

Some Possible Roles for Congregational Christian Education in Closing the Black-White Educational Achievement Gap

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THE EVENING MARTIN LUTHER KING WAS SHOT I WAS AFRAID. MY FAMILY LIVED IN A white neighborhood filled with huge magnolias, bordered on two sides by black neighborhoods—in Memphis. Rumors were flying that the garbage men were going to march from the colored neighborhood to our north, down to the colored neighborhood to the south—and burn everything in between. The night before, I’d watched news clips from King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, and I’d been afraid then, too. I was unfamiliar with his African American homiletical style, and I’d heard him as loud and angry—and as threatening.

Several days before, a deacon in my Presbyterian church had explained to me why “winning” the sanitation workers’ strike was so important. “The population is exploding. Natural resources are dwindling. The pie is only so big. The reason white people need to keep colored people in their place isn’t because they’re inferior. It’s because they want to be in our place—and there’s not enough room at the top. Taking care of your own is a God-given instinct. It’s my duty as a Christian parent to ensure that my children get all the advantages I can provide.”

In 1968 white parents in Memphis were afraid of what Martin Luther King was saying. In 2001, suburban parents all over the United States still seem to be afraid of what Martin Luther King said. And many of these parents are members of Christian congregations. In the conclusion of his beautifully crafted paper entitled “Closing the Black-White Achievement Gap: A Public Theology for Public Education Reform,” Ray Owens writes: “Parents in predominantly white suburban communities are afraid—afraid that achieving equity for black students will mean that the education of their

own children will suffer” (28). In this sentence I think Owens has pointed out the greatest stumbling block to educational justice in the United States—fear: fear on the part of the affluent that if we share radically enough to provide educational excellence for “those other children,” there won’t be enough educational resources left to provide educational excellence for our own. Although many suburban Christians would sincerely agree that “Yes, urban education ought to be improved,” few of us are willing to share our financial resources to fund urban education, nor to share our time and energy resources in political advocacy to change educational funding structures. I say “us,” because after years of teaching in urban congregations and schools, I am now immersed in suburban culture, teaching special education and Sunday school in Princeton.

This fear-based scarcity approach to resources, resulting in hoarding, is the opposite of Jesus’ approach of reliance upon abundant divine providence—resulting in generosity. One way to interpret the story of the fall in Genesis is to locate the serpent’s lie in his misrepresentation of God’s desires and motivations. The serpent insinuates that God is afraid that humanity might become like God, as if there’s only a limited amount of the divine nature, and God doesn’t want to share it. The serpent, therefore, portrays the Garden of Eden as a scarcity situation. There’s not enough Godlikeness to spread around, and God is stingy. Therefore Adam and Eve will have to do without Godlikeness unless they sneak behind God’s back and steal it. Jesus deconstructs the serpent’s scarcity scenario. His incarnation teaches us that God desires to share divinity with humankind enough to become enfleshed in our humanity. His object lessons of the miraculous meals flesh out the doctrine of providence—that God has provided so abundantly that the distribution of resources can be a cooperative rather than a competitive venture. The Spirit that Jesus promises fills the assembly gathered in his name with the divine nature in a way that can empower us to undo violent social constructions built upon fear of not having enough, and fear of being harmed in competitive struggles.

I agree wholeheartedly with Owens that *de facto* segregation driven by local property tax funding of public education causes some of America’s most vulnerable “little ones” to stumble. I am convinced that Christian congregations could lead our society toward a more equitable system—if church members can teach each other to “fear not”—to risk a common life of mutuality, and then model this risk-taking publicly.

REIFICATION AND IDOLATRY IN RACIAL INEQUITIES
IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

The Old and New Testaments bear witness to humanity's propensity to re-shape our experience of different portions of creation into idols we imbue with imagined power we teach ourselves to fear. Although I would question parts of their approach,¹ I think Berger and Luckmann's outline of the process of social reification² can shed some light on ways in which American idolatries make educational inequities in the United States seem so intractable. In his book *This Thing of Darkness: A Sociology of the Enemy*, James Aho summarizes Berger and Luckmann's definition: "Reification" refers to the way in which people perceive their own creations, wrongly or falsely, as things for which they have no responsibility, over which they have no power, and which they passively suffer as victims do their fate."³ I see at least six processes of reification (or social construction—or idolatry) that condition the black-white academic achievement gap. All, I believe, involve masking or projecting fear. These are:

