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## Building Bridges of Hope: The Church’s Role in Reaching Disconnected Black Youth

### Abstract

The research paper presents outcomes of a national study on Black teens’ disconnection from organized religion, profiles of these youth, meanings assigned to the term, “disconnected youth,” often called “unchurched youth,” and ministry paradigms that successfully build bridges of connection between them and churches. Study findings reveal teens’ views of shortcomings of faith communities; their needs, hopes and specific recommendations for churches; and the importance of reversing inattention to youth and giving them voice.

### Introduction

The role of the historic Black church was to assure that young people survived and thrived as hope-filled and hope-giving Christians along oft-times difficult life circumstances. Continuing this role is critical in this era of upheaval, racial division, and sense of hopelessness, lovelessness, and powerlessness. Frankly, the situation is tough! With each successive generation, the rate of Black youths’ defection from the church has risen. It is noted in follow-up contacts with 100 graduates of the Youth Hope-Builders Academy, a Christian leadership formation program for high school youth at Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, Georgia. All were church-connected in their teen years. Yet, currently, forty per cent (40%) of them are minimally churched by virtue of their church attendance of no more than one to two times monthly or irregularly.<sup>1</sup>

In the book, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, Lincoln and Mamiya highlight the tenuous hold of Black churches particularly on urban youth and young adults. They urge church reconnection for the sake of forging a better future for youth and the church.<sup>2</sup> The current-day role must also be carried out amidst observations of a general lack of youths’ connection to mainstream society, that is characterized as disengagement from activities that build human capital.<sup>3</sup> However, the view also exists of society’s and the church’s disconnection from them. Youth leaders report a dual unreadiness of youth for church and the church’s unreadiness for them.<sup>4</sup> Yet, little has been done, empirically, to ascertain who constitutes

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<sup>1</sup>Church attendance of graduates of the Youth Hope-Academy (YHBA) is one aspect of a larger follow-up initiative called “My Hope Is Built,” carried out by Pamela A. Perkins, YHBA Program Coordinator.

<sup>2</sup>C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 345, 382-383, 404.

<sup>3</sup>Besharove, Douglas J. And Karen N. Gardiner, “Introduction: Preventing Youthful Disconnectedness.” *America’s Disconnected Youth: Toward a Preventative Strategy*. Douglas J. Besharov, ed. (Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America, 1999), 3-4, 1-30.

<sup>4</sup>Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, Sandra L. Barnes, Karma D. Johnson, *Youth Ministry in the Black Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2013), 113.

disconnected youth, what their views are about church, and how churches may reach and serve them in hope-bearing ways. The research project centers on uncovering this information.

### The Research Effort

The research effort sought to uncover and illumine profiles of disconnected Black youth and ministry paradigms that build bridges of connection between these youth and churches. An ITC and field-based research team undertook a national survey of four-hundred (400) youth ages 13-18 across the four geographic regions of the U.S. (See Table 1).<sup>5</sup> The effort has taken seriously the voices of Black youth—to hear them out—rather than to rely on what adults say about them.<sup>6</sup> The survey invited youths’ reports of their church participation, issues they face for which they assign responsibility to the church, personal issues they face and sources of assistance, the church’s overall role in the lives of today’s Black youth, and advice they would give to churches that would bridge the gap of disconnection. The research effort not simply asked why youth are disconnected from the church, but what church models or “best practices” exist that succeed in creating hope-filled bridges of connection with youth. The ensuing sections present key findings.

**Table 1. National Survey Population**

Ages	South	West	Northeast	Midwest	Total
13 Male	11	11	1	0	23
Female	15	14	5	2	36
14 Male	7	6	1	0	14
Female	11	13	1	2	27
15 Male	5	11	1	1	18
Female	3	9	4	3	19
16 Male	8	6	1	4	19
Female	2	10	2	3	17
17 Male	12	4	3	1	20
Female	4	10	2	6	22
18 Male	36	3	31	13	83
Female	33	11	37	21	102
Totals	147	108	89	56	400

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<sup>5</sup>The on-base research team included Anne Streaty Wimberly, Pamela Perkins, Casina Washington, and Sara Farmer as well as field-based ethnographers.

<sup>6</sup>Focus on the voices of Black youth derives from acute awareness of the invisibility and muteness of these youth and the lack of attention that both larger society and faith communities given them. See: Gregory Ellison, *Cut Dead and Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 3-7.

### Patterns of Teens Church Participation

Survey results show 260 (65%) of the 400 survey respondents are in the broader category called “disconnected youth.” However, the analyses reveal four specific church “disconnection” types according to participation rates, including *purely unchurched youth*, *de-churched youth*, and *non-churched youth*. These categories and numbers of survey participants in each are included in the first three descriptions below.<sup>7</sup> A fourth category, *selectively churched youth*, is added for participants who did not reflect any of the other types.

