

Task Force on Theology of Social Justice Advocacy

Meeting notes

December 13, 2019

Meeting via Zoom teleconference call

Present: Sarah Lawton, Prince Singh, Ruth Frey, Anne Hodges-Copple, Brant Lee, Lallie Lloyd, Dora Mbuwayesango, Reuben Varghese, Susanne Watson Epting

Absent: Andrew Dietsche, Guy Leemhuis, Jose Rodriguez-Sanjuro

Dora opened the meeting with prayer before Ruth shared her reflection. See her attached written reflection.

Discussion and thoughts following:

- Sarah
 - We can't act authentically on behalf of others unless we come proximate to them; we need to take action, but we need to be in close to do that well.
- Susanne
 - Finds our theology somewhat deficient in that it doesn't move us toward another place; we get stuck sometimes
- Bishop Anne
 - Systemic change can be rooted in a theology of baptism, which holds Imago Dei and the Incarnation in creative tension: the Body of Christ requires healthy 'parts' (individuals).
 - We can move from the secular language of systemic change into a theological understanding of the cosmic body of Christ that cannot be whole and healthy unless each part is healthy and whole
 - Ten percent of the students who experience service learning are transformed by it - not everyone - but some deeply.
 - Systemic change and policy work - connects to theology - our task (on this task force) may be to keep knitting those pieces together.
- Dora
 - Touched by how All Our Children's closing is not a failure - coming to an end is a success - look at it from God's perspective - it served its season successfully - many people's lives were made much better.
 - We always come back to race, which is appropriate because slavery was the original sin for America -
 - Impact of greed, which leads to poverty.

- She's active in the Poor People's Campaign and can see how morally everyone is impacted by greed, not just POC.
 - Poverty is the end result of the sin of human greed, which continues to fuel how we look at success. It's not enough to focus on whether we are poor or not.
 - There's a moral question: How the money is getting into our pockets??
- Sarah
 - Re: Poor People's Campaign, The Rev William Barber is powerful at doing public theology - he looks at race and poverty in a deeply moral way (& Christian way, though he works in multi-faith context) and how they interact
- Prince - He has heard things that leave him wondering if we are creating a gradation in this theology around social justice when advocacy is held in higher esteem and assumed to be the end result of all social justice theology. Can we perhaps create a continuum wherein direct service, hands-on ministry, which is often disparaged as 'not enough,' can instead be seen as an expression of a different gift? Can we use a gifts perspective, the variety of gifts? Examples: Advocacy around homelessness or climate change or poverty is sometimes placed on a higher level and seen as better than volunteering in shelter, building a house with Habitat, etc. Advocacy is sometimes seen as the "better gift," which weakens our sense of wholeness of the body of Christ.
- Anne - Advocacy can become competitive, aggressive, the locus of power politics that can violate/take away dignity. Without a service component, it can be hollow. Embodied service (spending the night on the floor in a shelter) is solidarity (though we need to watch out for the sin of complacency, as in "Now I've done my service").
- Sarah - It's about becoming. Advocacy not grounded in community can be partisan, or hierarchical. It should be about transformation. "These children are the same as I was" The story of one wealthy white man's moment of transformation. How do "these people" become the center of our church? William Barber: "The first thing we do [in Poor People's Campaign] is give center stage to poor people to speak."
- Reuben - "As a brown man in a white church, I can't pretend I'm not white." At my church, I'm not hearing space being created except for white space, which is needed, but it's not all that's needed. We need brown space too. Advocacy and service at the same space - Advocacy seems to have become a four letter word in the church. There's a false dichotomy between advocacy and service. Sometimes prophecy can become pastoral and the pastoral can become prophetic. Prodigal Son - if we identify with the one set upon by robbers instead

of with one of those who passed him by. How can we better create space for people to be who they are so we can see them as they are?

- Brant - Direct service - feeding people: "I've done what I'm supposed to do I'm a good person." This is what I can do right now. There's a policy context that's exacerbating the problem. Transformation...the quality of opening up for those transformed by service - you didn't know there was an awakening to be had - suddenly your world is bigger - awakening falls on you - coming to awareness - intersection/distinction between our [personal] individual story and our shared [or public] corporate story. He's learning about American history from a perspective he didn't learn in school and it's changing his sense of the narrative of who we are (as Americans), and that's connected to our own narratives of who we each are. There are two kinds of work: personal development and awakening and the corporate national narrative. The church, if we get that right, will survive and thrive. He wonders if that's true. Is there a natural way in which those three things work together? We may get all these things (personal & corporate) right yet TEC may not survive. It's not God dying just this form of church!
- Sarah - What does it mean to be church and be faithful - not about the metrics - numbers, etc.

Dora closed the meeting with prayer.

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(See Ruth's reflection, below)

Notes taken by Lallie Lloyd

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December 13, 2019

Ruth Frey

Invitation:

- Reflection on your own experience and practice of the theology of social justice advocacy
- Share your story – origins and touchstones – that influenced your theology of social justice advocacy

Reflection – Ruth Frey

I was thinking how some of you have talked about parents, grandparents and ancestors as a way to locate yourselves in your journey around the theology of social justice advocacy. I really don't know a lot about my ancestors. But it was clear to me growing up that social status was highly valued. I think my grandparents on both sides worked to gain or keep the status they had, and the importance of maintaining the "good profile" was communicated to my sister and me as well.

My informal education in social justice happened around the dinner table where my parents engaged us in conversations about issues like racism, gender equity, poverty, and war. We developed a strong liberal progressive viewpoint, but not one that encouraged us to actually take risks or be involved outside of the communities we already knew.

