The Connection Between Faith and Social Action: An Effort at Lived Theology

Presented to members of the Congregation and City Workgroup of the Project on Lived Theology by the Rev. George B. Telford in Charlottesville, Virginia, February 7, 2003. Rev. Telford is a former pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville, and has recently become the Director of the Institute for Reformed Theology at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, in keeping with his calling to be a "pastor-theologian" in service to the church.

Good afternoon. I want to thank you again for inviting me to be here. The work of this project has been one which I have admired from a distance for three years now, and I am glad to have this first experience of its life, and honored that you would invite me to share with you how I have understood the conncection between faith and social action in my own life, particularly in the 1960's and 1970's, together with the struggles, challenges and joys involved. I will share with you particularly two periods of that life, in Auburn, Alabama, in the late 1950's and early 1960's, here in Charlottesville in the early 1960's, and, if we have time, in Tallahassee in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Before doing that, let me begin with a brief general introduction.

I have attempted in my life, above all else, to be a pastor-theologian. I have been fortunate to have been the pastor of four fine congregations, and my passion is shaped significantly not only by my basic theological convictions, but by their lives and effort to be faithful. Thus my primary commitments are shaped by the conviction that it is possible to build theologically strong, liturgically vibrant, socially sensitive, courageous congregations of God's people, marked by a sense of community with one another in seeking to discern the will and purposes of God and joining themselves to it. I am convinced that any substantive creation of mature and faithful congregations must be grounded in both the engendering in their midst of lay theologians who are able to articulate the convictions of the Christian faith completely and persuasively, and also by nurturing and encouraging those called by God to live out their faith in the public arena intellectually, and with commitments to compassion and justice. The engendering and training of such people who enable the churches to be communities of theological discourse, discernment, courage and compassion rests on the presence among them of pastors committed to be, as pastors, theologians-in residence, disciplined in mind and heart for that task.

In addition to serving four congregations over my 41 years of active ministry, I served as Director of the Division of Corporate and Social Mission of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.) from 1973-1981. This unit of the national church was responsible for the denomination's corporate witness in public affairs both nationally and internationally, its work in support of higher and public education, its programs for racial justice and justice for women, and for its relationships with other denominations through its office of ecumenical relations. I also served from 1983 to 1987 as Director of the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), co-ordianting the work of a staff of 16 persons who served the church by providing resources and leadership at the national level in the areas of theological studies, liturgical resources, discipleship,

spirituality, and faith and order. We were focused on the theological renwal of the churches, and on enabling the denomination to address faithfully and creatively the challenges posed by its theogical pluralism, the lack of clarity regarding the nature and task of the church, on the authority of scripture, and on the critical issue of the relation between faith and culture today. In these national offices I also found myself called to be Vice-President for Church and Society of the National Council of Churches, which took me to places like Utah for Christian witness and protest at the execution of Gary Gilmore and the resumption of capital punishment in this country, and to the Middle East on three ocassions, visiting with religious and political leaders across the region in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Israel and the Occupied Territories, developing the Middle East policy statement of the National Council, on the one hand, and then several years later helping write the Presbyterian Churches statement on the Theological Relationship Betweeen Christians and Jews. In all of these contexts I attempted to function primarily as a pastor-theologian.

I have had major ecumenical commitments all my life, beginning with my involvement as a young student in the work of the Student Volunteer Movement, though post-graduate studies at the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Institute, participating in the famous first conference of Liberation Theologians in Detroit in the 1970's, and in the Assemblies of the World Council of Churches' World Conferences on Faith and Order and World Conferences on Religion and Peace.

Finally, I concluded my formal service to the church as a faculty member at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta from 1993-1999, where I served as Associate Professor for Theology and Chruch, and also as Director of Advanced Studies. That work provided me with an opportunity to identify, encourage and sustain pastor-theologians for the church, to engage them in disciplined graduate studies, not as an end in itself, but in order to contribute to the re-formation of men and women who can think the faith, and create, with the people of God, disciplined and faithful communities which will have transforming power for personal and social life.

With that introduction, let me turn to three locations where, in modest ways, I tried to embody a lived theology in the late 1950's, the 1960's and 1970's. Perhaps there will be other times to talk about subsequent decades and our own time.

