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Shaping Ministry to Provide Emancipatory Hope
for
Women Who Have Been Formally Incarcerated

By

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Doctor of Ministry

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Abstract

Shaping Ministry to Provide Emancipatory Hope for Women Who Have Been Formally
Incarcerated
By Clarence Ford

During the late spring/early summer of 2015 I found myself traveling across the state of Texas speaking to members of the five regions of the Eighth Episcopal District of the CME Church on matters of social justice. After traveling to two regions I received a call from a former coworker who shared a chilling, but all-to-familiar, story. A former classmate of his daughter at Prairie View A&M had just been found dead in police custody. The young lady was a Prairie View Alumnus and had recently accepted a position there and had moved from Chicago back down to South Texas. Twenty-Eight year old Sandra Bland was at the dawn of the rest of what appeared to be a promising life.

What followed for me was a period of heightened focus on African-American women who found themselves engaged with the criminal justice system. Some suffered the indignity of public beatings while others were assaulted in the confines of central lockup. All found themselves incarcerated and in many cases spiraling into the abyss of darkness that is our Criminal "Justice" System. The systemic issues, the cultural insensitivity to, and the resulting challenges for women and girls who have been incarcerated all serve to rob these women of their humanity leaving them in a downward spiral of hopelessness. I contend that the Church, specifically the Black Church, is called to embody and impart the emancipatory hope needed to usher formerly-incarcerated women from the margins of despair and stand as a beacon of hope against the systemic tide of injustice.

Shaping Ministry to Provide Emancipatory Hope

for

Women Who Have Been Formally Incarcerated

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A Final Project submitted to the Faculty of the Candler School of Theology
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Introduction

I don't know why the memory has clung to me over all the years of my life. Still, the image of my mother being removed from our home in handcuffs is embedded deep within my mind. I was only four years old. My paternal father, a professional flooring installer, had taken product from a local retailer with whom he would regularly conduct business. He stashed the rolls of rugs in the garage of our home. One morning, while he was away, officers from the New Orleans Police Department knocked on our door with a search warrant. They proceeded to search the premises and found the rugs in the garage. Although my mother was innocent of any wrongs, she was arrested since the stolen property was found in our home. The image that haunts me most is the look of brokenness on my mother's face. I can recall clearly the attitude of the arresting officers. They had no regard for my mother's dignity. While this episode only served as a shadow of a moment in my mother's life, for me it resides amidst the gloomy memories of my troubled childhood. My mother was spared the indignity of having to relive that type of moment again in her life. This cannot be said of many other women in the United States and across the globe.

The number of women in prisons increased by 646% between the years of 1980 and 2010.[1] The numerical rise of women in prisons increased from 15,118 to 112,797. If we include women who are incarcerated in local, state, and federal jails today then that number climbs to 205,400. A New York Times article from September 2015 records that over 700,000 women are now incarcerated across the globe.[2] The incarceration rate is most prevalent among Black and Hispanic

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[1] Harrison P Guerino, W Sabol, "Mental Illness Surveillance Among Adults in the United States." 2011, Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Accessed January 15, 2021, http:// www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/su6003a1.htm?s_cid=su6003a1_w.

[2] Emma Bracy, "More than 700,000 women and girls are in prison around The world." New York Times. September 28, 2015, Accessed January 21, 2021,

