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## YOUTH MENTORING

**PROBLEM:** Many children have few positive adult influences and limited opportunities to learn fundamental social skills.

**SOLUTION:** Congregations have established mentoring programs to instill discipline, transmit values, and provide positive role models to the city's most vulnerable youth.

Each summer for more than 40 years, Jewish children from around the Midwest have come to Goldman Union Camp Institute in Zionsville to learn about Jewish history and ethics and to take part in recreation.

About 300 4<sup>th</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup> graders attend each of the two month-long summer sessions. Another 30 to 40 12<sup>th</sup> graders enroll in Avodah, an intensive nine-week program of work, study, and social experiences.

Rabbi Ron Klotz, director of the camp, describes it as “a celebration of Jewish life.” Goldman Union is one of 12 camps owned and operated by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, an organization of about 900 Reform congregations. As such, it takes a liberal approach to Judaism, Klotz says. “We want children to learn everything about Judaism. Then they have the latitude to make decisions when they’re older—whether they will keep kosher, how they will observe the holidays. There are many choices.”

Many Christian and Islamic organizations offer a similar program—a camp or “vacation Bible school” that offers recreational opportunities, but whose main purpose is to teach children the fundamentals of a faith tradition.

By comparison, relatively few congregations sponsor or support youth programs designed to teach fundamental life skills. Such programs may contain an element of religious education. But their primary purpose is to offer children positive adult role models—or mentors—and to teach them basic principles about getting a job, cooperating with peers, achieving and maintaining self respect, managing money, and the like. These programs are typically located in the city's poorest neighborhoods, where the odds seem stacked against boys and girls ever breaking the cycle of poverty, and the temptations of anti-social activity are powerful.

## A POPULATION AT RISK

These programs are notable for their sense of urgency, arising from the grim prospects facing the population they serve. A recent “Kids Count” report from the Indiana Youth Institute noted that one in seven children younger than 18 lives in poverty (defined as a household income under \$16,400 for a family of four). Among 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> graders in Indiana, one in five smokes daily; one in four admits to binge drinking. The state's juvenile violent crime rate is high, with only 14 states ranking worse. About 1,500 boys and 500 girls were committed to the Indiana Department of Correction in 1997, an increase of 50 percent over five years.

The report observed that the majority of Indiana's children are “healthy, doing well in school and staying out of trouble. But the children without supportive families, the poorly housed and fed, the children who are in

poor health, chronically ill or disabled, the ones failing in school, the children turning to sex and drugs, and the ones who break the law—these children remain the challenge for Indiana.”

In the early 1990s, a study commissioned by Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (which works only with children from single-parent homes) found that a mentoring adult can make a dramatic difference in children’s lives. Eighteen months after the start of the study, children with a Big Brother or Big Sister were 46 percent less likely to begin using drugs than children who remained on the waiting list. They were 27 percent less likely to begin using alcohol, 52 percent less likely to skip school, and they got along with their classmates and families better than non-mentored children.

However, children who want a mentor outnumber the available supply. The Big Brothers chapter serving the nine-county Indianapolis area manages about 450 matches currently, but has 250 boys on its waiting list. The local Big Sisters chapter has matched 506 girls but has 200 more on its waiting list. The average wait for those children will be about a year. Some will never be matched with a mentor. Statewide, 3,000 children are waiting for a Big Brother or Big Sister.

Big Brothers and Big Sisters, established in the Indianapolis area since the early 1970s, are the best-known organizations involved in mentoring. Their operations are sophisticated and well-funded, with an annual budget locally, in 1998, of about \$750,000 and \$900,000, respectively. The resources that most faith-based organizations can bring to youth mentoring are small by comparison. Still, the large number of children waiting for a mentor indicates that these programs meet a need. They seek to give children positive role models, educate them in basic life skills, and assure them that someone cares. Following are the stories of two such organizations.

#### Mentoring with a Mission, Inc.

Gregory Resnover was the last person to be executed by electrocution in Indiana, in 1994, before the state began carrying out death sentences by lethal injection. Afterwards, his cousin, Kevin Resnover, who had been the family spokesman throughout the ordeal, became the executor of his estate and mentor to his young son. The experience changed Kevin Resnover profoundly.

