

Cheryl Sanders and Ray Rivera

“Spirit, Power, and Social Progress”

The Conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage

Saturday, July 14th, 2003

Ray Rivera: Amen. Praise God. Amen, I can say that, right? Amen, this is a theological conference, amen. I’m excited to be here, and I just want to also thank Dr. Marsh and those who invited me. I’m primarily a pastor and evangelist, I do have an honorary doctorate, and I’ve spoken at different seminaries, but when I’m in the presence of people who come from an academic context, I usually ask myself rhetorically, “What am I doing here?” And it’s just exciting to be here, and I’ve learned a lot, and I just hope that I can contribute to the dialog.

Let me start off by saying that by way of my own personal journey, I experienced the Lord at the age of 16, I had a conversion experience, it was a personal experience, a personal encounter with Jesus Christ as Lord, and coming out of Catholic background and being on the fringes of juvenile delinquency and gang activity, even though I came from a working class family, that my father resisted us being on welfare and came in 1941 to East Harlem. It was there that as I heard music coming out of a dance hall I thought it was a dance because that’s where we used to go and dance and most of us had

left gang activity but we had become social clubs, which just meant kind of gangs with another name, and we thought we were conservative and had sweaters now and with our names on it, and this was in Johnson projects in East Harlem. And there, we went in, but to my surprise, it was an evangelistic crusade. And the preacher was speaking about his experience and how he had been delivered from drugs and of course, we didn't understand that, so we were laughing, you know, so it was, in some sense, he caught our attention. And it was there that this journey began. After the crusade, he took us to a church, we really went in because the girls were looking good and they had long, sanctuous hair. Latino Pentecostals, the women didn't use make-up, and you know, so basically, that was our motivation for coming. I wish I could say that I saw an angel or something, that there were visions or something, but that wasn't really what got me into the church. I visited and this local church, it was there that I had an experience with the Lord. In our tradition, you had an experience with the Lord and you went right into Bible Institute, so six months later, I was in Bible Institute, and I was learning the word of God, and then I graduated from Bible Institute, and right after graduation, my pastor, who happened to be the president, sent me to pastor a church, and I was only 19 years old. And they gave me this little church with 12 members, store front, and it was made up of three families, and they were all feuding. And in our tradition, the way they tested if you had a real call, they send you like to the worst church. And so, it was there that it was a tent ministry, it was about 1964, it coincided with President Johnson, the whole war on poverty, and I had to get a job, and my first job was as a community organizer. So here I was organizing welfare recipients during the day and confronting the system and picketing and demonstrating and doing sit-ins, and at night I was preaching to the people

“suffer now and we’ll get to heaven” In other words, if we suffer now, the Lord will eventually get us to heaven, so I felt like this creative tension. Amen. I didn’t even know how use that word then, but there was a duality because I was create change during the day but at night I was kind of preaching an other-worldly gospel.

And that began this journey of holistic ministry, of holistic theology; I felt the need to, for further study, so I went to New York Theological Seminary. Bill Weber had just taken over the presidency. And he had left Union, and I went to him, and Bill Weber is a classic theologian, was chair of church and society department at Union for over 30 years, and they brought him to New York Theological, it was called the New York Biblical Seminary, to see if he could resurrect the seminary because it was dying, so I went to him, and in my ignorance, I said, “listen, I want to study” and he said, well you can’t study here because you need a bachelors. And I didn’t have a bachelor's. So I didn’t know what to say, and I wasn’t as profound as our previous theologian that and I didn’t know that church growth could be a negative sign, so all I had to say was, what I said spontaneously to him, and I did it without much thinking, was, “well, listen your church”, since he was a denominational person, I said, “your churches are empty and ours are growing so we must be doing something right,” and he kind of laughed, and he said, “okay, if you find me forty like you, I’ll develop an undergraduate program here.” That was 1973. And I guess he thought I was kidding or something, so I went back and I brought 60 like me. 60 Pentecostals that wanted to be engaged in theological education, so he went again, to Lily, and he got a grant, and we developed the first undergraduate program at NYTS. It became a model, it was replicated all over the country, seminaries

working with colleges, and most of us got our bachelors, and we went on to further education. It was during that time that I later became a trustee there, developed programs for Latinos and blacks, and stayed there with Bill for about 10 years on the board.

During that time, this Reformed church minister, Don DeYoung, he was in East Harlem and I guess he thought I was some kind of expert, so he said, "Can you come and talk to my consistory on transitional churches?" And I said, well, okay, I didn't really know what that totally meant, so I went and was consistory, I had never heard the term, but I went and I shared, and they were excited. It was about 13 little older white people, and the church was dying, and they brought me in to kind of give some advice in that kind of transitional context. And when I went, I guess I was so good in the presentation that they asked me to come as the pastor. And I said, "Wow, let's see, I've always had to work in ministry, they're offering me a salary, they're offering me a parsonage" so I thought about it and I said, "all right, I'll come." So, and I started pasturing that church, and the older people, they died, and they went, or they moved, they moved and I developed a Latino ministry there and it grew in about three years, there were little pockets in the RCA, this is Reformed Church in America, so being an organizer, I started organizing them, and I developed the first Hispanic council in the reformed church, and then they asked me to come as the National Secretary of Hispanic Ministries in the RCA, and all of the sudden I find myself at 30 years of age at the interchurch center, 475 riverside drive, at the 18th floor, looking over (muffled), in a big office, and coming out of an indigenous Pentecostal setting, you know, it was so alien to me because you had to send memos for everything you had to do, and it took a long time for one memo to get from one side of the room to the other, and it felt like a multi-national corporation. In our tradition, we

