Helping At-Risk Youth Thrive:

An Urban Church in Partnership with Positive Urban Youth Development Programming

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By

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If for No Other Reason Than to Thrive

The adverse effects of poverty on African American at-risk youth and other youth of color and their families are destroying lives and lessening opportunities for future generations to be able to thrive. Additionally, many African American people experience undue burden for no reason other than being born the wrong color in a country still suffering from the genesis of systemic racism caused by America's evil days of slavery. Urban African American at-risk youth are experiencing the adverse effects of poverty at even greater rates than ever before and this injustice must be stopped. African American churches have often, in direct response to the oppressive experiences by their community members, been community and cultural hubs that have offered respite, solace, and guidance for those who have felt the burden of systemic racism. With their history of community support and development, traditional African American churches and churches in general are uniquely qualified and make for good partners in addressing the risk of detrimental poverty among at-risk youth. At-risk youth deserve to thrive. The need for social justice is a call the urban African American church in Seattle should answer; churches should be at the forefront in supporting urban at-risk youth through collaborative partnership with existing youth development after-school programs. Urban churches should forge collaborative partnerships with established youth development programs because of their collective church's resources in people, buildings, and congregational willingness to spread His kingdom. In doing so, the church can provide a holistic approach to enhance positive youth development.

I have contextualized a project from my summer fieldwork at Rotary Boys and Girls Club [The Club] in Seattle's only, and now dwindling, traditionally African American and people of

color neighborhood. From this, I formulated a model for my church, Holgate Church of Christ (Holgate) to volunteer alongside of youth development staff in serving at-risk youth. This contextualized project is a collaboration with others from my church and The Club. The Club's at-risk youth experience Holgate's African American members demonstrating humility through love. Holgate is able to mentor, listen to, and provide guidance while fulfilling its call to love others through volunteering. This idea of collaboration for Holgate is prefaced through prayer. In Henri J. M. Nouwen's, *The Wounded Healer* "…Christian leaders must be in the future what they have always had in the past: People of prayer—people who have to pray, and who have to pray always" (51). Nouwen observes that people living in community with each other help each other realize that, "To those who can see, nothing is profane*"* (Teilhard de Chardin qtd. in Nouwen 51). Thus, belonging to a church of likeminded people from a similar cultural background generates collaboration and engagement among us who see advocacy for at-risk youth as a natural outpouring of Christ's love.

To accomplish this, laying a foundation for partnership involves several steps. First, the innovative idea must be brought and explained to church leadership to get buy-in and support by a project coordinator. Second, the church must build a network of church volunteers through various sessions of people coming together in agreement to share best practices and ideas, ask questions, and get answers for its collective best foot forward. Lastly, once invited by the youth development organization, a church representative can become a Club board member and commit to support operations and provide wise counsel. As a precaution, the church must decide that it is ready (internally) for the work with club staff and at-risk youth, as it must understand its own strengths and weaknesses. In other words, the work in supporting youth-focused programming is about developing relationships with youth and learning an understanding of

youth as leaders in their own activism. The church should not be the one to get in the way but is a constant cheerleader in volunteering with youth. The church's goal in collaboration with the youth development organization should match its own outreach mission so that, in the end, God is glorified.

To understand how the church can partner with youth advocacy programs, I have organized my paper to explain why youth development program leaders work with at-risk youth every day. Additionally, I have included interviews of those who have spent time volunteering or working with youth programs. I also highlight the context of poverty for African Americans and African American suffering in America and explain my 2017 summer fieldwork volunteerism using appreciative inquiry as my focus of observation and gathering research. Before concluding, I explain my thesis project and give definition to what it means to be an at-risk youth in Seattle. From this point on, I have evidence and research-grounded examples of positive collaborations around the United States that reinforce the importance of the church's role in unity with existing positive youth development programming. Finally, Seattle's at-risk youth need help from people who care about their future. The church should forge collaboration with positive youth development programming for at-risk youth advocacy. Doing so allows the church to engage and interact with their community neighbors.

A Narrative from the Field

What started out as a place for at-risk male youth, the Rotary Boys and Girls Club has stood the test of time for over seventy years in a neighborhood that African Americans called home in Seattle's urban Central District. Seattle redlined other neighborhoods, banning people of color and people of different races and ethnicities from living in predominantly white

neighborhoods through covenants imposed for White people only (Berger). Today, The Club is still a safe-haven for youth, both male and female, to have that place of belonging and be productive while learning lifelong skills that enable them to grow and develop into responsible adults. The single most empowering emphasis in ensuring a youth's development is the ability to motivate that young person to understand who they are and what their purpose in life is. The Rotary Club, along with Boys and Girls Clubs across the world, does that by bringing in dedicated staff. Youth development is not a walk in the park nor is it a lucrative career choice- at least not for the hands that work in the field.

For example, Grant is a career professional youth development program director at Rotary. In my interview with Grant this past summer, he told me that he could not afford to take a vacation. In fact, Grant has never been able to go on a vacation while working at The Club. When he came to Seattle from Puyallup, Washington in 2010, Grant was able to buy a condominium on Capitol Hill, a neighborhood right next door to the Central District. Grant said to me, "I could not afford to go on vacation then because I had a mortgage, I cannot afford to vacation now because I still have a mortgage, and everything is so expensive for my salary." As we continued to talk, he took out his cellphone and showed me two photos. The first had a view from his condominium from 2010; in it one could see a water view of the Puget Sound between the Smith and Columbia Towers. The second photo was of the same two buildings but, with numerous others in the way no water view. Seattle had become so densely populated in a very short time period. When I asked Grant why he continued to be so committed to working with at-risk youth despite few rewards (even the inability to take a vacation), he said to me that each day he gets to see young lives change for the better (Grant).

Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater write:

Listening to language will help you move further inside a culture and become intimate with it. You'll introduce yourself to a subculture as you describe its settings, daily events, and behaviors and learn more by examining its histories and artifacts. But when you listen to and record its language, you'll understand the connection of language to a culture's way of being. You serve in a way, as a cultural translator. (272)

From this connection, and as a cultural translator, I understood Grant to say that for many at-risk youth, a vacation would be an experience of a lifetime. Grant came from a privileged background. He described to me that his very large high school had three Black kids all from one family. Coming to The Club back in 2010 was a cultural shock the first time he had seen so many Black kids in one place. Once there, he learned that many of those kids had never been on a vacation. I asked Grant if looking back he would do it all again. Grant described "This is what I am meant to do, and I would definitely do it all again-these kids have changed me too!"

As I think about Grant's background, I cannot help but make some comparisons to my own life except I am not White. I am Black and a minority but grew up with some privileges. In fact, five years ago, I would never have thought I would be telling my personal story of how I know God has called me to at-risk youth social advocacy. As an adult and for the past twenty-seven years, I was part of a large predominantly White church. That church was a part of my identity as a Godly woman. I was on many ministry committees including women, finance, leadership recruitment, and fundraising for building the large community center we developed in 2015. You could say I did it all; I was all in. At the same time, I worked for a large faith-based non-profit in a high-profile position reporting to the CEO. I also was finishing my bachelor's

degree in psychology at Northwest University and contemplating going on to graduate school. In 2016, after I made my decision to attend another two years at Northwest University in the International Community Development degree program, I gave my resignation to my employer and left my church. For work, I spent a year working full-time in the for-profit job sector. For church, I felt called to join a traditional African American church in the urban Central District Seattle neighborhood. This neighborhood was the same one I was born in; furthermore, it was the neighborhood I was comfortable going back to and where I completed my fieldwork. And to top that all off, my husband and I put our house up for sale, which was in north Seattle, to move just south of Seattle to a city which includes a higher number of immigrant, some displaced Seattle families, a sanctuary for refugees, and high Hispanic, African, Asian and Samoan populations. God called me away from the comfortable lifestyle to which I was accustomed to a very unfamiliar and unnerving new place. Similarly, to Grant my new home is where even more at-risk youth are, and I know that this is where God wants me to be.

Many kids may not choose to go to unfamiliar places and many have nowhere to go after school. So there is, however, another story to tell. It is the story of the many children that make up membership at Boys and Girls Clubs across America, and The Club in Seattle is no exception. Ms. Patrick Carter, Area Director for Boys and Girls Clubs of King County overseeing two club's programs, including The Club, explains after school youth development programming as a necessity. Carter quotes "America's youth are in a crisis. 11.3 million kids (1 out of 5) leave school every day with no place to go. They risk being unsupervised, unguided and unsafe" (Mar. 2018). Carter continued:

It is unacceptable for millions of kids every day to have no place to go after school. Many of our kids at Rotary are now the victims of being displaced from their Seattle homes. Their parents, even though they work in Seattle, cannot afford to live here anymore. We have a single mom driving from Kent to Seattle 45 miles roundtrip daily beginning at 6:00 AM to get here at The Club by 7:30 AM, only to drop off her two girls before school and work. We then load them up in vans with other kids and take them to school every day. If it were not for places like The Club, that mom would not be able to work. That mom cannot send her kids to school in their new neighborhood due to needing to work in Seattle. So, each day that family makes the sacrificial drive early in the morning and late in the evening to make ends meet.

According to Carter "By the time the family gets home every day, it is 8:00 PM. They are not the only ones; many times, we provide the last hot meal of the day for our members". It is hard to imagine what this family's life would look like without a structured, dedicated, youth development program before and after school. This is also where the church could be of solace and a partner. As a volunteer force, the church would know and see the struggle of this family's life and can, in prayer, look for resources within the church body for more opportunities to help.

Observation

For my summer fieldwork, I chose to volunteer with young girls 8 to 10 years old at The Club. Patrick Carter has had direct contact with at-risk youth for decades. In her role as Area Director/Executive Director, Patrick hires staff, assigns programs, directs operations, fundraises, monitors board engagement, includes parents and families of youth in youth programming outcomes, and loves on children and youth every day of the week where applicable. Known

affectionately as Ms. Carter by club members, she has been there for all youth who have come through The Club's doors. I sat down with Patrick in March 2017 to discuss my fieldwork project. She expressed to me her concern for families being displaced from the changing neighborhood due to gentrification and the effect it is having on youth in her club. The purpose of my fieldwork was to understand the importance of positive youth development and involvement in aligning resources to provide support for at-risk youth affected by loss of their parents' and grandparents' traditional African American community. It is a fact that it is increasingly harder to live in Seattle due to rising rent, higher home prices, and lack of affordable housing. The long-term effects from the lack of affordable living on at-risk youth is unknown. It is also unknown where families being displaced will live or where they will go. With the African American community neighborhood now gentrified, black families must leave what has been traditionally their neighborhood. According to DeSena and Ansalone gentrification is "the conversion of socially marginal and working-class areas of the central city to more affluent residential use" (62).