women. These women of color are jailed at a rate that is 43% higher than that of White women. Taken as a whole these numbers are nothing short of pandemic proportions. As the number of incarcerated women grows, so does the number of formerly-incarcerated women who then suffer from a lack of proper support on the outside. Dr. Jessica Jacobson, of the Institute for Criminal Policy Research, says that "these women and girls are an extremely vulnerable and disadvantaged group".[3] This community of women tends to operate with a loss of dignity, scarce resources, and with little hope for meaningful employment. The stigma of ex-con and other labels are used to marginalize and justify the lack of attention and care shared with this disenfranchised community. I contend that **the Church, specifically the Black Church, is called to embody and impart the emancipatory hope needed to usher formerly-incarcerated women from the margins of despair to the core of wealth.** My thesis is rooted in the story of Jesus and the Woman of Samaria as recorded in the Gospel of John. In chapter 4 Jesus engages this unnamed, disenfranchised, and marginalized woman in a theological discourse. The Samaritan woman reveals her in-depth understanding of appropriate religious praxis; Jesus reveals his clear understanding of the social dynamic that serves to constrain her. The story rises to a crescendo when the disciples return dismayed and the woman departs and evangelizes the inhabitants of the town.

> Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him. John 4:27-30 NRSV

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http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2015/09/28/more-than-700000-women-and-girls-are-in-prison-around-the-world/.
[3] Ibid.

Jesus ignites a spark of vibrant hope in this woman by 1) engaging her in an act of fellowship, 2) honoring her voice as she conveys her multiplicity of being, and 3) reveals that her historicity holds no power over her destiny. The church will all-to-often mimic the astonishment of the disciples when faced with the challenge to minister to women who have been marginalized by the penal system. Getting beyond this "astonishment" requires the Church to rethink the concept of "call" and the hope that she – the Church – is called into.

The Greek word for church is ecclesia. It means those called out and assembled together. The Church then is constituted of those who have been called out and assembled together. The assembling together occurs under the covering of hope. The Church is a community of diverse individuals who are experiencing new hope. This new hope is not something that the Church has created in and of itself. Rather, it is a product of grace. With this hope the Church enjoys peace, liberty, and the opportunity to thrive. Liberty is achieved through the "call". Those who receive the gift of Christ are called out of the world, out of our past, out of the ills that seek to devour. I refer to this as emancipatory hope. Jesus embodied and imparted emancipatory hope for and to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. This embodiment and imparting is what the Black Church is called to be and to do for women who are suffering through the oppression of incarceration as well as those who still exist under the veil of its shadow. While this might appear to be a daunting task, there are avenues that have been paved with the opportunity needed to usher the victims of incarceration beyond the walls of oppression.

Ministry Context

Without question, we are traversing an unimaginable period. In January of 2020 as the news of the Coronavirus began to ramp up, my wife began to express concern that bordered on the expectation of an apocalyptic event. Her concern quickly spurned into action as she began to stock up on essential items. Having experienced regional shutdowns due to hurricanes, the temporary inconvenience of large-scale power outages due to localized disasters, and the national shutdown of air travel after the 911 attacks I could not fathom a single event that would bring all of our expressions of communal life to a halt. Even considering the large scale closure of businesses, nothing in my cognitive senses would allow me to imagine a time when, on a national scale, our houses of worship would be shuttered and we were forced to implement a means of holding together our faith communities without the ability to commune together in one space. We find ourselves living in such a time. The challenge that I, as well as faith leaders across the globe, am confronted with is how to hold together the expression of a "beautiful community" of faith that we've been striving to create at Hill Chapel over the past fifteen years.

Coming to "The Hill"

I believe it is important to understand the nature of the congregation upon my arrival at Hill Chapel and what undergirds the need to establish a sense of community. Prior to arriving at Hill Chapel, the church had experienced significant loss of financial support. The church had a negative balance on the books and was several hundred thousand dollars in debt. The mortgage had not been paid in several months and the congregation bordered on foreclosure. The socio-dynamic was also in disarray at the church.

There were three distinct groups at the church. There was a group that represented somewhat of an aristocracy. While this group did little to support the needs of the church, they

garnered the majority of the control of decisions and wielded a type of power over the majority of the congregation. The second group rendered support for the ministry of the church and served to hold together some sense of communal life and hope. The third group was those that showed up occasionally but had no substantive voice or expression of being in the life of the church. My goal was to mold these groups into a cohesive community and to engage all persons in the life of the church while assuring that each individual would be afforded a voice in the direction and ministry of the congregation. An effective means of accomplishing this goal was to examine and rethink our engagement with the sacrament of Holy Communion.

