



## **Youth Ministry in a Harder Country** • *Harold J. Recinos*

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In U.S. society, youth are not crazed monsters who threaten the social order and need to be closely monitored, disciplined, and controlled. Youth are searching for meaning, a sense of belonging, an authentic voice, and a space to dream about a different and more hopeful future. In my first lecture, I argued that from the edges of society, youth created a unique rap music that reached beyond the boundaries of the barrios and slums where it originated to provide young people denied a legitimate voice in their society with a way to communicate feelings, fears, hopes, thoughts, and observations about living in the world adults create for them. Adults are challenged to understand and value the cultural production of young people and the way it reflects their understanding of life. In this lecture, I want to examine another important dimension of contemporary youth ministry, which involves critique and analysis of what society says and does to young people.

Young people born between 1976 and 1996—labeled the Millennial Generation, the Hip-Hop Generation, the September 11 Generation—are growing up during the war on terrorism, in a culture of fear, in a period of eroding civil liberties and economic hardship, and in an age of increasing racial and ethnic diversity. If these young people are not approaching the church in numbers worthy of celebration, perhaps it has everything to do with the way churches have routinely failed to approach youth with a message that encourages them to prepare to take possession of the future of society. Youth ministry needs to more effectively move out of the confines of religious community and engage society in ways that help youth develop a greater social awareness and resolve to transform the social expectations unhelpfully constructing their lives.

In what follows, I will first examine what is said about young people, especially the rhetoric that sees “kids as trouble, kids as problems, and kids as threatening,”<sup>1</sup> and how it affects their material and cultural lives. Second, I will make the unpopular argument that it is not young people who threaten the social order, but our governmental policy of aggressive militarism and

Homeland Security that daily drives our nation away from its deepest values and ever further into a darker and more fearsome future.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I conclude with the proposal that youth ministry requires the cultivation of a prophetic witness that speaks the words nobody wishes to hear and engages in activism that expands the boundaries of a worldly understanding of the self.

## The Suspects

The economic, political, and cultural existence of young people in the United States gives evidence that there is a “war against youth” underway. For instance, the United States is a wealthy and developed nation that spends less on youth today than it did in prior generations. Any clear-eyed social observer will notice that children and youth are excessively represented among the uninsured, homeless, poor, and incarcerated;<sup>3</sup> undeniably, they are growing up in a harder country.<sup>4</sup> Numerous authorities, politicians, leading institutions, and the news media regularly create an image of wayward youth threatening law-abiding adults; yet all the indicators tell us that crime rates are down among youth and up in the adult population. The empirical evidence shows youth crime rates are lower than in three decades, rap and heavy-metal music notwithstanding.

Since the 1990s, the media has routinely falsified data about young people, which helped to create an image that youth are suicidal, lawless, valueless, drugged-out, and pregnant sex-crazed teens.<sup>5</sup> Consider these headlines: “Teen Violence: Wild in the Streets” (*Newsweek*, 1993), “Killer Teens” (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1994), “Children Whom No One Would Call Innocent” (*Time*, 1994), “Why Do Kids Kill” (*New York Daily News*, 1997).<sup>6</sup> Why is it that adults seldom protest articles appearing in major newspapers that criminalize kids? *The Los Angeles Times* published a piece that stated, “The growing population of teenage boys will mean an increase in murders, rapes, and muggings. A new type of criminal is emerging. . . remorseless, vacant-eyed, sullen—and very young. . . we are entering a Stephen King novel. We are entering an America where adults are afraid of children.”<sup>7</sup> In my view, sensational headlines and stories about teenagers contribute a great deal to adult stereotypical perceptions of teens.

The media images of youth contributed to an intensification of public support for policies subjecting young people to the dictates of a repressive penal state and zero-tolerance guidelines in public schools. Not surprisingly, the moral panic about young people facilitated the criminalization of what would

otherwise be seen as normal developmental behavior. I was outraged to hear that a seventh-grader was jailed by a Texas judge for reading a graphic Halloween story he wrote to his class in school.<sup>8</sup> You should not be surprised to read one day in the newspaper about primary school children getting prison terms for hitting classmates in the eye with a spitball, too. When public school administrators use the threat of jail to educate children to exercise acceptable behavior, adults should raise questions.