never sent memos, you know, and it wasn't, but I learned there, the director of the black council at that time was a man named Bill Howard, president of the National Council of Churches, and Bill took me under his wing, and he said, "listen, this is the way that you navigate this" but we came into the RCA with a lot of passion for evangelism, the Black Council was already stereotyped that they didn't care about evangelism, which was not true, was a lie. But, that was the stereotype, and he kind of navigated me, and part of my portfolio was to go and interpret the mission of the church, about 20 %, I had to travel all around the country and I found myself in places like Sioux Center, Iowa. Or Holland, Michigan, you know? I was like, I remember being at a place called Christ Memorial church, big church, 5000 members, and when I went around I was received well because I had the, you know, Pentecostal passion, they like preachers, being there, and I would say "look, can I give an altar call, can I be myself" and they'd say, look, do whatever you want, so I would make an altar call. The Reformed church comes out of a Dutch context, basically people would come to the altar, and I remember you had to stay in people's home, so I was at this little elder's house, and he was about 73, and he was feeding me, and we was talking, and he said, "Reverend Riverra, that was a powerful sermon, the Lord really moved, that was great. And I'm glad you're not like those other Mexicans in town." And he actually said that to me. With no consciousness that I was Latino, you know? That kind of just reinforced the whole dichotomy between the social and the secular, between one's personal life and the social context of one's life, and I saw a lot of that. In the Reformed church, they had migrant towns and people, that were elders of the church owned the land in deplorable conditions and there was no connection between eldership and how they lived out the social implications. So that continued my search for

“How could this be, how could people be committed to Christ and have all the language but then the social implications of the Gospel, how they live on a daily basis is kind of not connected?” So that just continued my hunger to pursue this.

I just want to share with you my own understanding of what holistic ministry is and I’m going to go to the text, I’m going to go the Bible because in our tradition, as Dr. Sanders probably knows, if it’s not in the Bible, people are not going to listen. Pretty much, you have to be informed by Scripture. Not that our people always live the Scripture, but you have to show them that it’s in Scripture. My paradigm for ministry, and I’m writing now, and I hope that the book comes out, is doing ministry in a situation of captivity. And I believe that the context of ministry is captivity, whether it’s spiritual captivity, socio-economic captivity, or political captivity, but that’s the context on how we minister. We minister in a situation of captivity, so I’m just going to take you through about three examples, there are about 20 essays that I’m writing taking the Israelite experience in captivity and how that applies to the European context, so in the book of Ezekiel, and those that brought their text with them can just follow me if you want, I’m going to read beginning in Ezekiel. Chapter 1, verse 1. It says, Now it came to pass in the 13th year, in the 4th month, on the 5th day of the month, as I was among the captives, by the river (?), that the heavens were open and I saw visions of God.” Again, now: Now it came to pass in the 13th year, in the 4th month, on the 5th day of the month, as I was among the captives, by the river (?), that the heavens were open and I saw visions of God.” So I’m going to share with you some principles of what I think we need to do ministry in a situation of captivity. The first thing we need is, “Now it came to pass in the 13th year,

on the 4th month, on the 5th day, as I sat among the captives by the river (“), the heavens were open and I saw visions of God.”

The first thing we need is a transcendent vision of God. A vision that transcends history. A vision that’s beyond history. Captivity is an awful place to be in, can you say amen? See we try to romanticize captivity, most of us, when we see pictures of slaves, or migrant workers, movies, they put our people all happy with banjos and they’re singing, they’re having a good time, but we can’t romanticize captivity. Captivity is brutal. Captivity is dehumanizing. Captivity strips the human person of their dignity and intrinsic value. There’s nothing romantic about captivity. Captivity dehumanizes people, and when you minister in a situation of captivity, sometimes hope is gone, but the interesting thing is that even though the context was captivity, in the midst of captivity, the heavens were open and I saw visions of God, so there was a transcendent vision, even in the midst of captivity. In order to minister in a situation of captivity, you need a transcendent vision, or else captivity will swallow you up. Or captivity will begin to dictate your values, your circumstances, your ideology, so the transcendent vision transcends captivity. So that’s the first things. We need a transcendent vision.

But the transcendent vision comes in the midst of the historical context. Notice: he says, “in the 4th month, on the 5th day of the month, in the 13th year.” He marks the historical context. It’s a transcendent vision, but it doesn’t come in an abstract form. It’s not some pie in the sky vision. Say Amen. It’s concrete. It’s specific. He marks the time, it’s in the 13th year, it’s in the 4th month, and it’s in the 5th day. So the transcendent vision

comes in the midst of concrete historical reality. Transcendent visions have to speak to our immediate reality. They have to be relevant to our human situation. That's why we have to cancel out all this false preoccupation with eschatology. Eschatology can become escapism. And let me not move into a preaching mode. But you know that Jesus censured that false preoccupation with eschatology when the disciples said, "Will you restore the kingdom in this time?" and what did he say, "it's not for you?" What? To know? To know the season. In other words, this obsession, this false preoccupation is not a positive thing, a balance of discerning the times, that's okay, but this spirit where you have to know, is not a positive thing, so a transcendent vision, but that vision must come in the midst of a historical context, has to speak to juvenile delinquents, say amen. Has to speak to drugs, has to speak to the homeless. It has to speak to consumerism; it has to speak to militarism. The vision comes in the midst of a historical context, and you have to analyze that context, and if I was really teaching, I would say you do a demographic study and you analyze your context and your transcendent vision comes in the midst of that historical reality.

What else do you need to minister? If you go to chapter 2, the Lord says to Ezekiel, listen, I'm sending you to a rebellious house, I'm sending you to a people who don't hear, I'm sending you to a people who will not submit, but listen, whether they hear or whether they refuse, for they are a rebellious house, yet they will know that a prophet has been among them. What do you need to do ministry in a situation of captivity, you need prophetic integrity. Whether they hear, or they don't hear, they will know that a prophet has been among them. There's no place for being politically correct in the kingdom. Just

because the dominant culture dictates a particular lifestyle, that doesn't mean that the prophet subjects himself to that. Whether they hear, or they don't hear, they will know that a prophet has been among them. SO we need prophetic integrity in order to minister in a situation of captivity. You have to be able to tell the health system in your neighborhood, "you're not providing quality health", say amen. You have to be able to tell the educational system, "You're mis-educating instead of educating." You see, you have to have the integrity to be able to speak out and whether they listen or they don't listen, your prophetic integrity is in tact.

