

EXCERPT

IVP Books

Taking It to the Streets
Lessons from a Life of Urban Ministry

July 30, 2019 | \$17, 240 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4562-0

Reverend Harry “O.G. Rev” Williams from Oakland, California, is called to the streets: to the hungry, homeless, addicted, incarcerated, and vulnerable. Bringing us face-to-face with both the injustices that plague our cities and the gospel of compassion that offers hope to the downtrodden, this introduction to urban ministry will inspire and equip a new generation to bring the life-giving good news of Jesus to our cities.

Step Foot in the Resistance

When a gangster nods in your direction and says, “Oh, he’s solid!” you have arrived. If your ambition is to achieve royalty in the criminal underworld, at that moment you can consider yourself good to go. To have the right person say, “She’s about that life” or to use words like *reputable* or *real* in connection to your name is the equivalent of having the late Stephen Hawking proclaim you an astrophysics visionary. People in the ‘hood measure faith and faith institutions by the same yard stick. How committed are you to ministry in the killing fields?

Sure, you’ll hear a lot of singing when you enter most churches located in the inner city. Hands will clap in rhythm to choruses like “This Little Light of Mine.” You may feel like marching as great anthems of the church like “Onward Christian Soldiers” are lifted up. The pastor may even preach a rousing sermon exhorting his members to love your neighbor as yourself. But how will any that translate into the church body’s relationship with the most impoverished members of the community around the church building or across town? How will the light that was sung about illuminate the courtyard of the trailer park or the housing projects? Will the Christian soldiers be marching into the gang war to assure the besieged and beleaguered that God is yet concerned for them? And that message about loving one’s neighbor as oneself . . .

And yet it is real. I have seen the dazzling light twinkle in the eyes of men and women of God who wander the killing fields seeking someone to accept their prayer. I’ll never be too spiritual to ask for that prayer. I want to hear them read the Scriptures underlined in their well-worn Bibles. I tap my feet to the acapella style. They have come here to meet us, the weary and the hard pressed, saints and sinners.

Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few” (Matthew 9:37). Here’s what I found interesting as I recently considered that Scripture. Jesus lived in a world populated with Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes. In his sojourn through the dusty streets of ancient Galilee, Jesus is constantly running into these religious figures. Time after time, he argues with them in the synagogue or the temple; occasionally he finds himself reclined across from them at a dinner table. There seems to be no shortage of high priests or Levites in Jesus’ world. How then, could he possibly say that the laborers are few? The answer is quite simple: they did not routinely perform activities in the redemptive and healing works of almighty God.

Ministry has not changed much over the years. Religion is often an elaborate masquerade, and not everybody wearing a uniform or a name badge is necessarily going to work in the harvest field. Just like in ancient Israel, the harvest fields of inner-city America are brimming over and crying out for authentic believers who are committed to bringing the message and touch of Jesus Christ to the masses. People lost in the streets are searching not so much for orthodox church members as members of the resistance—Jesus-followers who are not going to trip when people come into the church with their pants sagging or the scent of marijuana emanating from their clothes. They are looking for believers who aren’t afraid to greet them on the avenue, and ask how they are doing and mean it.

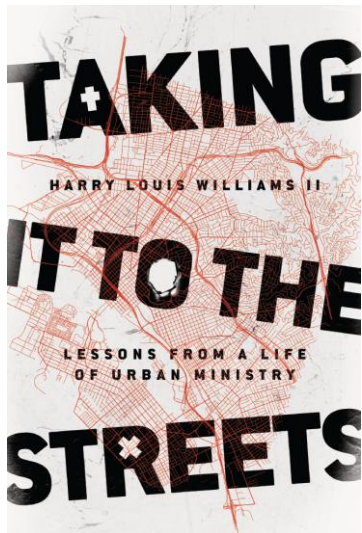


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Matthew 20:29-34 recounts the story of two men on the side of a dusty road in ancient Palestine. Though sightless, they can hear the excitement as the great teacher and healer who has become rather famous in their world draws close. They call out to Jesus. The crowd, thinking Jesus is too important to take up time with these men, tells the men to quiet down. Undaunted, they cry out all the louder. Finally, Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do?" They answer, "We want our sight."

Jesus touches the men and heals their vision. However, before this great miracle is performed, we find one of the most poignant phrases in the Scriptures. "Jesus had compassion on them."

I urge you to look up the word *compassion* in the Gospels. You will find that every time Jesus is moved with compassion, a miracle occurs. Compassion is more than someone looking at tragedy and saying, "Aw, isn't that too bad?" Jesus had unspeakable empathy. When Jesus experienced compassion, he was moved in his guts, in the very core of his being, by the plight of the person in front of him. When Jesus was filled with compassion, he responded with all of his power to meet the need.

Compassion is the opposite of apathy. Compassion is the fuel of the resistance. It is the heart that beats for the other. Compassion compels us to the streets.

