

On Becoming Irresistible

“El es mejooooor: (quien?) JOTA E ESE OO ESE!!!”

Filling the air, reaching all corners of our facility, is the singing and laughter of children. “Well He’s the be-est: (Who?) J-E-S-U-S!!!”

Summer Program is a special time in the life of Neighborhood Ministries. This summer we are focusing our attention on a very precious segment of society: eight through ten year old children, or third through fifth graders.

Precious? Yes, but also endangered. What Harry Morgan wrote almost twenty years ago rings true for most inner-city kids today:

. . . In other words, upon entering school in primary grades, black children possess enthusiasm and eager interest, however, by fifth grade the liveliness and interest are gone, replaced by passivity and apathy. . . I found after the third grade, the achievement rate of blacks began a downward spiral which tended to continue in the child’s academic career.

We can see it in their eyes. A hunger for acceptance. Love. Purpose. Yes, they are having fun at Summer Program. But will they find any answers to the deeper issues that trouble their young, fragile hearts? Will they find the hope that will motivate them to face life and succeed?

“You can have no goals if you have no dreams. But if you have dreams and no goals, you have only despair.” The quote hits home. For us in Summer Program the great question is: How can we instill hope and purpose in the lives of precious young people who are in danger of drowning in “passivity and apathy” right before our eyes?

The answer, according to Jesus, does not lie in specially designed programs or projects. Rather it has much more to do with his followers and their relationship to these children. The answer, according to Jesus, lies in the character, positioning, and focus of the people who embrace the name “Christian.”

Richness of Character

When Jesus said, “I have not come to abolish (the Law or the Prophets) but to fulfill them” (**Matthew 5:17**) he paints an intriguing picture. It’s as if he’s looking at a black-and-white sketch of a children’s by-the-numbers coloring book and comparing it to when it is fully colored in. Or a jelly jar before and after it is filled with jelly. Or a singer with natural talent today in contrast to years later after he has been fully trained.

Jesus says he has come to flesh out and model the full meaning of God’s commands, and that he expects his followers to do the same (**Matthew 5:20**). Applied to our situation, those that work with inner-city youth must be rich in character.

One of the issues that concerned our high school youth leaders was respect. “Will the fact that we’re young and from the same neighborhood keep the kids from respecting our authority?” Thankfully a youngster named Timothy faced a similar problem nearly 2000 years ago, to which his mentor replied: “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.” (**I Timothy 4:12**) In other words, as one commentator notes, “In Christianity, authority is contingent on character and not age.”

When our leaders, including and especially our indigenous teenage leaders, are growing rich in

Christian character day-by-day, it will show. And it will make an impact on the lives of the children they serve.

Touching Lives

“You (the emphasis is ‘and you alone’) are the salt of the earth.” (**Matthew 5:13**) While the common use of salt today is to enhance taste, in Jesus’ day it was to preserve food, to keep it from spoiling. Therefore, in order for salt to preserve, it must touch the meat.

We cannot instill hope and purpose from a distance. Jesus expects his followers to touch young people’s lives in a way that arrests the downward spiral that threatens them, and points them instead toward the hope found in knowing Christ.

We touch lives in many ways. In the Summer Program, we touch lives physically by talking, laughing, sitting with kids, never allowing ourselves to be physically apart from them. We touch them mentally and emotionally by giving timely “you-can-do-it” talks and taking advantage of teachable moments. We touch them experientially by creating in the classroom winning situations as they accomplish various tasks and complete projects. And we touch them spiritually by sharing stories about Jesus and his love.

Our indigenous staff touch the lives of kids by being effective instructors inside the classroom and good friends and neighbors outside the classroom. Our college interns maintain a lasting impact by building friendships, becoming pen-pals and visiting the kids and their families whenever they are in town.

Just as the leper marveled at the touch of Jesus, inner-city kids marvel at the touch of people who care. It makes a lasting impact on the children we serve.

The Power of Purpose

“You (again, emphatically ‘You alone’) are the light of the world.” (**Matthew 5:14**)

The beauty of light is found in its ability to dispel darkness. We who work with inner-city youth are both light-bearers and light-givers. As light-bearers, we strive to model God’s truth with integrity. As light-givers, we help others discover God’s truth regarding their purpose in life.

Recently Jimmy Jones paid us a visit. A onetime Neighborhood Ministries youth and later club leader, Jimmy now directs an exciting ministry he himself founded among impoverished youth in south Dallas, Texas. As we reminisced about our history together, we remembered some of the struggles we shared as we sought to discern Jimmy’s gifts and calling. At times people would question (we would too) whether or not ministry was the right direction for Jimmy’s life.

Over the years, as I wrestled with this, I was repeatedly drawn back to a simple, inescapable fact. Jimmy’s deep desire was to be in ministry. True, some skills were lacking. But this was his heart. Therefore I had to support him.

The proverb “Train up a child in the way he should go. . . (literally, ‘Dedicate the child according to his way’)” has profound significance for those involved in urban youth development. Children who over time have experienced the full force of ghetto life (poverty, broken homes, inadequate living conditions, drugs, gangs, etc.) don’t grow up knowing their divine purpose. Life is reduced to a matter of survival.

Yet there is good news. Beneath the layers of ghetto garbage, there remains a “way,” a God-given purpose and focus. The essence of urban youth ministry involves surfacing that “way,” and then creating an incubator-like environment in which children can reshape their lives around God-given values, and

within that context discover their life purpose.

This takes more than the efforts of a single individual. It will take the combined diligence of people involved in programs like Summer Program, Harambee, the Bouma Learning Center, and Simba!. It takes the ongoing work of a Jubilee Community Church. It requires the involvement of sister churches and ministries - local, national and abroad. It takes prayer, money. . .and time. While initial discovery of purpose may happen in a moment, the road to maturity involves careful and steady nurturing over time, through the often bumpy and difficult phases of one's life.

"I know I'll always be in ministry," Jimmy said. His heart remains the same. Discovering one's purpose is a great thing. It provides powerful motivation to one's life.

"Well He's the be-eeeeest!"

The children are indeed having a great time. But hopefully they're experiencing a lot more than they realize.

There is a phrase I learned in the context of communications that I enjoy applying to all aspects of ministry: "Make it irresistible!" For a product to be irresistible, its value must heavily outweigh its price. Our young people today are in great need of acceptance, love, hope and purpose. Yet the answers to the deeper issues of their hearts are within reach. It is the task of those who embrace the name Christian to step up and make a difference. And when we do it Jesus' way - by becoming rich in character, touching the lives of youth in ways that surface and nurture God-given purpose - our message will have impact. It will be. . . irresistible.