Moving to chapter 3, verse 15, listen, "Then, I came to the captives at telebee, who dwelt by the river (?), and I sat where they sat, and remained there astonished, in some versions, perplexed, in other versions, overwhelmed, among them for seven days. In order to do ministry in a situation of captivity, ministry has to be incarnation. He sat where the people sat. He experienced in flesh and bone what they experienced. We can't have these ministries that just drop in on Sunday. It has to be incarnational, it has to be existential, it has to become part of the reality of the people. He sat where they sat. So you have to have a transcendent vision, that vision has to come in the midst of historical reality, you have to have prophetic integrity, and ministry has to also be incarnational, you have to sit where the people sit. Verse 14, so the spirit lifted me up and took me away and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit but the hand of the lord was strong upon me. Listen: the spirit lifted me up and took me away and I went in what? In bitterness. You know, we have this illusion that we always have to go singing, "he set me free, he set me free." But many times that I submit to the Lord, I go in bitterness. I

go in the heat of the spirit because if you're in a situation of captivity, sometimes you get bitter. It's so oppressive, it's so dehumanizing. When you're in a situation of captivity and you see women that go into relationship after relationship and they're abused by men and oppressed by men and the system has conditioned them to such a degree that they're looking for validation outside of themselves and they're looking for value outside of themselves and you see them continuing the cycle of abuse, your spirit gets heated. If it doesn't, there's something wrong with you. When you see a sexual abuse, when you see all of it, you have to get angry about it. So Ezekiel says so the spirit lifted me up and took me away and I went in bitterness in the heat of the spirit. But the hand of the Lord was strong upon me. Because I went, even if I was bitter, even if I was heated, even if it was difficult, even if sometimes, I didn't even want to go, come on, say amen. Because I went, the hand of the Lord was strong upon me. And as sister Victoria shared, I'm sure many times she didn't want to go. Because there's nothing romantic about oppression. Many of our people – we believe in incarnational ministry, so we stay, we minister where we live, some of our people don't want to stay, they're tired of the garbage. Come on, say amen. They're tired of the struggle. They're tired of the poverty. They're tired of the conditions, so they are angry about them. But they stay, and the hand of the Lord is strong upon you, even in the midst of them. Amen.

Let's move to Esther. Esther is a different situation of captivity. Here we have Babylonian captivity, and in Esther, it's a Persian captivity. And if you notice, in Esther chapter, 1, it's an unlikely criterion for success. She was an orphan, she was an adopted daughter, and she was a captive. That's not exactly the criteria for being successful.

Orphan, adopted daughter and a captive. She's in a situation of captivity and if I was speaking to my type of Pentecostal audiences, I would say, 'I wish I could tell you that the movement in the book of Esther was the result of a prayer service. I wish I could tell you that people were speaking tongues and prophesying, but that's not it. The way she got into the palace through a beauty pageant. The king looked at her and said, "She's looking good." And we teach that God was in that. Come on and say amen, because we say that God's behind the book of Esther, even though the word God is not what? Mentioned. But that God was in that, so I'm not advocating for using beauty pageants as some methodology, but what I am saying is that we can't put God in a box. That he's an expert at jumping out of boxes, amen? And somehow, he used this beauty pageant and you see such a contrast because Vashti refused to be objectified, right? IN her flesh. She said, "I'm not showing my flesh." And it was unjust, she was removed. That's why sometimes, I can't get dogmatic because I want to confront every injustice, amen? I'm like, I got to go after that one, but the injustice committed against Vashti prepared the way for Esther. Isn't that something? That sometimes if you really believe in the sovereignty of God, that God somehow, like the sister said in the video, God's in the midst. That somehow, God's in control, it was part of the process and Vashti decline gave way to Esther's rise. So, Esther moves from being a captive into the palace. And you know, in the story, Mordecai and Haman enter and it says that Mordecai discovered a plot against the King, I'm just going very quickly, and Haman became the prime minister. And Mordecai would pass every day by Haman and he didn't bow and the custom was to bow. And Haman god infuriate because people said that Mordecai is not bowing. But you know the politically correct thing was to bow, because that was

legitimate power; in the context of the monarchy, that power was legitimate. Sometimes, we are confronted by legitimate power, but in the context of ministering in a situation of captivity, sometimes even before legitimate power we can't bow. Even if the power is legitimate. Even if the power is institutional. Even if the power has the appearance of legitimacy, Mordecai couldn't bow because he would violate the revelation of God in his life. He would violate his understanding of his covenant with God, and when we minister in a situation of captivity, it doesn't matter what the system says, what legitimate authority says, what the demands are, sometimes, we just can't bow. Tell the person next to you "we just can't bow." We just can't bow. It doesn't matter if it's legitimate. Sometimes, we cannot bow. Now there's consequences to not bowing. He didn't take it out on him, he moved for collective retribution. He went to the king and asked for the extermination and the destruction of a whole people. We have a modern word for that. What is it? Genocide. And that's what he asked the king for, and if you look in the book of Esther, there's an interesting transaction in Chapter 3. He goes to the king and says, "Look, king, I want a decree." And if you give me the decree, I'm going to put ten thousand talents into the treasure." There we see the relationship between economics and what? And power. Or economics and genocide. I submit to you humbly that every time there's a decree of death all over this world, money exchanged hands. There are economic transactions even as we speak that are signing death decrees on people. And it is so clear there. He says, "Look, give me the death decree and I'll put money into the treasury." And you know what happened. The king gave it to him and if you look at chapter 4, Mordecai sees the death sentence over the cities and he begins to cry and yell and scream, and he sits in ashes because there's a death sentence over the cities. I really

