



VOICES RISING

WOMEN OF COLOR FINDING & RESTORING HOPE IN THE CITY

SHABRAE JACKSON KRIEG &
JANET BALASIRI SINGLETERRY
EDITORS

FOREWARD BY
SANDRA MARIA VAN OPSTAL

“The normalization of the abuse and silencing of women inside and outside of the church has been shown for what it is—an affront to the image of God on earth—by movements like #Metoo, #Churchtoo, and #SilenceIs-NotSpiritual. As a result, women’s voices are rising and the church finally seems ready to listen. But there is a corner of the church that remains in the dark—muffled; women of color on the evangelical mission field. These missionaries continue the traditions of women of color who led the missions movement throughout the 19th century, but were usurped and replaced by white missionaries at the turn of the 20th century; at the same time that white churches vestries drew red-lines around their communities and devised and implemented systems to ensure white supremacy at home. Over the past two decades, God has been at work in the hidden corners of the evangelical church; raising up evangelical women of color to enter the mission field again—for the sake of the preservation of the faith and the glory of God. These are the voices of those women. Come. Listen. Behold.”

– *Lisa Sharon Harper, President and Founder of Freedom Road, LLC and author of several books, including The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong can be Made Right*

“Voices that have echoed from the margins now burst with telling in *Voices Rising*, resounding with stories of women from diverse walks of life, origin, and color, sharing a common purpose of seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. Scholars, students, and laypersons alike will be inspired by the narratives of God’s faithful daughters who seek to honor him by dedicating their talents and gifts to be a blessing through service. Their stories challenge us to live out our calling more fully in our lives.”

– *Ruth Chung, Professor and Director of the Marriage and Family Therapy Program, University of Southern California, Co-Editor of Religion and Spirituality in Korean America*

“Reading these words reminded me how much we all need to continue listening and learning from the diverse and complex intersections and social locations that women of color bring to the coming of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Readers may not be able to relate to every story or every nuance, but isn’t that how we interact with scripture? Take your time and wrestle with these stories that take us around the globe, and listen for God’s voice.”

– *Kathy Khang, speaker, journalist, activist, and author of Raise Your Voice, IVP*

“Voices Rising is a gift to the Church from these faithful leaders and ministers. Reading their diverse stories gives broader insight into what God is doing through these sisters in cities around the world, but what I found most powerful was honest descriptions of how they have worked out their callings amidst the diversity of backgrounds as women of color. Their stories also challenged me to reflect and wrestle with my own calling as a Christ-follower in new ways.”

– *Sabrina Chan, National Director of Asian American Ministries, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship*

“Reading Voices Rising is like sitting down for a cup of coffee with a group of remarkable women from all over the world. As each shares her stories of learning to live true to Jesus’ Kingdom and true to her unique identity, I felt inspired, challenged, and grateful. These intimate, poignant stories expand our understanding of who God is using as urban missionaries, and they enable us to learn from their faith.”

– *Lindsay Olesberg, InterVarsity’s Scripture Engagement Director and author of Studying Ephesians with the Global Church*

“Voices Rising is a remarkable array of stories that intersect racial/ethnic/national identity, gender, faith, and vocation. What makes these tales from the margins so compelling and insightful is their authentic and honest wrestling with the self, culture, and God. Whether you are female or male, a person of color or not, single or married, questioning or embracing God’s call to ministry and mission—in these stories you will find allies among those who have been on a journey, often times lonely and confusing, of discovering the transformative power of God’s love and grace for self and for others.”

– Michael A. Mata, Director of the Transformational Urban Leadership Program, Azusa Pacific Seminary

“*Voices Rising* is a powerfully hopeful and redemptive elevation of God’s work in and through women of color. Called to be and do life within the urban landscape, they rise and are rising to reveal an everyday orthodoxy that witnesses a prophetic imagination. You will enjoy and be challenged by *Voices Rising*. May you hear the faith, hope, and love of these urban ministers among us.”

– W. Tali Hairston, Senior Advisor for Community Engagement—Seattle Presbytery/Perkins Institute

“Strong women of deep faith telling powerful stories. That’s what you will find in *Voices Rising*. We are past due for a collection of experiences from Christian matriarchs of the twenty-first century. We need their voices to give us courage for the challenge we face and to plant seeds of hope in a world of hardship. In these pages you will encounter the stories of modern-day Desert Mothers. We would do well to heed their wisdom.”

