FINDING THE FORMULA FOR CONNECTING THE CHURCH IN THE LIVES OF TEENAGERS/YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

FINDING THE FORMULA FOR CONNECTING THE CHURCH IN THE LIVES OF TEENAGERS/YOUNG ADULTS

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Across the country, church membership is on the decline. Teenagers and young adults are one of the largest groups with declining church attendance. With a growing number of life options available to choose from on any given Sunday morning, a large segment of this vital population continues to be visibly missing, from church community. How can we reach this vulnerable population? Is there a formula for connecting our churches to the lives of teens and young adults in a way that is relevant to them?

Church leadership and congregations will have to deal with a generation of teens and young adults who are the collateral damage of "The War on Drugs, a war that led to unfair laws and mass incarcerations. The societal impact of this war, on the inner city, was experienced on many levels; lost incomes led to the destruction of entire families, neighborhoods and schools.

How can we as a church reconnect to our teens and young people? If a formula is to work it must be build on strong relationships or utilize already existing ones. The twenty- four teens and young adults chosen for the pilot program were given a preassessment that revealed their strengths and areas of challenge. The assessment focused on the following assets: personal, social, family, academic and community strengths. This information allowed for the direct development of challenge areas.

The premise is that when these areas of need are met, a personal connection will be made, and the church will become relevant in their lives. The participants were given a post assessment to determine if any change had taken place in their thinking. The results revealed that many of the participants improved in areas of challenge, established trusting relationships, and a willingness to walk that pathway back to the church.

When the church works to understand the teens and young adults, and meets their deep needs in a meaningful way, a new and stronger connection will be forged. Connection is what makes the church relevant, and may be what draws a person into a fellowship of believers.

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To my wife, Ruth; children Jacques, Asia, Paris, Cairo, and Siena; and St. John's Baptist Church

INTRODUCTION

THE BIRTH OF AN IDEA: NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem (Neh 1:1-2).¹

In the month of September in the year of 2013, I sat in the garden of my home in suburbia, praying and thanking God for my family, my health, financial stability and the very comfortable life I was living. I realized that the process of arriving at a comfortable life came at the expense of a disconnect from the very community I was now called to serve. This proved to be an important moment of clarity in realizing that I wanted to understand and eliminate the gap that was growing between the reality of my life and the reality of the ministry.

In 1986 I became a middle school teacher in the NYC public school system where I taught and lived. In 1988 I became the youth pastor of the Bethel Baptist Church about two miles from the school. In 1991, based on witness statements, my father was attacked by five young African American teenagers that resulted in his death due to head trauma. I

¹ All scripture references from *The Bible: King James Version* (Glasgow: Collins, 2008).

included this not for dramatics but because it marked a major spiritual crises in my life as to whether or not to continue to minister to youth. In 1995 I moved my family from the inner city of Brooklyn, New York to suburban New Jersey I continued to teach in the school and serve as youth pastor in Brooklyn. In 1997 I was called to pastor St. John's Baptist Church in Inwood, Long Island, NY. My life was now a far cry from where I served as community youth pastor, school administrator and from my upbringing in the Van-Dyke housing project in Ocean-Hill Brownsville in East New York City.

I grew up surrounded by the results and effects of what I now know of as the pipeline from school to prison, mass incarceration, drugs and violence. The contrast between Brownsville and suburbia caused me to think about the most important variable in my life, which was the family that enabled my brother, three sisters and I to escape the devastation that surrounded us each day. As a youth growing up in one of the housing projects in the Ocean-Hill section of Brownsville in Brooklyn's East New York, images of devastation were vivid and powerful for me over my eighteen years living there. It was there that I witnessed poverty at a level that seemed normal since everyone was in the same situation. There were always gangs and always drugs as seen through evidence of those nodding out on the corners. Although I had aunts, uncles and outside family, my family and I had a sense that we only had each other for support during the lean times.

When growing up, I was able to view the beginning of the change in our East New York community. I can remember walking home from school the day Martin Luther King Jr. was killed and witnessing the riots and destruction of most of the stores we had in the neighborhood. Although we hardly ever noticed at that time, there were several older white residents still living in the turning community during the late nineteen-sixties. On one particular day shortly after the riots, I witnessed the saddest event that has stayed with me until this day. An older white woman maybe in her eighties was sitting on the bench in the park when a group of youths I knew started to beat her, and would not stop until the police came. This was devastating to me. Those were the external challenges we dealt with on a daily basis. The internal and family challenges were simply living and eating from day to day, made more difficult by the parental arguments that were fueled by alcohol and financial limitations.

While growing up in Brownsville, I can't remember any of the local churches ever reaching out to the community on a level that positively impacted us. Any experience beyond the community came from our involvement in the local Community Center summer work programs and my mom's determination to expose us to a different world beyond Brownsville.

I always attributed that strong family commitment to succeed to my parents, especially my mother's insistence that we pray together several times a week as well as the constant reminder of certain principles we were to adhere to. The Catholic Church and parochial school we attended also served as a support and underpinning to what we were taught at home.

Without knowing it at the time but realizing it now, it was these experiences growing up that gave me the skills to enter into the New York City public school system in 1986. These experiences also gave me the skills, when given one of the toughest classes in the school, to survive and connect with students. This connection with the students began through the use of entertainment as a vehicle. In 1987, I began an antidrug and violence theatrical company and with a small grant and was able to travel to many schools in the district, organizing performances with youth for students. In 1988 I transitioned this group of over one hundred students into the church where I became the youth pastor. This youth ministry continued to grow and meet every Friday night for nine years. As a result of this ministry (to these teenagers and young adults), several youth grew up and many of them entered into the public education system. This consisted of one alumnus starting a charter school, one becoming a principal in Texas, and another a Dean of students in Harlem, as well as several others becoming teachers and paraprofessionals. Presently, the assistant to the pastor at my current church is a product of this ministry and we have continued to work together for almost thirty years.

This led me to believe that I had stumbled upon a formula for connecting the church to the lives of teenagers and young adults in a relevant way. This resulted in those teenagers and young adults becoming agents of change in the lives of others.

In 1997 I was called to pastor St. John's Baptist Church. My new role came with a host of new responsibilities and the delegation of leaders to do the detail work of the church. Over the past eighteen years I have witnessed a change in the surrounding neighborhood from African American to Hispanic. In addition, there was a rapid decline of the school system as well as an increase in gang violence and an aging congregation within the church and surrounding community.

This journey did not begin with the intention of ending up where I did. Both the ministry and I have been impacted by this experience in ways I will attempt to explain.

Like many other pastors, I was faced with the challenge of St. John's Baptist Church's declining membership. Initially, my motive was simply to reverse this trend of declining attendance in worship service and our weekly bible studies. My thought was that the church was losing its ability to be or establish its relevance and connection to the needs of teenagers and young adults and the life of the inner city community in which the church was located.

The project would start by focusing on the most endangered group in the church and the community, the teenagers and young adults. This was the beginning of my quest to find a way for the church to establish relevance in the life of this group.

My original motive to find relevance of the church in the lives of the teens and young adults was based on the desire to see the population and membership of the church increase. Research has revealed that the membership of most churches is on the decline. In "7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look At Church Attendance" written by Kelly Shattuck, he states, "If present trends continue, the percentage of the population that attends church in 2050 is estimated to be at almost half of 1990's attendance- a drop from 20.4% to 11.7%."² Dave Olsen, the Director of church planting for the Evangelical Covenant Church did a study projecting that "the years leading up to 2050 are less encouraging." He estimated a drop to 16.6% in 2010, and 15.4% in 2020. These statistics further supported and informed me that what I was seeing locally was also happening globally. It was these statistics that started me to believe that the decrease in church attendance was only a symptom for a larger problem. For me the church was missing key reasons for the lack of relevance in the life of teens and young adults. The vision and desire to reverse this trend came from a place deep inside of me to impact and win more souls for the kingdom of God.

² Kelly Shattuck, "7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look At Church Attendance In America," ChurchLeaders.com, accessed 3/12/2016, http://www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html.

The plan for this project was to develop pathways, programs and activities that would lead the teenagers and the youth to a sacred space that is the church. The goal was to develop a formula for winning youth to Christ. The idea of the project seemed straightforward enough but was based on an idea from the past that did not consider this particular generation's seemingly lack of trust and disconnect from the institutionalized church. I realize now that the first step in reaching the teenagers and the young adults was to be willing to create a pathway of trust. I also would need to walk down that pathway toward the teenagers and young adults into their world and community. I now believe that when this trust is established the teenagers and young adults would be in a position to decide many things. This included becoming part of a safe and sacred community regardless of what and how long that process may take.

Like Nehemiah, I had to ask the question, how are things going in the community? I was under the assumption that due to my thirty years of experience as a pastor and twenty-eight years as an educator, I understood the poor conditions and state of the church today and knew the reasons for the decline in teenage and young adult church involvement and attendance. I soon came to realize that my understanding of the community and the church had somehow become disconnected from the teenager's and young adult's everyday reality because of where my life had taken me.

It seemed very simple to establish a formula by which to attract young people and adults to the church. This also included engaging them in the spiritual development process that would help them see church was much better than where they were coming from. I soon realized my biggest problem was that I was asking the people who were already in the church the question, "How do we reach the teenagers and young adults on the outside?" I kept receiving the same answer, which was simply "to have more events to attract the youth, something that had not sustained their attention in the past." I had the right questions but I was asking the wrong people.

Again, like Nehemiah the true answer did not come until he asked the question to those who were from the old neighborhood. It seemed that as a church, we were out of touch with what was really going on with the youth and the community. Therefore, I had to go to the youth directly to get the answers to these questions; I needed them to educate *me* on how to reach them.

In my search for the church's relevance in the lives of teenagers and young adults, it was imperative to survey the degree of collateral damage done to this generation from the "War on Drugs" that led to a system of mass incarceration. I searched for signs of the physical, mental and spiritual devastation that had impacted this generation. I believed that this information and data revealed the approach the church needed to take in terms of reconstructing the walls of safety for this generation. In addition it also revealed the approach that would help lay the needed trust for pathways into their lives. The church would have to be a supplier of the materials to construct these walls as opposed to simply being a supporter of the teenagers and young adults. In other words, the church had to take on an active role in supplying the teenagers and young adults with foundations of success and not just as a support system that assumes the foundations are already in place.

In this project I involved twenty-four teenagers and young adults that made up three different groups. I decided to focus on teenagers and young adults because they are the group missing from church attendance on the most consistent basis. This journey with the twenty-four participants caused me to search deep beneath the surface of their

external lives. The most amazing part of the whole experience was that I had to be escorted into their world--a guided tour, if you will, into uncharted areas of their lives; a trip into the war zone with all of its unknown beauty and challenges. The twenty-four participants in the program were divided into three separate groups. The first group came from Brooklyn, NY, primarily from the housing projects located in the South Brooklyn area. Living in different housing projects brought about interesting conversations and conflicts. Many of these students came from low-income families and in many cases single-parent households. The second group came from West Orange, NJ. All of them were selected as participants because they attended a suburban school and lived in private homes and had both parents living with them or at the very least had substantial contact with both parents. The third group of participants was from the area directly around my church in Inwood, Long Island, NY. Although the area is considered low income, some teenagers lived in private homes while others lived in the housing project complex near the church. These students were very active in some aspects of church life, although they all had many friends who were not involved in the church.

