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The Urban Prayer Breakfast at Third Street Church of God

Introduction

The Third Street Church of God began the work of ministry in the city of Washington in 1910. Currently there are about 300 members who worship together on Sundays in a building located in the Shaw community, one mile north of the Capitol, in the heart of Washington, D.C. For 25 years we have hosted the Urban Prayer Breakfast as a faith community that puts poor and homeless persons in fellowship with persons from other socioeconomic categories with ethnically and denominationally diverse backgrounds. Essentially we offer an hour of worship, preaching and prayer beginning at 7:30 a.m. Monday through Friday, followed by a hot breakfast meal. We provide the breakfast and worship every weekday throughout the year, including holidays like Christmas, New Year's Day and Thanksgiving. The average attendance at the Urban Prayer Breakfast is approximately 100 persons, most of whom live in the nearby shelters and on the streets. We depend heavily upon our volunteers and ministry partners from various places to staff and fund our programs. Over the years, the volunteers who have invested the most time and energy into the ministry on a daily basis have actually come from the homeless population. In addition, we have volunteers from other churches and from the neighborhood who have been committed for years to work with us regularly as preachers, musicians, worship leaders, cooks and servers. Our paid full-time staff consists of a program director, a social worker, and two custodians. A grant from one of our ministry partners funds a full-time salary for the social worker, who follows up with persons attending the Urban Prayer Breakfast by providing support groups and individualized referrals. One of the custodians works part time as a truck driver, in addition to fulfilling custodial and maintenance duties at the church. We do not operate a "soup kitchen"—what we have is a daily offering of table fellowship among the poor.

Although we regularly purchase the foods we serve for breakfast, we also receive food donations of all types from various sources around the city. These items are distributed to needy families and individuals who show evidence of residence with facilities for food preparation. So our effort to combat hunger has two dimensions—a hot meal served daily to one population, and regular food distribution to another group. In both cases we endeavor to preach and promote a gospel of reconciliation and transformation.

This outreach ministry among the poor of Washington emerged from a dynamic ministry partnership of three key persons—John Staggers, an African American sociologist and community organizer; Louis Evans, a white minister who pastored the National Presbyterian Church in Washington; and Samuel Hines, the Jamaican-born pastor of the Third Street Church of God. In May of 1978 these three brothers began meeting once a

week at Third Street Church to pray for guidance as to how they could most effectively meet the needs of the indigent persons in the neighborhood. Coffee, juice and doughnuts were provided for these weekly gatherings. The first homeless person joined the group for breakfast in 1980. One day he just stopped in and asked for a cup of coffee and a doughnut when he observed the people leaving the Wednesday meeting. His request represented a major turning point in the development of the program, as he helped the group to see the need to open their breakfast fellowship to include the poor together with those who were meeting to pray for the poor. The homeless man, Horace Jordan, was offered housing and full-time employment as a custodian at the church, a position he still holds today. As important as the process of praying and planning may have been, the ministry was set in motion when the group of ministers was prompted by the homeless man to open the doors of the church to offer hospitality to the poor. Since that time, word of mouth has been the means by which the Urban Prayer Breakfast has been publicized among the poor. John Staggers died in 1990, Sam Hines died in 1995, and Louie Evans left the area many years ago to live in California. However, the relationship between the National Presbyterian Church and Third Street Church has been continually nurtured by pastors and members who remain committed to urban ministry and reconciliation.

The Ministry of Reconciliation

The Urban Prayer Breakfast is the centerpiece of the ministry of reconciliation at Third Street Church. The emphasis upon reconciliation is the legacy of Dr. Hines. He challenged the congregation to become "Ambassadors for Christ in the Nation's Capital," and to proclaim the message of reconciliation as directed by the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. The church adopted the following ministry statement in 1972:

> We are ambassadors for Christ in the Nation's Capital, committed to be a totally open, evangelistic, metropolitan caring fellowship of believers. To this end we are being discipled in a community of Christian faith, centered in the love of Jesus Christ and administered by the Holy Spirit. We are covenanted to honor God, obey God's Word, celebrate God's grace, and demonstrate a lifestyle of servanthood. Accordingly, we seek to proclaim and offer to the world a full cycle ministry of reconciliation and wholeness.

