

Overcoming Disdain: Resisting Luxury Beliefs to Collaborate for Young People

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ABSTRACT

Attractive to academics seeking recognition and organizations promoting products, luxury beliefs function like a **Chanel** boutique: admired for status, but inaccessible to most and hollow for those it claims to serve. Grassroots collaboration, by contrast, resembles **Dollar General**: ordinary, accessible, and serving the overlooked. Yet such Christ-centered, relational, small-church ministry often meets disdain from elites who view it as unsophisticated or unscalable. This paper argues that such disdain is both misplaced and harmful in light of teens' hunger for authenticity. Their transformation will come not through status-driven programs but through trusted friendships and Spirit-led community anchored in Jesus. Drawing on Scripture, theology, case studies, and practice, the paper critiques **Chanel**-style luxury beliefs and calls for **Dollar General**-style faithfulness expressed in Jesus-centered collaboration.

“10,000,000 young people. 100,000 collaborators.”

Too many young people are disaffiliating with established churches at a rate that is alarming. Noteworthy among their reasons is the perception that adults practice faith that lacks authenticity. Sadly, too many of those accused seem to be responding to this crisis with urgent scrambles to do something that will change this image. *“Hurry — become authentic enough for teens to want to belong with us!”* Performative activity that correlates with the essential problem cannot breed solutions to reverse trends of adolescent church abandonment.

Against the backdrop of alarming data, I embraced the vision of the **TENx10 Collaboration** before it formally launched. Further, I sought to serve this cause after retiring from my senior leadership role with Youth For Christ USA. The pandemic hastened this move, but I had been privileged to enjoy 41 years with YFC, and 17 of the last 20 had been commingled with being a tenured full professor at Huntington University. As a beneficiary of collaboration in this job sharing, I was especially drawn to **TENx10**'s aspiration to unite the efforts of 100,000 adults embedded in local communities who would engage the common mission of relational youth discipleship radically focused on Jesus.

Today, I'm concerned that I (we) am being derailed by something called **luxury beliefs**. In my first draft of this paper, I wrote without adopting my first-person voice. Then, not unlike the switcheroo I enjoyed as Ebonie Davis and I co-authored *Grit & Joy*, I decided to ignore protocol for an academic paper so I could better offer my own vulnerability for this cause. If such a thing as luxury beliefs are infecting the youth ministry landscape in America, they're likely hosted by people with resumés like mine. By volunteering to be dissected before becoming a cadaver, I pray I can advance the goal of this paper: to wonder aloud whether we who may hold luxury beliefs can overcome any inhibiting disdain for grassroots collaboration that helps teens know Jesus. In the light of open exploration, I also hope to embolden leaders to experiment with countermeasures that result in Christ-centered authenticity and Spirit-endowed unity.

“Luxury beliefs are held by elites concerned with status.”

Rob Henderson introduced the concept of **luxury beliefs** in his best-selling memoir, *Troubled*. First observed while an out-of-place undergrad at Yale, he noticed that persons of privilege are driven to seek and preserve their status. Among the many ways they accomplish this is holding ideas that confirm they belong among elites, even though such beliefs have no consequence upon *their* lived reality. This form of virtue signaling reinforces membership among those with elite social standing. Imagine overhearing some version of this phrase at a black-tie gathering: “Everybody who’s anybody agrees ... [state the belief].” Henderson also observed that such beliefs, if translated into policy or action, may actually be harmful to the masses who do not share their status. As an example, he pointed out that those who advocated for defunding the police were largely *not* middle-lower class citizens who could ill-afford the luxury of believing their vulnerability to crime would be reduced by fewer cops in their neighborhoods.

If there are elites in the youth ministry world, I suspect I might be among them. At least that’s my track record. My career includes both categories of people who wield disproportionate influence on youth ministry: *institutional scholars* and *ministry resource-providers*. Both traffic within organizational cultures where there are status hierarchies not automatically attuned to God’s Kingdom values. Insofar as such environments can offer the tempting rewards of thought-leader recognition, financial profits, or widespread popularity, they fertilize luxury beliefs.

