

Task Force on Theology of Social Justice Advocacy
Meeting Minutes
June 14, 2019

Present: Sarah Lawton, Prince Singh, Susanne Watson-Epting, Ruth Frey, Anne Hodges-Copple, Guy Leemhuis, Lallie Lloyd, Dora Mbuwayesango
Absent: Andrew Dietsche, Brant Lee, Jose Rodriguez-Sanjuro, Reuben Varghese

Opening Prayer: Anne offered opening prayer

Housekeeping:

- Basecamp: Everyone should have access, and we should start using it, including by posting resources.

Sharing/Discussion:

At this meeting, Susanne offered her reflections (written script pasted here):

Because I wasn't on the last call, I'm not sure that I can frame what I have to share in quite the same way that Sarah did, or that Lallie suggests, but I've tried to attend a little to origins, and then thought about touchstones and primary experiences to build a framework for sharing.

I have to admit, as I begin, that when I sent in my materials to the General Convention office, I thought the name of this task force was a task force on a theology of social justice. The word "advocacy" completely escaped me. Now that may have been because of a typo, because of my age, or because of my own projections. It seems to me that if we have a theology of social justice, and some days I would simply call that gospel living – but if we have a theology of social justice that is clear and deep, advocacy is simply a part of that.

So, about origins and touchstones . . .

I am a native Iowan, an only-child, who grew up along the Mississippi River. Most Mississippi River towns are different than the rest of the states where they exist – tending to be a little rougher, more diverse, with a much more pronounced division between the classes. In fact, I'm still looking for a middle class in the town in which I was born. Perhaps that's because the stories I heard growing up were about poor people, about survival.

My father was the oldest of six children. On Christmas morning, when he was 8 years old, his father died. The youngest child would be born a month later. From that day forward my father was the "man of the house," and would work every part time job, and do the equivalent of dumpster diving to ensure that his mother and his siblings had enough to eat. It was a crazy family, and I loved hearing my grandmother's stories about all those children. But my father's stories were about survival.

My mother was raised by an often-single mother and her grandmother. They were housekeepers, takers-in of laundry and ironing. Three generations of women lived together in a tiny flat in a river town making it through the depression any way they could, including sewing pearl buttons on cards as they made their way to display racks for purchase.

All the stories, on both sides of the family, were about hard work and survival – about taking care of family and neighbors. There was singing, almost always singing – somewhere. We'd sing in rounds doing the dishes after family gatherings. My grandmother played the autoharp and invited her Baptist women's circle into her home every Saturday to sing and pray.

It would take me many years past my childhood to see between the lines in those stories – to see, in new ways, the presence of deprivation, of sacrifice, of depression, of dreams dashed, but lives built, nonetheless on hope.

And as for the touchstones? I've often said that the shortest version of my spiritual autobiography goes like this: I saw Jesus when I was three. I got feminism when I was 35. The only reason I'm still part of the church is that I saw Jesus when I was three.

My parents dedicated me in the Baptist Church. And my grandmother would take me to Sunday School. But then my parents fell away, and didn't return until I was ten, and was old enough to walk to the Presbyterian Church by myself. As I spent more and more time there, they returned. Then by the time I was a sophomore in college, I'd converted to Roman Catholicism and become an associate of a women's religious order.

It would be easy to say too much about my journey through three denominations on the way to the Episcopal Church. I took the best from all of them. But the point is that, from a very early age, knowing that I was loved by God was a daily assurance, one that enabled me to carry, even in my child-like way, the knowledge that God loved everyone.

Now as for some of those other touchstones and markers along the way...

I suspect that I may well be the oldest member of our group. That's where I find myself often these days. I am both a product of the 60's and an accomplice in making them part of what they were. They were incredibly informative years, and would define my decisions and actions for decades.

I was 14 when JFK was assassinated, 18, when Bobby and Martin were assassinated. It took me eight years to get my undergraduate degree because I was carrying signs. My friends were being sent to Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement was alive and hot. The women's movement was beginning. And as some of you might remember, there was a phrase that was used over and over – “If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.”

I finally received my BS from the University of Minnesota in community based special education programs. They were days of de-institutionalization and my primary work was with adults who had developmental disabilities. I returned to Iowa for a good job, and found my way to the Episcopal Church. I came to the church in 1977, just after we'd approved the ordination of women to the priesthood, and just before we started using a new prayer book. So this prayer book is the one in which I am grounded.

And this prayer book is the one that redefined the diaconate. The thing is, it also redefined a theology of ministry – one that is rooted in baptism, rather than ordination. Those two things would come together in a way that would inform the rest of my vocational life in the church. Rather than going to seminary, I did my graduate work in American Studies with a religious twist. I concentrated on a multi-disciplinary approach to social inequality, and focused on the time period between Reconstruction and WWI. I claimed the prophetic voices of the 19th and early 20th centuries and bemoaned the ubiquitous takeover of

the social gospel by theologians that moved us away from the responsibility of the community (as opposed to personal salvation or personal responsibility.)

Before I was ordained to the diaconate, I worked as a lay administrator of a little Episcopal church, known as the Community of St. Francis. We made a conscious decision not to have a building or a full time priest. Our resources went to human service efforts. Over time, I became the HIV coordinator for a free medical clinic, while working half-time as diocesan director for the Institute for Christian Studies, later as canon to the ordinary with a portfolio including congregational and individual ministry development. And for ten years, I was the director of the Association for Episcopal Deacons, consulted with various offices at the Church Center, and ended my official time with the church when my book on the diaconate was published.

