



Episode 2: Coppin is Poppin’

Part One—The South Side

Megan DeWald: You’ve heard of the South Side of Chicago. It’s one of those places that has saturated the popular imagination—in literature, music, art, politics. In recent years, it’s had more of a spotlight on it because it’s where President Obama served as a community organizer, and it’s where his Presidential Center is being built. It’s a place that signifies hope and resilience—particularly that within its majority Black community, but it’s also a place that has been disparaged in recent years for being crime-ridden and dangerous, with little to no critical examination of how communities of color are systematically under-resourced. So, like most things, the real stories and realities on the ground are much more complex.

In the South Side neighborhood of Washington Park sits the 101-year-old Coppin Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Church on South Michigan Avenue between 56th and 57th Streets. And like every church, Coppin’s story is wedded to the story of its neighborhood, its leaders, its people, and its time in history. From its founding in 1919 in the midst of the Great Migration—a time when Black people were seeking to leave the racism and oppression they faced in the American South by moving to northern and western cities—Coppin rapidly swelled in membership in its earliest years, adding buildings and facilities, and enjoying great influence in its neighborhood. For roughly 50 years from the 1930s until the 1980s, about 2,000 people made Coppin AME their spiritual home.

But in the neighborhood—and in so many like it, because, as it turns out, racism is not isolated to the South—decades of white flight, housing discrimination, and other forms for systemic oppression created the conditions in Washington Park for high unemployment, under-resourced schools, poor public health, and gang activity to become the norm. And Coppin, of course, felt these effects. Congregation members who were able to move away did so and commuted back in for church—or they left entirely. Membership eventually shrank to less than a hundred active people—mostly middle-class retirees who commute in for worship. But that faithful community continues to strive toward justice, hope, and service in the neighborhood. And today, Coppin’s leaders are determined to bridge the generational divide between the older folks who attend the church and the hundreds of young people who call Washington Park their home.

Welcome to *Disrupting Ministry*, a podcast from the Institute for Youth Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary. I’m Megan DeWald, your host. In this podcast, we bring you stories of faith communities who are disrupting the status quo in the Church by developing innovative forms of ministry with young people. In this episode, we introduce you to Coppin Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Church and their quest to create a *new* normal in Chicago’s South Side.

Part Two—New Form, New Norm

Carmelle (at 52:26-52:36)



Coppin was one of those churches. Um, that from the beginning, I was very, very fascinated with.

Commentary

Megan DeWald: This is my colleague, Carmelle Beaugelin, who has gotten to know Coppin very well over the past three years as the Program Coordinator for the Log College Project, our grant initiative that has helped 12 churches from around the country design, test, and implement new forms of youth ministry in their contexts. When we received the application from Coppin, we were unanimously drawn to it, in part because—the application said that the church didn't have any young people in it.

Carmelle Beaugelin: Um, the application was submitted by Jon Robinson, who at the time was the lead pastor at Coppin. And he talked a lot about the interesting aspect of them not necessarily having any young people in their church. Which you would think, hmm, you're applying for a youth ministry grant, you know? Um, but where are the young people? And in his application, he proceeded to explain that while we don't have young people or teenagers as part of our membership or their parents necessarily being a large part of our membership, our young people are the young people in the community, and they are fully our young people.

Megan: It's extremely rare for us hear a youth minister—let alone a senior pastor—articulate their understanding of their youth ministry in this way—that the young people they're called to serve are those who are in their neighborhood and surrounding community, not just those who already show up on Sunday mornings or Wednesday evenings.

Carmelle: A particular hallmark that I saw in Jon Robinson and in Michelle Robinson, who eventually became the Design Fellow, um, for the first half of the grant with Coppin, is that they were okay with the young people, not coming to Sunday worship, which is not exactly how the older folks who came to Sunday worship felt, but they were okay with the young people, not necessarily being the cornerstone of their Sunday worship because they understood worship in their community to mean anything that involves the love of God in any ministry, in any way through Coppin.

