

COLT: Congregation and City Workgroup Presentation, Part 2

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For our first meeting the Congregation and City Workgroup read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's essay entitled, "On the Theological Basis of the Work of World Alliance" with our discussion highlighting this passage:

"The word of the church to the world must therefore encounter the world in all its present reality from the deepest knowledge of the world, if it is to be authoritative. The church must be able to say the Word of God, the word of authority, here and now, in the most concrete way possible, from knowledge of the situation. The church must not therefore preach timeless principles however true, but only commandments which are true today. God is always God to us today."

The Congregation and City Workgroup has spent the last twelve months gaining "knowledge of the situation" in Charlottesville, mostly listening to the story of Charlottesville's past and present told in part, as John just described, by residents in low-income neighborhoods, Legal Aid Staff representing the county's significant yet seemingly invisible migrant population, the Virginia Organizing Project's community activists fighting various injustices present in Charlottesville, and both retired and active pastors describing that which has and does divide our town. And, as previously mentioned, we have called this process "articulating a theological narrative of Charlottesville, Virginia." We are attempting to gain an understanding both of where, to echo Rauschenbusch and other theologians, the Kingdom of Evil has taken hold and manifested itself in Charlottesville, and also where the Kingdom of God has touched down in time during specific moments and in particular places. We heard workgroup member George Telford's story of his vocation as pastor-theologian and Christian Civil Rights activist in Charlottesville in the 1960's as he ministered at Westminster Presbyterian Church, near the University. Telford emphasized the importance of place, of opening space for the divine initiative to usher in the Kingdom of God. While speaking of his church's responsibility to the University community he read from a paper he delivered to the congregation in 1967, "Westminster has—because of its location, its membership and the need—another task. That is the task of bearing what is sometimes a lonely witness to some crucial aspects of Christian faith often ignored or played down, if not down right rejected, in many other churches". He was speaking of what he called, "the problem of race and the question of the use of American power." And he led his congregation to concern themselves with both segregated housing and segregated kindergartens in Charlottesville. Telford's personal trajectory towards social

activism for the sake of the Gospel was profoundly influenced, he stressed, by the courage of laypeople in his first congregation to support and encourage his leadership in these areas. We also heard accounts of the Kingdom of God's presence from Dr. R. A. Johnson, local Civil Rights activist for the past five decades and pastor of Pilgrim Baptist Church as he recounted, among other events, a local sit-in at Buddy's restaurant. Johnson also expressed his disappointment with the Charlottesville church today to speak prophetically but held the hope that clergy will once again pray and struggle together over civil rights causes.

In our most recent meeting, we discussed with Daphne Spain, a UVA professor in the Department of Urban and Environmental Planning, her book *How Women Saved the City*. Spain examines women's public contribution between the Civil War and World War I to the construction of America's urban landscape through the founding and operation of voluntary associations. She names such associations as the YWCA and the National Association of Colored Women, organizations that fostered what she calls, "redemptive places," playgrounds, public baths, boarding houses, and vocational schools. After learning about this historic, social movement, the Congregation and City workgroup was left with a helpful nuanced term for the category of the Kingdom of God, namely this idea of redemptive space. This notion for us refers not only to physical place but also to a movement or rhythm of space-making that breaks down the walls and barriers that segregate and exclude. The fact that space can be redemptive also implies that, as Spain says, the city in general still needs saving. A place is redemptive if it opens space for strangers to become neighbors, space that is liminal in that it is in-between, or better, beyond, a private-public divide, space that nurtures free and loving responsibility towards others. The Congregation and City workgroup itself seeks to be such a space as it fosters much needed dialogue, story-telling and redemptive remembering. When Renae Shackelford, a Charlottesville native and Robert Saunders, authors of *Urban Renewal and the End of Black Culture in Charlottesville, Virginia*, revisited the painful events surrounding Vinegar Hill, a once thriving African-American neighborhood whose residents were relocated under urban renewal plans, they filled Trinity Episcopal's reception hall with almost 200 community members struggling together to make sense of this troubling legacy. Shackelford told our workgroup that this was the first time that she had been invited back to Charlottesville to speak since her book was published five years ago. Again, our task thus far has been first and foremost to listen and to do so over a rather lengthy amount of time. We are not tourists, to borrow Amy Laura Hall's description of her workgroup visits around the nation. Rather, our workgroup's narrowed focus on Charlottesville has allowed us to immerse ourselves in our own city's detailed particularities. We have the unique challenge of rooting our whole selves (for each of us a unique conglomeration of scholar, activist, citizen, and layperson or clergy member) into this particular locale, which is, for us, home. Therefore the Congregation and City workgroup is an academic project that should not be divorced from the reality that we are players in this drama. And as actors many of us within the workgroup, especially myself as a young scholar at the beginning of my vocation along with the other graduate students, find that we play multiple roles. We come to the workgroup table not only as fledgling scholars but also as past and probably future community builders or pastors. Hence, the external conversation that the Project on Lived Theology has sought to make room for between scholars of theology and religious historians and sociologists on the one hand and activists and pastors on the other is also an inward