From Communion of the Elite to a Unified Expression

The act of sharing in Communion at Hill Chapel was quite revealing of the three factions that existed in the church. In the first months at the church I noticed that when the invitation to the table was extended only those who were in the group of "elites" came to the altar. They participated in the consecration of the elements and communed first. After which those of the second group would begin to line up along the walls followed by the third group and then those who served as ushers and stewardesses. Those who communed with the "elite" would disengage with the reverence of the moment as others gathered at the altar or waited to partake of the elements.

My changes were as follows: I changed the order of the liturgy. The elements of the liturgy were included in the regular order of worship. The prayer of consecration was performed with all of the congregants seated in the pews. After the ministerial staff communed, I extended the invitation with the instructions that all persons would gather at the same time. Members would take the bread and the cup and hold it. Instead of standing on the walls waiting for others to commune at the altar, all of the members gathered near the altar standing together at the front of

the church from wall to wall. I would then have those who served the table, the stewardesses, stand together nearest the altar and I would personally serve them. After each person had an element of bread and the cup, the congregation would all commune together at the same time. After partaking of the elements, I prayed the benediction and we all embraced each other and shared the words – "I love you and there's nothing you can do about it." Over the past fifteen years the love that was initially voiced is the love that is embodied and expressed one to another in the life of our faith community at "The Hill".

New Voices Emerge

The movement toward a unified body served to be empowering to persons in our congregation who had historically resided on the margins. One group that emerged is our women's ministry – "Just Between Sisters." This group serves both the congregation and the greater community of women by engaging in activities for faith formation, fellowship, and personal and professional growth. A key concern that exists for our women's ministry leaders is the concern for the number of women who are facing, or have faced, incarceration. Historically, Hill Chapel has avoided ministry opportunities that involve individuals who have struggled with the criminal justice system. The hesitancy to participate in ministries that engage individuals who either are or have been incarcerated stems from both a fear of a potential criminal element and a sense of apathy for the condition of these persons. However, the leaders of the ministry have a great passion for engaging in ministry that is empowering for women who are navigating these turbulent waters.

My hope is to lead the group and our greater congregation into forming and supporting a ministry that offers emancipatory hope for women who are formerly incarcerated. "The concept of emancipatory hope means expectation that dominant powers of racism, classism, sexism, and

heterosexism will be toppled" and that oppressed people will "have agency in God's vision for dismantling these powers of domination."[4]

Shaping the Project

Project Methods

The methods I choose to employ for the project are as follows:

- *Research statistical information on incarceration and conviction rates*

- *Interview Deborah Hill from the women's resource group of St. Andrews UMC*

- *Focus Group to follow up on the ownership discussion held earlier in the term*

  ➢ *Women's ministry leaders (Joyce Winbush & Doris Lewis)*
  ➢ *Red Door Pantry leader Mary Mitchell*
  ➢ *Judge Staci Williams*
  ➢ *Several women from the church*

- *Survey of the congregation to gauge both the need and the commitment to develop this type of transformative ministry.*

With the flood in information pouring in on the twenty-four hour news cycle individuals are subject to becoming tone-deaf regarding information that engenders pain and anguish. Turning from information that conveys a message of defeatism or struggle can be used as a type of defense mechanism from what some perceive as a world that threatens their sanity. I choose to begin my project by researching incarceration trends and the rates of recidivism for women of color in the United States. My goal was to offer a clear and concise view of the problem that we were to address.

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[4] Evelyn L. Parker, *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African-American Adolescents,* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), viii.