Remember, the anatomy of a luxury belief in youth ministry must include two elements: it should presume to enhance the status of those who espouse the idea, but potential harm rather than help enhance youth discipleship. Here are five ways we might be able to spot luxury beliefs wafting among those of us with some sort of elite standing in the youth ministry world:

- **HIDDEN COST?** *Identify the hidden allure of an idea — why it appeals in ways not immediately obvious — and the harm it may have on young people if practiced.*
- **SIGNALING OR SERVING?** *Assess whether the idea primarily lands as a boost to leader credibility or an aid to relational discipleship.*
- **EMPATHY & EQUITY?** *Determine if the idea is likely to be an accessible benefit to young people with limited resources, little voice, or no church background.*
- **GOSPEL CLARITY?** *Discern any ways this idea might distort or diffuse Christ’s call for followers who will trust him exclusively with all-of-life abandonment.*
- **GENERATIONAL CONTINUITY?** *Locate any ways this idea elevates adult ideals that enhance their status above teen empowerment so they can multiply disciples.* (These ideas stymie faith transmission when young people feel like *consumers of church programs* instead of *participants in Jesus’ mission*. Luxury beliefs disguised as “excellence” concentrate leadership in adults, leaving teens passive. Long-term fruit comes when teens are entrusted with responsibility, trusting God to grow them by letting them “fail forward.”)

A scan of the landscape leads me to nominate a few luxury beliefs that meet these criteria and pose a threat to Christ-centered authenticity.

- ***“Deconstruction is the primary pathway to authentic faith.”***
 - **Elite appeal:** Sounds intellectually honest, resonates with academic sophistication, and signals cultural savvy.
 - **Youth impact:** Leaves teens with dismantled frameworks but no relational path back to Jesus; authenticity is reduced to critique, not abiding in Christ.
- ***“Doctrinal clarity is less important than relevance.”***
 - **Elite appeal:** Wins credibility by appearing progressive and culturally attuned.
 - **Youth impact:** Faith lacks anchor in Jesus’ truth; authenticity can feel shallow if churches avoid hard questions and leave teens with untested slogans.
- ***“Innovation is an inherently more faithful path today than tradition.”***
 - **Elite appeal:** Status for professors predicting the future; profit for organizations selling disruptive models, apps, or curricula.
 - **Youth impact:** Relational discipleship is sidelined in favor of trendy programs. Teens see polish but not presence, fueling cynicism about authenticity.
- ***“Youth ministry must mirror secular psychology/sociology to be effective.”***
 - **Elite appeal:** Academic respectability; offers an organizational route with “scientific” branding to solicit grants and donors.
 - **Youth impact:** Jesus is presented as a therapy or self-actualization guide, not the source of life. Therapeutic lingo sounds inauthentic to wary, weary teens.
- ***“Bigger platforms are necessary to maximize faith impact.”***
 - **Elite appeal:** Professors and leaders gain status through conferences, book deals, and national visibility; organizations monetize large events.
 - **Youth impact:** Authentic discipleship is displaced by hyped gatherings. Teens equate faith with spectacle, disengaging when daily church life feels ordinary.
- ***“Digital tools are crucial, not optional, if faith is to be relevant today.”***
 - **Elite appeal:** Signals innovation, appeals to donor markets, sells apps and platforms.
 - **Youth impact:** Online discipleship lacks embodied face-to-face authenticity. Teens perceive church as TikTok imitation vs. Christ-centered life community.
- ***“The right theory or certification makes leaders credible.”***
 - **Elite appeal:** Academics build authority through complex frameworks and ever-widening cohorts; organizations monetize through credentialing.
 - **Youth impact:** Adults feel inadequate without elite training; teens see leaders too concerned about professional image than authentic relationship in Christ.

But for the purposes of this paper, I’d like to concentrate on three luxury beliefs that I’m personally acquainted with. Resisting the falsehoods within these ideas has been the goal of my

prayers and studies. Moreover, if there is any passion in my vigilance, it's linked to three biblical truths that are changing me, day by day.

