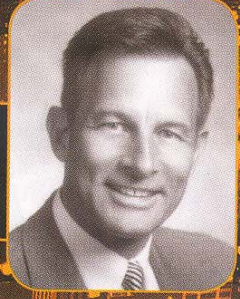


Urban Ministries

Charles Lyons, Pastor
Armitage Baptist Church
Chicago, Illinois



Faith-based programs get noticed

Vincent Smith was growing up in a tough public-housing project, but his dream was to play second base for the Philadelphia Phillies. He played Little League baseball and was an outstanding member of the Lathrop Chicago Boys Club. But there is no hope for Vincent becoming a major league star. One Sunday, as this 13-year-old tried to convince his mother to stop drinking, she stabbed him in the throat with a kitchen knife, killing him.¹

This story haunts me. Vincent died mere blocks from our church. So many kids, so little time; so many people, so few laborers. The urban darkness is so thick, yet this also means even a little light is very visible. In many places, Christians are stepping up and being noticed.

Consider these church-based programs that have reached into the secular world to truly impact lives:

KIDS Hope, U.S.A., founded by David Deters of Grand Rapids, Michigan, is a program that pairs churches with schools. Church members become mentors of at-risk students in the schools. It has been so successful that now 23 such programs are in action, and inquiries from churches and schools in 34 states have flooded the KIDS Hope office.²

In Madison, Wisconsin, a church has founded a multicultural, multigenerational mentoring program called Program Opportunity. This program made long-term commitments to 16 sixth graders at a local public school. Project participants commit to mentoring and tutoring students, and offering to pay their college tuition. The program has seen students maintain good grade-point averages, and local

school administrators are singing the praises of the program.³

The Fishing School, founded by Tom Lewis in Washington D.C., is a family service center which inspires children to become responsible citizens through activities such as fishing, tutoring and motivational sessions. However, Lewis believes the most important piece of the program to be the Bible studies and devotionals. One recent Fishing School graduate now has the realistic dream of becoming a lawyer. Another student who was tutored in writing has now received an \$8,000 college scholarship for his poetry.⁴

While a wealth of statistics is not available, one does not have to dig too deeply to find evidence that when the church partners with secular programs and institutions, great things occur. Take, for instance, these secular-based programs and organizations that have joined forces with churches only to find tremendous outcomes.

Inner Change, a Christ-centered pre-release program that has become an integral part of one Texas prison's rehabilitation efforts, is run by Prison Fellowship Ministries. It is believed to be the grandest experiment of faith-based solutions being encouraged and empowered by the government. The prisoners volunteer for the Bible-centered program and are put under the direct responsibility of a Houston church for six months upon their release from prison. While it is a new program, results are already overwhelmingly positive, and a similar program in Brazil boasts a reduced recidivism rate of five percent.⁵ In addition, federal prisoners who got leadership training from Prison Fellowship were less likely to be arrested after 14 years.⁶

Ottawa County in Michigan now pairs some welfare recipients with

members of Christian churches. Nearly 50 churches have helped more than 150 welfare recipients. Mississippi Faith and Families Program, which started only three years ago, has already paired 425 churches with 780 welfare clients. "We can provide bread for the soul," says its director, the Reverend Ronald Moore. "The state can only provide bread for the body."⁷

William Raspberry, columnist for the *Washington Post*, echoes the voice of many today when he says, "Show me a program that helps people to change their lives and I'll show you a program with a strong element of the spiritual."⁸

Economist Richard Freeman of Harvard University says that regular church attendance is a better predictor of whether an African-American urban youth will fall to drugs or crime than family structure or income. Freeman believes that in most inner cities, church programs "leverage 10 times their own weight and solve social problems for the poor."

Yet, while relatively few Christians are penetrating the urban mission field, other forces are. Planned Parenthood is here; the National Organization for Women is here; Muslims are here; homosexual activists are here; secularists and humanists are here; cults are here; entrepreneurs are here.

Cities represent great opportunities for local New Testament churches to demonstrate the glory of God and the power of the gospel in a new millennium.

Notes

¹"Youth's Dreams End With Slaying," Barry Cronin, *Chicago Sun Times*, November 23, 1982.

²WORLD, June 28, 1997, p. 21.

³*Christianity Today*, December 12, 1994, pp. 15-16.

⁴*Christianity Today*, January 10, 1994, Vol. 38, No. 1, p. 14. Edward Gilbrath.

⁵WORLD, August 9, 1997, pp. 14-16.