

Youth and Religion Project

Module 8

Church as Sanctuary for Puerto Rican Youth

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“Together With Jesus” (TWJ) is an urban youth ministry outreach program that caught the attention of the Youth and Religion Project’s Summer 2000 research team charged with canvassing urban Latino congregations in Metropolitan Chicago. The teenagers served by most such ministries are especially at risk of dropping out of school, gang involvement, premarital sex, teenage pregnancy, and drug use; TWJ impressed us with their creative answers to these challenges. Together with Jesus—a pseudonym—is part of an urban and mixed racial-ethnic evangelical congregation that we call Urban Faith Community Church (UFCC). TWJ services take place on Thursday evenings and usually last a minimum of two hours. TWJ attracts teenagers between the ages of 13 and 18, and for a typical meeting, approximately 120-150 such youth attend, predominantly Puerto Rican (with a significant African American presence and a handful of whites, Asian-Americans, and mixed race-ethnic participants). A typical service includes an “ice breaker” in the form of a lighthearted game, praise and worship, an offering, and religious teachings. Integral to TWJ services are elements of the urban youth culture, particularly the incorporation of Christian R&B and rap music during meetings, as well as the youth’s style of dress and talk. Based on our observations of TWJ services, formal interviews with youth pastor Bobby Ramirez (more affectionately known as “Pastor Bobby” by youth and adults of UFCC), informal conversations with volunteer adult leaders, and months-long series of visits with two UFCC families, we suggest five significant factors that have enabled the TWJ youth program and UFCC generally to serve as a sanctuary for Puerto Rican urban youth: youth-oriented activities, leadership roles, racial/ethnic/cultural affirmation, intergenerational relationships, and “extension of family.”

Youth-Oriented Activities

TWJ provides a number of youth-based programs and activities to keep teenagers engaged—both as participants and as leaders—beyond the once-a-week Thursday evening services. Common activities include Friday night movies shown at the church, Christian R&B and hip-hop concerts, overnight “lock-ins,” and other entertainment-oriented religious events. Many of these additional programs take place on a Friday or Saturday evening. The leaders choose these days intentionally: Friday and Saturday are days when young people typically have increased opportunities to hang out and become involved with at-risk behaviors.

TWJ’s alternative to Halloween event called “Amazing Grace,” held during a weekend in late October, may serve as an example. Amazing Grace draws hundreds of youth, not only from UFCC, but also from other Chicago congregations and high schools. A major attraction for this event is a human-sized maze that spreads through three unlit rooms in a building located across the street from UFCC. The maze—which TWJ youth and Pastor Bobby construct—is made out of dozens of refrigerator-sized cardboard boxes that have been taped together and painted black on the inside. Participants, who enter the maze in groups of five, must blindly tunnel through the maze in the dark for twenty minutes or more, eventually emerging to the applause of their peers on another side of the building. (Pastor Bobby commented that if a participant has not emerged after 30 minutes, s/he is helped out of the maze by a “maze monitor.”) Despite the fun, there are strict rules for those going through the maze: no horseplay, especially between girls and boys. Another major attraction of Amazing Grace is a highly competitive breakdancing contest (with \$50 going to the winner) that showcases the dancing skills of youth from the Chicago area. In many respects, this contest is similar to a breakdancing competition occurring “on the street.” Nonparticipants—as well as “breakers”—form a circle around the space where the breakers perform. A DJ (in this instance, Pastor Bobby’s son) plays Christian rap music that provides the pulsating beats and rhythms for the dancers to “pop and lock,” “spin,” and contort their bodies in perplexing forms. There is also an MC to introduce each dancer and keep the crowd engaged by providing commentary on each breaker’s performance. However, the MC makes sure the breakers and crowd participants “keep it clean.” For instance, when one young male participant,

seeing a breaker do a difficult breaking move, yelled, “Heelllll yeah!!!”, the MC responded into the microphone, “Watch your language!” and the teen acknowledged his error by raising his hand and saying, “I know. My fault. My fault.” The MC is also vital in regulating the competitive tension that escalates among the breakdancers. When a breaker, for example, lightly taunts another breaker standing to the side of the performance area with his moves, the MC shouts, “Hey! No need for that!” Ultimately, the winner of the contest is chosen by the crowd; the breaker who receives the loudest cheers from the crowd is crowned the victor. For those teens who are not skilled breakdancers, there are other activities in which they can participate including hula-hoop and food eating contests, with winners receiving a Christian music CD. Christian rap artists also perform during the weekend event.