I am a cradle Episcopalian and grew up in the white church of the 70's in Upstate NY in a community that was equally Catholic, Jewish and Protestant. Nothing would happen in school on the High Holy Days or Catholic Religious Education days. Religion provided a framework for the community.

Church was second home for me growing up, although the Christian education was poor, and I didn't understand most of the Episcopal Church's central ideas or theologies. But I loved the liturgy, the music and my friends – and the creativity of the congregation. The church was comprised of the leaders of the community: presidents and vice presidents of local industries, university professors, business owners. As much as I valued that community, I also see it now as a way to uphold the white power structure of the wider community.

As a teen, I resisted confirmation because I didn't think I could make that statement of faith (which I took very seriously). I remember struggling with the concept of sin. It seemed so oppressive to me. In college I wrote a long paper on sin as an exercise in distancing myself from the subject and "proving" it wasn't a useful theological concept. Instead, I ended up gaining a deeper understanding of sin and what it encompasses. I took part in the efforts to promote divestment in South Africa and protest nuclear weapons which were located near my college. I began to see how sin works systemically.

Like many young adults, I did not participate in church at that time in my life. After college I explored intentional communities, looking for a different way to be in the world than what I saw around me. In my late twenties, I came back to the church and really dug in, trying to figure out my relationship to God and this institution to which I felt so connected.

Eventually, I went to seminary; not to pursue ordination, but because I thought I wanted to do pastoral care. It turned out that wasn't my calling and I focused on Biblical studies. It was there

– especially studying Hebrew Bible – that things started to click in terms of social justice and Christian faith.

Throughout my life and career, I have been working in primarily white spaces and, until not too long ago (I am ashamed to say), I was not fully aware of this lifelong enculturation to white space. I am unclear if my growing awareness is prompted by the national conversation about race that has arisen in the last decade or so. I hear from others who call themselves white – including those on this Taskforce who have shared their stories – that this is growing awareness among many people.

I now live in Manhattan and this island has every imaginable kind of person God created packed in to a very small space. I am on staff at Trinity Church and I moved to NYC after serving on staff at Washington National Cathedral. Both are prominent churches with a big profile. But the Cathedral is located in an affluent white part of the city and requires a concerted effort to arrive at the door. Trinity, on the other hand, is in the middle of a very busy section of the city where all manner of humanity intentionally or unintentionally push up against it. Unlike DC, here in NYC, pain and suffering is evident right outside the doors of the church.

In my work at Trinity, I lead a team focusing on the witness, outreach and advocacy of the church. These three areas overlap, and I think they are critical for the work of the church. I see witness as “showing up” where support is needed on systemic issues. We show up for demonstrations, rallies and marches on criminal justice reform, immigration reform, climate change, etc. Through outreach we assist individuals with basic needs like food and shelter. And advocacy brings us together with other faith communities and non-profit organizations to organize for legislative and policy change. All three of these are critical to creating a just society. I recently attended a conference where a wise and seasoned advocate in the group said, “You can have all the programs you want but if you aren’t engaging on the policy level, you really are not helping people.” Systemic change is where the real difference happens.

My hope for actions of outreach (direct service) is that it brings us closer to the issues and how they are impacting people. Bryan Stevenson calls this “getting proximate.” What he means is spending time in communities and getting to know people who are impacted by laws, policies and practices that adversely affect them.

On one of our recent calls, someone observed that we, as a taskforce, seem to keep coming back to race as a central issue around the theology of social justice advocacy in the Episcopal Church. At the last reflection (that I was a part of) Prince talked about purity and pollution laws and practices in India and how it is part of every culture. In the U.S, it is built around centuries of systemic racism. The Episcopal Church is a white church and unless we come to terms with what that means, the church will continue to decline. And, frankly, even if we DO come to terms with what that means we may decline anyway. But, if we do, it will be with honesty, truth and integrity.

There are a few theological concepts that I would like to offer to our larger discussion:

- For a while I have been thinking about the centrality of the incarnation – God here with us – and the Imago Dei – all of us in the image of God. These two theologies/concepts are about physical bodies. And our discussions about race and how race plays out systemically is about our distorted perception of physical bodies: whose bodies are important, whose bodies are less important, and who we are to one another.

- Another area of focus is sin leading to repentance leading to reconciliation (ok, that is three...). Someone in our group asked Dora about distortion in the theology of reconciliation. Dora replied that distortion happens around racial reconciliation when we fail to recognize the harm done and the work needed to bring about restoration as a process toward reconciliation. In general, we want to move quickly through the process to get to reconciliation. On the topic of race, that isn't something we can schedule. Dr. Catherine Meeks (Diocese of Atlanta/Beloved Community) says she doesn't use the term "racial reconciliation" because to be reconciled means there was once an equal relationship.

There is such a high level of white fragility in our church, even among those of us who like to believe we are enlightened or "woke." Our national ethos encourages us to promote the "American Exceptionalism" narrative rather than come to terms with the damage that narrative has caused. The church is uniquely positioned to give us language and liturgy to confront our history and our current complicity. Serene Jones, President of Union Theological Seminary, was interviewed recently on "On Being" with Krista Tippett, and talked about grief and mourning. She said mourning makes sacred the pain while grief locks you in the eternal present. Both are part of the human experience. It seems that mourning invites community and can help us be more human with one another. Our liturgy and our theology are great tools for helping us face our fragility, mourn what we have created (or ignored) and invite us into transformation towards the reign of God.

- Which brings me to the last theological concept that I'd like to offer this group: The reign of God. As Christians, this is what we are called to make real on earth. It is this vision that gives us the courage and hope to confront our collective sins, join together to create just systems and work for a world where everyone is thriving.