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Supporting Birmingham's Children of Murdered or Incarcerated Parents

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Abstract

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This project was designed to illustrate how the Black church can network with diverse organizations in order to empower the urban neighborhood by creating an atmosphere that comprehensively supports Birmingham's children of murdered or incarcerated parents. A case study was done with the children of incarcerated and murdered parents in Fountain Heights. This project was influenced by the findings from the case study.

As the former pastor of Mt. Mariah Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama, I convened a variety of groups from the community. For eight weeks, this group shared ideas, information, resources, and opportunities to implement a process to heal children traumatized by murdered and incarcerated parents. The results of this project suggest that networking is an effective tool to address the challenges confronting children residing in murder-ridden urban neighborhoods thereby breaking the generational cycle of violence and incarceration.

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"Supporting Birmingham's Children of Murdered or Incarcerated Parents"

Between 1920 and 1980, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya in their groundbreaking book, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, suggest that because of urbanization, the African American community became divided along socioeconomic lines; and the Black middle-class began to internalize the American middle-class values of individualism, privatism, pragmatism, conspicuous consumption, and upward mobility¹. This desire for upward mobility motivated the Black middle class to search for the “American Dream” by leaving urban neighborhoods and relocating to suburban areas.² More specifically, some blacks in Birmingham, Alabama migrated to suburban areas pursuing the American dream which had devastating, unexpected results: the neglect of the city center and displaced impoverished children. Devoid of successful role models, these children have become synonymous with “America’s nightmare”—which is a social existence inundated with ruthless crimes and homicide. For this reason, Birmingham, once regarded as the “Magic City,” is now sadly referred to as “Murder-ham.” Therefore, the aim of this paper is to introduce a community paradigm of ministry that brings together committed stakeholders to break the cycle of violence and incarceration by turning at-risk youth into vibrant, positive citizens.

Without a doubt, this phrase “American Dream” received its impetus and articulation from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., during the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. King’s understanding of the “American Dream” must be seen considering his concept of the beloved community. According to Dr. James H. Cone, in his book, *Martin & Malcolm: A Dream or A Nightmare*, King’s concept

¹ Lincoln, C. Eric, and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990.

² Lincoln, 123.

of the “American Dream” was grounded in two sources: “the American liberal democratic tradition, as defined by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and the biblical tradition of the Old and New Testaments as interpreted by Protestant Liberalism and the Black church.”³ Energized by these two sources, King challenged the white public: the federal government, southern moderates, northern liberals, and religious communities to include Blacks in the mainstream of American life and to view Blacks as equals. King further urged African Americans to be prepared to enter these doors of opportunity once they became open. Therefore, King’s understanding of the “American Dream” and the “Beloved Community” was centered around his desire for African Americans to be liberated through integration and economic empowerment. Dr. Walter E. Fluker emphasizes this point further as follows, “As he was to speak later to the national conscience about his dream, which was deeply rooted in the American Dream,” King, at this point in his development, tends almost naively to identify the beloved community with the American Dream, which for him was centered around enfranchisement of the American Negro, desegregation and integration through legislation and economic empowerment of Black people.”⁴

Consequently, the desire of African Americans to live in integrated neighborhoods, attend desegregated schools, and dine in restaurants of their choice was fueled by the goals of the Civil Rights Movement and inspired by Dr. King’s concept of the “American Dream” and the beloved community. With this in mind, one can understand why African Americans who were able to take advantage of these new opportunities did so. But this vision from the Civil Rights has a major obstacle in Birmingham.

³ Cone, James H. *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. 20th Anniversary ed., Orbis Books, 1991.

⁴ Fluker, Walter E. *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989. 93.

The persistent crisis of homicide in Birmingham, Alabama, has left a profound yet often overlooked impact on the city's most vulnerable population—children of murdered or incarcerated parents. Rooted in systemic poverty, educational disparities, and the erosion of communal structures once fortified by the Black Church, these children face heightened risks of psychological trauma, socioeconomic instability, and cyclical involvement in crime. The purpose of this writing is to present a model of ministry that will provide practical instructions on how the Black church can restore and reconcile the broken relationships that exist in urban settings. More specifically, the central theme that runs through this document giving it continuity and direction is the concept of networking.

The goal of networking is to build relationships for the purpose of sharing ideas, information, opportunities, and resources to support Birmingham's children of murdered or incarcerated parents thereby breaking the generational cycle of violence and disenfranchisement.⁵ **Section 1** examines the community in which Mt. Mariah Missionary Baptist Church is located and describes the composition of the congregation. **Section 2** explores the homicide rates in Birmingham, Alabama, and its impact on the emotional, physical, and spiritual health of children. **Section 3** introduces the theme of 'Networking' in Old Testament as a way to bring healing to the fractured community in Birmingham. **Section 4** gives a description of the writer's model of ministry. Nehemiah's networking model of ministry is utilized to explain the process of bringing the following entities to the table for empowering children of murdered and incarcerated parents: neighborhood residents, neighborhood associations, city government, financial institutions, urban planner, and churches.

⁵ George Fraser, *Success Runs in Our Race: The Complete Guide to Effective Networking in the African American Community*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1994), p. 62.

SECTION 1

AN ANALYSIS OF MT. MARIAH MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

Mt. Mariah Missionary Baptist church, located at 7300 Georgia Road in the Gate City neighborhood of Birmingham, Alabama, has a rich history intertwined with the community's development. Mt. Mariah was organized in August 1905; the building it currently occupies was originally constructed for Gate City Baptist Church, which had been on this site since 1924. In 1995, Mt. Mariah dedicated this building as its new home.

Mt. Mariah was founded by the minority workers of the mining camp in the community now known as Oak Ridge Park. To keep the miners content, the owners of the mining camp gave the employees the land and materials to build an A-Frame structure, still used today as the main sanctuary of the church. In fact, these A-Frame structures were about 3 to 4 times the size of the typical shotgun homes of that time. Furthermore, the church was situated in the back of a row of shotgun homes and was fronted by a railroad track. In essence, shotgun homes are defined as homes that when entering the front door, a shotgun can be fired, and the bullet exits the back door without touching the walls.

