

## URBAN MINISTRY OVERVIEW

Churches in rural, suburban and urban settings are bound to be different. Mainstream churches, even in the heart of downtown may still be very middle-class and suburban-like. But churches in inner-city settings are unique for many reasons. Society caters to the needs of the middle and upper classes. Urban or inner-city ministry is forced to deal not just with spiritual and personal issues, but systemic issues such as housing, banking, health and child-care, and much more. In some respects, ministry among rural and urban poor are therefore similar.

Urban ministry deals with conditions brought about by poverty, class prejudice, racism, immigration and language differences. City and governmental services are notably weaker among the poor. Challenges of the ghetto have produced an oppositional street culture, hip-hop, gangs, crime, and drug-trade, along with a heroic majority of the population struggling to make life work. These same issues have generated dynamic churches, with powerful music, singing, preaching and responses. African-American churches have a long history of surviving with dignity, with challenging social systems, and with supporting the faithful. Other ethnic churches have fed off this rich tradition and added special flavors of their own.

Urban youth have much in common with all other young people. They share the same humanity and are going through the same transition to adulthood made so difficult by adult society. It is exciting to see urban youth mix with suburban and rural youth and with those from other countries in creative settings.

But urban youth realize their identities have been shaped by a different set of conditions. They have become socially sophisticated at a young age, they have learned to deal with violence and the code of the streets, they have had to navigate intense negative peer pressure. They realize they are facing an up-hill battle to succeed in their societies.

The church cultures of the city are shaped by different forces than their suburban counterparts. Their music, dance, rhetoric and spiritual styles can be different. Meanwhile the resources available for urban churches and youth groups often don't seem to fit their situation and style. Marketing principles produce resources suitable for the largest buying demographic group—which is predominately white and middle-class.

At a recent urban youth workers' conference, I heard black leaders joking about the *one* book a representative from a large Christian book company pointed out as suitable for black, urban youth. This bright, neat woman had no idea how "un-urban" the book really was—though written by an African-American.

This lack of resources and training opportunities is one of the huge challenges for urban youth ministry—and urban ministry in general.

The differences between urban and other ministries are therefore more a matter of style than substantive. All youth ministries deal with identity, relationships, future thinking, a moral life

style and response to the Good News of Jesus Christ. It may be a little easier for a suburban Christian to slide through high school than for a young urban Christian. The streets exude tremendous pressure to conform to their code. They will accept rejection of its code and values only from someone who proves to be real, the genuine thing. Hypocrisy or being critically judgmental are both dangerous on the streets.

Urban youth ministry itself must also be genuine and “for real.” (This article should be read in conjunction with studying the topic, “Urban Youth.”) It takes time to build solid relationships and trust. Trust and respect are key concepts because they are so lacking in the community and in our whole world today.

Status and safety are gained on the streets through *juice*. Trust without threat is therefore a counter-mode of relating. First, a leader must develop trust among young friends. Then, trust must grow among youth themselves and newcomers. In this context young people will better understand what it means to trust God, their heavenly Father.

Should anyone doubt the effect of racism and classism, they have only to study the depth of a young Black or Hispanic’s need for respect. *Juice* is a kind of counter-respect, a tolerance based on fear. Genuine respect can only come out of a reverence for God and the love that God gives. Even in the face of detestable behavior, a Christian can look into the soul of another with profound respect. Respect is the answer to all discipline problems. Respect provides everyone, even newcomers, with a safe place as it affords them with individual dignity.

With urban especially in mind, I have defined youth ministry as providing a safe place with caring mentors, where a person can hear someone else tell her story, until she has the courage to tell her own story—and be applauded, and in that context hear the great story of God’s love. The second part of the definition insists that youth ministry be a place of healing, liberation and empowerment for service to church and community.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. This article assumes that you have studied the topic, URBAN YOUTH. Why is this important, and what have you gained from these two topics?
2. You should also be sure to study our **Resource Centers**. What do (must) family, community, schools, peers and gangs, media, job opportunities and church (each and all) have to do with urban youth and urban ministry?
3. There are obviously strong and differing opinions about this subject. What criticisms do you have of the article, and what do you think is important to add?
4. What do you see as the outstanding strength and accomplishment of urban youth ministry these days?
5. What do you see as the most critical need(s) of urban youth ministry today? How would

you address them?

## **IMPLICATIONS**

1. For decades youth and pop cultures have fed off urban youth culture (and prison culture related to the streets). We must acknowledge and pay attention to this leadership.
2. Black (and other minority) Churches have much to teach the mainstream.
3. We must make up for the lack of resources and training being afforded valiant urban youth workers. We should know the organizations providing such help.

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