“For apart from me you can do nothing.” – Jesus Christ (*John 15:5*)

In the recent aftermath of yet another horrific school shooting, the public outcry—ramped up by angst—sought root causes so we can mitigate the risk that such a tragedy is repeated. Noticeably absent from this societal quest to understand and solve such crises was a reality lodged in the faith of Christ-followers: *the world we live in is under constant assault from evil forces hell-bent to kill, steal and destroy us*. I'm wondering if we youth ministry elites have been muted by giving a foothold to some version of this insidious luxury belief:

- ***“The struggles teens face aren't best explained or solved by referencing Satan or evil, but by reckoning with culture, psychology, and social systems.”***
 - **Elite appeal:** This belief aligns with secular scholarship, sounds pragmatic and enlightened, and opens doors for marketable human-centered fixes like programs, therapies, or platforms.
 - **Youth impact:** Though evil feels viscerally real, teens are offered naturalistic explanations for their despair, temptations, or relational fractures. The church appears inauthentic and powerless, shifting focus from Christ's victory over sin and Satan to human problem-solving.

If this idea is, in fact, widely held (and to be fair, my claim deserves some research scrutiny), it needs to be dragged under the revealing light of Scripture. Such discernment is needed for any presumed luxury belief. Jesus clearly confronted Satan and evil directly. As Paul finished his masterful letter to the Ephesians about church and community, he asserted that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but powers that exist beyond this world. Christ's death on the cross is understood to be a triumph over these forces of evil. In this ultimate victory, undeniably affirmed by Jesus' resurrection, his Lordship over all things is secured. He is the Head of the Church, choreographing the members of his Body with gifts and roles intended to fit his prevailing purpose for all creation. And so, if the above luxury belief is in circulation, then a theological counterpoint might look like this:

“The struggles teens face are rooted in a real battle with sin and Satan. While culture and psychology offer helpful insights, lasting hope comes only through the person, work, and teaching of Jesus Christ, who has overcome evil.”

Notice how exposing and countering the luxury belief in this way can pave the way for ministry responses that might otherwise be overlooked. Prayer is chief among them. As we embrace the promise that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth, we are privileged to enjoy

revealed discernment that can usefully guide research, innovation, and practice efforts. Aiming at faithfulness that depends on the grace of Jesus is a sufficient priority. Trusting Christ's teaching, we submit to the expectation that no lasting fruit can be had from work that is untethered to him. It follows that ignoring Satan disfigures the gospel in critical ways.

When I finished my doctoral work at Purdue in 1991, I asked the Lord what he wanted me to do with this shiny new research degree. Beyond hanging my "union card" on my office wall for display, I was led to write a grant proposal that simultaneously helped Huntington College gain a bit of national notoriety to support recruitment and shifted my career trajectory. God set me on a research pathway I never would have imagined six years earlier. What snuck up on me was how much I enjoyed the recognition that came from making discoveries to improve youth ministry practices. Thirty years later, I feel like I'm complicit if youth ministry has become so infatuated with research that our dependence on Jesus has been siphoned off. Only Christ can grow fruit. Unfortunately, a lot of the current research activity in the world of youth ministry now aims to promote existing programs or resources rather than discover how to improve faithfulness.

Consistent with Henderson's explanation, luxury beliefs will appeal to youth ministry elites because they can enhance their credibility, prestige, or profit. I get it. Commendations have moved me. Luxury beliefs persist as long as they "fit" the prevailing worldview among other elites. It's how they secure social belonging in the form of peer approval. They evade detection by left-brain vigilance because they're smuggled into our operational centers through the status we seek in certain relationships. The most dangerous luxury beliefs displace Christ or devalue his supremacy. Discounting Satan as incidental to faithful ministry responses on behalf of teens in crisis fits into this category. Other ideas may be labeled as distractions that diffuse a Christ-centered focus.

This doesn't authorize a retreat from interdisciplinary insights like those to be studied in psychology or culture but rather aligns our efforts under the primacy of revealed truth in Christ. Jesus is Lord. We can (must) depend on him to expose any harmful threats embedded in a luxury belief. Without vigilance, the Church is left in a simpering state, unable to defend prayer as a first priority when anguished survivors of devastating tragedies beg for something more concrete. And who can blame the teens who watch such cowering for concluding that this type of faith isn't worth engaging?

"Chanel has a powerful appeal but Dollar General has a ubiquitous presence."

Before I nominate two other candidates as luxury beliefs, let's consider their weightiness by invoking a metaphor. Using the word "*elite*" might call a few different images to mind. **Chanel** is one of the world's most profitable retailers, boasting a brand synonymous with wealth and privilege. *Chanel* stores deliver a boutique experience, sell ridiculously expensive items and serve an audience that cherishes its status. Their shoppers are an exclusive club of people with sophisticated taste who can spend money impractically if they so choose.