think there are death sentences over our cities. We can't hear them sometimes because we're spiritually deaf, but they're death sentences. Death sentences sound, death sentences that have been signed by the abuse of institutional power. Let me say that again. Death sentences that have been signed by the abuse of institutional power, and they're all over our cities. Death sentences. Mordecai started wailing and screaming as the death sentence – re-read the book – as the death sentence, I'm not going to quote anymore, but as the death sentence is passed from city to city, the wailing and the crying and all of the sudden stopped at the king's gate. And someone told Esther, "listen, your uncle's outside, and he's crying and he's wailing because there's a death sentence over the city." Everyone say there's a death sentence over the city. And when she heard that, you know what she did? She sent him a change of clothes. That's what she did. She sent him a change of clothes. Now, there's nothing wrong with a change of clothes, Amen? There's nothing wrong with dealing with the symptoms, there's nothing wrong with dealing with charity. There's nothing wrong with dealing with relief of the poor, but sometimes, the solution is not in relief. It's not in charity. It's a systemic issue. It's an institutional issue. So, when Esther sends him a change of clothes, what does he do? He refuses it and sends it right back. Listen, this isn't about my comfort. There's a death sentence over the city. This isn't about you alleviating my individual situation. This isn't about individual transformation. That's good, but there's something more involved. This is about a systemic, structural indictment that has caused a death sentence over the city, and when the messenger gets back to Esther, he tells her, 'You go tell Esther that she has to go before the king and has to advocate before the king and has to get this death sentence lifted over our people.' So the messenger goes back and she tells Esther and

read Esther's response. She says, "Look, go back and tell my uncle that there's some laws here in the palace. There's some laws here. No one can go to the king unless you're called and I haven't been called for thirty days." In other words, Esther had internalized the laws of the dominant culture. She had internalized the laws of the palace. Now, don't blame Esther. Life was good in the palace sometimes, yes? I mean, some of us have been allowed to enter the spheres of power. We're in one right now. Not everyone gets to go to these conferences, come on, say Amen. We're not going to be delusional and say that we really are the grassroots, you know? We represent the grass roots, but most grass roots don't get invited to this conference, come on, say Amen. So, basically, it's difficult being in the palace because assimilation takes place. Because acculturation takes place. At a minimum, accommodation takes place, and there's a difference between those three. And we can't get into them, assimilation, acculturation, accommodation, so Esther said, "Look, I can't go." And the messenger goes back to Mordecai and Mordecai hears him and says "listen, you go tell Esther. You go tell Esther that if she keeps quiet in this hour, salvation will come from some other place." In other words, Esther, you're not indispensable. Sister says, "you're not all that." I hear it, alright? In other words, he's saying, "Look, if you keep quiet, God's going to do it some other way, but you and your father's house will perish." What is he telling her, basically? Is he telling us, "Esther, listen, sister, you black." That's what he's saying. You Latina. You may be in the palace, but you ain't Persian. Come on, say amen. That's what, basically, he's telling her. When the decree comes down, they're going to find out that you're a what, you're a Jew, you're gone. You may be in the palace, but you're not from the palace. But who knows if for such a time as this, you've come into the kingdom, it's

been God's plan. You're there, but you're there to advocate for your people. You're there but it's a Kairos moment. God has been behind it. Amen. He's orchestrated it, and those of us in spheres of power that have been given access to the empire are there to be able to use our gifts and talents, whether we're Latino or black or white, we're there as representatives of the Kingdom and to advocate for our understanding of what God's plan is and God's historical process in our lives. It must of gotten to her because she said, "Okay, you go tell Mordecai that he should fast with all the people on the outside, and I'm going to fast and pray where? On the inside. And then I'm going to go before the king for holistic ministry." When she finally made the decision to go before the king, she understood that the weapons of her warfare were spiritual, not carnal. She said, "You go fast and pray on the outside, and I'm going to fast and pray on the inside." When we confront structural sin, when we confront systemic sin, when we confront the principalities and the powers that are demonic, whether you believe like me in a personal devil, or you consider it some evil or something, I don't know, whatever you believe in, Praise God, you don't confront that in your own strength. She knew where her deep rooted convictions were. She said, "Look, I'm going to go, but first, I'm going to pray and fast on the inside, and you pray and fast on the inside, and I'm going to go before the King, and if I perish, I perish. I'm willing to pay the price." And the price of ministry is always death, amen? It's always he that wants to find his life must what? Lose it. He that wants to lose it? Shall find it. He that wants to follow me, take up thy cross, deny thyself, and follow, there's always a risk in doing God's will and submitting to God's plan. So, the story ends with Haman all upset, he built gallows, he got hanged, I mean God liberated them. But how do you minister in situations of captivity? We have to

understand that those of us who have been privileged, I also met with President Bush as a Latino leader. That's a privilege. That's by grace. That's because of somehow, God's plan, we were only there, those of us who have been given this grace to be in religious principalities, because religions, denominations can be principalities to, come on, say Amen, so, even if you're a church executive, a professor, wherever you are, these are fallen institutions at least in my understanding. They're fallen institutions, you've only been given access to them to represent basically your people in the context of God's plan and God's purpose for your life.

I think I have a few more minutes, another essay. Daniel is interesting, situation of captivity in Babylon, if you notice, first chapter, typical oppressor methodology. Give me the best among the captives, yes? Give me the best they got, yes? Give me the elite among them. Even says they were good-looking, some of us wouldn't qualify. Give me the best that they have, and then here's what we're going to do with that: we're going to train them in the language and the science of the Babylonians. In other words, give me their best and I'm going to change their names. Give me their best and I'm going to culture them. I'm going to give them access to the tools of the empire, yes? I'm going to give them access to the language and the science of the Babylonians, and I'm even going to give them access to my table, to my diet. Now, notice what happens. Daniel and the three Hebrew children, they accept the tools of the empire, the language and the science, they reject the diet. I'll get back to the diet a little later. There's nothing intrinsically sinful with mastering the tools of the empire. All young people should master them. Say amen. They should go to Harvard, they should go to Princeton, they should be lawyers,