- √ 31 (7.8%) of the participants are *purely unchurched youth* or those outside church who never attended.
- √ 68 (17%) of the participants are *de-churched youth* or those who previously attended church worship and/or other aspects of church life but have ceased attendance.
- √ 139 (34.7%) of the participants are *non-churched youth* or the minimally churched who attend church and/or other aspects of church life unpredictably or infrequently, typically no more than 1 or 2 times monthly or only on special days/holidays.
- √ 22 (5.5%) of the participants are *selectively churched youth* or those who move back and forth or variously between periods of infrequent and frequent attendance in church worship and/or other parts of church life or who participate in selected activities on a regular basis.

### Assignment of Church Responsibility for Addressing Teen Issues

Survey participants were asked to identify from a list of current-day issues, which ones they think the church should address. More than fifty-percent of the total group assigned the greatest church responsibility for addressing the following:

√	Spiritual life	59.5 %
√	Suicidal thinking or attempts	57.5%
√	Grief/death/sadness	56.2%
√	Substance abuse/Drugs	52.2%
√	Crime/Violence Issues	51.2%

### Personal Issues of Teens and Sources of Assistance

Teens’ issues clustered in the areas of personal, relational, spiritual, educational economic, physical and mental health, and wider societal challenges. Survey results show the highest number of issues, in descending order of prominence, in the relational, personal, physical and mental health, and educational categories. *Relational issues* ranged from family concerns and conflicts such as divorce, abandonment or being kicked out, drug addiction, and family members’ incarceration, to dating, bullying, abuse, peer pressure, death of family and friends,

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<sup>7</sup>See: Lenetria Fix and Jeffrey Wallace, *Everybody’s Urban: Understanding the Survival Mindset of the Next Generation* (Group Publishing House, Inc., 2013); and George Barna & David Kinneman, General Eds., *Churches Understanding Today’s Unchurched and How to Connect With Them* (Tyndale Momentum, 2014), viii.

and as an 18 year old wrote: “Being concerned for my safety everyday I walk out the house. . . and not understanding the strikes I already have against me.” They identified *personal issues* of self-esteem, self identity, and appearance; life decisions, direction, and finding themselves; sexuality; attitudinal issues of anger, laziness, accepting change, motivation, and understanding the world; jail, and simply growing up. *Physical and mental health issues* centered on anxiety/stress, depression, loneliness, heartache, grief, suicidal thinking, thoughts about death, self-harm, trust, and keeping optimistic. Teens cited *educational issues* from keeping up with studies, discipline and study habits, grades, and failure, to staying in school including doing so after the death of parents, teacher meanness, preparing for college, and money issues.

The numerous issues cited by teens clearly call for available “protective strategies” and “stress buffers.”<sup>8</sup> The need is for faith communities to show them love and acceptance, give affirmation and support, model stability, provide anchors of faith, and point them toward a sense of hope.<sup>9</sup> Yet, teens were least likely to identify the church, pastors, youth leaders, mentors or church groups as sources of help. Moreover, nearly a quarter (24.6%) of the total survey group sought no one for help.

### Role of the Church in the Lives of Teens

Because of findings of teens’ tendency not to seek church assistance in addressing their issues, there was anticipation of a negative response to the question, “Would you say the church needs to be part of the lives of today’s Black youth? However, to the contrary, nearly 90 percent (89.7%) answered “Yes,” 3.2% said “No,” 2% indicated both “Yes” and “No” with an added response that “It just depends.” An added 4.7% gave no answer, and one teen entered “Don’t know.” The “Yes” answers were affirmed by statements such as “We need all the help we can get”; “It may change a kid’s thoughts and their decision-making regards to being on the streets and being around negative vibes;” and “Youth need figures who can support me in a time of need.”

Survey participants also responded to the invitation to give advice to churches on reaching today’s youth. In numerous statements, youth pointed toward the church’s vital role as a hospitable, unified, affirming, listening community that involves youth and uses their gifts; a spiritual guide that is not afraid to tell faith truths and give positive direction for life even when teens resist it; an assisting and sometimes intervening presence that responds to current realities; a people willing to “go to the streets” and “be available where youth are”; a place that “shows its strength when it serves people in need, . . . gives out book bags and school supplies. . . and gives free food “; “leaders with a focus on relevance, who “help me understand why I should attend church,” have a hope-filled and transformative view that “the church will be able to change most of the Black youth’s mindset,” with some “fun too;” and a people who live the words: “Don’t be lazy,” “Stay in our lives,” and “Don’t give up on us.”

