

Final Paper

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UR714: Leadership Development in the Urban Church

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April 26, 2023

Introduction

According to Esau McCaulley, “African Americans are not very far from Israel in carrying within our history a long list of enemies and injustices, personal and corporate. The tale of this suffering can be found in Israel’s psalms of lament.”¹ One example of this is Psalm 137: 1-4 (NIV). This scripture gives attention to a group of individuals lamenting, reflecting on their memories, being sorrowful in their present condition, as well as feeling displaced in where they were at that time. “Lament is not anti-hope. It’s not a stepping-stone to hope. Lament itself is a form of hope.”² What was expressed in regard to this scripture was also descriptive of what transpired in association to the civil rights movement era. The efforts of the civil rights movement were necessary in the pursuit of freedom of persons, in environment, in speech and song, as well as equity in truth and justice with and from others in society.

Biblical Theology of Justice

As it pertains to the subject topic of Biblical theology of justice, centrally focusing on the church’s role in the social movements, there are particular scriptures which were highlighted in the book *Testament of Hope*, the Sankofa participants guide, and other course material. One of the church’s roles in the social movement was to proclaim and encourage faith in God by those who were oppressed, and endured the cruel and often inhumane treatment of slavery as well as time after emancipation occurred. As was shared in the *Testament of Hope*, “The belief that God

1. Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2020), 122.

2. Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation and the Stories That Make Us*. (New York, NY: Convergent Books, 2022), 101.

is on the side of truth and justice comes to us from the long tradition of our Christian faith.”³ One could reference such scriptures as Hebrews 11:1 and 2 (NIV) as well as verses 35 and 36 (NIV). Both sets of scriptures from this “faith in action” chapter of Hebrews 11 reinforces the importance of having faith which helps individuals to endure in spite of.

A second role of the church in the social movement was to be Peace (shalom) agents. As was stated in *Testament of Hope*, “True peace is not merely the absence of some negative force, tension, confusion or war; it is the presence of some positive force – justice, good will and brotherhood.”⁴ An Old Testament scripture which contains this sentiment is Isaiah 11: 6 (NIV). – “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them.” However, as was shared in the Sankofa guidebook, the comparative scripture of Galatians 3:28, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,” is not always appropriately utilized towards achieving or promoting unity amid diversity. For this scripture to become a reality towards addressing the physical and spiritual needs of individuals, non-violent protest was advocated by Martin Luther King and encouraged to be the course of action by churches and other groups or members of the community.

A third role of the church in the social movements is that of being Repairers of the breach as denoted in the Sankofa Participants guide. The appropriate referenced passage is Isaiah 58. The church is encouraged to speak out against injustices. Speaking out against injustices

3. Martin Luther King and James Melvin Washington. *A Testament of Hope* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1991), 9.

4. King and Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 6.

and being committed to making an impact was also discussed by Bryan Stevenson regarding his work with the Equal Justice Initiative that was presented in the video “True Justice” which was watched while travelling on the Sankofa Journey bus on Friday, 2/24/2023.

It is important to note that while the church is engaging in necessary repairs in the social movements, they are also called to be proponents of hope. As presented by Martin Luther King, it is important to remind oneself “Never forget that God is able to lift you from the fatigue of despair to the buoyance of hope, and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace.”⁵ This role in what was transpiring was to give a forward look beyond how things were, to how things can and will be. Matthew 4:16 (NIV) is a scripture which gives focus to looking beyond the darkness and dismal outlook of how things were to an outlook for things to be better. Another scripture that can be referenced regarding instilling and encouraging hope is Isaiah 40: 4: (NIV) “Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.” This scripture speaks of conditions and situations improving. It also encourages the church to be vocal about injustices while expressing hope that the way things have been, will not always be the same in the future. The church is to be instrumental in restoring the breach of trust, working together, and understanding across cultural and race lines.

