationships matter, because ministry always moves at the speed of relationships.

### **Bring Youth to the Table**

As several scholars have noted, youth are assets to their communities. In order for the local church to build solidarity with youth successfully, they have to begin to see youth for their gifts, potential, and in positive light. When time is taken to listen to them, their gifts begin to come into light and these gifts could be the key to helping the community grow. Throughout the Bible, God uses the gifts and abilities of youth and young people to fulfill his mission and purpose on the earth. From David in the Old Testament to the boy at the feeding of the five thousand in the New Testament. Think of ImagineX with YF Neighborhood. The ideas and their tangible action to make them reality came from youth guided to imagine the possibilities. When building relationships and mentorship connections with youth, begin to discover them as gifts and cultivate those gifts in them. Mentoring is also about the process of helping youth accomplish their dreams. If they can find someone who shows them their dreams and gifts are for a purpose, then they will begin to live with purpose. This might not always look like another ImagineX program in a different community, but the principles they have established and the

fruit they are seeing is not something to ignore. Invite youth to engage in their community's growth by building programs that enable reciprocity and establish solidarity.

Practically, that may look like gathering a few youth together and guide them in creating an outreach opportunity. It will likely look like both youth and adults working together in the local church outreach process. For instance, if one of them is good with social media, then they can help in that. If one of them is great at coming up with games/activities, then allow them to be a partner. Youth have all kinds of ideas, thoughts, and passions about their community. They just need someone to see them as gifts and help them cultivate those gifts and ideas. In a study with Gen Z<sup>141</sup> and how they viewed the development of their gifts, 69% said there were “definitely” gifts/skills they want to develop with 29% saying “maybe”. Within this same study, 50% of those in Gen Z would be interested in growing and developing those gifts with the church.<sup>142</sup>

### **Do No Harm and Be Like Jesus**

Building the bridge of solidarity between the church and their community's youth is not an easy task. It will take the church going beyond its four walls and learning what it looks like to love their neighborhood and those who live in it. It means living out the mission of God and fulfilling the mission he has for his church. It will take the slow process of building reciprocal relationships that reflect the church's heart to care for their parish. It requires stepping away from what once was toxic to the development of the community and stepping into an asset-based approach. While the specific programs and practical steps will vary in different communities, the actions taken should reflect evaluating where the church is currently, being a neighbor, developing honest relationships with youth, viewing youth as gifts, becoming good mentors that

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<sup>141</sup> Generation Z is currently those of the ages of 11-26.

<sup>142</sup> Barna Group, “Gen Z Are Leaning Into Their Gifts – Will the Church Help?,” *Barna*, January 5, 2022, <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-gifts/>.

model the good story of heaven on earth, supporting their parents and families, and inviting youth to the table. Out of everything, there are two most prominent aspects that every church must take in hand when reaching the youth of their neighborhood. First, do no harm. Pursue only the common good for the youth and the community. Move in unity with the youth, not against them. Second, be like Jesus. Live by his example, love wildly as he does, and show them who he truly is. No counterfeit or watered down version of Jesus – just him. Remember, solidarity is only possible if there is compassion and empathy that results in tangible action.

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