Zero-tolerance practices were introduced in response to guns, gangs, and drugs in public schools, but it is clear the policy has been extended to other kinds of child and youth behavior. Today, U.S. students are subject to unwarranted drug screening, racism, censorship, restrictions on free speech, search and seizure violations, and other violations. With the criminalization of youth misbehavior, even kindergarten children acting out or disrupting a class are entering the juvenile justice system. Do you have your doubts? In 2005, at Fairmont Park Elementary School in Saint Petersburg, Florida, a five-year-old girl named Ja'eisha Scott was handcuffed and arrested by St. Petersburg Police for having a temper tantrum and ignoring her teacher's instructions in the classroom. She stands a good chance now of joining the ranks of the millions of children who are given psychiatric drugs to treat alleged behavior disorders.

A growing body of empirical evidence shows that youth are better behaved and less violent than twenty-five years ago; fewer take weapons to school, and even teen pregnancy is at its lowest level in two decades. In other words, the sociological evidence contradicts public policy and popular views about youth. What the public discourse about youth overlooks and what is rarely reported when the "generation of suspects"<sup>9</sup> is discussed is that "adults commit 75 percent of the murders of youth in America...and 62 percent of all the rape victims in the U.S. are under the age of eighteen," often abused by an adult.<sup>10</sup> Michael Males disputes the war against youth and contradicts the rhetoric, which he presents in a summary of ten years of youth research:

- Despite being worse off economically on average, the average youth today is better behaved than the average youth twenty-five years ago and the average adult today.

- Because of being much worse off economically, the most troubled one percent of youth today are more troubled than the most troubled one percent of youth twenty-five years ago—but not as bad off as today's most troubled adults. It takes a lot of killer kids to equal one Timothy McVeigh, and thousands of hoods full of teenage robbers to do the damage of a single S&L looter.<sup>11</sup>

Public opinion that advances a hateful vision of young people may very well be one reason why some young people articulate feelings of abandonment and fears about facing an oppressed future.<sup>12</sup>

Lamentably, the war against youth reflects a larger struggle between liberal and conservative political agendas in society.<sup>13</sup> Former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, who was addressing the subject of youth violence, summarized the conservative side of the political vision for America when he said, “The causes of youth violence...are daycare, the teaching of evolution in the school, and working mothers who take birth control.”<sup>14</sup> For his ideological camp, the so-called moral decay of youth is the fault of the liberal state that gave us women’s suffrage and reproductive rights, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, the Immigration Act, public school desegregation, affirmative action, and government social welfare programs. The liberal camp that battled class exploitation and inequalities due to race, ethnicity, and gender is yet losing ground to the conservative vision for the reorganization of social, political, and economic life. As the struggle for power between the liberal and conservative camps continues to unfold, the war against youth is now further played out on the bodies of young people sent to war.

### **The Future Will Judge Us Now**

On September 11, 2001, nineteen young men armed with box cutters used American commercial planes as lethal firebombs to attack the United States. Their criminal act claimed thousands of lives in the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The immoral massacre caught on film was seen around the world in images of thousands of human beings perishing in the fiery aftermath of plane crashes or plummeting to their deaths on New York City sidewalks. The Islamic extremists’ attack proposed to send a message opposing international capital and American military power, but the actions of the young male terrorists did little to lend political credibility to their cause or to aid the theological understanding of Islam.<sup>15</sup> The words of the prophet Isaiah capture our sentiment about that tragic day: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil” (5:20).

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, White House presidential speeches asked the American public to believe that the terrorists “hated the United States enough to die, killing as many people as possible on its soil, simply out of abhorrence for democratic institutions and civil liberties.”<sup>16</sup> American political leaders quickly banged the war drums, “certain only that

evil is foreign and virtue is American.”<sup>17</sup> The American pulpit also echoed White House rhetoric that terrorists hate the United States, and that the terrorists reject the noblest Western values—freedoms of religion, freedom of speech, freedom to vote, assemble, and disagree.<sup>18</sup> National religious leaders who challenged the spirituality of revenge defining the nation’s response to global terrorism were ignored or harshly judged.