The project's original plan was to use only one group from the church, but I decided to add the two other groups because I wanted to get data that would demonstrate the impact of this project on a cross section of teenagers and young adults. Having groups from different areas would give a clear indication of the impact that living in these environments had on the life of teenagers and young adults. In his book *Imprisoning Communities* Todd Clear emphasizes the importance of neighborhood and context in quality of life. "It is obvious that the place where a person lives is an important aspect of the quality of that person's life. People try to live in places that offer them the social

amenities they most want in their lives. They tend to live in the best places they can afford, moving away from less desirable locations when they can. People who live in undesirable locations are often stuck there."³

In order to get a more accurate picture of the conditions of the walls of safety in the lives of teenagers and young adults, I selected participants ranged in ages from thirteen to twenty-two. I also included five boys as the outliers to the conversations, where appropriate. Upon entering the doctoral program at Drew University in Madison New Jersey in September 2013, I also started a young men's leadership group made up of five African American 6th grade students. I continued meeting with them every week for three years.

It is my belief that in order for any organization, including the church, to be able to make a connection in the lives of teenagers and young adults, they must have an honest understanding of the needs that exist. It is my further belief that when needs are understood and met, then the church can establish and develop pathways to help build needed relationships.

The vehicle I chose to use was the Developmental Assets Profile (DAP). Developmental_assets are positive experiences and qualities identified by The Search Institute as being essential to healthy psychological and social development in childhood and adolescence. These assets have the power to influence young adults' developmental trajectories and protect them from a range of negative outcomes and help them become more productive caring and responsible adults.

³ Todd R. Clear, *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 70.

The DAP Focuses on four external assets: support, empowerment, boundaries/ expectations and constructive use of time. It also focused on four internal assets: a commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive identity in addition we also focused on five asset building contacts which is personal, social, family, school and community.

Assessment of assets is relevant to all youth not just those considered to be at risk for negative outcomes. The DAP is a descriptive tool that provides a standard portrayal of reported assets across the eight asset categories and alternatively across five other context categories. Quantitative indices derived from the DAP can be useful in a wide variety of settings for applied and research purposes.

After analyzing the data from all sources, the findings have supported that using the assessment surveys helped determine where the teenagers' and young adults' foundational challenges exist; in other words, where their areas of strengths and weaknesses were most prominent. It was further determined that this data, along with the conversations and activities with the participants gave a clear indication on how to meet these needs. Through the meeting of these needs the result was a building of trust, relationships, an invitation into their world and establishing a foundation for connection and relevance. It was further found that connection and relevance was not limited to the church or any particular place but to the people willing to commit themselves to the process of building the Kingdom of God into the lives of teenagers and young adults.

CHAPTER ONE

WHOSE JOB IS THIS?

The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it" (Neh 2:4-5).

Now this next story may seem out of place but it has played a major shift in how I think about the role of the church in the life of the community. As stated earlier I started teaching public school in 1986. I was given the responsibility to teach science to 6th, 7th and 8th graders. From 1986 to 1998 it was a simple teacher-centered model of instruction. During that time if a class was quiet, sitting and copying the work off of the blackboard then the administrators were satisfied just knowing that the students were under control. We as educators understood that unless a teacher can handle the behaviors in the class, little instruction could take place. Looking back, the real question was, were the students being educated to their full potential? Then in 1998 my classes were selected to be part of a pilot program to institute something called "inquiry based science." This moved instruction from being teacher-centered to being student-centered. Inquiry based science involved more hands-on activities with less chalk and talk and copying notes from the board or a book. The world of science and the way it was being taught was changing and placing the responsibility for learning in the hands of the student with the teacher as

facilitator. As the facilitator, I used assessments to drive the instruction so that the instruction was based on the learning needs of the students. Those teachers who refused to change or were not able to make the shift eventually left or were viewed as teachers that progressive parents did not want their children to experience.

Every organization, every business and every church has to be willing to grow and change in order to continue to meet the needs of the community they serve; in other words, in order to remain relevant. Although it may be difficult for some to see the church according to a business model of adaptation, in many ways a church has the same responsibility to grow and adjust to the changing needs of a community that has the power of selection. When the needs of the people are no longer being met by any organization, whether secular or religious, people will find somewhere else to get their needs met.

It was under such circumstances in 1929 in the Far Rockaway section of Queens that a group of five to six people decided that the vision of the First Baptist Church of Far Rockaway was no longer meeting their needs. Their decision resulted in the founding of St. John's Baptist Church of Inwood, approximately three miles from First Baptist Church. St. John's started in a small space, and after several years moved to its present location at 4 Henry Street. The church was located across the tracks from the mansions of Lawrence, Long Island. This neighborhood, across the tracks, was the area where all of the service workers and live-in maids resided. Most of the African Americans living in Inwood were transplants from the south. In the mid 1940's, there was a domestic and civil labor shortage in northern cities, and buses arrived in the south ready to transport African Americans to work in the mansions. Many young women came as live-in help to the wealthier families of Long Island.

With the growth of the African American population in the Inwood area, most of who were looking for a place of worship, St. John's Baptist Church grew. As the oral story goes, the members decided to purchase and build a new church. By having many bake sales, chicken dinner sales and contributing what little they had, they were able to build the downstairs section of the church. It was to that space that they marched to on a Sunday morning and worshiped. In the early 1980's the congregation added the upstairs sanctuary. Since that time, demographics have changed. Of the 9,792 residents of Inwood, 42.6% are Hispanic, 28.5% are White and 23.1% are African American. Although the percentage of African Americans has not changed significantly from the base of 25% in the past, the White and Hispanic populations have basically switched their demographic proportions.

Over the past ten years, many members have retired to the south while many of their children have moved to larger cities as part of their college transition. The result is a gradual decline in the membership and attendance at the church. Being the largest Baptist church in the Inwood area and having a presence in the community for almost 88 years, membership was struggling to maintain itself. In order to reverse the declining membership we as a church had to make some serious decisions about our future direction. One of the major concerns for the majority of the congregation (approximately 300 members) was the decrease in youth membership, and the condition of the youth in the schools and the community. The main theme of congregational discussions with church leadership was that the church was no longer speaking the language of a new generation. In other words, by maintaining the status quo, the church was losing relevance to the lives of a new generation.

One of the questions was how we could have missed the opportunity to reach the next generation, and not realize that it was happening. In searching for the answer to that inquiry, we as a congregation have come to understand how this could have happened.

The church's influence and relevance was clear during slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow and within my lifetime, the Civil Rights movement. In the 1950s and 1960s, many churches played a major role in the Civil Rights Movement's fight for equality in this country. During the research phase of this project I was able to speak to those who were active members of the church during the Civil Rights Movement. What they all seem to agree on was the fact that the church provided a sense of community. "It was a place where people felt free to discuss the issues and concerns of the times." "People watched out for each other and you felt safe because men in the church were always watching out especially when they started burning churches in this area." As a discussion with two of the older members of the church revealed, "These attacks did not only happen in the south but right in this area. Right on the beach, St. John's Baptist Church of Arvern was burned. There was a sense that you did not know what could happen next, the sixties were tough." Although we did not belong to the local church, my dad still managed to take us to the march on Washington when I was six years old.

The legislative gains of the Civil Rights movement seemed to have brought about a change for the better. On the surface it was as though racial equality was in reach. Then, in the 1980's Black life in inner city neighborhoods in America, including the old inner city neighborhood I grew up in seemed to be threatened by escalating cycles of violence, family disintegration, and poverty. I, like many others, understood this threat to be the introduction of crack cocaine. It was because of this that Black church communities added our support to the "War on Drugs," a war that seemed to be aligned with the values of personal sobriety and support of Black families and communities. But this alliance was based on a dangerous fabrication. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander explains that the popular view of the War on Drugs as a benign response to drug crime is the result of a campaign of misinformation.

Most people assume the War on Drugs was launched in response to the crisis caused by crack cocaine in inner-city neighborhoods. This view holds that the racial disparities in drug convictions and sentences, as well as the rapid explosion of the prison population, reflect nothing more than the government's zealous- but benign-efforts to address rampant drug crime in poor neighborhoods. This view, while understandable, given the sensational media coverage of crack in the 1980's and 1990's, is simply wrong.¹

The strange thing about this war was that it was waged before crack cocaine became a problem in the inner cities. With the unfair criminalization and unfair prison sentences for the possession of small amounts of crack cocaine, untold numbers of African American men and women were and are still serving long prison terms. And these numbers are far from racially neutral. "In some states, black men have been admitted to prison on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times greater than those of white men."² The reason why so many were blindsided by this War on Drugs is because it arose during an era that claimed colorblindness as an ideal. It was designed to remove those who were labeled criminals, and who does not want criminals put away? Therefore we agreed with the idea

¹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010), 5.

² Alexander, 7.

that anyone involved in the drug trade—what we thought was the cause of the destruction of our inner city neighborhoods--should be put away in jail. This all seems so logical and right until, through historical research and political conscientization, one can realize that the label "criminal" has only strategically replaced the category "black" in the justification of the War on Drugs, and has resulted in the same racial subjugation as the many other discriminatory practices here in America.

The difference between previous attacks on Black communities and the War on Drugs is that we did not see it coming. After what seemed like progress and movement for people of color during the Civil Rights Movement, the struggle seemed to relax for some of us. Then, with the destruction of the inner city neighborhoods you would be hard pressed to find anyone or any church not supporting the announcement of the War on Drugs. This support from communities and churches came because the War on Drugs seemed to be aligned with a project of a society free of criminal activity. Who could have known that this War on Drugs seemed to be designed to fuel the explosive growth of prisons in this country and to supply criminals to justify the building of the Prison Industrial Complex for mass incarceration, as Michelle Alexander argues? Who would have ever thought that a plan could possibly be put in place to make the "criminal" the new label to be controlled and without the mention of race make sure that the new title criminal would represent a majority of the "black community?"

It became apparent that the gap that exists today between the church and young people cannot be closed until the church understands the bigger picture of racism and mass incarceration in this country, and ministers in a way that addresses these injustices

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as it rebuilds the broken walls in the lives of young people. Real sustaining relevance comes when needs are met and brokenness is healed.

The entire premise of my project was at a point where I could have continued to do what I thought this project was originally designed to do. This was to connect and make impact in the lives of the teenagers and the young adults, and increasing their attendance in Sunday service. Through much prayer I had to confront the question I believed God was asking me to answer now, "What is it that I really wanted?" "What is it that we wanted as a church?" It would be the answer to this question that would give new direction to how this work was to be done.

Originally, my answer would have been to simply increase the number of teenagers and young adults in attendance at church. To connect with this group in a way that would have them grow spiritually and commit to the work of the church. This entire project would have been based on getting people to come to the church building by creating pathways that lead to the church, a place I considered a safe space. What I discovered was that the teenagers and young adults did not always see the church as that safe space or even a place they would consider visiting.

