

Learning and Mentoring Partnership (LAMP)

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Faith-based Mentoring and Transformation of At-Risk Youth

God is leading many people through a process of transformation in the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Located in the northeastern region of the United States of America, the metropolitan Pittsburgh area contains nearly 2.5 million people. As with all growing cities in the world, Pittsburgh has many signs of need and many signs of hope. Violence, racism, and systemic brokenness present some of the most recent signs of need. The city is also filled with assets in its people, places, and systems. Pittsburghers generally love their city, and they are rising to the challenge to participate in a process of transformation. Urban and suburban residents are experiencing shalom as non-violence, reconciliation, and healing of mind, body, and spirit through long-term, faith-based mentoring relationships.

The Transformational Impact of Mentoring

Over the past ten years, more than 400 mentors from Pittsburgh-area churches have entered into mutually transformational mentoring relationships with marginalized urban children through a city-wide, faith-based, youth mentoring initiative called the Learning and Mentoring Partnership, or LAMP. School-based mentors and community-based one-to-one mentors are matched with a mentee for a period of at least one year, with the opportunity to renew the relationship annually. The average LAMP match lasts for 3.8 years, compared to the national mentoring match's average length of seven months. Many LAMP mentors stayed matched with their mentees through high-school graduation, and they are now engaged in lifelong friendships. As the mentoring relationships have been built, the hearts of the mentors have been broken and the Holy Spirit has led these passionate followers of Jesus into right relationships with vulnerable people in their city. Through mentoring, the mentors have continued to develop right relationships with God, with themselves, with their neighbors, and with creation.

Young people involved in the mentoring relationships have transcended the isolation, pain, and violence so often experienced in troubled urban neighborhoods. The mentees have demonstrated remarkable progress academically, socially, and spiritually. Children with LAMP mentors have gone on to graduate from high school and college, and many are currently working jobs, supporting families, and serving to bring about peace in their

communities. Violence has decreased as developmental assets such as courage and resilience have emerged. However, the relational approach has been challenging. Several children involved in LAMP have died or been seriously injured by street violence. Some LAMP kids have experienced the pain of incarceration in a country that disproportionately locks up our young people of colour. Marginalized children experiencing poverty in Pittsburgh still face many barriers to fulfilling the unique purposes that God has in store for each individual.

Reconciliation through Relationships

LAMP is a mentoring initiative that points people toward Jesus. Most often this happens through consistent, incarnational actions over time. Often mentors are able to use words to point people toward Christ. Either way, God is being glorified through the long-term mentoring relationships. Mentors have shared that their faith has grown exponentially once they chose to step out of their comfort zones to actually build authentic relationships with people living on the margins of our town. Mentees, and sometimes their entire families, have entered into relationships with Jesus Christ as a result of LAMP's long term vision for urban transformation.

LAMP families have started attending and participating in the life of the local churches that are serving in their schools and communities. LAMP churches are mobilizing their congregations to step outside the walls of their churches in order to engage relationally with people in the schools and homes surrounding the church buildings. Most of the mentoring relationships bring people together across the deep racial, socioeconomic, and neighbourhood barriers that have traditionally divided residents in the Pittsburgh region. Healing is occurring at the mind, body, and spirit level as churches engage with students in public schools, and as materially rich and poor people learn to interact lovingly with one another.

Eight Perspectives of Transformational Mentoring

LAMP mentors were interviewed and surveyed in 2011 to determine the factors that lead to transformation in Christ-centered mentoring relationships. The results were presented in a doctoral dissertation through Bakke Graduate University, *Faith-based Mentoring and Transformation of At-Risk Youth*, in June 2012. The outcomes showed that the LAMP mentoring initiative in Pittsburgh is an example of transformational mentoring involving eight different perspectives. The transformational mentoring relationships are calling-, servant-, and shalom-based; incarnational; reflective; contextual; global; and prophetic in nature.

A strong sense of calling from God is prevalent among LAMP mentors. *Calling-based mentors* commit to spending time with a mentee, despite the potential outcomes of the relationship, because mentoring is something that God has called them to see through to the finish. When the calling to become a mentor comes from and is sustained by Christ, the mentoring becomes even more transformational for both the mentor and the mentee because the match lasts longer and the mentor may be more resilient to persevere when the match struggles. Calling-based mentors stay in their matches longer because of their obedience to God.

Most LAMP mentors perceive that they need to serve their mentees consistently over time no matter how difficult the circumstances or barriers encountered. *Servant-based mentors* initially become involved in mentoring because they want to serve God; however, as a result they come to be of service to a mentee. There is no agenda to fix individuals through human efforts in servant mentoring. It is often quite a sacrifice for busy adults to carve out time to spend with a high risk youth, but servant mentors are successful because they understand that this is an area of their lives where God is calling them to serve another person selflessly. Mentors struggle when they enter into a match with a top-down mentality. The 'saviour complex' is prominent in mentoring circles. Mentors think that if they try hard enough, and prescribe enough good advice, that they can save their mentees from poverty. This type of thinking almost always undermines the friendship, because nobody wants to be friends with someone who is constantly trying to change them according to their advice which may or may not be applicable in their life.

