

Mentoring Marginal Men in Tower Hill, Kingston, Jamaica: Nascent Hoop Dreams and Nagging Regrets

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Fractured Families and Marginal Men²

When our family moved to Kingston, Jamaica, in 1987, I (Tim) used to walk my young daughters, Sarah Beth and Rachel, up West Avenue from the Jamaica Theological Seminary (JTS) and Caribbean Graduate School of Theology (CGST) campus³ to Sunday school at Grace Missionary Church (GMC), a

1 Timothy Paul Erdel and Robby Christopher Prenkert teach at Bethel College, Mishawaka, Indiana.

2 “Fractured Families and Marginal Men” draws on language used by Jamaican scholars who discuss sociological issues in Jamaica, e.g., Errol Miller, *Marginalization of the Black Male: Insights from the Development of the Teaching Profession* (Kingston, Jamaica: ISER, 1986); and id., *Men at Risk* (Kingston, Jamaica: Jamaica Publishing House, 1991).

There are numerous similar studies of family life and male marginality in the West Indies Collection, Zenas Gerig Library, Jamaica Theological Seminary and Caribbean School of Theology, Kingston, Jamaica, as well as in the West Indies and Special Collections, the Library, the University of West Indies, Mona. For a preliminary discussion of such literature, see Timothy Paul Erdel, “From the Colonial Christ and Babylonian Captivity to *Dread Jesus*: Documenting World Christianity on a Shoestring Budget,” in *Summary of the Proceedings: Fifty-fourth Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association: Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California, June 21–24, 2000*, edited by Margret Tacke Collins (Chicago: American Theological Library Association, 2000), 83–95, especially 83–87.

Cf. the early writings of leading Jamaican scholar, Orlando Patterson, John Cowles Professor of Sociology at Harvard University, whose first novel, *The Children of Sisyphus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965)—with multiple subsequent printings and editions, including a new ed. with an introduction by Kwame Dawes, *Caribbean Modern Classics* (Leeds, England: Peepal Tree Press, 2011)—focused on the tangled, problematic lives of the poor in Jamaican “shantytowns” and “garrison communities.” Patterson has since turned his attention to social issues in US culture, see, e.g., Patterson, ed., *The Cultural Matrix: Understanding Black Youth*, with Ethan Fosse (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

3 Cf. Roger Ringenberg, “A History of Jamaica Theological Seminary: 1960–1992” (D.Miss. project, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1992), as well as such serial

congregation of perhaps 200 members in Constant Spring, a generally middle class neighborhood, though the GMC property line also literally borders an impoverished, troubled community known as Grants Pen.⁴

On Mother's Day in 1988 my daughters and I experienced our first "open Sunday school" in Jamaica, a program designed to show to parents what their children had been learning, as well as a device for drawing adults to the Sunday school hour who might not otherwise come to church. At the end of the time, mothers were recognized and honored. The event proved so successful that the enthusiastic Jamaican Sunday school superintendent decided to organize a similar program for Father's Day. On Father's Day, there was a decent though smaller turnout of adults to see that program. When the children finished, the superintendent asked all the fathers who had come to stand so that they could be acknowledged. One father stood. I was that father.⁵

The most important sociological fact about Jamaican family life, especially among persons of African descent, is the absence of fathers. The situation has grown worse over the decades, not better. Thus, the landmark study by British socio-anthropologist Edith Clarke, *My Mother Who Fathered Me*,⁶ first published in 1957, has been replicated many times by Caribbean scholars and

publications as *JTS Quest* ([1975, 1976 distinctly titled forerunners], 1977-), *BINAH* (1996-1997, then merged with *CJET*), *Caribbean Journal of Evangelical Theology* (1997-), and more recently, *Caribbean Challenge*, n.s. (2009-).

4 My son, Matthew, was just one year old when we first arrived, and it was all we could do to keep him contented during the meandering worship service which followed Sunday school, since the latter could run on into the early afternoon. So my wife, Sally, would wait an hour or more later before bringing him up the street to GMC as well.

5 There was a sad echo of this on Father's Day in 2001, when I was stunned to be named "Father of the Year" at Grace Missionary Church, the third of three persons so honored that day. The first was Courtney Richards (more on him in what follows), a Jamaican celibate bachelor, though at least a mentor to countless young men without fathers. The second was Zenas Gerig, a career missionary and founder or co-founder of some thirty institutions or organizations in Jamaica, the Caribbean, and beyond, including Jamaica Theological Seminary and the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology. So, while not technically a Jamaican, and though he was formally retired back in the United States, Zenas had at least invested his adult life in Jamaica, training numerous young persons for ministry. But it was eight years since I had even lived as a resident in Jamaica (not since 1993), and I was just there for a month to teach a course at CGST and then deliver the joint commencement address for JTS and CGST. *None of us were biological fathers of Jamaican children.*