Dr. Hines gave expression to his commitment to the ministry of reconciliation in many ways. He gave critical behind-the-scenes leadership to the demolition of apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s by aggressive and focused counseling of church leaders, political activists, and governmental leaders. His wife, Rev. Dalineta Hines, remains actively engaged in global reconciliation ministry in her frequent trips to Liberia and Guyana. As a gifted preacher and interpreter of the Scriptures, Dr. Hines insisted that the weight of biblical evidence places great responsibilities on the church to minister to the poor. His focus was to bring the powerful and the powerless together in ministry, guided by the conviction that "dogma divides and mission unites." His contribution to modern evangelical reconciliation thought and activity is highlighted in the third chapter of Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America by Emerson and Smith (Oxford, 2000). I have discussed his work and views in my self-published history of the Third Street Church, How Firm a Foundation (1990), and in my 1996

publication Saints in Exile: The Holiness Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture (Oxford, 1996).

My own interest in reconciliation is evidenced, first and foremost, by my ongoing commitment to pastor an urban congregation whose identity is shaped largely by our ability to provide table fellowship for the poor. My understanding of reconciliation ministry is enhanced by my commitment to two related concepts, empowerment and mutuality. I have offered my own theological reflections upon this work of reconciliation in broader perspective in two books: Ministry at the Margins: The Prophetic Mission of Women, Youth and the Poor (InterVarsity, 1997) and Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People (Fortress, 1995). In Ministry at the Margins I focus on the fact that in the Scriptures, and especially in the Gospels, we see marginalized persons—notably women, children, and the poor—being used by God to do the work of ministry:

> The biblical foundation of gospel ethics is Jesus Christ's invitation for all people to experience God's righteousness as personal salvation and as social justice. . . . gospel ethics entails both witness and work—the witness of proclaiming the good news of God's reign in the world and the work of implementing righteousness and justice in people's lives. (15)

Empathy and Black Empowerment

In Empowerment Ethics, the specific context of my discussion is the spiritual journey of African American people from slavery to freedom. I have not found black liberation theology to be a useful resource for ministry to and among the poor, because its premises and goals are articulated by and for blacks with minority status in white academic institutions. Black theology speaks on behalf of the poor to the dominant culture, but other than to advocate freedom from oppression, has little to say directly to the poor. My interest is to develop an ethics for people who are in charge of their own institutions, who are building capacity to minister to their own and to others. Moreover, I desire to engage the spiritual legacy of a people who overcame and endured extremes of oppression and deprivation because they envisioned themselves as being possessed by the power of a just and loving God. Employing a chronological frame of reference, I organize my discussion of black empowerment in simple terms using one-word chapter titles: testimony, protest, uplift, cooperation, achievement, remoralization, and ministry. Remoralization is a term I have coined for the moral and spiritual transformation of persons who have been demoralized by oppressive forces operating in the society and within the human psyche, toward the end of enabling them to function as socially responsible moral agents. Ministry incorporates empathy into empowerment:

> Empathy, simply stated, is intellectual identification of oneself with another. For Christians, the principle of empathy is embedded within the moral reciprocity of the Golden Rule, Jesus' admonition to treat others as you would like to be treated if you, in a way of speaking, had to trade places with them. . . . the resolve to uphold the moral and social importance of identity with the dispossessed is constantly put to the test in a dominant culture where empathy is readily discarded

> as an impediment to the pursuit of affluence and the preservation of privilege. (Ministry at the Margins, 117-118)

Case in point: In an editorial published in the Washington Post on Tuesday, June 10, 2003, E.J. Dionne notes how

> President Bush . . . is always eloquent in describing the exceptional work of those in churches, synagogues and mosques who devote their lives to the neediest among us. There's only one catch: When push comes to shove, the priorities of his administration are always somewhere else. Yes, Bush still talks about his faith-based initiative. But when the big money is divvied up, almost all of it goes to tax cuts, mostly for the wealthiest Americans.
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> In the recent $350 billion tax bill, Bush and Congress couldn't find $3.5 billion to expand the federal government's child tax credit to families earning between $10,500 and $26,625 a year. The expansion would have been worth an average of $150 per child, and as much as $400 for some children. But the provision got dropped. Helping these families required, as the president might put it, a little-bitty reduction in the huge tax cuts going to the richest Americans. Can't have that.
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> I don't want the faith-based approach to be a cover for the wholesale abandonment of government's responsibilities. . . . Millions of working people are poor -- and lack health insurance and adequate child care -- even though they do all the things that society and our religious traditions say they should. Religious groups will never have the money to transform the material conditions of these families. But relatively modest government outlays could make their lives much better.
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> There is a religious mandate for such an approach. "Jewish prophets and Catholic teaching both speak of God's special concern for the poor. This is perhaps the most radical teaching of faith, that the value of life is not contingent on wealth or strength or skill, that value is a reflection of God's image." Those thoughtful words are George W. Bush's. Is it too much to ask him to explain how his policies live up to that vision?