According to Carter "There is a lot of anxiety among kids these days" (Mar. 2017). Patrick's concern that Seattle youth lack a sense of belonging is significant. From my interview with her, she explained that girls as young as 8 years old are negatively affected by Seattle's increasing homelessness, especially as it may be a reality for their families if unable to afford housing. From this, Patrick had witnessed girls fighting amongst themselves. When the girls were talked to about their behaviors, they expressed fear about their own futures. At least a portion of at-risk youth is homeless. In a Seattle Public Schools Enrollment and Student Outcomes Report, Dr. Natasha M. Rivers emphasizes, "The total number of reported homeless youth 3-21 years old in Seattle Public Schools is 1,672" (10). Of those who are homeless, Dr.

River's Seattle Public Schools Enrollment and Student Outcomes Report adds, "Black students make up over half of the homeless student population or 51.79%, followed by Hispanic/Latino students or 20.22%, and then whites or 11.84%" (11). What makes this statistic even more alarming is out of 52,000 Seattle Public School enrollment numbers, 8% are black students or 4160, and around one quarter of those are homeless (Rivers 11). Patrick acknowledged that The Club served several homeless youth daily (Mar. 2017).

That said, the idea of young girls' behavior provoked by fear plus the safe environment within The Club's walls made for a great place to conduct fieldwork. And throughout the summer I taught an interactive cooking class that helped girls learn to cook, work together to prepare recipes, and build their own community. I used Appreciative Inquiry or AI in my fieldwork. AI was a productive way to discover The Club's program working to provide at-risk youth with a sense of belonging and appreciate to that value (Hammond). According to Hammond, "The tangible result of the inquiry process is a series of statements that describe where the organization wants to be, based on the high moments of where they have been" (6). From my experience interacting with The Club and its operation, I saw how each program within The Club built upon other programs to keep youth engaged. And from this I later designed a program for my church to volunteer using AI as the transformational model for the design. Additionally, The Club instinctively models AI's *five* core strengths including: *Defining* what it should focus on. *Discovering* what it does best. *Dreaming* what The Club can be for its members. *Designing* that dream to *Deliver* on its promise and mission (Hammond 26).

Bryant L. Myers explains "The appreciative approach to social change posits that social organizations can be imagined and then made by beginning with what is already creating value.

If we can determine what is for life and what is generating well-being, we can imagine its expansion" (258). Once more, from my fieldwork an idea for expansion evolved to having the church fill a need as volunteers and mentors for kids.

In the design for the church to forge collaboration, Myers suggests an evaluation step throughout the process of design and discovery called "Valuing or inquiries into what is working" (260). Myers posits "The appreciative bias can also be (further) extended (into) to evaluation. Rather than determining what went wrong and seeking solutions, the evaluation questions are different. What went right? What created energy and excitement? What emerged that people affirm as good (261)? (see table 1).

Table 1

Discovery	Dream	Dialogue	Delivery
What gives the positive youth development program appreciative life?	What is the dream as the church collaborates with The Club and how can the dream align with God's vision?	What should collaboration look like between the church of Holgate and The Club?	As two life-giving organizations form a partnership, evaluation is needed to understand what works well to sustain The Club's existing program delivery.

Evaluation of the young girls in my fieldwork led to a positive outcome of genuine relationships formed through learning cooking techniques and working together. In gathering feedback, the girls expressed having similar circumstances that brought them to The Club, including wanting a place to belong to that summer. Researchers, Loder and Hirsch defend, having a place where adolescent girls can share positive and safe experiences is key to their social development (9). In comparison, I observed another program that engaged girls at The Club.

Inside The Club's gymnasium on any given after-school evening and throughout summer evenings, there are bleachers filled with families, mostly Black adults, babies, children, and teens. Teams of kids wait for practice to begin. On my first day volunteering, there were about 60 people in the gym, and out of that number, there were six White people - one male and five females. There were also a lot of mixed-race children. The White male had the only White child in the gym. I noticed how the community of parents of basketball children were comfortable with each other. There seemed to be a sense of caring and interest in each other's lives and children. It seemed as if the gymnasium was a gathering place. The more I listened, the more I got a sense of the gym was a safe and familiar place. The Club's basketball program always seeks volunteers for scorekeeping, refereeing, and coaching making it a natural place for the church to be involved.

On this day, there were many volunteer coaches waiting to begin their practices in this tiny gym. As one coach was finishing up with his team I listened to him teach. His team was comprised of girls about six years old. His style of coaching was positive and appropriate for girls that age. The coach was competent, knowledgeable, and personable. He would stop the

practice to explain how he wanted them to dribble, defend, or shoot the ball. I knew beforehand that the practice had just started for the season, but the girls on this coach's team were very attentive and enjoying the learning experience. The coach did not go easy on the girls. For example, the girls ran back and forth four laps (the length of the gym) both before practice and afterwards. The girls ran across the gym grumpily, but they ran nevertheless.