6 Edith Clarke, *My Mother Who Fathered Me* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957). See also, among many others, Madeline Kerr, *Personality and Conflict in Jamaica* (London: Collins, 1952); Judith Blake, *Family Structure in Jamaica* (New York: The Free

its themes explored repeatedly by Jamaican authors.⁷ By 1995 Jamaican government statistics indicated that 86 percent of the children born on the island lacked a father of record, a figure that had reached an astounding 93 percent in Kingston, the capital.⁸ The phenomenon of “barrel children”⁹ and the rise of street gangs and of deadly posse gunmen¹⁰ are among the fruits of fractured families and myriad related social problems whose origins stretch back to slav-

Press of Glencoe, 1961); M. G. Smith, *West Indian Family Structure* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962) and id., *The Plural Society in the British West Indies* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1965); A. S. Phillips, *Adolescence in Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: Jamaica Publishing House, 1973); Adam Kuper, *Changing Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: Kingston Publishers); and Leon A. Dundas, “The Morality and Marital Status of the Caribbean Common-Law Union” (M.A. thesis, Caribbean Graduate School of Theology, 1990).

7 See, e.g., the trajectory of tragic futility that unfolds in the recent novel by Diana McCaulay, *Dog-Heart* (Leeds, England: Peepal Tree Press, 2010). Note that the middle-class protagonist, Sahara, who tries to compassionately intervene in the life of Dexter (a young boy from “Jacobs Pen” [cf. Grants Pen above] who is already headed toward a life of crime), and Dexter’s mother, Arleen, are both single parents.

8 This information was disseminated on a CVM-TV (Kingston, Jamaica) news report, which included an interview with and commentary by a former faculty colleague at the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology, Jamaican psychologist Barry Davidson, May 16, 1995.

What began primarily as characteristic of the bottom end of the social scale has percolated upward through the class system until the pattern of fatherless children now touches nearly every segment of society, a phenomenon some sociologists call “lower-class values stretch.”

9 Brook Larmer with Moses Knolly, “The ‘Barrel Children,’” *Newsweek*, February 19, 1996, 45. Mothers migrate in search of employment and a better life for their families, leaving their children behind in the care of relatives or acquaintances; but children must often fend for themselves. The mothers then fulfill their maternal duties by sending back an occasional (sometimes annual) barrel of goods. A significant number of those children have become victims, not only of neglect, but of outright abuse. There is a whole post-graduate program headed by Betty Ann Blaine at the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology with a focus on meeting the needs of such children.

The plight, disappearance, and death of barrel children is now also memorialized in a large, deeply disturbing “Crying Monument” in downtown Kingston, Jamaica. See Patrina Pink, “‘Save Our Children’: Crying Monument Reminds Nation of Lost Generation,” *The Gleaner* (Kingston, Jamaica), May 2, 2011, accessed from the Internet, November 3, 2015, at <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20110502/lead/lead8.html>.

10 Laurie Gunst, *Born Fi’ Dead: A Journey through the Jamaican Posse Underworld* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995). Originally armed from abroad during the East-West Cold War (see below), gunmen have served variously as political party militia, as “hit men” in the United States for the mafia, as the “soldiers” for “dons” of garrison

ery.¹¹

Men and boys of African descent have a particularly difficult time in Jamaican society. Systemic issues related to the so-called problem of “male marginality” have multiple roots: slavery itself;¹² British colonial social structures—especially *after* the abolition of slavery—socio-political patterns that fostered a stratified society bordering on apartheid;¹³ sharp *class* divisions sometimes based upon *gender* among persons of African descent; compulsory scholastic examinations from an early age that, based upon differing rates of socio-psychological development in boys and girls, tend to discriminate against young boys and push them toward the streets at an early age;¹⁴ resulting in what some

communities in Kingston, Jamaica, as violent enforcers for the Colombian cartel of drug traffickers, as common criminals, and so forth.

11 Cf. James G. Friesen, E. James Wilder, Anne M. Bierling, Rick Koepcke, and Maribeth Poole, *The Life Model: Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You: The Essentials of Christian Living*, 2000 rev. ed. (Pasadena, CA: Shepherd’s House, 2010), which was strongly recommended by James D. Fisher, a former visiting professor of psychology at CGST, for its spiritual and psychological insights into the types of psychological wounds endemic in Jamaica; cf. also the work of David E. Carlson, a long-time visiting professor of counseling psychology in Jamaica and the recipient of an honorary doctorate from CGST in 1998, *Counseling and Self-Esteem*, Resources for Christian Counseling, ed. Gary R. Collins, vol. 13 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988).

12 Over the years, a million or more slaves were shipped to an island the size of Connecticut. To gain some perspective on this number, it is commonly estimated that some 500,000 African slaves were taken from their homeland to the rest of North America. Perhaps 200,000 slaves brought to Jamaica were transferred to smaller islands, but most who were left to labor in Jamaica died under horrible working conditions. The average life-span for a Jamaican slave was approximately 26 years. At the time of emancipation in 1834 (though slavery was not legally abolished until 1838), there were only 320,000 slaves left on the island, and that despite intensive breeding programs. Cf. Katrin Norris, *Jamaica: The Search for Identity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), and Philip Sherlock and Hazel Bennett, *The Story of the Jamaican People* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers; Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, with the Creative Production and Training Centre, 1998).