The answer to this question has changed and that change has completely redirected my heart in the work that had to be done. This new approach to this project holds the potential to impact the very mission statement of the church in terms of how ministry will be done in terms of reaching new people.

The new answer stated that we as a church had to be willing to go into the lives of the youth and young adults in order to get a clearer understanding of the areas of need and challenge in their everyday lives. With this information the meeting of those needs became the vehicle that could serve to eliminate the gap that exist between the church and this targeted group. This clear understanding will work to establish pathways paved with trust that would lead to the building of a relationship with me first and then to the building that houses the church. I had to first be willing to walk into their lives in a real way and even then I realized that there was no guarantee that the teenagers or young adults would be willing to walk that pathway back to this safe space where the churches reside and worship.

Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou command thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations:

But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there (Neh 1:8-9).

It was here in this verse of scripture that Nehemiah remembers the power of what God has promised those who follow his command. Not following that command for me, meant the church getting caught up in other work that is not centered on the primary work of the church causing a scattering effect on that community. This scripture ensures that even if there is a scattering of the community, if the place that claims to be the institution that offers those who want an opportunity to live differently fulfills that mission then the community can be brought together.

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen (Mat 28:16-20). The mandate on the church and Christians from the great commission has always been clear to me. The challenge that I have been confronted with at St. John's Baptist Church is to continue to work to fulfill the great commission while dealing with changing demographics, declining membership and absence of the teenager and young adults on a consistent basis. Although I have always been aware of the great commission that the church and Christians are to fulfill, I am also aware that churches can easily get caught up in simply trying to keep the doors open causing a distraction from the real mission to save lives.

As for St. John's Baptist Church, and me we have been meeting to discuss and get a clearer understanding of what this command really means for us as a congregation in this particular place for this particular time. St. John's Baptist Church, Inwood, has been a part of the community for the past eighty-seven years. When I arrived there eighteen years ago there were two distinct generations of families. The generation who was in power was the peers and children of the first generation that founded the church; the second generation was their children. Being the largest Baptist Church in the area gave it a certain prestige and reputation as an elitist group. As the neighborhood started to change with an influx of Hispanic families, the younger members started to relocate or simply transfer to other churches. Although membership remained somewhat steady most of the newer members came from outside of the neighborhood. Over the years I began to see less and less community members and a widening of the gap between the church and the community at large. I started to sense that we had become a church in a community but not a church of the community, which I believe was and still, is a responsibility of St. John's. As part of the doctoral program I was required to do a projection study of the

future demographic of the area around the church. This revealed that the percentage of African Americans remained at 25% of the population in Inwood and that the Hispanic community had grown to nearly 40%. With a growing gang/drug problem, almost a 50% decrease in the local middle school attendance and lower reading and math scores on the state exams. Coupled with high unemployment rate and the impact of incarceration the challenges that lie before the church have increased. I believe the decline in the attendance of the local community is a reflection of the community's perception that the Church holds no or little relevance in their everyday lives.

The one thing that seems to remain steady in the community, as the core of any community, is the family unit. Like the cell is to the body, the family unit is to the community. Understanding that every family unit may be made up of different combinations of people, but are defined by the bonds that hold them together in times of challenge and in times of success.

For St. John's Baptist Church, the great commission is lived out through a new vision over the past three years with purpose and intention through four relationships. These are the four relationships the church has: between the church and those outside of it, the church and those within it, the church's relationship toward God, and God's relationship toward the church. These four relationships can be indicated by four directional words describing the direction of the relationship to the church. They are: Outreach: The church reaching out to those outside the church. (Evangelism, Missions). In-Reach: The church reaching into those inside the church. (Encouragement, Fellowship). Up-Reach: The church reaching up by communicating and giving to God.

(Praising, Prayer, Worship). Down Reach: God reaching down by communicating and giving to the church. (Bible Study, Preaching, Teaching, the Holy Spirit).

All of these relationships work together in balance and are necessary for each other to function properly. These four areas are all part of the discipleship process, which is the church's Great Commission, and is overseen by the spiritual leadership.

After doing an analysis on each ministry of the church, it has been determined that the area where most of the work has to be done is in the area of outreach. The assumption for many years has been that as the largest church in the Inwood area the people would naturally gravitate to us. But the Great Commission clearly states that we are to "go ye 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 not that the community had to first come into the church before any of this is done. We as a church have come to realize that we are to actively and with a planned intention do outreach as individuals and as a congregation.

The challenge for the church is that it is out of practice in terms of active outreach to the surrounding community in any meaningful way. The church has to now learn how to do outreach and do it in a way that speaks to the needs of that community. This challenge and journey as a church congregation is no easy task and has to be entered into with purpose and intention. The closing of the gap between the church and the community will not happen overnight and not without a plan of action.

When the church and I assumed that we understood and knew the community's everyday needs and concerns and acted on those assumptions it resulted in signs of temporary growth. It was at this point that the church and I had to make a decision on the course of action. Together as a church we discussed the options before us. We could do nothing and that would lead to slow but certain death of the congregation. We could make a decision to move to a different location and rebuild. Our church decision with great excitement and understanding was to restructure and redefine how the work of the church is to be carried out. This work had to be meaningful to both the church and the community. Like Nehemiah I had to be able to answer the question posed to him by the king, "What is it you want?"

I was able to answer the question. What I wanted most was to be able to find a formula that could be used to establish a connection between the church and the community, in this case the teenagers and young adults. The church/community connection being made relevant by understanding the areas of their lives that are in need of support and rebuilding in a way that is without judgment. I believe that this building process will create pathways of trust and gates of access into a supportive community called the church.

CHAPTER TWO

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire" (Neh 1:1-2 NIV).

To address the problem of the church's irrelevance in the lives of teenagers and young adults, it is necessary to understand the devastation to family life, community life, and church life that the War on Drugs has caused.

Michael, an eleven-year-old 6th grader helped me to understand the answer to my question of "How was the neighborhood community doing?" Michael told me how his grandfather beat and killed his grandmother. He also told me the only person he cared about was his little sister. He continued telling me he was there when his father shot and killed his mother's boyfriend and is now in prison for thirty years due to this murder. He claimed that due to his father's reputation and doing time in prison he was protected by his father's friends in the neighborhood. Although Michael was small in stature, when I first met him, I could not understand why so many of the other students in his school feared him. I also knew his mother when she was a student years ago and knew that she wanted the best for him and this resulted in her giving him what she thought he needed to survive on the streets. For this particular family, school suspensions were ineffective and

he saw incarceration as a right of passage into manhood, violence and getting over. The impact of church and its principles had no relevance to what Michael was learning in his family life and there was no relationship between the church and the family to introduce a different way of thinking. Without a different set of principles to influence his choices, which could be developed through a connection with the local church, I realized that Michael's fate was pretty much determined. I believe that Christian principles can open up a world of different choices and in time this relationship between the student and the church could offer the student a different set of life opportunities.

Michael's story is a far cry from my experience growing up in a similar neighborhood. Over the past thirty years the backdrop of our society as a nation has helped create stories like Michael's. This view into the condition of the communities has caused me to be confronted by several unexpected realizations.

Three surprises, in particular, come to mind. The first is the assumptions that because a church stood for so many years in a particular neighborhood, that the church automatically held relevance in the lives of the community. The second is the assumption that I could ask congregants in the church questions about how to reach the youth. The third is the fact that such a wide gap could grow between the church and the youth without the church being aware of this gap. In the first case, although I was surprised, I also know that nothing, including the church has automatic relevance unless needs are being met, thus creating relevance. In the second case, I had the correct questions but I was using a traditional model to ask the wrong people, the congregation, what they thought the needs of the youth were. I needed to take the correct questions to the youth directly. The third surprise seemed to have been a result of the first two. My assumptions of the automatic relevance of the church and the congregation having all the answers about the needs of the youth would naturally lead to the church not being aware of how large the gap between church and youth really was. Somehow I knew instinctively that the reason for the growing gap in St. John's relevance to the community was due to the lack of understanding of the attacks that were taking place in and on the community. It seems that unintentionally the church in general could be so attached to a purpose that it no longer saw the need to adjust the method of fulfilling that purpose. When the church becomes attached to the method without considering a changing community it will soon lose its relevance and ability to connect to that community.

In the following chapters you will be given the opportunity to read the narratives of some of the twenty-four youth participants in this project that continued to confirm my second surprise that to understand how to reach the teenagers and young adults the conversation and questions had to be addressed directly to that group of teenagers and young adults. I also found that conversations with the teenagers and young adults revealed that my original assumption that the church was relevant by its mere presence in the community was incorrect. The teenagers further revealed that the safety the church believes it provides a community seems nonexistent in the face of gangs, gun violence and drug dealing, and that to those teens the welcoming gates into the church did not seem readily opened. As long as the church did not provide a sense of safety or open its doors with a spirit of welcome, then the church would be lacking relevance.

In order for the church to truly understand the real condition that teenagers and young adults are dealing with on a daily basis, it will be necessary for the congregation to be brought into a conversation about what it means to be living in the era of the New Jim Crow. In *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander states,

An extraordinary percentage of black men in the United States are legally barred from voting today, just as they have been throughout most of American History. They are also subject to legalized discrimination in employment, housing, education, public benefits, and jury service, just as their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents once were.¹

If the system was at least designed to free a person after serving their time in prison or that prison was at least mandatory and then a person labeled a criminal was given an opportunity to restart his or her life then it would make a little sense. But the person has to carry around the label for the rest of their lives based on the current laws that are ensuring that a prison system will remain fed. As of 2008, there were approximately 2.3 million people in prisons and jails, and a staggering 5.1 million people under "community correctional supervision"—in other words, on probation and parole.

Of the eight boys involved in this project, seven are without fathers in the home. It is so easy to read and write statistics but when a real face is put to it things change. Although I meet with the boys several times a week, our greatest time together is the *morning workout reward*. This is something I started with the boys that would allow them to work out in the gym three times a week if they got their academic work done. It is during these sessions that I see how much it means for them to be affirmed by an older man. It is like giving them the right to cross over from boys to men. One story that has had a particular impact on me was the story I heard while working out in the gym. One of the boys told me that he has never met his father and did not understand why. I found out from his mother that his father's family made that decision after a case of domestic

¹ Alexander, 1-2.

violence was brought and she ended up going to prison for four years. Now we have a relationship between a father and son that is non-existent.

In essence, without the church or the community really knowing, the War on Drugs systematically led to mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex. This lack of knowing by the community can be understood in light of Michelle Alexander's statement about the mid 1990's that,

The system functioned relatively automatically, and the prevailing system of racial meanings, identities, and ideologies already seemed natural. Ninety percent of those admitted to prison for drug offenses in many states were black or Latino, yet the mass incarceration of communities of color was explained in race-neutral terms, an adaptation to the needs and demands of the current political climate.²

When the heads of families are blocked from ever recovering from the criminalizing label,

the impact is and has been devastating on the children and other members of the family.

"Barred from public housing by law, discriminated against by private landlords,

ineligible for food stamps, forced to 'check the box' indicating a felony conviction on

employment applications for nearly every job, and denied licenses for a wide range of

professions," how can one provide for the family? Or live any semblance of a normal

life?³

Nehemiah Inspects Jerusalem's Walls

I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days, I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

² Alexander, 58.