I was ordained in June of 1958 in Auburn, Alabama, having spent the academic year of 1956-57 there as an intern. I was called as Campus Minister, and was also assistant Minister at the First Presbyterian Church. In the years of my ministry there from 1956 until 1960, when I left to study at Harvard with a Woodrow Wilson fellowship, the Auburn Presbyterian Westminster Fellowship was full of vitality. I opened an old file several days ago and was reminded once again of the richness of our intellectual, spiritual and social life as I looked at list of programs we held there on Sunday evenings following dinner, and a service of worship, in the student center. A list for one Spring semester had on March 29th a summary sesion on "The Christian Student and the World Struggle," led by one Marianne Jackson, a student who had been leading a weekday study on the theme of a National Student Christian Federation Conference booklet prepared for

a major upcoming conference. The next Sunday, April 5th, was on "The Social Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Answer to the Social Probglems of Our Day," led by Dr. John Leith, the pastor of the church. The following Sunday, April 12th, was on "The Jews are not a Race," led by a local faculty person. On the next Sunday, April 19th, the evening program was "The Negro in America: History, Contributions to Our Culture" led by someone from the nearby Tuskegee Institute; April 26th was "Can We Afford to Maintain a Segregated Society," focused on issues of economic and politcal expediency, Supreme Court cases, and so forth. In May there were programs on "The Ecumenical Movement," "The World Council of Churches: Ends and Means," and on "The South and Education."

It was, of course, a socially rich time in Alabama. A crucial time for the Church. George Wallace was Governor. The Auburn Westminster Fellowship had for years had a relationship with the Presbyterian students at neighboring Tuskegee Institute. On Sunday evening March 22nd, 1959, a signficant number Tuskeegee students came to the Westminster Student Center in Auburn, to share with us a meal, worship, and an evening program, and on April 5th, the Auburn Presbyterian student group went to Tuskegee. One of the Auburn students wrote home to her father about the experience of sitting beside and eating and talking with a Tuskegee student. It was for her a deeply moving and liberating experience. Her father was an Alabama legislator, and her grandfather had run for governor of Alabama on a race hate platform several times.

On April 10th, 5 days after the dinner in Tuskegee, Mr. J. Bruce Henderson, a Presbyterian elder, of Prairie, Alabama, and the above-mentioned student's grandfather, wrote a letter to Ralph Draughon, the President of Auburn University requesting him to use all of his great power to persuade the session and congregation of the Auburn Presbyterian Church to terminate interchange of social integration between young white male and female students of Auburn and colored male and female students from Tuskegee. In a long letter Mr. Henderson protested, arguing against what he called inter-sex integration, and claiming that this action against Scripture, Alabama custom, experience and law needed to be halted, and that "Rev. Telford's folly might at any time precipitate a maelstrom of racial passion that will 'pale' the Artherine Lucy incident into insignificance." He conluded by saying that if these things cannot be controlled locally and promptly, the entire eldership of the Presbyterian Church of Alabama, the taxpayers and the legislators will need to know.

The Columbus Georgia Tribune published on April 22nd a front page story: "Auburn's First Presbyterian Church in Hazzle (sic.), Over Integrated Class. Members of Church Alarmed and Infuriated at the Rev. George Telford's Leadership of Integration of Races." The sandstone columns of the Presbyterian church were spray painted with an expletive on a Saturday night, and officers rushed to sandblast them off before church began on Sunday morning. Articles apeared in the Birmingham News and other papers. We don't have time to relate the whole story as it played itself out over the next weeks and months. The short description is that the Synod of Alabama received a resolution from the Presbytery of Tuscaloosa to halt the activity, the Synod sent a commission to Auburn to interview me, students, and members of the Auburn church and others. On June 14th, in Memphis, Bruce Henderson argued for the Tuscaloosa Presbytery that I was a pink-

cheeked communist liberal who should be brought to trial. The Campus Christian Life Committee of the Synod of Alabama defended me. The Synod voted 111-18 to support the ministry at Auburn. It noted the comprehensive program there carried on through worship services, Bible study, reading and study groups, prayer groups, church school, personal counseling, fellowship, conferences and retreats, summer service and work camps, and services to local churches in the community and the world. It affirmed the purposes of the meetings of students, and affirmed that the Rev. George Telford, "whom we regard as one of the most promising ministers to students in our churh, has the full confidence and support of the Synod's Campus Chrisitan Life Committee, that the ministy was faithful, wise, constructive, missionary and Christian." Had the Synod acted otherwise, I would not be here today, I could not have remained in ministry, and my life work would have been different.

It was during that same time that the Auburn church itself not only made a public statement in support of the ministry that was part of its life, but voted to make clear that it would welcome all who came to worship there. I remember so clearly the debate. The senior minister had left the church to take a teaching position at one of the church's seminaries. I was left in charge, and the Session met to consider the matter. Before the vote I asked that we go around the room and let each Session member speak. I will never forget the Director of Athletics, one Jeff Beard, a powerful member of the University community, vulnerable to political forces in the University and the state, saying into the silence that he was opposed to integration, he had spent all his life in Alabama and it ran against all his personal life, but that he was an elder in the church of Jesus Christ, and he knew that segregation was against the Gospel, and that he would vote yes.

