

Pastor Choco: Chicago Hood's Crime Rate Dropped 42% When We Obeyed

Everyone knows that Chicago is one of the most dangerous, crime-ridden cities in the United States. But I recently heard an amazing story of transformation and new beginnings in that city. Pastor Wilfredo “Choco” de Jesus and his New Life Covenant Church are making a difference in the heart of Chicago—to the point that crime has dropped as much as 42% in one area as a result of their influence! I’m told that in the “hood,” whoever owns property has dominance. As you’ll read later, his church bought a grocery store/liquor store in a high-crime area. As a result, today there is a medical clinic in that location. And because the church has taken dominance, the crime rate has plummeted!

Pastor Choco’s upcoming book, *Love Them Anyway*, will come out next year through our publishing arm, Charisma House. So we invited Pastor Choco to share his radical message at a staff meeting at Charisma Media’s headquarters in Lake Mary, Florida. He was interviewed by Marcos Perez, executive vice president of the Book Group, in front of the staff. The interview was so good we edited it to use for my “Strang Report” podcast. You can listen to it right here or in this article.

Pastor Choco grew up in Humboldt Park, Chicago—which, if you don’t already know, is one of the roughest neighborhoods in the city. Choco, the youngest of six kids, grew up for the most part without a father and lost his own brother to gang violence. Most of his siblings dropped out of high school.

“I was not raised in church,” he says. “I come from the hood. ... Humboldt Park, Chicago, in the 1970s was declared the worst

park in the United States. What you saw in Ferguson, Missouri, a few years ago—I lived that in the city of Chicago.”

Choco remembers the riot in 1975 between Puerto Rican residents and the police department. It was so bad, he says, that the governor had to bring in the National Guard to surround the park. He saw violence. He saw injustice. And without Choco even knowing it, God was planting the seed of compassion that would later on transform that neighborhood.

“There was a lot of loitering—people were breaking into stores,” he says. “I decided I was going to go into one of the stores that were being broken into and steal. ... So I walked in, grabbed a bottle of Pepsi, closed the refrigerator ... and crossed over the threshold of the door. When I got on Division Street, I heard a voice say, ‘Put it back.’ Now, today at 54, I know it was the voice of the Holy Spirit. But back then, I was like, ‘What is this?’ So for a few minutes, I entertain this voice, and I give into the voice. I go back into the store, open the refrigerator, put the Pepsi back, walked onto Division Street and [said to myself], *Who am I?*”

A few years later, Choco got a job from the government, along with thousands of other young people, to clean the streets of Chicago for 90 days. While other teens were told to sweep alleyways and highways, Choco was assigned to an area near a Pentecostal church.

“So I walked into this church, and I said, ‘My name is Wilfredo de Jesus. I’m here to clean streets,’” he says. “And they say, ‘You’re not going to clean streets. You’re going to do VBS.’ ... So in 1977, the young people would come in before they started their shift. They would come to the altar and pray. I would sit in the back because I wasn’t raised in church. I didn’t know Jesus.”

It was August of that year when Choco asked a church supervisor what the young people were doing at the altar. The

supervisor responded that they were praying to Jesus.

"Would you like to meet Jesus?" the supervisor asked Choco.

"I do," Choco responded. "Where is He? I want to talk to Him."

The supervisor gathered the other young people and they began to pray for Choco in a circle.

"In the hood, you never get in the middle of a circle," Choco says with a laugh. "This is called a beatdown. ... I said, 'I'm not getting in the middle of the circle.' ... But nobody hit me. I closed one eye, then I closed the other eye. And I said the simplest prayer on planet Earth. I said, 'God, if You exist, change my life.'"

Twenty-three years later, Choco was still in that church. But by that point, he was married to the pastor's daughter and had just been selected as the next senior pastor! Choco wrestled with the Lord about this new responsibility, but as God confirmed His will, Choco received it.

After Choco became the pastor in 2000, things began to shift in the church. They took down the gates in the front, a move Choco believes told the community they were welcome in God's house. Church members started ministering in the streets with evangelism, gospel dramas and even clowns.

But one of the most significant actions the church took was buying real estate. In 2008, New Life Covenant decided not to participate in the recession. Instead, they purchased buildings, including a liquor store on a prominent street corner, and converted them into ministries, such as medical clinics and clothing stores. As a result, Choco says, crime has dropped in that area by 42%.

"So now New Life Covenant owns over 30 properties," he says. "We bought properties before we even had a church building. We had ministries like the Dream Center, a teen center, different

clinics and so forth. All that pretty much came first before our church building. I think we're celebrating five years in December this year of being in our new building. Prior to that, we were in a high school for 10 years."

As the church prioritized community outreach over members' own comfort, Choco saw miraculous transformations take place. God burdened his heart to purchase a farm to minister to prostitutes, but he had to wait eight months until that burden came to fruition.

He started by sending his assistant out and asking five prostitutes how much they would charge for an hour's worth of service. The assistant brought five women back, and—after Choco paid them \$225 total—they asked, "What do you want us to do?"

He merely responded: "Follow me."

He led the five women into a room where his team had set up a banquet. Choco helped seat each woman at her place at the table, which was covered in romantic decorations. Choco's wife led worship, and the ministry team performed a gospel drama. By the end of the night, the prostitutes were in tears.

"They said, 'Preacher, no man has ever treated us this way. We don't want your money,'" Choco says. "And from 2000 to today—and we still have the farm—over 643 women have been rescued from prostitution and human trafficking, to the glory of God."

The cultural change has been immense on account of Choco's and his church's radical obedience to Jesus' message. But he knows none of this would have been possible unless God had given him a revelation of His love for the lost and the broken.

"We have lost our love for humanity," Choco says of the American church. "Luke 15 is about you. Go out. Find the lost. Why? Because in Luke 19, Jesus says, 'I've come to seek and

save that which is lost.' So as you think about your value, your worth, ... your job and my job is to seek and save that which is lost because our Father loves them. And we do it at all costs, right? Because there's a cost for reconciliation."

I hope Choco's message inspired you as much as it inspired me. If we all had that same passion to win the lost, the church could revolutionize the culture in the U.S. We could see revival that touches every corner of our country. But that type of change starts in our hearts.

If you agree, share this article with a friend. And be sure to listen to Choco's inspiring message in the podcast, where he shares many more exciting stories of miracles God has done for and through his church. You can just hear the passion in his voice. [Click here](#) or scroll up to listen!