At the very least, Amazing Grace functions as a fund raiser for TWJ, where \$6 is charged for entry into the maze (\$3 for re-entry), and refreshments such as soda, bottled water, and nachos are available for \$2 or less. Amazing Grace also provides a safe place for youth to hang out while still participating in activities they would enjoy doing if outside of a youth ministry context. Most significant, however, is that even though Amazing Grace is for youth to enjoy themselves, substantial time is made for religious expression and teaching. For example, during a rap group performance, one of the rappers remarked that “...hip-hop is nothing without God!” and told the breakdancers that “God was with you on the floor!” Also, Pastor Bobby gave a brief sermon, referring to his pocket bible, and focused on issues such teenagers remaining virgins (citing Luke 1:26-27) and encouraged teenagers to stay in high school and subsequently finish college. This brief sermon functioned much like those of TWJ’s Thursday night meetings—including prayer and an altar call. In sum, the youth-oriented activities sponsored by TWJ are elaborately planned and make a conscious effort to incorporate fun with faith. Pastor Bobby says that he likes to “go all out” for these types of events and has had the support of the senior pastor to do so.

Leadership Roles

Another way that TWJ provides sanctuary for its youth is through the leadership roles made available for them. One example is a program, implemented by Pastor Bobby, where teenage members serve as “Levites.” Levites are youth who have been hand-selected by the youth pastor and adult leaders of the church to help them during TWJ services. Not only do Levites train to be youth leaders, but they also learn to read the Bible in great detail, learn how to pray, and learn how to communicate with God. Teens have other opportunities to serve in leadership roles in TWJ services: as praise and worship team members (instrumentalists and/or vocalists), overseers of the audio-visual equipment, prayer intercessors for altar call, tithing collectors, or as the DJ, a role that rotates among 3-4 male teens. Some youth who do not hold more formal roles in TWJ can nonetheless serve as leaders by volunteering their personal testimonies. For instance, a Puerto Rican girl of about 15 gave a heartfelt account of her experience of being made fun of by other students at her school; despite the harsh words directed toward her, she explained that her faith and her belief in God allowed her “to be strong.” In another example, a Puerto Rican boy, a senior in high school, encouraged his peers to continue prayer, even if the immediate effects from prayer are not evident. He explained that he had felt “let down” by God when his prayer to be accepted in a special military-oriented high school program did not get him into the program. Nevertheless, he explained that he met a military recruiter at his school and would be joining the Air Force once he graduated from high school. Teens who stand before their peers to give personal testimonies can in these ways serve as leaders, or more specifically as role models. Youth can also serve by assisting adult leaders with youth activities sponsored by TWJ. For example, at Amazing Grace, some youth of TWJ carried out grown-up responsibilities such as serving in “security patrol” outside the building and as “maze monitors.” These youth, working in conjunction with adult leaders by communicating over walkie-talkies, oversee the activities and the grounds, making sure that there were no problems by seeing to it that participants made it

safely through the maze, and more importantly, that youth attending the event were not causing trouble outside in the adjacent neighborhood. Some youth who attend Amazing Grace are not fully clear of gang involvement, and the neighbors are concerned about this. Nevertheless, UFCC encourages these youth to come to Amazing Grace in order for TWJ to reach out to them. Youth working as patrollers and monitors know that they are part of this larger vision.

In sum, leadership roles for the youth—whether formal through TWJ-appointed positions or informally through personal testimony—foster feelings and behaviors of accountability and dependability toward their fellow members of TWJ. In addition, leadership roles increase feelings of responsibility and belonging on the part of those that fulfill them. And of course, youth leadership participation enhances their commitment to their religious faith.

Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Affirmation

Racial, ethnic, and cultural affirmation manifests itself at Together With Jesus services in at least two ways: 1) as racial-ethnic and cultural pride, specifically Puerto Rican pride, that is particularly evident in the Pastor Bobby's sermons and other TWJ activities; and 2) through the intentional inclusion of urban youth culture. During TWJ services, the youth pastor's sermons vary in topic, ranging from the incorporation of prayer into young people's daily lives, religious accountability (especially for individual actions), the importance of education, and, most notably, the significance of Jesus Christ in the youth's lives. Pastor Bobby is able to tie in these topics as ways of avoiding societal risks such as gang involvement and violence, premarital sex, and dropping out of school. Moreover, embedded within these messages is the relevance of the youth's racial-ethnic minority status in the United States and the ways to challenge subordination. For example, Pastor Bobby (who himself is Puerto Rican) reflected about a guest speaker's observation that only a small percentage of Puerto Ricans are socioeconomically successful. Contemplating this discouraging statement, he exclaimed, "No statistic is gonna get me! Not *this* Puerto Rican. Not this borriqueño!" In response to Pastor Bobby's exclamations, many of the youth and adult leaders (not just Puerto Rican but also black) clapped and cheered. Relatedly, in another youth meeting, a young twenty-something Puerto Rican male, a student at a local, predominantly white urban Christian college, visited the youth service to inform members of an upcoming event at his college, mentioning features of the event like Christian hip-hop and gospel music, graffiti writing, short dramas/skits, and Puerto Rican food. His mention of the last item brought some claps, whistles, and cheers from the TWJ youth as well as adult leaders. As he finished his announcement, the visitor said that the event was "a way to show our white brother and sisters" how urban youth worship. He asked the youth to pray for him, and they did so by coming forward and laying hands on him for about five minutes. Regularly, Puerto Rican youth in TWJ represent their racial-ethnic culture by wearing the Puerto Rican flag or the words "Puerto Rico" on t-shirts (often airbrushed or in graffiti-style writing) and gold necklaces. These examples demonstrate how TWJ has become a place where young people can freely express themselves racially and ethnically within the boundaries of religious faith and worship. Such expression boosts self-esteem and group esteem. (Interestingly, while these examples show ways of how TWJ embraces its "Puertoricanness," the black youth and black adult leaders appear not to feel left out. They also clapped and cheered when exclamations of Puerto Rican pride were made.)

In common with recent youth generations, cultural expression is important in the formation of young people's collective identity. Together With Jesus youth are no different in this respect than members of Gen X or Gen Y. TWJ teenagers' membership in an urban youth culture—particularly a hip-hop culture—is evident in their style of dress, appreciation of music, and the activities in which they participate. Because the sanctuary where TWJ meetings are held is outfitted with a

well-equipped sound system, Christian R&B and rap music beats loudly through the sanctuary while youth mingle with one another before services begin. Youth dress in urban/hip-hop styles wearing baggy jeans and brand-name clothing with urban flare such as Fubu, Nike, or Tommy Hilfiger. Pastor Bobby even defers to youth culture to the extent of wearing what he describes as “cool t-shirts” (such as a Spiderman t-shirt) and baggy jeans. He even alters his style of talk with the youth by using phrases such as “You make this brutha proud.” While Pastor Bobby realizes that he must incorporate elements of urban youth culture—even in his sermons—in order to attract and keep youth involved in the ministry, he is also greatly aware of the pitfalls that accompany the incorporation of the urban youth culture. A persistent theme in urban youth culture is materialism and consumption—making money and spending it on clothes, cars, junk food, and video game systems. In response, Pastor Bobby has had to figure out ways to challenge youth materialism and consumption and redirect it toward personal religious commitment. By way of illustration, his sermon after the breakdancing contest stressed that “there is more to life than Fubu and Tommy Hilfiger. . . . The clothes don’t make you. **You** make the clothes!” To further challenge the consumption of material products, he encourages youth to pledge a dollar a week to TWJ. It is evident that the Pastor Bobby performs a delicate balancing act to simultaneously embrace and regulate urban youth culture in his ministry.

Intergenerational Relationships

Assisting with the youth activities and programs of Together With Jesus are volunteer adult youth group leaders, some of whom have their own teenager daughters and sons taking part in the youth ministry. Each adult leader is responsible for 12-14 teenagers who form a “cell group.” Cell groups are named after brands of soda (Orange Crush, Mountain Dew, or Coca-Cola) or NBA teams (Chicago Bulls, Utah Jazz, or Minnesota Timberwolves). A half-dozen such cell groups compete in games against one another during the “ice breaker” segment of the service; the games include scavenger hunts, leap frog and foot races—all taking place within the sanctuary. Winning teams accumulate points, and at the end of every month, the team with the most points wins a small pizza party held after a Thursday night service.

While the primary function of adult leaders is to provide supervision of the youth during Thursday services and weekend activities, their responsibilities also include outreach to those teenagers who need guidance, or more broadly speaking, “just someone to talk to.” Pastor Bobby explained that his youth ministry heavily depends upon the presence of such adult leaders because of the need for mentoring and one-on-one interaction. So, adults are involved not only as agents of formal and informal social control, but also as providers of social support. Quite a few of the youth at the church lack meaningful interpersonal relationships with adults as well as peers. Pastor Bobby estimates that “half of the youth come on their own,” without any of their family members attending UFCC services. It is clear to us that some youth are drawn to TWJ in part because of the adult presence. Conversely, adults leaders enjoy being a part of the young people activities. Without the existence of intergenerational relationships, the youth are more likely to drift away from their families, friends, and the church and toward bad habits and risky behaviors.