³ Ibid., 94.

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire" (Neh 2:11-12, 17).

Every war, no matter how noble, has its share of collateral damage. In this project I have come face to face with the results of a war that has contributed greatly to the destruction of the inner city communities, families and children. It has become obvious to me that before the church can become a place where that has earned the trust of the community teenagers and young adults, it has to first understand the destruction that Alexander and other cultural observers have noted." Todd Clear, in *Imprisoning Communities*, states, "the consequences of imprisonment to the community are embedded in three important legitimate systems of neighborhood order: family, economic and political. Familial systems are the most important source of private controls."⁴ In my search for the church's relevance in the lives of teenagers and young adults, it will be imperative to survey the degree of collateral damage to this generation from the War on Drugs that led to a system of mass incarceration. I will search for signs of the physical, mental and spiritual devastation that has resulted to this generation.

Most of my conversations throughout the day are with mothers who are trying to navigate their sons through the challenges of growing up without help in the home. I remember a mother of one of the boys in the program asked if I would simply become that mentor for her son.

This will reveal the approach the church will have to take in terms of reconstructing the walls of safety for this generation that will help lay the needed trust for

⁴ Todd R. Clear, *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 87.

pathways into their lives. The church will have to be a supplier of the material to construct these walls as opposed to simply being a supporter. It has now become somewhat apparent to me that the proper lens has to be worn in order to see "the trouble" we are in when we consider our neighborhoods. If we continue to look through the lens of past experiences, this pretext over the natural eye we will continue to see a generation of teenagers and young adults in a distorted context of their natural appearance. It is this appearance that makes the church believe it is easy to connect and be relevant in the lives of this generation. Going beyond a surface connection means that a different lens must be worn: one that sees past the superficial and into the hearts of this generation. It also means opening up the mind to at least entertain the concept that this War on Drugs and its ensuing mass incarceration of many communities has produced mental, physical and spiritual casualties of war.

In "The Invisible Trauma of War-Affected Children," Robert Muller writes of the widespread and invisible trauma of war-affected children, and claims, "Millions of children struggle with the physical and psychological traumas of war."⁵ Eighteen million children are being raised in the chaos of war. In the past ten years, as a result of armed conflict, over 2 million children have been killed, 6 million have been disabled, 20 million are homeless, and more than 1 million have become separated from their caregivers. I know that for a long time I would never have equated the wars like the Afghan war, the war in Iraq or the Syrian war to what some inner city churches are dealing with in their communities.

⁵ Robert T. Muller, "The Invisible Trauma of War-Affected Children," *Psychology Today*, accessed 3/12/2016, https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/talking-about-trauma/201304/the-invisible-trauma-war-affected-children.

On any given Sunday morning at the fellowship moment during service, when we greet each other, I am embraced and surrounded by a group of young children ages five to ten years old. These are the children that are in foster care and most are without a male figure in the house. For me this is a moment of pure love and relevance as they are all telling me how well they are doing in school, dance and singing.

I feel I have to make a case for the comparison between what has been seen as traditional war and this inner city War on Drugs. Before a war can be fought it has to first be declared. According to Michelle Alexander, the War on Drugs was declared officially by Ronald Reagan in 1982, not in response to popular concern about drugs, but in order to exploit America's racialized fears.

In October 1982, President Reagan officially announced his administration's War on Drugs. At the time he declared this new war, less than 2 percent of the American public viewed drugs as the most important issue facing the nation. This fact was no deterrent to Reagan, for the drug war from the outset had little to do with public concern about drugs and much to do with public concern about race.⁶

Alexander's assessment challenges the narrative that the War on Drugs was in direct response to the crack epidemic of the 1980s. The fact that crack did not hit the streets until 1985 offers more evidence supporting the claim that this war was about more than drugs.

Tony Lewis, author of *SLUGG: A Boy's Life In The Age Of Mass Incarceration*, was the son of a notorious drug dealer in Washington DC. Lewis writes extensively about the high toll that the mass incarceration and the War on Drugs took on family structures and the generational prison pipeline.

⁶ Alexander, 54.

Given prison, death, and abandonment, in my neighborhood the number of homes without a father was extremely close to a hundred percent. Worse yet, for a number of reasons, some similar to the father's absence, many of the mothers around Hanover didn't raise their children either. So raising the children was often left to the grandmothers, and thus the total breakdown of the most fundamental unit in life was complete. These kinds of failing families came to shape thousands of neighborhoods across the country. These families and the conditions of the community, both in substance and in spirit, created a pipeline to prison and a generation so lost and deadly that hope seemed futile.⁷

In addition to wars being fought between armies on a remote battlefield, there are wars being fought at home. Lewis argues that the majority of modern conflicts take place within countries, not between them. And whereas civilians were once far removed from the fighting, they're now routinely targeted and make up 90% of the casualties. In many conflict zones children account for the majority of the casualties. Most die not from the weapons themselves, but from preventable diseases that aren't prevented or treated because the health system and infrastructure have been destroyed.

Once again as I was researching the cause of the churches' seeming lack of connection to the lives of teenagers and young adults, I discovered something far outside of my expectations. I had thought that I would simply find a key to the interests of teenagers and young adults that would yield a formula of pathways to the church and principles for a successful life. These principle would include, (1) setting the right goals, (2) promoting education and preparation, (3) maintaining health (4) drive and endurance, (5) resourcefulness and (6) reliance on God. What was revealed to me between the lines of the stories many of the participants told was the missing pieces of the walls of safety in their lives that had to be reconstructed. These missing pieces are represented by the four

⁷ Tony Lewis and Kevin L. Reeves, *SLUGG: A Boy's Life in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (New York: Hanover Place Press, 2015).

external asset categories, the four internal asset categories and the five context areas that will be discussed in chapter three. It was then that I started to realize that until I had a clear understanding of these pieces of the wall that were missing, and established a plan of action to rebuild, true relevance and impact in the lives of this group would be temporary at best.

Both Michelle Alexander and Todd Clear are able to give a big picture view of the impact of the War on Drugs, understandable to all who read them. They have both played a major role in the support of this project. It was a young man by the name of James that gave me a clear understanding of what this war on drugs looked like for him on an everyday basis. He explained that because his family lived in one of the housing projects for over fifty years he knew everybody and all that went on there. He explained that there were many "trap houses" places where the drugs and drug money is kept. He said he knows that there are weapons and gangs that run and protect the housing projects. Apparently no one trusts the police and will never report any of the criminal activity that goes on. He told of the gang war that has been going on since last summer between two opposing housing projects mainly over drugs and territory. It would be strange to find a family without at least one person in jail or right out of jail. He said "Going to school is like going to a different land. How could they know what really goes on in the hood?"

In this paper, I am proposing that the walls of safety that are in a state of destruction represent some of the foundational physical, mental, emotional and spiritual structures that are needed for teenagers and young adults to grow and achieve their full potential in life. The further thought is that for the church to be relevant in the lives of this generation, there has to be an understanding of what is missing and how to assist in the reconstruction of these basic foundations. Like many before me I was under the impression that what this generation needed was a program that was able to hold their interest, engage them in a good time and then work to build them up through the principles in the Bible.

My journey to find a formula for the church's ability to connect to the lives of teenagers and young adults has taken on new meaning. Relevance is determined by the degree of real understanding and the willingness to meet the needs and conditions of a community. To do anything less, to pursue my project according to my initial presumptions would be the equivalent of Nehemiah inviting the brothers into the citadel for a celebration but not addressing Jerusalem's condition. This would also represent a failure to understand the impact that such devastating conditions in a community can cause to the mental, physical and spiritual state of those living within it. Why would anyone accept an invitation to a celebration that ignores its context of economic and educational community devastation? It was with this thought that I reoriented my project from an initial concern with church membership and survival to a quest for the survival and well-being of the young people in the church's community, a community that cannot be understood without the historical context of mass incarceration and the new Jim Crow.

CHAPTER THREE

AN HONEST LOOK INTO THE LIVES OF THE YOUTH

Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass.

Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned.

And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work (Neh 2:14-16).

An honest look into anything will reveal the truth about that situation. The challenge is to be prepared to see the truth that is revealed and to be ready to act on that truth. My most eye-opening experience came when I met a young twelve-year-old girl named Antonette. She was a student at one of the local middle schools near the church I was serving in 1992. We were holding auditions for one of our anti-drug performances and she walked in with group of other girls trailing behind her. I knew immediately she was the leader and if she agreed to be part than all of the other youth would be a part of the performance. Her family lived in the housing projects near the church for many years starting with her grandmother. She did not know her father and her mother was not present, she and several brothers and sisters lived there with the grandmother. I would come to find out that her grandmother passed away and she was living in the apartment by herself and a younger brother and sister. Antonette became very close to our family

and spent most holidays and weeknights doing homework and eating dinner with us, she simply became our daughter. In time when she turned sixteen she was placed in a foster home because she could not live alone. Antonette is now a thirty-six year old mother of three married in Atlanta, GA. We often speak and she jokes about how she thought my life was part of real life but now she says her children are growing up exactly the way I expected her to grow up. All three of her children are involved in the youth ministries of their local church.

This story spans over twenty-four years in relationship and I realize that this amount of time cannot always be invested into every life we intersect. Through time my wife and I were able to understand the areas of strengths and challenges in Antonette's life. With this understanding we were then able to pour into those specific areas making a real connection by impacting her deeper needs.

If there is to be a formula that can be used to establish the church's relevance in the lives of teenagers and young adults it has to be built on the foundation of a strong relationship. Working with this particular group of teenagers and young adults I have found that the most important element in this relationship is trust. Over my thirty years of working with teenagers and young adults I have found that either intentionally or unintentionally I have built trust by supporting the youth in the "five critical needs of every teenager's life." Those five needs are acceptance, allowing honest expression, listening to them, being patient with them and supporting their friendships.

This project has been able to use the foundation of trusting relationships along with pre and post assessments to determine the areas of strengths and areas of challenges that teenagers and young adults may be dealing with on an individual and group basis. It is my idea that if the person involved in the work of the church or the organization is to reach and impact the lives of the teenagers and young adults use the information gathered from the pre and post assessments along with the activities to build a relationship then true connection or relevance will be made in their lives. In the case of Antonette I believe this process was employed without really understanding what was going on at the time. What I have experienced is that the positive outcomes working with teenager and young adults is that I have always invested a great amount of time to learn their strengths and challenges. One of the questions that would attempt to answer is whether or not the use of the assessments can reduce the amount of time needed to connect and make real lasting impact in the live of the participants. If indeed this turns out to be true then applying this formula has the potential of reaching an increased number of teenagers and young adults by connecting with the issues and needs in their lives and thereby increasing the potential for teenagers and young adults to give their lives to Christ.

Meeting the Groups

The twenty-four participants in the program were divided into three separate groups. The first group came from Brooklyn, NY primarily from the housing projects located in the South Brooklyn area. Living in different housing projects brought about interesting conversations and conflicts. Many of these students come from low-income families and in many cases single-family households. The second group came from West Orange NJ. All of them were selected as participants because they attended a suburban school and lived in private homes and had both parents living with them or at the very least had substantial contact with both parents. The third group of participants was from the area directly around the church in Inwood, Long Island, NY. Although the area is low income some lived in private homes while others lived in the housing project complex near the church. These students are very active in some aspect of the church life along with friends who are not involved.