This was lived theology on the part of a group of Christians in a minority position in their society. Their courage still sustains my life. They got that courage not from the secular society, but from deep theological wells. These were elders, many of whom read and discussed together the theology of Augustine, of Calvin, of Reinhold Niebuhr, and Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, who heard sermons on a regular basis which sustained their personal and social lives. One of those elders who did those studies published the local Auburn Newspaper, the Lee County Bulletin, and wrote week after week editorials against the policies of George Wallace. He had had a Nieman Fellowhip at Harvard for journalism, and had been appointed by Lyndon Johnson to the Poverty Commission. He was also a member of the national Presbyterian Committee which wrote a Declaration of Faith, one of the finest confessional statements of Christian faith marked by social senstivity produced in the 20th century. And he started with a group of Presbyterians a Presbyterian Community Ministry locally to build and rehabilitate houses for the poor that continues today in that community. I will ever be grateful to have been a minister among them.

I left Auburn in 1961 to go to Harvard University on a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to explore whether I should live out my life in the academy. I went to study theological ethics. That year, and the year following, were to be foundational for my future life. My major teacher there, along with all the others, was Paul Lehmann, whose book *Ethics in a Christian Context* was in its final stages, and from which he lectured in class. Paul

Lehmann's ethics was a koinonia ethics, and at its heart was Christian discernment of what God was doing in the world "to make and keep human life human". It was powerful stuff. Anyone wanting to see a summary of the heart of his ethical work may read *Humanization and the Politics of God: The Koinonia Ethics of Paul Lehmann*, by Nancy J. Duff, (Eerdmans, 1992). She relates Lehmann's thought to contemporary debates on narrative, pluralism, public theology, and revolutionary violence. Lehmann lectured here in Charlottesville twice, once in a major address at the University, which some older faculty and students still remember, and again in a series of lectures at Westminster Church when I was minister.

At the end of my year at Harvard, I decided not to go on for the Ph.D. I decided to return to the South, and to pastoral ministry. I remember well conversations with colleagues there at Harvard who could not understand why, if I had escaped from the South (and to Harvard no less!), I would want to go back. It was 1961, during the heart of racial struggles. Ironically, my colleagues would soon learn that their Boston community wasn't as liberal as they thought, when nearby Roxborough was the scene of violent demonstrations.

Before coming back, I spent one more year in study with young theologians and pastors from around the world at the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches, associated with the University of Virginia. It was another critical year in my theological odyssey and preparation for the years ahead. If we had time I would say more about it.

In June of 1962, with the years at Auburn behind me, and with my formal theological education completed, I was called to be minister at Westminster Church, on Rugby Road. I was 28 years old. The church had 750 members, among them the President of the University, Edgar Shannon, numerous faculty, and in due course a very significant number of students became participants in the worshipping life of the church, including some of those who were involved in the direct challenges to the administration during the Vietnam War demonstrations.

When I was to be installed as minister, I called Francis Pickens Miller to come to Charlottesville and be a member of the commission to install me, and to deliver what is known as the "charge to the minister," a brief address given to the new minister as a call to faithful discharge of responsibilities. He was a Presbyterian elder, and a member still of the First Presbyterian church in Charlottesville. I told Pickens Miller that I wanted to be identified at the beginning of my ministry with what he had stood for all his life. He was then working in the State Department, and had been an ambassador in the Kennedy administration. But he had run for Governor of Virginia twice against Harry Byrd and his machine, significantly on a racial justice platform. What isn't generally known is that in his youth he was one of the founders of the international World Student Christian Federation, that he wrote early ecumenical documents on social reponsibility with some of the early founders of what became the World Council of Churches. If there were ever anyone who embodied a lived theology, it was this "man fom the valley." On the day of my installation, he delivered a great charge to me in the presence of the congregation, calling me to what we would later come to call a "public theology." I met him again

some years later, at a banquet in New York, sponsored by the great journal, *Christianity and Crisis*, in honor of Hubert Humphrey, and thanked him for doing that for me. He told me how much it meant to him to be asked. He said his own minister at First Presbyterian in Charlottesville had never said a public word of suppor for him all the years he was running for public office and speaking for racial justice in Virginia.