Be filled with compassion. Let it envelop you. Let it encircle you. Let it surround you. Let it pour through the membranes of your skin. Let it glow in the pupils of your eyes. Be like Jesus. Let compassion be the prevailing force behind your motives and movements.

Compassion will press you to find answers that must be searched through late-night study. It will force you to go beyond what some might think reasonable. Compassion is the godly grace that will press like the hands of God on your back when you are tired and the situation appears hopeless.

If you want to be successful in urban mission, godly compassion is not the only tool you'll need, but it well may be the essential one. If you possess it, you won't have to tell anyone. Everyone will see it. Compassion will help you to make sense of what you're about to read. You need it. If you don't possess it in measure, you must crave it. Pray for it.

In the coming pages, I will take you face to face with some deep problems that confront people in the inner cities. Some of you will be startled to find out that people in the United States live in such squalor, deprivation, and hunger. You may even be tempted to put this book down and stick your head back in the sand. I want to encourage you to resist that urge and keep reading. However, instead of reading this book like a theologian or a sociologist, I want you to put on what I call your "Jesus glasses." Look at the world I'm laying out for you through the lenses of Christ's compassion. Pray that God will peel away the layers of unseen apathy that might hinder you from seeing his children as Jesus sees them.

Remember apathy is the great enemy of our cause. It must be resisted. We need to strip it off like grave clothing. Have you chosen to do so? Then welcome to the underground network of believers called the "resistance." Let's take it the streets.

—Adapted from chapter one, "Step Foot in the Resistance"



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Harry Louis Williams II (M.Div., Palmer Theological Seminary) is an ordained minister and the author of several books, including *No Easy Walk*, *Street Cred*, and the bestselling urban fiction book, *Straight Outta East Oakland*. He serves the poor, addicted, homeless, and formerly incarcerated in Oakland, California. In 2015, Williams was awarded a proclamation from the Oakland City Council for his efforts to heal street level violence and aid victims of human trafficking in Oakland.

Follow him on Twitter: @Revharry1.

Meet O.G. Rev

At this point, I want you to use your sanctified imagination. It is a cool, California summer day. You've just landed in Oakland. The instructions you've received lead you to a public park on East 86th Avenue where you find a middle-aged cat with salt and pepper hair wearing a T-shirt that says, "O.G. Rev." (That would be me.) I am sipping an eight-ounce bottle of orange-flavored Perrier water. I'm nodding my head to an obscure Wu-Tang Clan song playing in my headphones. I am deeply immersed in a book titled *The Dead Emcee Scrolls*, by poet Saul Williams.

The music is super loud, but when I look up from the book, I think that I can almost read your lips. Did you say, "Brother man, apathy has turned the whole situation into an icicle. It seems as though the whole faith community is rolling with the status quo. What can be done?"

Allow me to introduce myself. In the streets, they call me O.G. Rev or Rev for short. Consider me your O.G. homie. Not familiar with that term? Let me break it down for you. O.G. stands for "original gangster." Since nothing in the 'hood is ever exactly what it looks or sounds like, let's go in a little deeper. An O.G. is not necessarily a career criminal, though they might have a colorful past. An O.G. might have at one time or another been a gang member infamous for putting in that work (as they say), aiming an Uzi out of the window of a rust bucket Ford Pinto and showering hot shells on rivals. An O.G. might have also spent a decade or two in a California concrete slave ship. After this person has lived long enough to outrun their past, in semiretirement they become known as an O.G., a respected (or feared) veteran of the block.

Relax, I'm not that kind of O.G., though I am a veteran of the same streets. Over the years, my mission hasn't been to sling dope but to give hope. My goal has not been to leave rivals dead in a puddle of blood but to preach eternal life through the shed blood of Jesus Christ and his resurrection. I know O.G.s who can disassemble an AK-47 like a Green Beret, and my aim is to be able to take apart a Bible in much the same way. What I have in common with your traditional O.G. homie is that as a minister to the 'hood, we are both out in these streets to influence the same people.

Stare through the dark tint of my Loc sunglasses. Can you see the reflection of this lost world in my eyes? These eyes have seen oceans of tears and rivers of blood. These eyes have seen kids with snotty noses dancing in the rain as their addicted parents sit in dark apartments without gas or electricity sticking needles into their burnt-out veins.

Can you see the reflection of this lost world in my eyes? These eyes have seen so many of my brothers herded in chains to live till they die in the California concrete slave ships, toiling like tortured slaves for less than twenty cents an hour.

Can you see the reflection of this lost world in my eyes? These eyes have seen pastors in luxury sedans flying through the mayhem and rubbish, taking corners on two wheels, racing behind iron gates to preach the Word of the Lord, Bible and collection plate in hand. Yeah, man. What I've seen through these two eyes is enough to make your brain twist in your skull. I am your O.G. homie.