13 It was no accident, but presumably a deeply felt cultural affinity that prompted Jamaica to lead the way in calling other nations to boycott South Africa as a means of ending Apartheid. The British had an empire, and they imported ethnic groups from around the world—Chinese, East Indians, Lebanese, Syrians, among others—to serve as buffer classes (along with Jews, mulattos, and women) against justifiably angry Afro-Jamaican males, who were deliberately kept at the bottom of the sharply divided social scale in post-emancipation Jamaica.

14 Typically some three-quarters of the children taking the Common Entrance Exam (since 2000 or so replaced by the Grade Six Achievement Test, see “New Test of

scholars now argue is a thoroughly a "feminized" school system in which, until very recently, less than one percent of the male population received a university education; business and economic structures strongly favoring European, Asian, or mixed-race minorities (or males from smaller islands); informal marketplaces dominated by women; and matriarchal family life—tendencies with roots running all the way back to slavery, but which phenomena have been aggravated by various forms of oppression within Jamaica since then.¹⁵ It is no accident that the best known religious body indigenous to Jamaica, Rastafarianism, with its reggae music, religious use of *ganja* as a sacrament, and rhetoric of righteous judgment upon "Babylon" (Europe and North America), is one appealing particularly to Afro-Jamaican males, as it arose from and speaks squarely to their tragic historical situation and their deepest psycho-social needs, beginning with a basic affirmation of their human dignity within a socio-historical context that repeated denigrated or denied it.¹⁶

These factors are compounded by numerous other social and economic pressures that give rise to neo-colonial forms of oppression, many from off the island, that frequently threaten to unravel the fabric of Jamaican society.¹⁷ One

Ability for High School Entry in the Caribbean," by Corinne Barnes, on the Internet at http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/know_sharing/grassroots_stories/caribbean_2.shtml, accessed on February 23, 2011) in Jamaica would fail, a disproportionate percentage of them male, all but ending effective education beyond grade school level. Those who would pass could be allotted a precious space at a school virtually anywhere on the island, regardless of their own geographical location or of the school(s) attended by siblings, depending upon their selection in a selective "draft" system that distributes scholarships according to test rank, a situation that exacerbated the challenges faced by the vast number of persons in the lower classes, who would have far fewer resources with which to prepare for the exam or to navigate the system, and who may even lack the means necessary to even accept an offer of admission if it entails attendance across the island.

15 Errol Miller, *Marginalization of Male*; id., *Jamaican Society and High Schooling* (Kingston, Jamaica: ISER, 1990); and Miller, *Men at Risk*.

Jamaican society is a vivid illustration of the fact that matriarchy rooted in the tragedies of slavery, colonialism, and similarly oppressive social structures is not a particularly good cure for the evils of traditional patriarchy. The present authors would commend biblical egalitarianism instead. But that is a subject for another day.

16 Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlene, eds., *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, consulting ed., Clinton Chisholm (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), and William David Spencer, *Dread Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1999).

17 For an overview of the appallingly unjust economic pressures from abroad and their effects on ordinary Jamaicans, see the searing 2001 documentary film, *Life and*

recalls the sad quip about global economics, “When the United States catches a cold Majority World countries suffer pneumonia.” The backwash from turbulent economic waters further north can easily swamp a Caribbean island. Or again, when Jamaica became a political pawn in the East-West Cold War, a people who traditionally eschewed handguns were suddenly flooded with high caliber small arms as the two leading political parties, the People’s National Party (PNP) and the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), became proxies for Communist and Capitalist aspirations in the West Indies. Kingston became known in the late 1970s and early 1980s as “the Beirut of the Caribbean,” a tragic but accurate commentary on the widespread, vicious political violence prevailing in both cities at that time.¹⁸

The Alienation of Afro-Jamaican Males from the Jamaican Church

Roman Catholicism first arrived in Jamaica when Columbus landed there on May 4, 1494. Anglicanism was added to the mix after Cromwell’s conquest of the island in 1655. Other established Protestant denominations made their presence felt by means of missionary outreach, especially during the nineteenth century; and they were followed by waves of evangelicals and Pentecostals in the twentieth century, though by then all sorts of indigenous Christian groups were springing up as well,¹⁹ until Christianity had become in some respects fairly ubiquitous throughout the island. The frequent claim that there are more churches per square mile in Jamaica than in any other country on earth is probably a bit of an exaggeration—there is, after all, Vatican City.

But most congregations struggle to attract a significant percentage of Afro-Jamaican male members, who frequently drift away during their teen years and return, if at all, only much later in life. Church, like school, is not a place

Debt, directed by Stephanie Black, with a script adapted from the award winning essay by Jamaica Kincaid, “A Small Place” (originally about Antigua), and distributed by New Yorker Films. *Life and Debt* has won awards in at least eight different international film festivals.

18 One side of this complicated political story is told by former Prime Minister and Jamaica Labour Party leader Edward Seaga in *My Life and Leadership*, vol. 1: *Clash of Ideologies, 1930–1980* (Oxford, England: Macmillan Education, 2009). (Vol. 2: *Hard Road to Travel, 1980–2008* would appear the next year.)