At the end of my time that day, I left with a couple of intriguing questions. I wondered if, as the neighborhood was changing from being a Black community to a non-black community, The Club's demographic would change. And would African American churches hold predominately Black congregations? Would youth development programs designed for mostly kids of color continue to be sustainable? In like manner, Myers "idea of "always learning" is relevant. Myers explains:

Holistic practitioners must know that they don't know all they need to know. They must be learners who are always seeking new insights from Scripture, from the community, and from development research…they must be people who document, who ask questions, who listen to the stories of the people, and who spend time with people in reflection (226).

The African American church needs to be aware of the demographic changes of a neighborhood of color and help others see this change as beneficial for growth. Not doing so can lead to self-betrayal. The Arbinger Institute describes this idea of self-betrayal as leading to self-deception, putting oneself in a box and unable to focus on results (174). Even without all the answers, being able to collaborate with existing youth development programming is helping at-risk youth thrive.

I later interviewed the young girls' coach. Coach AC is a Black 33-year-old dad of three kids under the age of six years. I sat down with him at another gymnasium in northeast Seattle

where he coaches predominately White adolescent boys and girls. I referenced seeing him coach at The Club with a style that seemed to engage little girls to understand the game yet also have fun. I also witnessed that he made their practice a true workout. For example, like having them run throughout the practice. Coach AC laughed as he explained why:

> Kids need to learn that athletics is the real deal. If they come with an attitude to try their best, they will make it through the good, the bad, the wins and the losses. Good coaches are teachers and kids inherently understand that. Just like they know when someone isn't a good coach they will ultimately give up. And good coaches help guide kids through the beginning learning phases all athletes go through.

When I asked AC why he coaches, he told me that it was adults who coached him: teachers, coaches, youth leaders, even his parents. AC believes all kids are at-risk. He believes he is making a difference and that he is giving back so that that one kid doesn't fall through the cracks at least not on his watch. (AC)

The Church Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow in Context of Community

Understanding the origin of the church in Black communities helps to answer questions about future sustainability. Perhaps some context of the origin of the church in Black communities might be of some help to answer the questions above of its future sustainability. The revolution of European Christianity has left a bad taste in the mouth of many developing countries (Jenkins). America is an exception. Black Americans, for example, adapted to European Christianity during slavery in America to survive. Dr. Albert J. Raboteau, a Henry W. Putman Professor of Religion and Chairman of the Religion department at Princeton University, expounds on the influence of African American religion in the life of survival for the slave and

his acceptance of a God that loved rather than hurt him. Similarly, Raboteau discusses the importance of the spirituals that expressed transcendence and their sense of humanity, dignity, and heritage. Most important is the attitude towards suffering and accepting suffering as a part of life, not just for black people but for everyone. Indeed, even though slaves learned Western religion, not all slaves were Christian; some kept African customs and cultures which were expressed through their religions in America (Berkley 0:24-6:34). Besides this, Jenkin articulates data of the global world in 2050, "Only one-fifth of the world's 3 billion Christians will be non-Hispanic Whites. Soon, the phrase *a White Christian* may sound like a curious oxymoron, as mildly surprising as *a Swedish Buddhist*" (430).

Today, there is a need for urban church partnership with urban youth development programming. In the article *"Empowerment, Leadership, and Sustainability in a Faith Based partnership to Improve Health"*, researchers use participatory research to build awareness between local churches and community health partners (Young, et al.). Through collaboration, the church provides holistic care, aligning with positive youth development. The Christian faith of the future will be the universal language of God's love for all people, especially the poor. And for tomorrow, once again, there is a need to keep prayer in the forefront of these partnerships. Katongole and Rice expound "The first language of the church in a deeply broken world is not strategy, but prayer…We are called to learn the anguish cry of *lament*" (77). Lamenting is a call to listen to what God wants to teach the church about what to learn and unlearn to thrive in a broken world (78). Through prayer, the church can do what it does best. Prayer can help guide the church to learn how to work with existing youth development programming in showing up regularly and often. Working outside of the church walls and alongside youth development

program specialists, the church learns how to help at-risk youth thrive in tomorrow's uncertain world.

The Project

My Urban African American church has been asked to step up to the challenge to partner and volunteer to make the community aware of its mission to improve the lives of at-risk youth, so they become productive, responsible people. My pastor Jimmy Hurd was one of the first people to volunteer personal time. In a twelve-week message from the pulpit, Jimmy describes the life of a Christlike, complete Christian as:

> One who is in the word of God to develop character and to improve and practice certain behaviors that model Christ. Reading and understanding God's word is key to knowing where God wants to lead. God develops one's character through faith. Practicing certain behaviors include having a plan of action, taking the time to develop meaningful relationships, encouraging others, praying, and being accountable (2017).

Jimmy Hurd also helped recruit volunteers for The Club by printing the following message in a four-week announcement forum: Volunteers Needed. We are recruiting volunteers to work with young people of our community at the Rotary Boys and Girls Club in Seattle. The volunteers are invited to serve as a part of a special project 1-3 times per week from January until March. As a church, we are continually interested in forging partnerships with community organizations that are having a positive impact. If you are interested please see Robin Ullman, Project Coordinator.

The project started with a small group of busy professionals who volunteered to come alongside at-risk youth. All the volunteers were asked for their emails to forward to Patrick who facilitated an online national background check screening. Once approved, Patrick invited volunteers, by email, to participate in the project. The Rotary Club held an orientation to help the

group become familiar with Boys and Girls Club procedures and guidelines, and then the volunteers began visiting The Club.