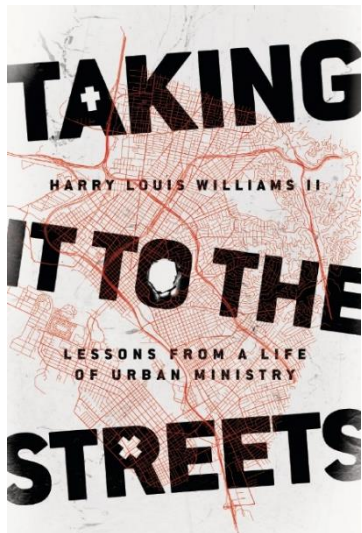


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Why do you need an O.G. homie if you want to do ministry in the streets? Pretty much for the same reason that a hoodlum intent on learning the game needs a seasoned mentor. In the 'hood, the toss of the head or a slang term can have two or three different meanings. The same playful joke that might make you the life of the party in the suburbs might land you at the wrong end of a pistol in a place where people live close to the edge. Someone with life experience as an insider on the streets will probably be able to help you both optimize your ministry effectiveness and avoid some terrible pitfalls.

In *The Mack*, a famous blaxploitation movie of the 1970s, Max Julien plays Goldie, a young pimp set on making a fortune from the Oakland streets. One of the most powerfully drawn characters in the film is a blind man with jet-black sunglasses. He's an older cat who sits on a stool in the back of the pool hall day after day, a former hustler who has experienced a run of bad luck but still ventures out of the house suited and booted to take his perch in the den of iniquity. He has few lines. In fact, I'm not even sure he has a name. He might sit there motionless every day amid the cigarette clouds and profanity, but his ears are capturing everything. He is Goldie's crime mentor. He whispers priceless insider information about the dark doings and goings on in the underworld into Goldie's ear. For the next two hundred pages, I'm going to be your sanctified version of the hoodlum in the pool hall with the jet-black shades.

—Taken from chapter two, "The Resistance Is Real: Welcome to My 'Hood'"

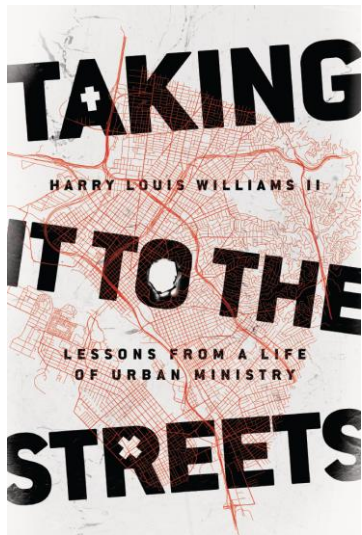


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ENDORSEMENTS



Taking It to the Streets *Lessons from a Life of Urban Ministry*

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A Firsthand Guide to Urban Ministry

“Rev. Williams seeks to take his readers beyond the headlines and stereotypes to expose the reality of communities and people who have been neglected and abandoned by society. He tries to educate people on the realities of whole segments of our society who have been demonized and treated as throwaways. He reminds us that the good news of Jesus calls us not only to do the acts of charity that call us to care for our brothers and sisters but to demand justice and transform a society that has become comfortable with leaving brothers and sisters on the side of life’s road.”

—Michael L. Pflieger, Faith Community of Saint Sabina, Chicago

“After thirty-eight years of studying, living, and ministering in inner city Chicago, I recognize an authentic tour guide when I see one; they wear Jesus glasses, and they are incarnate and not in a car. Reverend Harry ‘O.G.’ Williams takes us to school with lessons from Oakland. His teachers are tenured by streets, courts, and prisons. But Harry speaks another truth: Oakland is disappearing. The people with power to steer the survivors of slavery, Jim Crow, and every other injustice you can imagine by systemic disinvestment, have returned, this time to take the neighborhood back for the expanding tech empires of the Bay Area, as we see happening across this country and many others. Harry meets gentrification, and it’s ugly in different ways. Harry’s people are being forced out so that Oakland may be safe and secure for those who will profit from massive social displacement, making the community safe again so those pastors who function like ‘those religious cruise ship directors’ will move back to the city. Thank you, Harry Williams, for telling it like it is. We know that CCDA will empower some to stay and that is good, but what will urban ministry look like when the poor are scattered into the unincorporated collar counties distant from cities and community services?”

—Ray Bakke, senior associate, Ray Bakke Associates, professor at Ray Bakke Centre for Urban Transformation, Hong Kong

“Harry Williams has taken his years of work in the streets of Oakland and written a helpful and hopeful guide for those of us who know the gospel centers on the ‘least of these.’ Read these words carefully but be warned: *Taking It to the Streets* is a rousing call to action from an ‘O.G. Rev’ that can’t just be read but must be lived.”

—Jonathan Brooks, pastor, author of *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods*

“I’ve walked the streets with my friend Harry ‘Rev’ Williams and know that he embodies the message of Jesus by living a life of radical, compassionate presence. This book is an urgent, gentle, lyrical, and prophetic invitation to let our hearts be broken, imagine a better future together, and join the resistance.”

—Mark Scandrette, author of *FREE, Belonging and Becoming*, and *Practicing the Way of Jesus*



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