Therefore, intergenerational relationships at Urban Faith have become increasingly important not only for TWJ meetings but also with the parent congregation. For example, Pastor Bobby encourages youth to attend Sunday services with the adult congregation. As he remarked toward the end of one of his sermons, “[Try] not to make Thursday night your **only** night at Urban Faith.” Moreover, at the end of a Sunday service a few weeks later, the senior pastor of UFCC announced to the congregation that the youth of the church would have their own special section of seating so that adult congregants can have a visual representation of youth at UFCC. To further extend intergenerational relationships, the senior pastor occasionally attends TWJ

meetings, shaking hands, hugging, and talking with teenagers in order to show that he *truly* acknowledges the youth as a vital part of UFCC.

Extension of Family

Mentoring and one-on-one interactions between adult youth leaders and teenagers extend beyond the confines of formal, church-sponsored meetings and youth activities. Furthermore, these interactions are not just between parents and their children. For example, one Puerto Rican male adult youth leader (in his 40s) commented during a Friday evening youth activity, “I try to reach out to kids as much as I can, especially to those kids who don’t have a father in the home.” This leader’s outreach included taking kids on fishing trips, inviting kids to his family’s home, and writing personal letters to teenagers to express how much he—and Jesus—appreciates them.

We observed similar types of adult-youth connections as expressed by the youth leader above, particularly in ethnographic work with two Puerto Rican families from UFCC. As we spent time with both families, we saw how each family opened up their homes to teenagers outside of the family, who, in most cases, initially came into contact with the families because of school-based friendships with teenage family members. For instance, the parents of one family (who also serve as adult leaders during the TWJ meetings) considered two such teenagers (one girl, one boy) as virtually their own children, in addition to the four the family already had. In each home visit completed with this particular family, at least one, if not both, of these teenagers had been taking part in family activities, religiously-based or otherwise. On one of our visits, the family gave a surprise birthday party for the girl, inviting her friends from TWJ to be part of the festivities. And on one Sunday afternoon after worship services, the teenage boy helped around the family home by doing the dishes (he actually *volunteered* to do them). Furthermore, the boy often referred to the parents as “Mom” and “Dad.” The father/husband of the family pointed out that his family was “some sort of spiritual magnet” that draws non-related youth to his family. He believes that the girl and boy were drawn to the family because neither have a father in the home. The father/husband stated that he was pleased his family could provide a sense of comfort and support for the two teenagers. It was our impression that the family’s enhanced spiritual magnetism drew the biological children closer as well.

Conclusion

There is an unmistakable consciousness permeating Urban Faith that the surrounding urban environment is a dangerous place for young people. The Together With Jesus youth ministry, and more broadly speaking, Urban Faith Community Church, has to contend with the societal risks that can entice its young people, not only away from the church, but also away from their families, their communities, and, ultimately, their futures. Because of this awareness, Together With Jesus has developed and nurtured a youth ministry where young people can feel safe and relatively protected from these risks. Furthermore, the youth ministry has built and maintained supportive relationships—both generational and intergenerational—through personal religious involvement, congregational leadership roles, and shared racial/ethnic/cultural unity between the youth and adult youth leaders.

Yet the most evident and most significant components of TWJ’s serving as a refuge for its youth are intergenerational and extended familial relationships that are encouraged *both within and outside* the church. This converged with YRP’s findings on African American religious patterns. For example, in YRP’s report, “Church in Black and White,” Rhys Williams, suggests that, in comparison to white college students’ church involvement, black college students are “integrated into the congregational community across generations.” Moreover, Williams observes, the concept of “church family” not only includes blood-related family but also non-related individuals or “fictive kin.” Similarly, in the YRP report “The Black Church As A Village It

Takes To Raise A Child,” Stephen Warner proposes that the idea of “family” in his observations of a black urban congregation is much like that of an “extended family” and is not limited to blood ties. Perhaps one explanation for the similarities of intergenerational and familial relationships in black and Puerto Rican congregations is that church might be thought of as a safe and welcoming environment from the shared, similar experiences of blacks and Puerto Ricans encountering high-risk societal conditions. In addition, both groups have had similar negative racialized experiences as minority groups in the U.S. Both types of experiences—the risk of deleterious involvements and negative racial-ethnic treatment—are serious issues that black and Puerto Rican congregations need to address. Moreover, these experiences are not age-specific for both racial-ethnic groups. It is clear to both youth and adults that they have a lot in common in this society.

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