The September 11 attacks deeply affected young people. I think the political decision to send our sons and daughters overseas to die in unnecessary wars is morally unjust and indefensible. We can agree that American life was changed by the events of September 11; yet, as our fear of otherness grows and we prosecute a war on terror, which Vice President Dick Cheney remarked would likely take another fifty years to end, political leaders who ask American youth to kill for them need to be reminded that God opposes both the spirituality of terrorism and the spirituality of revenge.<sup>19</sup> I am grateful that President Bush reminds us that a great deal has changed in America since September 11; however, what has not changed bears examination, too. As Henry Giroux remarks,

[A]lmost nothing has been said about what has not changed. I am referring to the aggressive attempts on the part of many liberal and conservative politicians to undermine informed debate, promote a remorseless drive to privatization, and invoke patriotism as a cloak for carrying out a reactionary economic and political agenda on the domestic front, while simultaneously cultivating an arrogant self-righteousness in foreign affairs in which the United States portrays itself uncritically as the epitome of purity, goodness, and freedom, while its opposition is equated with the forces of absolute evil.<sup>20</sup>

It does not take a great deal of intelligence to know that the war in Iraq has resulted in instability in the Middle East and increased Islamic extremism. Christians must be among the first to say that the death and mutilation of American youth and Iraqi children is morally unacceptable and at odds with God’s redemptive plan for humanity.

After the events of September 11, President Bush put a false choice before the American public when he stated: “You are either with us or against us.” The Bush Administration’s belligerent militarism suggests that those who oppose the United States are not only the bad guys, but that they are

standing on the side of evil. The political narrow-mindedness that paints the United States as a beacon of righteousness has tragically affected global politics and contributed to new laws in the United States that both erode our civil liberties and provoke rising levels of bigotry. Will stopping the violence of terrorism be achieved by the violence of war, repressive domestic programs, and imperial assertions? One courageous pastor noted,

As America has slipped into empire's sleepy embrace, it has been to the background noise of political leaders who have listed into the lofty language of good and evil usually reserved for the worship hour. We're being called to unity in response to an axis of evil. As the geographic boundaries of the enemy shift so rapidly from Afghanistan one day to Iraq the next, to Iran or North Korea tomorrow, how convenient it is to consider evil to be an axis, a topologically indistinct shoot through the world that only experts can keep track of.<sup>21</sup>

For such a time as this, our political and church leadership needs to encourage youth to have a broader knowledge of the world.<sup>22</sup>

Days following the September 11 attacks, a resolution was passed in Congress (September 18, 2001) titled "Authorization for Use of United States Military Force" (AUMF) that granted the president a congressional blank check to go after any nation, organization, or person considered involved directly or indirectly in the September 11 attacks. The AUMF also includes the authority to order foreign intelligence surveillance within the United States—legal scholars are debating whether or not the president exceeded the bounds of the statute when he issued an executive order authorizing the National Security Agency (NSA) to wiretap phone and email communications involving people within the United States, without obtaining a warrant or court order pursuant to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 (FISA).

In spite of the Homeland Security measures and the legal power to go to war, the White House learned that stateless martyrs can outsmart conventional forces trained to attack high-value targets. Thus the war on terrorism was taken to villain states; since "martyr-seeking hijackers cannot be defeated by smart bombs, well-trained infantrymen, or nuclear deterrence...[we left] them in their inaccessible mountain lairs and anonymous global city hovels and [went] after rogue state elites in Kabul and Baghdad."<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Barber

considers this policy shift of intervention in the affairs of another territorial state for which there is no evidence of explicit support and promotion of international terrorism “defective, inefficacious, and perverse.”<sup>24</sup>

