

Organizing Local Churches for Social Justice

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Abstract

This dissertation in public theology chronicled the process of organizing a local Christian alliance of Pastors to develop and promote a joint social justice initiative. The intention was to provide resources to disenfranchised people who are grappling with the issues of hunger and poverty. This project was carried out in Rockland County, New York, a diverse area of approximately 330,000 people inclusive of a vibrant and strong immigrant community. A demographic study of the area anchored this work.

The collaboration within the faith-based group provided direly needed food and poverty relief to children, women, immigrants, and minorities whose needs have been historically unaddressed within the county by the institutions of church, government, and community and which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a project on public theology, this work sought to document the process needed to transition faith-based leaders from theologies of service and charity in the public square to theologies of social justice. A byproduct of this work was a shift in my own sense of theological vocation in the public square.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my ancestors: who prayed, suffered and sacrificed for me yet never knew my name. May they continue to rest peacefully and be pleased with me.

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Introduction

The focus of this professional project on public theology is to document the process of moving a local alliance of Christian pastors located within or immediately outside of Rockland County, New York from charitable or service works to the faith work of social justice. The area is located approximately 35 miles outside of New York City and is home to approximately 330,000 diverse people inclusive of a vibrant and strong immigrant community as well as a large Orthodox Jewish population. The region is connected via rail and commuter buses. Most residents are primarily employed and or connected to the economic hub of New York City.

The overarching goal of this project was to document the process of moving this alliance of Pastors to a commitment to a joint justice initiative together that made the food pantries a reality within the affected community. The intent is to serve and provide relief by way of resources to the invisible people who live in the area. These people are grappling with the issues of hunger, poverty, poor education, and immigration; their needs have been historically ignored and unaddressed within the county by the institutions of church, government, and community entities. This project will utilize existing demographic data provided by the county of Rockland.

The project will impact minorities, women, children and immigrants who live in the community and are grossly underserved in the areas of health, mental health, nutritious food, economics, education, immigration, homeless services, and housing within the county. These persons are invisible in the suburban landscape community at large and live in the shadows of America. Their needs are typically unaddressed or overlooked by the major institutions of church and government on many levels.

Chapter 1: The Case against the Church

Poverty is a social phenomenon which includes dynamics of health, education, economic, political and environmental injustices perpetrated on communities of marginalized people including minorities, women and critically vulnerable children. The crippling impact of law and policies designed to frustrate, entrap and ensnare poor people has reached a critical point in this country.

President Donald J. Trump eliminated welfare programs, reduced the federal education budget, privatized federal prisons, and decimated the Affordable Care Act passed into law by his predecessor President Barack Obama. All of this has occurred while the Center for Disease Control (CDC) has reported that for two years in a row the average life expectancy of minorities has declined. The deteriorating morality in America is correlated directly to the inability of human

institutions including the church to ensure that the poor and marginalized have access to quality food, adequate shelter and community resources.

The combined efforts and focus of this concentrated response directed towards a communal issue should forge greater synergy among the participating churches. The project will chronicle the actions taken in this social justice initiative and should not only benefit the oppressed members of the community, but rather lead to an organized concentrated response from those tediously working on the field of liberation to pool their resources and talents towards a more focused response to realize the call of God to care for the least of these in the community of Rockland county.

This project is extremely relevant especially given the fact that income and wealth inequalities continue to widen tremendously in America. This is evidenced by the current health pandemic COVID-19, which has “temporarily” left over 30 million people unemployed. This temporary condition has allowed for the wealthy to have unlimited opportunities to accumulate more wealth in a relatively short period of time. This unfortunate public health crisis has left many individuals, women and families without jobs, money, food, shelter and assistance. Many citizens in the United States will be experiencing such acute shortages for the first time in their lives and their faces won’t resemble the ones we are accustomed to seeing “begging for bread” or asking for money anywhere previously in America.

Where will they turn to for help as savings are depleted and government stimulus checks are delayed or exhausted? How will people who were previously gainfully employed provide food for their families? Many will have to secure vitally needed food from organizations like food banks and resources and assistance from institutions like churches and other non-profits. The resulting crisis has created a panic in America, one that has not been experienced since the great depression.

The triumphs, failures, detours, regroupings, disagreements, obstacles and challenges of moving a consortium of churches towards a unified effort will be chronicled. It is hoped that documenting this process in print will allow me to articulate more clearly a theology regarding how institutions of faith form alliances to serve oppressed and traumatized populations. Moreover, it is hoped that the project can be utilized as a blueprint of how to build coalitions within faith communities to do the necessary work of justice, which is sorely needed in Rockland County and our nation as more and more vulnerable people in our community experience acute need.

Poverty intersects with every social justice issue currently plaguing the United States of America. It affects every ethnic, racial, and gender group represented in this country. Every issue any group is challenged with in this country has a connection to poverty as each group has members represented within

the class of the impoverished. The scope of the proposed work in Rockland County will be transferable to any suburban community. The intended partnership among churches should be transferable to urban, suburban or rural communities all over America. If we as a society can turn a blind eye to hungry individuals, families and children then it should be of no surprise that we cannot solve the challenges of nationalism, racism, sexism, homophobic or xenophobic behavior, ignorance and hatred.

Before we can consider the churches role in social, environmental, legal, educational, and justice initiatives we must ensure that the most vulnerable among us; children who make up one third of the impacted group, have enough to eat in America. Poverty has been a social issue since the end of World War 2. As a predominantly Christian country, America, the richest country in the world, should not have women, defenseless children and vulnerable people going to bed at night in temporary shelters or housing without a well balanced, healthy meal. There is a huge gulf between America's wealthy and the rest of us. The top 1 percent of America's richest people has more money than the bottom 90 percent, according to a survey from the Federal Reserve. "The median upper-income family (those who make more than \$127,600) now holds 75 times the wealth of the median low-income family (those who make less than \$42,500), according to an analysis of the

data by the Pew Research Center.”¹ A study done by the nonpartisan wealth research firm New World Wealth found that 56.2% of the 13.1 millionaires in the world were Christians.²

Our Christian texts tell us “If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so that they may continue to live among you.” Leviticus 25:35-36

“Like most important subjects, this one is simple and complex simultaneously. The phenomenon is simple in its basic form, and complex in the interpretation of that form. The subject tends to become overly complicated when one exists, thinks and interprets out of a position of privilege and relative influence. To speak about the poor, Western Christians and theology in the same breath is an immense task, but a necessary one. Such an address must consider the apparent and immediate issues, as well as the contradictory and ambiguous ones. This study will attempt both.

A vast amount of poverty exists in the world today. The figures range from between 25 to 80 million poor persons in the United States of America to a projected figure of not less than 2.4 billion globally. Alongside this poverty are the undeniable facts of influence and wastefulness, particularly in the United States.

¹ Tyler Huckabee “Why Christians Should Care about America’s Wealth Gap.” Relevant Magazine (February 2018), <https://relevantmagazine.com/love-and-money/christians-care-americas-wealth-gap/> (accessed July 2020).

² Bill High “What is the Religion of Millionaires?” CNBC (2015), <https://www.cnbc.com/2015/01/14/the-religion-of-millionaires-html/> (accessed June, 2020).

For the most part, the world's wealthy are Christian, Western and Caucasian. We consider them "Christian" because their predominant moral and ethical beliefs have been largely determined by the Christian religion. They are "Western" by geography, attitude and social-economic life-style. Most people on our planet are poor, non-Christian, non-Western, and non-White. A premise of this paper is that there is a connection between wealth and poverty, generally, and wealthy Christians and the poor specifically."³

In the wake of growing inequality and a lack of class mobility, a significant number of vulnerable children and families are becoming increasingly poor. The poverty rate published by the US Census Bureau in 2017 was 12.3 %, which included 39.7 million people. While this might seem relatively low, consider that the "poverty threshold" for a family of four (two adults, two children) that determines this rate in 2017 was a yearly income of \$24,858.⁴ This assessment of the amount on which a family of four can theoretically survive is extremely low compared to actual cost of living."⁵ Even if poverty were measured by a standard that more closely reflects the realities in the US, using the definitions provided by the US Census Bureau, half of the US Americans are poor or low-income.⁶

"Poverty is therefore not only the isolated experience of a few people who are

³Colin Archer, *Poverty: The Church's Abandoned Revolution* (Nassau, Bahamas: Colmar Books, 1980), 2.

⁴ United States Census Bureau. <https://tinyurl.com/y8kvngqb> (accessed June 2020).

⁵ Crystal, Hall, *Insights from Reading the Bible with the Poor* (Minneapolis, MN Fortress Press, 2019), 14.

⁶ Paul Buchiet, "Yes, Half of Americans Are In or Near Poverty: Here's More Evidence," *Common Dreams*, (October 16, 2017), <https://tinyurl.com/yy9b7vwe> (accessed June 2020).

street homeless in the “inner city.” Poverty is not only the experience of people living in rural areas overcome by the opioid epidemic. Poverty is not only the experience of people living in so-called “third world” countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Poverty is as American as apple pie. What makes it so difficult to see and interpret is that capitalism (like white supremacy and patriarchy) is deeply embedded within US American society.”⁷

“The opposition to those who work for social change does not come only from those who are the guarantors of the status quo. Again and again it has been demonstrated that the lines are held by those whose hold on security is secure only as long as the status quo remains intact. The reasons for this are not far to seek. If a man is convinced that he is safe only as long as he uses his power to give others a sense of insecurity, then the measure of their security is in his hands. If security or insecurity is at the mercy of a single individual or group, then control of behavior becomes routine. All imperialism functions in this way. Subject peoples are held under control by this device.”⁸ I agree with Howard Thurman, the poor are racially divided, this division has hierarchical dimensions. Poor whites feel superior to poor blacks and this competitive rivalry prevents the group from uniting to fight the common systemic issues confronting the poor irrespective of ethnicity.

