

Street Ministry and the Gospel of Luke

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To read Luke is to prepare for change. Zechariah knows that God reigns and change will come (1.68). Anna foresees redemption (2.38): not just forgiveness but a new way of life. Change is the initial mission of John, who baptizes “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” and “to turn the hearts of the fathers” (Luke 1.17). When the valleys and the roads are filled and changed (3.5–6), the salvation that comes means not only eternity in heaven but a new life now. The call is more than a mental response, for listeners know to ask, “What shall we do?” (3.10). It is the nature of the gospel to upset the safe parameters of our lives, to disorient us, and to call for a shift in our values.

Luke is, in a sense, a values-clarification document: a call embedded in story, a call for revolution and rebellion of the self against a life shaped by the values of the world. Mary announces the disorienting call of the gospel: God fills the hungry but sends the rich away empty-handed (1.53). Mary announces a future that her son will bring, a future that turns our ordinary human life—the expected human life—upside down. She posits this change as the very will of the God of Abraham. Later in the story, Jesus scandalizes a Pharisee in his own house by not washing, then invites the man to give what is in his cup to the poor (Luke 11.41). Jesus calls for a new value: caring action will make the Pharisee truly clean.

To read Luke is to be captivated by the necessity of change. If there is a heart-turned trust in the one who tells the story, then the change demanded is acceptable, and the disorientation the story brings leads to a new orientation and a life based on new values. Luke’s story calls the rich to go away empty voluntarily, and be found with Jesus. The rich ruler answers this call negatively, but Zacchaeus empties himself. The story has a clear answer about the nature of the new values of God’s reign: share, be fair, be content.

The change that Luke’s gospel calls for is at the heart of Made in the Streets (MITS), a ministry by and for street kids in Nairobi, Kenya. God is changing the lives of children in the ministry, but others are changed, too. Many times, people from the United States have told us that working a few weeks with MITS and walking the streets of a Nairobi slum “changed my life.” A high school computer teacher who returned from two weeks with MITS persuaded his wife and children to join him in change. They moved from an urban area to a rural school, primarily to have more time to devote to creative work on behalf of service to street children. A university student who returned to Colorado after spending three weeks with MITS, sought a similar experience there and began to work with Dry Bones Denver, an outreach to homeless teens and young adults. Ten years later, when he and his wife planned an adoption, they travelled to Africa to find a baby to love, and he spoke to the MITS team about how they had shaped his life. A young couple took six-month leaves from their jobs to work with MITS. When they returned to the United State, they sold their home in an upscale neighborhood, moved into “the Hood” in Nashville, and reordered the way they spent their money.

These changes did not come from seeing pain and suffering, but from seeing the hope engendered by the gospel in the presence of suffering and pain. The call of Jesus, as told in the stories of Luke’s gospel, is retold in the church’s ministry to the poorest of the poor, and it engenders agreement with the values of God and engagement with the goals and deeds of Jesus.

Our Story of Saying “Yes” to Jesus

Always there is a story. The history of MITS can be seen in a series of disorienting events that produced a process of change within which the core event has been to say “yes” to Jesus. After having served in congregational ministry for decades, we came to Nairobi in 1992 to minister to and with the young people of the church. We taught them, did youth camp with them, and led recreation programs with them. When they married, we stood beside them. We ministered in other ways, too. We went into jails, for conversation and encouragement. We spent time with blind and dying people. We took care of a computer college dedicated to the poor in its growing years. This experience and more led up to August 3, 1995.

There were others there that day, and they had their own stories. Some were born in poverty and stayed that way. Others were born in poverty, and then life turned really bad. They found themselves lost on the streets, huddling in doorways and alleyways at night, surviving through odd jobs, scrounging in trash, begging at shops, stealing, always with the smell of glue and the presence of drugs.¹ But on that day, they were drawn to the church, drawn to people who loved them without reserve.

Our youth group of about seventy-five teenagers met on Saturdays. A teaching team of twenty was preparing to go out to villages and lead Bible schools for children. They also taught the church Sunday school, which had rapidly grown to more than three hundred children. These special teenagers always accepted any street kids who showed up.

One of them was Sammy, a street kid who first came because he wanted help when he got in trouble with the police. He stayed around because of the good news about Jesus, and he brought other poor people. He brought street kids. One day, before August 3, he had come to the principal of the college and said, “Dr. Charles, can you hire some guys who just need a break? They would do anything, and there are seven of them.” So Charles hired the seven to clean toilets at night and dig ditches for the college. Soon most of these seven boys were off the streets and living in one-room apartments in the slum. (Today, one of them, Francis Mbuvi, is the administrator of MITS and preaches at the Kamulu Church.)