I began ministry at Westminster as any minister should, with as much faithful preaching and solid pastoral work as I could. I led the church to call as an Associate Minister the Rev. Robert B. Albrittton, whose ministry in the church was formally focused on campus ministry, but who also brought deep concerns for social justice and solid theological work. He was a fine colleague. Toward the end of my time, just before Albritton and I left, we brought in another minister, Howard H. Gordon, Jr., as an Assistant Minister, who worked with undergraduate students.

My minsitry was a teaching ministry. My model of ministry was, as I have indicated, that of a pastor-theologian. I saw Westminster as having a crucial ministry within the University community, to make sense of Christian faith to persons whose primary vocation was the life of the mind. I led the church to bring in major theologians for public lectures. We read together books like John A.T. Robinson's *Honest to God*. I led in the formation of an annual Lenten School of Christian Study, sponsored by Westminster Church and St. Paul's, in which other churches (St. Marks Lutheran, Trinity Epsicopal, Unviersity Baptist, the University Catholic Center and Meadows Presbyterian) participated. We had lecturers from across the nation speak, and then followed them with discussion courses. At one Lenten we had William Stringfellow speak. I remember even now his great address on "When the knife is at the Belly," an attempt to explore what the Christian response should be if confronted with the violence of the dispossesed.

On September 29, 1963, a little over a year after coming to Charlottesville, I preached a sermon at Westminster entitled "When Silence is Treason." It was on racial justice. Just to set the time frame, you will remember that 1963 was an intense period of struggle in the South. Martin Luther King wrote his letter from the Birmingham Jail on April 16th, 1963. The sermon I delivered on that September Sunday was after there had been many prayers in public worship, and numerous discussions. But it was to be the act that precipitated much which was to follow. We announced a six week study of the church's responsibility in the area of race relations. The study was chaired by a University professor who was a member of the church, using books by Will Campbell, Kyle Haselden, Sarah Patton Boyle, the grievances paper of the local NAACP, the “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” and biblical and theological materials. At the conclusion of that study, on November 3rd, 1963, a group of 28 Westminster church members wrote the Session (the governing body of the church) a letter urging it to make public that all Christians are welcome to worship and membership in the church without regard to race. The Session acted. It also ordered sent to each member of the church the full text of a report by the Lexington Presbytery on racial relations, it welcomed into the church shortly sfterwards a black school teacher and her family, black students began to sing in the choir, one of the church secretaries hired was black. Moreover, the ministers and many other members of the church, including its officers, were soon participating in

meetings of the NAACP, the Charlottesville and Jefferson Chapters of the Virginia Council on Human Relations, and a new group, initiated primarily by members of the church, called Charlottesville Churchmen for Social Action. The church's pre-school kindergarten was open to all members of the community and had black children in it. Members of the congregation became heavily involved in a kindergarten for culturally deprived black children that met on Saturday morning on our church grounds, and another at Mt. Zion Baptist Church downtown.

By 1965 we were urging members, if at all possible, to attend the Christian Action Conference in Montreat, NC, at which Dr. King, Gayraud Wilmore of the United Presbyterian Commission on Religion and Race, Mr. John Doar, Acting Assisting Attorney General from the U.S. Dept of Justice, and others were to be speaking. I wrote a letter to many Presbyterian ministers in the surrounding state urging their attendance, talking about the importance of the mater and saying: "Let no minister anymore complain about not understanding, or not knowing what to do, or what Christian repsonsiblity is in this area (of racial justice), who will not take this opportunity to learn."

On February 14th, 1966, I wrote a letter to the Westminster congegation telling them that the Session of the church at its meeting the previous Sunday night, having considered among its business concerns for the life of the church, its worship, its Christian education program, its support of Union Theological Seminary, and many othjer items, gave voice to two particular concerns in our community which it felt should receive the attention of the members of our congregation because of their Christian commitment. The Session, I wrote, "has given these concerns its prayerful attention and would commend them to you, asking that you likewise consider them before the Word of God and in sensitivity to all our brothers 'for whom Christ died.'" The two concerns were first, 'Regarding Housing in Charlottesville,' and second, 'Regarding Kindergartens.' The statement regarding housing began: "It is wholly out of accord with the Christian gospel that anyone would be subjected to the indignity of being advised that he cannot buy a house that he wants simply because of the color of his skin. Neither should he, on that account, be offered only token opportunities to buy in white neighborhoods. Instead he should have access to a market indistinguishable from that to white persons, one that includes a variety of houses in a variety of neighborhoods." The statement went on to call on the congregation to give active support to efforts to open the Charlottesville and Albemarle housing market to persons without discrimination, and listed, in additon to reasons of the gospel and of Christian faith, practical reasons for so doing, and finally noted that the Family Night Supper the forthcoming Wednesday night would be on the subject of "Fair Housing and Christian Responsibility in Charlottesville."