they should be doctors. There's nothing wrong, you need the tools of the empire to navigate that empire, there's nothing intrinsically wrong. The problem was that after they mastered them, you know the story, they were appointed as governors, and I'm skipping over a lot of stuff, but read it with a contextual mind, read it applying it to our situation. They were appointed governors, and if you notice, the king had this dream and he wanted to build this statue, and after he built this statue, he gave the commandment that all of the subjects had to bow. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with upward mobility. These brothers were moving on up, they were Jewish Yuppies, they entered as captives and now they were governors. They were doing well, yes? They were doing well within the empire, and some of us are doing well, come on, say amen. We're doing well. There's nothing wrong with doing well. There's nothing wrong with upward mobility. The only problem is that sometimes, that upward mobility will be tested, where you loyalty really lies, and they had to decide at the sound of the trumpet, at the sound of the harp, all subordinates will have to bow. And the three Hebrew children, they decided not to bow, and the king said, "Listen. And which God, who's going to deliver you from my hands?" and they said, "Let it be known to you, o King, that the God that we serve, he'll deliver us from your hands, but even if he don't deliver us, we'll still not bowing. We're still not bowing. Our loyalty is to the kingdom. Say amen. Our loyalty...we have a higher source of authority. We appreciate that we were governors, we appreciate the professorships, we appreciate being church executives, we appreciate the upward mobility, but when it comes to where my ultimate loyalty lies, I'm not bowing." And that's the creative tension between upward mobility and serving the kingdom that all of us have to face in one way or another, sometimes, because sometimes they are in

tension. Upward mobility and serving the kingdom, positions of power and serving the kingdom sometimes are in tension, and when we say no, again, there are consequences. They wound up in the fire seven times. How many have been in the fire, raise your hands. Raise your hands if you've been in the fire. We've been in the fire for decisions that we've made where our loyalty was to the kingdom. I was against the Vietnam War and got arrested several times during that era. There are times when we can't bow. When the issues are diametrically opposed to the kingdom and we have to decide where our loyalty lies. They put them in the fire, you know that they said that his bodyguards tied them up, threw them in the fire, and you know the famous phrase, you've probably been hearing it since childhood. Hearing some of your pulpитеers preach it where they say, "Did we throw in what? Three? But I see four!" But if you look at the text, it says, "I see four loose and unbound." That's what it says.

Now, they were put in bound, but now in the fire, they're loose and unbound. See, if you stay loyal to the kingdom when you're ministering in a situation of captivity. If you come against principalities and powers in your neighborhood, systemic structural sin, I can't guarantee you that you won't wind up in the fire. But I can guarantee you that he'll be with you in the fire. He'll be there in the fire with you. And that nothing can really bind you. Nothing could bind Mandela, say amen. They couldn't. He was in jail, but he was free in a mental sense, in a spiritual sense. So when you're in the will of God, and you're doing Kingdom big business, they really can't bind you. Not in the real, real sense of that word, and you know how they came out of the fire, it's so interesting if you read the end, it says that the King promoted them. And I'm just being metaphorical here,

but to me, promotion in ministry come through the fire, that's how I see it anyway. It really does come when we're doing ministry in situations of captivities and remain loyal to the kingdom.

I'm going to end by saying this. All of this is kind of the way we're informing our people and discipling them and doing ministry in situations of captivity and I want to end with what the young man said as he introduced me and that was that we've permeated all of our programs at LPAC. We have an after school center, we have a youth program, we have a gang intervention program, we work with Latin Kings, we have Bloods, Crips, we have a ministry and outreach to gangs, we have six basketball teams, we have a football team, we have a little league, we have martial arts, we have a boxing team, all of that is done, you've figured out, in a Christ-centered way, by a staff of Christians, so as they're doing all of these things, they're sharing the Lord. And I started it ten years ago just being a secretary and today we have over 100 employees and close to a four million dollar budget, and you know, the Lord has blessed us, but it hasn't been without tension, with out navigating in Pharaoh's house, right? How do you do that? Because once you have access to public funds, you're in Pharaoh's house. How do you navigate that and still keep integrity?

Dr. Sanders said that she was pro-faith based initiatives, and so am I. I'm a life-long Democrat, but I've found myself in strange company these last few years. But it's so interesting to me. Sometimes, God works in such interesting ways. I think Bush, and you may disagree, has done more to put faith as part of the public discourse in the last

three years than most theologians in the sense that faith has been discussed in the New York Times, in the (muffled). God works in mysterious ways, either you're pro, you're against, but faith has become part of the public discourse. And when we get to the questions, I'll answer but what I'm saying is that at least people have had to talk about faith and it's become part of the public discourse. I remember being at a faith based conference and this minister did something, he was against some of us that have accessed funds and foundations, very holier than thou, "Are we going to lose our prophetic voice?", and I got up and said, you know, "What prophetic voice?" There ain't too much prophetic voice in my neighborhood. I don't know about your neighborhood, you know, but there wasn't, you know, but sometimes, it's just exercises in rhetoric, you know it's rhetoric, there is not much of a prophetic voice. In my neighborhood, it's prophetic Sharpton. About the only one in New York City who speaks consistently on behalf of the poor, maybe Calvin, and certain (muffled) whenever he gets covered, you know, in our community very few would get covered. So, you know, to me these four principles have guided us. And let me end by just mentioning them. It's liberation, we believe in personal liberation in Jesus Christ, you'll know the truth and the truth shall set you free. Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty, but we also believe in structural liberation, that there are fallen structures, that these structures need to be confronted, the principalities and powers, demonic forces made flesh and we do community organizing and we build housing and we have a charter school as a response to the public school system in our neighborhood. (muffled) most of the (muffled) organizing was done, very involved in confronting the whole police brutality, so yes, personal liberation because I can't give a social analysis to an addict who needs hope, come on, say Amen, that's not

going to do it. He needs the power of God transforming his life, regenerating his life, so personal transformation, experiencing Jesus as Lord, but also structural liberation, confronting the system. The second principle is healing and we take that from Isaiah 53, he's the wounded healer, we think being a wounded healer is important because when you're a wounded healer, you're not arrogant, you're not condescending, it's kind of "I'll show you my wounds, and you show me yours", you don't feel spiritually arrogant because you're wounded healer as Nouwen says in his book, but basically that concept we've incorporated because if you don't, you can deteriorate into Pharisaism, so we're wounded healers. We've been wounded, we've been healed, and now we can also be instruments of healing. The third principle is community, and we take koinonia, we are called to be an authentic community, interdependent, interconnected, love one another, pray for another, the whole Pauline language, one another, one another, one another. So, we believe we're called to be an authentic community, but the second component of community is diakonia, and that means service, so we believe that you're called to koinonia, but only as a means to diakonia. In other words, the authentic community is only to be used as an instrument to serve the larger community. What's the basis? In Abraham, all nations shall be? Blessed. Go to the whole world and make, so, the call is always an outward call, suffer with Christ outside the gate, so, it's koinonia but for the purpose of diakonia, and when the church stops being involved in mission, they really deteriorate into a social club, and social clubs only take care of the needs of who? Their members, right? And their paying members. Some of our people don't even pay. But community, koinonia for diakonia. And the last principle is transformation, and we define transformation as a call to perpetual growth. We're being renewed daily, renewed

by the transformation of the mind, renewed daily into the image of his son, it's a constant process of transformation, we never arrive, we're always in process, we're always being transformed, until that day when Paul says that the mortal will transformed into the immortable and the corruptible into the incorruptible. Thank you for listening.