Without a doubt, to capture the soul of Mt. Mariah one needs only to reflect on the song, "Little Wooden Church on the Hill" This became Mt. Mariah's theme song, and it was sung annually at our Church Anniversary. The artist, Dottie Peoples, sings this song; it has been handed down orally through the years. The song goes like this:

"As I let my mind go back, I can see a little old church sitting by the railroad track.
Just a little shabby old place where we used to sing Amazing Grace.
Talking about a good time, Laud a mighty, mighty good time.
Somebody would put up a tent in a little open field. Folk would come from everywhere,

Traveling over rocks and hills.
 Very little money was raised, but many, many souls were saved.
 Talking about a good time Laud, a mighty, mighty good time.”

In 1992, the writer was elected pastor of Mt. Mariah. Interestingly, I was a young, educated, progressive pastor with a corporate following. Through strategic planning and timely programming, the church grew from 25 to 200 members within two years. In addition, we developed a successful youth program that implemented an after school-tutoring ministry, a summer jobs initiative that employed over 25,000 youth, and a “Buds to Flowers” ministry that connected disadvantaged youth with senior citizens in the community. In short, these were a few ministries that galvanized the community with the evangelistic spirit of Mt. Mariah—we adopted a new theme song, written by Edwin Hawkins, “If I Can Help Somebody.”

In 2020, almost 30 years later, I became the pastor of Mt. Mariah for a second time. Certainly, as a leader, I have discovered that change does not come without crisis. Some of the ills that existed 30 years ago still exist today. Over the past few years, the Gate City neighborhood has experienced approximately 50 acts of violence and several killings while the city of Birmingham has become the second leader of murders per capita in the United States. Without question, this has forced the church and community to adopt a new level of ministry that inspires us to confront and conquer violence in the streets. Undoubtedly, with a social justice focus and fire in our belly, we have generated a new ministry mantra: Face It, Fight It, and Fix It. In other words, we face the problems with courage; we fight the problems with faith; and we fix the problems, so everyone wins.

Mt. Mariah’s Congregation

Presently, Mt. Mariah membership has decreased and currently have 50 active members and remains in the Gate City community. 35% of the members are over age 50; 45% are between

ages 25 and 40; while 30% of the membership is under age 25. Also, the congregation is comprised of 75% women. In fact, women are considered the backbone of the church but are often pushed to the background. Furthermore, the leadership of the church is 50% men and 50% women. Consequently, the worship experience on Sunday morning is not based on a high liturgical design; instead, it is filled with uplifting, spirit-filled music, with the preaching moment serving as the centerpiece of the worship event. Hence, the ethnic composition of Mt. Mariah is 100% African American while the facility was purchased from a predominantly white congregation.

The members of Mt. Mariah come from diverse backgrounds and live in various areas of the city. Mt. Mariah is a commuter/community church in that some of the members live in the immediate community, while others reside in other parts of the city or outside the city limits. To be sure, the socioeconomic status of the congregation ranges from homeless to middle-class. Mt. Mariah has members who reside in public housing and others who live in economically stable and thriving neighborhoods. Not only are the living conditions of the congregants varied, but the occupations of the members are diverse. Mt. Mariah is basically a middle-class church which promotes education. As a result, college graduates and individuals who have received training beyond high school comprise 55% of the congregation. While a portion of Mt. Mariah's membership receives welfare assistance, a significant portion earns its income in the following careers: House Maids, Janitorial Services, Childcare Workers, Secretaries, Barbers & Beauticians, School Teachers, Policemen, Military Personnel, Federal & State Workers, Management Positions in Corporate America, and Business Entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, Mt. Mariah's membership and ministry provides focus and vision to address the diverse needs of the Fountain Heights Neighborhood in Birmingham, Alabama.

Profile of The Fountain Heights Neighborhood

The ministry context for this project is Fountain Heights in Birmingham, Alabama.

Fountain Heights is one of six neighborhoods that comprise the Northside Community.

According to the 1980 Census (when I was in high school), 22,600 people lived in Fountain Heights. The 2020 Census indicates that the population decreased to 2,210 residents. Therefore, from 1980 to 2020, the population decreased approximately 90%. The Census reports also show that Fountain Heights has 1,702 Blacks; 420 Whites; 44 Spanish origins; and 22 other ethnicities.

The exodus of the Black middle-class devastated Fountain Heights and other similar neighborhoods. This exodus stripped the neighborhood of its positive role models and decimated the economic strength of the community. Also, owner-occupied homes became rental properties which deteriorated the housing stock. As a result, absentee landlords became common place in urban settings. Along with the demise of the housing value, the business district rapidly declined and skilled workers found better jobs in higher paying areas. In essence, the urban neighborhood became a segregated community of poor people with restricted access to opportunities for jobs, education, and role models. In short, urban communities have no “success network” to plug into.

The Fountain Heights zip code designation is 35234, which possesses a high crime rate. According to background information, the violent crime rate in this area is 86.8%, significantly higher than the US average of 22.7%. In addition, the property crime is also a major issue in Fountain Heights, with a rate of 92.5% compared to the national average of 35.4%. This means that residents in this 35234 zip code are at a higher risk of experiencing both violent and property crimes. For these reasons, Fountain Heights endured a severe population decline. Furthermore, it is important for law enforcement agencies and community members to work together to address root causes of crime in this area and implement strategies to improve safety for all residents.⁵

⁵“*Birmingham (Zip 35203), AL,*” n.d. <https://www.bestplaces.net/zip-code/alabama/birmingham/35203>.

The socioeconomic condition of Fountain Heights and the city of Birmingham, Alabama has affected the ministry of Mt. Mariah. Throughout her existence, Mt. Mariah has risen to the challenge of meeting the needs of the community. Therefore, confronted with an urban context that is inundated with dilapidated housing, economic poverty, gang violence, and unemployment, Mt. Mariah seeks to continue a ministry of holistic care through networking.