I personally had the opportunity to engage Mr. Bush face-to-face on the meaning of empathy in a briefing of religious leaders convened in Austin, Texas to promote the faith-based initiative in December of 2000, weeks before his inauguration. Since that time I have sent correspondence to him and have visited the White House twice on other matters, but I have not succeeded in continuing this conversation with the President.

At Third Street, we have had one small government grant in 25 years, and it helped us to establish the social work component of our ministry. Although I personally support and favor the current faith-based initiative, we are unwilling to make ourselves eligible to receive government grants by compartmentalizing our services to the poor and our understanding of church so as to separate the preaching and practices of the gospel from other aspects of our ministry. Our ministry to the poor is motivated by our commitment to the gospel—we would not do what we do if it were not for our belief that the gospel

brings hope and transformation to the lives of people. While we do not force people to convert to our religion, we offer them the opportunity to be nourished spiritually and physically at the same time. The most important commodity we serve is not grits, but hope.

Ministry is spiritual formation for service, and its ultimate measure is whether the remoralized, transformed individual is motivated and equipped to give back. At Third Street, our work with the homeless does not end when the person finds a job, housing and builds capacity to acquire adequate food and clothing. Our ministry succeeds when that remoralized person is positioned to give back—time, talents, gifts, money--signifying that meaningful spiritual transformation has indeed taken place.

Mutuality in Ministry and Missions

The principle of mutuality is a significant underpinning of the ministry of reconciliation. Whenever we position ourselves to minister to others, we must allow for the possibility that the other has something to offer to us. A biblical example of this principle is Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well (John 4). As the story goes, Jesus was tired, and presumably also very thirsty, as He sat down by the well to wait for His disciples to go into the town to buy food. The encounter begins when Jesus asks the woman for a drink of water. Her immediate response directs attention not to His need for water, but rather to the cultural, ethnic, social and religious barriers that exist between the two of them, because Jesus is a Jew, and this woman is a Samaritan. Jesus responds to her question by stating that there is something called living water that she ought to be seeking from Him. The ensuing conversation between them on the topic of water and wells inspires us to examine our assumptions about the neediness of others we may seek to help. Both Jesus and the woman need water—clearly we see their common humanity. But a peculiar ambivalence plagues us here—both Jesus and the woman desire to be ministered to, and each is positioned to minister to the other. Sometimes when we commit ourselves to particular mission projects, we fail to recognize the common bond of humanity that exists among people regardless of differences in such things as race, income, and gender. We make a further mistake as Christians when we assume that we are playing the role of Jesus in the encounter, especially when we see ourselves ministering to others out of our abundance, affluence, privilege or even our spiritual giftedness. In the work of missions, our task is not to position ourselves as Jesus. None of us is Jesus. Rather, our task is to seek genuine engagement, conversation and exchange with others, as we assess our own neediness in light of things we all have in common. It just may be that the person I set out to minister to has something of value to offer to me, if I would only be receptive and open to this type of role reversal instead of being offended by it. The entire story hinges upon Jesus acknowledging that He is thirsty. Without this admission of thirst, there is no conversation with the Samaritan woman, and they go their separate ways unchanged. Instead, we see Jesus as a thirsty man offering life-giving water to a woman whose life was shipwrecked by a series of failed relationships, as a hungry man feeding off His own mission to do the work of God. When His disciples returned from the town with food, and urged Him to eat, He replied, "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me, and to finish His work." His hunger is satisfied by the work of feeding others the bread of life; His thirst is quenched by helping others drink from the fountain of life.

Conclusion

At Third Street Church of God, our hunger and thirst for righteousness motivates our ministry and advocacy among the poor of Washington, D.C. Our religious commitments and theological convictions give shape to our preaching and our practice, to our visioning and aspirations. This year we are seeking to expand our facilities so we can house our ministry offices in a new structure and make our 76-year-old church building accessible to the disabled. We also desire to construct an urban ministry center on our campus that will enable us to consolidate our outreach ministries into one space. In the meantime, we will continue to use the available resources and space to foster reconciliation, transformation and empowerment in a faith community where the disinherited are motivated to hope, and the privileged are challenged to care.