

Reporting from CCDA's 30th Annual Conference - November 1-2, 2018

A Catholic Looking In: Before coming to UVA, I worked in the Catholic social justice world. I spent a significant amount of time, at gatherings and through relationships, getting to know its core ideas, leading thinkers, and foundational literature. So, when I set out for the [Christian Community Development Association's](#) annual conference, even though I had not previously encountered CCDA and was unfamiliar with the evangelical community, I felt confident that I would find kinship and familiarity.

The reality was that I did and I did not. I did insofar as I felt at home with the energy and passion of those inspired by their faith to live and serve on the margins of society. I did not insofar as I had hardly encountered any of the speakers, books, and organizations on display prior to arriving (exactly one speaker, one book, and one organization out of hundreds). This gathering was a whole new ecosystem.

My first reaction was one of excitement; I was excited to learn. My second reaction was one of sadness as I reflected on how divided we remain in the world of faith and justice. We build from roots in the same faith, we speak much of the same language, and we have similar ends, and yet we are worlds apart. Dr. John Perkins' three R's of Relocation, Reconciliation, and Redistribution would have fit perfectly in any Catholic meeting on justice and faith just as young Catholics of the [Jesuit Volunteer Corps](#) (where I previously worked) and committed activists like those of the [Catholic Worker](#) movement could have easily filled the seats of CCDA. I am left wondering where the traditional lines that separate us are meaningful and important—and where they prevent us from joining together in more effectively carrying forth the mission of Christian faith and justice.

Defending the Orthodoxy of Justice: From the start of CCDA's Annual Conference I heard a familiar theme: those working for justice defending the orthodoxy of their faith. The opening bible study with CCDA's founder Rev. Dr. John Perkins and former board chair Dr. Wayne 'Coach' Gordon focused on demonstrating that the work of Christian Community Development is, in fact, scripturally based. Its principals are not ancillary to the gospel but central to the gospel. They, as well as numerous speakers that followed, shared stories of being challenged by other Christians for the lack of orthodoxy in their work—accused of straying from personal devotion into socio-political action or speaking out against institutional sin rather than personal sin. Defending the work of justice as central to the practice of faith is a common experience in the Catholic space as well. The dialectic reminded me of the Catholic voices that complain that Pope Francis should not be so vocal about poverty or climate change. The words of Micah 6:8, cited by Coach Gordon, compelled me most: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" That the Christian faith demands work for justice seems so abundantly clear. And yet it remains in need of defending.

Bursting the Bubble: On Friday morning, reality broke through the walls of the Arie Crown Theater at McCormick Place Conference. CCDA's Annual Conference was twenty-four hours old at this point and had been filled with joyful praise for the grace of God, collective

lamentations over the state of our community and nations, and rousing preaching and workshops rallying the participants to dialogue and action. At the end of the first plenary of the morning, Noel Castellanos, the CEO of CCDA, rose to the stage to close the morning in prayer. Before he prayed he shared that the brother of one of the participants at the conference had been gunned down the night before just a few miles south of the conference center. Silence and sighs rippled across the packed theater. It can become easy to separate from reality as long as the praise and worship crew is booming, fellow participants are all smiles, and one literally cannot see the outside world from within the conference center. But moments of painful heartbreak, even for someone few of us knew, re-centered me on the reality of the sorrow. There was yet another victim, another family, another painful death. We prayed together for the young man and his family, and continued forward in awareness of the fragility and pain of our world.

Rooted: The theme of the CCDA's Annual Conference was "Rooted." The importance of deep rootedness—in place, scripture, memory, community and God—echoed through our two days together. The theme played most powerfully for me in the back-to-back talks of Dr. Ray Bakke and Pastor Enid Almanzar. Dr. Bakke called on the crowd to remember the various taproots of faith from Luther, John Edwards, and John Wesley but also from the Catholic, Orthodox and various Coptic Christian churches of early Christianity. These interwoven tap roots, often forgotten, shape the church today. Pastor Almanzar built on the image of the rooted tree and called to our attention the risk of planting near toxic waters such as racism, xenophobia, and misogyny. She called for distinguishing roots of prayer, meditation and love from those toxic forces that have long infected Christian theology. She reminded us of the long hard work of repentance, lamentation, and reconciliation required to truly separate out these roots and position ourselves by the life giving stream of God's waters.

Conflict Within the Movement: As many who follow CCDA know, the conference ended in the midst of controversy—both over the words of one of the final speakers and an internal dispute between staff and leadership that spilled over into conference. As someone new to the community, I spent most of my time simply trying to understand what had happened and how such a chasm had grown within members of the community. Others, especially members of the CCDA community, are far more qualified to share the details of what's happening and you can hear from CCDA in their [statement of repentance](#). My simple addition would be that these crises seem to be arising all over the justice space and particularly within the faith and justice space. The jeremiad of Dr. Daniel White Hodges and the demands for change from former staff members called all present to look inward in uncomfortable ways on issues ranging from white supremacy to misogyny to LGBTQ rights. Especially in spaces that reach across generational and racial lines, in a time of upheaval like the one we are living through, these calls for inward examination will almost always wound and divide. And CCDA is not alone in wrestling with these challenges. How honestly can we reckon with these challenges? How bravely can we reconcile ourselves to each other and to God?