Resnover became an outspoken opponent of the death penalty; he also determined to help prevent children from ever entering the criminal justice system. Today, a small, white, single-story building at 3740 N. Central Ave. is the headquarters of Mentoring with a Mission, Inc., which Resnover describes as his “answer to the death penalty.”

As executive director, Resnover oversees a staff of nine volunteers. They work with about 40 boys and girls, ages 11 to 19. The children come from all over the city, but primarily from Mapleton-Fall Creek. The majority are African-American.

Resnover, a full-time employee of the City of Indianapolis, oversees MMI on his own time with support from his family—two of whom serve on the staff—and his church, Christ Temple Apostolic Faith, where he serves as assistant minister.

Christ Temple provided space to get the program started—a house on the city’s near west side—and provides funding. MMI receives funding as well from Broadway United Methodist, Eastern Star, and Mt. Zion Apostolic churches. Its annual budget is about \$250,000.

MMI’s primary means of reaching out to children is a “survival life skills” program consisting of 10 three-hour-long sessions. Each session is devoted to a particular topic: money management, sexuality, career preparation, mental and physical health, and self-esteem. When a child has completed the program, Mentoring with a Mission sponsors a dinner to celebrate the event.

The 30-hour survival skills program is intended as preparation for a more intensive, year-long program, in which children are matched with an individual mentor. The adult mentor helps the child work through the 12-part curriculum, which was written by Resnover. Each month the child is required to do a project designed to teach a practical skill and to illustrate some principle.

One month, the theme is gardening, and the children plant vegetables and flowers. The theme several months later is “reaping the harvest,” and children gather the vegetables and cut some of the flowers. Another month, the focus is career preparation, and the children write a resume, fill out a mock job application, and research the skills and education necessary to succeed in a chosen field.

Finding mentors willing to commit from 12 to 20 hours a month to a child has been difficult. There are currently only six mentors, and no child has yet completed the entire 12-phase program, though 10 have graduated from the survival skills course. There are more than 100 children on the waiting list for a mentor.

Resnover hopes to recruit more mentors from local churches. He also wants Mentoring with a Mission to become a training center for churches around the city.

“Five to 10 years from now, I see us having five locations in the city,” Resnover says. “I see us helping youth organizations by offering mentor certification and training. It’s my goal to always have young people coming through, but it’s also my goal to minister to those people who minister to the kids.”

Young Men, Inc.

Young Men, Inc., recently completed its seventh summer of working with boys ages nine to 16. The program is headquartered at Great Commission Church of God, 3302 N. Arsenal Ave. A minister of the church, Malachi Walker, serves as its director.

Walker started YMI in the summer of 1994 with a small grant from the Indiana State Police. The budget that year was about \$2,000, and there were 25 participants. This summer the budget was nearly \$22,000, and there were 50 participants; all were African-American, about half living in public housing projects.

The YMI summer program offers educational and recreational activities two mornings a week. In the afternoon, the boys break up into squads to work on community service projects. The program runs for 10 weeks beginning in late June.

Occasionally, the routine is broken by an all-day field trip, such as this year’s visit to Purdue University. The boys toured the campus, and a representative of the school spoke to them about getting accepted into college. The group also makes an annual trip to an amusement park.

The program emphasizes conflict resolution, career development, spiritual life, health and fitness, self-esteem, community involvement, cultural awareness, and reading skills. Walker stresses a different theme each week.

Walker has established a system to encourage the older boys to be mentors to the younger boys. Participants are assigned ranks according to their performance in several categories, including leadership, dress, attendance, and spiritual development. The highest rank, teen counselors, shoulder the biggest burden of responsibility and are paid for their services. The four teen counselors in this summer’s program earned about \$1,000 each.

Walker’s interest in cultivating young leaders and mentors came from his own experiences as a boy growing up in public housing. He describes himself as too busy to get into much trouble as a child. At the age of 13, he organized the children in his project for a fund-raising drive. They did chores and put on skits and plays at the local community center, and then went to an out-of-state amusement park with the money they raised. But Walker saw many friends and neighbors fall into trouble as they got older. As a young man, he decided to do something that would help children growing up in similar circumstances.

At 21, he took a job with Youth Opportunity Unlimited, a program of the 4-H organization. He helped establish youth clubs in public housing projects and served as an adult counselor to the clubs. At 23, he became a firefighter—the job he still holds—and used that as a platform for sponsoring fund-raisers to benefit poor children. Walker decided to found a youth mentoring program that would operate through his church—Young Men, Inc.—after a Christian conversion experience in his mid-30s.