Chanel confers status in a way that mirrors luxury beliefs. When youth ministry elites prefer innovation over faithfulness, satisfy themselves with half-steps of skilled faith deconstruction, care precious little about doctrinal vigilance when public admiration can be gained, or enjoy summarizing the dynamics of faith by invoking psychology, sociology or neuroscience, teens and adults alike might be impressed. They won't necessarily be transformed by God's Spirit. The *Chanel* metaphor calls to mind a ministry that's sunk a ton of money into R&D for a discipleship platform. Lots of people may applaud, but teens are left without experiencing relational engagement with anyone who's authentically and deeply captivated by Jesus Christ.

At the other end of the retailer spectrum is a sprawling money-maker: ***Dollar General***. As anyone who drives through small-town America can testify, these unimpressive stores—over 20,000 in America and still expanding—are conveniently located and easily accessible. They are ordinary. In many ways, their clientele is those who have been overlooked by other profiteers.

If a chain of stores can be humble, *Dollar General* has captured that vibe. Do they even invest in national advertising? Do they need to when they are so ubiquitous? Recognizable, without presumption, serving the lowly and, unlike *Chanel*, they opened over 1,000 new shops in the past year. The *Dollar General* ministry parallel might be reflected in the efforts of a bi-vocational youth pastor who invests sacrificial time in a dozen teens. Lots goes on behind the scenes without fanfare. Efforts sometimes look clunky, awkward, or unsophisticated, and there is certainly room for improvement. But if this small ministry lacks showcase sizzle, it drips with authenticity. Lives are changed because to simply engage Jesus as Lord together is enough.

Any luxury belief, if it distorts truth, deserves to be treated as an influential threat. Ideas observed to be widely shared by youth ministry elites warrant testing. For the glory of God, we can correct even the slightest errors to ensure Christ is in command. Earlier examples related to faith deconstruction, doctrinal clarity, ministry innovation, and social sciences can be reframed to express this faithfulness:

- **DECONSTRUCTION** - *“Authentic faith grows when teens bring honest questions to Jesus and trusted mentors, allowing him to deepen their trust and understanding.”*
- **DOCTRINE** - *“Doctrinal clarity is essential because Jesus is truth; cultural relevance matters only as it helps teens grasp his reality.”*
- **INNOVATION** - *“Youth ministry thrives when teens are discipled in life-on-life relationships focused on Jesus; innovation can support this, but it cannot replace it.”*
- **SOCIAL SCIENCES** - *“Psychology and sociology offer helpful insight, but only Jesus brings freedom from sin and the power to withstand evil.”*

Should we be concerned that youth ministry thought leaders and resource providers have allowed disdain for *Dollar General* type of collaboration to diminish its priority? That depends. Is collaboration a potentially useful ministry option to consider among many others or a reflection of the heart of Jesus and his expectation of faithfulness for all of his followers?

“...everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him.” – Paul (Philippians 3:8-9)

Not everyone has experienced the benefit of being knocked off your ride by Jesus while presuming to do great things for God. I envy Paul’s sudden and complete jolt into understanding why his zealous efforts amounted to a pile of dung. Count me among those who have come to such a realization slowly and painfully. I’m deeply grateful for God’s surgical skill to my identity confusion. He disentangled what I presumed to do *for* God from who he made me to be as his constant companion. It seems entirely plausible to me that Jesus’ upending Judgement Day reply to those who did lots of impressive things in his name might land squarely in the lap of elites who’ve been hoodwinked by the enemy: *“I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God’s laws”* (Matthew 7:23). Moments before being arrested, Jesus aimed his prayer squarely at our visible unity so that God might be revealed. What harmful luxury belief propels elites to neglect collaboration when it so clearly flows from the heart of Jesus? Here's my observation:

- ***“Collaboration is a distraction from clear mission focus, and the return on investment is too small to justify the effort.”***
 - **Elite appeal:** This belief elevates efficiency, scalability, and visible wins as marks of sophistication. Collaboration looks messy and slow compared to centralized control, which garners prestige and resources.
 - **Youth impact:** Teens live downstream of adult leadership siloes. They experience fragmented programs rather than a coherent witness of unity in Christ. With implicit clarity they surmise that faith is about polished outputs, not Spirit-shaped community, undermining authenticity.