The reason for working with the three different groups from different neighborhoods as opposed to the original plan to work with only the first group from the Inwood area around the church where I pastor was to get a clearer understanding as to the effect of this formula proposal on a cross section of teenagers and young adults.

In his book *Imprisoning Communities* Todd Clear states, "It is obvious that the place where a person lives is an important aspect of the quality of that person's life. People try to live in places that offer them the social amenities they most want in their lives. They tend to live in the best places they can afford, moving away from less desirable locations when they can, People who live in undesirable locations are often stuck there.¹"

Method

With all of the three groups I was already in a position to establish a relationship of trust. As an educator I was in contact with the Brooklyn group on a daily basis. With the Inwood group I am the pastor of the church where they are members. The West Orange group all attended the High School with my daughter so although there wasn't a direct relationship I knew most of them.

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¹ Clear, 70.

With each group I first opened up with a casual discussion about family and community. These discussions took place prior to administering the pre-assessment to each group in order to hear real stories not influenced by the 58 questions in the survey.

Each group of teenagers and young adults were given the opportunity to ask questions about the process and then with parent permission they took the pre-assessment.

The question I had to answer for myself was what vehicle would I use to travel into the area trying to understand the mind of the teenagers and young adults that were part of this program. The thought I had was that perhaps the information from the survey could be used to reduce the time needed to connect to the participants as opposed to the years it took with Antonette.

The vehicle I chose to use was the *Developmental Assets Profile* developed by the Search Institute of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Developmental assets those positive experiences and qualities identified by The Search Institute as essential to healthy psychological and social development in childhood and adolescence. These assets have the power to influence young adult's developmental trajectories and protect them from a range of negative outcomes and help them become more productive caring and responsible adults.²

The Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) focuses on four external assets: support, empowerment, boundaries/expectations, and constructive use of time. It also focuses on four internal assets: a commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive identity. This project also made use of the DAP's five additional context factors

² "Developmental Asset Profile," *The Search Institute,* accessed 3/12/2016, http://www.search-institute.org/.

known as "asset building contacts:" those relational contexts identified as personal, social, family, school and community.

According to The Search Institute, asset assessments are relevant to all youth, not just those considered to be at risk for negative outcomes. The DAP is a descriptive tool that provides a standard index of reported assets across the eight asset categories (four internal and four external); and across five additional context categories with quantitative indices that can be useful in a wide variety of settings for applied and research purposes.

In the 2015 Pixar movie *Inside Out*, the premise is that a little girl is going through a tough time growing up in a family that has just relocated to a new city. The movie shows the internal emotional conflicts and their impact on her actions and decisions when her life circumstances are thrown out of balance. In addition, it shows how she has several foundational support systems that her life as a youth is being built upon. With those support structures, the heroine of *Inside Out* is able to weather the disruption to her external circumstances and build emotional strength from adversity. In the lives of real life youth, including the youth of this study, support systems can be destroyed or not allowed to develop properly, and the prospects for growing into a strong, well balanced adult can be diminished.

One of the beginning assumptions of this project was the idea that the church has in the past played the part of providing support for the necessary structures in the lives of young people, and that the relevance of the church depends upon its ability to take on this role in the present. In the event that developmental structural assets do not exist or are not fully functional in a youth's family, then the present day church should be able to help youth by putting in place the necessary structures for a balanced life. If a church or any other organization could be made aware of the conditions of the basic structural needs in the life of young people, then its relevance would be restored merely by constructing or reconstructing these basic supports.

Nehemiah went with a few others into a territory of devastation to assess the situation. It is important that the person on the mission should go first and travel into the culture and experience of the new generation, in order to understand how to connect to them in a way that is relevant and impactful. Without this journey into the context of young people, connections can only be attempted based on knowledge of a past generation who are already adults. Trying to imagine what is needed for a new generation through guesswork can cause the church to miss the mark and end up with missions and ministries that may look good on the surface, but have no deep meaning or connection into this new generation.

For the purposes of this project the youth and young adult participants were evaluated in several areas. We began with inquiry into the five context areas identified by DAP as foundational supports for a young person's life: the personal, social, family, school and community contexts; and further explored the four external and four internal assets evaluated by the DAP survey process.

Over a six-month period, each of the three separate youth group participants met and participated in an interview process developed by the Local Advisory Council (see Appendix 1). It was discussed by the LAC that in order to get a clearer picture of what the youth participants' experiences of the eight areas surveyed by the pre and post assessments, two questions for each of the eight areas should be developed. After the two questions were asked of each participant during their group sessions, a follow up question was asked about the church's influence as it related to that particular survey component. Essential to our study was the uniformity of the questions for each of the participants, regardless of which group they represented. See appendix for explanations of the asset areas.

The Search Institute makes clear the limitations on the results of the DAP and the best way to use the results. In terms of a standard of comparison the Institute states that simply administering the DAP to a group of young people before and after they are exposed to the program or intervention will not allow you to conclude that any changes can be attributed to the program or intervention alone. In, fact, we do not know normatively how the level of assets as young people change through their teen years so there are no national norms that can be used as a standard of comparison. The Institute further states that the DAP scores are meant to be used in conjunction with other kinds of information about the child, and in no way should the DAP be used as the sole source for clinical or professional purposes.³ It was important to keep in mind the three applications of the DAP: its use as a traditional research tool, as a pre/post test survey for program evaluation, and as a clinical tool. Though the purposes and goals for each of these applications differs, the DAP provides meaningful information useful for each of these arenas.⁴

Although the DAP pre/post survey instruments were crucial to the project, the LAC and I were also careful not to place over confidence in those results alone. We used it as a baseline for the research and a supplement for the stories and information gathered

³ The Search Institute, 46.

⁴ Ibid., 43.

from the conversations and time spent with the youth and young adult participants. While the DAP was a vehicle used to establish a baseline for the work to be done with the teenagers and young adults, I used the five critical needs of every teenager as a basic protocol format for collecting the data. These critical areas helped establish a trusting relationship. Every meeting, activity and conversation was immersed in an environment of acceptance, self-expression, being listened to, being treated with patience, and being surrounded by peers.

Observations Before Pre-Assessment

As described in some detail above, the Search Institute DAP pre-assessment is made up of 58 question that measure the four external asset categories, four internal asset categories and five context categories (Appendix 2). The rubric used to determine the scoring is in four distinct areas. From highest to lowest range is thriving, adequate, vulnerable and challenged. Prior to administering the pre-assessment to any of the groups I recorded all of my predictions I had about what I thought the results would look like for each of these groups and the comparisons between each of the groups. These predictions were solely based on what I thought I knew about the groups based on their general background. My assumption was that high scored would indicate the least amount of work to be done on the basic foundational structures of teenagers and young adults.

I predicted that the West Orange group would have the highest scores. The participants from this group all attend a well-funded suburban high school with many opportunities to get involved in academic, social and athletic experiences. They live in private homes with both parents who are employed and living a middle class life. Many received their drivers' licenses and have access to their parents' cars for school and social events. They spend most of their leisure time at the local malls or at each other's houses. At this point in their lives they are most concerned about SAT scores and what college they will attend in the fall of 2016.

And yet this group was not without its challenges. Even in privileged settings, violence makes itself known in the lives of teenagers. As one participant related, even under parental supervision, events can unfold in a dangerous way for some advantaged teens. "We were all at a party in the West Orange Hills, a really nice house. The party started getting crowded and people who were not really invited started to arrive. At some point the parents of our friend wanted to make some of those uninvited students leave. An argument started and all of a sudden this girl pulls out a stun gun and shot it at the father. His wife started screaming and they did the same to the mother. Just messed up the whole thing the cops came and settled everything."

I predicted that the Inwood group would have the second highest scores. Most of the participants in this group are residents of the Village of Inwood, Long Island. Others live near the area in the Far Rockaway housing complexes. Most of them come from public housing in Inwood and attend the local Lawrence School District. They are a close-knit group due to the fact that they all are part of St. John's Baptist Church youth ministry and praise dance ministry. Most of their free time is spent together, doing things as friends and as a part of the church's ministry. Although these students are members of the church, they have unique stories that can create challenges for the older members of the congregation. During their time as members of the dance ministry, three of the girls between the ages of 16 -19 became pregnant; now their children are also involved in the ministry.

The Brooklyn group was predicted to have the lowest scores. All of the students in this group attend the same middle school and have been together as friends for the past three years. They live in the inner city of Brooklyn in the various apartments and housing complexes near the school. They attend a gifted and talented school and although they don't all perform well they all have the potential to do so. Most are from single-parent households with little or no contact from many of the fathers, for various reasons. The area is going through gentrification, and all of the properties around the housing complex are being developed. Rental properties are being impacted by the New Barclays Center less than two miles away. From the stories of the students, there is an ongoing feud between two of the housing projects located directly across the street. Those two projects are also part of another feud with a housing complex about two miles away. To demonstrate the seriousness of this situation, one of the students told me a story of a shooting that took place while a group of students were on their way back home from school. These students reported knowing the young man that was shot and killed, admitting that they also knew that he was involved in "guns and stuff."

What I found amazing was how matter of fact their telling of the story was, as if it was supposed to be a normal occurrence. One young man told me "it was exciting to have to run from the sound of bullets."

Based on my personal predictions of the asset areas covered in the pre-assessment survey, I thought I knew what the results would be even before seeing them. I originally thought that West Orange participants would score higher in all eight of the asset categories because of the economic status, educational system, parental support, and reduced violence in their lives. Specifically, I predicted higher scores in the asset categories of support, empowerment, positive values and positive identity. In terms of the context areas, I believed this group would have highest scores in family, schools and community assets.

With regard to the Inwood group, I considered the economic challenges, educational failure rate, lack of jobs for the residents, daily gang and drug activity to be mitigated by church activity, and predicted that this group would score second highest. I believed that their involvement in the church would likely have a neutralizing effect on the negative conditions of the neighborhood. I thought that involvement in weekly church activities would impact this group's score positively (scoring second among the three groups) in the areas of constructive use of time, positive values and social competencies. I predicted they would score well in the context area of social assets, where strength is drawn from people outside of the family through the friendships and positive peer and adult models that they might be receiving from the church community.

Considering the Brooklyn group, I assumed that living closer to the effects of the mass incarceration would correlate with the lowest scores of the three groups. In terms of external assets, I believed that participants would struggle in the areas of support from family and other adults, empowerment through a basic feeling of safety in their environment, and constructive use of time. Regarding internal assets, I also assumed that the participants would struggle with commitment to learning, positive values or standing up for one's beliefs, and social competencies--building friendships and being sensitive to and accepting others.