19 Cf., e.g., the astounding ministry of a former African-American slave and self-styled Anabaptist, George Liele (ca. 1750–1828), who voluntarily indentured himself once more as a slave in order to enter Jamaica as a missionary (before William Carey ever sailed from England to India), see Timothy Paul Erdel, “I Wish I Had Been There: ‘Negro Slavery’s Prophet of Deliverance,’” *Mennonite Historical Bulletin*, July 2001, 8–9.

where young (or even many middle-aged) Afro-Jamaican men go.²⁰ Many churches are, somewhat paradoxically, rigorously patriarchal in preaching and teaching, with a tiny minority of males holding the office of bishop, priest, pastor, or elder, but thoroughly matriarchal in form and function, with women dominating actual church life and practical ministries.

R.E.N.E.W.E.D. Ministries and Hoosier Hysteria

R.E.N.E.W.E.D.²¹ Ministries was founded in 1996 when Dennis Engbrecht, Senior Vice President at Bethel College, Mishawaka, Indiana, joined together with the dynamic, charismatic Courtney Richards, Jamaican evangelist, educator, and counselor,²² to establish and fund a ministry that would reach out to marginal young Afro-Jamaican men without fathers.²³ Although the mission is egalitarian by conviction, its primary focus has been the fatherless men of African descent who form the very bottom strata of Jamaican society. Its ministries have since been extended to young women and to other Caribbean islands as personnel and resources have allowed. In fact, ministry outreach has spread not only from Jamaica across the West Indies, but to additional countries such as Nepal, Northern Ireland, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa. But the fatherless Afro-Jamaican males were the primary ministry target from the beginning, and remain so.

In the providence of God, it so happened that there was a significant addition to popular sports culture in Jamaica during the same time period that R.E.N.E.W.E.D. Ministries was being founded. For the mission emerged in

20 E.g., Samuel Vassel, "Understanding and Addressing the Absence of Men from the Jamaican Church" (D.Min. dissertation, Columbia Theological Seminary [Decatur, Georgia] with the United Theological College of the West Indies [Kingston, Jamaica], 1997).

21 "R.E.N.E.W.E.D. (beyond the obvious connotation of "renewal") is a somewhat extended and ambitious acronym for: "Reaching/Evangelizing/Nurturing/Encouraging/Worshipping/Educating/Discipling."

22 Courtney Richards had just resigned from his position as Dean of Students at Bethel College in order to return to ministry in Jamaica, where he also accepted an appointment at JTS.

23 They were joined by other persons, especially from the Missionary Church who were also affiliated with Bethel College, Mishawaka, Indiana, who were aware of the deep needs of young, Afro-Jamaican males as a distinct people group, and who were also frustrated by the decision of World Partners, the official mission of the Missionary Church, that Jamaica was thoroughly evangelized and therefore no longer in need of missionary endeavor.

the midst of “Hoosier Hysteria,”²⁴ that is, in a state bathed in basketball and on a campus that happened also to boast the dominant small college men’s basketball program in North America during that same decade, recording six national championships and two near misses²⁵ over a nine year time-span, a school (officially NAIA II/NCCAA I) with a proud tradition, especially during that magical decade, of competing successfully against elite teams from virtually every level of collegiate competition (NCAA I-II-III, NAIA I-II, and NCCAA I-II).²⁶ The sharp-shooting co-captain of Bethel’s first national championship team, Robby Prenekert, and his wife, Jeanie, were recruited by

24 Though the authors recognize that by this time traditional “Hoosier Hysteria” was on the wane, see Timothy Paul Erdel, “Who Killed ‘Hoosier Hysteria’?: 1911–1997, RIP,” a guest lecture presented in conjunction with the screening of the movie *Hoosiers* (1986, directed by David Anspaugh, written by Angelo Pizzo) in the course “Film,” The Language Company/South Bend English Institute, Indiana University South Bend, South Bend, Indiana, October 29, 2009, in which at least five possible causal factors were discussed for the demise of “Hoosier Hysteria”: 1) the introduction of *class basketball*; 2) the massive *consolidation of schools and school districts*, killing traditional small town rivalries; 3) growing *competition* from multiple sources—from other sports in schools that formerly just offered one or two other athletic options, from other types and levels of competition (AAU teams for players and college and professional teams for fans), from the media (television, Internet, video games, and so forth), and from still other travel and entertainment options made possible by improved modes of transportation and communication; 4) the phenomenon of *couch potatoes*—the physical lethargy that sets in when children no longer work or play outdoors all day when not in school, but sit watching or listening to electronic media or playing electronic games; and 5) a *combination* of these and still other factors (such as the cultural phenomenon of the enthusiasm for “March Madness” transferring from the ISHAA, where it originated, to the NCAA tournaments, and also to the indirect impact of Title IX, though a very good thing in itself, on male sports).

25 See, e.g., Timothy Paul Erdel, “A Bump in the Road: 1995–1996: Near Perfection Falls Short,” in *Band of Brothers: 2006–2007 Bethel College Basketball*, compiled by Chris Hess with Mike Lightfoot, Pete Morey, and others (Mishawaka, Ind.: Bethel College Athletic Department with Evangel Press, 2006), 12–13, which recounts the journey of what may have been Bethel’s greatest team, but which was upset in the second round of the NAIA II men’s basketball national tournament.

