John Kiess's presentation – Congregation and City Workgroup

The Congregation and City workgroup was unique among the other workgroups in that its focus was tied to a particular context, the city of Charlottesville. Besides making life substantially easier for Charles and his budget, this focus seemed essential for a number of more important reasons. Foremost among these concerned the very integrity of the project at home. How, as Amy Laura Hall asked yesterday, can a project focused on the living energies of particular communities not turn its eyes with increased vigor to its own backyard? How can lived theology matter if, in the very institution the project is housed, there is not a break from conventional modes of theological reflection, and some effort made to address the summons of the neighbor here locally? To remain true to its fundamental rationale, the Project on Lived Theology needed to get its hands dirty at home.

The Congregation and City workgroup was formed out of this need. Composed of pastors, activists, students and theologians who all share the same zip code, the workgroup explored the possibility of creating a lasting, vital culture of lived theology locally, a culture in which it becomes impossible to ask questions without at once being implicated in the matters at hand. To ask questions was to put oneself in the dock, to have one's own practices called into question. Students in the workgroup who met with residents of Westhaven and South First St had to reckon with the realities that animate the lives of the men and women who clean their dormrooms; pastors had to reckon with the legacy of their church's inaction and silence; activists had to reckon with the limits their shallow ecclesiologies imposed on their work; professors had to reckon with the

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community-disrupting effect their employer has had in numerous neighborhoods throughout the city.

Our local focus quickly relieved us of any illusion that the academy and the community are disconnected. The irony in Charlottesville is that the two couldn't be *more* connected, for all the wrong reasons. The University exercises a profound influence on the affairs of the city, from employment to housing to the flow of traffic. But more powerful is the influence it has on the local imagination, how pervasively its conception of the city has won out against all rivals. Its narrative, which is embodied and enfleshed to near perfection, sets the parameters for a just wage, for the growth of local industry, for transportation, for neighborhood development and sustainability. As a workgroup, we sensed that the question before us was not how to reconnect the academy to practical concerns, but to reconfigure the connection itself in a way that was theologically responsible.

Thus the need for narrative. We understood narrative to be much more than simply a description of the city. We saw narrative to be something that can do things to time and space: it can fragment subjects, make neighborhoods into grids, impose dichotomies like public and private, affordable and unaffordable, rich and poor. What makes a narrative theological? That's a question we struggled with, and continue to struggle with. We developed only intimations of answers, intimations that I hope you will help us develop.

The first, I think most critical intimation, concerns the methodology of the narrative itself. Theology teaches us neighbor-love, and neighbor-love has profound implications for the way we are to understand language. Our resort to words does not take place in an ethical vacuum—or gnostic space as many have said this week—but in the presence of the other. Narrative, theologically understood, is dialogical; it requires what David Ford calls 'facing': positioning oneself before the face of the other, incorporating that voice in a democratic discourse. As a workgroup, we found that the first step in the construction of a theological narrative of Charlottesville is a turning towards the neighbor: it is a discovery of *primary names*: Audrey Oliver, Joy Johnson, Karen Waters, Jarvis Williams; it is a discovery of *street names*: Monticello Ave, 10th and Page, Prospect Ave; its is a discovery of *communities*: Vinegar Hill, Garrett Square, Westhaven. The narrative then swells with the neighbor, the neighbor most often left out of rival narratives: African-Americans displaced during urban renewal, the migrant workers who occupy corners of warehouses rented out for $1000 a month, the protesters holding up signs for a just wage for workers at the Courtyard Marriott. I remember vividly when Joe Szakos, head of the Virginia Organizing Project, challenged us, "What if, during you coffee hours at church, you asked your high-level business executives when the last time they spent some time with their workers. Ask them if they'd be willing to share lunch with a few of their workers and hear their stories. This simple personal encounter would open eyes and do much to communicate the conditions of workers that any Christian would find unacceptable."

We wondered, as a second intimation, whether theological narrative conceived dialogically allows us to recover a sense of the performative character of language. We, like Bonhoeffer in his Baptism letter to Bethge, lament the impotence of theological language, its failure to speak with history-dividing power, but if theological narrative conditioned by love requires closer proximity to the neighbor—requires a conversation with the neighbor—these words are caught up in the creation of community. Articulating a vision of the city which incorporates the voice of the voiceless requires a relationship with the bodies from whom those voices arise. The narrative itself is a relationship, a social reality inaugurated by agape. After a year with the workgroup, it is difficult to conceive of a narrative of Charlottesville emerging without the corresponding community that arose, that is still rising. Words were never too far from flesh.

Of course, this means the narrative is never finished, or perhaps, never really started, which is to say a narrative is most properly theological in its eschatological dimension; its unfinishedness; its perpetual unfolding. The temptation is to hold up narrative as a finished product, as a written document, that if only we get the story right we can begin to act. If I know finally how the church relates to the city, and the precise dimensions of its story (the beginning and end), then I can begin. The end of the narrative is not ours to possess. Nor should we feel captive to reach it. We risk bowing to a false soteriology (fetishizing knowledge) and projecting a story onto the world. We reduce the world to words, reducing what is other to the same. The narrative must remain open to the neighbor who continues to shape it.