⁷ Hall, *Insights from Reading the Bible with the Poor*, 14-15.

⁸ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA Beacon Press 1996), 14-15.

Within the United States, we also turn our eyes away from the growing domestic inequality that ruins lives and breaks spirits. Pope Francis speaks directly to this: “While the income of a minority is increasing exponentially, that of the majority is crumbling. This imbalance results from ideologies which uphold the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation, and thus deny the rights of States, which are themselves charged with providing for the common good. The United States, which for so much of its great history has stood for economic mobility and a broad, comfortable middle class, now reflects gross disparities in income and wealth barriers to mobility. The poor suffer a “benign neglect” in our political conversations, and absorb brutal cuts in government aid especially at the state level. If the Catholic church is truly to be a “church for the poor” in the United States, it must elevate the issue of poverty to the very top of its political agenda.”⁹ It seems as Pope Francis has acknowledged that the Catholic Church has failed in its mission to protect the poor. This failure includes all branches of the Christian faith tradition.

These days we occasionally hear more because since the “Great Recession” began in December 2007, the gulf between rich and poor has deepened. Reports document that four in five Americans live in danger of falling into joblessness and

⁹ Robert McElroy, “Pope Francis Makes Addressing Poverty Essential,” American Magazine (October 2013), <https://americanmagazine.org/church-poor> (accessed June 2020).

poverty, and that nearly one in two Americans is poor or has low income (family living at less than 200% of the poverty line).¹⁰ In communities across the United States, banks foreclose on an average of 10,000 homes a day. Nearly 40% of Americans between the ages of 25 and 60 will experience at least one year below the official poverty-in 2016 that means a family of 4 makes less than \$24,300. Half of all American children will, at some point during their childhood, reside in a household that uses food stamps.¹¹ Poverty, low levels of education, poor social support, and other social factors contribute to as many deaths in the United States as familiar causes like heart attacks, strokes, and lung cancer combined.¹² Poverty disproportionately impacts people of color and women. Nearly 1 in 3 Native Americans (29.2%), over one in four African Americans (27.2%), one in four Hispanics/Latinos (23.5%), one in ten Asians (10.5%) and one in ten non-Hispanic whites (9.6%) live below the federal poverty line. More than half of all children below the poverty line live in families headed by women, and women make up two thirds of all minimum-wage workers.¹³

¹⁰ Associated Press, "4 in 5 Americans Live in danger of Falling into Poverty, Joblessness." NBC (July, 2013), <http://usnews.nbcnews.com/news/2013/07/28/1938595-ap-4-in-5-americans-live-in-danger-of-falling-into-poverty-joblessness> (June 2020).

¹¹ Mark Rank, "Poverty is Mainstream in America," New York Times, November 2, 2013.

¹² Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. <https://www.mailman.columbia.edu/public-health-now/news/how-many-us-deaths-are-caused-poverty-lack-education-and-other-social-factors#sthash> (June 2020).

¹³ Liz Theoharis, *Always with US? What Jesus Really Said about the Poor* (Grand Rapids, Michigan Eerdmans Publishing, 2017), 11.

Food insecurity in America is an historic issue that has reached crisis levels. The conditions imposed by the current health epidemic, COVID-19, has exacerbated the problem for critically vulnerable families and children in particular. This rise has overwhelmed our food supply system and poses a significant challenge for systems of care like churches along with federal, state, county and community entities. The COVID-19 pandemic has shaped 2020 into a year characterized by public health and economic crises in the United States, destabilizing millions of families. One of the most striking and consistent indicators of ongoing hardship is an elevated level of food insecurity in American households. Food insecurity sits at the intersection of the economy and health; is a measure that a household lacks sufficient resources to provide adequate nutrition to its members. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the prevalence of moderate to severe food insecurity in the United States has continued its downward trajectory following the Great Recession. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity has increased in the United States.¹⁴

There is an undeniable correlation between access to nutritious food and health. Such implications are germane especially in minority and poor communities, and the impact upon children can affect their lives and livelihood.

¹⁴ The Hamilton Project.
https://www.hamiltonproject.org/blog/hungry_at_thanksgiving_a_fall_2020_update_on_food. (accessed January 17, 2021).

While this fact may be obvious to health care institutions, organizations and professionals, there is little attention afforded this growing problem by social institutions, organizations and professionals working in impacted communities. There are immediate and long- term health consequences to inadequate nutrition and limited access to food. Children born into food insecure households risk birth defects and children living in food-insecure households tend to have lower health-related quality of life, higher rates of asthma, less nutritious diets, anemia, and cognitive and behavioral problems that affect well-being and school performance.¹⁵

The threats to our food system are formidable. Since the COVID-19 pandemic struck, food insecurity in US households with children more than tripled, from the already unacceptable 9.3% to 29.5%. In addition, food prices are rising. In the United States, poor diet is now the leading cause of mortality, causing more than half a million deaths per year. Almost 60% of the calories in the US diet now come from ultra-processed foods—energy-dense, nutrient-poor products produced by the industrial food system—that are strongly associated with the rise in diet-related chronic diseases.¹⁶

According to Bill Fay, “Poverty is a pervasive human condition of being unable to obtain or provide a standard level of food, water and/or shelter. It exists

¹⁵ The Hamilton Project.
https://www.hamiltonproject.org/blog/hungry_at_thanksgiving_a_fall_2020_update_on_food.

¹⁶ Nicholas Freudenberg and Marion Nestle, A Call for a National Agenda for a Healthy, Equitable, and Sustainable Food System (American Journal of Public Health November 2020, Volume 110 Issue 11), 1671.

in every country to varying degrees, and is unlikely to disappear anytime soon. The United States is considered the richest country in the world, and yet millions of its residents live in poverty. Poverty is measured in two ways-absolute poverty and relative poverty. Absolute poverty looks at the goods and services someone (or a family) cannot obtain. Relative poverty looks at the context of the need, how one social group compares to others. The official method of calculating America's poverty level was developed in the 1960's and has not been refined substantially since then, although critics maintain that the government overstates U.S. poverty levels because it counts impoverished people who in generations past would be considered as not living in poverty.”¹⁷

Christian Churches Together a non-profit religious organization has a published statement on poverty long before the pandemic COVID-19, “As Christian leaders in the wealthiest society on the earth, we are called by God to urge our churches and nation to strengthen and expand efforts to address the scandal of widespread poverty in the United States and around the world. The Gospel and our ethical principles place our service of the poor and vulnerable and our work for justice at the center of Christian life and witness. Our common faith compels us. Christ our Lord teaches us that when we serve and stand with “the least of these,” we serve and stand with Him. Our bible teaches us in hundreds of

¹⁷ Bill Fay “Poverty in the United States”. Debt.org (n.d.), <http://debt.org/fags/americans-in-debt/poverty-united-states>. (accessed November 6, 2019).

places that the God we worship has a special concern for the poor. As leaders in Christian Churches Together, we believe that a renewed commitment to overcome poverty is central to the mission of the church and essential to our unity in Christ. Therefore in order to obey our God, respect the dignity of every person, and promote the common good of society, we must act. Our focus here is domestic poverty, but we reaffirm our commitment to overcome poverty all around the world. Widespread and persistent poverty challenges us to action. The painful truth is that about thirty-seven million people in our country live below the poverty line. Tragically, eighteen percent of all our children struggle in poverty. We lament this ongoing poverty.”¹⁸

“The Christian Church has rarely been able to exercise and sustain an authentic ministry and mission among the world’s poor. Indeed, throughout its history, the Christian Church has been intimately identified with, and representative of wealth, privilege and an extensive array of social, economic, political, cultural, and religious power structures. This stance and image are contrary to the life, crucifixion, death and resurrection message of the Church’s Lord, Jesus the Christ. It is, therefore, essential that voices be heard within the ranks of the privileged, worshipping Christians of faith as they address themselves

¹⁸ Christian Churches Together, “Statement on Poverty.” <http://christianchurchestogether.org/statement-on-poverty>.

to the total poor/rich controversy.”¹⁹ Clearly, Dr. Colin Archer agrees that the Christian church in America has not done enough to support the poor.

Dr. Archer further stated that the Christian Church shall not have a useful, relevant and authentic existence in the modern world and the human future, unless and until its power, strength, motivation, service, and total resources are geared to, and derived from a meaningful solidarity and identification with the powerless and despised human persons, institutions and communities of the global family of the poor (ochloi).²⁰

Liz Theoharis suggests, “Poverty is a defining issue of our day, even as we largely ignore it. Indeed, the poor have come to represent the social ills of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, ageism, ecological devastation, violence and war-and are disproportionately impacted by these ills. But throughout the country and war-and are disproportionately impacted by these ills. But throughout the country, poor people are rising to confront it. We often miss this too because we think poor people lack the agency and will, the organizational savvy and resources, to challenge poverty. But I have seen a movement brewing in poor communities across the country—it is small and sometimes scattered—but it is certainly real. The purpose of this book is to argue that we must read the Bible with that

¹⁹ Archer, *Poverty: The Church’s Abandoned Revolution*, 5-6.