dialogue within some of us in the form of a tension, albeit, we trust a creative tension that hopefully is leading towards constructive scholarship and action.

The roles we each play as a workgroup member, and the voices with which we have articulated and discussed portions of the narrative, produce an intriguing workgroup dynamic. Some of us are getting to know each other for the first time through this workgroup experience, some of us work together at Abundant Life Ministries which serves the Blue Ridge Commons Housing Project, or work together in the Religious Studies Dept at UVA, some of us pray the same liturgical words together every Sunday, some are clergy and laypeople within the same church body. And this means that our conversations can be powerful and sometimes messy. I have been attending, and three weeks ago was received into, Christ Episcopal Church, a wealthy white parish historically composed of Charlottesville's socially elite and previously involved in Virginia's "Massive Resistance" against school desegregation. I have written and presented to our workgroup a theological narrative critiquing Christ Church's participation in Massive Resistance by examining, with the help of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr., this church's previous conception of its Christian duty in relation to Charlottesville's school closings in 1958 and its consequent relationship to the historically African-American congregation at Trinity Episcopal. With gratitude I have attended various joint services over the past two years led by the rectors of these two Episcopal congregations. Still, the wounds left on Charlottesville's black community from Massive Resistance are real and present for those who lived through it. The concrete word of God must break the silence and be spoken today in the language the church knows best, confession and forgiveness. The Congregation and City Workgroup provides one forum for the inclusion of many interlocutors and creates space for what Bonhoeffer calls "the community of the cross" the fellowship of confessed sinners bearing the burdens of each other's sin and the sin of Charlottesville's past and present, and in turn becoming a vehicle of transformative power.

So we have spent a year gaining knowledge of Charlottesville, articulating a narrative, but what needs further exploration and clarity is how to more specifically speak theologically about this narrative. The life embodied in time and sociality is always already theologically imbued. In one simple turn from the horizontal to the vertical, so to speak, we may enclose our understandings of justice and injustice, community and segregation, societal participation and inactivity within a theological framework. The incarnation validates materiality and makes our history God's own. The Son's descent into humanity's depths through the incarnation, crucifixion and the Hell of Holy Saturday, his ascension to the Father and the Spirit's consequent descent into the believer's soul, reveal our goals of reconciling solidarity already as divine work and, eschatologically speaking, as divine triumph. Of course, understanding Trinitarian life and love to any degree is itself a complex enterprise and what is still more difficult is translating such understanding into participation with the divine in our own, concrete situations. In other words, we have well spent a year listening and asking with Bonhoeffer, how do we speak the concrete word of God in Charlottesville today? What do we say to Charlottesville's monolithic power structure, the university, of which many of us are a part as it extends its reach into once stable neighborhoods? What do we say to pastors and members of a church slowly opening its eyes to the wounds of its neighbors? To neighbors enduring these injuries? To the

Charlottesville church racially and socio-economically divided on a Sunday morning? How will we let the concrete word of God speak into our own individual lives and challenge us towards faithful prayer and social action? Although the formation of the Congregation and City workgroup and the knowledge gained over the past year has been a necessary prologue, we must begin to offer answers, however incomplete, to these and other urgent questions.