The terrorist threat has largely been used by power elites to gain control of the world’s second-largest oil reserve, which is located in Iraq.<sup>25</sup> If innocent civilian lives were lost on September 11 at the hands of evil criminals, today the propaganda of a handful of arrogant men and the reckless political leaders who legitimate it require Christians to unflinchingly state that one cannot “impose democracy on vanquished enemies at the barrel of a gun.”<sup>26</sup> Against White House attempts to disregard public discussion of military policy, it should be clear to us that swords cannot be beaten into plowshares unless we admit to being part of the economic and political power that allows evil a place in the world. “American Christians,” as Stephen Chapman wrote, “must clearly articulate...a non-messianic vision of nationhood that stresses openness instead of jingoistic defensiveness, cooperation instead of isolationism, generosity instead of retribution, responsibility instead of privilege, and modesty instead of imperial ambition.”<sup>27</sup>

Youth do not make the decisions that place them in harm’s way; rather, adult politicians send the young to fight, get maimed, or die. Since the start of the Iraq war, more than 40 percent of the casualties have been college-age soldiers or young persons between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. How many youth need to die before our political leadership concedes that “peace and liberty are the offspring of law and cooperation rather than war and unilateralism?”<sup>28</sup> In these dark days, let us not forget that the violence, suffering, and death caused by war is also devastating to the children and youth of Iraq, especially since half of Iraq’s 24 million people are kids under the age of fifteen. I cannot forget the words of an Iraqi youth spoken at a peace rally organized by U.S. citizens who were concerned about their country dropping bombs on Baghdad:

When people think about bombing Iraq, they see a picture in their heads of Saddam Hussein in military uniform, or maybe soldiers with big black mustaches carrying guns...take a look at me, a good long look. Because I am what you should see in your head when you think about bombing Iraq.... We as in the children of Iraq who are waiting for something bad to happen. We as in the children of the world who don’t make the decisions but have to suffer all the

consequences.... We feel scared when we don't know if we'll live another day. We feel angry when people want to kill us or injure us or steal our future...we feel confused because we don't even know what we did wrong.<sup>29</sup>

Some forty-five days following the September 11 attacks, Congress also passed emergency legislation known as the Patriot Act, which expanded the powers of the federal government to “prevent domestic terrorism.” In part, the Patriot Act allows the neutralization of basic constitutional legal protections and the removal of legal constraints on arbitrary executive and governmental power in favor of antiterrorist measures. It permits law enforcement to engage in information censorship and manipulation, infringement on civil rights, and widespread ethnic and religious profiling. You may have caught glimpses of or participated in student protests on college campuses over concerns that the Patriot Act, and the Orwellian-like path the country has taken, stifle civil demonstrations.

The Patriot Act expanded the surveillance and investigative powers of law enforcement agencies, especially by overcoming restrictions placed on spy agencies like the FBI, which were restrained in response to their practice of investigating and infiltrating civil rights groups in the 1960s and immigrants rights groups in the 1980s. The new antiterrorist legal context contributes to “dissident profiling” through security practices that proliferate “electronic surveillance, roving wiretappings, harassment at the workplace, the infiltration and disruption of anti-war groups, and the stigmatization of any critics of U.S. militarism as disloyal and subversive.”<sup>30</sup> An editorial in *The Baltimore Sun* reported,

Under the Patriot Act, student groups can be labeled “terrorist” organizations if they engage in certain types of protest or civil disobedience.... The government can demand that schools hand over student information without presenting probable cause that a crime has been committed. According to the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, more than 200 colleges and universities have turned over student information to the FBI, Immigration and Naturalization Service, and other law enforcement agencies...some college police are reporting directly to federal law enforcement agencies, thus allowing the government to monitor

the actions of student groups and individual students without notification to the students or even college administrators.... Beyond violating constitutionally guaranteed rights, the effect of the Patriot Act on college campuses is to create a suffocating educational and social atmosphere. The result of this legislation is the slow deterioration of student involvement and full intellectual participation on college campuses. If students are not allowed to express themselves in college—to question authority and to team with other students for positive social change—America’s future is bleak.<sup>31</sup>

The domestic war on terrorism institutionalized by Homeland Security legislation has created numerous legal and civil rights victims largely among immigrants of color, South Asians, and Arab Americans.<sup>32</sup> Democracy is not served when college students from the Middle East flee the country due to persecution based on their ethnic and religious identity. America is less free when Muslim young men are rounded up and detained without criminal charges against them.<sup>33</sup> We should not hesitate to shout in the public square that the legal and cultural practices exercised against Muslim youth do not make us more secure from the evil of nihilistic terrorists.<sup>34</sup> How long will Muslim youth be forced to live in a climate of fear, intimidation, and demonization?