The second statement by the Session was regarding "Public Kindergartens." It recognized that by operating a kindergarten, our church was helping to perpetuate the wrong wherein the maintenance of private kindergartens meets the needs of those families that can afford the expense, but: (a) fails to meet the (probably greater) needs of those who cannot afford it; and (b), it relieves the more affluent and influential families of the need and incentive of establishing kindergartens open to all persons without discrimination on the basis of ability to pay. It noted that the school board was presently

establishing its budget, that the League of Women Voters and others had urged funds for kindergartens be given priority, that the Session had written the school Board about its concern, and had offerred the use of Westminster facilities for this prupose if necessary. The Session also suggested to members that it is their responsibility and privilege to actively encourage plans for eliminating economics as a basis whereby children are separated into two categories of which one receives pre-first grade instruction and the other does not, and that letters to the school board might be an effective way of providing such encouragement.

In late 1967, I gave the Session of Westminster Church a white paper on *The State of the Church*, commenting on many things in the life of the church, how we were doing in membership, budget, Christian education, personnel, music, the particular role and responsibility of the church in ministry to and within the University community. I expressed serious concerns about faculty-student relations, church concerns for the life and ethos of the University, etc., and then turned again in a long section of the paper to say that "Westminster has - because of its location, its membership and the need - another task. That is the task of bearing a witness to some crucial aspects of Christian faith often ignored or played down, if not downright rejected, in many other churches." I summarized this responsibility by saying that "there are two major issues before Americans today: the question of how to deal with the problem of race, and the question of the use of American power." There are, I said, a number of related issues, and there are others of importance. These two, however, are of crisis proportion, and to deal with them is a despearate need for a Christian word.

I wrote:

> We are probably going to handle the problems caused by the final disillusionment of black citizens in this country by repression and violence, as we move toward insurrection in our cities. The mood of the country is, according to all reports, very ugly, and one of the prime campaign issues is 'law and order' against crime in the streets, and such words are directly primarily against the Negro.
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> It is yet not as clear how we will handle the Vietnam crisis and all that it represents and particularly how we shall handle dissent. The signs are that both will be handled with increased violence. The gross violence visited upon persons at the Pentagon demonstration recently reflects our basic response as a nation to radical dissent, and the disillusionment of many of the most humane persons in our society with the possiblity of effecting change peaceably grows.
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> Most churches, either ignore all this or reflect in the preaching and prayers and actions of the congregation the dominant moods of our culture, without searching for the word of Christian faith and of God to the situations. Partly this is because congregations have not been exposed to the depths of the Biblical and Christian tradition, and for many congregations it is now too late. A prophetic stance would destroy the congregations. This church, by the grace of God, is one of the places which has borne a responsibility for hearing, wrestling with, and acting upon the Word as it has touched our corporate life. Because it has, it now has become a congregation in which some Word for our crucial problems can be heard and in which, among many members, concern is evident. The location of our church, its membership, and the need placed before it gives us this other major task then: not only to minister to and within this university community, but to bear what is sometimes a lonely witness, but not entirely so, to a Word which challenges the

> 'realism' of basic decisions in our national life, which increasingly have quite evidently failed.

This paper notes the transition in the public life of the church to the issue of the Vietnam War which was to be so important over the next years. I preached a sermon shortly thereafter on "Vietnam and the Crisis of Conscience", and invited members to a discussion about it immediately afterward in the church hall. From then on, until I left to go to Tallahassee, the issue of the Christian responsibility in the face of war was joined to all the other matters - race, housing, public education, economic justice, university life - that characterized the expression of a lived theology in the life of the church.

Over the years since leaving Charlottesville in 1968 I have, of course, thought new things about the relationship between gospel and culture, theology and social action. I wrote a paper once about "Prophetic Ministry Reconsidered," brought my theological views into conversation with other theologians, and with others engaged in social and political analysis. How I tried to work out the relationship between theology and social action, a lived theology, as a pastor-theologian in Tallahassee, Florida, in the national offices of the Presbyterian Church, in another congregation in Blacksburg, Virginia, and on the faculty of a theological institution, will have to await for another time to write and share. I now serve as the Director of The Institute for Reformed Theology, a Lilly funded initative located at Union Theological Seminary and the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia. I work part-time fairly passionately at that task, participate in the work of the Project on Lived Theology, and think with you all about how to be faithful in this time.

I very much welcome your reflections and comments on this presentation, and on the way to build now, in *this* time, the deep and sustaining theological conversations desperately needed in church and society today, as well as how to build and sustain a blessed community of the people of God that may live with courage, and wisdom, and passion.