If the challenge is to multiply hundreds of thousands of adults willing to collaborate so millions of young people can know someone in their back yard who loves Jesus radically, it seems like God already committed to the *Dollar General* model in Christ’s incarnation. *Chanel* is undoubtedly impressive but hauntingly hollow. Grassroots practices that zero in on deploying adults who walk alongside teens, care little about image. The goal of real transformation is all consuming. Mirroring a gritty focus on the bottom-line is like *Dollar General*, and fruitfulness awaits those humble enough to sidestep the allure of status to plant proximal collaborations.

Luxury beliefs gain power because they “fit” two ways: they feel coherent inside a person’s worldview, and they give belonging inside a peer group. **CONNECTIONS**, a *New York Times* daily puzzle, illustrates this dynamic. I recently completed the challenge and took the screenshot below capturing my win to help me explain how the game is played.



Before this results page revealed my victory, I stared at 16 words arranged in a 4x4 matrix. Each word had to fit into one of four groups with shared similarities. All 16 words belong in a home with three others; only then can the puzzle be solved. In my example, it was tempting to quickly pair “snail” with “slug” and hunt for the missing two companions. But that’s the trap: premature choices collapse the puzzle, leaving twelve words

stranded with no way to fit. Luxury beliefs work the same way. They seem coherent in a small cluster (like cultural explanations for teen struggles), but they collapse when tested against the full set of connections God calls his people to hold — connections that only stand firm as we trust him to work.

CONNECTIONS helps me understand something else about luxury beliefs. When elites embrace ideas that are shared by the peers with whom they want to belong, they can erect quick internal scaffolding so everything fits neatly. They don’t experience dissonance. But our blind spot is we only have the capacity to target some of the possible arrangements. I immensely enjoyed making strategic contributions to teams I served on, but I can’t see all the variables God has set in motion. As a result, we elites can’t help but draw conclusions that are, in fact, flimsy when they are tested under the weight of the whole set of options. *Luxury beliefs in ministry often “work” within a sub-system but fail when tested against God’s all-of-life faithfulness standard.*

Most significantly, we ignore Jesus as the architect and host of our collaborations. We betray the deficit that comes from not knowing truly enough to trust him totally.

Collaboration can expose false and flimsy connections. When leaders from different contexts bring their convictions together, they often discover that what “fit” neatly in one small cluster fails the broader test of gospel coherence. The Spirit uses collaboration to reveal where a belief simply cannot carry the weight of Christ’s mission. Collaboration dismantles luxury beliefs in two ways: it exposes the **internal weakness** of false beliefs that cannot connect across the whole gospel, and it replaces fragile **social belonging** with Spirit-shaped community. When rooted in Christ, collaboration doesn’t just diversify or scale up—it recalibrates the grid so that every connection points back to Him. This glorifies him, secures us in him so we can be fruitful. We can refute the errant luxury belief around collaboration with this theological counterpoint:

“Collaboration with Christ in mission is essential — he designed his Body to work together in faithfulness through unity for fruit beyond all we can imagine from contrived sub-groups.”

Now let's test its depth against the influence of a third possible luxury belief that may undermine relational youth discipleship radically focused on Jesus.

“We know, in fact, that God works all things for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.” – Paul (Romans 8:28)

N.T. Wright's translation of the iconic verse above sits within an entire book dedicated to understanding a single chapter in the Bible, *Into the Heart of Romans*. He convincingly asserts that we mustn't miss how profound it is to realize God's agency to do the work of reconciling all things for good will be accomplished through the partnership of all who love him and are therefore among the called to drive his purpose. This privileged co-laboring is elsewhere asserted in Scripture, but perhaps no letter captures God's beautiful unity-through-diversity master plan as explicitly as does Ephesians. All of creation groans in the waiting upon we humans, God's masterpiece, to get our act together and attack our common and customized callings with Spirit-led faithfulness. Only Jesus can accomplish this perfectly coordinated symmetry. And we can submit to one another as we tackle our particular assignments from the Lord with confidence that he is both the converging force and destination of our efforts. Paul urged the Philippians to copy Christ in the self-emptying humility required to do what God wants without tripping over our own entitlements (2:1-11). As I'm advocating, our Lord Jesus wants us to collaborate and he expects that his own diversity designs will fuel the beautiful outcomes he ignites.