The program’s maximum capacity, given its current budget, is 50 boys. Walker is pursuing new funding in

hopes of having 100 participants next summer. Funding so far has come from Lilly Endowment Inc., the Indianapolis Foundation, *The Indianapolis Star*, and several churches, including Church at the Crossing, Eastern Star, Second Presbyterian, and Calvary Wesleyan.

Like Mentoring with a Mission, YMI relies on the efforts of volunteers. Walker's wife writes grant applications, for example. Aside from a part-time administrative assistant and the teen counselors, in fact, all of the dozen or so people involved in the program are volunteers. Walker's schedule as a firefighter—24 hours on the job, and then 48 hours off—affords him sufficient free time to oversee the operation.

Transportation is the biggest single item in YMI's budget, because its service area is large, and most of the children need a ride. Walker leases three vans each summer to transport the children.

Walker also operates what he calls "phase two" of Young Men, Inc. This is less a formal program than a casual, year-round attempt to stay in touch with the boys and their families. Walker, his assistant director, and other adult volunteers make calls, visit homes, and randomly check up on the boys at school. Occasionally, the entire group gathers for some sort of outing. This phase of the program is funded primarily by Great Commission Church of God and by the donated time and resources of the volunteer staff.

## THE MEASURE OF SUCCESS

The city's premiere faith-based mentoring operation is Project Impact, sponsored by Light of the World Christian Church on East 38<sup>th</sup> Street. Every four months, the Marion County Juvenile Court refers 70 boys to Project Impact for a program of group instruction that lasts six weeks. A follow-up program, called Boys to Men, involves 12 weeks of one-on-one mentoring, based on a curriculum written by the church's pastor.

Though Light of the World has several thousand members, its programs face the same problems common to virtually all mentoring programs.

Sean Weaver, the manager of mentoring for Boys to Men, constantly recruits volunteers from organizations around the city, because Light of the World cannot supply enough mentors. This is due in part to the population that the program serves. A survey published by Big Brothers of Central Indiana in 1998 found that volunteers strongly resist working with "at-risk children (predominantly teens and young single adult males)". Only 10 percent said they were willing to do so—yet this is precisely the population that many mentoring programs aim to reach.

The issue of funding is complicated by the question of whether a faith-based organization should accept government funds—and perhaps alter the character of the program in doing so. Light of the World receives government money because it works closely with the city's juvenile justice system. But Weaver says that the program's instructors sometimes feel constricted by this arrangement, wishing they could bring spirituality more explicitly into their discussions.

Mentoring programs aim to accomplish things that are not easily measured and cited in reports. If a despairing child finds hope because of his or her mentor, how is that quantified and cited in a report? Funding sources often expect programs to account for themselves with hard numbers. (Light of the World has an advantage in this regard. Since it works with youth who have been referred by the juvenile justice system, it measures its success by the recidivism rate of program graduates. Eighty percent stay out of trouble for at least 18 months.)

"Measuring success is very difficult," says the Rev. Eustace Rawlings, pastor of Great Commission Church of God. Rawlings wrote his dissertation at Anderson University on the subject of the church's role in preventing juvenile violence. He says that proving these programs work is a big frustration for all mentoring programs. "It's difficult to say we've had a certain level of success, but I can look at the lives of the children and see positives where there were negatives before."

One recent morning, a group of about 35 African-American boys, participants in Young Men, Inc., gathered in the basement of Great Commission Church of God. Hanging on the walls around them were banners

bearing inspirational slogans: “To accomplish great things, you must believe, dream, plan, and then act.” “For every obstacle there is a solution.” “Success is an attitude.”

The boys were there for mock job interviews, to be conducted by representatives of the Indianapolis Fire Department and several local media outlets. Each boy carried a folder with a filled-out employment application. Some wore dress pants and shirts rather than their usual camouflage shorts and olive-green tee shirts.

In prepping them for their interviews, Malachi Walker emphasized the advantages they had over himself at their age. “No one ever came around and did this for us,” he said. “This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Take advantage of it.”

Soon the boys broke out into a round of loud rhythmic clapping, interspersed with the chant of “I—I am somebody—I can succeed!”