Megan: I spoke with Michelle Robinson, the First Lady of the church, Pastor Jon's wife, and she explained how she became the Design Fellow for Coppin, which is what we've called the point person in each congregation who has the responsibility of developing a design team from their church that would take the ownership of the Log College Project. And Michelle shared her husband's understanding that the youth of Coppin were the young people who lived in the neighborhood beyond Coppin's walls.

Michelle Robinson: I can tell you, we were excited about the potential at Coppin, uh, AME. Uh, so when we got there, the community itself, the church sits in the heart of a neighborhood, and there are kids everywhere. Um, literally across the street, uh, was at least like the core of our, our youth group. Uh, that's where they lived. Uh, but there were kids everywhere. Uh, whenever we did our, our, the programs that I was sharing with you that were ongoing at Coppin, the youth would be there, um, for sure, for a meal, um, but they would hang around me and Jon like afterwards. And it was just trying to find, uh, an innovative way to engage them.

We want, we applied for the innovation for a way to engage our young people in a nontraditional way of ministry, because they weren't sticking around for church after, you know, morning breakfast. And they weren't, um, they didn't grow up necessarily in a church or have that around them. And then of course it took a life of its own once we introduced them and started doing the work.



Megan: Being a part of the Log College Project did involve some work. We required each church to form an intergenerational design team, which had to include at least two young people as full participants, honoring their full agency in creating and critiquing the new ministry. We also provided some teaching and interactive curriculum that took each team through a human-centered design process. And we provided each church with a \$15,000 grant to help bring their new ministries to life, hopefully thereby removing one of the major obstacles that prevents churches from doing something risky.

So, Michelle began to develop the Design Team for Coppin very organically, by hanging out with the kids in the neighborhood and telling them, “Listen, our church is getting a \$15,000 grant to come up with something that meets the needs of the young people in this neighborhood. That’s you. Come join us, and help us figure out how to spend this money.” Here’s Carmelle again.

Carmelle: One of the magical things about proximity and interaction and community is that as you start to do work alongside and with—not to—but alongside and with, um, and you start to see the people that you are engaging with as, um, co-laborers in ministry, as people in equal standing in ministry, as you, you’re not, you know, proselytizing to them. They’re with you in the active formation of, of ministry that fosters and spreads the love of God. You see them as people. And that goes back to kind of the human-centered piece, right, of the process.

Megan: Michelle also recruited older folks—lay leaders from the church—and she brought the whole group together to do the work of the Log College Project. And in that space—in those meetings—that’s where the magic really started to happen, as these people from different generations and different experiences shared this common goal to do something transformative in the neighborhood. The older folks—remember, most of them don’t live in this neighborhood—they had to listen to young people who *do* live there, and they had to take seriously the fact that these young people are the experts of their own experience. Likewise, the younger folks began to view this church not just as an historical building on a street corner or a place to go get a meal but as a community of people who genuinely cared about them.

Carmelle: I would say that the Log College Project and the structure of you have to have two, three young people on your Design Team at the table, designing alongside you; they’re leading, they’re inviting their friends and giving those young people that kind of agency at the ministry table, at the decision-making table? I think that that transformed not only how the older generation saw the leadership capabilities of the young people, but I think it also transformed how the young people saw the older folks that, ‘Oh, they actually believe that I can do it. They actually listened to me when I say that I want to redefine what living in my community looks like.’

Megan: As the adults and young people came together, they shared the tasks that we’d given them to help research and understand their neighborhood and needs more fully. They discovered, for instance, that the average age of a resident in Washington Park is fairly young, at only 30-years-old. And they discovered through interviews with people in the neighborhood that people who are under the age of 20 describe their typical state of mind as “bored.” There isn’t much to do in the neighborhood that is fun, healthy, and safe, and they don’t spend much time outside of their homes—even before Covid hit.