The Patriot Act reflects a Homeland Security policy that weakens an openness to outsiders that immigration researchers tell us has long been the foundation of the country’s economic and social fabric. In terms of higher education alone, foreign students in U.S. colleges and universities not only pump some \$12 billion dollars into the national economy, but they also provide an intercultural bridge of understanding that gives the United States an improved position in international affairs.<sup>35</sup> America has profited from its ties with Kofi Annan (UN secretary general), Vicente Fox (president of Mexico) and Prince Faisal (Saudi Arabian minister of foreign affairs), all of whom graduated from U.S. universities, but the new student visa restrictions and the Patriot Act that allows increased surveillance of faculty and students and increased government intrusion into the substance and conduct of research at American universities are turning away the next generation of pro-American ambassadors.<sup>36</sup>

Cornell West observed, “The great dramatic battle of the twenty-first century is the dismantling of empire and the deepening of democracy.”<sup>37</sup>

Loud-mouthed militarism, blind patriotism, the war on youth, and the war on terror should not dissuade peacemakers from defying pious support for empire-building and economic structures of global domination.<sup>38</sup> The Lord now calls young people out of the life-denying conditions of the world to learn how to be more just, to love their enemies, and to use nonviolence to transform dehumanizing social, political, and economic conditions of life. In my view, youth ministry today means engaging in prophetic readings of social reality so the world is not seen as a struggle between “us” and “them,” but in terms of encouraging the oppressed, defending the cause of the powerless, pleading the cause of the neglected, and denouncing the selfish interest that elects blood over justice (Isaiah 1:17; cf. 5:7–8).

### **Youth Ministry in a Hard Country**

The Hebrew prophets understood that all sides of national life and all classes in society needed to be led to a higher level of ethical conduct by a witness that evoked a “consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around [them].”<sup>39</sup> Their moral criticism of economic exploitation, harsh words for those who governed, displeasure with smooth pietistic messages, and denunciation of injustice aimed to deliver people to a deeper knowledge of God and the practices of justice.<sup>40</sup> The prophets faced turbulent events in their day, speaking of a God of grace who paid close attention to the situation of persons abused by power. The prophetic theological critique of the failures of society intended to guide people walking in darkness toward the limitless radiance of God (Isaiah 9:2).

The prophets never speculated about how to logically prove the existence of God.<sup>41</sup> They proclaimed the will of God in various settings and sought to impress the truth on individuals who were being misled by those entrusted to give spiritual and political guidance. They upset the religious, political, and economic order by questioning people’s attitudes toward God, life, good, evil, justice, the helpless, sin, and fidelity. Although the prophets never doubted that the justice of God would prevail in contexts that devalued the concern to achieve justice for the neighbor, they wanted God’s word to censure, threaten, change, and transform society.<sup>42</sup> They were truth-tellers committed to shattering the system of lies that enclosed people with injustice. They courageously denounced “systems of power, greed, arrogance, violence, and

hate, and...follow[ed] with announcing hope and life for the victims of...sin, evil, and injustice.”<sup>43</sup>

The prophets understood that God required religious and political authorities to discontinue the practices that cause harm to others; hence, they questioned the way those who governed interpreted the meaning of nationhood and ignored oppressed humanity at the edges of society. Because peace with justice is God’s plan for humanity, the prophets urged people not to comply with a world strongly affected by its own destructive tendencies. For them the highest calling of humanity consisted of cultivating faithfulness in life by seeking first the freeing presence of God. In our context of widespread insecurity about the future, the hopeful vision and fierce anger of the prophets instructs youth in the church to declare that God aims ultimately to deliver the world from relationships based on power brokers’ interpretations of events in history, to relationships based on justice and peace.