The project started initially within a strict time frame of three months, but the work is far from finished and now there will be a longer-term project to build upon. The redesigned project includes a framework for transformation for both at-risk youth and Holgate church's volunteers (Myers 239). This design also includes monitoring and evaluation using a learning process approach (Myers 245). According to Myers "In a study of five successful development programs…these programs succeeded because they made continuing adjustments to their program design based on information that arose from a continuous process of monitoring and observation" (245). Members from Holgate volunteering are finding their niches as tutors or with the College Readiness program. In joining Rotary Boys and Girls Club in community development, more volunteers from the church are inquiring about volunteering, and the number of volunteers is growing. In contrast, others have stated they want to volunteer but have not followed through. When the project started in January, there were six participants, today there are eight.

L. Berry a Holgate volunteer is personally engaged with youth on this journey. Berry finds the time and effort a worthwhile answer to a God calling. Berry explains "Patrick immediately connected me with a young girl to mentor. I invited her and her mother to Microsoft for a tour of my finance department." This is a firsthand connection, perhaps even a potential internship for this young woman. This connection is a seed being planted and a step closer to a holistic and thriving future. This approach includes coming together in prayer, meeting with youth development program leaders, and in time, there will be other opportunities to serve. As the project coordinator, it took a concerted effort to recruit volunteers through church

announcements and word of mouth. Through answering curious questions to engaging in

conversations with others each week, I also found myself coaching volunteers on how to begin

conversations with at-risk youth. All of time involved brings Holgate one step closer to its vision

in the community.

The design for Holgate's partnership with The Club began with the desire to empower the

existing youth development programming by building relationships and simply understanding at-

risk youth needs today. In so doing, it has become important for the church to know itself and its

worldview. Myers' explains how the church must be aware of its own cultural assumptions and

as an African American church in a gentrified neighborhood being able to see the reality of

diversity among people (249). The church also should be aware of its own Christian traditions

and how the church acts because of it. This spiritual view is important for Holgate to realize as a

changing neighborhood may also mean diverse worldviews and spirituality (Myers 249).

Furthermore, Holgate will need to learn that it can learn from The Club and its at-risk

youth (Myers 249). At-risk youth are constantly living with injustice and uncertainty. By failing

to understand their experiences needed relationships lack attention. Researcher, Shawn

Ginwright helps to identify the cultural makeup and complexities that both adults and youth face

living in a society full of systemic discrimination and injustice. Ginwright looked for ways to

address the need for both adults and youth to understand their individual perspectives on social

problems facing African Americans living in America. Ginwright suggests that African

American adults need to be aware of their own insecurities so that they can effectively

understand youth societal concerns (107). Ginwright explains "Through workshops, meditation,

reading material, and discussion groups, adults are given important self-care tools to transform

how they think about working with youth" (108). Ginwright's information is one roadmap for

intergenerational work between youth and adults in an urban community. It also addresses many intergenerational and cultural attributes common in African American families and communities. As a result, more needed time will enhance the design for Holgate and The Club's collaboration. A next phase to recruit more volunteers will include a roadmap for intergenerational work that volunteers can study. This idea of a roadmap will be a vision for relationship building between youth and adults to make the partnership of these two groups successful.

Why Invest in At-risk Youth?

To help make a difference in the lives of underserved youth, it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel. For example, technology and information offers access to some great examples of at-risk youth advocacy from others who have made a difference. Marian Wright Edelman has tirelessly advocated for the rights of children and youth to have the same entitlements of the rich in America. What began as a cause for justice in America's poorest part of the county has now grown to include all America's forgotten and exploited youth. A letter written by Edelman to the President of the United States before his first state of the union speech on January 30, 2018 reads:

> According to the most recent federal data, more than 3.2 million children – 1 in 5 – live
> in poverty, six million live in extreme poverty, 14.8 million children live in food-insecure
> households, more than one million homeless children are in our schools, 3.9 million
> children still lack health insurance, the majority of public school students of all races
> cannot read or compute at grade level, nearly 700,000 children are abused and/or
> neglected, nearly 50,000 children are in juvenile justice facilities or adult jails and
> prisons, and 3,128 children and teens were killed with a gun in 2016, enough to fill 156

classrooms of 20 children. All these distressing outcomes disproportionately affect children of color who will be the majority of children in our country by 2020 and already are the majority of our children under five.

It is a challenge for the church to pinpoint the implications of disparate poverty due to the uncertain direction of the economy of the United States. Despite this, as one goal, it will be wonderful to hear hundreds of youth from impoverished backgrounds break from cycles of no one in the family going to college to being first generation college students and graduates (Lucier).

Daniel G. Groody, author of the book, *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice: Navigating the Path to Peace,* writes*:*

Because Christian spirituality deals with the highest aspirations of the human life, it deals with the heart…In other words, the heart is the place of divine-human encounter. The challenge of Christian spirituality, lived as following Jesus, deals with making the mind and heart of Christ one's own. Likewise, fasting and praying help achieve this heart of Christ. (243, 249)

Groody elaborates "Prayer is not just a psychological tool for self-actualization but a spiritual grace that facilitates human transformation" (250). The urban church I attend has a stated vision "To be a multicultural, multigenerational body of Christ expressing the goodness of God's Kingdom that transforms lives and communities" (Holgate). To be successful in the collaboration with at-risk youth development programming, the church will be challenged to look within for transformation in order to live out its vision in a changing neighborhood. That

said, African American church volunteers will need to be ready for cultural differences and generational divides among at-risk youth that issues of poverty and inequity bring.