A fourth role of the church in the social movement was to be a Proponent of justice and transformation to correct inequalities in economic, political, and societal aspects of communities as ambassadors of reconciliation. As presented in *Testament of Hope*, “Those of us who call the name of Jesus Christ find something at the center of our faith which forever reminds

5. King and Washington, 222.

us that God is on the side of truth and justice.”⁶ One can also look to 2 Corinthians 5: 19b & 20a (NIV) “And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation, we are therefore Christ’s ambassadors.” This scripture highlights a great responsibility to be fulfilled. A correlating scripture is Amos 5:24 (NIV) states, “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.” This speaks of not expecting justice or righteousness to be stagnant like a lake, but to be continuous in movement towards reconciliation and justice to prevail. This sentiment is echoed in biblical passages such as Psalm 82:3 which states, “Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.” Another scripture is Isaiah 1:17 that states, “Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, and please the widow’s cause.” The church must seek to influence establishing or rekindling a right relationship with God and with those around where one lives.

A fifth role of the church in the social movement was to be reinforcers of the spiritual, emotional and psychological encouragement of sermons, praise and worship experiences. Examples of this can be found in Psalm 30: 4 and 5 (NIV) and Psalm 34. As referenced in the Sankofa participant’s guide, there is coming a day when Revelation 7:9 and 10 will occur, “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. -And they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” Until that day occurs, these scriptures, as well as many others, denote the importance of never losing one’s song or songs as one is going through tough or difficult times.

6. King and Washington, 88.

Sociological Analysis of the Civil Rights Movement

As one expands beyond the theological aspect to include or proceed with the sociological analysis of the Civil Rights Movement, there are various factors which one can explore. It is important to consider the effect of slavery and its impact on the lives of Black individuals and to note that, “They were brought here from Africa and, unlike the Pilgrims, they were brought against their will, as slaves. Throughout the era of slavery, the Negro was treated in inhuman fashion, He was considered a thing to be used, not a person to be respected.”⁷ This view of the slaves (the oppressed) which persisted by their slave owners (oppressors) persisted even after the freedom of slaves was declared via the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. It is interesting to observe that “After his emancipation in 1863, the Negro still confronted oppression and inequality.”⁸

Slavery for many was a tremendous economic resource and the emancipation served as the catalyst for discord and subsequent hostility and conflict between whites and blacks to transpire. What ensued in the history of Blacks in America were a variety of different means to stop or thwart the progress of Blacks to easily experience what should have been experienced as a result of the end of slavery. The cruelty which persisted at that time in the civil rights movement is clearly evident when one visits the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and sees the following words – “For the hanged and beaten, for the shot, drowned, and burned. For the tortured, tormented, and terrorized. For those abandoned by the law. We will remember.” It is a sobering reality to realize that as it was in history, so it is today, “In American life there is

7. King and Washington, 5.

8. King and Washington, 6.

today a real crisis in race relations.”⁹The crisis existed then and still exists today on various topics, but this paper will focus on the following topic areas of school desegregation, employment challenges, police brutality, voting restrictions imposed against Blacks, and access to housing as it pertains to racial equality.

What was often the case for Blacks were the challenges of poverty, educational and employment opportunities, as well as suitable housing conditions as examples of lack of access to resources. LuLa Joe Williams had shared with the Sankofa group on 2/23/2023 about the need for the formation of “Resurrection City” in 1968 on the mall in Washington, DC to bring awareness and support for the war on poverty. As a result of not being able to keep up with certain required conditions, the permit for “Resurrection City” was not renewed, and it ceased from existing after 6-weeks. However, the war on or struggle with poverty still remains today.

After so many years of intimidation, it was recognized that for civil rights movement success to be achieved that united action must occur. “When one Negro stands up, he is run out of town, but when a thousand stand up together the situation is drastically altered”¹⁰ It is with this thought in mind that the use of “different examples of nonviolent protest – mass boycott, sit-down protests and strikes, sit-ins, mass marches, mass meetings, and prayer pilgrimages”¹¹ were increasingly utilized in the pursuit of achieving justice, equality and belonging for Blacks in America. It is often quoted that for every action in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction. This holds true for sociological matters in our historical and current contexts.

9. King and Washington, 85.

10. King and Washington, 184.

11. King and Washington, 33.

One of the initial challenging areas was in regards to achieving desegregation of public schools, and equitable access to educational resources for Blacks. Jim Crow laws of the 1870's was instrumental in reinforcing the legal racial segregation of Blacks and Whites. It was also noted at the National Civil Rights Museum, formerly known as the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, that separate is not equal and the 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson decision also supported segregation of schools. After much protest and resistance, the "Brown vs. Board of Education" was signed on May 17, 1954.