– *Scott Bessenecker, Director of Missions, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and author of The New Friars and Living Mission, IVP*

“For too long the American Church has been content to offer platforms to white men or occasionally white women and to let our theology and practice of ministry be shaped only by that perspective. Yet the crowds who were first drawn to Jesus were primarily those on the outside of such agency! The voices of these women of color are precious gems given to shape the life and future of the American Church. May we heed our sisters’ collective wisdom, and in so doing, better understand the heart of God and healthy life and ministry for the Church.”

– *Scott Hall, National Director of Urban Programs at InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA*

“The voices of women of color are rising. These are strong and compelling voices, while also humble and gracious. Women of color call the Church and the world to peace, reconciliation, justice, diversity, and hope. They show us the grace, passion, and prophetic wisdom cultivated at the margins of our Church and world. In *Voices Rising*, women of color offer personal and prophetic stories and insights that can renew the Church, transform the world, and lead to lasting hope.”

– *Graham Hill, Author, Global Church and Healing Our Broken Humanity*

VOICES RISING

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**WOMEN OF COLOR
FINDING & RESTORING
HOPE IN THE CITY**

**SHABRAE JACKSON KRIEG &
JANET BALASIRI SINGLETERRY
EDITORS**



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Servant Partners is an interdenominational evangelical missions agency that sends, trains, and equips those who follow Jesus by living among the world's urban poor. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we seek the transformation of communities with the urban poor through church planting, community organizing, and leadership development.

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FOREWORD

WOMEN ARE AND HAVE always been at the center of mission, compassion, justice, and peacemaking. In the words of pop singer Beyoncé, the Queen B herself, “Girls run the world!” Listening to the stories of those who are most impacted by suffering and injustice will shape how we creatively love those on the margins. Sadly, it’s typical to find the same few people giving voice to how we as Christians can love our neighbor. If we want to be equipped to impact the world with the compassion and love of Jesus, we not only need a diversity of voices, we need those who are more socio-economically and racially marginalized to be at the center. This follows what Jesus Himself did in His ministry. It is thrilling to hear the voices of women of color at the center in this book, telling the stories of their communities and the ones they serve alongside in solidarity.

My mother is the woman who taught me to write my own story. She had the courage to move to a new country and re-establish herself. Mi mamá Colombiana is as beautiful as she is compassionate. She taught me that no matter how poor or rich we were, no matter what others said about our community or the people we come from, I should always follow my dreams. She taught me that

everyone is valuable to God, and that the more voices are heard, the better we can fully understand His word and the world. Her voice rises!

Migdalia is the woman in my community who has taught me the importance of telling my own story. She is an entrepreneur, a community leader, and a woman of faith. Her beauty salon has been a place of rest and rescue for me in a world of cross-cultural ministry. When I am there surrounded by women from Puerto Rico, Mexico, Honduras, and Ecuador, taking time to take care of themselves, I am reminded that I matter. The intentional atmosphere reminds me that I am loved by God, not for what I do but for who I am. Being around other women of color is a catalyst for me to continue to urge the rest of the world that we have a story, and we can tell it ourselves. The time has come for our voices to be heard, not as way to appease our egos, but because the Church needs to consider new ways to approach ministry. Our voices rise!

Laquita, my neighbor, has raised two children into young adults on her own. Despite the challenges, the statistics, and the insane expectation that one can afford rent on a minimum wage. She worked two and sometimes three jobs to provide for her kids. She fought illness that developed due to the stress of life on African American women. In the decade I've known her, she has come over to drink wine, ugly cry, pray in tongues, eat chocolate, and dream for a new way. At her daughter's high school graduation, we celebrated this next generation of Black women achieving the influence the last generation just could not secure. She is the expert voice I want to hear when my own kids are driving me nuts. Her voice rises!

FOREWORD

Rachael grew up in the slums of Kampala, Uganda. God gifted her as an evangelist; her community was transformed by her leadership and that of other youth leaders. She went off to Oxford for training. Today she is one of the apologetic and evangelistic speakers for Ravi Zacarias Ministries in Uganda. She is the expert on the questions like “Is God fair?” and “Why does He allow injustice?” She continues to congregate and lead a youth worship team in her hundred-person church. She is proclaiming and living out the gospel and allowing her voice to rise.