SECTION 2

EXPLORING THE HOMICIDE RATES IN BIRMINGHAM

As a native of the historically significant southern city regarding the Civil Rights Movement, Birmingham, Alabama, I have witnessed the Black community struggles continue. As a pastor, I have always advocated for mercy, justice, and reconciliation. While living in Birmingham and now, Atlanta, I have struggled with witnessing murder within communities, leaving many children alone without a parent (or parents). Dietrich Bonhoeffer states, “The ultimate test of a moral society is the kind of world it leaves for its children.”⁶ In addition, Bonhoeffer posits, “*Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.*”

Homicide is defined as the killing of one human being by another.⁷ A homicide may be non-criminal, such as accidental or in self-defense, or criminal, as in the act of murder. The United States has a significant problem with homicide occurrences. In 2022, the United States was second in the world concerning homicide deaths, with a total of 21,593 deaths. This high number was second only to Mexico with 33,287.⁸ In addition, America held 19.07% of the total

⁶ Bethge, Eberhard, and Victoria J Barnett. 2000. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*. Unspecified.

⁷ Dictionary

⁸ World Population Review. 2024. “*Crime Rate by Country 2024*.” World Population Review. 2024. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/crime-rate-by-country>.

global deaths by homicide.⁹ Last year, there were 19,252 murders in the US.¹⁰ These statistics do not end at the country-level. Alabama was 14th in the country with the number of homicides (524) in the US. In 2023, there were 135 murders in the Birmingham area.¹¹ Birmingham homicide numbers dropped 12% in the third quarter of 2023. ‘We still have a lot of work to do’ - al.com.¹² It is significant to also note that about 80% of all murders are of males.

In contrast, worldwide, Japan, Singapore, Australia, Austria, Iceland, and Italy are among the countries with the lowest homicide rates.¹³ Why and how have these countries been so successful at keeping their homicide rates low? They have a zero tolerance rate, and they are not releasing murderers from jail on low bonds. Whereas, in Birmingham, you can commit murder and still get out of jail on low bonds. What do they know that we do not know in the USA? How are they protecting their citizens from the tragic loss of life and the consequent disruption to the family, the community and posterity that homicide brings? It has also been determined that the wealthiest countries and communities have the lowest homicide rate. These parameters need to be examined with the purpose of learning what specific approaches these communities are implementing, that is enabling them to avoid these crimes.

Studies show that several factors impact homicide rates, including economic, educational, and interpersonal/emotional competence.¹⁴ Frequent changes in leadership have obstructed the continuity necessary for effective education strategies. Since 2000, Birmingham City Schools

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Robinson, Carol. “*Birmingham Homicides up 15% Six Months into 2024: “It’s Just Destroying Family after Family.”* AL.com, July 2, 2024.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Maverick, J. B. “*Which Economic Factors Most Affect the Demand for Consumer Goods?*” <https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/042815/which-economic-factors-most-affect-demand-consumer-goods.asp> August 28, 2024.

have seen eight superintendents vacate their positions, hindering the development and implementation of long-term improvement plans. In the Birmingham city school system, student enrollment has deteriorated by almost 50% since 1998, from 40,000 students to only 23,000 today. With so much superintendent turnover, hopeless parents are abandoning city school systems by the thousands.⁶ When you have superintendents dropping out, then students find themselves dropping out. During the same time span of this decline, the community of Fountain Heights has diminished at an alarming rate. So goes the schools, so goes the community. While we are busy building stadiums and bars, there is no plan to build a better education system for our children.

Furthermore, economic hardship has connections to homicides. Statistics indicate that 10% of residents in the nation live below the poverty line. In Birmingham, 16% of residents in Jefferson County live below the poverty line and 26% of residents in Birmingham, Alabama live below the poverty line.²⁰ The lack of sufficient income, education, and opportunities results in helplessness and hopelessness among the affected population, allowing for a greater likelihood for substance abuse and crime. Further, without emotional education and conflict resolution skills, the situation will be further aggravated. In the words of Solomon there is nothing new under the sun. What is happening today has happened before.

There is much to be considered in addressing issues such as poverty and educational deficits. Conflict resolution should probably be added to the elementary and high school curriculum across the country. Of course, this is a life skill that children should be taught at

⁶ Trisha Powell Crain, tcrain@al.com and Trisha Crain, tcrain@al.com. “5,000 Alabama Third Graders Could Be Held Back Because They Aren’t Reading Well Enough.” *Al*, May 17, 2024. <https://www.al.com/educationlab/2024/05/5000-alabama-third-graders-will-get-a-warning-about-reading-what-to-know.html>.

²⁰ Ibid

home, but it is a skill as critical and necessary as reading, writing and arithmetic. There is a youth-led group in Birmingham that has the goal of looking for solutions and conflict resolution with the young people. This type of initiative is what is needed to move us forward in addressing this issue: Why do people kill on factors associated with homicide? A critical review of the literature – A study from the World Health Organization found that:

“Beyond its direct impact, homicide has serious negative effects on the lives of surviving family members, particularly children. Psychological effects include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, aggression, guilt and a heightened sense of vulnerability. Socio-occupational effects include problems in school and at work. Homicide may also lead families to incur expenses they can ill afford, such as funeral costs and lawyer fees. If the victim was a breadwinner, families may no longer be able to cope financially. Homicide can generate a sense of insecurity in society, and when high rates occur in countries with weak, inefficient and corrupt criminal justice systems, can contribute to undermining social and economic development.”¹⁵

As previously stated, the focus of this paper is to highlight the rising number of children that are actual victims of the violence of murder. At the time of this writing, it was reported that a nine-year-old child was hospitalized after more than 200 shots were fired at a Birmingham apartment building. Although this is an example of physical violence, there are multiple examples of physical, emotional, and relational trauma that children face due to violence. Over the past few decades, we have seen the damage and destruction caused by school shootings. This is one aspect of a crisis that has become all too common in our society. Something must be done. We can talk about the tragedies and mourn the losses, as we should, but at some point, a change must take place. Hope and help must be offered. Real solutions must be implemented. After facts, research, and knowledge are gathered, action is required. There is an old saying that goes,

¹⁵ World Health Organization. “*Violence Info – Homicide*.” Accessed January 29, 2025. <https://apps.who.int/violence-info/homicide/>.