Later, Sammy asked again that we do something for kids on the streets of Nairobi. This time, Charles said, “August 3, Sammy. There is nothing happening on campus that day. Only the guards and I will be here. Invite the street kids in, and we’ll talk to the youth group about doing classes and cooking a meal. I’ll check to be sure it is okay with the college staff and the church.” When he asked, the people in the church and the school said, “Street kids won’t come here.” So we thought maybe thirty or forty would show up.

But by 8:30 a.m. on August 3, two hundred street kids were at the gate: one hundred eighty boys and twenty girls. We let them all in. Members of the youth group rushed out to buy more food and get more first aid supplies. The kids washed up in the college restrooms. We ran a first aid line for burns, cuts and sores. We spent the rest of the day together, playing games, singing and having Bible studies. The fog from exhaled glue was thick. Darlene and the youth told the kids local versions of Jesus’ parables, which they had previously prepared to use in Sunday school. The titles were “The Good Somali,” “The Lost Calf,” and our favorite—the best for that day—“The Lost Boy.” Of course, these stories were based on parables in Luke (10.25–37; 15.3–8, 11–32)! When the street kids heard that story, tough and hard and cold young men said, with choking voices and barely held tears, “How did you know? That’s me, that’s me.” The story resonated because lostness, fear, defeat and self-degradation are ever present in life on the streets.

When the day was over, we sent the street kids back to the streets. We gave each a bag of food to carry and eat later. Then we sat down with the youth group to debrief. We wanted to share what we felt, what we thought happened that day, and how the street kids had responded. But the young people of our church quickly drew us toward the future. James, one of the youth teachers who had been brought a few months before by Sammy, said, “You know, they’re coming back.” “What?” we asked in unison, thinking our task for the streets was done. “Well, we invited them back on Sunday and many said they would come.”

It turns out we were the “lost son” of Luke 15. In the story, the son’s disorientation—his call to change—does not happen until he sits in the garbage, realizing finally that good is in his father’s house, but he has not

1. Street children in Nairobi constantly sniff glue to numb the overwhelming pain in their lives

yet chosen it. Then he turns and finds his heart's desire at home with his father after all. For us, interaction with the street kids was new and interesting, but our disorientation came later, at four o'clock in the afternoon when James said, "They're coming back." At this moment, we were faced with saying "yes" or "no" to Jesus. Our answer helped us find our hearts' true desire, and our lives were forever changed.

So we made a plan for Sunday morning: washing up, first aid, a meal and a Bible study. Where would we meet? What would we do the following week? Then, it was not long before we realized that we must do more than meet once a week with street kids. We taught them not to steal, but where would they find the ability to gain food for themselves? We urged them to stop sniffing glue, but what would they do to fill the time and get their minds off their troubles? We called them to honor God, but who would teach them how to do so? In such questions, a ministry was born, and Made in the Streets became a driving force in our lives. We found ourselves deeply embedded in the story that Jesus writes, just as the disciples in Luke became enmeshed in that story. Like them, we have no greater desire for our lives.

Faced with the gospel's disorienting call, there's always the option of an answer that dismisses change. The rich ruler, when faced with a new command, turns away in sadness and refusal (Luke 18.23). Simon rejects a sinful woman (Luke 7.36). The lawyer tries to justify himself when confronted with teaching that reveals his heart (Luke 10.29). Jesus too is tempted to say "no": he is tempted to feed, mystify and dominate people in the usual way, following preferred and expected methods (Luke 4.1–13). "Help them to be dependent on you. Create a persona that overwhelms their defenses. Control them." But Jesus will not. Instead, he announces a different story line in Nazareth (4.18): "The good news will be preached to the poor." "Today this is fulfilled," he says: this is the day of change.

The MITS Kids' Stories of Saying "Yes" to Jesus

The genius of Luke is that he makes room in his story for the hungry. Our world tells the stories of the rich and famous. We know a great deal about Hollywood and Bollywood actors, about athletes and politicians. But who knows the story of a lost boy? The poor and hungry seem only to have their story told en masse, when they become objects of the world's pity because a famine ravages the land where they live. But for Luke, the stories of the poor and hungry count. And Luke cares whether they too reach a point of disorientation, coming face to face with a call to change.

Abdi

A teenager named Abdi writes about his own experience of this call, which brought him from a hopeless life on streets to hope in his future.

I did not enjoy living on the streets. It was not fun. Our base grew and we became seven of us.² Later, older boys came one by one to join us. They would beat you up if they find you just sitting and thinking about life. They would order you to buy them a cigarette and if you failed to do it, they would hit your face and take all your money. Life seemed so unfair. If you thought about going to collect scrap metal, you just thought how heavy it would be to carry a long distance. It was so heavy to carry but only brought fifty or one hundred shillings. Then you would be so tired from working all day. You never could expect anything. You only lived for the day. You could just give up on life.