Now more than ever, we need to hear voices rising from women who are working alongside those on the margins, and who come from a context similar to that of the many people we will live with and love. The time has come to focus on the women getting it done. There is a famous saying by Mexican actress Maria Felix, “Soy más cabrona que bonita, y mira que bonita soy,” which loosely translated means, “I’m more badass than beautiful, and as you can see I’m very beautiful.” Women are the force of nature on the ground who mobilize the masses to show up and speak out. The women in this book not only capture that spirit in their own ministries, but in the stories they tell of the communities they serve. We as a Church are in need of their biblical insight and creative approach to ministry. We can learn from them how to love and live at the intersection of worship, compassion, and justice. From these women, we can learn how sit for tea with the widow, bandage the wounded, and march right to the center of power.

Our *abuelas* (grandmothers) taught us to fast and pray, and to access our identity in Christ, not in the praise of

others. They taught us to rely on the resources of the Holy Spirit and not self-sufficiency. They taught us to persevere through suffering, not to run from it. They modeled courage and faith in a manner only an abuela can. Abuelita theology is the set of values, beliefs, practice passed down to us as we spent time with our grandmothers in the kitchen. It is a spirituality rooted in our communities of origin that informally influences generation after generation on how we both understand who God is and what our role is in the world. In many majority world cultures, our earliest religious education comes from the mothers and grandmothers. Cesar Chavez's mother and grandmother were huge influences in his life. Some say that he was able to develop a new type of non-violent peacemaking because of the strong female role models in his life and their influence over him. Abuelita theology was the bedrock for everyone in the community, not just the women. These voices rising will be a foundation for all in the generations to come, not just the women.

Women of color embody a spirituality of sacrifice, decision-making, and worshipping on the run—with all the noise and chaos of our families and communities in the background. We don't spend much time debating the best approaches to loving God and loving neighbor—we simply neighbor. I know you will find wisdom in the stories of joy, surprise, pain, surrender, and faith that are captured here. May you hear the voices rising.

– Sandra Maria Van Opstal, July 17, 2018

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

WHEN WE BEGAN to explore the concept for this book, we both felt some hesitancy to lead such a large project. My life and calling have not panned out as I (Janet) had expected. I grew up in a non-Christian, conservative, immigrant family. My parents owned a restaurant where I worked during my entire childhood. My education was intended to lead me on a path toward comfort and prestige. The idea that I would be called to be a full-time minister, and to fundraise my own salary and benefits, was not a notion I had ever considered. This calling has been meaning and surprising at times. When the *Voices Rising* book project began, I hesitated. I do not love doing new things, especially when I don't have a lot of experience. I soon realized that the type of book that *Voices Rising* would be—a book that spoke directly to women of color, about women of color, and written by women of color, especially women of color seeking to learn and grow in an urban poor ministry context—was not something I had on my bookshelf. A book like this was needed. God began to bring to mind the experiences of women in Servant Partners who I knew were following God's call to learn and live among the urban poor around the world, and their stories needed to be shared. The beauty of giving space for these voices to rise helped to overcome my hesitancy.

Similarly, I (Shabrae) was encouraged by the idea of helping to facilitate new spaces for women of color. As we prepared to take on this new challenge, I recalled a short conversation that I had with Dr. C. Rene Padilla some years ago. I wanted to hear his opinion regarding who were the up and coming new voices of justice emerging in the world. He calmly replied that he believed that there would not be a specific individual or outspoken movement leader in the future, but instead there would be a rising of many around the world who would lead out in big and small ways, calling forth justice and reshaping our world. He emphasized that some may come to be known and others may not, but the response to injustice would be one embraced by many and not focus on just a singular leader. Dr. Padilla may not remember me or our conversation, but that brief encounter has remained with me these past twelve years. In the years since, I have met many along the way—men, women, youth, and children—whom I would identify as agents of change. Their lives and prophetic voices bring good news in their own unique ways. They are responding to the complex challenges in our world, which require a response from a multitude of leaders.

It has been a joy for us to dive deeply into the stories of fellow agents of change, to learn from their experiences, and to share their stories with others through this book. It is our hope that one more voice can be added to the multitude of voices working on behalf of the poor around the world.