So, through these meetings, tasks, and conversations, the seed of an idea began to emerge. What if they could do something in the neighborhood that brought young people out of their homes in a fun, healthy, and safe way? This was the primary question that Coppin’s Design Team brought with them to the Design Lab—a 5-day event on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary where we brought together all of



the teams from all twelve churches in the Log College Project about a year after we began our work with them. During one evening of the event, we held a barbecue at the seminary's 21-acre farm called the Farminary. And this was one of Michelle's highlights from the event with her team because of how she witnessed the transformation of the team's initial idea for how they might address the need for fun, healthy, safe space.

Michelle: A memory that I have of Princeton Log College is the lesson that they learned of death and the renewal that comes from death. You had us all to, um, go to a farm.

Megan: *Right, the Farminary, uh huh...*

Michelle : And, um, a minister spoke about, um, how there is renewal in the compost, um, and that we would bury our ideas, are, the things that have died. We buried them. And it's a part of that richness that comes from the compost that will grow something new. And our youth, if you recall, they showed up at Princeton with an idea of having a carnival, um, and that idea died. And they wrote that idea down that died and collectively buried it with the understanding that it was going to be the, the fuel for what was next, and, um, that was, that was powerful for all of them as they buried it and got emotional. And, uh, you know, one of them started singing, you know, a traditional, uh, song, uh, you know, uh, "I shall wear a crown," uh, the burial was going over. Uh, there was, yeah, that was another kind of growth moment, if you would, just to watch them do that.

Megan: By the evening at the farm, Coppin's team knew that they were on to something with the need to create a fun, healthy, and safe space for young people in the neighborhood, but one of the lessons that the Farminary has a perfect way of teaching is that we have to pay attention to the entire ecology around us. While a carnival might have been one way to address that need, there was something deeper that the team knew it wanted to address. And it was summed up perfectly by a young person from Coppin named Kyla who, during another moment at the Design Lab, stood in front of an audience of nearly 300 people and said: "In my neighborhood, you become immune to death, gunshots, violence, shattered glass, liquor bottles, and intoxicated people. That's our normal. But it shouldn't be."

Michelle: Being able to name it had an impact, but what was more impactful is the newness and the life that came from death that they are not used to seeing. So, to your point, um, and you even heard it from Kyla when she was talking about the norm, um, that she witnesses, um, on the South Side of Chicago of death and people that are even her age, but it's the life and the newness that comes from death, that was new to all of us there on that, on that farm.

Megan: The life and the newness that comes from death. The team sat with this for a while before going back to the drawing board and reflecting on it. If the norm in the neighborhood was an ecology where conditions that were no fault of their own made it difficult for young people to thrive, then how might they cultivate life and newness out of such death?

Kyla's prophetic declaration helped focus the team on what they really wanted to do—to create a new normal in the neighborhood—a place where people can safely be outside, clean streets, and a space for young people to learn and grow and develop. They called this space Life Lab, and described it as a permanent safe space in their church that focuses on learning vital life skills and making connections in areas such as handling trauma and grief, conflict resolution, African history, and even "adulthood." The vision for this space included neighborhood watch teams, conflict resolution training, neighborhood



clean-ups, and green spaces curated *for* neighborhood youth *by* neighborhood youth. Life and newness springing forth—a new form of youth ministry, a new norm in the neighborhood.

Part Three—The Only Constant Is Change

Megan: The Design Team from Coppin returned home to Chicago after the Design Lab, eager to get started on developing the Life Lab. But just like on a farm—we're not always in control of all the variables in the ecology around us. At Coppin, shortly after the team's return, the church received the news that Pastor Jon and First Lady Michelle Robinson were being appointed to serve at a different church in a different state. As a denomination, the AME practices itinerancy with its ministers, which means that ministers are assigned to their churches at the discretion of the bishop. I spoke with Frankye Parham, a volunteer lay leader and Design Team member who had attended the Design Lab and returned home to this news.

Frankye Parham: Well, to be honest with you, it was very difficult. Um, the Robinsons, Pastor Jon and Michelle, um, have a great love of the youth in the community too, and it was infectious. Uh, the youth loved them. Uh, I loved to see what they were doing. Uh, I wasn't involved in the, uh, Log Project from the beginning because whenever they had meetings, I had conflicts with my food ministry. I was involved in both. Uh, but the summer that we went out there, I got very involved, and I just, I fit into their vision. So, we were very excited about what was going to happen when we came back.