After a stay in a refugee camp and a road accident, Abdi came to Made in the Streets:

I love MITS so much. It has been like a mother and father to me, taking care of me and the others. I want to learn more in every subject that I am taught. I even like working in the shamba (farm) for two hours because I believe I will own my own cattle someday and plant my food. I am being

2. A "base" is a rough sort of camp used by a particular group of street kids, who gather there to share food and sleep.

taught basics in English, math, Bible, and computer. In just a few months I have been able to learn so many things, like speaking in English. I am going to be the one to share in chapel next week. I know stories from the Bible, even the family tree of Jesus from David.

God has done marvelous things in my life and I thank him so much. He had a purpose in my life. I know that because even after I got involved in the road accident I am still alive and well. I can't believe my dream came true—I wanted to live at MITS and that is where I am. I will pray so much to completely forgive my stepdad for the pain he caused my life; I think I already have forgiven him. I love my mum so much; she could never watch anyone beating me without defending me. I pray that I will succeed in life so that I can take her out from the slum life in Mathare. In the slum, there is always a fight between tribes, or houses being torched now and then. I am interested in learning more about computers. Maybe I will be a computer engineer or technician some day. Only God knows.

Abdi's story fits the story of Luke so well: from hungry and poor, through a disorienting series of events to change, to being filled with good things, and to being satisfied. Once he saw that his story counted to God, he could have a new life. To appreciate the power of the message of Luke, we must see that power actually working in individual lives and in the life of the community of faith.

Laurent

Another street boy's story dramatizes God's work and values. Thirteen-year-old Laurent lived in an alleyway in a shack he built out of cardboard and scrap wood. He had never been to school and had left his mother because there was no food at home. He was invited to MITS in its first year. He heard the good news of Jesus: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6.20). He took that message to heart and found himself in the story of the lost son from Luke 15. He said, "That's me." Like that boy, Laurent lived in the garbage and would gladly eat what was fed to the goats. He was on drugs, and the harassment he received from older street youth caused his moods and personality to swing up and down in a cycle of depression that he almost reveled in. Once he wrote on the wall in crayon, "I belong to the devil." For Laurent, the story of the lost son was disorienting because it brought him into a different story. It became his story, and he came home. After he was baptized, no one ever needed to speak again about his mood swings.

Laurent continued to find himself enmeshed in the stories of Luke. Jesus invited the rich ruler to find life by selling everything and giving to the poor, so too, Laurent found ways to give. Here is one story. One night, as Laurent walks through the warren of makeshift homes in the deep slum of Mathare Valley, he hears a cry that he thinks at first comes from a cat. But it continues. Looking under a sheet of tin, he finds a tiny baby, naked, still with the umbilical cord. A number of women are nearby, working on food and crafts they hope to sell the next day. He attempts to talk to them, seeking their help, but they ignore him. He gets close to them and asks them to do something, but they do not look up. So finally Laurent takes a blanket from someone's clothesline, wraps the baby in it, and walks two miles to the local maternity hospital, where he gives the baby to the nurses. They question him, thinking he may be the father, and accept his answers. He stays all night in the hospital as they labor to save the baby. In the morning the baby is alive and looking better. The nurses say to Laurent, "You must go. We will report the baby to the police. If you are here, they will give you a hard time and maybe arrest you. You must go. We will care for the baby." Laurent leaves, believing God has his eye on the baby.

In Luke 19.8, Zacchaeus rises up during a dinner, with Jesus present, and declares, "Half my goods I give to the poor." Zacchaeus has gone through a disorienting series of events: Jesus' insistence on a relationship and then the experience of his own abundant feast, alongside his new knowledge of Jesus' values. His moment of change now comes. So too, Laurent understands that Jesus has met his needs. At MITS, he receives a literacy education and is sent to cooking school. He then gets an internship at the University of Nairobi, a privilege usually reserved for those related to a faculty member or an administrator. They love him at the university, which leads to a full-time job. Just before Christmas he receives his first salary, and he boards a minibus from the university to the Eastleigh slum, heading straight to a kiosk where a woman cooks basic

Kenyan foods for sale. Handing her half of his salary, he tells her to provide food for street kids who mention his name. He then goes around to the bases, telling the kids about the food. Kids rush to the kiosk, and after two hours, the woman gets worried, because the money is starting to run low and more kids are coming. Laurent returns and gives her the rest of his salary, and all the street kids he knows get a Christmas meal. When he gets his next salary, he helps his mother move out of Mathare Valley into an apartment in Eastleigh. In the same way, Jesus announces to Zacchaeus, “Salvation has come to this house today” (Luke 19.19).

Later, a street youth named Ingosi wrote this about Laurent:

Laurent would tell me that I could make it if he made it. He would make every one of us pray, even if it was a short prayer. This really touched my heart. After about a year I decided to surrender my life to Jesus Christ, and a MITS teacher baptized me. All the students were around that day, and we sang and prayed together. God helped me to stop the bad things that I was doing in my old life.

