

TAKING FOCUS ON THE FAMILY TO A WHOLE NEW LEVEL

THE CHURCH AS FAMILY AND GANG VIOLENCE

By Paul Louis Metzger



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I wish to thank President James C. Rodriguez of Fathers & Families Coalition of America, Inc. for the opportunity to share this article on the Coalition's website. Originally, I was approached by Dr. Sharon Chan to write a piece for Great Commission News. A version of this article will appear in Great Commission News thanks to Dr. Chan and her colleague Dr. Samuel Ling.



God has placed on my heart a growing burden for ethnic communities in this great country of ours. This spring, I was invited to the San Francisco Bay Area in my role as Director of The Institute for the Theology of Culture: New Wine, New Wineskins of Multnomah Biblical Seminary in Portland, Oregon. I met with leaders of diverse ethnic backgrounds during my visit. One of the themes that surfaced repeatedly was that of isolation and fragmentation.

Among other things, we discussed the isolation of churches from one another, especially along ethnic lines, and the fragmentation that is occurring in the region as reflected in increasing violence, most notably the result of gang activity. I will take up the first item first—the isolation of churches, and then go on to discuss social fragmentation bound up with gang activity. I believe that in one way or another, the two problems are related. I will argue that we need to come together as the church and build family across ethnic and socio-economic lines if we are to address the problems associated with the dissolution of families and increasing gang activity in our society.

We Evangelicals have been known for great ministry ventures like Focus on the Family. We the church need to take that focus to a whole new level as local ecclesial families that come together to care for families in disrepair and the fatherless in our communities.

Some African American pastors in San Francisco shared with me how the African American Christian community is often excluded from a vital place at the table of fellowship with other Christian leaders in the Bay Area. One Chinese American pastor in the area responded to their statement by saying that “We Chinese have not been invited to the table either, so we simply made our own table.” These diverse leaders were saying to me that there is not sufficient intentionality toward the development of community involving equality and solidarity in ministry among people of diverse ethnic backgrounds.



As is often the case in the Greater Portland area, it seems that the Bay area also struggles with Christian ministries often doing their own thing—whether it is an Anglo American or Asian American or African American thing. The list of isolated things could go on and on.

So, is there anything that can bring us together? We can lament our lack of unity, or look with prayerful expectation to how God might bring us together. But unless we sense our need for one another, we will not come together. We will not come together unless we know that we are dependent on God and one another for our ministry to succeed in society. The challenges we face are just too daunting to go it alone.



One very large challenge that has the potential to tear our society apart unless the churches come together is gang violence. Both the Portland area and the San Francisco Bay Area struggle increasingly with gang activity and violence. The challenges are immense and overwhelming. The growth of violent gangs reflects an increasing fragmentation in key quarters of our society. While gangs often demonstrate strong social bonds internally, they reflect the dissolution of social bonds across society. Such dissolution of solidarity often reflects ethnic and economic tensions.

One way or another, the lack of cohesiveness and unity in one part of society has a bearing on other

parts of society. Is there a connection between the lack of unity in the body of Christ and the lack of unity in our society at large? Does such disunity bear upon the tensions and rivalries in our society concerning gangs? All too often, we do not engage issues, if we do not think they affect us. But all systemic issues in a society affect every

person, directly or indirectly. Moreover, if those systemic problems are allowed to fester and grow, the malignancy works its way throughout the society, as a disease often spreads through one's whole body if left untreated.

Churches often function as gangs—I have my gang and you have yours. We do our own thing and protect our own people and interests to

the neglect of others. Often, our church gangs are ethnic in stripe. While we do not pick up arms to fight with one another in the church, we fight against one another in overt and subtle ways, even by simply not partnering together as equals.

In John 17:23, our Lord pours out his heart in prayer to his Father, longing for God to make his people one so that the world might know that God has sent his Son. Our Lord longs today for our churches to move beyond gang identities along ethnic and socio-economic lines to partner together to confront the ills that plague us and our society at large, including gang violence.

So, how can we get out of our ethnic ghettos and trenches and partner together as the body of Christ?



How might it bear on the gang violence sweeping through our society? As one African American leader in

the Bay Area told me recently, "We are a fatherless nation which affects our families and communities and even to the place where fathers may be present in the home but the home is still fatherless." The churches must come together to help parent increasingly parentless communities. Among other things, this will entail the younger people in our churches even now looking to godly elders for wisdom and counsel. So seldom do we inquire of them, when we have so much to gain from them.

