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## THE CONDUIT OF THE CHURCH

The structure to address social and racial problems is already in place. We don't need to create new institutions in order to implement viable and lasting solutions; we just need to leverage that which we already have.

The church, in particular, exists as the best vehicle through which we find the necessary elements to achieve the purpose of social restoration, for a number of reasons.

First and most obvious, churches are located everywhere. In fact, there is an average of three churches for every public school in America.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, churches are closer to the needs of the people since they are located in the heart of the community. In addition, churches offer the largest volunteer force in our nation. Next, churches already have buildings for housing community programs. And finally, churches offer a spiritual and moral frame of reference for helping people make the right choices.

Since many of our communities' issues are ethical and moral at their foundation, churches represent the most natural social service agency to address these issues. The church provides holistic, long-term solutions that change how people think, which ultimately determines how they live.

One avenue of broadening the churches' impact on their communities is to recognize that churches and schools represent the social, educational, familial, and potentially spiritual nucleus of the community. As people and businesses come and go, churches and schools remain and are ready to accommodate newcomers to their neighborhoods. If these two institutions

share common ground as well as longevity, a strategic alliance between the two can precipitate, to a greater degree, positive outcomes for children, youth, and families living in the community.

The spiritual must never be neglected if life is to function as our Creator intended. On the contrary, the spiritual must integrate with the social at every level. Yet doing this in a nation that has essentially removed God from our public schools and many arenas within our communities must be done in such a way that respects the institutional separation of church and state while also reflecting God's kingdom values through acts of service.

In essence, social services to those in need satisfies the law of love while building a relational bridge back to God and the ministries offered through the local body of Christ.

Research verifies what we have frequently heard, and that is that those most open to conversion and life transformation are under the age of eighteen. Two out of every three Christians trust Christ prior to this age.<sup>4</sup> Yet our operative values in the church, which are often revealed by our budgets, rarely take this knowledge seriously. It may be time to rethink our strategies.

George Barna, popular Christian pollster, states that polling shows that the target of the modern day church is adults. He says, "Adults are where the Kingdom action is."<sup>5</sup> However, as a result of extensive polling on the formation of worldview, habits, spiritual development, and the creation of patterns for making life choices, Barna concludes that outreach "to children is the single most strategic ministry in God's kingdom

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[and will have] . . . the greatest possible impact.”<sup>6</sup>

Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent annually on programs, worldwide missions, and ministries aimed at adults when the ripest harvest is right across the street in the lives of young people longing to hear that they are valuable, skilled, and have both a future and a hope. The church is the corporate structure already set in place to deliver that message to a generation in need.

As we reach kids, they become the conduit to reaching the whole family and community. As the lives of children are impacted through churches’ adoption of schools, the opportunity to access and influence families increases. To the degree that families are strengthened and stabilized, communities are positively affected. This is so because the breakdown of the family is the single greatest cause of social disintegration.

And social disintegration affects everyone in our nation, not just those living in our urban centers.

Taxpayers spend more than \$8 billion annually on high school dropouts for public assistance programs such as food stamps.<sup>7</sup> Teen pregnancies contribute to a \$10 billion annual bill by way of public assistance, lost revenue, and increased health care costs.<sup>8</sup> High school dropouts earn an average of \$260,000 less over the course of their lives than graduates—which equates to a cumulative loss of over \$300 billion annually in earned taxable revenue.<sup>9</sup> Our prison population has nearly tripled the number of inmates since 1987 to the highest per capita rate in the world,<sup>10</sup> and now costs us over \$52 billion a year on budgets for prisons.<sup>11</sup>

**“HUMAN PROGRESS IS  
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The consequences of society's problems reach us all and have contributed to our nation standing on the brink of economic collapse.

Our society's problem is not solely our government's problem. It is the church's problem. It is our problem. Our mission field is not merely across the sea. It is across the street—in our own Jerusalem and Judea—in Detroit, Dallas, Baltimore, Miami, and in your community. To look away now may cost us more than we can afford. It may even cost us the futures of our own sons and daughters.

### **KINGDOM IMPACT IN THE CULTURE**

Making an impact in our communities is not something that will come easily, though. As Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. . . . Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."<sup>12</sup>

One of the ways that this is done is through what we have established in Dallas as a local model of church-school partnerships. Church-school partnerships consist of churches partnering with schools to seek to rebuild communities by comprehensively influencing the lives of urban youth and their families in addressing the education, health, economic, and social needs of hurting people based on spiritual principles.

This strategy began organically when I was a young pastor in what was then, and still is now, a predominantly urban community nearly three decades ago. A nearby high school

was experiencing increased difficulties at the time, including delinquencies and low academic achievement. Gang activity had broken out affecting all areas of performance within the school. The principal of the school decided to reach out to me for help. After I got his call, I decided to go over to the school with around twenty-five men from our church. The principal stopped all the classes and brought all of the male students into the gymnasium, and we shared what it was like to be a real man.

After our time together, and after some of the men from the church began hanging out in the hallways—offering help and hope to those in need, plus accountability for those who wanted to cause trouble—the gang activity shut down. Student grades went up, delinquency was lowered, and the school acknowledged that the church connection was good for producing a more productive learning environment.

The principal later became the superintendent of the district of eighteen schools, and requested our church's involvement in all eighteen schools. We then organized ourselves and adopted all of the schools, expanding our support services to each through mentoring, tutoring, counseling, offering skills training and wrap-around family support services. When the word got out to neighboring school districts, the eighteen schools soon became thirty-six, and eventually increased upwards of over sixty schools at this time.

In addition to that, I initiated a meeting open to all the principals once a month and hosted at our church for Bible study, prayer, and spiritual encouragement. Over the years,

we saw an average of thirty to forty in attendance, and these meetings continue to this day biannually.

Many of the problems students had in school were an extension of brokenness in the homes. When we adopted the school, we also connected with the families, which in turn allowed us to connect at a deeper level with the entire community.

As our church positioned itself to be the major social service delivery system to the schools, the church provided an avenue to community transformation outside of the schools. This came through a pregnancy center, thrift store, educational center, food pantry, and much more. In fact, we have one of the largest functioning black pregnancy centers in the nation, providing not only prenatal care but also classes for both fathers and mothers.

We help people get an education and acquire job skills through our Technology Institute, then help them find jobs and get homes. We have a thrift store to help sustain and expand the economic growth in the community, as well as a Credit Union. We develop businesses and provide medical assistance on a regular basis free of charge to the community.

Why do we do this?

Because the church has been uniquely called to impact our society for good. Churches around the country are to set the agenda for effecting positive values and beliefs. One way this can be done is by partnering with public schools and reaching into the community to attract a high quality of life in that area. When churches can set the agenda for the community, positive returns are compounded.