Cheryl Sanders and Ray Rivera

“Spirit, Power, and Social Progress”

Q&A Session

The Conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage

Saturday, July 14th, 2003

Ray: Obviously, I think that I had the opportunity of, you know, we went around when we met with Bush and everyone could ask him a question and I was intrigued by the fact so I said it, I said, look, you know, our communities, every time someone gains the presidency they're born again, so you know, there's a lot of suspicion about people that use "born again" terms and could you tell us about your experience. And you know, the man said that he was an alcoholic and his marriage was on the rocks and stuff like that and at some Billy Graham Crusade he accepted the Lord and that he had a change of – I'm not going to judge that, I'm going to leave that, but do I think his ideology follow that? Absolutely not. He may have some Christology, I'm not going to judge that, but his ideology is a right-of-center ideology that is diametrically opposed to everything in our communities. So that's kind of my take on that. I'm not going to judge his vertical but I certainly judge his horizontal.

Brian: Brian VanderWel, Assistant to the Rector here in Charlottesville at Christ Church. I was really encouraged to see this passage in Ezekiel where you talk about how he was carried away in the spirit and was carried away in bitterness. I have been reading for the

first time with this whole trilogy of the movies of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings series and I own The Silmarillion which is the kind of pre-history to this and I've been reading through it and shocked in some respects to find a character there whose name is Neana, and Neana's purpose in his mythology is to be the one who weeps over the broken wounds. In fact, there's a scene where these great trees have just been uprooted from the land, these trees of light, and Neana goes in, and through her tears into the wounds of the tree, healing is brought. I want to connect that issue of lament and sorrow into what you talked about with Esther in that Esther kind of understood that there's kind of a spiritual reality to what we confront, and so what I'm wondering is there a spiritual reality to our lament and sorrow, for what we encounter and what we experience in the brokenness of others?

Cheryl: I really don't know any other way to think about that than as a spiritual transaction, particularly if you're going to regard, I'm not familiar with the Lord of the Rings, but I'm assuming that is the case with a lot of great literature there are allusions and ideas and metaphors that are borrowed from the scriptures, but certainly this story represents ways in which wounds are healed by what -- when I was talking about mutuality, that's a dimension of that. The acknowledgement, I am not the savior, and see we have to deal with this and in my community because of the fact that we have so many of the groups that come to volunteer, some come for a day or a week, and they come from a far away, but for the most part they're white groups, particularly white young people. And it's sort of like, "Okay this is our mission trip to Washington." And we receive them, but for many of them it's not about thinking of -- it's like the homeless are just, you

know, this project and they're not people. And so we do what we can to help them understand that while, you know, you may pat yourself on the back about all the wonderful sacrifice you made to spend a day or a week in Washington, these are people's lives. And it just may be that by just sitting with them and listening to their pain, you can offer a measure of healing but it has to be a spiritual transaction, which is to say, doesn't even require the words, necessarily. But mutuality for me is how I name that, and a willingness to hear, to listen, and to respond, and also to realize I don't have to have all the answers. And in fact, I'm pretty clear that I don't have all the answers, but I do care.

Ray: One of the things that we do have is that we have is we have a residential facility for 60 men and women who have HIV/ AIDS and they're homeless, and it's a contract with the city. And we don't, we just have to provide transitional housing for them. In other words, it's not a program, so we have rules where you can't smoke, you can't drink, you can't use drugs in the house, but all they have to do is get back there by 11:00 at night, they have a curfew, so they can do whatever they want, they don't have to accept any treatment, so what we've done is we've created prayer services in the house, we've created services in the house, but they're not mandated to come. So sometimes, when the people come back at 11:00 at night, they're all blasted, drugged up, so it's almost a theology of presence, and before in my old tradition, I didn't understand that too much because you know, kind of the Pentecostal tradition, a lot of the motivation is kind of spiritual notches on your gun, how many souls you're going to save, that kind of motivates you in the beginning, I used to laugh about that a lot because they used to say for every soul you save you get a star on your crown. And I, in my ignorance, used to

try to imagine Billy Graham's crown, if it was true that he'd won all those people in the Crusades, but I didn't understand that it was metaphoric. But to me, sometimes, you just have to be there, and cry and weep and do all the witness, and some of those people the Lord has dealt with and saved, but others, it hasn't, but even if it hasn't, I think being there and weeping and being present is also a witness.

Question: I actually talked to you a little bit before; this question is for Ms. Sanders. I heard you speak at the Impact National Conference in DC about, I think, race relations and something else. But I was particularly interested in your work with reconciliation because it's something that I've had a lot of experience here with as well. My question has to do with how a lot of times on these trips, I think a lot of times, reconciliation, the concept can be very mushy and over-idealized, and I don't know how much, like how effective that kind of viewpoint is. I was wondering if you could share some of your experience with that and what it kind of looks like in your ministry and kind of your opinions on that.

Cheryl: On the mushy aspect of reconciliation?

Questioner: Yeah, not just on the mushy aspect, but on your work and what it has looked like, like what reconciliation has looked like in your mission in particular, and in your work.