²⁰ Archer, *Poverty: The Church’s Abandoned Revolution*, 6.

perspective—that we are called to join and support a necessary and growing social movement to end poverty, led by the poor. This is what the Bible and our faith demands.”²¹The work of public theology integrates this into social justice action.

One of the stark realities about researching or writing about poverty is the quantitative statistics vary on the number or percentage of persons and ethnic groups impacted. There is universal agreement from all sources utilized for this project that minorities, women and children are disproportionately negatively affected by poverty. But the exact statistical impact remains unknown in part because there is a shame or embarrassment associated with being poor which prevents persons affected from self-identifying as poor. Such behavior is an outgrowth of capitalism in which the projected cultural message is if you don't have enough food and or money then something is wrong with you.

Additionally the uneven enforcement of federal immigration laws targeting certain ethnic groups due to political influence has created tremendous fear and apprehension in such communities across America. If poverty were treated like a disease, we would have longitudinal studies completed, inclusive of statistical indicators to alert systems working on behalf of poor people and a real understanding of the conditions that constitute being poor and a real understanding of exactly how many persons are affected.

²¹ Theoharis, *Always with Us? What Jesus Really Said about the Poor*, 12.

The range of who is impacted is debatable and continues to be redefined and changed as now it includes well educated previously labor secure professionals and small business owners. What unfortunately are not debatable are the growing income divide and the accumulation of wealth and privilege in the United States of America between the top 1% and virtually every other income bracket in America.

Bill Fay wrote in Poverty in the United States “that there are critics on how the government determines who is impoverished in America.” These critics believe that the government overstates the number of people adversely impacted by poverty because those included in the modern profile would not be counted as living in poverty in the past. I believe those critics refuse to recognize that the cost associated with the provision of child care, housing, family dynamics and the cost of living have dramatically changed and increased since the 1960’s, when the formula was first conceived. To ignore this fact is victimizing the poor all over again and placing the responsibility for their predicament on them!

I concur with Colin Archer’s premise that the non-poor Christian has an obligation and a mandate from God by Jesus to care for “the least of these” however he is suggesting that the poor are incapable of overcoming or solving poverty on their own and need to be rescued by their bigger, stronger and more capable brethren. I think that the non-poor Christian needs to be supportive of the feelings, thoughts, actions, platform, proposed legislation and legislative changes

designed and crafted by poor people to uplift poor people. To do anything less moves the pendulum from justice to charity. The community organizing described in Theoharis and Hall's work encouraging the organized poor to lead the way in issues confronting their circumstances resonates well with my soul as a researcher. While initially the impacted group may need assistance in facilitation/organization, real solutions only occur when those impacted by circumstances are engaged in the process to determine the solutions to their problems. This type of partnership traditionally leads to cutting edge and radical reform as evidenced by what occurred in Baltimore city.

Baltimore, a deteriorating northeastern port city where public theologians, activists and organizers developed a bible study with a community human rights group. This group was formed to oppose poverty by developing and organizing low income workers. In this struggle for liberation, although a contested terrain, the Bible has historically been, and can today be, successfully claimed as a resource. Reading the bible with the poor intentionally and deliberately locates it within communities of the organized poor out of a commitment to struggle.²²

While leading the Poor People's Campaign in 1968, "Dr. King saw that poverty was not just another issue and that poor people were not a special interest group. Throughout his many speeches in the last years of his life, he described the

²² Hall, *Insights from Reading the Bible with the Poor*, 1.

unjust economic conditions facing millions of people worldwide. He held up the potential of the poor to come together to transform the whole of society. He knew that for the load of poverty to be lifted, the thinking and behavior of a critical mass of the American people would have to be changed. To accomplish this change of consciousness a “new and unsettling force” had to be formed. In other words, the poor would have to organize to take action together around our immediate and basic needs. In doing so, we could become a powerful social and political force capable of changing the terms of how poverty is understood and dispelling the myths and stereotypes that uphold the mass complacency and leave the root causes of poverty intact. He described this force as a multi-racial “non-violent army of the poor, a freedom church of the poor.”²³

In order to better understand why the church has been unable and some would say unwilling to alleviate poverty, we must look intently at the Bible which is the compass for Christianity. “The Bible—a text replete with calls for economic justice and denunciations of the scourge of indifference to the poor—has been misused and cynically politicized to suggest that poverty is the result of the moral failures of poor people sinning against God, that ending poverty is impossible, and that the poor themselves have no role to play in efforts to respond to their poverty. Biblical texts, especially “the poor you will always have with you” are used to

²³ Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. <https://poorpeoplescampaign.org/history> (accessed June 6, 2020).

justify the inevitability and to provide religious sanction for the dispossession of the majority for the benefit of the few. The well-known preacher Jim Wallis regularly conducts a short Bible quiz with American audiences that he speaks to, asking the question: What is the most famous biblical text about the poor? Every time, he receives the same answer: “The poor you will always have with you” as a way to discredit antipoverty organizing, justify the foreordination of poverty. Such assertions are made by people who place a great deal of authority in the Bible as well as people who describe themselves as atheists or agnostics.”²⁴

Chapter Two: Jesus and a Theology of Poverty

Crystal Hall informs us, “A third theory, added by Theoharis and others at the Kairos Center for Religious, Rights, and Social Justice, is that poverty is one’s “fate” or is willed by God. Jesus in the Gospels is quoted as saying ‘you always have the poor you’ (Matt 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8). Alongside other biblical passages and theological justifications, “poverty as fate” declares that poverty is willed by God, a spiritual discipline or even a virtue.²⁵ Each of these theories, poverty as pathology, accident, and fate, are expressed not only in popular culture

²⁴ Theoharis, *Always with Us? What Jesus Really said about the Poor*, 13-14.

²⁵ Liz Theoharis, *Always with Us? What Jesus Really said about the Poor*, 15-16.

but also in public policy and academia. They influence not only how biblical scholars and economic historians interpret poverty in the ancient world but also how poverty is understood today.”²⁶

Hall further stated “In my experience, the text “the poor you will always have with you” in Matthew 26 is the major biblical roadblock to people coming forward with solutions to poverty. The supposed inevitability of poverty and biblical justification for it, common to most interpretations of the story, make it a popular proof text used by the rich and poor people alike. I argue that rather than interpreting this line to justify poverty’s existence, one should read it as a reminder that poverty is not God’s will but is the result of the people’s disobedience to God’s commandments and Jesus’ teachings. It ought to be understood as saying that the plan to overcome poverty—with the Sabbath and Jubilee prescriptions at the core—is central to the gospel message, mission of Jesus, and realization of God’s Kingdom. It must be interpreted to support the idea that Jesus Christ, the Messiah of the poor, our Lord and Savior, was a spiritual and social-movement leader who urged his followers to commit themselves to movements for social transformation and highlighted the moral, political, and epistemological agency of the poor. The Messiah Jesus provided a deep economic critique suggesting that

²⁶ Crystal Hall, *Insights from Reading the Bible with the Poor*, 13.

adherence to charity and dominant economic systems and structures just made the problem worse.”²⁷

This religious and political movement was accurately understood by the ruling elite of the Roman Empire to be in stark opposition to Rome, especially with respect to its economic, political, and religious structure. The consistent theme in Israelite prophecy is Yahweh’s concern for the lack of social, economic, and political justice for those who are poor and unwanted in society. Yahweh, according to Hebrew prophecy, will not tolerate injustice against the poor; God will vindicate the poor. Again, God is revealed as the God of liberation for the oppressed.²⁸

As Archer asserts, “It is truly ironic that the church seemingly established to be the Church of the poor, has come to almost exclusively a Church of the rich and privileged. There is no denying the fact that the new Faith fast became the religion of the cultured, or rulers, the sophisticated and the privileged, and remains so. A major emphasis of this book is that because of this shift away from the poor, the spontaneous justice-power-love-dynamism of Christianity has been lost. We now quibble with abstract theologies, have no ethical rigorousness whatsoever, compromise with policies of governments and nobilities of both Church and State,

²⁷ Theoharis, *Always with Us? What Jesus Really said about the Poor*, 145 -146.

²⁸ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 2.

and in almost every instance, side with the strong and the rich at the expense of the weak and poor”.²⁹

For the sickness of the Church in America is intimately involved with the bankruptcy of American theology. When the Church fails to live up to its appointed mission, it means that theology is partly responsible. Therefore, it is impossible to criticize the Church and its lack of relevancy without criticizing theology for its failure to perform its function. Theology functions within the Church. Its task is to make sure that the “church” is the Church. The mission of the Church is to announce and to act out the gospel it has received. When the Church fails in its appointed task of seeking to glorify itself rather than Jesus Christ, it is the job of theology to remind her what the true Church is, for theology is that discipline which has the responsibility of continually examining the proclamation of the Church in the light of Jesus Christ.³⁰

Poverty is mentioned frequently throughout the various books of the bible. I support Theoharis’ premise that out of all of the verses, the one verse that is misinterpreted the most to justify the church and most Christians philanthropic attitudes and viewpoints towards the poor is Matthew 26. I also feel that Jesus as a revolutionary radical change agent trying to bring change in an economically and

²⁹ Archer, *Poverty: The Church’s Abandoned Revolution*, 80.