“People don’t really care how much you know until they know how much you care.” With this in mind, we must prioritize children, so they do not continue to face violence.

Another aspect of the problem is that the victims of these killings are overwhelmingly male. Currently, while penning this document, Birmingham, Alabama, has experienced more than 150 homicides in 2024; 85 percent were males.¹⁶ We will discuss this disparity and its impact later, but this is an important fact that must be noted. In fact, most of these killings were committed by men. Another situation in Birmingham drew national attention. After a mass shooting took place on Birmingham’s southside in 2024, where four people were killed and 17 were injured, Birmingham’s mayor met with President Joe Biden and former Vice-President Kamala Harris at the White House. There, Biden signed an executive order to enlist federal assistance against gun violence. Where previously local politicians seemed hesitant to address the issue fully, this tragic event brought legislative changes.

More than a decade previously, in September 2011, a mother of two young children, ages seven and five, became the victim of a murder/suicide in Birmingham, Alabama. These children will be referred to as J and A. She left behind two defenseless children who would eventually become the dependents of their maternal grandmother. J and A’s story is a case study of the devastation of the loss of a parent by murder. Senseless violence has led to many children being left without one or even both parents to raise them. Whether the parent is the victim or the perpetrator, this is a sad and all too common occurrence that leaves a child without the provisions, guidance, and nurturing necessary for them to become healthy and productive adults. Sadly, these same children whose parents committed such a violent crime can end up becoming delinquents, being wards of the state, homeless, or sometimes becoming incarcerated along with

¹⁶ Robinson, AL.com.

their offending parent. Unfortunately, the lack of the care mentioned above can propel some of the children to continue the cycle and fall into a life of crime and become felons as well.

Gun violence has been shown to be the primary culprit of the devastation that has contributed to homicide in our inner cities. And as the gun violence persists, death numbers continue to rise, week after week. We have a state of emergency in the city of Birmingham, Alabama, the city where I was raised. Birmingham is ranked 3rd in the nation in murders behind St. Louis, Missouri and Mobile, Alabama.¹⁷ Over fifty people were murdered over a ninety-day span.¹⁸

In Birmingham, Alabama, where the population is roughly 195,400, there have been over 689 murders in the past five years.¹⁹ This is significant as this tragedy correlates with my time at Candler. During this time, I was also pastoring Mt. Mariah Baptist Church, in Gate City, a community on the east side of Birmingham, Alabama. This project fell into my spirit when one of my members, a 71-year-old woman named Midge, was brutally murdered by a gun outside of her home at point-blank range. Just two months before Midge's death, her grandson was also murdered right in the same neighborhood. It was believed that Midge's murder was somehow connected to what had happened to her grandson. In addition, according to Midge's daughter, five people were murdered in their family in the past twenty years. If no one else recognizes that this is an epidemic, this family does.

In June 2023, another young 18-year-old man was killed in the same community. The police reported that there were over 70 gun shots to his body, which killed him instantly. This killing happened in the very community where I was licensed and ordained as a minister. This

¹⁷ Curran, Hannah. "Birmingham ranked No. 3 nationally in homicides." Trussville Times. July 7, 2022

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Watkins, Donald V. "Homicides in Birmingham are Completely Out of Control." Donald V. Watkins (blog), November 24, 2024. <https://donaldvwatkins.com/homicides-in-birmingham-are-completely-out-of-control>.

was the 62nd murder in the city this year, as compared to 2014, when the total killings were 62. Much insult would be added to these injuries and losses if those who had the power to take a stand refused to do so. Every life has a purpose. Every man, woman, and child have the right to be able to live in peace and to become a contributing, thriving part of society. These killings cut lives short and leave a trail of devastation in their path, not only for a family but for the community at large—these killings are a cultural cancer.

During that time, the city leaders seemed to be in denial though the murders have steadily increased. In the last month, there has been statistically more rampant disregard for human life, even amongst the juveniles. After media appearances and sights of the billboard, there were claims that the numbers were not true. However, I had used information from their offices and local news sources. I suppose I understand the hesitancy of city leaders to want to bring more attention to the city’s “personal” problems, however, no problem has ever been solved by sticking your head in the sand. This is my city, my community, my people. The killings are increasing each year and that is the fact. It’s a tragic fact, but it is a fact indeed.

SECTION 3

NEHEMIAH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE OF COMMUNAL NETWORKING

Networking and Sharing Ideas & Information

The purpose of this section is to provide biblical justification for the Black church’s involvement in the activity of communal networking. Nehemiah advances a Torah-centered leadership model that highlights a strategic process on how the black church can address the crisis of gun violence and form alliances with other community organizations: (1) Nehemiah reorganized the community to reconstruct the temple and wall (Neh 3:1-32); (2) Nehemiah

confronted the economic crisis in the community (Neh 5:6-10); (3) Nehemiah galvanized a list of exiles returning home (Neh 7:4-5); and (4) Nehemiah reinstituted worship (Neh 8:5).