Cheryl: Well, I think it looks like inviting the poor to be at a table with everybody else. I'm not sure what you're asking me beyond what I've already said. Reconciliation means you, first of all, open the door to welcome them and that's a major step that many churches are not willing to take, and once you welcome them, you have something for them. And you make an effort to know their names and to know their situations and to see how you can be helpful to them and to see how they, what they have to contribute to who you are and what you are trying to become, that's the mutuality piece. But reconciliation assumes that there is estrangement, alienation. It's helpful to have an analysis of that, but even if you can't analyze it, you have, it's really a faith perspective that says this is the will and purpose of God. And that God brings people together from these disparate places for a particular purpose and that purpose has to do with the kingdom of God, yes, but also being able to affirm our equality, our common humanity, and also the work that we're called to do, to bring about transformation individually and also in the society at large.

Questioner: I think what I was also kind of talking about has to do with racial reconciliation. That's specifically having to do with the mushy over-idealism that I feel like is often incorporated. I was wondering if you have had any work with that.

Cheryl: Well, I think I just mentioned in the previous question that we have whites, a lot of whites, most of the, the vast majority of the homeless people who come are African American, some of the them are Hispanic or Native American or white, but most of them are African Americans. Most of the volunteers that come to us from outside of the

church are white and so the problematic paradigm is the view of missions that says, “We are privileged white people who are going to spend a day or a week or a month or a year in the ghetto in the inner city learning about ministry,” and even though, you know, sometimes it’s kind of hard to accept that, we accept those people with the hope that we can show them something beyond that very narrow mindset. In some cases, they haven’t even dealt with their own racism, they’re afraid of the people, particularly the kids, the youngsters, like, I guess their youth pastor or their mother or somebody made them come and, you know, they’re scared to death, they don’t even want to hand the people a cup of juice, but we try to help them to understand that, you know, these are people, and just, you know, that sounds like simplistic, right? But very often we don’t see the humanity of the people we’re trying to help, we just see them as an issue, as a problem, and then we see ourselves as either having the answer to the problem, or unloading a little measure of guilt because we tried to do something, and so what we try to get at is to try to help people understand that whoever you are, whether you’re rich or poor, whatever your color, whether you’re male or female, whatever your nationality, that you have a place at God’s table.

Josh: My name is Josh and I work with Mission Year, and I had a follow up on the white folks in the city. Anyone that’s familiar with Mission Year, we train young people to go and spend a year in the inner city and primarily white folks, and I happen to be an extra large white folk myself, so, um, I have a framework that I use in my training that I’m interested in your reaction to. Or feedback from anyone else’s for that matter. I use the story of the Good Samaritan and obviously a very

familiar story, however, the way that I reverse the story is to help white people recognize that their grandfathers were the robbers, and that we have the chance now to be the Good Samaritans only because grandfather gave us the money to do so, and that's a helpful way, I've discovered, anyway, a helpful way for these young people, these white young people to begin to recognize the reality of America. We've talked about slavery a few times in this context. Another story that I find really helpful is the story of Zaccheus. Obviously, Jesus meets with Zaccheus and Zaccheus finally says, out of nowhere, we don't know what Jesus said, he says, "Anything I've taken unjustly, I'll return fourfold and I give half of my money to the poor." It's interesting that he didn't wait for the rest of the Jews or for the Roman state to come along with him on that, he didn't kind of coerce that project, he just did it himself, but the question I came to ask is if Jesus were to encounter the children of Zaccheus, if Zaccheus chose not to repent, and the children of Zaccheus inherited that money, would Jesus then also say this is an invitation then for you to deal with this historic injustice and if you want salvation to come to this house, which is the phrase Jesus uses, would you then, would the children of Zaccheus need to respond in some way? So, I used to identify myself as the White Knight of the Good Samaritan story, without my recognition that my grandfather was the robber. And now, I identify myself as a child of an unrepentant Zaccheus who has to deal with the fact that a tremendous amount of wealth, culturally, economically, has come my way as a result of historic injustice, and I have to ask myself and I invite others to ask themselves, what does it mean to be invited to Jesus' table and to hope

to hear that salvation has come to this house, in light of that historic injustice? I'd just be interested in your reactions.

Cheryl: Yeah, I think that one key that makes that work is a willingness to tell the truth and reconciliation without truth telling, I mean, a lot of times there are scenarios where reconciliation is you know, hugging, and you know, all of this, and you can do all that, and that's fine. I can hug with the best of them, but at some point, the truth has to be told about how we got to these places of disparity and discrepancy, and that's not just laying a guilt trip on somebody, but if you're going to have reconciliation, you're going to have to tell the truth about how you got to be estranged in the first place. And what happens is very often people in the dominant culture don't want to hear that and the irony of it – I've been doing some training at the church the past few weeks with the Sunday congregation with some of the homeless people have joined us too, we've been talking about an initiative, an evangelistic initiative, and just talking about a starting place, you're going to share the Gospel with people. At some point, you're going to have to get people to have some awareness of sin, but with some populations, that's an alien concept, and with the homeless people, we don't have to belabor people, we don't have to belabor that part of the Gospel that says "You are a sinner", don't have to belabor that, don't have to convince them that they're sinners, everybody tells them they're sinners, but as such, they're much more open to hearing the whole truth of the Gospel than people "I'm okay, you're okay, we're okay, we're not responsible for what happened some other time, even though yes, we're privileged, this and that, and we're privileged, obviously, that's a sign that God has blessed." Even if people don't say that, they think it. And so, one of the

things you try to do in reconciliation ministry, and sometimes you have to soften people up, is listen to the truth. Even if you strategize, at some point, the truth has to be told, and you speak the truth in love, but toward the end of providing an opening for God to do the work of healing and reconciliation because as long as people are resistant because Americans, we specialize in denial. We specialize in that, and denial is our enemy, is an enemy to reconciliation, so the truth-telling piece can be very painful and sometimes you have to be really careful in crafting your language or even finding a language where you can have that conversation, but do you commit yourself patiently and courageously to do that work, and I would say as Christians we're people of hope, and so we have to hope that there's an opportunity that truth-telling will be done effectively, and it's not just me telling you the truth, but us together taking ownership of the truth.