³⁰ James Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 94-95.

socially oppressive Roman empire is not preached from church pulpits in America. It is the Bible that tells us that God became human in Jesus Christ so that the kingdom of God would make freedom a reality for all human beings. This is the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus. The human being no longer has to be a slave to anybody, but must rebel against all the principalities and powers which make human existence sub-human.³¹

I share Archer's viewpoint that social justice was and has been replaced within the heart of Christianity with charity. Charity maintains the status-quo and does not liberate the poor from the state of poverty nor the unjust state or condition. Charity feels good to the institution or giver and only provides a temporary, momentary relief for the recipient. Working for social justice demands and requires strategy, diligence, commitment and stamina. Working to create change is exhausting for the entity, person or group spearheading the work of justice attempting to be the hand and feet that provides liberating resources for the poor and impoverished.

I also support the belief that poverty is not the will of God; however I have a different interpretation of the text "the poor you will always have with you". I have every confidence that an omnipotent Jesus who understood the human heart, knew that humankind would never move beyond charity. Charity allows people to give,

³¹ Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 33.

generally money and feel good about themselves and better than someone else, while simultaneously maintaining superiority and class structures. Jesus knew that our human desire for individual and institutional power would overwhelm our senses to care for “the least of these” in the way he instructed us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything(1 John 3:20). Great is our Lord, and abundant in power, his understanding is beyond measure (Psalm 147:5). These verses, from the new and old testament illustrate my belief that when Jesus stated “the poor will always be with you”, that he was predicting the current and futuristic state of the heart and mindset for all of humanity irrespective of faith affiliation. I believe he saw a Christian Church and its flock hopelessly lost without an authentic or spiritual connection to their true mission to seek justice for all people! As evidenced by the work represented in Baltimore city, the heart and mindset of the Christian church towards justice shall remain hopelessly in decline until it seeks intentional relationship and partnership with the oppressed poor through activities like conducting Bible studies.

Jesus also knew that Christian oppressors would create narratives to justify their actions and relieve their collective consciousness. Oppressors understood that in order to make the narration successful it would have to permeate through the entire community and must include the institution of church. Involving the institution of church is paramount to establishing a culture for making the untrue

narratives acceptable for the people and entire community. It created the necessary foundation to ensure that the narration became accepted as fact within societal history. Once accepted as truth even the oppressed group supports and promotes the false narrative.

The “surrender” of the oppressed occurs silently and is directly correlated to the ostracized group’s inability to record or maintain their oral history to combat the narrative and construct a shield of ethnic or cultural pride. The systematic annihilation of a group of people requires the support of every segment of the society inclusive of law, science, government, publishing, art, performing arts, print media, visual media, history and education. However the chief cornerstone is the church! This strategy has been successfully reflected in the history of America. Every persecuted group from the indigenous people, who were present when Columbus allegedly discovered America, through slavery and the immigration period have been controlled and victimized through such false doctrine and narrative. This remains true in modern American history as today this technique is very evident in the current treatment of Muslims in the post 9-11 era, and the assaultive behavior exhibited towards Asians in the current health crisis known as COVID-19.

To accept that the “Poor will always be with you” first and foremost puts the onus of being poor on the poor people themselves. This frees the oppressor from

accepting any responsibility for the conditions leading to people being poor and oppressed. It also exonerates the oppressor from assisting in developing policies or laws to assist the poor. Ironically it grants the oppressor freedom from speaking out or protesting regarding actions taken by society or government designed to oppress more people.

Interpreting the “poor you will always have with you” literally frees the institution of church from accepting responsibility in a country that prides itself on having a clear separation of church and state. If the government which was created to take care of all of the citizens of this country cannot solve all of the societal ills, then how could the church ever be expected to? This interpretation of the scripture framed by the church, government and community is the primary cause of the deterioration of the quality of life indicators for far too many minorities, women, children and families in America. It is equivalent to sin in my opinion because the lack of institutional accountability by the church to address its biblical mandate or parlay that collective strength to force government to act represents a complete moral abandonment of the most fundamental right of humanity in the most developed country on the planet, the ability to eat.

As mentioned previously in this paper, the pandemic COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on the economy in America. Many low-income households, especially those with children are having a difficult time providing groceries to

feed their families. When this is combined with the reality that the cost of food has significantly increased and that many Americans have lost employment and or don't have access to money or food. This is creating an overwhelming problem for state and local authorities.

Where will people turn to for help as savings are depleted and government stimulus checks are delayed or exhausted? How will those who were previously gainfully employed provide food for their families? Many will have to secure vitally needed assistance from institutions like food banks and resources and assistance from churches and other non-profits. The resulting crisis has created a panic in America, one that has not been experienced since the Great Depression. The health crisis has exacerbated a long standing problem in America and requires immediate attention and action from God's people and the houses of worship they attend.

The application of the work represented by this project to my current ministerial setting is immensely relevant particularly in terms of geographical location. The Rockland county area is located approximately thirty minutes from the largest and most expensive city in America, New York City. The county is culturally diverse, with a large immigrant population. Most of the county consists of single family homes and taxes are high consequently the cost of housing is extreme even in the minority or poor neighborhoods. Surprisingly or perhaps not,

Rockland County with its close proximity to New York City does not have a homeless shelter for individuals or families. This is clearly representative of the lack of charity and speaks poorly about the state of the heart condition in the community. Homeless people and families simply do not exist and are invisible to the collective eye of the people as long as they remain geographically separated or hidden within the community.

It is very difficult and challenging to discuss social justice issues, work or initiatives if charity is not visibly evident. There is an overwhelming need in the community for the work proposed by this project as there are many poor immigrant people that live in the community, hiding in the shadows, who are struggling to feed and provide stable housing for their families. Minority members of this affluent suburban community, specifically those residing in the Spring Valley area, are suffering from poverty, poor healthcare, underemployment, low wages and a poorly managed educational system long before the pandemic COVID-19 arrived in New York. However, since the arrival of the health crisis many of these vulnerable families have been devastated by the economic impact felt in the small business sector where many residents were employed.

Rockland is not unlike many suburban communities in the United States; people of tremendous wealth and extreme poverty live in close proximity to one another. Moreover, I reside in a county which is representative of the morality

struggle we are currently facing in America to bring social justice to poor children, women, and unprotected individuals and immigrant families. As the economic gap between have and have not continues to widen in my county and our country, I feel called to begin my involvement right where I live by focusing attention on the issue of local hunger and poverty.

Perhaps the COVID-19 pandemic presents the various institutions of the faith community an opportunity to reimagine church. Such reimagination is critical and comes at a time when the church is at the crossroads in terms of being relevant. The movements and subsequent public outcries for equality and justice carried out by groups like Black Lives Matters in response to the many unjust policies and actions perpetrated upon people of color are grassroots movements happening outside of the sanctuary of church. If this phenomenon continues, with so many marginalized groups organizing and demanding equality and justice, then the church could be rendered obsolete because it abandoned the mandate given from God to “care for the least of these” by being a voice standing with and for the oppressed. “The church will not have power to act or believe until it recovers its tradition of faith and permits that tradition to be the primal way out of enculturation. This is not a cry for traditionalism but rather a judgment that the church has no business more pressing than the reappropriation of its memory in its full power and authenticity. And that is true among liberals who are too chic to

remember and conservatives who have overlaid the faith memory with all kinds of hedges that smack of scientism and enlightenment.”³²

The recovery of the church’s faith and power is uniquely hinged to its ability to acknowledge the historical role it has played in allowing sinful, wicked, evil-minded and immoral acts to occur to indigenous people and enslaved Africans in the name of kingdom building and capitalism. Additionally the gospel has been utilized as a skillful weapon in judging oppressed people guilty of singular responsibility for their predicament in being impoverished. Blaming poverty on the poor is a very clever strategy to create amiable polarization which I define to mean: the poor willingly accept their condition and second class status. This lack of friction or healthy tension leads to communal complacency which in turn leads to acceptance that the problem cannot be resolved with any degree of success. This firmly leaves the problem at the feet of the endangered people experiencing the debilitating affect of injustice who lack adequate resources to address their problems.

Clearly the church is guilty as charged in terms of failing to meet the mandate given by God to the church and its believers to take care of everyone in the kingdom whether resident or visitor to the land. Whether through willful intent or ignorance this blight on the soul of Christianity is very present today as the line

³² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN Fortress, 1978), 12.

for those who have less than continues to grow exponentially and disproportionately impacts upon innocent children who have become the face of poverty. This failure is of epic proportions as we as humanity have fallen short of fighting for change in our federal and state policy and laws, demanding change from our corporate/business communities and funding change from our local houses of worship and corporate church headquarters. Christians have turned their backs and closed their hearts on the poor in America.

Chapter 3: The Case for the Church

While unequivocally guilty as charged the church is still the only institution uniquely charged with affording and providing care for the community at large. I hold fast to the hope that the church and its people will intentionally rediscover its faith and then and only then is it possible for the church to find the pathway back to its Godly purpose. I agree with Bruggemann that the faith community must focus on recapturing its authentic message, which is to be a voice to challenge the consciousness and perceptions of the elite. With that secured it will find its strength of character and ultimately find its will, power and might to find solutions to overcome the problem and heal our land. With the blinders removed perhaps we'll see like the church of Acts, that the humanity we are to serve remains in the oppressed streets and outside the sanctuary walls.