Nehemiah presented an effective plan to reconstruct the temple and wall. In fact, Nehemiah organized diverse groups within the community: priests, men of cities, sons of families, perfume-makers, temple servants, goldsmiths, and merchants (Neh 3:1-32). To be sure, this wide-range of community support encouraged physical and emotional buy-in from the participants as well as the enhancement of neighborhood pride. In similar fashion, we meticulously arranged various stakeholders in the Fountain Heights community: churches, financial institutions, schools, politicians, business owners, hospitals, law firms, law enforcement, and neighborhood residents. Interestingly enough, the first few meetings were challenging because there was a pronounced element of suspicion. The residents in Fountain Heights were uncomfortable because they didn't trust city officials or individuals in the private sector. Consequently, the initial meeting was one of honesty and truth-telling about the perceptions of the relationships between the community and city officials. Therefore, before genuine relationships can be formed there must be trust among all parties involved. For instance, after the atmosphere of skepticism subsided, associations between the residents of Fountain Heights and the Birmingham City Council began to heal and mend. In other words, before we can go up the hill and rebuild, we must heal the hurts and heartaches of the people. For this reason, Mt. Mariah Baptist Church, Fountain Heights neighborhood, and the City of Birmingham are working together in other community-oriented programs to improve the moral and spiritual climate of inner city neighborhoods.

Furthermore, Nehemiah displayed the moral courage to confront the economic crisis in the community. More specifically, the returnees to Jerusalem experienced a sense of collective trauma through economic oppression.¹ In short, the social crisis in Neh 5:1-13, motivated

Nehemiah to respond to the “outcry” of the people who were being over-taxed and economically oppressed by their Israelite neighbors.² With righteous anger, Nehemiah organized a community meeting to address the issue (Neh 5:6-8). We contend that it is this righteous anger which is a moral response to sin and injustice that will ignite the people’s fire to give them a mind to work and build. To put another way, righteous anger is the indignation felt towards wrongdoings that are not adequately addressed by those in authority. Instead of being confronted, these issues are ignored, accepted, and even encouraged by them. Along the same line, Fountain Heights neighborhood is confronted with an affordable housing crisis: vacant lots, dilapidated housing, and absentee landlords. With this in mind, Mt. Mariah has crafted a 10-step networking process to tackle the housing catastrophe: 1) A group of volunteer architects and Mt. Mariah will develop a neighborhood housing plan for the Fountain Heights community; 2) Neighborhood Services, Inc. will assist Mt. Mariah by interviewing and counseling potential low income home buyers who will be able to qualify for a mortgage ranging from \$45,000 - \$47,000; 3) A church or community group will make a commitment to raise the \$50,000 material cost and recruit the required construction volunteers, Mt. Mariah will match them with a prospective home buyer and designate the location of the home; 4) An architect and volunteers from a church or community group will work with the family to design the home and plan construction activities; 5) Mt. Mariah will recruit construction volunteers to work in groups of 10-15 people and schedule them for work days; 6) Construction will take 4-6 months if volunteer groups work at least two days per week; 7) The Mt. Mariah construction coordinator will purchase materials and work with the church’s volunteer coordinator to schedule volunteers; 8) The home buying family is expected to contribute sweat equity; 9) When the home is completed, Mt. Mariah will assist the family in securing a commercial mortgage and the sale proceeds will be used to build

additional houses; and 10) New homeowners will be required to join the Fountain Heights Residents Association and attend home ownership workshops.

In addition, Nehemiah discovered a list of repatriates that served as an effective border for inclusion and exclusion in the community, which led to the expulsion of foreign wives and children (Neh 7:6-72).³ In a related move, Mt. Mariah established a list of residents and families who desire to remain in Fountain Heights or return to the community after its redevelopment. All things considered; this list will allow the Fountain Heights Neighborhood Association to empower potential residents to transform a crime-infested community into a safe, viable, self-directed neighborhood. For example, when creating a daycare for the community, the family is empowered by the establishment of a waiting list of interested and qualified students who are prepared to enter the educational journey with excitement and a thirst for knowledge and learning. Plus, this permits intergenerational relationships between seniors and children. This nurtures the individuals and helps in healing the prior hurts and heartaches by giving them an investment in the project. We cannot rebuild any community without the inhabitants having an investment and buy-in in the project or movement. Because this rebuilding is more than just a project; it is a movement.

Moreover, through his Torah-centered leadership style, Nehemiah, after the completion of the wall, and the discovery of the census list, introduces the Torah in the worship service to praise God for success and victory (Neh 8). It is imperative that as we rebuild the wall in Fountain Heights that we continue to implement worship in this community because this is a Christ-centered project. To reintroduce the word of God into the community, we are going to take one of the abandoned buildings and revitalize it by turning it into a place of worship, revival, and recovery. Our plan is to: (1) Hold revivals in Fountain Heights every six months; (2) Host

weekly bible study centered around the Nehemiah project; (3) and like Ezra, we will have daily readings from the outward pulpit that we have established in the community; (4) Unite with architectural students at Tuskegee to assist with the rebuild; (5) Weekly attendance at City Council meetings, (6) Praying with all clergy in the community; (7) work with Parks & Recreation in the revitalization of the community, and (8) Work with public and private schools in the community. All these meetings will be centered around togetherness and rebuilding. We must reinstate the word back into community just as Nehemiah reintroduced the Torah to the people by having Ezra read the Torah in the temple. The reliance of the Torah is more pronounced in Nehemiah 8. After the completion of the wall and the census lists of the repatriates, Ezra reads the Torah in public (Neh 8). This allowed the community to praise and worship God for God's divine assistance and help.

Networking With the Youth

This networking process birth the relationship between church and community. This involved internalizing the magnitude of information shared and organizing a timeline for when and how the expertise of each group could be utilized. Also, attention was given to the issues that affect the youth in Fountain Heights. The youth shared important information about the presence of gangs in the neighborhood. In fact, four active gangs were identified: the Disciples, Crips, Bloods, and Four-Way. Amazingly, the leaders of two of the gangs attended one-third of the planning sessions. Finally, the youth expressed an interest in exploring and seeking employment opportunities. The youth were not just satisfied with securing employment, they also wanted to know how to start and create their own businesses. Therefore, the residents agreed to address the issues of safety, housing, and the exploration of business opportunities for the youth.