In recent decades, many youth ministry leaders have recognized that our understanding and practice has been shaped disproportionately by white, middle-class, resource-rich churches. The voices and wisdom of non-white congregations and economically disadvantaged communities were often ignored, even though these churches have embodied resilience, faithfulness, and relational discipleship under challenging conditions. Correcting this historic neglect is essential. Collaborations that welcome diverse leadership reflect the breadth of the Body of Christ and honor the Spirit's gifting across every community.

This has been one of the ennobling values of the TENx10 Collaboration. I cherish being a part of a movement that elevates persons of color to positions of leadership. We risk fundamentally misrepresenting God's intent if we mute critical voices that reflect the full spectrum of his Kingdom. Yet, at every step I've prayed that we might not settle for some token positioning that's less than the truly remarkable, beautiful, and *essential* value flowing from the heart of Jesus. This paper, and the conviction that I should wonder aloud about how luxury beliefs may inhabit the circles I travel in, has me wanting to be extraordinarily careful about warning when an idea does more harm than good. Can a push toward inclusion ever harden into this luxury belief?

- ***“Faithfulness to Christ alone is not enough; authentic growth for young people requires diverse voices.”***
 - **Elite appeal:** This belief signals cultural sophistication and moral enlightenment, earning credibility in academic, organizational, and donor circles. It showcases progressiveness and justice while quietly shifting dependency from the sufficiency of Christ.
 - **Youth impact:** Elevating diversity above faithfulness teaches teens that some transformational necessities lie beyond the scope of Jesus’ orchestration. Shallow, token inclusion and merely symbolic progress (fruitless) can result. Church may mirror cultural values over embodied authentic life with Christ.

When collaboration elevates voices primarily for demographic balance, without reference to Christ-centered faithfulness, the effort risks becoming another status marker. Academics and organizations may celebrate their visible diversity while overlooking whether the collaboration is actually rooted in life with Jesus, resisting evil, and producing fruit among young people.

The better way is not to retreat from inclusion, but to qualify it: **diversity matters most when anchored in Christ**. Collaboration across racial, cultural, and economic lines dismantles luxury beliefs when those connections are tested against the whole gospel. In this way, the richness of the global church exposes blind spots, challenges elitism, and equips us together for fruitful ministry with teens. That is my hope and prayer for what we are truly pursuing in TENx10. Here’s a modest proposal of a theological counterpoint to the diversity-oriented luxury belief:

“Faithfulness to Christ is fully sufficient for authentic growth; diversity enriches this growth when it is anchored in life with Jesus as Lord.”

I have come to appreciate how much easier grassroots collaboration seems to be than that which is sought after by those holding elite platform access keys. I’ve seen national youth summits highlight diverse panelists without giving them true influence. Their brochures and Instagram pics look impressive (like an “obvious” puzzle solution) but it’s like the grid resisted being complete. Diversity wore the garb of a luxury belief, signaling status without deep fruit.

By contrast, I’ve also been part of a local network that built their collaboration differently. Leaders of varied racial and economic backgrounds raced to celebrate Jesus as our relational host. Prayers could be expressed freely even as listening together grew more and more important. We read the unembellished words of Scripture with an eagerness to apply what we heard rather than impress one another with insights. Christ had called us together; that was our common center. Diversity was not the end; it was the soil in which Christ-focused discernment could flourish. Together, we launched mentoring initiatives that spread unhindered by ego, bearing fruit in teens’ lives. In puzzle terms, the *Connections* “held”—every piece found its rightful place under Jesus’ operational leadership.

There seems to be no getting around how crucial humility is to authentic, empowering, and fruitful collaboration. If unity is the ultimate scorecard that pleases Jesus and diversity is the bankcard that reflects the amount of assets available for working together, humility is the keycard that gives someone access to where we are synergized by God for the work he planned for us before the beginning of time. I remember my immediate dismay upon meeting an undergrad major of mine years ago who proudly declared that his goal was to be a national speaker. Social media entices people to seek the status of a heavily trafficked platform. There's a near-constant barrage of *Chanel*-like allure that needs to be recognized and resisted. We can do so if we possess the sort of *Dollar General* humility that encourages grassroots collaboration without disdain.