- 1) constructing the racial other as invisible. Ralph Ellison's novel *The Invisible Man*⁴ illustrates this process brilliantly.
- 2) constructing the other as enemy. Aho outlines this process in the first half of *This Thing of Darkness*, drawing significantly upon Levinas.
- 3) constructing the disparity between black and white academic achievement as an insoluble mystery, rather than as the result of multigenerational lack of equal access to social and economic capital.
- 4) constructing academic problems in black students as the result of genealogical differences or character defects.
- 5) constructing the resources of suburban school districts and churches as being too overstressed to contribute to the positive transformation of urban education.

¹ Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg's remarks in *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), 403–7.

² Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday-Anchor, 1967).

³ James Aho, *This Thing of Darkness: A Sociology of the Enemy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 27.

⁴ Ralph Waldo Ellison, *The Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952).

6) constructing the efforts of suburban churches to address this problem as being either tokenism or patriarchalism so that one can insist: “This is a problem that we need to give urban black churches the space to address on their own.”

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY, CONGREGATIONAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES, AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF RACIST IDOLS

I was asked by the editors of *Koinonia* to respond to Owens out of my experience teaching in urban and suburban schools. But I was also asked to respond as a practical theologian. My formation as a practical theologian has been greatly shaped by James E. Loder, a Christian educator whose death this fall has been a great loss to the field. I’ve been shaped not only by his theoretical depth and pedagogical wisdom, but probably more than anything by his prayers at the beginning of our doctoral seminars. Almost invariably these prayers began, “We are so profoundly grateful for your generosity . . .” and ended with an invocation of the Holy Spirit to empower us for transformative learning and teaching—prayers grounded in the doctrines of providence, incarnation, and the Holy Spirit—and in a passionate conviction that these teachings are transformatively true. Dr. Loder’s “transformational model” of practical theology insists that the core problematic of the discipline involves “combining two incongruent, qualitatively distinct realities, the Divine and the human, in apparently congruent forms of action.”⁵ Practical theologians work best, I think, when they focus on this divine-human congruence, that is, when they explicitly ask the question: “How might humans act in partnership with what God is doing, here and now, in this particular situation?” It’s a question that takes a lot of gall to ask. It takes even more gall to assume that a group might be graced with answers, because the question presumes that collectively we can—partially, brokenly—discern the mission of God in our unique context.

During the first half of the twentieth century George Albert Coe, one of the leaders of the “new” academic discipline of religious education, argued

⁵ James E. Loder, “Normativity and Context in Practical Theology: ‘The Interdisciplinary Issue’” in *Practical Theology: International Perspectives*, ed. Friedrich Schweitzer and Johannes van der Ven (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 374.

tirelessly that Sunday Schools and other congregational Christian education programs should teach toward social transformation. He urged church members to support nonchurch reform movements seeking to make public schools more egalitarian and more conducive to broad-based participatory democracy.⁶ I think his chapter entitled “The Aims of Christian Education” speaks to the current black-white educational gap when he insists that “thinking upon ethical problems, and upon the will of God, in terms of social causes and effects belongs within Christian teaching . . . [W]hat should we do with a social order that stunts multitudes of human lives for the sake of money, and does it, not by disobedience to the laws of the state, but under the protection of laws and of courts? How can we really believe in human brotherhood if we are willing to acquiesce in a stratification of society . . . ?”⁷

Unfortunately, Coe’s passion for social justice in public schools was filtered through what I see as an inadequate doctrine of sin, and an inadequate doctrine of God which emphasizes neither God’s transcendent, critical “otherness” over against the current social order, nor God’s immanent, transformative, guiding presence within the church through the action of the Holy Spirit. His inadequate eschatology seems to confuse the expansion of liberal democracy with the spread of the kingdom of God. He created what I see as a false dichotomy between “transmission” models of Christian education (which emphasize passing on biblical and doctrinal teachings) and “progressive” models (which emphasize learning to think critically, make ethical decisions, and then implement them—all in a cooperative manner). Although Coe, who occupied a chair in practical theology for a decade at Union Seminary in New York, envisioned Christian education as socially transformative, his inadequate response to what Loder poses as the “chief problematic of practical theology” (the quest for theories and practices of congruence between divine and human action) drained power from his efforts. It is my conviction that it is the church’s rootedness within the

⁶ I am drawing heavily here upon a chapter by Richard R. Osmer on the religious education reforms in the early twentieth century, to be published by Erdmanns in a book he coauthored with Friedrich Schweitzer about religious education in Germany and the United States.