So the story goes on; disorienting events lead to changed lives, and the hungry are filled with good things. Good things are not only food and money but also prayer and surrender.

Numerous street kids have identified how change took root in them.

Caleb says:

One day I won two hundred shillings in a casino. But my friends Keith, Alex and Ndungu were not happy with my win, because I was with my friend Johnson. They wanted to beat me up, but I took out my dagger and cut Ndungu’s hand. Keith and his friends were scared of me then. My friends respected me. We took care of each other. But sometimes, big boys from other bases would come to our base and take money from us by force. If we had no money, they would beat us up. I like MITS because the standard of life has gone high, and there is a lot of love from the teachers and the students. I have changed my life and stopped fighting and stabbing others. I also stopped using drugs. Duba and I like math.

Fauzia, a thirteen-year-old girl, says:

I don’t need to think about school fees, soap, water or clothes or a blanket or food. Everything is provided here at MITS. Ever since I came to MITS I have decided to behave like a mature person. I think and plan for my activities. MITS has also made me realize I am an important person. I feel wanted and I have realized that I am beautiful. I would like to live a life different from my parents—no drugs or alcohol. I also want to have a marriage where there is only one wife.

Simon says:

But now I am changed. I no longer use bad language and I don’t fight with my friends. I am interested in school now. I listen and I can understand what the teachers want us to learn. I have good role models like Cugia, who was in the streets like me but is now a good person. I listen to Cugia and I want to change like him. At MITS I have learned to be responsible, and I know to do the right thing. I have also learned to cook here; I cook good meals. I am thankful for getting education. I want to work with computers in the future.

Ian says:

One day MITS invited us to a party. They gave us good food, juice and loaves of bread. I have never seen someone who cared for me the way MITS did. My friends and I were very happy. We

left the center with full stomachs and some spare food for dinner. They even gave us blankets to keep us warm at night. Everything here is free. My life has changed for good because I feel loved and cared for. I have things that I can call my own: a basin, a bed, a mattress, clothes and a desk. The teachers and the students here are like family.

Jackie says:

Wairimu and I became good friends. We walked together and smoked bhang [marijuana] and sniffed glue and msii [another illegal substance] together. One day Wairimu was given a bottle of msii by a boy. As we were walking along the streets, the boy came to Wairimu and demanded sex as payback. I want to be able to read and write like other people. Even though I am in the beginners' class, I know that God will help me and that I will make it. I would like to work hard in my studies and be a mechanic. I would like to go home and help my mother start a legal business and stop selling illegal liquor.

Heeding Mary's Call to Change the World

There is more to the story. Soon after coming to the church, Sammy and Francis went back to the streets to preach and teach. They wanted people to know what great things can happen when you trust God: that they had both stopped taking drugs because they trusted Jesus, that they had also stopped stealing. As teachers in the church and on a teaching team for the villages, they had great stories to tell and did so using the parables of Jesus, many of them from Luke.

Street children and youth have a host of problems in common. Most of them have suffered abuse in their family homes. They have usually not known their fathers, and they have gone without food. Many of them have never slept on a bed with a mattress and a blanket. They have huddled outside in the rain and darkness with little clothing. They have eaten garbage when they couldn't beg or work. They have lived with alcoholic relatives who treated them as slaves. They have suffered abuse from a "Master" at a street kid base. That "Master" may be one who forces himself sexually on the younger boys. Or he may be one who pressures the most attractive girls on the streets to be available to him when he wants. If a girl refuses, then all the young men at the base can take their turns with her. Kids often believe that life will be better when they leave home for the streets, and sometimes it is, but never for the girls.

The street kids of Nairobi live in a terrible world, and it is into this world that Luke continues to pronounce the kingdom of God for the poor. Their testimonies of change show that Mary's cry for a new world—where the hungry are filled with good things—will transform the minds of those who believe and then become a reality in our world. The Word disorients the one who hears, changing the world day by day, as a person with two coats gives one of them to another person, who has none, and that person, having been filled, does the same (Luke 3.11).

CHARLES AND DARLENE COULSTON MET IN UNIVERSITY AND HAVE SERVED TOGETHER IN MINISTRY FOR FORTY-TWO YEARS. THEY RESIDE IN NAIROBI, KENYA, WHERE THEY ARE BLESSED TO HAVE FOUND THEIR PEACEABLE KINGDOM AND HEARTS' DESIRE: HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE—ESPECIALLY STREET KIDS—ACHIEVE STRENGTH AND RESPONSIBILITY AS THEY ARE CALLED TO GOD. TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT MADE IN THE STREETS, VISIT THE MINISTRY'S WEBSITE AT [HTTP://WWW.MADEINTHESTREETS.ORG](http://www.madeinthestreets.org) OR E-MAIL CHARLES@MADEINTHESTREETS.ORG.