The Importance and Power of Assessments

As an educator for the past thirty years, I have been aware that one of the foundational methods in any educational system is to understand and utilize the data collected in an assessment to inform future instruction. This is extremely basic to excellent pedagogy and practices. As an example, teachers are always assessing their students to understand and find out what they know and are learning, in order to remove the emphasis from what is being taught to what is being learned. This has not always been the practice in all classrooms. There have been, and to some degree still are some educators who are simply more concerned with covering the curriculum instead of ensuring that the material being covered is what the students need to support their educational experience. Without proper assessments, the teaching profession could be reduced to presenting a lot of material just hoping that the students grasp that material, and continuing to present new material without really knowing where the students are educationally. When educators do not take the time to perform summative and formative assessments on their students, then they are reduced to assuming and guessing academic levels and abilities without really knowing. When the proper assessments are administered to students, then the educator is able to successfully meet the individual learning needs of each student.

My understanding of best practices in teaching, including the use of assessments, is an essential resource in my work at the church. In order for the church to be relevant in the lives of teenagers and young adults, I believe that if the foundational systems in their lives are addressed and supported, then the work of the church and its ministries will be relevant.

Unfortunately, over the past thirty-three years of ministry I, like most of my peers in ministry, seem to have given what we "think" teenagers and young adults need rather than assess their actual needs. This is a familiar dynamic from my experience as a public school educator where teachers often teach and re-teach without assessing. In other words, ministry, like teaching must become "assessment driven." I have always assumed the needs of the teenagers and young adults to be supplied by various activities and bible studies. This system of ministry to teenagers and young adults has amounted to a ministry of Christian education based upon a lack of real information. It is my belief that when ministry is based on assumptions and lack of real assessed information, church relevance is weakened or lost because real needs are not being addressed. In Chapter Four I will present the data collected from the pre-assessment and follow up questions, and compare them to my assumptions made based on prejudged information.

CHAPTER FOUR PATHWAYS INTO THEIR WORLD

Gathering such extensive and often personal stories with information that reveal private areas of one's life must be done in relationship. I realized early in the research process that I was not always the best person to have these conversations that I hoped would cause youth to open up honestly and completely. The pathway into their lives had to be supported with a great degree of trust and respect. Therefore, the design was to have these conversations and permission to tape them embedded into an already established relationship. Each group was designed to involve the youth in activities that they would normally be involved with and use that level of comfort to open up other areas that may not be so familiar and comfortable. Working with the LAC, I was able to recruit two women and the youth minister that teaches the youth Bible study to have the subsequent interviews with the Inwood Group after my initial conversation to get them to support the project and agree along with parents to be part of the research. After the initial contact with each group they were in the hands of those leaders with me at a distance but not always present. This also developed trust with those working with the individual groups. The Inwood group continued to meet for bible study and praise dance rehearsal and have the necessary discussions and conversations for the project. They continued to go on outings and fun activities while feeling that they were contributing to the health of the church and the larger community.

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The West Orange Group were made up of mostly juniors in high school and were given a different leadership level of responsibility. I did not have the same close relationship that I have with the Brooklyn Group and the Inwood Group. They were part of the High School and friends of one of my four daughters. Because of the close community, they all knew each other and for one reason or another they all spent time at the house with my daughters. My eldest daughter was on my LAC and played a major role in introducing me into the group of friends, that gave me some legitimacy to ask them to be part of the project. This group usually stayed in touch through social media and chat rooms. Therefore, with their input we established an online chat room that introduced topics and questions that were based on the survey. Several times they arranged to meet for pizza at the house to continue the conversations and discussions. When they come to the house now they are always asking about the work and the impact they believe it will have on the community around the church.

The participants in the Brooklyn Group were all members of my school where I am the administrator. I used students from my graduating class and a sixth grade group of students that were already part of my young leaders group because the relationship of familiarity trust was already established. With this group we often met throughout the day informally, and we met once a week during the lunch period to discuss the questions and other issues they may have been dealing with. With this group I established special lunch dates where they were taken out to eat at a nearby restaurant. We also started the after school workout program that allowed them to go to the gym with me to use the weights and equipment after all schoolwork was done. These students were constantly monitored for academic success and behavioral conduct. This particular group of students, because of the daily relationship we have, did not hesitate to come to me to talk about situations before reacting. I often have set up meetings with the student and the teacher to talk about expectations in a calm manner to avoid an argument that could lead to disciplinary actions.

I found that one of the most important aspects of the program was the ability to use already established relationships as a pathway of trust into the intimate stories and lives of the participants. These established relationships exist everywhere and must not be ignored if true inroads are to be made. This is a variable that we cannot control but must respect and not try to get around. In *SLUGG*, Tony Lewis makes it clear that when he was trying to get into different neighborhoods to do mentor and community service work he always had better success when he had the co-signature of a high profile member of the community. Now this community relationship was not always with positive individuals but with those who were familiar to community members.

The process of investigating the condition of the walls of security and foundations in the lives of the teenagers and young adults required responsive, responsible parameters. In order for me to have confidence in our results, in order to get an accurate read of the true needs of each of the participants, our process was as follows: initial conversation and establishment of basic assumptions, pre-assessments, survey based questions and discussions results, and finally comparison of pre-assessment and post assessment results.

Pre-Assessment Data Collected for Groups

The administration of the pre-assessment for all groups was the same. Each group took the assessment with the members of their group. The pre- and post- assessment is made up of a total of 58 questions. The results were then imputed into an online database and sent to the Search Institute to be analyzed professionally. The survey takes about 10 minutes to complete and is focused exclusively on assets. It is designed to be sensitive to changes in reported assets over time and it is suited to research and program evaluation.

The scoring ranges from thriving, adequate, vulnerable and challenged. There was a total of 13 assets scored, 4 external, 4 internal and 5 context assets. Of the 58 items, 26 tap external assets, and the remaining 32 tap internal assets. The 58 items can also be grouped according to the five context areas.

A first look at the pre-assessment results revealed the following: the overall results were in conflict with my initial assumptions. The group scoring the highest in the overall asset scores was the Inwood Group, followed by the second highest scores from the Brooklyn Group, and the lowest overall scores by the West Orange group.

The Inwood Group scored adequate in 13 asset areas. The Inwood Group of teenage and young adults participants scored the highest in the three major categories, external (24), internal (23) and context areas (23). A closer analysis of the survey data revealed that the Inwood group scored very high, close to thriving in the areas of support, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, social competencies and family. As a group the Inwood participants scored low in the areas of empowerment, positive identity and community. Although this data is one step beyond information based on assumptions it was still not enough to really address the possible issues that exist within the group. Although the survey gave an overall profile of the three separate groups a deeper dive was needed to understand the impact on the individual participants.

Pre-Assessment Data Collected for Individuals

Each participant was given the opportunity to be part of an open discussion that took part in a group setting and was based on questions created by the LAC. In addition to the structured discussions the participants were always being engaged in conversations throughout the week. These conversations take place through casual contact. An example of one such exchange would be the short conversation I had with Jada based on knowledge from her survey stating how she is really a great leader to the other members of the group. I know that Jada has the influence to lead her friends in either good or bad direction. For the purposes of this work I have selected participants from each group to do what I call a deeper dive into the data. The reason for the selection of these participants was because they best represented the survey results as compared to the stories told. The reason for this deeper dive for me would be to get a clearer picture as to how the participants' answers and open discussion line up with their results on the survey. If indeed their conversation further supported the survey results, this could be an indicator of an area of foundational support that could be focused on within the curriculum, and used to engage the group by the church or ministry involved. As an analogy, I consider this information to represent the walls in the lives of the teenager and youth participants that need support. I further believe that supporting these specific areas in individual's lives will restore the church's relevance or connection in their lives.

Dellia's Story

Thirty years as an educator and thirty-two years in ministry has allowed me to cross paths with thousands of students. Three years ago I met a seventh grader name Dellia. From the beginning she caught my attention due to her very pleasant manner, although she was always involved in fights with students from other schools. She single handedly caused 70% of the afterschool conflicts often requiring police presence at the school. She was always in conflict with her teachers and had no reservations saying whatever was on her mind. When she thought something was unjust she was there fighting for the cause, literally fighting! One day I told her that I had a program I wanted her to help me with and that we should talk. I explained what I was working on and she agreed to be part of the Brooklyn Group. She also said she needed to talk to me without the other students around, and that she had a reputation to protect. Dellia is a half white half Hispanic 14-year-old female living in the inner city tenement houses of Brooklyn NY. She lives with her mother and her two older sisters. One of her sister's boyfriends and their baby also live there. Her brother is currently in prison and her father was in prison for a short time but left the family and lives nearby with a new family.

As Dellia revealed these details about her life it helped me to understand why her pre-assessment revealed very low scores in the area of "positive identification." Dellia felt she was never protected by her family, specifically her father. She did not share many things, except that what happened to her while she was growing up should not have happened. In addition, she stated that all her father can do for her is give her money. She will never forgive him and does not trust any of her family members. She did say she has friends that are close to her--one boy in particular. Dellia has made it clear that it takes her a long time to trust people and she only gives a person one time to cross her, then "they are done for life." Dellia's pre-assessment also revealed a low score in the area of community, which supports her constant involvement in many fights in her home and in the neighborhood as well as with her teachers in school. This revealed her issue with authority figures. She was failing her subjects and in danger of not graduating from the 8th grade. This was primarily due to her free time being spent in the streets hanging out. This was also reflected in her low score in "constructive use of time."

Dellia did score very high in the area of "empowerment" and "social interactions." It was this piece of data that I was able to use over a relatively short period of time to develop a trusting relationship with her to the point where she began telling other students I was like her father and that I was the only one in the building she could trust. It was also the very high score again in the category of "empowerment" that revealed Dellia would be an excellent candidate to assist me in solving conflicts amongst our younger students.

This gave her the opportunity to exercise her leadership ability, which gave her a sense of positive empowerment. The benefit to me of this placement was that I knew of most of the impending conflicts in the building and after school before they took place. This new relationship of trust, the data from the pre-assessment and an understanding of the issues Delia was dealing with in her life, presented me with the opportunity to focus on particular areas of challenge and align them with the above pre-assessment. We continued to meet weekly after school in the homework club, which caused her to turn all of her grades to passing, putting her back on the graduating list. Dellia did get accepted into the High School of her choice, and I still see her on a regular basis when she comes back to the school to visit. Although the program did not solve all of Delia's issues such as her conflicts with others, fighting and refusing to make new friends in high school, it is demonstrated that this must be a process that supports the needs for teenage and young

adults to be a part of on-going positive relationships. Ultimately, conversations with Dellia show she is making better decisions and has a more positive view of herself. She says she wants to visit the church and bring her mother.

Jada's Story

It was the first week of school in September 2013 when I first met Jada. She was brought to my office after hitting a boy with a broom inside of the local pizza store. She was with her twin sister who attends another middle school. Instead of suspending her I purchased some good will by simply discussing a different way to resolve conflict. She quickly reminded me that what I was saying would not work where she was from. Jada came to me several times to complain about teachers and other students and I had to talk to her to calm her down. Jada is now a 14-year-old eighth-grade student. She became part of the group of girls that I met with for the entire year leading up to this project. She lived in the Redhook houses in Brooklyn with her mother, her twin sister, and a younger brother. Her father lived in a nearby project with his new family. The pre-assessment revealed challenges in the areas of "positive values," "commitment to learning," and "community."