The bitterest near miss was probably Bethel’s double-overtime 111–109 loss to Cornerstone University in the 1999 NAIA II men’s basketball national championship game, when an apparently game-winning three-point shot was disallowed near the end of the second overtime. A knowledgeable observer from Texas called it, “the greatest game of college basketball ever played,” a nearly mythical clash with seemingly endless human interest side stories. One measure of the focused intensity during that contest was that the two teams together buried 56 of 60 pressure-packed free throws.

26 See, e.g., the team histories and program statistics in Andrew Bowen, comp.,

Courtney Richards to join with him as the first team of missionaries to go out under R.E.N.E.W.E.D. ministries.²⁷

Jamaican Hoop Dreams

Jamaican popular sports culture traditionally focused on track and field,²⁸ cricket, boxing, horse racing, soccer, netball (for women), table tennis, badminton, tennis, swimming, and “karting,”²⁹ or such games as dominoes and pool, with very little attention to or interest in basketball.³⁰ That all changed through a curious sequence of circumstances. After Hurricane Gilbert decimated the island on 12 September 1988, the state-owned Jamaican Broadcasting Corporation (JBC), which at that time held a monopoly on local television broadcasting, began relaying CNN news coverage almost non-stop, so that those Jamaicans who still had access to electric power and who could afford televisions could follow CNN’s nearly around-the-clock coverage of both the damage caused by Gilbert and the various international relief efforts on behalf of Jamaica. As CNN’s regular programming ultimately covered more than just the ongoing crisis in Jamaica, this move opened a window onto a world of broadcasting beyond the somewhat narrow confines of JBC, and soon created

Bethel College Basketball: 2015–2016 Then, Now, Always, with Robby Lightfoot and others (Mishawaka, Ind.: Bethel College Athletic Department with Duley Press, 2015), a media guide of some 150 pages (without counting the generous section of unnumbered advertising pages).

27 Courtney Richards had served as a spiritual mentor to Robby Prenkert, i.e., when Courtney was a student dean and Robby was an undergraduate English major at Bethel College, then later as a senior colleague in mission.

28 E.g., a long history of excellence in the sprints on the international level reached a phenomenal peak when tiny Jamaica completely dominated the shorter races during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, bringing home six gold medals, three silver medals, and two bronze medals, eclipsing better known athletes from the United States, while directly challenging the combined achievements of the rest of the world. The surge of national pride that swept through Jamaica was well-captured in a brilliantly colorful commemorative issue of the nation’s leading newspaper, *The Sunday Gleaner* (Kingston, Jamaica), August 24, 2008. This overwhelming success was more-or-less duplicated at the 2012 Olympics in London, with Jamaica taking home four gold, four silver, and four bronze medals.

29 “Karting” fueled the idea, along with Jamaican success in track, of developing and entering a Jamaican bobsled team in the Winter Olympics, which led in turn to the popular Hollywood comedy, *Cool Runnings*, directed by Jon Turteltaub (1993).

30 Jamaica was unlike Trinidad and Tobago, which had developed a thriving basketball culture subsequent to the introduction of round ball by American military servicemen during World War II.

a popular demand for other types of television programs, entertainment formerly restricted solely to persons wealthy enough to own a satellite dish. Thus, a second, private station soon developed in Kingston (CVM TV); and, in the scramble between JBC and CVM to find programming that would appeal broadly to Jamaicans, NBA games were at first occasionally and then regularly aired.³¹ While the high percentage of athletes of African descent was presumably a matter of general interest, there was a special focus upon games involving Patrick Ewing from the New York Knicks, since he was born in Kingston. Soon boys and young men on the street began to develop their own hoop dreams.³² So this sudden, unprecedented surge of Jamaican interest in basketball more-or-less coincided with the founding of R.E.N.E.W.E.D. Ministries.

What follows, as the shifts in tone and perspective should make obvious, is a personal memoir of sorts about Robby's experience as a young R.E.N.E.W.E.D. Ministries missionary engaged in discipleship and sports ministries reaching out to fatherless young gang members, an experience filled with endless ironies and enduring regrets.

31 The NBA itself was beginning to aggressively market its television coverage internationally at that time, and presumably offered games as a loss-leader inducement to cash-strapped Jamaica, hoping to build a viewing audience that would later demand the broadcasts at full price.

During roughly the same time-span, the NFL once provided a feed of the first half of a Super Bowl to Jamaica, but that one short snapshot of America's second game meant little to people on the island. American football has remained an alien sport.