I am fortunate to have worked with Deborah Hill on several occasions during my pastorate in Collin County. Her work in women's ministry at Project Hope, a ministry of St. Andrews United Methodist Church in the city of Plano, focuses on empowering women and single mothers to escape abusive and oppressive conditions and to move into a life of independence. My goal in interviewing Ms. Hill was to gain insight on the structure and content of a ministry that speaks to the lives of women who have been incarcerated.

My goal in engaging the focus group was two-fold. I hoped to gauge the passion for this project from both the leaders and all others who were invited. I also hoped to gain some insight into the commitment and level of sacrifice the leaders were willing to embrace in designing and implementing this type of ministry.

The survey was used to gain a better idea of the need for this ministry in our local context and to benchmark the level of commitment that the general congregation would rise to in the shaping of this type of transformative ministry.

Discovery

A concise summary of the research follows:

Pandemic Incarceration Rates

- *According to the Washington Bureau of Justice Statistics the number of women in prisons increased by 646% between the years of 1980 and 2010.*

- *The numerical rise of women in prisons increased from 15,118 to 112,797. If we include women who are incarcerated in local, state, and federal jails then that number climbs to 205,400.*

- *A New York Times article from September 2015 records that over 700,000 women are now incarcerated across the globe.*

Disproportion for Women of Color

- *The incarceration rate is most prevalent among Black and Hispanic women.*

- *These women of color are jailed at a rate that is 43% higher than that of White women*

A Hopeless Existence

- *As the number of incarcerated women grows, so does the number of formerly-incarcerated women who then suffer from a lack of proper support on the outside.*

- *Dr. Jessica Jacobson, of the Institute for Criminal Policy Research, says that "these women and girls are an extremely vulnerable and disadvantaged group".*

- *This community of women tends to operate with a loss of dignity, scarce resources, and with little hope for meaningful employment.*

Working with Ms. Hill yielded a treasure trove of value. Her insight into the subject was at times overwhelming. A valuable lesson that I walked away with from our interview was to plan this type of interview over multiple sessions. It was also important for me to extend an invitation to Ms. Hill to participate in the continuing discussion and planning of this endeavor.

Members of the focus group displayed a healthy sense of commitment and concern for women, and men, who have been, as well as those who remain, incarcerated. The members of the group were also keenly aware of the crisis that women of color face in dealing with the "criminal justice" system. The hope of the group was that we could and would be an agent for systemic change for those women whom we serve through this ministry. While the group conveyed a sense

of commitment, it was difficult for me to discern a level of sacrifice that those in attendance were willing to ascend to. I have often experienced the waning of commitment as the need for a higher level of sacrifice was manifested.

The members of the focus group also had a sincere concern for the humanity of those persons who live under the threat of recidivism. The members of the group expressed a desire to shape their faith community in such a way that the humanity of all persons is honored and that those persons are afforded a life of dignity. I saw in this the embodiment of Fulkerson's words in *Places of Redemption, Theology for a Worldly Church*. Concerning homemaking Fulkerson writes: "by homemaking I mean to suggest the distinctive ways the community maintains itself as a physical place, for example, maintenance and upkeep, but also as a livable place – a real home-place where people offer each other material, emotional, and spiritual support."[5] Fulkerson goes on to say that "Christians have long been in the business of providing mutual support for one another. From ancient traditions of caring for the widow and the orphan, and sharing possessions in the earliest churches (Acts 2:43-47), down through the centuries a wide variety of ministries has emerged to define and meet members' needs." (Fulkerson 139)

The brief survey of the congregation yielded mix results. There appears to be two distinct groups that have emerged in my local context. One group embraces the mission and ministry of the church in terms of worship and fellowship. There is resistance in this group towards ministry that goes beyond the worship experience. The second group adheres to the ethos that they have a role to play in liberating God's people from oppression. This group understands and has an

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[5] Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Wordly Church*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 127 .

expressed eagerness to engage in this form of prophetic ministry. Subsequent follow-up discussions with persons in the congregation whom I discern are among the first group lead me to believe that their theological perspective does not include the church as an entity of change for systemic injustice. For these individuals it is difficult to embrace a gospel that focuses on social justice. Further, there appears to be an idea that those individuals that are encumbered by former incarceration are deserving of their plight as opposed to being a victim of a justice system gone awry. These persons find it difficult to embrace the thought that, as Elizabeth Liebert writes in *The Soul of Discernment A Spiritual Practice for Communities and Institutions*, "systems, by definition, produce their own behavior over time."[6] The imbalance of power and sentencing authority in the "criminal justice" system lay at the root of the causes for injustice at the intersection of race, social economic status, and gender.