Although she seemed to be very capable, her grades suffered because she said she did not always do the homework. One of the things that stands out about Jada was a statement she made when I asked how she keeps her confidence up and does so well in school. She said, "My mother has a certain confidence about her. She doesn't take any nonsense from anybody and I try to be like her." She said that growing up, her mother lived in the same neighborhood and held her own. At first the low score in positive values was confusing in light of her strong sense of confidence. This confusion was cleared up when she said, "Even in my neighborhood it's good to know that the boys have guns because it keeps me feeling safe if anyone wants to come from another neighborhood to try to cause harm to us." It wasn't that Jada did not have positive values; it was that her positive values were tailored to her life and neighborhood. Jada has become one of the leaders of the Brooklyn group. Jada carries herself with a great sense of influence that causes the others to follow her lead whether it is in conversations or what they plan to do after school. I have watched Jada's influence become more positive because she seems to always keep a level head in making decisions. She has expressed that her goal at this point is to stay close to the neighborhood, and she is fearful of going to High School.

With the relationship of trust established and the information from both the survey and project program questions, I developed a plan to support her in her challenge areas. To impact her commitment to learning, I placed her in a class that did not have any of her close friends. I also made an additional computer available to her in my office where she is free to do her research because there isn't a working computer in the home. Presently her grades are very good and she is conscientious about doing homework. Jada scored very high in the area of family, and does not want to disappoint her mother. She checks in with me about twice a week and has not had any physical confrontations this entire year. Every successful report card that is received warrants a free lunch for the participants at a restaurant of their choice.

Chad's Story

I met Chad as an incoming 6th grader in September 2013. He was with a group of friends he knew from elementary school. The friends he was with apparently did something his physical education teacher did not approve of, and was speaking to them. Chad, believing that he was not involved, started to cry and became very angry. I was walking by and pulled him to the side and helped him explain what really happened. It was his first week of school and he was afraid of being in trouble. I told him that he would become part of my young men's leadership group. Chad was a 10-year-old at the time and lives with his mother in an apartment building in a working class community. Chad, along with five other boys, has met with me every Friday for the past three years. His mother is very strict and determined to make sure he succeeds in his life. She has asked me to mentor him, and said, "Take him to church if you want to." The preassessment revealed areas of challenge in "community," "positive values," and "empowerment." He has never met his father who lives in the same city. He says that his father's family never liked his mother and so he never had any relationship with him. He says, "I am a good kid but he never tried to get to know me." He wrote to his father once but did not get a response. He has above average grades and is a candidate for the top high schools. Chad is a special kid with great potential and extremely popular with the girls in the school. But one of the most important relationships, a father/son relationship is missing from his life. I made it clear that no one can ever take that place, but that whatever he wanted to talk about I promised to talk to him like I talk to my own son. One day, Chad came to me and said that he cut off all his hair because he was changing the way he was behaving. Most of our time is spent with the other boys in the workout room

of the school three times a week. This is where most of the teaching and listening takes place. Once a semester we go out for lunch to celebrate.

Shakeema's Story

Shakeema was introduced to the church by her boyfriend about three years ago. She was then 16 years old and joined the dance ministry. She lives with her grandmother but does have a relationship with her mother. Her mother has come to the church to see her dance. In terms of building a relationship, I knew that I would always be seen as the pastor of the church and would have to rely on others who had already built a relationship with her. The dance ministry director was part of my LAC and agreed to work with the participants who were also part of that ministry. Her pre-assessment showed that her area of challenge was "empowerment" and her areas of strength were "support" and "commitment to learning." She continued to dance with the praise ministry until she was three months pregnant. At that point she refrained from dancing for safety reasons until she gave birth to her daughter. During her pregnancy the other members of the dance ministry really embraced her and stayed very close to her. She now lives part-time with her grandmother and at her boyfriend's house. Together they arranged for the dedication of their daughter on a Sunday morning during service. Today, Shakeema is one of the lead dancers in the ministry and her daughter, now two years old, is with her at every rehearsal. Her daughter is a child of the dance ministry. The church congregation proved to be very supportive of Shakeema and her daughter.

Reflecting upon the strengths and challenges of these family structures, I turn again to Tony Lewis, in *SLUGG: A Boy's life in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. Lewis

tries to convey the dynamic of his family, and says of his uncle, "Kenny's dichotomy-deep love for family and living a life of crime--typified the manner of all the men in my family." Regardless of the makeup of these families, and no matter how different they seem from what the world calls "normal," all of these families seem to want deep down for their families to survive and thrive.

Post Assessment Results

After each group went through the meetings and activities along with answering the questions created by the LAC, the participants then took a post assessment survey that was identical to the pre-assessment. The post assessment was given approximately 5 months after the pre-assessment. The reason for the post assessment here is to determine if there was any change from the results of the pre-assessment. Any change represented by the post assessment would be closely correlated to the short relational interaction in the groups. The result of the post assessment point toward next steps for this project: to develop a curriculum for youth and young adults, as well as for educators and mentors in the church community. Our post assessments would at least give some indication as to what could possibly be expected when a fully focused curriculum is put in place. This individually designed curriculum would take place right after the survey question period and the data analysis of each individual. The Search Institute produces a report with a section entitled "Focus your action: Asset category report and plans," that would need to be explored further.

Comparing the pre-assessment to the results from the post assessment there were several areas that showed change. Because this post assessment was based on the discussions based on the LAC questions from the survey categories, the results suggest that there are still areas of concern. For example, Zoe's positive values stayed the same at (15) and her family score went from (17) to (9). Although there was change, these are still areas of concern. Jada's community score went from a low of (17) to an even lower score of (13) which at the very least confirms her having a challenge in the community asset. Cassandra's score in the area of positive identification went from (15) to (22) and although her score increased from (11) to (15) it is still low and has to be an area of concern.

One of the great challenges that I have encountered is the amount of work that goes into trying to get an honest read on those to be impacted by the work of the church. I still believe that the best way for the church or any organization to remain or gain relevance in the lives of others is to address the needs of those you want to reach. One of the goals from this work would be to streamline the work leading up to the implementation of the program that would be designed to address those needs. I believe that this is called assessment driven ministry.

CONCLUSION

BUILDING WALLS FOR A NEW GENERATION

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me (Neh 2:17-18).

I believe it is still true that it takes a village to raise a child, and that includes supporting, loving, and contributing hope to young people's lives in a way that ensures their survival, and ensures that life makes sense even in the face of great adversities. What I have come to understand and learn more about is that the basic needs in a teenager and young adult life are somehow being managed by their communities, whether we recognize them as positive or not. All teenagers and young adults live by a set of foundational principles that are to some degree dictated by the neighborhood and the environment in which they live. Therefore, to a large extent the condition of the people depends on the condition of the neighborhood. There are many external factors that impact the major structures needed for young people to grow and succeed. All of these factors together result in an alternative means to survive. What I learned is that a person's need to survive and thrive will prevail, even if it means overriding the rules of the larger society.

When major foundational structures have been decimated and there has been an infiltration of negative forces into the family, the community, the school system and everyday safety, overwhelming challenges will be the result. These conditions in the community will put caregivers in circumstances beyond their control and lead to personal choices that seem forced upon them and their families. When major structures are systematically devastated over time, there will be a loss of trust in police protection and increased stress and health challenges. This cultural reality in the life of the neighborhood feels like a world apart from the law-abiding ethos of the church. We attributed the devastation of the neighborhood to individual moral choices instead of questioning the massive structures of inequality that continue to attack our communities. Unfortunately, through its faith in the color-blind aspirations of a previous generation, and fear of accepting criminality within its walls, the church lost relevance when it lost connection to its neighborhood. Without intending to, we prioritized own walls of safety and protection at the expense of the support structures in the lives of our community's young people. This is how St. John's lost connection with the next generation and did not even realize it had happened. This is how the church has played a part in our village's dysfunction.

In many areas it is not that God does not exist it is just that the community has replaced God with other gods such as money, the making of money, sometimes the high from drugs as an escape and for others the power that comes from the violence associated with respect. It is not that there aren't leaders in the community it is just that the leaders are now 13-year-old boys pushed into the role of 30-year-old men, without the requisite knowledge of being a man; it is that the young 12-year-old girl is now pushed to being a woman without the requisite knowledge of a woman's responsibility. Therefore instead of a community having in place a positive system of security that supports and nurtures success, young people and the community are left to choose alternative lifestyles that may be illegal but offer a sense of security, however temporary or false.

Traveling to a community and studying the lives of young people can lead one to believe that the devastation is too great to turn around, but nothing could be further from the truth. It's simply going to take a great amount of work to rebuild the trust that has been lost or trust that has been forgotten by generations of children. Trust in the church will grow when it is no longer seen as an institution of religion but seen as a new community where principles of living a Christian life are deep in the hearts of everyone participating. When being a Christian is not just going into a building, but walking out of that building and sharing our lives, pouring into the lives of others, then limitations are removed from the impact we can make on an everyday basis.

The original goal of this project was to find a formula for restoring the relevance of the church in the lives of teenagers and young adults in the church and the community. The original purpose of the project was to increase membership and church growth. My hypothesis or my educated guess would be that if the foundational needs of these teenagers and young people could be determined in some real everyday way then the information could be used to develop what I would like to call (adapting from the public school system) an "Individual Christian Education Plan" for all participants. It is my further thought that in time and with development this idea and principles could be applied to all religious and secular institutions.

Even with only the preliminary work of this project, I have seen growth and change in the attitudes and outlook of many of the participants. A first step in this process has been to sojourn with young people, enter into their lives and listen for their needs, fostering a relationship with an adult with whom they can safely express themselves, and developing peer groups where they can experience friendship. In order to bridge the gap between the youth and the church, the church must continue to educate ourselves about dynamics in the lives of young people: the complexities of their family lives, and the political and economic structures that have crumbled their walls of support and protection and threatened the foundation of their lives. As church in community, as a church that would be relevant to the next generation, we need In-Reach and Up-Reach to prepare for the work of healing and rebuilding our communities, reaching into the lives of our young people, one relationship at a time. This work requires education about the deeper structural issues involved in mass incarceration and the new Jim Crow, and a Christian response of acceptance and patience as we listen to our young people express their needs and hopes.

It is my belief that a strategically planned curriculum based in activities grounded on Christian principles could foster dramatic changes in the thinking and attitudes of those involved. When individuals' lives are impacted in such deep and basic ways, then the place or persons who are now vehicles of that change can become and remain relevant in people's lives. It is at this point of experiencing a genuine impact that teenagers and young adults might make a decision to become part of a revolutionary movement, whether it is a person or a church. Whether the result is positive church growth or not, lives are still changed for the good as the true purpose of this work. Therefore the focus becomes changed lives with a consequence of possible church growth instead of prioritizing church growth a hit or miss approach to changed lives. After working on this project idea and the research I realized that the concept became internalized. This is what is expected of leaders working with this assessment driven approach to ministry. On several occasions I have found myself dealing with teenagers and young adults and being able to sense one or more of their areas of challenge they may have been struggling with at that particular time. Using that knowledge and instinct that comes from caring for people in ministry can bring an immediate sense of impact when deeper needs are addressed.

I am reminded of two stories one took place in church the other one took place outside of church and yet both were filled with spiritual impact not one less than the other.