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<sup>8</sup>See the discussion on “protective strategies” and “stress buffers” in: Carole Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

<sup>9</sup>Chapman presents evidence and descriptions of these needs of children in: Kathryn N. Chapman, “What Children Need From Significant Adults,” 43-55 in Andrew D. Lester, ed., *When Children Suffer: A Sourcebook for Ministry with Children in Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 44-47.

## Model Programs

The need for youth today is for the church's embrace of a journey toward disconnected youth that acts on the biblical calling found in the Great Commission and the African proverbial view: "I am because you are, and because you are, I am." Thankfully, churches exist that address head-on the very social, emotional, and spiritual issues associated with disconnection to which youth in the study point, by engaging in concrete practices of connection. This section presents ways churches have succeeded. Based on interviews and participant observations of ten churches located across the four U.S. geographic regions, the findings offer "best practices" that hold potential for enabling churches to effectively reach out to disconnected youth. Specifically, five models of connection will be described including: wrap around ministries, gap ministries, shepherding ministries, community infusion ministries, and journeyer ministries.

*Gap Ministries.* Gap ministries provide a bridge from the community to the church. While youth may not ever go to a particular church, the experiences of mentorship, nurture, and social services combine to show concretely an image of God's love. These ministries primarily emerge from responding to a specific need in the community. Ministries in four churches demonstrate this model. Bethany Church in West Orange, New Jersey, provides a safe place for youth, particularly Black males, to play. The church's outreach to disconnected youth exploded when the pastor realized that children from the school that sits across from the church, walk through the church parking lot to get home. In a moment of exploration, the pastor placed water bottles outside to see if children would take them. They did. The pastor began to take notice of needs of youth in the community. A "Hoop Ministry" evolved from recognition that youth had nowhere to play basketball. Zachary Guyton, pastor of Bethany, believes there is a preferential option for disconnected youth. God gives priority to youth who are disconnected from the Body of Christ. He believes the church is the answer. The church has fifty-five members, but he sees five hundred boys yearly through his basketball program.

Like Bethany Church, Mt. Airy Church of God in Christ (COGIC), a mega church located in the heart of Philadelphia, also functions as a gap ministry. It is a worshipping body that provides ministry opportunities for over 742 on the roll and 400 active youth. Its focus is on outreach to disconnected youth and programming and events that draw them such as fashion shows, spoken word nights, a scholarship ministry, and basketball plus informal conversations on relevant events. They also offer dual programming for both parents and youth.

Positioned between an affluent neighborhood and an area of low-to-moderate income people, Calvary Baptist Church serves as a gap ministry. It both seeks to connect with those disconnected from the church as well as to reconcile the vast disparities between the wealthy and the poor. Affectionately identified as the "lily pad in the middle of the swamp," the ministry reaches out to people from the lofts and the streets. A primary function of this gap ministry is the community wellness center, which provides a fitness facility to all ages and teen a program called HYPE (Helping Youth Plan for Excellence) that uses art as an expressive tool for youth to share their concerns. Currently, the community surrounding the church uses the community wellness facility more than church attenders.

New Direction Ministries in California is a non-denominational church that partners with

*CeaseFire* to engage in activities such as night walks and rallies to help transform crime-infested areas. It seeks community buy-in and action on behalf of peace and safety. The ministries also offer resourcing events to introduce service providers to the community and their role in that community. The church functions like a church without walls. The major task of Donnell Jones is his desire to galvanize local clergy to respond to community issues of crime and violence.

*Wrap-Around Ministries.* Wrap-around ministries are the most difficult to develop from a church because they typically require resources beyond the church. Because of the need for cross-sector collaboration that comes from both private donors and government resources, these ministries often function as a non-profit entity. Two ministries—Greater Life Fellowship Church through Greater Life, Inc. in Newark, New Jersey and Grace Bible Church through Hope Development Corporation, in Charleston, West, Virginia—operate from a community development corporation base.

Greater Life Fellowship, where Rev. Michael T. and Rev. Maria Westbrook provide pastoral leadership, serves as a wrap-around ministry through the Greater Life, Inc. non-profit organization that provides a community outreach center, a metropolitan urban family institute, camping experiences and juvenile detention outreach. Their focus is to do “on the street” outreach that creates an unbroken circle of support. Grace Bible Church, whose pastor is Rev. Matthew Watts, is a wrap-around ministry that provides educational and spiritual renewal opportunities that, through its Hope Development Corporation, aim to interrupt harsh conditions many youth experience.