As a result of the aforementioned survey data and the massive killings taking place in this community, I must agree with Walter Brueggemann's suggestion that bringing hurt to public expression is an important first step in dismantling criticism that permits a new reality, theological and social, to emerge.²¹ Furthermore, most oppressive regimes and political systems use economics, politics, and religion as instruments to solidify and concretize the status quo.

Brueggemann contends that Imperial Regimes use economics, politics, and religion as follows:

“Imperial economics is designed to keep people satiated so that they do not notice. Its politics is intended to block out the cries of the denied ones. Its religion is to be an opiate so that no one discerns misery alive in the heart of God.... This model of royal consciousness does not require too much interpretation to be seen as a characterization of our own cultural situation.”²²

This notion of politics “being used to block out the cries of the denied ones” is crucial to understanding the importance and power of a community's ability to express their grief. Without a doubt, having the capacity to grieve and articulate one's hurt is a form of direct criticism and an announcement that there are problems with the present political system.²³ In this regard, the cries of a murder-plagued community are significant and must not be ignored or taken lightly. True and authentic dialogue with the oppressed occurs when their thoughts, ideas, feelings, and reflections are respected, valued, and trusted. This is what Paulo Freire means when he defines praxis as a reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.²⁴ Simply put, the statements of grief uttered by disadvantaged communities is their way of reflecting on their existential situation or context of suffering so God can initiate and participate in its transformation. Freire further elaborates on praxis as follows:

“To achieve this praxis, however, it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in

²¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 21.

²² Brueggemann, 41

²³ Brueggemann, 20

²⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993), p.33.

their ability to reason. Whoever lacks this trust will fail to initiate (or will abandon) dialogue, reflection, and communication, and will fall into slogans, communiqués, monologues, and instructions. Superficial conversions to the cause of liberation carry this danger.”²⁵

It is this element of trust that gives the method of dialogue and sharing its integrity and authenticity. In essence, when one is working with a community that has been dehumanized by murder and death, then the methods or strategies that one employs must be liberating and uplifting. For sure, the ability of the Jewish community to publicly share its hurt and pain with Nehemiah was an essential part of networking and the first step in the process of their rebuilding efforts and redevelopment project. The ability to share my pain is the first step to liberation. In similar fashion with Nehemiah, after we ascertained the vision from the people, we took it to city government. In short, we demanded the mayor to hear our concerns and design a plan to stop the killings in Birmingham. Furthermore, as a leader, I placed on billboards around the city of Birmingham, “Stop the Killings!” The billboards became a sermon or a message to the mayor, the residents, and the entire state to highlight the mayor’s deficiencies and the urgency of the problem. On the billboards, we placed a counter that counted each time there was a killing in the city – a glaring reminder of the killings that were happening in the city of Birmingham. Also, a prophetic nudge of speaking truth to power.

Networking and Relationships

Not only does Nehemiah allow the community to share ideas and information about its devastating condition, but he also uses his connections with King Artaxerxes to impact the Jewish community. Nehemiah’s position as King Artaxerxes’ cupbearer afforded him the opportunity to inform the King of the condition of his people. Nehemiah says to King

²⁵ Freire, 48

Artaxerxes:

“If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah to the city of my fathers’ sepulchers, that I may rebuild it.” ...So, it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time. And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah.” Nehemiah 2:5-7

Nehemiah’s ability to listen to the voice of the community motivated him to share their plight with the king. In fact, through this moment of sharing, Nehemiah builds and sustains his relationship with the king in order to effect change in the community. To be sure, it is the voice of the community that reconnects and recommits Nehemiah to his history, roots, and communal relationships. Therefore, Nehemiah sees himself as being one with the community in its struggle for liberation. This concept of “oneness” is reflected in his prayer to God in verse 6 of chapter 1, Nehemiah states, “We have sinned against thee. Yea, I and my father’s house have sinned.” Nehemiah does not view himself as being separate from the community but being in solidarity with the community.

The challenge confronting the Black church is that we must encourage parishioners to see themselves as being one with the community of pain and suffering and not separate from the community. It is this “oneness” perspective that motivates us to use everything at our disposal to empower our murder-ridden communities. Being captured by this spirit of “oneness” motivated Nehemiah to use his time, talents, skills, relationship and connection with the king for the good of the community. Therefore, Nehemiah’s cupbearer status or middle-class position was a blessing for the community and not a curse. In our efforts to make Mt. Mariah one with the community, we invited one of the leading educators from Montgomery, Alabama to inspire and encourage our young scholars. Why her? Because it was her former schoolmate whose mother

was killed in High Chapparral, one of Birmingham’s housing projects. At that function we gave out book bags and school supplies to the youth of the community. We have also held a drive and provided items for the citizens in Fountain Heights. In another initiative, we went outside the state of Alabama and showed inner city children in Atlanta, Georgia, a “New Way in a New Day” by providing clothes and school supplies as they returned back for their 2nd semester. We used our status, time, talents, skills, relationships and connections to become one with the communities of need. Like Nehemiah and his team who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, we believe there are stakeholders in Fountain Heights who can galvanize the remnant that remains and rebuild the walls of this community.

Networking and Resources

Nehemiah’s association with King Artaxerxes provided financial and human resources for a community in need. In other words, the resources were a by-product of a friendly and genuine relationship of trust. George Fraser refers to this as networking for influence. He defines influence as having access to key people. Fraser further contends:

Knowing a person with the ability to link you to what you need to reach your goal—this is critical to your success. It is particularly important in volunteer organizations when specific projects can only be accomplished through the goodwill of highly influential people who, in turn, share common resources—either personnel, finances, or goods and services.²⁸

Nehemiah did not misuse or abuse his relationship with the king. The requests that Nehemiah made to the king were reasonable and well within the king’s ability to grant. Through his connections with the king, he was able to gain the support of the queen, the governors of Trans-

²⁸ George Fraser, *Success Runs in Our Race: The Complete Guide to Effective Networking in the African American Community*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1994), p. 143.

