

DISTINCTIVES OF MINISTRY TO URBAN CHILDREN/FAMILIES

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Introduction

As I set out to explore the inherent distinctive of urban ministry, specifically as it relates to children, I began realizing that though I have lived in urban environments/communities all of my life it is difficult to put the experience into words. There are some truths that really have to be experienced in order for one to fully grasp what an environment is like. Trying to explain the differences between what it means to minister to kids in the city and kids in the suburb is like trying to explain what snow is to a person who has never experienced living in an environment where it snows – you simply have to *be there*. Though this is true I will attempt highlighting some of the distinctive that I have gleaned from my years of living and doing ministry in urban environments. Some of these realities are true of non-urban settings however they are seen in disproportionate numbers in urban contexts.

Cultural Diversity

The need to speak the Gospel in the language of more than one cultural group to ensure receptivity is part and parcel of urban ministry to children/families. In urban contexts one is surrounded by a vast number of cultural groups that is distinct from ones own. In such an environment the reality is that many, if not most churches tend to segregate and zero in on producing a worshipping community that caters to one individual culture. Subsequently many congregations experience limited growth in relation to the potential growth that could be experienced. Many congregations are unwilling to stretch themselves beyond this pattern, however those that do find that real community and effective ministry does not come easy – especially as it relates to ministries for children and families, yet it is nevertheless worth celebrating once achieved!

Concern for Safety and Well Being

Local news reports often provide a warped view of city life that leaves an outsider with a misguided view of what urban environments are like. Certainly there are a vast number of negatives, yet there are even more positives that are overlooked and unreported. With the presence of both negative and positive experiences in urban environments, it is important to be spiritually prepared when attempted to minister to the urban child. In the city of Chicago where I live, we approached the month of June – six months into the year 2009 and were able to report that approximately 40 kids/teens had been victims of violent shootings. Presenting God to children in such an environment requires contextualizing the Bible to address the pain and frustration that many urban kids live with daily.

Building on Different Foundations

Urban ministry to children is a ministry that is built on a foundation that is vastly distinct from that of many suburban churches. Many suburban churches are built on the foundation of spiritually forming children so that they live for and serve God as children and into adulthood, while many urban ministries are built upon a foundation of cementing biblical truth into the minds of children in order for them to store it up for a later time when they are old enough to use it. The expectation of many is that they will eventually leave church and return some day when they are adults because we have taught them well enough. The drop – out rate of young people continues to repeat itself because kids are not experiencing relevancy when they come to church, rather they are forced to sit through worship gatherings that are designed to be relevant to adults who are present and change is necessary to achieve the desired result of developing people who passionately follow Jesus

Limited Resources and Adult Ministry Focus

Many urban churches tend to be adult focused. Urban leaders are focused on repairing the lives of the broken adults they see within urban communities with a seeming unawareness that part of the reason for the brokenness they see is because of a failure on the part of adults to properly invest in the lives of those broken people while they were young children. An additional unspoken barrier to giving adequate attention to ministry to children is the financial needs of congregations – kids allowances are not adequate to finance the ministry. This remains a frustrating reality. Additionally, adequate and applicable training for ministry to children in urban settings is lacking.

Urban Children/Family Ministry practice necessitates the inclusion of some of the following:

Holistic Approach

The best urban kids ministry is a ministry effort that embraces a holistic approach to ministry. A ministry that refuses to ignore the daily needs and social disparities encountered by the urban child cultivates the ground of receptivity to the Gospel message. Jesus must be presented as one who is not only concerned about their salvation, but also about their daily situations. Urban ministry at its best will extend beyond Sunday morning gatherings to include programs that address the social and educational needs of children in a particular area. In many urban areas children do not have access to arts, music, and dance classes due to financial challenges or inaccessibility. Can these type of classes be provided in the community at reduced costs through churches?

Help Them See Beyond Tomorrow and Develop a Proper View of Self

Many urban children, particularly children of color, are constantly faced with societal messages that communicate to them that they are “less than.” Whether it’s the texture of their hair, the style in which they wear it, the way they talk, or the manner in which they dress. Receiving sublime messages that one is less valuable can wear down self esteem and diminishes self confidence. Many consider themselves inferior and uncertain of what it means to be loved, and children feel the constant pressure of needing to prove themselves because of a lack of positive affirmations. In addition issues of violence, insecurity, and poverty fuel a ‘live only for today’ mentality that smashes dreams to the ground. Ministry in urban environments must find ways to inspire hope and confidence.

The Oasis – Creating Environments of Hope and Solace

The gift of presence is a gift that is valued by urban children/families! Provision of clean, fun, and safe places where children can simply “be” and also “become” all that God intends for them to be are both lacking and yet also necessary not only because children are valuable but also to shield them from some of the hostility they face each day. Sue Miller’s concept of “Making Church the Best Hour of a Child’s Week” could never be more important in the urban context. In many urban communities, parks are present, but unsafe, family vacations unaffordable for families with multiple children, many rely on public transportation rather than the luxury of two or even one family car, so the provision of free, family friendly environments are crucial.

Urban – Suburban Partnerships

I often wonder how partnerships can evolve as we do ministry in distinctly different contexts. What would happen if we possessed more of a Kingdom mentality that inspires us to reach beyond ourselves and our specific ministry contexts and work together recognizing the value, significance and contribution potential of each context. In saying partnership, I am not encouraging what I have seen in the past – a relationship where one group dominates the other or becomes the “savior” of the other, rather a true partnership where both parties recognizes the value and contribution of the other and develops a reciprocal relationship.