If the church and its members are to rediscover its true genuine voice, message and purpose, it must rethink, refocus and bring new energy and commitment to bear in its role and involvement in the community. This involvement must be defined to mean assisting and advocating for the people living in the area surrounding the outside walls of the church or sanctuary. The church must also seek forgiveness by confessing and setting the record straight regarding the account created to support the myth that they came in peace and desired only to serve and “save” the indigenous natives, by introducing them to their faith in the formative years of America and somehow over the course of time losing its way. This is the narration perpetuated by the institutions of faith in America. Tragically it is only a tale contrived to conceal the real intent of the colonizers whose purpose was greed and self preservation. This means the real desire of the early church in America was to capture the land, enslave the natives and start a Christian country for white anglo sextons only. The intent was never to include or serve the indigenous community outside of the church. Consequently, the church was utilized as an instrument to support its members’ express quest, purpose and mission to seize the land and accumulate wealth and establish its dominance and superiority.

This is hugely important because it means that the Christian church in America has never had a vision to consider the needs of the people outside the

congregational walls, inherently the institution completely lacks purpose when it comes to serving the community at large. This means that the modern church is diametrically opposed to the philosophy of the early church as described by Paul in Acts. This cataclysmic failure has always been highly visible in American society, however it has become more evident with the current health pandemic COVID-19. This contrast between the early and current state of church is remarkable. Striking among them are: 1) They would sell their possessions and distribute to all in need, 2) They had the goodwill of all the general population, and 3) They attracted new believers and the church grew.³³

How does Christianity in America find a true authentic vision and voice, especially given the fact that it has not had one since the beginning of empire? First let me state that I believe that there are churches that are actively engaged in the work of liberation of oppressed people through intentional actions based on the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew challenging Christians to realize and pursue the principal Godly work of love and justice. However, they are an oasis in the desert for oppressed and impoverished children, women and minority persons in America. Most exist through a vision from a modern day prophet. Considering the immense wealth, talent and resources available to the Christian church and the lack of any systematic response to the problem is the overwhelming evidence of a

³³ Rick Rouse, *Beyond Church Walls: Cultivating a Culture of Care* (Minneapolis, MN Fortress Press, 2016), xix.

heart ailment in America. Just as we have been loved by God, so we are to show love and care for the lonely, the outcast, the hungry, the homeless, and others in need. “The worship has ended, let the service begin” is a sign that adorns the exit doors of many churches. It is a reminder that the people of God gather not only to be spiritually fed by word and sacrament, but that this is only a means to an end: Christians are nurtured and strengthened so they may better serve God and others in daily life.³⁴

In order for the church in America to realize its Godly purpose it must deconstruct the current model from an exclusive internal congregational membership driven focus to a local community or discipleship focus in my viewpoint. “A major challenge facing congregations in the United States has to do with the horizon they use for framing their life and ministry. When they first come into existence, most congregations are very outreach oriented and seek to actively engage their larger community. They have the world in view as their primary horizon. Congregations that have matured, however, tend to develop complex ministries focused increasingly on the needs of their own members. Their horizon begins to turn inward towards meeting their own needs.”³⁵

³⁴Rick Rouse, *Beyond Church Walls: Cultivating a Culture of Care*, 18.

³⁵ Rick Rouse and Craig Van Gelderland, *Field Guide for the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 45-46.

Author Rick Rouse also believes that the church can rediscover its power and role in social justice activism. While I share his optimism, I believe that considerable time and energy must be spent exploring the impact of the narrative of racism created and perpetuated by the church. This mechanism was established to control and dominate indigenous people, the unwanted poor and enslaved minorities. These groups were engaged through the controlling lens of capitalism which by design keeps the foot on the neck of the poor and oppressed and lacks the spiritual force and power of the work of collective justice!

Charity keeps the road blocks in place and continues to place other challenges on the roadway for poor and oppressed people to overcome. Conversely the tedious and necessary work of justice requires people, communities and churches to explore, rethink, and understand their historical role in the problem. The work of justice demands courage from the liberating forces; courage to face the collective demons and actions of their ancestors; courage to realize their affluence and privilege; courage to deal with, acknowledge and rectify past transgressions against other human beings. Change is an allusive foe, one that can only be overcome through intentional, deliberate and calibrated efforts.

Oppressed people can be organized and taught strategies on how to advocate for themselves and demand change. Such groups must have sustainable futures in their respective communities because they are the local accountability

partner that sounds the alarm alerting the fellowship. Meaningful and permanent change must come willingly and thoughtfully from the hand of the oppressor via changes in law or enhancements to policy. Otherwise it is only momentary change and instantly the changes are lost and society quickly reverts back to what was comfortable for the oppressor. This kind of one foot forward, two steps backwards is the progress or lack thereof that has become synonymous with America's attempt to make things right for people deeply hurt and oppressed in this country. Indigenous people could be accepted and treated like whites, only if they denied their heritage and customs. Slaves were emancipated after the Civil War and slavery was abolished and equality for blacks was achieved until a political dilemma occurred and suddenly those social gains were ceased in a political deal and America ushered in the Jim Crow era to keep peace among the oppressors. Civil rights legislation was passed to end Jim Crow, only to unleash unfair laws designed to control blacks in housing, education, employment and the legal system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated all of these issues and put them on display in the public square for the entire world to see the unrealized problems in America. Problems that have been swept under the rug for centuries have surfaced in the pandemic and the effect of this turmoil on the world stage has shown the globe how fragile America's democracy really is. "We find ourselves

living in a complex society. Incredible cultural shifts have occurred over the past fifty years as the United States has seen a growing diversity in ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexual norms, generational differences, a growing divide between the rich and poor, and increased political polarity. It is not easy to be a church in a post-Christian, post modern world that offers so many challenges and no simple solutions. And racism continues to haunt our country with cries for justice and equality taking the form of many voices, from Latino, to Asian, to African-Americans.”³⁶

I want to reiterate for the record that I vigorously believe that the mandate extended by Jesus, the Great Commission means that the Church is the institution charged by a righteous God to create and produce the required changes. As per Jacobsen, “Without seers of the world as it should be, only the cynicism of realpolitik remains. Despite the ongoing rejection of its moral vision, if the church is seduced by the world as it is into abandoning its vision of the world as it should be, then it has abandoned its calling, its mission, and its lord.”³⁷ I think this is evidence of unilateral agreement with Jacobsen that establishes the church as the designated institution called by God. The call is to battle the visible and not so

³⁶ Rick Rouse, *Beyond Church Walls: Cultivating a Culture of Care*, 28-29.

³⁷ Jacobsen, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing*, 15.

visible opponent (s) in the square and every sphere or space it exists in this very real modern day crusade to fight for the least of these in the kingdom.

In order for the church to fulfill its mission it must be willing to undergo radical change to battle embolden unconventional forces of hate that have been recently unleashed upon America under ex-President Donald Trump.

Congregations must be open, willing to change, and must begin exploring the world immediately outside the sanctuary. This exploration is about learning how it can better serve the community and humanity outside of the walls of the church.

This is not a call to be the expert or determine what needs to happen, this call is for the church and its members to learn and better understand the problems and challenges facing poor impoverished people and children in the community. To understand the plight of the poor and oppressed requires the church to conduct forums where it can listen and learn from the people experiencing the problem.

The church must be the energizing force to engage the community in the dialogue utilizing the immense resources at its disposal. Namely its buildings, talent and capital resources!

Chapter 4: Prophetic Imagination

As a public theologian searching to find my voice in the wilderness, I have always been a constructive force in every setting that God has allowed me to

occupy. I have always been a community organizer, from co-founding a basketball association in 1991 that serves over 400 children each year to sponsoring cultural events for brown people like Kwanzaa and black history month celebrations in a suburban predominantly white community. Before I understood the impact, I had local and county government officials attending these events because so many minority voters were present at these community gatherings. Of course we were doing voter registration at every event.

To develop the basketball league, I wrote a proposal and went before the Township committee seeking approval. I was denied because I was a young brown man. Fortunately I had white friends in the community, who took the same proposal and were granted approval by the council! These supporters/friends were shocked and embarrassed by the display of institutional racism. Interestingly enough the township had baseball, football and soccer organizations for many years before the request for basketball. Because basketball is popular with minority youth there was a tremendous reluctance to fund such an organization. In the inaugural season the Mayor and Township committee members attended every game held in the township schools fearing racial tension and destruction of school property. Ironically, this suburban community lacked apartments or affordable housing developments which meant that the majority of the residents were home owners and subsequently tax payers in the township.

This lack of consideration angered me as I began to ask myself what type of community were my young children and I living in? Was I living in South Jersey or southern Mississippi? I was already President of the civic association in my housing development and realized that I needed to be more involved in the affairs concerning the larger community around me. This led to the formation of a grassroots action coalition, the Winslow Action Committee (WAC), to begin holding the local government accountable to all of its citizens, ensuring the community was informed regarding the governing council plans and actions. WAC began supporting and endorsing candidates who promoted community inclusion and representation for everyone in the community.

My intent was to remain behind the scenes until a pivotal school board election which featured for the first time in township history two black persons running on opposite tickets. At a meeting with all of the black clergy and activists in the community, I proposed that we instruct the minority community to vote for the minority candidates and not cast the third ballot. To remind the base of the importance of executing this strategy I suggested creating palm cards instructing minority voters to vote for the two female minority candidates and get out of the booth! This strategy led to both of the minority candidates winning seats on the school board. Naturally the young brown man, now perceived as radical and racist was blamed for organizing the political coup. Suddenly I was being referred to as

“Malcolm X” in a community of black Christian religious fence setters who were uncomfortable because both parties’ leadership began asking questions and demanding answers to what occurred in the election. In the historical unprecedented victory for the minority community, loyalty to the suppressors was called into question.