The crucial factor in the success of faith-based mentoring programs is not so much a congregation’s size, but its ability to articulate a vision and attract volunteers, and its willingness to invest time, energy, and funds in that vision.

For those interested in mentoring, the field is wide open. There is competition for volunteers but not for turf; the needs overwhelm the resources to meet them.

“This was something I always had on my heart,” Walker says of YMI. “I always wanted to work with young black males. So I put together a plan and set down goals and started from there. I knew that money was going to be an issue, but I decided to not get hung up on it. I just started the program and let God provide.”

## **POINTS TO REMEMBER:**

- Mentors can make a dramatic difference in children’s lives, increasing the likelihood that they will stay in school and avoid risky behavior.
- Most congregations do not have the resources to provide one-on-one mentoring. “Group mentoring” programs are much more common.
- Recruiting mentors is difficult because of the time mentoring requires, and because people are reluctant to work with the “at risk” population served by mentoring programs.
- Programs struggle to measure results in a meaningful way.
- There are many opportunities for those who wish to volunteer as youth mentors. The demand far exceeds the supply.

## **CONTACTS & RESOURCES:**

Big Brothers of Greater Indianapolis  
300 E. Fall Creek Parkway North Dr., Suite 400  
Indianapolis, IN 46205  
(317) 925-9611  
[www.bigbroindy.org](http://www.bigbroindy.org)

Big Sisters of Central Indiana, Inc.  
615 N. Alabama St., Suite 336  
Indianapolis, IN 46204  
(317) 634-6102  
[www.bigsistersindiana.com](http://www.bigsistersindiana.com)

Goldman Union Camp Institute

9349 Moore Rd.  
Zionsville, IN 46077  
(317) 873-3361  
[www.uahcweb.org/camps/goldman](http://www.uahcweb.org/camps/goldman)

Light of the World Christian Church  
5640 E. 38<sup>th</sup> St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46218  
(317) 547-2273  
[www.lightoftheworld.org](http://www.lightoftheworld.org)

Mentoring with a Mission, Inc.  
3740 N. Central Ave.  
Indianapolis, IN 46205  
(317) 925-0540  
[www.mentoringmission.org](http://www.mentoringmission.org)

Young Men, Inc.  
Great Commission Church of God  
3302 N. Arsenal Ave.  
Indianapolis, IN 46218  
(317) 923-7690

Other programs:

Area Youth Ministry  
1641 E. Michigan St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46201  
(317) 635-4151

AYM needs volunteers to work in its “drop-in center” on East Michigan Street, where children gather before and after school.

Church Federation of Greater Indianapolis  
1100 W. 42<sup>nd</sup> St., Suite 345  
Indianapolis, IN 46208  
(317) 926-5371  
[www.churchfederationindy.org](http://www.churchfederationindy.org)

The Church Federation with Indianapolis Public Schools sponsors Loving Our Children, a program linking churches and schools to serve “at-risk” children.

JOY  
First Meridian Heights Presbyterian Church  
4701 N. Central Ave.  
Indianapolis, IN 46205  
(317) 931-0621

JOY (Just Older Youth) is a program to build leadership skills in children ages 13 to 19. The time commitment required of volunteers is flexible.

Mentoring in the City  
Marian College  
3200 Cold Spring Rd.  
Indianapolis, IN 46222  
(317) 955-6083

Mentoring in the City matches Marian College students with youth from congregations and other organizations for “group mentoring” activities. The program is open to new partnerships.

St. Monica Church  
6131 N. Michigan Rd.

Indianapolis, IN 46228

(317) 253-2193

St. Monica's youth programs aim to help children develop social skills and friendships. Volunteers are provided with training.

Other resources:

Indiana Youth Institute

3901 N. Meridian St., Suite 200

Indianapolis, IN 46208

(800) 343-7060

[www.iyi.org](http://www.iyi.org)

IYI offers training and development to people and organizations that work with youth, and publishes the *Kids Count in Indiana Data Book*, a collection of information about the well-being of Indiana's youth.

The United Way of Central Indiana and the Information and Referral Network publish a *Mentoring Opportunities Directory*. Call the Mentor Hotline at (317) 921-1277. For a list of youth programs on the Web, see the IRN's Human Services Database at [www.imcpl.lib.in.us/cgi-bin/irntop.pl](http://www.imcpl.lib.in.us/cgi-bin/irntop.pl).

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