Chester Eastside Ministries (CEM), in Chester, Pennsylvania is a wrap-around ministry, providing a series of social services in the community. Led by Rev. Bernice Warren, programming includes a peace camp where junior and senior high school youth are hired to work, a parenting program, pantry, movies, dinner discussions, and cultural enrichment trips. This faith- and community-based ministry seeks to connect youth to opportunities to see beyond their local context and instill hope.

*Shepherding Ministries.* Two churches carry out shepherding ministries. Both Friendship Community Church in College Park, Georgia, and Glen Addie United Methodist Church in Anniston, Alabama embrace Christian nurture as part of their mission. However, in these ministries, the leaders understand that nurture and discipline go hand-in-hand. The tools of a shepherd are both the rod (of discipline) and the staff (of guidance and support) from which youth feel both challenged and nurtured. In this sense, outreach into the community as shepherding ministries welcomes disconnected youth knowing that they will be challenged by the guidelines that undergird the ministries.

Friendship Community Church, whose pastor is Donald Earl Bryant, carries out a shepherding ministry through its involvement of youth in the expressive activities of the youth choir and participation in the worshipping community. To participate in it, parent and youth must adhere to a dress code. This practice is not intended to deter youth from coming but to emphasize God rather than external looks as a priority in ministry. This form of shepherding ministry prepares youth to live in a society that has acceptable and unacceptable behavioral norms by assisting their formation of critical thinking, and decision-making skills. In a different manner, Glen Addie United Methodist Church whose pastors are Drs. Tiwirai and Adlene Kufarimai, represent a form of shepherding ministry that sets forth an image of parental love and

authority. Rules of conduct are established in conversation with youth, agreed upon by them, the pastors and parents. These rules guide youths' involvement in choir, liturgical dance, other worship leadership activities, study halls, and youth group meetings. Youth who disobey the rules are not permitted to continue. Yet, invariably, these youth find their way back to this ministry because they see the rules as means of protecting rather than hurting them and communicating a message of worth and value to youth who may not receive the same discipline at home.

*Community Infusion Ministries.* Impact Church, a United Methodist Church in Atlanta, Georgia where Olu Brown is pastor, is rightly called a community infusion church because it is not simply interested in the community surrounding the church but the community within the church. One of its direct links into the community is through its connection with the schools. Their innovative strategy of adopting a school seeks to meet the needs of students and teachers while also communicating the church's desire to be actively engaged in building and nurturing the community in which it resides. Intentional decisions about and uses of church environmental space, technology, and community outreach demonstrate the desire both to connect with and be relevant to youth who lack confidence in the church. The way Impact Church functions reflects its motto—"doing church differently."

*Journeyer Ministries.* Journeyers honor the relationship at all ages and stages of youth development. Phil Jackson is pastor of The House, a hip hop service offered to youth and young adults two Saturdays a month. Pastor Phil also directs The Firehouse Community Arts Center located in the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois. The Firehouse Community Arts Center resides in a refurbished fire station. Born out of the desire to see kids discover and share their gifts, the building itself is symbolic of its mission—"putting one fire out at a time." While introducing youth to Christ, the emphasis is meeting youth where they are and providing a safe space where they can engage truth. The starting point to building relationships with youth is art that, in its creation and fulfillment by youth, is viewed as redemptive transformation. The activities are means of building bridges that help create questions about identity and vocation, of gaining rapport with youth through consistent presence and support, and establishing trust and gaining the ear of youth in communities where instability is the staple.

### Plugging Back In: Implications for Building Bridges of Hope Through Reconnection

Teens' open and honest survey responses stand as wise counsel to churches and their leaders. Their entries must surely prompt action to connect with youth who, on the one hand have disconnected from the church in various ways and, on the other hand, who have targeted the importance of the church in their everyday lives.

While the model ministries diverge from each other in distinct ways, they also share aspects that provide insights for any church seeking to connect with disconnected Black youth. Their wisdom converges with the research findings and narrative responses youth entered on the surveys. It is clear that not simply are youth plugged into other activities that captivate their attention by which they are unplugged from the church, but the church is unplugged from youth. Churches that have been able to maintain connection with youth share significant strengths. These churches offer four core messages and practices for use in the Black Church (in particular) and the church (in general) in expanding their ministry to disconnected youth. Strength resides in

the ministry's ability to: (1) provide holistic care to a generation that often lives fragmented lives; (2) provide a relational presence to a generation that often experiences absence and loss; (3) provide sites of affirmation and reclamation to a generation that feels the pressure to conform because of an identity that is contested for being young, Black, (and Christian).