The black clergy’s support of only black candidates did not sit well with their white counterparts and some members of the minority community as well. Shortly thereafter I ran as an Independent candidate in the general election for Town Council in my ward and finished ahead of the Republican club, losing to the tired senior black Democrat incumbent. Many elders expressed their concern to me at the polls, acknowledging that in essence that in their heart they wanted to vote for me, but their conditioning required them to support the black democratic candidate. Finishing ahead of the Republican club led to them not sponsoring a candidate in any subsequent race in Ward 3, this fact is still true today in the politics of the community. In looking back on those days I used to think that it was time wasted, keeping me from answering the call on my life. I now know that God was allowing me to hone my skills as he arranged time to fit my skill set.

In my prophetic imagination I see the role of church in community differently than what we currently have constituted in most communities across America. I am beginning to understand my purpose in the universe and see that I

have been uniquely crafted as a community development organizer and voice that compels people to combat hunger, poverty, racism and other social justice issues. All of my experiences from being a candidate running for public office, sponsoring community events, creating community organizations, serving on local, county and state boards and committees, leading ministry pursuits while primarily being employed as a leader in behavioral healthcare have prepared me for this moment and these unique and challenging times.

While I have always felt the call, I have always felt uncomfortable in the church building. In my preferred state, I need to be out in a community where I feel free, driven and purposeful. The pulpit in the church never held much attraction to me as I always felt it was confining and limiting in terms of how you express your voice, thought and views on issues impacting people. A traditional Pastor's voice must be measured and the message diluted to not offend those who support and fund ministry so that they can feel safe and secure in their world in my opinion. This has contributed significantly to the decline in relevance of the local church and the attachment to the community immediately outside of the sanctuary in my viewpoint. Godly change agents especially those who have a burden or passion for the community at large and discipleship development find it difficult to survive in such environments and either conform to serve membership or leave such spiritual death traps. The point that prophetic imagination must ponder is that

there is no freedom of God without the politics of justice and compassion, and there is no politics of justice and compassion without a religion of the freedom of God.³⁸

In reading Brueggemann's work I was reminded of the fact that I have always been a positive disrupter or force in every setting that God has allowed me to occupy. I have never been totally comfortable in any of my ministry settings and now better understand that those feelings of disconnect may be attributable to my conviction that God has entrusted me to do some very different work. As the leader of the Men's ministry in my church, I developed an annual conference for men which has become a signature event for our church; however my focus was on connecting with men from other churches to do Godly work together outside of the church. Child welfare and improving the lives of those who are motherless and fatherless has been my passion for many seasons. I have always considered it to be my first ministry, the one that fulfilled and brought energy to me when traditional ministry did not. Now, that also feels confining in that I cannot be my real authentic self and share all of my voice and gifts. As I look back on my activities, I realize that an omnipotent and all knowing God was allowing me to hone my skills for a unique assignment and call.

³⁸ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 18.

This has become obvious as I am now trying to make my DMIN project a reality in the community where I live. My energy and motivation has shifted and this project has become my passion. In drafting a letter to pastors/community leaders announcing the project I purposely didn't include affiliation with my church home as my spirit led me to do. I identified myself only as a minister of the gospel and a DMIN student at Drew University. I now fully realize that I feel called to be unattached from any corporate or church identity and want to be viewed as a committed man of God freely standing up for the injustices plaguing our society and imploring other churches, groups and activists present in the community to partner in the fight for morality. This epic struggle must be waged simultaneously in the streets to protest bad policy and laws which adversely impact vulnerable and oppressed people and in the rooms where policies are drafted and become law. For the first time I can now envision myself as a Pastor, but the church won't have any walls and the congregation members are the community at large! I agree with Brueggeman's assessment that "The liberal tendency has been to care about the politics of justice and compassion but to be largely uninterested in the freedom of God. Indeed, it has been hard for liberals to imagine that theology mattered, for all of that seemed irrelevant. And it was thought that the question of God could be safely left to others who still worried about such matters. As a result, social radicalism has been like a cut flower without nourishment, without any

sanctions deeper than human courage and good intentions. Conversely, it has been the tendency in other quarters to care intensely about God, but uncritically, so that the God of well-being and good order is not understood to be precisely the source of social oppression”³⁹

Chapter 5: The Good News

Pastor Ed Illaraza is a modern day Lazarus. I first encountered him as we were both very active members of the same church, Gracepoint Gospel Fellowship located in New City, NY. On Easter Sunday in 2010 Ed had a massive heart attack at first service and was subsequently removed from the church via ambulance and taken to a local hospital. Upon arrival to work at second service I was briefed on what occurred. During the second service there was an update in which the congregation learned he had coded and was in grave condition, Pastor decided that the church needed to go into prayer for our beloved brother. He remained in a coma for 3 days before miraculously reopening his eyes and recovering without any lingering or long term effects.

While his body resumed its previous state of functioning, Ed was completely different. In the words of members of the church he was “On Fire for God!” The Deacon Ed whom everyone knew died that Easter Sunday and the guy who

³⁹ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 18.

replaced him, no one seemed to recognize. Hence my reference to Lazarus, he was energized completely in a different manner than before his heart attack and while attending a men's conference in Portland, Maine felt that God was calling him to gather Pastors together for prayer. What occurred after the conference was truly remarkable as shortly upon returning home he organized a community clean up day at the local high school and was able to secure a donation from Lowe's to assist the effort. Over 200 hundred people from local churches showed up to clean the building, refurbish the grounds and paint with all materials donated. This was the start of him organizing community activities generally designed to get churches to work together on community projects. Many people still don't know what happened to Ed; I now know and understand that Ed was resurrected as a Public Theologian!

All of these actions led to the founding of The Good News Association, a 501c3 non-profit organization which was incorporated on June 29, 2016. The Association is best described as a grassroots Christian organization consisting of approximately 28 churches. The group is loosely governed by a 5 member board which meets as infrequently as the member churches. The lack of meetings is directly attributable to the fact that Pastor Ed is a force of energy and secretly has little patience for pastors who refuse to see the invisible people living in the community and their problems. What began as a support group for pastors to come

together and pray for each other and the community has evolved into providing mentorship for students at Spring Valley HS, sponsoring county wide activities for the National Day of Prayer and a rally march for Black Lives Matter. The association has been providing food for elderly, sick and shut-in residents inclusive of COVID-19 positive people by delivering food to the doors of residents in need in the health crisis. Seniors, sick or shut in persons who are unable to go out order and pay for their wanted items from the supermarket and the association delivers the purchases to the door. The association encourages member churches to conduct food drives to stock the pantry, donate money and provide volunteers. The association purchases meat, dairy and food items from a local supermarket to supplement what is given out. Good News has provided well over 1700 bags of donated groceries and wants to expand to meet the critical need for resources from families who have been impacted by the pandemic.

Rockland county shares a land border with Bergen county to the south, the fourth highest income county in the state of New Jersey⁴⁰ and Westchester county, the second highest county income in the state of New York⁴¹ sits across the Tappan Zee bridge to the north. New York City the number one highest income area in the

⁴⁰United States Census Bureau.
<http://census.gov/quickfacts/facts/dashboard/bergencountynewjersey/ni/inc110219#inc110219> (accessed June 6, 2020).

⁴¹ United States Census Bureau.
<http://census.gov/quickfacts/facts/dashboard/newyork/ny/inc110219#inc110219>.

state of New York⁴² is less than 30 miles away. The county of Rockland ranks sixth in terms of highest income in the state of New York. The community has a large immigrant community and a large orthodox Jewish population among its approximately 330,000 residents.

As the Director of Men's ministry for Living Word Christian Fellowship my pathway often intersected with Pastor Ed. I was the representative to the Good News Association and he faithfully attended the Men's conference that I organized annually under the Men's ministry at the church. Ed was aware that I was attending Divinity school at Drew University. I contacted him to share that one of the requirements for graduation from the program required a professional project involving social justice and that my fervent desire was that whatever it would become it could not be theoretical and the topic must include the church and poverty. I also expressed that I felt that Good News was the perfect place to begin such a conversation regarding community partnership. We agreed to meet via Zoom while I was away on vacation in the midst of the pandemic at the Jersey shore.

It was during this passionate one and half hour meeting in which we explored together brainstorming ideas before settling on two possibilities that I

⁴²United States Census Bureau.
<http://census.gov/quickfacts/facts/dashboard/newyork/ny/inc110219#inc110219>.

proposed: developing/expanding the mentorship program for disadvantaged minority male students at Spring Valley high school or developing a food distribution network to serve Rockland county families economically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic by providing healthy nutritious food. Of course he wanted to do both and I reminded him of my only requirement, that the project would be real which would require tremendous focus especially given the challenges presented by the pandemic. Additionally, either project would require relational work and patience in order to get sustainable involvement from member churches. The project selected was to develop a food distribution network of pantries setup like a supermarket allowing people to select the items they desired based on the size of the family in at least four locations throughout the county. The project would primarily recruit Christian churches. One of my core beliefs regarding the development of the project was the notion “No congregation alone can bear the responsibility for changing their neighborhood or transforming their community. Congregations that are serious about taking the gospel out into the world need to consider the concept of community organizing, which includes partnering with others if they hope to make a difference. As we have suggested, the church is also called to partner with God in God’s mission for the sake of the

world. This means taking stand for the biblical imperatives of love, peace, equality, and social justice in their own communities.”⁴³

Rouse is talking about moving a singular congregation forward on a justice initiative in terms of partnership. How do you move a coalition of Christian churches forward with the inherent yet unspoken competition regarding size of building, membership and affluence? While my observations are still preliminary, I think the key to this kind of collaboration is that it must be relational and not transactional. Transparency, shared experiences, trust, openness, persistence and patience are essential foundational ingredients to getting the faith community to work together in my opinion. The ambivalence, reluctance, or disdain of most clergy toward the public arena keeps most churches in the sanctuary.⁴⁴ My interest and purpose is to move people of faith to take the risk of forming new and enduring relationships, deepening the connection with their neighbors and their communities, and getting involved in organized efforts to change the world as it is into the world as it should be.