“Disdain is a powerful social dynamic not to be ignored.”

Anyone who has secretly slipped into a nearby *Dollar General* for a few necessities and felt a bit red-faced when bumping into someone important outside who would “never” shop at such a place can quickly note how social disdain is suppressing force. It seeks to shame people into conformity that somehow certifies the status of privileged members. Scholars and researchers who care about receiving the respect of their colleagues might avoid eye contact if they're empty-handed as they walk the halls of a professional conference celebrating ministry innovation. CEOs of ministry resourcing organizations could double the budget line dedicated to rebranding that's impressive. It may be that luxury beliefs reinforce their operational core.

It's the premise of this paper that desperately needed grassroots collaboration could, if blessed by God, make a huge difference on relational discipleship among young people...as long as it can overcome the roadblock of disdain. Locally practiced collaboration succeeds because of variables that too often evade national understanding or control. In many ways, it is *Dollar General*-like: unsophisticated, hard to measure, and resistant to strategic scaling. There is a simplicity embedded in the neighborhood, where Jesus-centered relational trust and vulnerability propel working together. The priorities of the coffee shop don't care whether elite prestige is weakened. Buying certain products and/or services is of little concern when tight friendships help make things happen. Scholars who are eager to develop tight theoretical models may even dismiss the flow of fruitful teamwork practices as outliers so as to insulate themselves from any intellectual threat. Do these elites lob disdain on those they can't reach? It happens. As this disdain dynamic gathers momentum, it may show up as...

...being dismissive of relational discipleship as *small ball*, lacking visionary heft.

...reframing bubbled-up, field-based insights as earnest but naïve contributions.

...tokenizing small-ministry voices at conferences hosted by controlling elites.

In brief, disdain is a powerful socializing dynamic that slips into the mindset of elites via their luxury beliefs. If not carefully and humbly discerned, its festering influence harms youth ministry in the coffee shop nooks and neighborhood crannies where collaborative mentoring gains traction.

But the good news is that our Lord Jesus is very familiar with such humble locales, and he loves tagging people for service who care very little about chasing status.

Have you ever wondered about what Jesus meant when he said the gates of hell will not prevail against the church he builds (Matthew 16:18)? It can't be a reference to the 501(c)3 organizations strewn across the American landscape. Every day some of those operations shutter their doors. Many have concluded that Jesus is describing the worldwide, eternal, and invisible Church, and that may well be. But I'm captivated by how Jesus follows up this statement by entrusting Peter (a proxy?) with "keys" that have consequence in the heavenlies. And shortly thereafter, Matthew uses the near identical phrase about binding and loosing two chapters later when speaking about how we are to react to wayward believers (Matthew 18:18). Then, as if laying out the welcome mat so Peter would follow up by asking about the limits of forgiveness, Jesus offers a summary statement in verse 20 that seems crucial to this paper's conclusion: *"For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them."*

Christ-centered gatherings need not be impressively sized. Two or three collaborators who are dedicated to doing what Jesus wants is sufficient. To my dismay, TENx10 has concentrated its early efforts to spark collaboration by engaging invested leaders of national and regional ministries. Against the backdrop of this paper's exploration, we may be youth ministry elites who are reinforcing the status of other elites. With 100,000 or more in our aspirational crosshairs, such a strategy must be hoping for a trickle-down effect. Since no one in my lifetime has attempted a mission with a parallel scope to learn from, I'm OK with these efforts. Unless...

...unless we unintentionally articulate and protect luxury beliefs that spew the exhaust of disdain, discouraging *Dollar General* type of collaborations. Imagine hordes of twos and threes held in Jesus' grip and similarly called to do relational youth discipleship. These are units of connection ripe for viral multiplication, and God is making sure they will all fit perfectly into his cosmic plan. With operational stealth and no need for status-seeking notoriety, this movement of collaborators hugging Jesus while mentoring teens can ridicule efforts from hell to thwart them.

For any readers who might confess, like me, to being members within the circle of youth ministry elites, I urge the simple step of making local coffee connections with those on the frontlines a regular routine. We can best deliver encouragement in the presence of Jesus that will overcome disdain when we're face-to-face. Be assured, God will solve all the other puzzling connections needed for the young people he loves.