

Stop the Violence!

The recent gang-related shooting death of 9-year-old Janessa Ramirez has become a rallying point for many in our city to put an end to the increasing acts of violence that occur almost daily. This is the second time in the past decade or so that I remember our Chief of Police requesting a gathering of local church and civic leaders to come together to pray. And this is the second time I feel we owe him an apology.

I remember arriving late to the first gathering held in southeast Fresno more than 10 years ago. After being seated, I looked at my watch and wondered if I had mistaken the start time or if somehow they had all managed to pray by the time I had arrived. But seriously, I wasn't *that* late! As the gathering progressed, there was a lot of talk about statistics, case studies, and *what we need to do to fix the problem*. The meeting was led by key leaders in the areas of urban renewal and city-wide ministry—visionary men and women with experience, education, and administrative abilities. Our Chief of Police spoke with humility and passion about the problem and gave each of us a copy of the crime statistics available at the time. Perfect. I assumed we would follow immediately with an informed time of extended prayer, but instead the meeting continued with more talk.

There were several urgent pleas to get involved and a variety of ideas and words of encouragement to do this or that—statements that began with, "We need to . . ." Finally, at the close of the meeting, now 5 or 10 minutes past its allotted time, someone raised their hand requesting to speak. The host of the meeting responded with, "Jack, you're killing me! We're out of time so will you please make this quick so we can conclude?" "Jack" remained seated and asked, "I was just wondering if we could at least take a little time to pray since that's why we came here today?" The host then said, "Sure, let me wrap this up and will you then lead us in a closing prayer?" Apology number 1.

For the second and most recent meeting, I arrived a little early. Many of our local pastors, Christian business and civic leaders were gathering on-stage along with our police chief. There were several local news agencies adjusting their cameras while those attending were taking their seats. It was a good turn out and there was a sense of unity and urgency in regard to the current state of our city. The meeting began with prayer and a unified statement from the Christian community that was represented by a number of pastors and other key Christian leaders.

The most poignant moment of the evening was when Janessa's mother, Stacey Gonzales Ramirez, shared her last moments with her daughter just prior to her child's death in front of the laundromat where she was shot by the random gunfire of a neighborhood gang member. As she laid there on the pavement, both mom and daughter were confused about why she suddenly collapsed to the ground complaining her stomach burned and her back hurt. As Mom lifted up Janessa's garment to see what she at first thought was a cigarette burn, a friend standing nearby exclaimed, "She's been shot!" In the moments that followed, Janessa and Mom both talked about and talked to Jesus before this little angel finally said, "Bye mommy, I love you." Silence now filled the room where we were gathered listening to her story. There were a few intermittent and audible expressions of grief as she continued to relate the events of that horrible evening.

Once again, I expected we would follow this moving testimony with prayer and a time of corporate intercession, not only for this devastated family, but for our city, and against the powers and choices responsible for her death. Instead, a few more speakers approached the microphone and passionately began to implore us to "get involved" and to "up our efforts" to make a difference in our community through prayer walks, community involvement, and evangelism.

As I listened, I both appreciated the opportunity to be there and the efforts of those who are working unseen and often with little support to make a difference in our community among the *least of the least*. I also felt that what was being proposed seemed like a dishearteningly slow and long-term process that left me with little confidence in seeing any real change. I also wondered how the Chief felt. Earlier, he sullenly expressed, "In all my years on the force, nothing has personally impacted me more than Janessa's death."

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