In setting out to create this compilation of stories and experiences, there was much to consider. The more

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contributors we included, the more perspectives would be shared. This sounds great in concept, but it can also mean that though we are all connected through the same organization, the beauty of Servant Partners is that each voice is unique. We all have felt called by God to urban ministry, but the ways in which we live that out varies vastly. We have chosen to allow each author to keep her voice in preferences for her description of community, race, and ministry calling. Within these pages you will find a variety of writing styles, from personal essays to more academic reflections. Additionally, at each author's discretion, some names throughout this book were changed for privacy.

Despite this diversity, a few specific decisions were made regarding capitalization for the sake of consistency. All references to race or any cultural or ethnic groups have been capitalized. As stated earlier, our desire is to provide space for each voice and experience, even when those individual expressions could be in contrast to each other. An example can even be found in our title, "Women of Color," a phrase that is not commonly used outside of the United States or Canada and that may have a different meaning or connotation in other settings. In reality, there does not exist one specific name or title to describe each author, nor this grouping of us, nor is there a phrase that completely or conveniently expresses our individual or collective lived experience.

As editors, we are aware that terminology used throughout the book may be incomplete, in process, and ever changing. We recognize that some terms are seen as social constructs and have no biological grounding, and yet we have given space for the process and conversation

to happen even with our always-imperfect words, even while we try to press forward with the best use of words possible. With this in mind, we would like to offer four invitations.

First, if you come across anything that is uncomfortable, we invite you to go deeper and enter into a dialogue with us. This book does not completely represent *Servant Partners* nor all women of color who have gone into mission. Rather, it is a representation of a group of women who are on their own spiritual journeys and have something to offer to the global Church.

Second, if you are a woman of color, we wrote this book for you. We collected our stories and worked and talked through them and tried to make sense of our experiences for you. Many of us had never read a book like this in which we saw ourselves reflected. We hope you find resonance, connection, inspiration, challenge, and encouragement in these pages.

Third, if you are not a woman, or a woman of color, you are also welcome in this book. Although our primary audience is women of color and we geared some of our editorial decisions to that audience, you are also welcome. We hope you too find something for your journey—a word of life, challenge, encouragement, or invitation.

Finally, the effort to give voice to one's experience, to take pieces of a life and share it with another, is not easy and at times vulnerable. Thus, our final invitation is one towards grace as we enter into each other's stories. We offer a series of stories that uncover and elevate the experience and memories of women of color living into their

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

missions and callings around the world—adding their voices to the masses. We acknowledge that we are here because of the many women who have come before us. We stand on their shoulders as we look to pave the way for the young women who will come after each of us.

INTRODUCTION

THERE ARE NOT MANY women who are written about in the pages of mission history books, nor many women who have authored them. Found even less frequently in the index, table of contents, or bylines of those books are women of color. Although we as women of color are not often represented in “official” mission numbers internationally, there are innumerable women of color who are agents of change working for Christian transformation, and who are ministers of the transforming gospel, serving all over the world in countless contexts and communities.

Yet where are these stories? Who are the women of color who labor for peace and justice, who speak Christ’s words of light into a dark and suffering world? And why are our stories so hard to find? Is development and mission work only for those with money and who come from a specific class, race, or country? Certainly not. But when one sees only people of a certain group around the mission board, the decision table, or on stage at the latest ministry or mission conference, then this can support an incomplete perspective that only a certain type of person can be called as a minister of the gospel. Incomplete models create incomplete perspectives, and those incomplete representations of the body of Christ can create obstacles

to Jesus rather than opportunities. A more complete representation provides opportunities for as many people as possible to be invited into God's kingdom, into the jubilant celebration of all peoples, nations, languages, and colors described in the biblical model of church (Acts) and surrounding the throne of God (Revelation).

At the time of this writing, to be a woman of color in missions is to be continuously on the outside. We recognize that the struggle for representation continues in many contexts where women are working for full expression and acceptance. We are still living in a world of many firsts—the first Asian American female executive director of a major missions organization¹ to the first successful blockbuster movies with full casts of actors of color². And when thinking about missions, women of color are often some of the last images that are represented in the mainstream, emphasizing the incomplete narrative of who is called and who responds. Yet we too are here to serve, to return to our communities, to go into new communities, to build movements, to preach from the pulpit, and to respond with our voices and our lives.