The State of Being At-Risk in America

There is a growing concern for youth who come from families faced with the inability to get out of poverty. The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) explains:

There were 73.6 million children in the U.S. in 2016, 23 percent of the nation's population. The child population has increased every year over the past 50 years. In 2016 children of color made up 49 percent of all children and the majority of children under 5. Nearly 1 in 5 children were poor in 2016—more than 13.2 million children. Nearly 70 percent of poor children were children of color. About 1 in 3 Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children and 1 in 4 Hispanic children were poor compared with 1 in 9 White children. (CDF 2018)

In no way do I infer from my research that the problem of poverty in America as divisive. For example, poor children of color are every American's problem, not just people of color. The CDF reports that poverty affects all races "The income and wealth inequality gap continue to widen with low-income families and households with people of color falling further and further behind. In 2016 White families held seven times more wealth than Black families and five times more than Hispanic families" (CDF 2018). Everyone can help make a social impact in reducing poverty among all children and especially children of color. The subject of race and ethnicity in America is one that is unfairly divided and for many compelling reasons. On one hand, being of a privileged social economic status is a long-term constant and the opposite is also true. Disproportionately, White Americans have enjoyed the privileged status of wealth and economic

prowess, while Black and other Americans of color have not. And, unfortunately, racism still exists today in structures designed to keep the poor marginalized and unable to claim the same basic human rights of those who are not judged by their skin color, neighborhood, or social-economic status [SES]. Many good people want to know how, as advocate for basic human rights, we can further our societal responsibilities to ensure future success for the next generation to live more equitably.

Defining the At-Risk Label

Children born at-risk in America have a lesser chance at flourishing as adults over children who are born into more privileged families. At-risk youth in America are children who, by no fault of their own, are born into a world of poverty that contrasts privilege and, for many reasons, lack basic human rights. The majority of at-risk youth are disproportionately children of color (CDF 2018). Even worse is the unknown potential of these children left to somehow survive in this country unwilling to end poverty. By the year 2020, (two years from now) children of color will be the majority--a tipping point for racial and ethnic diversity (CDF 2018). From here, the numbers for America's poorest are not only alarming but are unfathomable. According to the CDF, in 2016, 13.2 million children were poor, or 1 in 3 Black/Native American, 1 in 4 Hispanic compared to 1 in 9 White children (2018). Additional CDF statistics suggests "About 3 million children live in families trying to survive on $2 a day per person which rivals child poverty in some of the world's poorest countries. And the youngest children are the poorest, nearly 1 in 5 are under 6 years old" (2018).

Income and wealth in America are two indicators that reflect how at-risk youth live each day. In fact, the gap has never been as wide as it is today between those who can afford to live

comfortably and those who do not. In 2016, the top 1 percent in America held almost 39 percent of its wealth, almost twice the amount of the bottom 90 percent (Egan, 2017). And according to CDF:

> In 2015 the median family income of White households with children ($80,800) was about two times that of Black ($35, 900) and Hispanic households with children ($41,000). In 2016, White families held seven times more wealth than Black families and five times more that Hispanic families...Children comprise more than 1 in 5 of the nearly 550,000 homeless people living in shelters, transitional housing and on the streets on a single night in January 2016. Black families represented about half of homeless families with children and 49 percent of those who were sheltered that night. (2018)

These two indicators, income and wealth inequality experienced by at-risk youth, are not all-encompassing by any means. For example, Sebastian Lipina's study, *The Biological Side of Social Determinants: Neural Costs of Childhood Poverty* defends research originating from a century ago in developmental psychology. The context of such research looks to various theories that make up "exploratory and experimental" frameworks for the study of human development (Lipina 266). Social interaction theories contain "series of context" which describe a child's interpretation of social interaction including everyday experiences from family, peers, and teachers, to community interactions including media (Lipina 266). All interactions form a child's behavior (Lipina 266-71). Lipina posits:

> Available evidence from neuroscientific studies indicates that the influences of poverty on brain development are heterogeneous and modulated by stage of development, neural network, and level of organization (i.e., molecular, neural activation, cognition). In this

modulation, the neural systems most sensitive to poverty seem to be those involved in genitive control, language, and learning processing (275).

Children and youth at-risk are also subject to food insecurity in their households which affects their nutrition and brain development. Many of these hungry youth have poor nutrition and health and lack quality healthcare. Furthermore, at-risk youth do not fare well in the public-school system, and many cannot read at grade level. According to the CDF "In 2015, the majority of public school children in fourth and eighth grades could not read at grade level, including more than 75 percent of fourth and eighth grade Black, Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native public-school students compared with less than 60 percent of White students." Likewise, researchers McGill-Franzen, Anne, et al. suggest summer reading as one way to narrow the gap but admit that access to stimulating reading material is problematic. McGill-Franzen, Anne, et al., argue evidence pointing to this gap:

> The gap is already large upon student's entry to kindergarten, exacerbated over time by the few resources for academic learning available to poor families over the summer…As a harbinger of the future, a steadily increasing achievement gap translates into intergenerational poverty and diminished human potential (585).