Leadership Strengths and Gaps

My greatest strength in terms of my leadership in the faith community is the passion that I have for matters of justice and in creating a reality where individuals can live out the hope of a life of dignity. The abundance of passion can, at times, lead to an autocratic style of leadership. The irony is that in many of our churches, Christian Methodist Episcopal Churches, congregations embrace this type of strong leadership. I notice that I must make earnest efforts to resist this type of "strong" leadership. In his book *Community: The Structure of Belonging* Peter Block categorizes groups as embracing a "habit of dependency" when led by an autocratic leader. Block goes on to say that "what is missing or dismissed here are the community-building insights about

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[6] Elizabeth Liebert, *The Soul of Discernment: a Spiritual Practice for Communities and Institutions*, (Louiville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 56.

how groups work, the power of relatedness, what occurs when ordinary people get together. We write communal possibility off as just another meeting, the blind leading the blind, citizens coming together to pool ignorance or to speak truth to power, which is just a complaint session in evening clothes."[7]

A key skill that I look to continue to develop is my ability to formulate questions. In working with the focus group there were moments when the group veered off task. Having a well formulated question served as an aid in directing the group to remain on topic. Well formulated questions not only aid in managing the meeting, Block states that questions often yield more substance than the resulting answers. Block writes:

> Questions are more transformative than answers and are the essential tools of engagement. They are the means by which we are all confronted with our freedom. In this sense, if you want to change the context, find powerful questions. Questions create the space for something new to emerge…"[8]

Hopes for the Faith Community

My hope for the congregation that I serve is for the membership to embrace the opportunity to engage with persons that exist in the space beyond our walls that fall upon differing intersections of life. Making connections with individuals of differing and diverse experiences opens the mind to greater possibilities. We know and are comfortable with who we are. However, many members at Hill Chapel tend to be less open minded in regards to the "other" in society. This became evident while working on this project. The results of one of the survey questions led to an understanding that several persons/families were affected by the high incarceration rates among women in particular. For the most part, I was aware of this. However, many of the persons in the

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[7] Peter Block, Community: the Structure of Belonging, (San Francisco: Barrett-K0ehler Publishers, Incorporated, 2018), 41.
[8] Ibid.

congregation that were affected have in some way disassociated themselves from those who have been or are incarcerated. In many cases there is an attitude of contempt towards those persons. I understand that family dynamics are complex and are laced with their own intersectionality. Still, there should be a higher calling that we ascend to that beckons us to strive for opportunities to embody the hope of Christ for the least, the lost, and the hopeless. Of primary concern to me is the lack of voice that is expressed by the church for individuals who have found themselves on the wrong side of our criminal justice system. We continue to see inequities in judgments and sentencing between individuals who are on the upper end of the socio-economic scale and those who lack the financial resources to speak for themselves. Coupled with this perpetual injustice is the enactment of laws and policy that prevent these citizens from having a voice in the electoral process and to obtain gainful employment. This tragedy is amplified by the voice of the religious community that touts a theology of "righteousness" while offering a very limited definition for neighbor. My hope is to clarify the hope of Christ, the call upon the Church, and give embodiment to a response that is appropriate to the Christian witness for our neighbors who have made decisions in life that may have led to a repetitive cycle of judgement in our criminal justice system.