We are often looking to a future of which we know nothing, and fail to draw insights and perspectives on how to live now in view of history which others have already lived. While attending to the needs and cultural identity of our youth today is extremely important, fixation with the youth culture and failure to engage the older generation today inside and outside the church can only harm our social fabric inside and outside the church. So, what is the collective wisdom of our elders in the Christian community at large in the Greater Portland Area and the San Francisco Bay Area? Among other things, they teach us respect and the need to take responsibility and develop appropriate boundaries as it concerns honoring laws that promote the common good. Among other things, this will require diverse elders having the opportunity to come together to share their wisdom not only with their own people but with the communities at large. But will that opportunity be provided, and will we all come together? Pastors have been father figures. Pastors from diverse backgrounds need to come together to help parent their communities, even

setting the example by partnering together with pastors of diverse ethnicities so that communities have role models who work inclusively rather than exclusively.

White Euro-American Christian leaders like myself have so much to learn from leaders of other ethnic heritages. For instance, we need the help of the Asian American Christian community. The church at large has so much to learn from our Asian American brothers and sisters. For example, generally speaking, there is so much respect for elders and such strong family ties in the Asian American church context. Moreover, at times, there have been greater inroads toward reconciliation involving Asian Americans and African Americans based on shared experiences of facing similar oppression and because of certain relational instincts in having such strong solidarity in their communities. As a result, Asian American Christian leaders are often well-placed to promote reconciliation between African Americans and white Americans like myself. We need the insights and perspectives of Asian American pastors and other leaders to help build these bridges.

It is also important that Asian American and African American leaders work together with other ethnic groups, since their surrounding communities will engage in violent activity more readily with one another than with whites because of power imbalances in our society. For example, the powers that be will often crack down much more readily when white communities experience violence at the hands of minorities. In addition, minority communities of similar economic status tend to compete with one another over scarce land resources. As with domestic violence, those



who lash out will often lash out violently toward those closest to home. The harm usually occurs in those communities in closest proximity, whether it

involves gangs or others. So, learning and understanding and respecting one another will build the community at large, moving us beyond fear and hate to beloved community. Such trust and solidarity will build the social fabric and help decrease violence as the result of gang activity.

We live in a racialized nation, where we have often been raised to be racist, intentionally or unintentionally. Without exposure to one another, without the building of ties with one another where we move beyond stereotypes and prejudgments, we cannot become one. Did our earthly fathers raise us to view those of different ethnicities as equals? Did the fathers of our churches parent our churches in such a manner that for all our churches' rich and beautiful ethnic textures, they also sought to build bridges with those churches of diverse ethnic backgrounds?

Even the founding fathers of this great nation of ours failed to hold true to this country's grand ideals, including the conviction in the Declaration of Independence "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." These founding fathers of our great nation permitted the slave trade to flourish; and, even though the slave trade has long been abolished, the impact of the slave block with the blatant disregard and destruction of African American families as husbands/fathers and children were torn from their wives/mothers continue to play a role in African

American homes and our society as well.

All too often, we blame the victims of those injustices for the fragmentation of African American homes. The Chinese and Japanese faced huge and grievous challenges as immigrant and minority populations in the 19th and 20th centuries with oppressive working conditions and internment camps in some cases, while others who longed to come here fell victim to exclusion acts. No doubt, the descendents of these Asian immigrants can appreciate something of the horror that African Americans have experienced along the lines noted here.

Each situation is unique, and so the response to each scenario will be different. Still, we must not repeat the sins of the past by failing to care for families and ethnic communities in need. We must also learn to welcome new immigrant populations, remembering the old saying: "It takes a village to raise a child." Our churches must come together to parent our youth inside and outside the church, even engaging in civic partnerships in increasing measure. While we should never view our churches as babysitters for our children, nonetheless, our church communities must partner with nuclear families to care for the children and youth. In view of past racialized structures and present realities, there are great needs in impoverished inner cities and other





communities in disrepair where youth are so vulnerable to gang influence.

Many gangs are made up of youth who often come from families and communities in crisis; these youth form and join gangs to find some sense of social cohesion and belonging. Having said that, the reality is that gang activity is spreading into the suburbs as well. I think of Santa Rosa, California and the amount of gang activity there. In these days, it is not just impoverished inner cities but other communities, too, since families are in disrepair and dysfunction everywhere, leaving the youth most vulnerable. Gangs are families, but they are often missing out on father figures, earthly and heavenly. They are looking for membership and inclusion in a fatherless world.

As stated at the outset of the piece, we Evangelicals have been known for great ministry ventures like Focus on the Family. We the church need to take that focus to a whole new level to care for families in disrepair and the fatherless.

James tells us that God calls his people to care for orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27). The Greater Portland area and the San Francisco Bay Area are in increasing distress. Will we the church come together across the ethnic spectrum to partner together to parent our communities? We need the collective resources, including the wisdom of our elders who have fostered solidarity and social cohesiveness for years so that we can be agents of God's healing embrace for the orphans and widows in their distress.

On Tuesday, November 22nd, we will be holding a forum in the Bay Area to pray and discuss these issues and to move forward

as ministry partners who would build families and communities in places where gang violence abounds so that our society's youth would experience the embrace of Jesus' love through his family, the church. Please refer to www.new-wineskins.org for more information in early October.

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