Amos, Micah, Hosea, and Isaiah took issue with what was done in the name of the God who delivered the people from bondage in Egypt, fed and protected them in the wilderness, and accompanied them to the Promised Land. Isaiah, for instance, addressed situations of inequality in his society where the powerful failed to seek justice for the poor, rescue the oppressed, and defend the vulnerable (Isaiah 1:17). His message to them was, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter” (Isaiah 5:20). For Isaiah the main condition for peace in society was justice (Isaiah 32:17). Although he warned of the impending judgment of God, he preached that a new era of divine blessing was promised by God for those who keep the covenant and “maintain justice, and do what is right” (Isaiah 56:1).

Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah who prophesied during the destruction of Jerusalem under Hezekiah, insisted that people’s basic religious concern should consist of fulfilling the requirements of justice, being faithful, and being open to the presence of God (Micah 6:6–8).<sup>44</sup> Micah was not at all concerned with reconciling the meaning of faith in God at an intellectual level; instead, he said what most concerns God is that those who profess to live by God’s will should do what is agreeable to God. This strident prophet of the poor condemned the people on top of society who were responsible for the plight of those on the bottom. He made it clear that the Lord accepts nothing less than the active promotion of justice, service for the good of others, and conformity to the divine will. Amos lifts up the suffering oppressed and

declares that the Lord denounces rich oppressors and that God will not save a society that neglects justice.

For Hosea, authentic knowledge of God in the Northern Kingdom was displaced by a system of corruption largely created by religious and political leaders. Because Israel was guilty of leaving the covenant stipulations in a shambles, as evidenced by political violence, lies, slaughter, immorality, theft, exploitation, violence, and murder (Hosea 4:1–3), the prophet concludes that God’s judgment will be on the entire nation. Hosea tells the nation that “God sorrows that we settle for so little, that we grovel before empty idols and seek after wealth and violence instead of the joy, delight, and freedom that are offered to us by the One who loves us passionately.”<sup>45</sup> Although the Northern Kingdom was overrun by Assyrian troops, Hosea also says that national defeat cannot prevent the renewing love of God from once again embracing Israel. As people turn to God and away from the idols made by their own hands (Hosea 14:4), truth, justice, and merciful community will come to define their lives.

If Amos, Micah, Hosea, and Isaiah were with us today, they would be among the first to walk the streets reminding those in high places that present-day insecurity cannot be overcome by increasing military spending, waging war, or practicing a belligerent politics that draws society closer to a more dismal future for youth. From their God-awareness, the prophets would denounce the injustice of a U.S. foreign policy that fails to respect the lives of tens of thousands of defenseless people in the countries where that policy is applied, be it in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua in the 1980s, or in Afghanistan and Iraq now. The message of the prophets suggests that when youth workers attempt to ground the thinking of young people in everyday life, they should help them remember the prophets’ message: to allow to come into being the new world God intended by not learning war anymore, and by beating swords into plowshares (Isaiah 2:4).

Young people of whom leadership can be expected have the power to tell their political leaders that the pursuit of justice requires dreaming of new ways of life rather than commitment to past options that continue to ignore the hopes and dreams of the least among us. Young people who respond to the prophetic witness by walking alongside silenced and abused human beings can find plenty of reasons to rebel against the masters of this world who always seek to transform God into an almighty power of national security ideology and money-grubbing interests. Prophetic youth are never silent in adult-run

society, in the face of the drama of war, the pursuit of false security, empty promises of freedom, and the misery of the powerless all over the globe. They prefer to take seriously the social analysis and cultural critique of the prophets. Moreover, they are encouraged and called by the prophetic vision of Jesus Christ.