And then I needed to step away. I had felt rumblings for quite some time. I had determined that I would no longer create anything that was dependent on the institution, nor would I prop up what seemed to me to be a dying institution. I felt complicit as I reflected on our theology and liturgy and governance. While my participation in national task forces and Anglican Communion task forces was a gift, it also raised more questions about who we love most – God or the church. Questions about how enculturated we have become, about how willing we are to change, about how we use our privilege – and maybe even why we have so much of it.

Now as co-founder of the Beloved Community Initiative in Iowa, building relationships with people of color daily, recognizing over and over how much white people don't know, and don't know that they don't know, I'm encouraged that there was at least a little grant available to us to be church in a different way, and yet, I know that the work there is to do really does involve theology, not just defining it but re-examining it. What is it in our own systems of thinking and believing that contribute to white supremacy? And how does our liturgical language keep privilege alive? And what do the images inside our churches reflect? And while I'm excited about some of our initiatives in the church, I sometimes fear that we'll try to make Beloved Community warm and fuzzy without doing the hard work of confession and repentance.

I feel privileged to be part of this group. It is, in a sense, a way to close out my time in the church. By the time we end our work, I'll be close to 72. But it is here that I think there is a chance to make a difference, to ask the church how seriously she takes justice, and to remind her that the God who has loved us from ages to ages, still invites us into a world where justice is real and true and motivated by love. You all have shared important pieces of your own work for justice and longing for justice that I echo and affirm with gratitude.

In closing, there are two things I would share that continue to inform my theology and journey. One is the reading from Jeremiah that is so often read at deacons' ordinations. Not because of what's there, but because of what isn't there.

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.'" Then the Lord put out

his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, now I have put my words in your mouth. (Jeremiah 1:4-9)

Comforting, yes? But now listen carefully to the verse that follows that we don't hear during the reading of that lesson....

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

You see, Jeremiah's call, as the prophet, would involve "deconstructing" the realities and structures of unfaithful nations, as well as planting and promising hopeful new realities.

And I believe that is, in part, what we need to reclaim. Not a thoughtless tearing down, but deconstructing in order to build something new.

The second thing I carry with me is a hymn from Wonder, Love and Praise that goes like this:

The church of Christ in every age

 beset by change but Spirit led,
must claim and test its heritage
 and keep on rising from the dead.

Across the world, across the street,
 the victims of injustice cry
for shelter and for food to eat
 and never live until they die.

Then let the servant church arise.

 A caring church that longs to be
a partner in Christ's sacrifice,
 and clothed in Christ's humanity.

For Christ alone whose blood was shed,
 can cure the fever in our blood.

And teach us how to share our bread
 and feed the starving multitude.

We have no mission but to serve

in full obedience to our Lord:

to care for all without reserve.

And spread Christ's liberating word.

We need not be afraid to claim and test our heritage and keep rising from the dead.

Thank you for being companions in that work.

Words: Fred Pratt Green (b. 1903); © Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL 60188

Music: *Dunedin*, Vernon Griffiths (1984-1985); © Faber Musci Ltd.

Responses from the Taskforce Members:

- Anne: Appreciate the stories of the generations of women survivors who also have had hope. In a process of deconstructing, how do we draw on the dignity and hope of our people and honor their stories?
- Lallie: Reflecting on the importance of doing contextual theology, listening, formation.
- Sarah: Appreciate hearing from rural / Middle America experience! Hearing an emphasis on the need for rigor in how we approach this. For better formation for social justice work. Also struck by the contradictions in our enculturation and love of privilege in the church versus love of God.
- Prince: Appreciate the different theological strands (Baptist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Episcopalian) in the story. Also: contextual theology really means contextual theologies, plural. There is a certain messiness inherent in doing this work, in listening to people and being in different contexts. Are we ready for that messiness? If we do this well, there will not be one comprehensive theology or approach. Also, there is an ongoing relationship between thinking/formation/theology and doing/praxis.
- Lallie: Grappling with the messiness must happen in community, with community accountability and reflection.
- Dora: Would like to read more of the theology that Susanne is doing, because it is rich and deep.
- Susanne: In terms of decolonizing our theology, is reading the work (hard to find) of Black and Brown women theologians from around the world. For example, Musa Dube who finds even our scriptures to be unhelpful to her community.... What does that mean? What does deconstruction mean?
- Lallie: Reminds her of a story from seminary, with Mpho Tutu, who said that when they finally translated the Bible directly from the ancient texts into Xhosa, rather than from English in Xhosa, the stories were entirely different for them.
- Anne: And do we need to do more power analysis? Where do we grapple with how power works in our society?
- Susanne: Regarding formation, does the church need to do more economics and systems training?

- Lallie: And reclaim the prophetic tradition and the prophets (unloved as they are).
- Anne: In terms of contextual theology, would recommend (and will post links to) “Living with Our Enemies” and “Nazareth Manifesto,” theology books based in deep community work in Durham NC.
- Susanne: Lessons from the Beloved Community work in Iowa include the need for listening, listening, listening. Especially for white people to learn about what whiteness and white supremacy are and how much we don’t know about what we don’t know. It takes time.
- Guy: Will recommend (and post on Basecamp the link to) “Dear White Christians.” Also, this conversation is raising a question about our purpose. Although anti-oppression and decolonizing work are close cousins to theology for social justice advocacy, ultimately we have to focus on the latter. There obviously are intersectional questions here, but we will need to make the distinctions at some point.

Next meeting: Guy will do the reflection and Brant will take the notes. Since so many people are away, we will do a poll with the whole group about skipping the July meeting and meeting again at the regular time in August.

Closing Prayer and Next Meeting: Anne offered the closing prayer