32 This is a rather different slant on the history of basketball in Jamaica from that told in the "official" online history presented by the Jamaica Basketball Association (JBA). That history rightly credits the Chinese community with introducing basketball to Jamaica in the 1940s, and correctly suggests there was some (sputtering) support for basketball on the school level during subsequent decades, with occasional spikes of interest when Jamaica hosted or unexpectedly did well in international competitions, especially after selected Jamaican players began to win scholarships to university and collegiate programs in the United States, which players would in turn form the nucleus of suddenly competitive national teams—at least competitive against other teams from the Caribbean basin, if not on a grander scale. The JBA essay does identify the tremendous rise in popular enthusiasm for the sport during the mid to late 1990s, with a dramatic proliferation of leagues on every level; but it fails to recognize the role of popular mass media in fueling the athletics hopes and dreams of young males highlighted in this paper. See Enid Sterling-Angus, "The History of Jamaica Basketball," published online April 27, 2005 at <http://www.jamaicans.com/culture/sports/jamaicabball.shtml>, also available as "Jamaica Basketball Association" at the Jamaica Basketball Association website (last updated in 2008). http://www.basketballjamaica.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=1. See also <http://www.latinbasket.com/Jamaica/basketball.asp> (all three sites were accessed 15 February 2011).

*Of Dreams and Regrets**Summer 1993*

The early August Kingston sun has baked the city to a dull and dusty brown, and though each afternoon threatening clouds appear over the hills, not a drop of rain has fallen since our arrival a week ago. On this Sunday afternoon I sit on Mrs. Simpson's veranda, staring out on the parched front lawn, as Jeanie takes an afternoon nap and Courtney watches soccer highlights on the television inside.

We have come with the Rev. Courtney Richards, friend and mentor, to his Jamaican homeland to "check things out." We spend the week exploring the possibilities for his more permanent return home, and with his encouragement, we try to figure out whether God is calling us to partner with him in a ministry to the young men of Jamaica. I want to know if the kind of short-term ministry I had done on two trips to the Dominican Republic with my college basketball team can be effectively duplicated in Jamaica over a longer term. After a week on the island I have yet to see a basketball hoop.

I am a twenty-three year old graduate student; I have not gone more than two days without playing basketball in fifteen years. The people we talk to, including pastors and denominational leaders, know little of basketball. And while conversations focus on how desperately everyone wants Courtney—beloved, magnetic, natural evangelist/comedian that he is—to come home to Jamaica, to pastor a church, and to train people in the art of mentoring and disciple-making, I want to know if anyone thinks a basketball ministry has any chance of working here.

The somber afternoon clouds take the edge off the tropical heat. Bored with the novel I'm reading and certain that it definitely looks like rain falling in the hills, I wander barefoot into Mrs. Simpson's small, walled front yard, toward the gate. The first few drops splash on my face; I silently wish to be christened by my first Jamaican downpour.

That's when I hear an old familiar pulsing—music to my Hoosier ears. No, not rumbles of thunder nor the patter of bigger raindrops on the street, but an even lovelier music: the "poom-poom-poom" of basketball on pavement. I make my way through the front gate and stand on the sidewalk staring gape-jawed down the road at three boys—all gangling arms and spindly legs—chattering and laughing, dribbling what turns out to be an oversized and over-inflated soccer ball.

The boys—two eleven year olds and a twelve year old—tell me they had removed the spokes from an old bike tire and fashioned themselves a backyard

basketball hoop. They were playing ball until an especially violent slam dunk left them hoopless.

I will never see these boys again, but I never forget them.

In the few days before we fly back to Indiana we meet with Pastor Sam White and Pastor Luke Simpson, both of whom say that young men in neighborhoods surrounding their churches have created makeshift basketball hoops out of anything they can find, and that if you travel the side streets of Kingston's poorer neighborhoods, you won't look long before you see boys playing basketball in the streets. Though football (soccer, that is) is still number one, they tell me that basketball has just recently exploded in popularity, in some part due to the national TV coverage of the Chicago Bulls' run to the NBA finals earlier that year. They have given me the eyes to see Kingston's "basketball courts," and in the final days of our visit I find them everywhere—rusty iron rebar bent into something barely resembling a circle and attached sometimes to an undersized scrap of plywood and hung from a concrete wall, sometimes nailed directly to a telephone pole. I hadn't noticed them.

I never see a full basketball court on my first trip to Jamaica. But I visit two Missionary Church Association congregations—one on the edge of a poor neighborhood called Grant's Pen, the other in the heart of one called Olympic Gardens—with ample room on their properties for full-sized asphalt courts. Through the help of a short term work team from Bethel College and a fair amount of fundraising and generous financial and volunteer labor support from both American and Jamaican Churches, regulation basketball courts, with regulation basketball hoops, will be built by the spring of 1997, and finished shortly after Jeanie and I move to Kingston in July of that same year.

Between July 1997 and July 1999, I spend countless late afternoon weekdays and Saturday mornings playing basketball with children and young men on the dusty asphalt in a Kingston ghetto. Though I have played basketball at a fairly high level in college, I never had a black teammate in my career. For these two years, I will be the only white person on the court every day. I will find myself in an over-populated concrete jungle trying to share the gospel and mentor children and young men without fathers—barrel children, gang members, confessed killers, self-described *rude bwoys*, and *ginnals*.³³ I will be a long way from home, but for two years my dream of marrying hoops with the hope of the gospel will be my reality.

