

Vision of a city church

The silver casket resting in the front of the packed auditorium cradled Jermaine's body. Outside, it was a sunny May Saturday. Inside, a somber congregation clouded by bereavement contemplated the life of a 16-year-long life cut short. He collapsed while playing basketball at school and died two days later.

Loved ones, neighbors, schoolmates, and church family hear the story of an 8-year-old who started coming to a new church, meeting in a house. Jamie Thompson, assisted by Armitage Baptist, was planting the church. Jamie was drawn to Garfield Park, a quintessential inner-city hood, three miles from our church building.

Curtis, Jamie's brother, led Jermaine to Christ. Curtis cut his spiritual teeth in the Armitage youth group. Jermaine drifted. However, he rededicated his life at age 14 while at Armitage's youth camp. The next year he brought his girlfriend, Nekia, to camp. She got saved. Soon, Nekia's two sisters came to Christ. Jermaine's older brother made a profession of faith. Michael, another young man discipled at Armitage, now a part of the church plant, invested in Jermaine's spiritual walk.

The grieving congregation heard of a young man who loved Jesus. Jermaine wore a purity ring and explained it to people. He left football practice early to walk six of the most dangerous blocks in America to attend Bible study. He joined the men in an all-night prayer meeting. He volunteered at kids' camp. He didn't care what other people thought of him. Because of his love for the Lord and his winsome personality, he was respected.

His own words at age 16, "I was an angry person who wasn't kind to women. Then I prayed with Curtis to accept Jesus. I walked away for a while, but last year I got serious. I want to live for God."

Who could have known he was so close to the end of earthly life?

Pastor Jamie pointed the grieving

congregation to Jermaine's life as a witness to the saving, life-transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

You see, Jamie, whose father was in Christian work, grew up in the hood looking more like the hood than the son of a missionary. "I was good at hiding all the things I was doing from my parents. I was in a real rebellious state at that time, trying drugs and drinking with friends. God used a message from Kenny Ruiz in a Sunday morning Bible study at Armitage to bring repentance and salvation," Jamie recounts.

Kenny. Yes, Kenny! Oh, yes, Kenny! He grew up in the streets. I remember the week he showed up at church a brand new Christian. I recall missing Kenny in church a few weeks after he began attending. Inquiring, we discovered the Jehovah Witnesses had found him. Our staff knelt on a cement floor praying against the evil one, doctrines of demons and false teachers, interceding for the life of this baby believer.

Several years later, God used Kenny to bring Jamie to faith in Christ. Kenny is now pastor of yet another young church not far from Armitage.

As Jamie grew in the Lord and expressed a desire to pursue ministry, he was discipled and mentored in our body. A portion of his training was our Chicago Armitage Urban Studies Experience (CAUSE), which recruits and trains leaders to work in cities around the world.

Vision. I was just a kid, but God gave me a vision: a New Testament church thriving in the center of our city. I didn't know any better. I believed the vision. I believed God. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

There were no models. There were no books. There were no conferences. There was no support.

There was no safety net.

There was a vision. From God.

It was a vision of a church of such size and strength so as to impact the whole city.

URBAN CURRENT

A multicultural church. A church for everyone.

To my knowledge, such a church did not exist at the time. Many churches that did exist in our grossly under-churched city were dying and/or moving out of the city.

Now, I think back through the years. I reflect on our congregation. Urban through and through. Unsophisticated. Unassuming. We lack many of the things churches take for granted — adequate building, ample parking, members with means. Here we are, buried in a gang-ridden neighborhood doing what a New Testament church does — loving God, following Jesus, and preaching the Gospel.

Kenny grew. God used Kenny to bring Jamie to Christ. Jamie grew. His brother Curtis grew. Kenny plants a new urban congregation. Jamie plants a new church with Curtis.

That's how Jamie came to be standing in front of hundreds of people in an hour of sorrow, pointing to the power of Christ through the short life of one more convert, Jermaine. Oh! And Nekia, Jermaine's girlfriend? She is now a children's ministry intern.

Ah, the multiplication of ministry. It does happen every now and again.

A vision
Souls won to Christ
A church grows
Young leaders trained
New churches started
An at-risk teenager transformed
Hundreds more evangelized at his funeral

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