Voices Rising: Women of Color Finding and Restoring Hope in the City is a compilation of the stories of many women in mission. In these chapters, themes of belonging, identity, calling, loss, privilege, and more emerge, outlining the difficulties in this type of work and challenging the image of missions while calling new voices to help shape the narrative. This group of authors has also journeyed together in embracing their own unique calls in an evangelical environment that does not always see or hear them with clarity or fullness. It traces the discourse

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of intersectionality, margin, colonialism, and Scripture—aiming to invite and encourage all women to participate in the mission of God within our world and in whatever they may do.

Each story outlines the joy and grace we have found working in the margins of our world. The empirical data used by the United Nations and many other groups employ a variety of colorful words in how to define and describe a slum, a squatter settlement, or an urban neighborhood. But for the authors of this book, these spaces are home. Despite the challenges, we have grown, we have found hope, and we have been taught by those whom we have sought to serve. The communities represented in this book move beyond data and are defined by the people whom we have come to know and by the lessons we have found in this space of margin. This too forms part of the narrative—what we have learned when we have responded to God's call.

God's call to serve the urban poor is a crucial call that many more of us should consider, as we are living in a world where nearly one half of the world's population—more than 3 billion people—live on less than \$2.50 a day. A world in which more than 1.3 billion live in extreme poverty—living on less than \$1.25 a day. Our world is urbanizing, rapidly.

According to Doug Saunders, a Canadian-British author and journalist, and author of the book, *Arrival City: The Final Migration and Our Next World*, 130 people are migrating from rural to urban areas each minute.³ Our urban areas are often characterized by difficult housing conditions, which frequently include the following:

insecurity of tenure; lack of basic services; inadequate and sometimes unsafe building structures; overcrowding; and locations on hazardous land. Over one billion people live in such conditions.

The issue of urban poverty is one of the most important issues facing our world in the twenty-first century. And yet it is one of the areas in which fewer number of churches and workers are present. Servant Partners, along with a small group of other organizations named *The New Friars* by Scott Bessenecker⁴, were all moved by the Holy Spirit to answer the call into this kind of work. They call their work “incarnational,” being moved both by the command to love the poor and by Jesus’s own becoming flesh and “moving into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, The Message Version) And people from all over the world have responded to that invitation. As urban poverty is complex, this work has required a holistic response in working towards whole-person and whole-community transformation, engaging physical, spiritual, emotional, mental, social, and communal needs. The combined strategy of discipleship-based faith communities and grassroots community organizing became the tools Servant Partners chose to engage this challenge.

But this is no small task. It is no small mission. It is no small need. So we seek new molds and movements that embrace the diversity of all our voices and our unique expressions of mission to be the hands and feet which move toward the calling of a whole-person, whole-community transformation. The world needs an image of the Christian minister, missionary, and worker that goes beyond what we may have previously seen.

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This book is not Urban Ministry or Racial Reconciliation 101. It is a collection of stories, a snapshot into some aspects of our lives, ministries, and callings. You may learn something about urban ministry, poverty, racism, reconciliation, or cultural competency, yet ultimately these are stories from our lived experiences.

Voices Rising is an invitation for the reader to recognize the need for diversity in mission and to see the uniqueness that women of color bring. We strive in these pages to expand the current narrative and discourse by providing space for new voices to arise. We hear their voices, and we hear Christ's voice interwoven. And yet there are still so many new voices to be heard.

Our own stories are still in process, and we invite you to journey with us. We invite you to enter into all the pieces of the stories that we carry. We have let our voices rise within these pages, as a beginning.

¹ Megan Briggs, "Tom Lin and Sharon Koh Becoming the Key Executives of Prominent Ministries," May 17, 2016, accessed August 16, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2o52HCR>

² Jamil Smith, "The Revolutionary Power of Black Panther" (February 19, 2018), *Time* magazine. See also Suyin Haynes, "Crazy Rich Asians is More than Glitz and Glamour. It's Groundbreaking for People Like Me" (August 10, 2018), *Time* magazine, accessed August 16, 2018, <https://ti.me/2PvP63U>.

³ Doug Saunders, *Arrival City: The Final Migration and Our Next World* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2010).