The selection of the Good News Association as the perfect partner to complete my professional project was a “no brainer.” The group had name recognition, a track record for doing charitable work in the community and seemed

⁴³ Rouse, *Beyond Church Walls: Cultivating a Culture of Care*, 98.

⁴⁴ Jacobsen, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing*, 23.

committed to the painful work of justice after stumbling onto the pathway with the march in support of BLM. Pastor Ed caught “hell” from some of the clergy who publicly declared support for Blue lives, feathers got ruffled and in the ensuing quiet fight, I saw Ed’s heart! I’m thoroughly convinced that what Jacobson asserts is true: “Churches that have been seduced by civil religion engage the public arena but usually do so to support capital punishment, military buildup, or other social policies that are punitive toward people of poverty, immigrants, and people of color. They are guided by servitude to the dominant culture, not by servanthood to the Sermon on the Mount. This response is nothing new. Historically, the church has often aligned itself with oppressive forces and crucified its Lord anew. Small wonder that many reflective persons would prefer to see the church stay in the sanctuary where it can remain irrelevant and do little harm.”⁴⁵

I quickly developed the letter that I discussed earlier, written on Good News letterhead identifying myself as a DMIN student fulfilling graduation requirements. We agreed to send the letter out via Good News’s list of churches and my list of contacts as the Director of Men’s ministry. My list of contacts included community organizations and elected officials. We understood that some people were going to be bombarded with the same letter because they were on both lists, which was our intent. The Association can measure if its recipients open the

⁴⁵ Jacobsen, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing*, 26.

email which affords the ability to measure project impact informally, 23% of the churches were opening Good News emails at that time according to Pastor Ed. The email also asked respondents to contact me to complete a short survey regarding resources and outreach efforts. Because of the pandemic we were limited to email and regular mail as our primary tools for contact. We agreed to at least four mail/email drops each before our first Zoom meeting which was scheduled for January 9, 2021 and contacting churches regarding the project began in September 2020.

Pastor Ed and I have had weekly telephone calls since our Zoom meeting in July. On meeting days we have contact an hour before our meeting to review and discuss the agenda. Meetings occur on the second Saturday of each month @ 9:30 via Zoom. We met immediately after the meeting to review how the meeting went. Minutes are sent out within a week to the respective mailing list. Grassroots organizing requires structure in order to build traction and synergy in the community. It also builds credibility among the cerebral community who privately look down upon activist types for being reactionary with no clear destination or purpose in mind with their actions. By the time of our first meeting, Pastor Ed shared with me that a little over 50% of the recipients were opening the emails.

As the first meeting approached we agreed that I would facilitate the meetings and develop the agenda. The meeting would be conducted for an hour

with an established agenda: Opening prayer, Welcome, Roll call of churches in attendance, Vision for Network, Community mapping, Church/community outreach, Church activities in community, closing prayer. In the first meeting held on January 9th we had 23 people on the call with 10 churches represented and 3 churches excused due to scheduling conflicts. The meeting went extremely well and there was a noticeable energy of positivity, potential and purpose in the call. Ironically a Pastor from one of the larger evangelical churches during roll call identified himself as a MDIV student who was very interested in the survey and wanted to know if we would share data because he was interested in doing a project to compile such information. Of course I quickly agreed, sharing that 11 churches and groups had completed the survey knowing that this would keep that congregation engaged in the project. The group consisted of four predominantly white churches, two Spanish speaking churches, one multi-ethnic church, one Black church, one African church, and one Haitian church. The group represented three large churches with congregations with more than 300 members, four medium size churches with congregations larger than 200 members and three smaller churches with membership under 100 members.

In our call after the first meeting Pastor Ed was elated with the response and how smoothly the meeting ran. He asked if he could facetime me for the call, which I thought odd, however I complied. It was during this call I felt we really

bonded as fellow prophets. Ed simply asked me “what are you thinking about when you’re in church”? My response to him was “I find myself thinking and looking outside wondering, how do I reach the community and people outside of the building”? I recall saying to him that while I am very competent in the pulpit and have the ability to preach, that I am not motivated by anything inside the building. When I finished he loudly proclaimed “I knew it”! He further explained that this was his position and that he often had some heated discussions with his lead Pastor son about his desire to focus on discipleship matters outside the church while his son reminded him of his duties within the church. He shared his observation of me during the meeting and informed me that he could feel my passion and energy. This exchange characterizes our relationship and serves as the cornerstone of the irrefutable bond that has developed between us as fellow Public Theologians on a mission to serve the community at large.

We agreed to modify the format of the meeting to make it more educational as part of our organizing strategy by including some facts regarding food insecurity in the United States and the impacts on the poor and marginalized, especially children. The intent is to bombard participants with facts as a way of shocking them into the realization of how this problem could be affecting children and families living in Rockland County. At the second meeting held on February 13, there were seven churches represented along with the Director from the Spanish

Eastern District of the Assemblies of God based in Tappan representing over 500 congregations. Pastor Ed shared with the group that the second pantry proposed for Tappan was in need of renovation to be a storage site and the estimate for the work was \$3200 dollars. Members present were challenged to conduct food drives to keep the pantry stocked and or donate resources to make the second pantry operational. We also discussed the importance of the membership recruiting volunteers from their congregations for the Good News Association. The energy and eagerness of the group to do something was evident throughout the meeting. In our meeting afterwards Pastor Ed shared his concerns regarding the need for us to show progress in our efforts or we would lose some of the participants. I shared my viewpoint that if we keep presenting those in attendance with the truth regarding the statistical impacts of the pandemic on poor and marginalized families in the country, then perhaps they could begin imagining the plight of some of their neighbors. That by making an appeal to consciousness they could not continue to ignore these realities, no matter how hard they tried to not see the need of the invisible people. The so called community of the American church is most often a social setting for reinforcing the false values of a privileged society. Hugs, handshakes, and hallelujahs may be emotionally invigorating, but they are hardly a

substitute for the community that invites the Word of God to divide soul and spirit, bone and marrow, exposing our complicities and compromises.⁴⁶

In between meetings I was contacted by Pastor Mark from Bricktown Gospel Fellowship located in Haverstraw, who informed me that their board had met and were interested in sponsoring a pantry. Haverstraw was identified as site for the network based on demographic need and location. While the church has been involved with Good News from the beginning, the pastor confided with me that it sometimes feels that Pastor Ed is lecturing the group and placing demands upon them to participate in activities sponsored by the Good News. This was not the first time that I had heard such a story and Pastor Ed and I have previously discussed how his growing frustration with pastors is at times quite evident and plainly visible. Pastor Mark wanted to set up a meeting while making it clear that both he and the senior Pastor wanted me to be in attendance at any subsequent meeting regarding the project. Pastor Mark felt comfortable in sharing these concerns with me because both he and senior Pastor Elias have attended the Men's conference that I have organized as Director of Men's ministry at my church. They were attracted and attended because they liked the intentionality of partnering with other godly men in the community to forge deeper communal relationships. I shared that Pastor Ed means well and sometimes seems frustrated because he has

⁴⁶ Jacobsen, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing*, 127.

strong feelings regarding the church's responsibility to assist the "least of these". Pastor Mark acknowledged that fact and agreed to contact me with some dates for the meeting with his board. Doing the work of justice requires a great deal of energy, passion and generally involves exchanges of ideas among persons with strong viewpoints. This collision of forces can lead to some heated moments and exchanges within the circle. This combustion is necessary fuel for the fire that must be lit in the community to begin forming alliances to create change. "Healing and transformation occur as congregations address issues that are important to the larger community and as they bring people together to have conversation and to strategize about how to respond to various concerns. As churches....become leaders in public conversations on behalf of a town, village, or community, pastoral care benefits not simply those who attend the church, but the community as a whole."⁴⁷

For the March meeting we had ten churches represented on the Zoom call. We received food donations from All Souls and Faith Assembly of God for the Clarkstown pantry. We announced that progress, that now only \$1500 was needed for the repairs to the pantry in Tappan and that the work should be completed within a week, and that Bricktown Gospel's board has expressed interest in sponsoring the third pantry in Haverstraw. This news energized all present on the

⁴⁷ Rouse, *Beyond Church Walls: Cultivating a Culture of Care*, 99.

call as clearly we are gathering momentum towards achieving the communal goal of establishing a network of food distribution locations. The group seemed to be developing a collective identity and bond even though we are meeting exclusively via Zoom. While reading facts regarding food insecurity and the impact upon children and families at each meeting has played a part in forging the synergy developing among the participants, the issues revealed by the pandemic and prominently being shown in the media has created concern among members of the faith community that are leading them to action. The bond of collective empathy and grief has transformed into a shared vision for the community. It is important that congregations who seek to connect with their community in a vital way seek out healthy partners that have a common sense of mission and like-minded passion of making a difference for good.