A young couple one week away from having a baby within two weeks sat in church and the young man stood up and said, "We wanted to do things right and get married," and as he put his head down he said, "We're going to the justice of the peace Pastor because we want to do things right." I then sensed that they felt a lack of support, a lack of empowerment, and didn't get the sense that they really felt part of the congregational family. This was one of the most powerful moments I experienced because this exchange took place right in front of the congregation during the morning service. My response was, "Why would you do that when this is your community of love right here?" He said, "You mean we can get married here?" and I said, "Absolutely." I know their surprise was based on what they expected from the traditional Black Baptist Church, which is to shame those with a child before marriage. This type of negative attitude that exists in churches is common among church leaders. Therefore, this moment was a turning point for us as a church. The following week the couple invited almost 150 people to church to witness the coming together of those two hearts. It had to be by far the greatest wedding I've ever performed because it was so real. The bride didn't have any bridesmaids so we pulled up young friends from the community to stand with her. He didn't have a best man so we pulled up a young man from the community to stand with him. Just before the ceremony a young man pulled up on a motorcycle and came into the church and sat in the front row. Before starting the wedding ceremony I said to the young man with the helmet, if I ever dreamt of arriving at any wedding it would be riding in on a motorcycle. The crowd burst into laughter and that moment we became a community of healing and love. This move was a shock to the tradition of the older members of the church, but because of its great impact not one word was said in criticism. This was a living demonstration that St. John's purpose was about changing perspectives and embracing people by restoring them back into a community of love.

The second story comes when I had to give detention to two young women of Hispanic descent. While I was reading *SLUGG* by Tony Lewis, I came across a quote he gave from one of Jay Z's rap songs. While I was reading one of the girls said, "Stanislaus, why do you care so much about what we do?" I realized that she might have been struggling with positive values and family standards that would take her in a certain direction. Opening the discussion with what Jay Z was saying in his song about footprints already being laid for us to follow by our friends and family, I told her that so many people follow friends and family even though they know it will lead to a place they may not want to go. We started to talk to about choices in their lives and that although they love their families and their friends the real question is can they make different choices as young beautiful young ladies. I went on to explain to them that who they choose to be with could propel them into greatness or hold him back from being who God has called them to be. I knew this moment was special because I really had their attention in a way that I never had before. They explained to me how both of their mothers had gotten pregnant when they were 15 and 16, and how their sisters were headed in the same direction. I asked the girls if they were strong enough to create their own life vision. We then discussed new opportunities available to young women and I gave them an example like computer coding and other career opportunities that would be opened to them in the future. One girl teared up and said, "Oh my God, this is so good that we spoke," and she said that she would make better choices and that we would continue to have conversations until they graduated.

During this exchange with these two young ladies I sensed a moment of grace in a very spiritual way. What we experienced was a connection, due to the trust that was established. The most beautiful thing about this exchange was that it did not take place inside of a church building but at lunch in my office in a public school. In this moment of grace there was no mention of religion, God or Christ. For me this story further supported that church is about bringing people into a healing, loving community and that may or may not be the physical building. Instead it is the fact that we carry the power to change someone's world each and every day.

So, did I find the formula—a formula for finding the relevance of the church in the lives of teenagers and young adults? I don't know if I would call it a formula unless we can claim a motive of supporting people instead of church buildings, a willingness to search for the deeper needs in the real lives of people, and a love for serving others that can ultimately lead into a relationship with God. If that is the case, then that is my formula. For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more (I Cor.9:19).

Use their own beliefs and ways to show them the truth (Author unknown).

APPENDIX 1

PROGRAM FOR DETERMINING RELEVANCE OF THE CHURCH IN

THE LIVES OF YOUTH

I. Establishing Relationship:

The first phase involves establishing a foundation and building relationships with participants using the 5 critical needs of every teenager:

- Acceptance
- Expression
- Being Listened to
- Being treated with Patience
- Friends (Peers)

Meeting with each of the three groups of participants to have open discussions on several topics. The topics ranged from Family, school, Community, Handling Anger, race relations in this country. The purpose for the discussions were to establish a sense of trust and a sense of a space where confidence was established.

II. Pre-Assessment

Administration of Pre-Assessment via The Search Institute's *Developmental Assets Profile* (used with permission).

III. Meetings

The meetings will focus on the following asset categories:

- Support
- Empowerment
- Boundaries
- Use of time
- Commitment
- Positive values
- Social competences
- Positive identity

The above asset categories will be surveyed according to the following context areas:

- Personal assets
- Social assets
- Family assets
- School assets

• Community assets

IV. Follow Up

The follow up to each of these meetings will be the use of a biblical principles related to the topic and how it relates to church and its relevance.

V. Celebration and Writing of the Post-Assessment

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION IN GROUPS

I. ADULT SUPPORT

- 1. Who are the adults in your life that give you support in reaching your goals? Think about family, community and school.
- 2. What can adults do to make you feel supported?

Follow Up Question:

What role has the church played in your support or should a church play in the support of teens? What are your expectations of church support?

II. USE OF TIME

- 1. How would you say your time is spent in the following areas? Personal, community, social and Family.
- 2. What part does media play in the above areas? What would a week be without your mobile device?

Follow Up Question:

What part of a teens life do you feel church should occupy on a weekly basis?

III. COMMITMENT TO LEARNING

- 1. As far back as you could remember what topics have really held your interest and inspired you to study? Personal, socially and in the community.
- 2. What does it mean to be a life long learner?

Follow up Question:

What learning do you believe the church can offer that no other place can offer?

Do you think that children who learn Christian principles early tend to make better decisions as teens?

IV. SOCIAL IMPACT

- 1. What is meant by the following statement "Bad company corrupts good character"?
- 2. How do you decide which social circle you will hang with?

Follow up Question.

Do you have any idea what the Bible says about choosing those who will be close to you?

Do you believe that a person's steps (choices) could be ordered and protected by a force greater than themselves? If so how?

V. POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION

- 1. In terms of how you see yourself how has family, community, school and peers contributed to your self-identification? It can be positive or negative.
- 2. Who do you look up to and how has that person played the role of mentor in your life? That person(s) can come from family, school, community or close friends.

Follow up Question.

Do you feel the church is a place where one should be able to find a positive image to emulate or be like? If you don't think one could be found in the church please explain.

VI. BOUNDARIES

- 1. How do you balance your growing independence with the boundaries set by family, community and school?
- 2. Do you feel the rules and the boundaries set for you are fair? Have you played a role in setting up the rules and boundaries you are expected to follow?

Follow up Question.

How do you presently see the church, as a place that grows a teen's independence or a place where rules and boundaries are set fairly or unreasonably? Do you see the Bible as a book of rules and regulations? If so, why?

VII. POSITIVE VALUES

- 1. What role has family, community, school or peers played in establishing your morals, ethics and positive thinking?
- 2. How do you determine if a value is either positive or negative?

Follow up Question.

The Bible teaches that we are to love those who hate us, pray for those who are our enemies and that it is better to give than receive, do you believe these are positive value? If so, do you feel that the youth of today can live by them? What would prevent teens from living up to these values if considered positive?

VIII. EMPOWERMENT

- 1. What do you think it means to be empowered?
- 2. When do most feel like you are empowered? Family, community, school or around friends.
- 3. How has family, community, school and friends helped to empower you?

Follow up Question.

I have heard many Christians say "I can do all tings through Christ", does that mean they are empowered through Christ? Do you believe in the power of prayer? And can prayer change things.? Do you believe the church is or could be a place for teen empowerment?

If you were given the opportunity to design a place of safety that would allow teens to grow in their understanding of themselves what would it look like? Be as creative as you wish.

APPENDIX 2

DEFINITIONS

The following definitions of context assets, external assets, and internal assets are based on research prepared by the Search Institute.

Context Assets

These basic structural supports can play as the underlying foundation for the four external and four internal assets. These assets in terms of scores range from challenged, vulnerable, adequate and thriving.

Personal: Scores in the excellent range on this scale (25-30), indicates a young person with a high degree of honesty, responsibility and integrity, as well as high self-esteem and sense of purpose. These personal assets are likely to help make youth resilient to a range of risk factors, particularly if assets are lacking in the larger family, school, and community contexts.

Social: High scores on the social scale indicates a young person with many assets related to social relationships working in their lives. Such youth would have the support, encouragement, and role models necessary for healthy development and thriving.

Family: High scores on this scale suggest a young person with safe, warm, and supportive family, with good parent-child communication. It also suggest that parents are active in providing active, setting and enforcing rules, and monitoring their child's behavior. Low scores on the family scale are associated with increased risk behaviors, including alcohol and drug use, and violence and antisocial behavior.

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School: High scores indicate a safe and caring school environment with clear rules that are fairly enforced. Youth are likely to have high academic achievement and have very low risk of school related behavior and discipline problems.

Community: High scores on this scale reflect a combination of safe and supportive neighborhood, youth service to the community, and youth empowerment and engagement at the community level. Low scores reflect weak community assets for youth and may reflect poor community attitudes towards youth, lack of after-school activities, or few youth service opportunities.

External Assets

Support: Excellent scores in support suggest diverse asset-based strengths involving parent-adolescent communication, family support, as well as caring, encouragement and support extending outside the family to the neighborhood, school, and community.

Empowerment: Excellent scores suggest that an adolescent feels safe across many contexts, and valued and respected by others. This is associated with reduced risk of depression, suicidal and self-injurious behaviors, and violence.

Boundaries and Expectations: Excellent scores suggest reporting of consistently clear rules and consequences at home, school and in the neighborhood, plus positive role models among friends, family, and outside of the family. This asset category is most strongly and consistently related to a variety of youth outcomes, particularly high academic achievement. Low scores on this scale suggest increased risk of depression, suicidal behavior, and antisocial behavior among all youth.

Constructive Use of Time: Excellent scores indicate a high degree of reported extra-curricular involvement in four areas, religious or spiritual activity, a sport club, or other group, creative activities and family. Low score are associated with increased risk for alcohol, tobacco, and drug problems, and school problems among males.

Internal Assets

Commitment To Learning: Excellent range of scores reflects a high degree of reported motivation to learn and active engagement in learning both in and out of school. Low range scores are associated with poor academic performance, under-achievement, and increased risk of dropout and school related problems, as well as antisocial behavior among males.

Positive Values: This category includes personal virtues such as honesty, integrity, responsibility and restraint as well as caring about others and working for equality and social justice. Adolescents with excellent scores have significant protection against unhealthy behaviors such as alcohol, , tobacco, and drug use. They are expected to be responsible and trustworthy and may therefore be good candidates for youth leadership positions.

Social Competencies: This scale covers assets pertaining to planning and decision-making, cultural competence, and social skills involving the ability to build friendships, resist negative peer pressure, and resolve conflicts peacefully. Excellent scores in this category indicate a rich set of social competencies that reduce risk of a range of negative youth outcomes and promote thriving, particularly in affirmation of diversity and leadership.

Positive Identity: This scale reflects several strengths in an adolescent's emerging identity, including self-esteem, internal locus of control, optimism, and a growing sense of purpose in life. high scores on this scale are associated with increased psychological resilience and reduced risk for psychological distress including anxiety and depression.

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