⁷ George Albert Coe, *A Social Theory of Religious Education* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1928), 54–55.

cultural “otherness” of the Christian Scriptures’ witness to the mission of God in history that can give us the critical perspectival distance we need to see what is actually going on in our culture. And it is our rootedness within the “nearness” of the actual presence and cooperative action of the three persons of God within the assembled church that can empower us to discern cooperatively—and act cooperatively—in congruence with the mission of God.

Both sides in America’s current war against terrorism have made claims to be fulfilling God’s mission. But the ease with which people can mistakenly and destructively claim to be doing God’s work should not (I think) lead us to fearfully abandon all attempts at ecclesial discernment. I’m convinced that part of the core mission of the church is to retell the story of Jesus’ actions and, in the light of that story, and with a reliance upon the Spirit’s guidance, to discern what actions God is leading the church to take to continue Jesus’ mission, knowing that at any point our sin or frailty can confuse us. When I try to respond to Owens’ paper as a practical theologian working in Christian education, I can’t avoid focusing on two questions whose answers, I think, involve spiritual discernment:

1) What educational practices might help congregations, especially affluent congregations, let go of their fear of sharing—that is, let go enough to desire to respond to educational inequities generously?

2) If congregations do desire to work sacrificially in public education, where might they find the power? The power, first, to stick with the messiness of a mutual discernment process until they reach agreement as to what actions might be congruent with what God is doing in their local context, and, then, the power to persist in these actions when they don’t meet with immediate success?

It seems to me that congregations might lose some of their fear, and find more power for social change, by reviving and/or strengthening four educational practices taught and modeled in a variety of New Testament texts.⁸

⁸ I owe a great deal to Richard Osmer’s forthcoming book on the teaching ministry of congregations (Westminster/John Knox) for pointing out how Paul’s epistles both 1) bear testimony to the apostle’s assumption that the practices of catechesis, discernment and exhortation were an ongoing part of congregational life and 2) give further instruction and modeling for how to engage in these practices more faithfully. A fruitful extension of Osmer’s work might be looking at these practices in the pedagogy of Jesus in the gospels. I have adapted Osmer’s schema of the

I doubt I would ever feel comfortable constructing a list of definitive practices of the church, educational or otherwise. But I think congregations seeking the power to deconstruct idolatrous social realities and belief systems would do well to practice these four: 1) mutual retelling and rehearing the story of Jesus, 2) mutual discernment and decision-making, 3) mutual encouragement and 4) mutual forgiveness.

1) *Mutual retelling and rehearing the story of Jesus* via word, sacrament, and countless other ways reminds congregations not only that confronting structural evil inevitably involves great cost, but that God can bring victorious transformation through such expenditure. Retelling Jesus' parables and other teachings schools us in the agenda of God. A Christology that emphasizes the unique authority of Jesus' ethical teachings and redemptive work is crucial, I think, if one is to interpret the gospels in a way that supports long-term political advocacy.

2) *Mutual discernment* involves making corporate decisions in the light of this story, with a reliance upon the guidance of God's Spirit. Group decision-making often involves patience-grinding hours of listening and sifting, patience that can be sustained only, I believe, if the congregation is also practicing mutual encouragement. Robert Putnam opens his chapter on "Democracy" in *Bowling Alone* with Oscar Wilde's quip: "The trouble with socialism is that it takes too many evenings."⁹ For too many of us in suburban churches, so would a process of spiritual discernment aimed toward social justice. Perhaps it would help if our ecclesiology took more seriously the political implications of the choice of the word *ekklesia* to describe the fellowship gathered around Jesus in the New Testament. As feminist theologians have pointed out,¹⁰ the *ekklesia* in Athens were the free males empowered with making public policy decisions on behalf of the entire commu-

three core practices of Christian education and have added forgiveness as a separate fourth practice. My vision of the breadth of pedagogical practices that can foster Christian growth in both congregations and in the academy was enlarged by the "Introduction to Christian Education" course at Princeton Theological Seminary cotaught by Profs. Osmer and Kenda Creasy Dean in 1999.