Josh: To look at the sort of, as you both have said, the scriptures are foundational, if you can lead from the scriptures, then you're able to move people in the direction that you want to take them. That's true with these white Evangelicals that come to me. And if I can lead from Zaccheus and say, you know what Zaccheus paid reparations, that's what this is, if I've taken anything unjustly, I'll pay four-fold, all of the sudden, again he didn't wait for the state to do it, he did it himself, and all of the sudden the language of reparations is introduced through the scriptures in Zaccheus. Another thing that's very helpful and follows up on exactly what you said is keying on "salvation has come to this house" as the form of motivation rather than a bashing kind of guilt. Everyone wants to hear that internally, to hear Jesus say "Salvation has come to this house."

Cheryl: Not unless we're convinced that we're already saved before we hear Jesus or before we hear the gospel. That's when it gets difficult, but you're right. And that invitation, and I'll just say also, the community that we're in, the neighborhood that we're in as is the case with other communities in Washington, is in transition, and we have had an influx of a much more affluent, predominantly whites, who can afford to buy the property values that are escalating so these are people, as has always been the case, who can afford to purchase the property. I don't regard them as invaders or enemies. I want those people to be welcome, too. In recent months, we've had three white members who've come from the community, from the neighborhood, and so, my job as a pastor is to try to position the church so that we can welcome whosoever comes, whether you're poor and homeless or whether they're affluent and got a fistful of dollars, whatever, we want to find a way to welcome them, there's all kinds of challenges in terms of your liturgy, etc, your music, and various kinds of things, but that's the challenge of the gospel, and see, when you say "Bible", see, I could, that's the thing, well, I won't say it's a red flag with me, with evangelicals, but see my problem with evangelicals is the skewed reading and interpretation of the Bible. Evangelicals think that all the people in the Bible are white. And they don't understand, it's not so much a dynamic of race, but you have an issue of color difference, ethnic nationality, all those differences that gets addressed in the Bible, but we have this mindset that, well maybe Simon who carried the cross is black, but other than that, they're all white, including Jesus. And until we have a better understanding and Curtis DeYoung, who has a new book of which he's the lead author, I mentioned the *Divided By Faith* but the sequel to that book is now out, it's

called *United By Faith* and it's a book that shows how congregations make multi-cultural worship and membership work, and in that book, as in some of DeYoung's other writings, he makes this point about that if you could even look at the church in Antioch, where the believers are first called Christians, the Bible makes the point about the ethnic diversity of the leadership and that kind of thing is just off the screen for white evangelicals. In other words, the key, the answer, the solution to the problem of reconciliation is in the scripture, but we've got to take off the blinders when we read, and it's not just "oh, you're just trying to bring the race issue, well, no, race is isn't a problem in the Bible, race is a modern problem, but diversity, multi-culturalism, is a part, is in the picture of who God calls to the table, that's why whenever you see Jesus having these arguments with these scribes and priests and Pharisees, very often, especially in the Gospel of Luke, the argument is about who God invited to the table. Why? Because they're the riff-raff. The prostitutes, the point is that when you invite all this diversity and people to the table, then all of the sudden, you look around and say "oh, this is what Jesus did." I had a friend who came, one of my scholar friends, the few of them who will do this, who came to the breakfast, and we were sitting there, and actually we were sitting at a table for some reason on that day, and he looked around, and he said, "you know, actually, I understand why you write the way you do because you hang around with poor people." He looked at me and said that, and then he said, "and this is what Jesus did, isn't it?" He said, "He hung around with..." I mean, you see it in the scriptures. But we easily just overlook that and we paint some other picture of Jesus, other than sitting with the poor, healing them, listening to their pain, meeting their needs, and I, you know, I don't say that to try to acquire some kind of special accolade. It's just doing what the

Gospel requires. And we're just trying to model that. Not that we're the experts, but the simple thing that we learned, we could have gone on for twenty-five years having weekly meetings of ministers praying about what to do, we could have, and I'm sure there are churches that have done that, they've spent weeks and years and months studying the problem, all we had to do was open the door and say to that one poor person, "okay, we have something for you." That was the whole turning point. Just open the door of the church. It doesn't have to be a breakfast, it might be a coffee house, it might be an evening thing, but typically people in our communities, they don't feel welcome to our churches, they just assume that the church is irrelevant. And maybe we are irrelevant, but we can try to be relevant and to begin is by opening the door.

Ray: Just to complement, I think, um, I didn't even address anything about this whole civil thing, but I think that part of the challenge also is for us to address the civil discourse in this country, in my opinion, whether it's on a conscious level or subconscious level is rooted in manifest destiny, and I think really, the heirs of Manifest Destiny kind of is the evangelical church to some degree because they actually feel that this is the new Israel. This is the land that flows milk and honey. So, the sign of being the new Israel is that you're blessed. And if you're blessed, that means that you've got money. You're prosperous, so if that's true, then the opposite is true. If you are blessed because you're part of the new Israel, then if you're poor, then you must be a sinner. Do you follow what I'm saying? I mean, in other words, how come you're not blessed if you're in the land of milk and honey? In other words, you must be the way you are because you what? You want to be. Because there must be something wrong. So in the

civil discourse in this country, I think at a subconscious level, the poor are synonymous with sinners. Whether it's conscious or not. And especially in this new Republican legislation that we both said we supported, if you see some of the welfare reform laws, they say that the poor are morally flawed, if you read them, they actually say that in some of the legislation. And that, and so, the implication is that if you're poor, you're morally flawed. They don't say that the rich are that morally flawed, so, you see, I wouldn't mind if they said that we were that morally flawed because we're part of the human condition. But they don't say the rich are, you are too, but they kind of say that poverty is a result of being morally flawed. I think most, the civil discourses, I think most white people believe that, whether at a conscious level or at a subconscious level in the evangelical church unless you've been, you're what I call a progressive evangelical, you believe in holistic ministry, you understand systemic sin, I think you're going to the church and into our ministry, you go basically seeing us as objects of mission, not as part of the body, but if you have been enlightened, then you go as a member of the body, and you go not only to give, but you go also to receive.

Charles: Thank you so much, Pastor Riverra and Professor Sanders. Something amazing happens at this one o'clock slot, doesn't it?