³³ *Rude bwoy* is a slang term for a juvenile delinquent or criminal. A *ginnal* is a con man or a trickster.

Summer 1997

One sultry late afternoon in Kingston, I am coaching the Thunder basketball club through an intra-squad scrimmage at Tower Hill Missionary Church. We have lived in Kingston a year now, and the young men who come to play ball at the church nearly every day are my friends. I have accommodated myself to the endless banter of Jamaican street basketball, most of which, I have learned, is a good-natured part of the game and culture. Though not my style, I have learned to laugh along and on occasion play along with a bit of my own corn-fed trash-talk.

But on this day, in addition to the usual *chatta* among competing teammates, I notice something more bothersome. Phillip, having been manhandled in the low-post by the thicker and stronger Bullah, throws a razor sharp elbow that catches Bullah on the chin. A glancing blow, really, but it is done purposely, and Bullah knows it. The next trip down court Bullah returns the favor, elbowing Phillip, not viciously, not hard, but clearly on purpose, as if to send a message.

I should stop this immediately; blow my whistle; have everyone take a water break.

For some reason, I don't.

As the players transition into the other half-court, Phillip takes a violent swing with his fist, clocking Bullah in the back of his head. The game stops, and players from both sides fade into the background, passive observers as the brawl erupts. Bullah returns the sucker punch with a wicked round house into Phillip's face. He marches after Phillip, whose incomprehensible stutter-screaming has a sinister edge of rage and fear. They dance their way off the court where Phillip snatches up a five-foot dried out tree branch an inch and half thick lying nearby and proceeds to break it into three or four pieces over Bullah's ducking head. Left with a few inches of stick, Phillip—wild eyed—stabs the air with the dagger-like piece remaining in his hand, before Bullah has a chance to pick up two large stones, which he will use on Phillip should he need to.

I find myself between them, half-crazed, shouting, "Enough! Enough!" still stunned that no one else has intervened to stop what looks to me like an explosion of deadly rage. Instead, their teammates scatter, some to the water cooler for a drink, others to grab a seat on the retaining wall near the sanctuary, watching. I hear laughter from the children playing on the monkey bars nearby, and then I notice they are not the only ones who laugh.

This I do not understand. Each time I have witnessed a fight in Jamaica—and there have been too many—a crowd gathers at a not so-safe distance to

watch and laugh.

I am not laughing. I am furious. Furious that our team has so quickly dissolved into two individuals who want to kill one another with crude weapons and a bunch of unwilling-to-intervene observers, laughing. All that goes through my mind is, “How have I so failed to reach them?”

On my drive home and in the days after, I blame myself, disgusted that have not been proactive enough in modeling and teaching peace, that I intervened far too late, that I watched the thing escalate and did not respond with grace. I do not question that I did respond to the explosion of the fight, and I do not wonder about my involuntary reaction of placing myself in between the two enraged combatants.

Many years later, I will, instead of cursing my failure to act, wonder how I was not paralyzed by fear in moments like these and others I experienced. That I did not hesitate to place my body in harm’s way, between two large and angry men armed with crude weapons, ready to kill one another.

This fact—that I will in the future be shocked by my fearlessness back then—will make me sad.

Phillip and Bullah both apologize to me separately at the next practice. Phillip suspends himself from the team for a week. Bullah promises that nothing like this will ever happen again. Both seem genuinely ashamed. I try to use the incident to teach about reconciliation and forgiveness, and about our responsibilities to our brothers, and several of the other players agree that the right thing to do should anything like this happen again is to help break up the fight. Through this ordeal and its aftermath, it dawns on me that my approval matters a great deal to them, and that disappointing me is painful. I do not know what I am to do with this knowledge—with this manipulative power I could wield. And I do not know what I am to do with the feeling that I believe I could and should have prevented all of this.

A few weeks later after practice, I announce that I will be leaving the island for a month and half, returning home to raise support for a second year in Jamaica. I try to emphasize that I will be back in forty days or so, and encourage them to press on with training for the final games of the regular season and the playoffs that will likely begin before I, their coach, return. They wipe sweat from faces hardened by too many years of poverty and violence, by the pain of abandonment and neglect, by disappointment.

And also tears.

§

These tears are a haunting affirmation. I feel loved and hopeful that I have reached them in some small way, that I have a chance to continue reaching

them with the transforming message of the gospel in deeper ways down the road. The younger children have more questions. “You’re coming back, Coach?” they ask over and over. “Yes, I’m coming back,” I reassure them.

“You carry back something for me, Coach?” they ask again and again.

The children cry, too—though others tease them for it.

At home I tell Jeanie how much we will be missed during our weeks away and how I had to reassure the children that Miss Jeanie will be back and how some of the guys from the team tried hard to hide their tears from their coach. It is something to know we will be missed, and in part this makes having left families and friends and good jobs in America for the burden God laid on our hearts for Jamaica all the more worth it.

But later I come to a more layered interpretation and appreciation of those tears. Courtney suggests to me that those tears are not merely inspired by a sadness and fear that Miss Jeanie and Coach will not come back. They do not cry just because they will miss us the few weeks we are away. Rather, those tears remember fathers they never knew who have abandoned them and mothers who have “gone a-foreign” with the promise to return and to bring them to New York or Miami or London and a better life when there is money. Those tears tell a story of the past. Those tears say, “We have been left behind before.”