As a result of this signing, racial segregation in public schools became unconstitutional. Notable individuals such as the "Little Rock 9" in Little Rock Arkansas in 1957, or Ruby Bridges in 1960, being escorted by marshals to school serve as historic examples of the struggle for desegregation in education to occur. When one looks at many of the public schools in communities of Black and Brown children today, there are still visible testaments that the disparity still persists at this time. "Entrenched disparities continue to plague America's education system, holding far too many Black students back from achieving their full potential. Because of persistent racial and systemic injustices in our Nation, Black students remain more likely to attend high-poverty and racially segregated schools than White students."¹²

A second area was striving to ban discrimination in public accommodations, and unfair employment treatment against Blacks. When one turns their attention to fair work practices and conditions, one must mention Martin Luther King going to Memphis in response to the 1968

12. "White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Black Americans." *Federal Register: The Daily Journal of the United States Government*. October 22, 2021. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/10/22/2021-23224/white-house-initiative-on-advancing-educational-equity-excellence-and-economic-opportunity-for-black>.

Sanitation Workers' strike. This strike occurred after two sanitation workers were crushed to death after they had taken shelter in the back of their truck to get out of the rain, and the truck malfunctioned. The end goal of the strike was for both better working conditions as well as wage increase. The slogan for the Memphis workers was "I Am Man." The significance of what transpired in Memphis at that time was shared by Elaine Turner in regards to the visit to the I Am Man Plaza. Additional facts about Memphis were shared while she was on the bus as well at the Slave Haven Underground Museum.

As Blacks engaged in sit-ins and other forms of nonviolent protest in support of the strike and other aspects of social movement efforts, what often transpired was police brutality and trumped-up fines, which resulted with imprisonment. Police brutality was a common occurrence. "The most tragic and widespread violations occur in the areas of police brutality and the enforcement against the Negro of obviously illegal state statutes."¹³ During the Civil Rights Movement, police brutality was nondiscriminatory to Blacks whether they were as young as children or senior adults. It was impartial as it related to men or women. All were equal recipients of the unwarranted onslaught of this pain and suffering.

On May 2, 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama examples of this were when police officers utilized clubs, forcefully sprayed protestors via fire hoses, allowed their dogs to attack the young non-violent protesting students, and then arrested over 700 students on that day. Police brutality still exists in present time and has been widely documented as it relates to the suffering of such as Rodney King, Walter Scott, as well as George Floyd and Eric Gardner. "The Civil Rights Act of 1964 in part was to address prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion,

13 King and Washington, 172.

religion, sex or national origin.”¹⁴

Another subject topic, in which Blacks were met with great opposition, was in association to being granted the right to vote, and the voting restrictions which were in place. It has been stated, and I agree that, “voting is the foundation stone for political action. With it the Negro can eventually vote out of office public officials who bar the doorway to decent housing, public safety, jobs and decent integrated education.”¹⁵ Blacks recognized that the right to vote was a critical component towards achieving political reforms. This sentiment was presented by J. T. Johnson when he addressed the Sankofa group on 02/23/2023 at New Life Covenant Church. He shared that we are called to vote in appreciation for those who suffered in the movement so we could vote today and be involved in making changes in our societies. As stated in *Color of Compromise*, “White ‘redeemers’ introduced a deliberate and systematic reign of terror to prevent black people from voting, obtaining economic independence, and exercising their full humanity as citizens and human being created in the image and likeness of God.”¹⁶

During the walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge as part of the Sankofa journey, it became a grim reminder of Bloody Sunday in Selma which occurred on March 7, 1965. This was a civil rights demonstration which ended with the vicious and violent attack toward non-

14. “Legal Highlight: The Civil Rights Act of 1964.” n.d. *U.S. Department of Labor*. Accessed April 18, 2023. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasam/civil-rights-center/statutes/civil-rights-act-of-1964#:~:text=In%201964%2C%20Congress%20passed%20Public,hiring%2C%20promoting%2C%20and%20firing.>