Megan: Frankye had joined the Design Team with Michelle's encouragement, but before that, she had been involved in the youth ministry at Coppin as a lay leader since her retirement as a special education teacher in 2010. For the first time in a long time, she was feeling very energized by the relationships that were forming across the generations in the church. And she was nervous that this leadership transition was going to bring all of that good work to a halt.

Frankye: We sat down and I said, this is going to happen, but you have to look at this as your church. This is your church. This is your program. And whoever is the leader—leaders change, but you have to own this. And they did. But you know, you have to put it in God's hands. I, it wasn't anything that we could control—the kids can't control, or I can't control. They laid a wonderful foundation, and we just had to take a deep breath, put it in God's hands and step out on faith. And that's what we did.

Megan: So Frankye stepped out on faith and stepped in to becoming the new Design Fellow with the church, charged with the task of helping to bring the Life Lab idea to fruition. For a few months, things were able to pick up again. The youth led the charge to organize a neighborhood clean-up on Saturday mornings, picking up trash up and down Michigan Avenue and they also began to show up to the church to prepare the space in the building they hoped to hold their Life Lab—painting the walls and floors, cleaning up. But then again, just as things were building momentum, the spring of 2020 rolled around, and COVID hit, and in its wake, Frankye and the team are continuing to live in the tension that all of us are—trying to find the gifts of this time while also facing the very real challenges.



Frankye: Communication has been difficult, but we have gotten some feedback from our youth on programs that they're interested in. So, at least that gives us a stepping off point. And the adults that are involved in our programs are assisting me a great deal more than when we were in church every day. Now that we're on Zoom, where the adults are communicating about different programs and different things that we can set up for the kids. So, it's challenging. Communication is a challenge, uh, for, uh, the Log College Project right now.

Megan: This challenge for Coppin is also unique. How will they continue to cultivate the intergenerational relationships that have been forged through this journey? If worship is now happening online via Zoom, then the regular members of the church don't even have to drive in to Washington Park anymore, potentially disconnecting them from the people of the neighborhood yet again. And assumed access to personal electronic devices and reliable WiFi, not to mention the cold and darkness of winter already driving people indoors, keeps piling on to the challenges Coppin faces in this time. Yet even so, Frankye is committed to her calling and her work in youth ministry at Coppin.

Frankye: The gifts, it's giving me the opportunities to work with young people. For a long time, we just didn't have a lot of youth in our church, and Pastor John and Michelle reached out and grabbed them and brought them right in. So that's the, one of the things that they, um, that God sent them to us for and gave us. I saw those youth come in and I jumped up out my chair and ran to them. I was so happy to see them.

Megan: Oh, that's wonderful.

Frankye: That was a gift to help us reach out, do outreach into the community, because there's a lot of young people that could benefit from what we can provide.

Megan: Michelle also knows that these transitions have been challenging for these young people, but she, too, has seen God up to something in this community.

Michelle: Um, for all of them, I can honestly say, um, I'm, I know that they, they have a relationship, uh, with God and to have been a part of that journey to see that curiosity, um, just be piqued, and they have an interest, it's in 'em. So, I don't know, I don't know what they're doing on a day to day. I don't know what pressures they may be faced with, but I know it's in 'em, I know it's been planted, and now, here's the test. And they may not pass every test, but they do have at least the, um, equipment or the, you know, that, and I say the equipment, they know how, they know how to call on the Lord, or they have that personal relationship, which is more important than any Ms. Michelle or Ms. Frankye. They have it, they have it.

Part Four—So, Who's a Youth Pastor?

Megan: Throughout this project, we've been conducting research by listening to the stories and perspectives of the people in these churches, hoping that the patterns and themes that emerge might provide insight for other faith leaders who are passionate about youth ministry. For Coppin, we recruited our friend, the Rev. Aqueelah Ligonde to serve as the researcher.