⁴ Scott A. Bessenecker, *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World's Poor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

1

BRINGING A DISH TO SHARE WITH THE WORLD

Michelle Kao Nakphong

Michelle Kao Nakphong served with Servant Partners from 2003 to 2015, starting as an intern in Los Angeles and ending as a site leader in Bangkok, Thailand. In Bangkok, she started a bilingual internship for both Thai and American young adults, transitioned an organization from a charity-based approach to one with a sustainable development approach, and organized around land and housing issues. With a desire to affect more broad and systemic change, Michelle is now pursuing a PhD in Community Health Sciences at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health. Her research explores how economic policies and programs affect health outcomes. Michelle, her husband AJ, and son Pascal like going around the corner for donuts while they figure out what to eat next.

AN ALL-AMERICAN GIRL

I HATED WHEN KIDS at youth group told me I smelled like stir-fry. I hated that at camp, I was called “Kim” three separate times in one summer (because all Asians are named Kim?). I hated that I was teased by the sing-song rhyme,

“Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these,” while classmates pulled their eyes up and down into slanted slits. I hated when kids asked me if I could actually see through my eye slits. Being one of four people of color in my grade, I hated my differences. I learned to cringe at them and was embarrassed by any vestiges of my Chinese culture or ethnicity. I just wanted to be “normal” and tried my best to paint over myself and my life with a glossy coat of all-American.

By high school, I virtually thought of myself as a White person. Not much of my life resembled anything Chinese, besides my face. To keep my “all-American” identity alive, I even asked my mom to wait outside when she needed to come pick me up from school so I wouldn’t be embarrassed by her accent and unusual mannerisms. I saw nothing good about being Chinese.

When I arrived at Johns Hopkins University, I encountered more Asians, but still had a difficult time embracing my ethnicity. I was now in Baltimore: a raw, complex city with a fraught racial history. The disparities in class, race, and economics I saw in Baltimore were jarring at a core level. As a young student, I attended classes on a pristine, landscaped, perpetually renovated campus while drugs and blight plagued the community a ten-minute walk away. I was disturbed by the juxtaposition of poverty and my own privilege. How could I make sense of my own identity amidst this dissonance?

At the same time, I had recently become personally acquainted with Jesus the summer before I began college. As a new freshman, this nascent spiritual relationship was cultivated by a deep interest in the Bible and my

involvement with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a campus ministry. Precisely in this unsettling context, biblical passages about justice, poverty, and healing were coming alive to me.

This compelled me to dive into opportunities to minister and connect with people in the city. I wanted to work with vulnerable populations, know them, and know their stories. I was particularly drawn to an incarnational approach to ministry. Jesus, in His ministry, became flesh and dwelled among us to show us His love up close and personal. Modeled from this aspect of Jesus' life, incarnational ministry emphasizes being present with people in their challenges and their pain. I sought to engage with people and communities in this way and found opportunities to live and get involved in communities in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles.

But my new journey towards justice and God's Kingdom posed a new predicament for my Chinese identity. As a young, resourced, Chinese woman from Michigan, I felt like I couldn't identify with my urban neighbors enough. My neighbors and I did not share the same background, ethnicity, education, or opportunities, and all of my unearned privilege burdened me with a sense of guilt. Guilt for being born into a nice neighborhood. Guilt that my life trajectory was higher education and a professional career. Guilt for being a "model minority." Guilt for having options and opportunities and resources. All of this caused me to feel even more insecure about being Chinese. I looked more like the owners of the liquor stores whose businesses profited from and perpetuated harmful dependencies in the community. I wanted to identify with

the people in the neighborhoods where I was beginning to minister and exist as a neighbor, but whether it was Baltimore or later Los Angeles, I had the nagging feeling that I could never identify the way I imagined I should. I cringed at my own identity: it wasn't good enough for urban, incarnational ministry. And yet, that is exactly what I felt called to do.

A BOWL OF SOUP

IN MY MID-TWENTIES, I had a persistent thought: God's work is global. This realization motivated me to look beyond the poverty in the United States and recognize poverty around the world. It was this thought that compelled me to move to Bangkok, Thailand and into an informal community⁵ to see what God was doing there and how I could get involved. Even as an Asian American in Asia, I struggled to fit in, exacerbated more by the fact that I also needed to learn the Thai language. It was obvious to neighbors that I was American by my mannerisms, my gait, and my independence. On top of that, my Chinese ethnicity also associated me with the more affluent Chinese merchants and businesspeople in Thailand. Would I ever experience a connection between my identity and my vocation?