15. King and Washington, 183.

16. Jemar Tisby, *Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021,) 97.

violent protestors by Alabama state troopers and civilians. The gravity of the incident shocked the world as they viewed the depth of racial divide, hostility, and aggression, which did not shrink back at being displayed in written or broadcasted format. Martin Luther King and supporters visited the bridge for prayer on March 9, 1965. They subsequently marched across the bridge and continued from Selma to Montgomery on March 25, 1965. These marches became a key point or important contributor to The Voting Rights Act of 1965 being signed. The law was aimed to overcome legal restrictive barriers at the state and local levels which would prevent African Americans from being able to exercise their right to vote. Time has changed but some efforts still persist. It must be noted that “as of January 25, 2023, state lawmakers in at least 32 states pre-filed or introduced 150 restrictive voting bills. Restrictive legislation often disproportionately impacts voters of color.”¹⁷

The fair and equitable access and housing conditions for blacks was another issue to be addressed during the Civil Rights Movement. The purpose of The Fair Housing Act of 1968 was to prohibit discrimination of individuals concerning the sale, rental and financing of housing based on race, religion, national origin or sex. It was constructed to serve as a follow-up to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Fair Housing Act stands as the final great legislative achievement of the civil rights era. However, The National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) released its annual report on Mar 16, 2023, which highlighted that significant federal investments are needed to address the shortage of 7.3 million affordable and available homes for the nation’s lowest-income renters. The report finds that “renters of color are more likely than white

17. “Voting Laws Roundup: February 2023.” *Brennan Center for Justice*. February 27, 2023. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-february-2023>.

households to be renters with extremely low incomes and are more likely to be directly impacted by the lack of affordable rental housing.”¹⁸

Application to my ministry context

There are various pertinent current and future ministerial context points, which I was able to acquire, and will strive to be intentional about executing and incorporating in my interaction with others. From *Reading While Black* one of those points is that “Jesus asks us to see the brokenness in society and to articulate an alternative vision for how we might live. We let the world know that we see the cracks in the façade.”¹⁹ This will require me to ask God to open my vision to see what is truly occurring in the lives of those around me. I must be empathetic and vocal about the areas of brokenness of others. I must be willing to engage in addressing and correcting those broken places in society. I also can incorporate the following point that “Good news for the poor is bread or a job or political freedom. That is true insofar as it goes. But Jesus also cared about the spiritual lives of the poor. He saw them as bodies and souls.”²⁰ For me to be Christ-like, I must address their physical and soul-related needs. This, on my part, must be done with a Christ-like love towards them.

As it pertains to the *Color of Compromise*, what I can utilize for current and future ministry context is being able to lament. I can utilize those opportunities for lamenting to gain

18. “NLIHC Releases The Gap 2023: A Shortage of Affordable Homes.” *National Low Income Housing Coalition*. March 16, 2023. <https://nlihc.org/news/nlihc-releases-gap-2023-shortage-affordable-homes>.

19. McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 66.

20. McCaulley, 93.

direction from God regarding how to progress my next step efforts in achieving changes in the condition and lives of others. “We lament and repudiate historical acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest, and we recognize that the racism which yet plagues our culture today is inextricably tied to the past.”²¹ I cannot stand by and avoid engaging in transformational opportunities that address the injustices in the lives of individuals around me. Extracting from *Subversive Witness*, I must be willing to be Christ-like in different capacities and to be a subversive witness. I must also be willing to utilize any privilege I have to continue the progress of the civil rights movement efforts, by continuing to give attention to the needs of the oppressed and marginalized in our communities.

Conclusion

We must strive and look forward with prayerful anticipation for things to get better. To effectively achieve requires that we consider our history and also look forward to a brighter future. Doing that helps us to remember those who laid the foundation upon which we build today as well as the faith and hope which has endured. “With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.”²² As written on the walls of The National Memorial for Peace and Justice - We will remember with hope, because hopelessness is the enemy of justice. With courage because peace requires bravery. With persistence because justice is a constant struggle. With faith because we shall overcome.

21. Tisby, *Color of Compromise*, 172.

22. King and Washington, 219.

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