Aqueelah Ligonde: So, my name is Aqueelah Ligonde. I'm the interim pastor at Far Rockaway Presbyterian Church in Far Rockaway, Queens. I'm also a staff consultant with Ministry Architects and a coach with Ministry Incubators. Um, and, uh, I feel like I'm forgetting a job.

Megan: That's what happens you have 30 of them.

Aqueelah: I kinda lose track! Um, and so my role with the Log College, uh, Project has been as a researcher, which a new role for me, but it's been really exciting, and, um, and I've learned a whole lot.

Megan: Before she lived in New York, Aqueelah had lived in Chicago for three years. She'd gone to seminary there, had worked in a church there. She knows the neighborhoods and the cultures, and she was really drawn to working with this congregation. Aqueelah herself had grown up in a Black Baptist Church in Ohio and has great love and respect for the Black church and for the AME in particular.

Aqueelah: I mean, I knew what it was like, or I know what it's like to kind of grow up in a congregation that, you know, might be a little older and didn't quite understand young people, um, very much. And, and so I kind of resonate with that with the kids from, from Coppin. And then also as a leader, and what it's like to try to lead kids who aren't necessarily, you know, "church kids," but they want to be there and they found a place to be loved and nurtured. Um, and so working with Michelle and with Frankye, I hope they listen to this, and I hope they don't take this as anything offensive, but they're kind of reluctant leaders. They're like, 'I don't know, you know, I don't know what, uh, I'm not a youth leader.' They didn't want to be called youth leaders. Um, I remember at our, at the Design Lab, they were totally youth leaders, totally youth leaders, um, and the way that they engaged the kids was so real. And it was so caring and nurturing and the kids like fed on that. Um, and so my, my relationship with both Michelle and Frankye has been the honor of watching them come into this role that they still kind of don't really claim, but I'm claiming it for them, um, of a youth leader and somebody who, um, who can really effectively lead youth in, in church setting or community setting.

Megan: I told Aqueelah that I have conversations all the time with people who have reached out to the Institute for Youth Ministry for resources or other support in their work, and they often think they're about to shock me when they say something like, "I'm not a typical youth pastor," or "It's a really weird story how I ended up in this job." I've heard it so much now that I call these folks the "accidental youth pastor," and I sometimes wonder if it's the majority of us who ended up with this vocation. People who are very clearly doing the work of youth ministry, very clearly loving young people and attending to their wellbeing and faith development, but who have found themselves surprised to be doing this work that they didn't necessarily set out to do or receive formal training to do.

I also think that we hear these stories all the time because people carry around this archetype in their minds of what makes a "real" youth pastor. It's typically somebody—well, look, it's typically a straight white guy who grew up in church and has a goatee and plays the guitar and can eat his weight in pizza and understands technology and maybe isn't afraid of public speaking, right? And look, if that's you, thanks for listening; the peace of Christ be with you. However, I think we're learning through the Log College Project that that archetype is a fantasy at best—a scapegoat at worst, and we're not doing the church any favors by clinging to it, especially when there are the Frankyes and the Michelles sitting right there in our pews, gifted and called to the work of youth ministry. These young people at Coppin, for instance, were not lacking anything by not having a quote-unquote real youth pastor as their leader. In



fact, the mutuality in their relationship with Frankye and Michelle may have empowered them to take ownership of this project in a unique way.

Aqueelah: I was surprised how ‘all in’ they were from the beginning, they were ‘all in.’ You know, I worked in Chicago the whole time that I was in seminary at a church, uh, with kids, um, kind of from around that area. And, uh, I, I gotta tell you, I don't know if I, if I had those kinds of kids that showed up at Princeton for the Design Lab that represented Coppin. Like, they came and they were, they were like, let's do this. They were ready to do all the things. They were ready to participate in all the things. Um, and I don't know why that surprised me so much. I think that, that they were, um, engaged with it. They, they had invested so much. I think they came with this with this idea, like, we're gonna, we're gonna change something, like we're gonna make something better for our community. And that the church had given them this gift of, uh, not just leaving Chicago and taking a really cool trip to New Jersey, but they'd given them this gift of like space to create something, um, for, for their, for their community. I don't know if they at, uh, at that point really made a connection with the church, like this is our church, and we're a part of this church.