Euphrates, the keeper of the king's forest, and strategic army and Calvary officers. It is the connection with the keeper of the king's forest, Asaph, which is most intriguing. Nehemiah says to the king, “ ‘...in a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house which I shall occupy.’ And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.” (Neh. 2:8)

As a result of Nehemiah's ability to network with the king, timber from the forest was used to build the gates of the temple, the walls of the city, and houses in the community. Without a doubt, millions of dollars were pumped into Nehemiah's Redevelopment Project as a result of his connections with the king. Nehemiah did an excellent job of establishing, sustaining, and nurturing his relationship with King Artaxerxes. George Fraser suggests that when one is maintaining networking relationships, it is important to honor and respect the people within the network. Fraser refers to this as his Success Net Maintenance Rules. The five (5) rules are: *See the knots, not the net; Be up front, up front; Be the host, not the guest; Don't make promises you can't keep, but keep the ones you make; and 'Fess up when you mess up.*⁷

We learned a lot from Nehemiah because he taught us how to network. The first lesson that we learned was when he went and got a letter from the king. The letter served two purposes: one for protection which provided safety for his journey and the second was for economic reasons to help with his efforts to rebuild the beams for the temple, the walls of the city, and the homes for the people. This is the guideline for us in our initiative with Fountain Heights. We first established relationships with the community and gang members. The gang members actually

⁷ George Fraser, *Success Runs in Our Race: The Complete Guide to Effective Networking in the African American Community*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1994), p. 143.

have given us a letter in the form of protection, a “hood pass” for us to walk through the neighborhood freely and unharmed. We met with the leaders of the four gangs in that community: the Bloods, the Crips, 4-Way, and the Disciples. They have offered us protection and they have suggested an innovative pizza delivery idea. Home Boys, Inc was borne out of the need of the community. The crime in Fountain Heights is so bad that the local restaurants will not deliver pizza to that area. We are working with Home Boys, Inc., as stakeholders, to provide delivery service to the community, offering a much-needed service.

SECTION 4

NETWORKING MODEL OF MINISTRY: MT. MARIAH NETWORKS WITH COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS TO ADDRESS THE KILLINGS

The writer’s convictions regarding the validity of networking were undergirded during matriculation at Candler Theological Seminary after he was intellectually challenged and spiritually nurtured by Dr. Gregory C. Ellison II and Dr. William K. Gravely. Based on the foregoing, the confirmation is overwhelming that the process of networking is an appropriate response to murder-plagued city neighborhoods. Commenting on the power that networking gives oppressed individuals, George Fraser writes:

“Leaders emerge in any group, but in networks, leadership is generally shared More readily and spread across the group rather than organized in the traditional Pyramid style. Information becomes the source of power, and information flows to anyone willing to receive it. It is not racist or elitist or exclusive. That is what makes networking so effective: many voices are heard; many minds are tapped. Ideas flourish in this environment. Power builds.”³¹

³¹ George Fraser, *Success Runs in Our Race: The Complete Guide to Effective Networking in the African American Community*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1994), p. 36.

With this approach in mind, the purpose of this writer's model of ministry is to create an environment where the sharing of information, ideas, opportunities, and resources empowers the people involved in the networking process. Therefore, to reverse the present status of the Fountain Heights Neighborhood in Birmingham, Alabama, Mt. Mariah has emerged to organize a networking process. This process will allow Mt. Mariah to strengthen its relationship with Fountain Heights neighborhood, while improving its capacity to network with diverse community organizations to impact the lives of children who are homeless or have parents who are incarcerated or murdered.

In addition, Mount Mariah convened two important components of the City of Birmingham; each group shared how it could participate in making Fountain Heights a safe, viable, self-directed neighborhood. The following groups shared important and insightful information: 1) The Birmingham City Council—the representative informed the group of the various types of funding sources available to projects of this nature. The councilperson shared the city's plans for Fountain Heights and gave valuable suggestions on how the two plans could coincide. The councilperson also encouraged the neighborhood to develop a comprehensive plan for the designated area and present it to the Mayor of the City of Birmingham. 2) Urban Planning Department—the representative reminded the group that the neighborhood must be designated as "Urban Renewal" before the City of Birmingham could participate in the acquisition of land for the project. Therefore, the representative shared the details of the "Urban Renewal Designation" process and the zoning of the land in Fountain Heights.

In Birmingham, neighborhoods were historically autonomously directed to implement development projects rather than collaboratively. In other words, community development was

incorporated from a top-down perspective instead of a bottom-up approach. Fortunately, this projects' "Networking Process" allows those at the bottom of the economic ladder to set the vision for their neighborhood and gain control of their own destiny. In other words, in the absence of proactive engagement by marginalized communities—manifested through articulating concerns, contributing innovative ideas, and implementing self-derived solutions—dominant external forces are likely to assert control over the neighborhood's direction and vision. This underscores the importance of grassroots mobilization and participatory governance in order to counteract imposed agendas that may not align with the community's interests.

Networking With Community Stakeholders

As previously stated, it takes a village to raise a child. The pilot that I am designing will use a village to care for children of incarcerated persons. This program will use innovation that surpasses theory and puts our ministry into practice. It is no secret that church memberships and attendance in Sunday morning worship have declined in the post-pandemic era. This development has forced present-day ministers to be innovative in their approach.

Definitely, we will address the murder/incarceration issue by using all of the resources available to us. First, we will organize the community stakeholders: neighborhood presidents, community residents, parents, pastors, law enforcement, department of corrections, business owners, school principals, banks, city council members, state representatives, and congresspersons will be galvanized to cast the vision. Second, we will design a survey to collect data on the residents' ideas and solutions to the killings in the neighborhood. Third, we will partner with the Department of Corrections to visit those convicted of past murders to understand their mindset. Fourth, we will schedule weekly meetings with the stakeholders to discuss the

survey results, carve out a vision and specific action steps for the project, develop Indigenous leadership, and establish a comprehensive plan. Fifth, the role of the stakeholders will be clearly defined: the vision and solutions will come from the residents living in the community of need, and stakeholders will provide human resources, career skills, and financial support. This will ensure the vision comes from the bottom up and not the top down. Sixth, we will reach out to both families: the victim and the perpetrator. Seventh, we will visit other programs around the country that are successful in dealing with these issues to hear their stories and gain insights from their journeys.