One year later we move back to Indiana permanently.

The Present

Now when I recall things that I did and places I went in these supposedly dangerous and depressed neighborhoods—places both the tourist books and middle-class Jamaicans insist are off limits to outsiders—and I am unsettled by how fearless I once was. In my more cynical moments, I chalk that fearlessness up to ignorance. Had I known more, had I read what I’ve now read and seen the documentaries I’ve now seen, would I have been more cautious, or would I have been completely paralyzed by fear?

I do not know.

I cannot recall ever feeling afraid during my time in Jamaica. One time I boasted of this to Courtney, saying flippantly, “I guess perfect love casts out all fear.”

He said, “Are you saying you love perfectly?”

Ouch.

“No,” I said, appropriately rebuked. “No, I mean I just don’t think about being afraid. I love these guys, and I love this place.”

Spring 1999

One Saturday morning I arrive at the Tower Hill basketball court for practice

with the Thunder. I am, as always, the first to arrive, so I do what I always do. I saunter out of my pickup with a basketball and shoot jumpers. The clang of the hoop and pounding of the ball on pavement sounds the alarm—it's time for basketball practice to start. Which means in half an hour or so most of the rest of the Tower Hill Thunder will show up—two thirds of them being either brothers or cousins who live in “yards” across the street from the church.

This day a twelve-year-old boy aptly named “Grinney” greets me first with a “Mornin’ coach” and his infectious smile. But then, in an uncharacteristically serious tone, he says, “Coach, dem kill a mon last night.”

He leads me to midcourt to show me the dark blood stains near the sideline. “Who?” I ask, meaning, who killed someone—fearing by “dem” he means some regular to the basketball court.

“Mi no know,” he says, his grin ominously absent. “Some mon on a bike, not from here. Dem stab ‘im up.”

A man killed on this holy ground, and this boy telling me so matter-of-factly. I have no words. His smile returns; he pokes the ball from my hip where I have it propped under my arm, and playfully dribbles between his legs, making fancy spin moves, grinning with his whole face.

I want to know who killed the man, and I want to know who the murdered man was. But Grinney doesn't know. And life goes on; Grinney wants to play basketball; so we play.

Later on, the older guys on the team do not seem overly troubled that their court has been desecrated by bloodshed, and the best I can tell is that the dead man was from “down so,” meaning he was from Binns Road and that apparently someone from “over so,” meaning Balcombe Drive, got him. Nobody names any names and nobody claims to have known either person. Instead they rehearse the NBA playoff action from the night before.

I watch the local news later that same night. Nothing. Plenty of highlights of the Bulls victory. No report about a murder on our basketball court. I buy a Sunday paper the next day. Nothing. Big picture of Michael Jordan on the sports page.

My friends in Tower Hill accept this thing so nonchalantly. Sure, when I ask them about gunfire in the night, they say they hear shots most nights, but mostly they think those are not shootouts but just the people “over so” and “down so” firing into the air to make the others “over so” and “down so” know, just in case, that it would not be a good idea to find yourself in the others' territory.

I wonder if any of them have fired any shots like those.

In our own middle class neighborhood “up so,” we hear plenty of gunfire,

typically in the wee hours of the night, occasionally very close by, most often, I suspect, from the gully that runs past our townhouse on the seminary campus.

Many years later I will remember these gunshots, I will remember about that murdered man, I will remember about the times I rather feebly intervened in the fisticuffs that that erupted and could have so easily turned deadly. I will be more frightened remembering these things than I ever was when I found myself in the midst of them.

I will regret. I will wonder and worry if I am incapable of recapturing my courage, and more heartbreakingly, my love; even if that courage, even if that love were quite likely mixed up with starry-eyed innocence and hoop dreams.

Today

Perhaps I could say I think about my time in Jamaica and my regrets often, but often is a relative term. Occasionally I think about them. I think about what I did for two years. I think about how many days I drove alone to Tower Hill with a bag of basketballs, a sack of corned-beef sandwiches, a five-gallon jug of Kool-Aid, and hope. It troubles me, a bit, that I don't think about those days more often. It troubles me more that when I do think about them I am astonished by the courage of the young man that lived them, because the young man that lived them had more courage and more faith, more hope and more love—even if less self-knowledge—than I fear I will ever have again.

We left Jamaica almost seventeen years ago. Seventeen years' worth of reading, conversations, prayer, and writing—writing this, even—and I am still left wondering if I will ever truly understand my experiences mentoring marginal men with hoop dreams on the dusty asphalt of Tower Hill, Kingston, Jamaica. I never regret that we tried to marry Christian evangelical missions with basketball or doubt that somehow God found ways to redeem the work of this fool, done with passion and in His name. But there does remain a double-edged nagging sadness I feel: I wish I'd been a better coach, a more faithful friend, a more knowledgeable and sensitive mentor to them then; and I wish I could recapture that former wild hope and fearless love today.