

Lived Theology and Community Building Workgroup Meeting Three – Narrative Summary

Meeting Highlights

Los Angeles, CA

May 4-6, 2001

On May 4, 2001, the Lived Theology and Community Building workgroup traveled to Los Angeles, where it visited Christian community builders in west LA and the Boyle Heights neighborhood. The site visit day offered a study in theological contrasts.

On Saturday morning, the group visited with Mark Whitlock, the director of the Fame Renaissance community project of the First AME Church of Los Angeles, an 18,000 member, predominantly middle-class African American congregation, which in the past decade has come to be surrounded by a Hispanic community. (Television personality Arsenio Hall is a member, and the church boasts of the fact that every American president in the past fifty years has spoken on a Sunday morning. Whitlock's office features photographs of Nelson Mandela, Tom Hanks, Bill Clinton and Michael Eisner.) As President of Fame Renaissance, Whitlock has been tremendously successful raising sizeable grants to fund its community development initiatives. After the 1992 riots, Michael Eisner, the CEO of Disney, gave Fame a million-dollar contribution to help create jobs and opportunities for the neighborhood, which had been decimated in the riots. (The riots served as the catalyst of much church-based urban development throughout L.A.) Fame's primary concern is to help lower-middle-class blacks reach the upper-middle class and remains uninvolved in the Hispanic community at its doorstep.

On Saturday afternoon, the group visited the Delores Mission in East Los Angeles. Delores Mission, located in the Boyle Heights neighborhood, sits in the middle of the largest tract of subsidized housing west of the Mississippi. "This huge piece of social engineering hasn't worked out so well," noted one journalist ten years ago. The Pico Gardens and Alison Village are "poor, crowded and packed with gangs"—more than 60 gangs and 10,000 gang members within 16 square miles. But the members of Delores Mission, and its priest, Father Greg Boyle (sometimes called the Irish-American Jesuit homeboy) have steadily gone about the work of the church, celebrating the Eucharist daily, praying with gang members at funerals, forming prayer and spirituality cell-groups in neighborhood homes, establishing day schools and tutorial programs and turning the sanctuary at night into a safe sleeping space.

Over the past decade Boyle Heights has become livable once again. "I keep telling them they're not the bad son," says Father Boyle. "I keep telling them over and over, 'You are the son that any parents would be proud to claim as their own.' That's the truth. That's not some fantasy. As soon as they know that they're exactly what God had in mind when God made them, then they become that. Once they can do that—love themselves—they're not inclined to shoot somebody or hurt somebody to be out there gang-banging."

The group raised many questions in response to the two different community-building initiatives: What are the theological influences of a community development vision based on black-

empowerment? One member used the christological description of a muscular Jesus ascending from generations of weakness to exert its strength. The image raised interesting considerations of how a “theologia gloriae”—“a theology of the glory of the new man actualized and introduced in the crucified Jesus Christ who triumphs as the Crucified” (Barth)—might shape differing images of social capital and power than a “theologia crucis”—a theology emphasizing the self-revealing of God in suffering and in the cross—and of how many fashionable ecclesiologies tend to underwrite institutional weakness and social quietism. What role does doctrine overtly and covertly play in influencing social engagement?

In addition to Delores Mission and First AME’s Fame Renaissance, the workgroup’s visit to the Young Nak Presbyterian Church (a 8,000 member Korean church with Korean- and English-speaking congregation) offered a fascinating case study in the way one culturally isolated congregation shifted its theological and evangelistic priorities in the events following the 1992 L.A. riots and became a congregation intensely involved in community development.

In addition, the group raised critical questions in response to the general issue of faith-based organizations, (FBOs). Heather Warren’s helpful presentation cast light on many of these: What is happening ecumenically, if anything, in FBOs? Are FBOs mission or evangelism? How has the relation between mission and evangelism been understood/changed in the history of mainline Protestantism? How have theologies affected Protestant ideas about the causes of social ills and their remedies? How have these theologies been shaped by social conditions and cultural assumptions? How do FBOs work out the tension between ministering to individuals and ministering to social structures and institutions? Why has America seen the rise of Community Development Corporations (CDCs) since the 1960s and 1970s?

The weekend prompted vigorous and substantive conversation about the theological enterprise as it takes shape in conversation with pastors, organizers and other disciplines. Exceptionally thoughtful papers by Omar McRoberts, Stephen Fowl, Heather Warren and Wallace Best encouraged further our shared belief that something fresh and important is happening in our collaborative work that may very well change the way many theologians think about their subject matter and pastors think about theologians, as well as the way historians and sociologists think about the role of theological commitments in lived experience.

Readings

- Carle, Robert D. and Louis A. Decaro, Jr., eds. *Signs of Hope in the City: Ministries of Community Renewal*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1999.
- Linthicum, Robert C. *Empowering the Poor: Community Organizing Among the City’s Rag, Tag and Bobtail*. Monrovia, CA: World Vision, 1991.
- Orr, John. “Los Angeles Religion: A Civic Profile 1998.” Center for Religion and Civic Culture. 19 September 2000.

Papers/Presentations

- Omar M. McRoberts: Communities Within Community: The Birth of a Contemporary “Religious District”
- Stephen Fowl (32k, pdf): God’s Beautiful City: Christian Mission After Christendom
- Heather Warren (34k, pdf): Historical Perspectives on Faith-Based Organizations and Community Development