## The Prophetic Jesus

As a prophet, Jesus calls on us to come out of a godless world and stand with all people in justice and love. Jesus stood with the poor, denounced the accumulation of wealth, invited individuals to give up their love of money, rejected oppressive behavior, created a community of service and humility, and made opposition to injustice essential. He told the destitute that their poverty was connected to the rich (Luke 6:24; 12:13–21), religious authorities (Luke 11:46ff; 11:39–44; Mark 11:15–39), and powerful officials (Mark 10:42). He reminded followers to bear witness to God and accept the cost for it (Luke 21:12–13; 22:36; Mark 13:9).<sup>46</sup> I have no doubt that the God we meet as a friend in the prophetic Christ is the One who is knowable in the midst of the daily struggles of young people and the cries of those now terrified by violence and war.

Today, youth ministry should offer formational experiences that motivate a commitment to a prophetic vision for life together. I believe that in a world divided by hate-filled ideologies and terrifying practices, the church should encourage young people to stand in the line of the Old Testament prophets and the prophetic Christ to declare that we are free to go beyond our fatal divisions. Christian youth should be among the first to reject a church that stands with court prophets crying “peace, peace” where there is none. Hence, youth ministry requires leadership that awakens the prophetic vision of young people so they can address life-denying economic, political, and cultural structures and the ideologies that justify them. The church should not hesitate to enable young men and women to rescue their voice from silence, speak the truth to persons in power, seek the interests of justice especially for crucified human beings, and respond to God’s good news of abundant life.

It is time for a Christian youth revolution that insists on being permanently prophetic in the world, a Christian youth movement that rejects the political theologies marched around the public square that are loath to admit that Jesus came into the world to comfort the despised, love his enemies, reject exclusionary practices, defend the poor, heal the sick, feed the hungry, feast

with sinners, disclose a God of radical welcome, and die in order to save us. In a world crushed by the massive weight of injustice; by ethnic, religious, and political violence; by gross inequalities between the “haves” and the “have-nots”; by amnesia about the prophetic tradition and the prophetic Christ; and by privileged definitions about the meaning of life, prophetically formed youth will be in a position to proclaim in the public square that peace with justice is God’s ultimate plan for human beings.

I end with my original thoughts: youth ministry requires getting in touch with the social reality of young people by thinking about how the culture of fear, the war on youth, and the war on terrorism are affecting their lives. Youth leaders can better theorize about the situation of youth in society by considering the way young persons are pathologized by the state, media, and public figures or placed in harm’s way when sent to fight in needless wars. The dominant political narratives that persuade adult members of society to prosecute a war on terrorism and send our sons and daughters overseas to die in perverse and preventable wars require youth ministry to actively convince citizens to refuse to acquiesce to the self-justifications of those in power and the capital interests they justify and defend.

Youth who struggle against the so-called war on them will find, in the prophetic tradition and the prophetic Jesus, the theological resources with which to respond to oppressive local and global ideas and systems. Youth formational experiences that address the widespread insecurity about the future and encourage youth leaders to engage the world with fierce prophetic anger will finally develop theological leadership for churches that need to hear anew that God aims ultimately to deliver human beings in the richness of their diversity to relationships based on justice and peace. Young friends, do not grow weary of your ministry to society and the church, for God is already delivering you to a more hopeful future.

## Notes

1. Lawrence Grossberg, *Caught in the Crossfire: Kids, Politics, and America’s Future* (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm, 2005), 16.

2. See Mark Lewis Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), chapters 1 and 2.

3. According to a study by Child Trends, among the 823,300 young adults ages 18 to 29 who were incarcerated in 2004, some 42.6 percent were non-Hispanic Black male, 20.3 percent were Hispanic, 27.9 percent non-Hispanic White male, 2.2 percent were other male, and 7.1 percent were female. For further information see especially Child Trends <http://www.childtrendsdatbank.org>.