On April 8th I received a call from Pastor Ed asking whether I could attend a press conference being held shortly to announce that he was being named to a task force to oversee and advise how to utilize the 162 million dollars secured for the East Ramapo school district through the American Rescue Plan. Also named to the task force are the East Ramapo schools superintendent and Congressman Mondaire Jones, a graduate of the district's Spring Valley HS. I shared Ed's excitement regarding the appointment and quickly informed him that he must advocate for the selection of a student to the task force or create an advisory board consisting of

students to review the decisions of the task force as a way of ensuring that grant is properly utilized to improve the school district for the students and not for any other purpose. I shared that he must protect himself and the credibility of the association from being used as a sign to the community of integrity and transparency, in terms of how the money will be utilized in the district. Pastor's Ed appointment to the task force was shared at the April meeting and was very well received by the representatives of the 6 churches in attendance along with the news that all funding for the pantry was secured and the work complete for the pantry in Tappan. All Souls and Risen King congregations were "shouted out" for raising over 900 pounds of food for the pantry in Clarkstown.

The Good News Association appears well on its way to successfully achieving the goal of establishing the food distribution network with two pantries operational and a meeting with the leadership of the third pantry scheduled. The application has been completed and submitted to become a vendor for the Food Bank of Westchester County. This work has been completed in the midst of a pandemic and as the country is moving towards reopening, the association is poised to improve its presence and visibility in the community. With the appointment to the task force Good News is establishing itself as a viable local Christian grassroots organization that is carving out a place for itself at the intersections of church, community and politics in the county of Rockland.

Chapter 6: Food for Thought, Insights & Lessons Learned

That the work represented in this project is being performed in the county of Rockland is germane for a number of reasons. First, the area is representative of many communities in this country with its ethnic diversity and towns with strong urban features like Spring Valley, Nyack and Haverstraw within its jurisdiction. Secondly, the keys to replicating the work presented in this dissertation are identification of a credible community partner or church and intentional relationship building within the affected area. Public theology and the work of justice require partnership and community engagement in order to be successful. While this work may involve some personal risk taking in terms of deliberately cultivating relations with others, the necessary players are present in every hamlet in this country irrespective of classification as urban, rural or suburban. The complexity of diversity and poverty located within minutes of extreme wealth and affluence is not unlike many areas in this country. Poor people live within eyesight of the elite; however there are clear delineated borders and boundaries between the have and have-not communities. These invisible fences or boundaries are not breached and parameters around the borders are diligently maintained by a local authority known as the police in America. This group maintains a strong presence at all parameters of entrance into their communities and targets persons who may not reside in such a place. Churches in communities like this also honor the

boundary by not extending the hand of help or fellowship across such intersections to brothers, sisters and children in need grappling with hunger and poverty! All of this has become readily apparent with the advent of the current health pandemic COVID-19.

The potential to build relational rapport necessary for successful work within a community means that the Good News Association must be expanded beyond the scope of Christian churches. In order to produce meaningful and sustainable change the Association must engage all members of the faith community, not just Christians. We must begin finding areas of mutual commonality and begin erecting bridges to work with our Jewish, Muslim, Buddhists, Unitarians and any other faith group brothers and sisters who identify with morality and goodness. I was able to stumble on to this pathway in part because I had a Pastor as a conversation partner who was a devout supporter of former President Donald J. Trump. When I began searching for a project and began sharing possibilities I noticed that even he was moved by the impact upon people, especially women and children, of not having enough food to eat in this great Christian nation.

The circle must also be expanded to also include community activists and concerned people living within a community. The gang hell bent on hate does not limit membership or association. Why do the people who want to do good deeds

limit themselves in the challenging, tedious, slow and draining work of justice by not partnering with other groups and individuals?

In order to effectively partner with other groups it is imperative to remember that such coalition building work is not transactional, it is purely relational. We must intentionally engage relationships in all spheres of influence impacting and or revolving around the local community. I was able to partner with Good News because of a relationship that predated the project. Many of the cooperating churches involved in the network I am familiar with because of my position as Director of Men's ministry and their knowledge of my desire to outreach and partner with men from other congregations to community build together outside of the walls of our respective church homes. In other words, a lot of the relational groundwork was already paved. The times we are living requires the people of faith to retool to develop new strategies and commit ourselves to doing the collective work of justice together. It is far too late in the evolutionary process of this capitalistic society in America for any church or faith group to engage in justice work isolated from other faith groups or individuals mutually motivated by love, light and truth. The work must begin in terms of dismantling the walls that have been erected to divide the beloved community and has prevented any meaningful relationship development. Consequently, America's deterioration is uniquely hinged to the faith community's institutional failure to live out the

mandates clearly given in the Torah, Koran and Bible in regards to providing care for members and strangers in the land. “ Lay leaders working on task forces and pastors active in clergy caucuses of congregation-based community organizations are blessed with the opportunity to build authentic relationships across racial and class lines. It is slow, sometimes delicate work. It takes time to replace mutual suspicions with mutual trust. Gradually, presumptions and prejudices are found to be false. The unity of brotherhood and sisterhood in the Christian faith is joyfully discovered to be preeminent. Friendships are formed. Community is experienced.”⁴⁸ I couldn’t agree more with Jacobsen’s assertion I would only change the last sentence to reflect that the community would not just be experienced, it would be effectively transformed.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

What began as a project to develop a food distribution network in Rockland county for persons in need has turned into something significantly more. When I became Director of Men’s ministry at church, and established that one of the goals of the ministry would be to connect with men from other houses of faith to forge relationship and to kingdom build outside of our church affiliations, I had no idea

⁴⁸ Rouse, *Beyond Church Walls: Cultivating a Culture of Care*, 99.

that I would become a divinity student at Drew University Theological school or that our world would be encountering a health pandemic. When I developed our signature event, the Men's conference, I was clueless as to how this thread would lead me to this point. My energy and focus has been laser--like; my intent is to make this project a reality for the community that needs its service.

At some point in this process, I began to see that while motivated to complete the project that all of my thoughts and intentions began to shift to the Good News Association as a model to replicate. Clairvoyantly I began to see and understand the importance and need for a coalition to bring people of faith together to do the necessary work of justice. The organizational structure that Good News needs are skills that I possess. As an executive of a large non-profit behavioral health company for over 20 years I have developed the acumen necessary to lead and take such an organization to the next level as a model. I don't believe in happenstance; I began to find it ironic that people that I have relationships with were instrumental cogs willing to begin unlocking the door of resistance and forge partnership for the sake of community. Has God predestined me to serve the association in some capacity? Why was Pastor Ed so willing to listen to whatever I had to say? Why did he offer me a non-paying position to be the Director of Outreach for Good News? Why is a predominately African church with dreams of being multicultural asking me to join the pastoral team? How have we been able to

move the project forward utilizing only Zoom? As I began to meditate on these questions and pray for clarity, it became abundantly clear that I was entering a season of great change!

It is now time to courageously step out and leave my first ministry assignment, my day job for the last 20 years. It is also time to resign my post as Director of Men's ministry at Living Word Christian Fellowship. I know that I have been created to do something different in and for the body of Christ. My call is about partnering with other like-minded people to do the work of justice in the community. If I am to be a pastor, the church cannot have any walls and must be motivated to do justice work in the community adjacent to the church space. The work that needs to be done in this country I believe is not macro level work in my opinion, it is micro work. It does not take celebrities, public figures or religious leaders, as evidenced by the protest, marches and movements that have enveloped this country since the senseless season of murdering black men and women in public began appearing on media in American homes.

This frustration has been the linchpin that has forced many otherwise non-engaged people into the streets filled with emotion and demanding action and change. This exuberance is being perpetuated by young, marginalized and oppressed people who see the hypocrisy and historic failure of the institution of church to simply love humanity in all of its varying shapes, sizes, color and

identity. The redeemed church must be engaged as one body and begin healing our land, heart by heart. This work requires partnership with community agents and organizations at every level. It requires theology in the public square. As Jacobson writes, “Congregation-based church organizing forces the church out of its somnolence and into the public arena. It draws congregations together and into public stands against prevailing powers and oppressive systems. It is controversial. It challenges the church to take risks and to act with courage. Congregations engaged in this kind of organizing are indeed set apart for God’s purposes. They are instruments of justice and agents of deliverance. They are bearers of the Word of God into the world. In this regard, they are holy.”⁴⁹

The poor will always be with us as long as Christians continue to willfully ignore and defy their purpose and the charge given by Jesus to love, care and provide for the “least of these.” This epic failure is on full display for the entire world to see with the pandemic, and the issues cannot now be neatly swept back under the rug where they have festered for centuries. All of the American institutions inherently have been revealed to be complicit inclusive of the church. Additionally the church has been exposed as the author of the narrative that has promoted oppression of the poor, minorities, women and immigrants. The time is now for the church to become the change agent that Jesus represented and

⁴⁹ Jacobsen, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing*, 129.

represents to our Christian faith. This challenge is a collective one that requires the response of all the residents of the beloved village of hope in every hamlet in America. In the words of Dom Helder Camera, Brazilian Archbishop and champion of the poor, “If I dream alone, it is only a dream. If we dream together, it is the beginning of reality.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Jacobsen, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing*, 108.

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