Mt. Mariah Convenes Local Groups

Mt. Mariah convened representatives from the following local organizations in Birmingham: Birmingham Public School System, Social Worker for Homeless Children, Birmingham Police Department, Comprehensive Design Group, Wellsons Financial Group, 4Sight, Inc., and Psychologist (Mental Health). Each member of the group was offered the following core values: 1) confront oppressive systems and offer real potential for change; 2) provide the poor and exploited opportunities to change their situation; 3) seek to transform systemic city governments; and 4) participate with God in changing the lives of the poor and the powerful in the city. For sure, commitment to these values will create a disruption in the status quo. In essence, this initiative emboldens individuals, collectives, and communities to assume the role of ‘disruptors,’ actively interrogating and challenging entrenched paradigms and practices that perpetuate exclusion and oppression. By fostering critical engagement, the goal is to dismantle barriers that impede outreach and support for diverse populations, thereby promoting inclusivity and social equity.

As a result of this partnership, Mt. Mariah is positioned to impact the lives of 60 homeless children in Birmingham. These children will be provided with the following services: mental health counseling, transportation, food, clothing, and housing in two facilities for children. These buildings are currently under contract for purchase. More importantly, a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) Academy will provide high-quality STEM education in a caring and nurturing environment and positioned to prepare students to become leaders, scientists, innovators, and analytical people. In short, the STEM Academy would be a private school with a rigorous and advanced academic curriculum promoting student creativity and innovation. Therefore, the whole of the student's physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being would be impacted with a comprehensive Biblical and Technological course of study.

Overcoming Obstacles

In organizing this consortium of community organizations, the following are some of the obstacles that Mt. Mariah had to overcome: (1) Turf Issues – When working in the community, pastors and churches tend to become territorial in their concept and understanding of ministry. Therefore, Mt. Mariah overcame the turf issues by contacting and corresponding with each pastor in the community and inviting them to be a part of the networking process. To be sure, the success of the partnership depends on the church's ability to communicate with local clergy and community leaders effectively and consistently. (2) Past work of Neighborhood Organizations – This is important because Birmingham is broken down into 99 neighborhoods; each neighborhood consists of neighborhood presidents and board—these are the gatekeepers. The church must be abreast of the past work of neighborhood organization. Furthermore, this work must be appreciated and respected. In relating with neighborhood organizations, Mt. Mariah did the following: A) Attended Neighborhood Association meetings in order to keep the residents

informed about the progress of the networking process. B) Carried neighborhood officers to meetings with city officials, financial institutions, and business owners in the community. This allows the residents to take ownership of the work and ministry in the community.

A grant writer will be brought on board to craft proposals and secure government and private funding. Also, a diverse board—comprising residents, neighborhood members, and community leaders—will be established to address real, relevant community issues. In like manner, neighborhood partnerships will include collaborations with neighborhood presidents, city council representatives, and church leaders. To put it another way, through using the tool of surveys we will garner the needs of the community and hear the voices and concerns of the people residing in the area of need. The sources that make the ministry successful are volunteers from various community churches and corporations. Also, financial contributions from the City of Birmingham, private foundations, national foundations, and local churches and businesses add to the effectiveness of this project. In addition, this ministry is not just about building a community—it is about building a city or nation that is grounded on the transformative principles of faith, hope, love, and action.

Creating a Non-Profit, 501(C)3 Organization

Mt. Mariah formed a non-profit, 501(c)3 Development Corporation to address the challenges in urban communities. The composition of the Board of Directors consists of 75% of the board members are residents in the community of need. Hence, the residents have control of the decision making process. In other words, their voices will set the vision for the community and determine the activities in the neighborhood—this is communal empowerment. Also, this ensures the longevity of the project while nurturing indigenous leadership, which secures the legacy of Mt. Mariah. Furthermore, the self-care of the leadership and staff is enhanced through

the delegation of responsibilities and the sharing of important tasks. As a note of caution, the church must not allow outside grants to dictate its social agenda or silence its prophetic voice.

Mt. Mariah's networking process works as follows: 1) Birmingham Public School System establishes the relationships with homeless students or students in crisis. 2) Psychologists provide counseling to strengthen the mental health of the students. 3) Birmingham Police Department will provide safety training for the students and create a safe community. 4) Comprehensive Design Group is tasked with the architectural design of residential facilities for boys and girls. In collaboration with Tuskegee University's Department of Architecture, the design group will engage architecture students to serve as mentors for the children residing in these homes. This project not only provides practical experiences for the students but also offers valuable mentorship to the children. Furthermore, Tuskegee architecture students have demonstrated excellence in their field, evidenced by the first place win in the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA) Student Competition. 5) Wellsons Financial Group will share information about the "Community Reinvestment Act." This program encourages banks to reinvest funds in disadvantaged communities through housing and business programs. Wellsons will also provide financial literacy classes, spearhead all real estate purchases, and galvanize relationships with other financial institutions. 6) 4Sight, Inc. will oversee a STEM Academy, provide a rigorous physics curriculum for K-12 students, and job certifications in Cyber Security and Bio-Technology; for students interested in these STEM related career fields. Consequently, this writer is convinced that the most potent weapon that the Black Church must overcome present urban calamities (or plights) is the process of networking. By expanding ministries across states and globally, the needs of children in crisis can be addressed and further foster a collective resilience and capacity for systemic change. This change will be implemented

to help build the family and the Black community. This will stop the neighborhood to prison pipeline and neighborhood to cemetery pipeline. It will create a new pipeline from Pre-K to PhD—generating a community of young leaders, innovators, and analytical people. The success formula in the Black community is God, family, and education.

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