Beyond this point, many children and teens experience mental and emotional trauma associated with poverty. Developing partnerships with existing urban programming can allow for many of these youths to get the kind of help from resources aligned with youth development programming. In the article, *Predicting Improvement of Transitioning Young People in the Partnerships for Youth Transition Initiative: Findings from a Multisite Demonstration* by Mason G. Haber, et al., youth in need of mental health support for transition into adulthood need many

forms of partnership (489). This is a concept that I have not thought about before my research, but it is too important to overlook. Urban youth, particularly impoverished African American youth and other youth of color, experience emotional trauma regularly. Not having enough food to eat or not having a bed to sleep in at night is traumatic.

As if this were not enough, many at-risk youth are left out of opportunities to grow up and become responsible citizens. More evidence of this is the staggering rates of incarceration among poor youth and youth of color. According to the CDF:

> Many children are incarcerated in the juvenile justice and/or adult criminal justice systems, placing them at risk of serious physical and psychological harm. In 2015, 48,043 children were held in residential placement [youth detention centers] more than 60 percent were Black or Hispanic; 993 children were incarcerated in adult prisons, and Black children are nine times more likely than White children to receive an adult prison sentence. Once incarcerated, children are at risk of serious harm, including physical and psychological abuse, sexual assault, suicide, inadequate educational instruction and solitary confinement. (2018)

In her New York Times Best-seller, Attorney Michelle Alexander defends the reality of the prison system's unfair practices against people of color, especially young black and brown men. Alexander contends:

> Many people never even meet with an attorney; witnesses are routinely paid and coerced by the government; police regularly stop and search people for no reason whatsoever; penalties for many crimes are so severe that innocent people plead guilty…and children, even as young as fourteen, are sent to adult prisons. (59)

The reality of youth incarceration is that hundreds of children are placed in adult prison systems annually and half of those charged for non-violent offenses (CDF 2018). And according to the CDF, race and ethnicity play a tremendous role in the equation as Black youth are nine times as likely as White youth to be sentenced to adult prisons (2018). Additionally, incarcerated youth are abused by others in prison. Dierkhising, Lane, and Natsuaki in a preliminary study write:

> According to these data, the most prevalent forms of abuse during incarceration are physical abuse and assault. Physical abuse by staff was reported by approximately one third of youth who directly experienced physical abuse (34.4%), and more than two thirds reported either witnessing or hearing about physical abuse happen to others (71.9%, 78.1%, respectively). For this very reason lawmakers are considering this social and emotional abuse attention for policymaking and to increase youth safety in prisons. (188)

The experience of poverty and of being at-risk for youth today will more likely determine their future without intervention. As today's world pursues greater innovation and the need for skilled people to control these systems, the next generation needs to be prepared for specialized skilled fields including health sciences and technology. A child today, denied of his or her basic human rights to be nourished, have shelter and a place to sleep, have an opportunity to finish high school and beyond, will not be able to innovate or build his or her confidence. The divide today increasing the gap between the wealthy and the poor needs advocates to intervene help for all children to thrive. Indeed, at-risk children need people, including the church, who care about America's future enough to advocate for them.

Bringing the Hard Facts Closer to Home

Seattle is a unique city as growth and development has changed the landscape known by many long-time residents. The traditional neighborhoods of yesterday have changed, and gentrification has changed historically African American neighborhoods into something unrecognizable. In fact, many African Americans no longer can afford their former African American neighborhood as home prices have increased mortgages, taxes, and rents. That said, the former African American neighborhood still reflects a diverse community. Many Black people still work in Seattle; they are commuting from outlying city areas in the south like Kent, Federal Way and Tacoma, and they cannot afford to leave jobs in Seattle. Many people still have children attending Seattle schools, and these families travel together daily to work and school.

For the most part being at-risk means living in poverty; belonging to certain ethnic, racial and social classes; and/or being homeless. Naturally, marginalization is concomitant to worries about the future. As Seattle grows increasingly unaffordable for the middle and lower-class wage-earner, the pressure on its marginalized youth to achieve academic success, eventual employment, and a decent place to live will become even more out of reach. Once more, at-risk youth will experience the anxiety of an uncertain future, but will recognize this problem and what will they do about it?

There are multiple examples, data, and information on increasing housing prices and lack of available housing in Seattle and its outlying neighborhoods. Seattle is outpacing cities across the nation in rising home prices along with shrinkage of inventory of homes for sale. The medium income is $80,000 and the medium home price is $609,000 (NWMLS). Conversely, the ability to meet this medium income criterion for the at-risk youth family from the dwindling

African American neighborhood once known as the Central District or CD is dire. According to

Henry McGee, a Seattle University Law Professor:

> The overall percentage of households reporting incomes of $50,000 or more has risen
>
> substantially. Most black families in the CD report incomes of less than $15,000 and
>
> these low-income families comprised a smaller percentage of the total households in
>
> 2000 than in 1990. In 2000 most of the area's residents between 22 and 39 were white or
>
> Asian. Most blacks, in comparison, were either under 22 or over 60. These percentages
>
> suggest that there are fewer blacks in the District in prime income earning years.