I think they came in thinking like, we're going to do this for our block, like, we're going to do this. Um, I remember one of the young ladies in the group, um, you know, they had this idea and all of us were like, ah, we don't know if that's a good idea. It's to us, it's it sounds so simple. They were going to do, I think, like a carnival or something. It's so simple. That's not, that's not innovative. Um, but when they said why they wanted to do it, oh my goodness. I think all of us just kind of shut our mouths. They said, you know, in our neighborhood, um, the kids in our neighborhood are afraid to come and play outside. And there's so much that happens. You know, they were like shootings that happens on their block in their neighborhood. So, we want a safe place for our brothers and sisters to play. And to know that we have a neighborhood where you can have fun, too. And I was like, ‘do all the carnivals you want to do. That was the most beautiful thing you've ever heard.’

Megan: Sign me up. I will show up with a bounce castle.

Aqueelah: ‘I will dress up like a clown, you can throw pies at my face.’ But they came with, we're doing this for, we're doing this for our little brothers and sisters. And I was surprised by that, by that language and that heart. I just, I wasn't ready for that. I also think that that's a challenge though, because that's a lot of weight for a kid to handle, to carry, like we're going to do something for, for, for our siblings. Like we can change this. Um, and it, I think the challenge for them was like, how did they take that energy that they had, like, we can do this for our siblings. We can do this for our community. I was worried about how that was going to translate when they hit the streets of Chicago, when they leave home and they got back on their block and, and real life outside of this Design Lab bubble happened. Um, cause I know, you know, it's, Chicago's a challenging place for young Black folks.

Megan: Even with the leadership transition, even with the COVID pandemic, something transformative is happening at Coppin. A new normal *is* emerging from the seeds of ministry ideas, intergenerational relationships, and a reorientation about who *counts* as the church's youth. And we can't help but wonder—why can't this be the new normal for youth ministry, too?



Aqueelah: Uh, even coming back to the story of, uh, the young lady who gave her pitch and just that magic that happened, um, in that moment. I, I've been thinking about where else can we capture that kind of, that kind of energy for young people? Where else, how can we replicate that and not make it such a special moment? And it was special. And I don't want to take away from that, but how do we make that the norm, like kids feeling like they have this wonderful thing inside of them, that they are leaders, that this is a ministry I've been called to, like, how do we make that happen? How do we make that a part of how young people see themselves every day, um, because it was so special and it was so great. And then I thought, well, why? Or how come, you know, why can't we, why can't this be the normal thing that kids shine that way?

Um, and especially, uh, Black and Brown kids in situations where, you know, they might not have all the resources that other folks have, and how do we give them that, that space and that, um, yeah, that space to, to really shine, um, and, and pull out? You know, that, that wasn't something that Princeton put in 'em. It wasn't something that Michelle put in them. Wasn't something that Coppin put in 'em. It was, it was who they were as they really are. And so how do we, how do we lift that at a young people, um, to be confident enough to let that shine every day?

Conclusion

Megan: Next week on *Disrupting Ministry*, I'll introduce you to our friends at the First Presbyterian Church of Middletown, Ohio, and you'll learn about their vision to serve pop-up hospitality to young people in their community through overflowing tables of welcome and belonging.

Today's episode was written and recorded by me, Megan DeWald, and then, the brilliant and fabulous Nii Addo Abrahams made it all sound better and smarter with his audio editing wizardry. Special thanks to Tamesha Mills for her research in this episode, and to Maiia Avelino and Christine Toto for their assistance with logistics and promotion. To find out more about the Institute for Youth Ministry, visit our website at iym.ptsem.edu—and from there, click on the words that say Princeton Theological Seminary or visit directly at ptsem.edu. Until next week!