⁹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 336.

¹⁰ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza in her 1996 *Women in Church and Ministry* lecture at Princeton Theological Seminary.

nity. Jesus invites everyone—regardless of gender or status—into the *ekklesia* of God. Would that congregations could take seriously the potential power of their mutual decisions and political action for transforming their communities, and make those decisions in a way that listens responsively to all the voices within that community. Various models for ecclesiastical spiritual discernment can be found in the Ignatian, Quaker, and Anabaptist traditions—and in the contemporary works of Episcopalian Suzanne G. Farnham.¹¹

3) *Mutual encouragement* involves good food and good singing—and all other practices which nurture the courage to grow morally and respond to suffering with wisdom. Important examples are small group prayer and Bible study meetings, and relationships of mutual accountability.¹² I am talking about a level of accountability greater than that seen in many “self-help groups,” which Robert Wuthnow describes all too accurately when he writes: “Some small groups merely provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others. The social contract binding the members together asserts only the weakest of obligations.”¹³ Our obligations to each other in the body of Christ are measured, and forgiven, by the cost of Jesus’ death. We owe each other the debt of love.

4) *Mutual forgiveness* can keep this love alive. When combined with confession, it can keep trust from completely unraveling when it is damaged by the inevitable individual sins and corporate failures within a congregation, particularly the failure to see quick results from political advocacy. Hard-learned trust in the effectiveness of mutual forgiveness can shape a congregation’s compassionate response to social evils outside as well as inside its own membership.

¹¹ Esp. *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1999).

¹² Thomas H. Groome’s *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Vision and Story* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980) and Daniel S. Schipani’s *Religious Education Encounters Liberation Theology* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1988) offer models for small-group praxis-oriented Christian education.

¹³ Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America’s New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 6. Wuthnow’s guidance of the Center for the Study of American Religion’s workshops increased my hope in the possibility of truly pluralistic public education and scholarly discussion that values the distinctiveness and contributions of different religious viewpoints.

When done in humble congruence with divine mercy, these four practices have the potential for teaching us to “fear not”: to risk nondefensive sharing and political action in line with Jesus’ teachings. I’ve been convinced of these practices’ value for social transformation since I was immersed in Anabaptist communal ecclesiology in the seventies.¹⁴ My current hope about their potential for public practical theology owes a great deal to the work of Dorothy Bass, Craig Dykstra, L. Greg Jones, and Miroslav Volf;¹⁵ the base community movement in Latin America; and to the practice of confession in African churches and of testimony in African American churches.

Ray Owens writes, “Hope for achieving equity in public education lies in our capacity to convince all the involved constituencies . . . to encompass a larger concern for all school children, not merely their own. . . .” (28). He offers “the view of humanity outlined in King’s thought” as a “solid foundation for promoting such commitment to the common good” (28). King’s translation of Jesus’ anthropology into terminology that can be used in non-Christian contexts is brilliant. But as important as King’s theories were to the civil rights movement, I think that the primary source of its power “to convince involved constituencies” was the incarnation of Jesus’ anthropology in African American *congregations*—who retold the story of Jesus and at their best practiced mutual discernment, encouragement, and forgiveness. And in performing these practices in Jesus’ name, the disempowered learned to take political risks—together.

These four practices of congregational self-education could help restructure public education today because they can nurture communities with enough grit, social capital, and openness to grace to support political advocacy over the tedious long haul. Ugly church politics and ugly school board

¹⁴ At Reba Place Fellowship in Evanston, Illinois.