LAMP mentors view themselves as peace-makers and participants in bringing about God's shalom in the midst of a complex urban environment. *Shalom-based mentors* are bridge-builders who encourage reconciliation between a mentee and the world around them. These mentors understand that by impacting the life of one child, they are supporting ever-increasing levels of shalom in the community and in the world. Many outreach programs seek to make change in communities, but they miss the key element of long-term, meaningful relationships with people. By investing in young people, shalom mentors build the fabric of the community over time. By speaking into their mentee's lives, mentors can often help their mentees to respond differently and more effectively in situations that they might not have been able to handle without a mentor.

Just as Jesus intentionally spent time with people on the margins of mainstream culture, LAMP mentors understand that presence with vulnerable people is a key that unlocks the process of mutual transformation. *Incarnational mentors* intentionally spend a significant amount of time with a mentee in the mentee's neighbourhood or environment. Many mentoring programs encourage the mentors to take kids out of their neighbourhood because those neighborhoods are perceived to be dysfunctional. While it is important to

show kids new things, mentors should be careful not to reinforce the concept that for mentees to have a good life, they must escape their dysfunctional home life or neighborhood. Just as Jesus entered into many messy situations, so also mentors who follow Christ should be willing to meet mentees where they live and spend their time. High-risk youth do not need to be rescued from their environments, as tempting as that may be for a mentor. Mentees should be empowered to thrive where they live.

LAMP mentors take the time to reflect on their relationships, and they are often encouraged to do so by the mentoring supervisors supporting the relationships. *Reflective mentors* move beyond programs and activities, and focus their mentoring experiences in a way that will allow them and their mentee to find meaning within the context of their relationship. Some mentors may quit because they do not feel like they are getting anything out of the program. Other mentors quit because their mentees seem to be unresponsive or unappreciative of the mentoring activities. Reflective mentors invest in the relationship by helping their mentees unpack what they are experiencing during the time spent together. Reflective mentors also reflect on the meaning of the mentoring experiences in terms of how God is intending for their lives to be transformed according to his purposes. Sometimes God will require mentors to do things that do not make sense at the time, and only upon reflection are mentors able to understand God's purposes.

Training is an important part of setting mentoring relationships up to succeed, and LAMP mentors participate in extensive training in order to develop an understanding of the context in which they will be mentoring. *Contextual mentors* respect a mentee's life and culture as they seek to help mentees experience meaning according to God's purposes, not from the perspective of a mentor's own limited worldview. The goal of mentoring is not to make high-risk youth change social classes when they become adults. Some mentors struggle with this issue because matches are often cross-cultural. Contextual mentors must remember that God was working in a mentee's life long before the mentor entered into the situation, and that God will continue to work in their life long after the mentor stops influencing them. Mentors can help mentees to become empowered followers of Christ by encouraging them, setting a good example, and planting seeds that are culturally appropriate. Mentors learn to trust in Jesus.

The majority of LAMP mentors are able to assist mentees in developing a greater understanding of the broader world outside of their home or school. *Global mentors* intentionally expand a mentee's worldview by teaching about the complexities of the modern world. Many high-risk youth live in poverty, and one of the major issues facing people living in poverty is isolation. Global mentors introduce their mentees to experiences outside of their neighborhoods. They can help their mentees to learn to navigate urban environments, introduce them to the skills needed in the workforce, help

to encourage setting goals for higher education, and support their mentee's faith in God. While global mentors are careful to avoid imposing their cultural values on their mentees, they are successful at giving their mentees new experiences.

LAMP mentors become empowering, prophetic influences in the lives of their mentees over the course of time. *Prophetic mentors* provide mentees a voice by advocating for them consistently over time. Prophetic mentors take on broken systems in a way that will help clear the barriers to a mentee's development. Many high-risk youth experience the feeling of being marginalized by mainstream society, so as young people they can lose hope pretty quickly. Things like access to good jobs or higher education may seem to be unattainable, but prophetic mentors encourage their mentees to pursue new dreams and goals. Prophetic mentors are dream casters, serving to cast vision with their mentees and then helping to speak truth into their lives where other adults often try to discourage and break them down.

Increasing Assets

The LAMP mentoring relationships are making a significant difference over the course of ten years in Pittsburgh. Individuals, churches, schools, and the entire city are being transformed as God's light breaks forth in our urban context. LAMP is an example of effective integral mission being implemented in a complex urban context. The process of transformation is increasingly holistic as spiritual, emotional, and intellectual assets are built and life skills, resilience, and courage increase over time. The chains of oppression, violence, and anger are being broken in the city of Pittsburgh. Justice, peace, and joy are increasing through the ongoing words and actions involved in transformational mentoring.