There is compelling evidence for community development efforts between urban youth

programming and African American churches in Seattle's vastly changing urban neighborhood.

With successful urban youth programming geared towards developing the whole child and teens

into responsible adults and citizens, like what is seen at the Rotary Boys and Girls Club, the

African American church and its local neighboring churches in the community are being called

to this social justice work; therefore, more partnership efforts should be explored.

Urban Churches as Role Models in Partnership for Positive Outcomes

Parents living, working, and worshipping in or near Seattle's urban neighborhood may

look to urban youth development programming and surrounding churches for support in positive

child development. Additionally, single moms, two parent households, caregivers, and even

homeless families can benefit from both the church and urban youth development programming.

For example, each has individual resources and strengths such as biblical teaching (church) and

character building (both church and youth development programming) curriculums. That said,

the role of the adult in the Christian family is critical for positive youth development.

In Meagan Patrick's article, *Faith-Place Parenting Intervention,* a University study revealed how parents from a church collaborated with an evidence-based prevention program to better understand the social context and issues of their own youth. The research study was successful in that participants of the study were able to self-report advantages of the University partnership. Patrick explains, "Pretest data show that 70% of parents had never participated in a parenting program of any kind, although the group felt that parent involvement in preventing youth problems was extremely important" (4).

Associate Professor of John Hopkins University, Steven B. Sheldon suggests "School outreach to involve families and the community in children's education is an important strategy for increasing the number of families involved and the consequences of their efforts" (151). This research study was a look into the partnership between school, family, and community to improve student test taking. To emphasize the previous point, in Seattle's urban neighborhood, the African American church can be the community partner that helps support urban youth with existing youth development program partners that already have partnerships with schools. The African American church is extremely family-oriented. At Holgate, generations of families are represented in the pews. Holgate can serve both as a role model for intergenerational family and representatives for mentoring at-risk youth at The Club. Additionally, the church is another layer of ensuring collaboration between youth and their success in school and in life.

Conclusion

In closing, I have initiated and lead a project for my church, Holgate Church of Christ, in forging collaboration with an existing at-risk youth development program by volunteering at The Rotary Boys and Girls Club in Seattle's Central District. This is a neighborhood changed by its

future and in the middle of that change at-risk youth are experiencing its adverse effects. These adverse effects including poverty, systemic racism, and homelessness must be stopped. There are many ways to encourage others to care for today's youth and invest in their tomorrow. But for this involvement to happen within the church, it will take a revival of inner self reflection and a change of heart for some, a spiritual awakening for others, and a commitment to a thriving tomorrow for the next generation. The time is now for the church to join existing youth development social advocacy programming. In fact, the church must forge the collaboration. Groody calls it love. According to Groody "Discipleship challenges us to behold and love the world as God loves us in Christ" (263). The African American church is one church that can through partnership with existing youth development programming, provide that love. African American churches and all churches are exceptionally qualified for partnership with social advocacy programs that address the risk of detrimental poverty among at-risk youth. The church can care, love children, and volunteer at youth development programs. The church must love God and pray for guidance and encourage others to do the same.

Seattle's African American population is small in comparison to other big cities experiencing economic disparity. But, Seattle's at-risk youth will be left behind unless the church community can along with youth development programming, encouraging them to become productive citizens. The Holgate church is forging a partnership with Rotary Boys and Girls Club by volunteering regularly. During a meeting with Area Director Patrick Carter and a small group from Holgate church at the beginning of the project, Patrick surprisingly remarked "No church or, for that matter, no African American group of people (volunteers) have ever offered help to this club at least not while I have been here" (Mar. 2018). This collaboration is timely. Paul reminds us in scripture:

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the

cone who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things

grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each

be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God's service; you

are God's field, God's building. (*New International Version*, 1 Cor. 3:6-9)

This approach includes coming together in prayer, meeting with youth development program

leaders, and in time there will be other opportunities to serve. The key here is for the church to

understand that forging collaboration is about building relationships. I had a unique opportunity

to use Appreciate Inquiry in my summer field work at The Club to observe, ask questions, and

learn from others in field everyday working with at-risk youth. From this I contextualized this

project for the church to join in. To be a successful partnership, the church must align its mission

with youth development programming. Perhaps this is a bigger design by the ultimate Creator.

At-risk youth need not live at-risk. For others wanting to take this model into their churches and

urban neighborhoods, I recommend volunteering at an existing youth development program and

discover and appreciate what is working. Then begin to dream how to provide a volunteer base

engaged in building relationships with youth. I have included a model with several practical

steps to begin this journey (See Appendix). The dream is imperative, at-risk youth must begin to

thrive with the church by their side.

Appendix

7 Steps to Church/Youth Development Partnership (facilitator's guide)

Step One:	Volunteer at a local Boys and Girls Club (The Club) or Local Youth Development Program (LYDP)
Step Two:	Meet with Executive Director at The Club to discuss potential church volunteer base
Step Three:	Meet with church leadership to ask them to commit to prayer and to help recruit volunteers
Step Four:	Meet with volunteers and arrange background checks and orientation with The Club
Step Five:	Allow time for volunteers to find their niches
Step Six:	Meet with youth to explain church volunteer partnership
Step Seven:	Plan to meet regularly with appointed church coordinator and youth programming lead for continued assessment and feedback. Integrate feedback into program.

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