¹⁵ Especially Bass and Dykstra’s *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), Dykstra’s *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1999), Jones’s *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), and Volf’s *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996)—all of which include some response to Alasdair MacIntyre’s neo-Aristotelean thoughts on social practices. I discovered *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), edited by Volf and Bass, after this response was initially delivered. Dykstra and Bass’s, Jones’s, Volf’s, and especially Nancy E. Bedford’s chapters are quite pertinent.

politics look and feel a lot alike. Church members who have learned that the time invested in responsive, inclusive decision-making eventually pays off in more joy-filled church policies could enter into the fray of public education policy-making with greater patience—and hope. Owens notes: “According to school choice proponents, the primary causes of public school failure include stagnant bureaucracy, rigidity, and the limited capacity of parents and concerned people to force schools to change” (16). Bigness is often blamed. Experiences of being shut out of the decision-making process—which lead people to assume that change can only be “forced”—are also blamed. But if large parochial systems can maintain a sense of face-to-face local control, and some do, so can large public school districts, I think. Some parochial and charter schools have demonstrated that ongoing responsiveness to parents and other community members can reduce per-pupil expenditures—and administrative blood pressures. Congregations whose public advocacy makes them visible in the community could model, to all the players in school conflicts, that responsive mutual decision-making works.

SOME PERSONAL OPINIONS ABOUT URBAN EDUCATIONAL POLICIES

The following five opinions should be taken with a grain of salt, as the rather thin, individual perspectives of one public schoolteacher, and not as the thicker and more powerful conclusions of mutual spiritual discernment in a congregation. First, I think that in some urban districts some charter schools are playing a useful stopgap role, but not by offering competition, as some insist. They can be most helpful, I think, if they focus on offering hope-filled alternative models of urban education, and if their charter includes a timeline for rejoining and renewing their local district’s administrative structure. Clearly—despite the best intentions of urban charter school administrators, teachers, and parents—charter schools are unfortunately functioning in a role of educational tokenism, providing a false rationale for continued underfunding of urban public districts. I would like to see this role phased out, and the incredible dedication of much of the urban charter school movement directed into educational channels that can benefit more students. But I have a great deal of respect for congregations who have prayerfully discerned that in their local context they are called to

support charter schools or nonpublic schools rooted in a particular religious tradition. And I also have great respect for parents who believe that it is part of their children's vocation (and part of their own) to be salt and light in public schools.

Second, I'm wary of vouchers, not only because they could weaken the financial base of public schools, but because they could weaken the independence of independent schools. I agree with Owens that "greater choice and competition cannot solve the problem of inequitable school funding formulas" (19–20).

Third, I agree with Owens that strengthening affirmative action and civil rights measures are important for moving the United States toward educational equity. And I also agree with him that aggressive urban renewal can improve the educational tax base of cities. This is an area in which I see great potential for creating partnerships between urban and suburban congregations.

Fourth, I doubt President Bush's initial "school accountability" proposal could solve the problem of racist educational inequities, with its plan to cut Title I funds to districts not showing enough test score improvement. I do not believe standardized test scores accurately measure excellence in either teaching or learning. I agree with Whitworth professor Gregory Fritzberg that "the vast majority of educators serving in high poverty areas deserve our support rather than the threat of fiscal abandonment."¹⁶

Fifth, I also agree with Fritzberg that the legislation based on "opportunity-to-learn standards" models—legislation defeated at the federal level in the mid-nineties—still offers creative ideas which could move the United States toward just distribution of educational goods. The ethical reasoning behind most "opportunity-to-learn" proposals is that: 1) all public school students, either on a state or a national level, should have access to high quality educational resources such as instructional materials, libraries, laboratories, athletic facilities, appropriate class size, and, most of all, to well-trained and well-prepared administrators and teachers—and 2) that educational funding should be readjusted to provide these resources to all schools.¹⁷

¹⁶ Gregory Fritzberg, "No Shortcuts to Excellence," *Sojourners* 30, 3 May–June 2001, 18.

¹⁷ Gregory Fritzberg, *In the Shadow of "Excellence": Recovering a Vision of Educational Opportunity for All* (San Francisco: Caddo Gap Press, 1999), chaps. 4–5.

CONCLUSION

These personal, individual opinions of mine listed above have no power to change current educational inequities. One of the reasons Martin Luther King functioned so powerfully as a public practical theologian was because he taught Jesus' ethics of the inbreaking reign of God to *congregations*—and taught them in a way that inspired these congregations toward political actions congruent with what they had discerned to be the mission of God in their particular context. Contemporary Christian educators can nurture such risk-taking, I think, by supporting congregations in learning corporate Christian practices that build a more closely-knit, and thus more risk-filled, common life. But this riskier sort of common life also has the potential for being filled with more transformative power for good—and with more joy.