One of the first people who caught my attention when I moved into my Bangkok community was May. At eight years old, she was silent and rarely spoke. When I first met her, I mistakenly thought she was a boy because of her short hair. I learned that she never had a chance to grow it out; she caught head lice often and her parents'

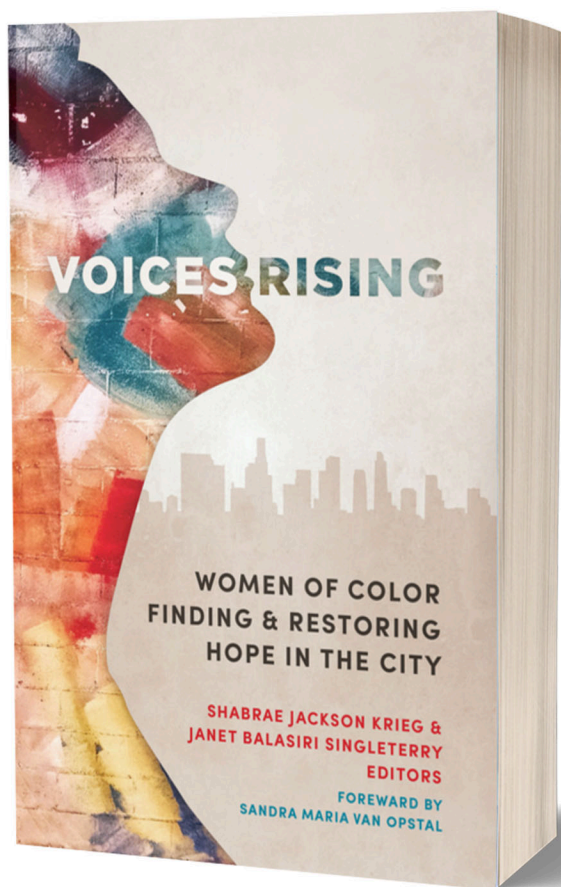
convenient solution was to shave her head. May's parents were addicted to alcohol, and both passed away within a few years of each other from multiple diseases caused by excessive drinking. As a result of their drinking, May was born with cognitive disabilities and was unable to keep up with kids much younger than her. Her less developed cognitive skills made her an easy and constant target for teasing and bullying. But despite the hostility and neglect she experienced, she was still an incredibly sweet girl with a knack for nurturing. She was the primary caretaker for her baby niece, and though she did not always make the healthiest choices in caretaking (a daily breakfast of soda and candy for a one-year old), she demonstrated incredible patience and care. Some church members and I regularly spent time with May, and she became a regular in church. As a part of our house church, she came out of her shell and became a talkative, sociable, and confident kid. I consider it a tremendous gift to have seen her discover her confident, lovable self.

Part of worship in the house church included sharing a potluck lunch together every week at church. Each person would bring something to share, and we would eat family-style on the floor. Some members brought curries, some were famous for their Thai desserts, while others might bring street food purchased on the way. We loved to eat together and we were always glad to include anyone, especially May. For her, we knew that this was the heartiest meal she would eat all week. The rest of the week, she ate little besides plain rice or snacks neighbors might give her.

One particular Sunday, May received ten baht (about thirty cents) from her parents, which was uncommon. At church that day, she told one of the church members, "I have ten baht. I want to bring something to share for lunch." The church member, knowing how seldom May received an allowance and how little she ate, responded kindly, "Don't worry about it, May. Keep it for yourself. Buy some snacks for yourself later." May became silent and looked disappointed.

When confronted with poverty and need, well-meaning, well-resourced people often reinforce attitudes of helplessness. They see others' needs and their own expertise and resources and think, "You need X? I have X to give you!" They only see apparent needs, like May's need to eat beyond Sunday. But too often, if well-intentioned acts or projects seem like good solutions but are actually driven by outsiders' ideas of what is necessary, they bypass the most critical factor of success: an individual's own self-determination. This kind of model of giving and receiving without thought of the recipient can also reinforce the idea that the resource-poor person or community is impotent. Instead, solutions must hinge on people's own motivation, effort, and resources. Human capacity should not be discounted or underestimated.

Fortunately for May, another member noticed the change in May's countenance and mood and offered, "It's ok, May. If you want to buy something to share, that would be great!" May smiled. She quickly got up, and walking out the door said, "I'll be right back!" She soon returned with a child-sized portion of noodle soup and a huge smile on her face. This was the first time she was able to share



[End of Voices Rising Excerpt]

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