



In the city for good youth ministry

Blessings and challenges of life in the city

For better or worse, youth ministry as we know it has primarily been a resource restricted to mainline suburban congregations. Not so true anymore, however. Increasingly, city congregations and families, schools and communities are discovering that cities offer positive contexts for ministry.

Many problems which plague our cities can be addressed by revitalizing youth ministries in the urban context. At the same time, the whole church needs to understand and celebrate the wealth, beauty and resourcefulness the city offers. The perception that the city is a less than desirable place for ministry or to raise a family is quickly becoming an outdated misperception, especially among youth and young adults.

In the city, people are Black, Hispanic, White, from every ethnic group and walk of life, gay and lesbian, attend neighborhood and metropolitan congregations, or have no church affiliation at all. City folks know that the city is an exciting and creative place to experience ministry. For youth in this increasingly diverse and global world, the city offers opportunities to be tested and strengthened by faith.

Consider Redeemer Lutheran Church. More than 200 youth and caring adults gathered for the community Christmas celebration. The youth who came were Black, American Indian, White, Hispanic and Asian; a number of them were recent immigrants from Russia. They were both poor and wealthy. Many had participated in Redeemer's vacation summer school program. Both city and suburban congregations provided food.

Youth, family and community ministry in the urban context can be exciting and creative. People who have spent time in cities know that cities are filled with the same challenges and resources as other communities. In the city, you'll find kids of every shape and color, loving and broken families, caring and caustic adults, congregations of every venue, and schools with both good and bad teachers.

What distinguishes city youth from other youth is most often the environmental factors which have caused city youth to become stigmatized and disproportionately at risk. Given the same support and opportunities for success, city youth and their families are no different than other kids.

Because youth in the city are often "environmentally at-risk," a successful youth ministry must be relational and confront factors which cause kids to be at risk. For example, a sewing club or wood shop sets the stage for relationships between adults and youth to flourish while young people

learn time management, math and other skills. Add a Scripture study and service project and your congregation provides excellent intergenerational youth ministry in the city.

But wait, why so much focus on the city anyway?

During the '60s and '70s, there was in this country a culture shift from cities to suburban communities. Critical community resources such as jobs, people, congregations, schools and civic agencies (i.e., scouts) participated in the great exodus from the city to suburbs. As a result, city youth, families, schools and congregations were abandoned to face the onslaught of challenges, including an economic recession, dads lost to the Viet Nam conflict, infusion of drugs, media influence and family breakdown. Although these factors affected every community, traditional pillars in the city lacked adequate resources to meet the challenge.

Thanks be to God, today we find ministry in the city has a positive story and witness to share. Throughout our church, city congregations are joining together to strengthen youth ministry through shared confirmation programs, vacation church school, Sunday school, ethnic specific programs, tutoring, mentoring, community gardens, after-school programs, worship, and various forms of support for school and community.

- In Los Angeles, five congregations have formed a strong association called New City Parish.
- In Portland, Oregon, the Portland Lutheran Urban Ministries sponsors a Healthy Communities Day reaching out to the entire community.
- In Chicago, Bethel New Life—in collaboration with many ELCA and Missouri Synod congregations—partners with Lutherans for Career Development to train and direct youth to successful futures.
- In St. Paul, Minnesota, congregations share staff and volunteers to provide after school programs.
- In Pittsburgh, musicians from an ELCA congregation formed a professional music group that sold recordings to fund a summer neighborhood music festival, mid-week youth outreach and sent you to summer camp.

Foundations for city youth ministry

- Be attentive to relationships. Relationship is the universal language in youth ministry, and in the city, relationships provide the primary lens through which ministry is measured.
- Programs and skills may look different from other communities. In the city, kids write and play on sidewalks and in alleys. Wilderness and camping experiences can be alien and threatening. Primary care givers may be grandparents, and access to private transportation for activities may not be an option.
- What is universal, however, is that kids love to play, learn, belong, experience affirmation and have access to an adult who will take the time to listen, hear and care for and about them.
- Safety is critical. All young people need people with whom and places where they will feel safe. Ironically, that is why youth are tempted to join gangs and affiliate with groups, hoping to avoid judgment and rejection.
- Develop and publicize a mission statement that communicates your congregation's core values. Incorporate into your mission how your congregation will offer to all youth safety, belonging, acceptance, experience and openness to differences.

- Set young people up for success by pairing them with adult mentors. Those mentors may just be for relationships, but they may also be teaching mentorships—passing on congregational and life skills.
- Offer intentional activities that: promote and model partnership among school, church and community; support the self-worth of the young person; and provide youth with values that equip them for servant leadership.

Nurturing koinonia among city youth (Based on Acts 2:41-47)

*By Kristian Johnson, Youth Minister
Immanuel Lutheran Church
Chicago, IL*

Like youth in many places, those who dwell on our city streets are hungry for koinonia—a faith community. With a koinonia approach to youth ministry, programs are viewed merely as a means to relationships. Relationships—with God and with one another—transform lives.

Prayer: "They devoted themselves to...prayer." Acts 2:42

Prayer connects us to the one who made us and saves us, but it also builds community:

- Pair a youth with an adult, asking them to pray daily for one another and exchange notes, letters or e-mails once a month.
- Gather a prayer team of adults who are committed to regularly lifting up the names of youth in prayer.
- Set a ballot box in the church or youth room into which youth can submit prayer requests to the prayer team, known or anonymous.

Identity, belonging: "All who believed were together and had all things in common." Acts 2:44

Koinonia is:

- to give, contribute, or share the life of another
- to be equally responsible for one another
- to be initiated into the mysteries of Christ

Build togetherness and a sense of belonging by...

- Teaching the urban, multicultural context of Scripture, Jesus was not White, and the church's ministry was multicultural and multiclass from the beginning.
- Involving senior citizens in youth ministry. Many urban ELCA congregations are older, homogenous in membership, yet neighborhoods are young and multiracial. Bringing the two together is rich.
- Marking the passages through which young people travel. These are defined as "signs of progress that come...as (youth) move to new responsibilities, restraints and responsibilities. They stand for a past to leave behind and a future to cleave to." (Phil Jackson, Lawndale Community Church, Chicago) Baptism and confirmation are the church's first markers, perhaps, but be creative in honoring others which youth and their families travel. One city church used to bemoan the fact that members seemed to often be leaving, until they realized that life in the city—especially among young adults—is often transient. Now they honor those who are leaving with a public farewell and prayer.

Share meals together: "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts." Acts 2:46

A byproduct of today's rushed, disconnected family culture is that many youth don't know the sacredness of sharing a meal together. The church can be a place where young people, not the least of which is at the Eucharist, can discover and celebrate the sacredness of breaking bread together. Believe me, it is not happening in the school cafeteria and in many homes.

Try:

- As you're financially able, provide food at all youth events.
- Invite families to weekday dinners or Sunday breakfasts. Among some ethnicities in our wonderfully diverse cities, the entire family comes along anyway!
- Involving youth in cooking and baking in the church kitchen is a perfect intergenerational task.

Intensely and creatively worshipping God:"...praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." Acts 2:47

When young people sense that God is working in their life, they love sharing it in a public setting. Ask youth to:

- Do more than be acolytes. They can preach and teach, read and greet, assist and usher, act and sing.
- Help the pastor and/or worship committee shape the liturgy. The assembly will be blessed with creativity, enthusiasm and energy that only youth can bring. And their involvement will bring more youth to the pews.

Contributed by the *Rev. Kelly Chatman*

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