4. L. Grossberg, "Cultural Studies, the War against Kids, and the Re-Becoming of U.S. Modernity" in *Postcolonial Studies*, 6, no. 3 (2003), 327.
5. Michael Males, *The Scapegoat Generation* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1996).
6. Grossberg, *Caught in the Crossfire*, 23.
7. R. Rodriguez, "The Coming Mayhem," *Los Angeles Times* (January 21, 1996): M1, M6.
8. Annette Reynolds, "Seventh Grader Freed after Being Jailed for Essay" in *The Dallas Morning News* (November 2, 1999).
9. Term used by Henry Giroux.
10. Grossberg, *Caught in the Crossfire*, 329.
11. *Ibid.*, 41.
12. *Ibid.*, 22.
13. *Ibid.*, chapter 6.
14. *Ibid.*, 107.
15. Manning Marable, "9/11 Racism in a Time of Terror" in *Implicating Empire: Globalization and Resistance in the 21st-Century World Order*, ed. Stanley Aronowitz and Heather Guatney (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 3.
16. Gilbert Achar, *The Clash of Barbarism: September 11 and the Making of the New World Disorder* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002), 15–16.
17. Benjamin Barber, *Fear's Empire: War, Terrorism, and Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 72.
18. George W. Bush, "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People," White House Office of the Press Secretary, Washington DC, September 20, 2001.
19. Interestingly, President Bush's religion-political rhetoric evidenced in speeches describing his war on terrorism, like that of Osama Bin Laden, is dualistic, absolutistic, and polarizing; perhaps, that is why some argue today that the conflict between Islam and the West originates in their similarities rather than their differences. See Harold J. Recinos, *Good News from the Barrio: Prophetic Witness for the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).
20. Henry Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 2.
21. Lillian Daniel, "Empire's Sleepy Embrace: The View from the Pew" in *Anxious about Empire: Theological Essays on the New Global Realities*, ed. Wes Avram (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 181–83.
22. In a recent publication by Cornel West titled *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2004), West examines the arrested state of democratic culture in the United States with his brilliant brand of radical historicism and his vision of democracy as a regulative ideal of life together.
23. *Ibid.*, 127.
24. Barber, *Fear's Empire*, 126.
25. Transcript of interview with Noam Chomsky on Iraq War conducted August 29, 2002, and available at <http://sf.indymedia.org/news/2002/12/15551023.php>.
26. Barber, *Fear's Empire*, 35.
27. Stephen B. Chapman, "Imperial Exegesis: When Caesar Interprets Scripture" in *Anxious about Empire*, 100.

28. Barber, *Fear's Empire*, 229.
29. Charlotte Aldebron, "What If You Were a Child in Iraq?" *Front Page News* (March 1–8, 2003); available at <http://www.whatkidscando.org/intheirownwords/teenworld.html>.
30. Marable, "9/11 Racism in a Time of Terror" in *Implicating Empire*, 9.
31. Morgan MacDonald, "USA Patriot Act Stifles Dissent on Campus," *The Baltimore Sun* (November 24, 2003), 13A.
32. See Sunaina Maira, "Youth Culture, Citizenship, and Globalization: South Asian Muslim Youth in the United States after September 11th" in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 24, no. 1 (2004), 219–31.
33. *Ibid.*, 220.
34. The restrictions imposed on foreign students by the Patriot Act are the harshest of any Western democracy, which has resulted in a decrease in foreign students from Muslim states. Subsequently, potential foreign university students are headed for the U.K., Australia, and other European universities, and the ties that could be built with students who may come from any of the fifty Muslim countries opposed to terrorism are being neutralized.
35. John Paden, "America Slams the Door (On Its Foot) in *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2003), 8–14.
36. *Ibid.*, 9.
37. Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).
38. Civil religion has been a topic of conversation for at least four decades in American society relative to the various ways it helps to either transfer allegiance to the larger structures of formally organized power in society, or how it challenges the institutionalized ways of government. Although civil religion promotes social integration in a pluralistic society, it has been criticized for excluding the public voice of women and expressing the views of White society by way of narratives that ignore the historical experience of enslaved Africans, slaughtered Native Americans, and conquered Mexican and Puerto Rican humanity.
39. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 13.
40. The section on prophetic witness is partly drawing on insights from *Good News from the Barrio*.
41. James M. Ward, *The Prophets* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 143.
42. Megan McKenna, *Prophets: Words of Fire* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 15.
43. *Ibid.*, 21.
44. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 124.
45. *Ibid.*, 89.
46. Especially see Harold J. Recinos, *Who Comes in the Name of the Lord? Jesus at the Margins* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), chapter 3.