Congregational Model

In an effort to stand in solidarity with women who have suffered the indignity of being caged we are implementing a layered congregational model. The key elements of the model are as follows:

- Develop resources to support the restoration of dignity in *fellowship* and in worship,

- *Develop and strengthen **partnerships** to assist in **navigating life**.*

- Leverage organizational opportunities that foster *ownership* and a voice for shaping policy on sentencing.
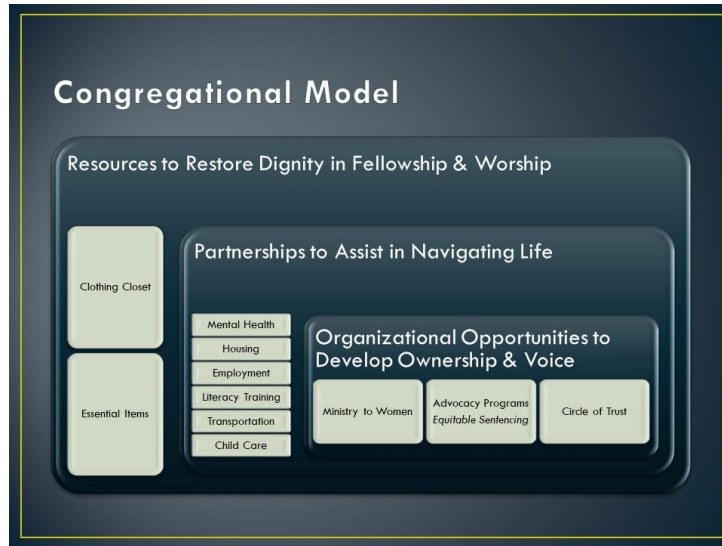
Figure 1 - Hill Chapel CME Emancipatory Hope Congregational Model

Engaging in Research

Crisis for Women of Color

The numbers reported above paint a vibrant picture of the crisis that exists for women of color. The present situation serves to constrain Black and Latina women into a life lived with neither dignity nor the material resource to elevate their social location. The tone of our initial gatherings harbored on the belief that we lacked either the ability to be successful in this endeavor or that this task might be best met by organizations beyond the walls of the church. In her book *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America* Keri Day argues that the "black churches can participate in a project of thriving with and for black women so that justice can become a real possibility".[9] Day uses an ideology critique to "examine the ways in which economic inequities and cultural inequalities collude to structure adversely the economic opportunities of black women."[10] Opportunities are constrained and oppressed by the "interrelated spheres" of economy and culture. Class oppression in alienated communities is illuminated through the lens of culture and economy. This view also offers a glimpse into the conditions of hope and thriving that are possible. Day asserts that the exploration of "culture and economy as interrelated spheres is important because economic relief and cultural flourishing are both essential for poor black women to move out of poverty."[11] Day's reasoning is in contrast to the "advanced capitalist" practices of neo-liberalism. Neo-liberals promote the "myth of meritocracy" by resisting "government oversight and intervention" as they "adhere to a philosophy

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[9] Keri Day, Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America. (NY, New York, Orbis Books, 2012), 5.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., 6.

of success through individual action and merit."[12] This ideology contributes to many black women's state of "possessing insufficient income and lacking the economic and cultural assets needed to develop their human capacity to thrive and flourish."[13] Historically, black women have constituted the majority of faithful members in black churches. Day affirms that the "black churches are important when discussing poor black women's sense of flourishing and well-being."[14]

The Black Church is interpreted as "both a theological and sociological construct – confessional community and human institution."[15] The prophetic witness of the Black Church is essential for strengthening the resolve of black women as they endure "social degradation that often accompanies their daily lives."[16] Contradictions between biblical understandings of humanity and the practices of white churches are exposed through the Black Church as a confessional community. However, an analysis of black churches reveals deep ambivalence when presses to join "in solidarity with poor black women."[17] This apathy manifests itself as somewhat of a wilderness experience for many black women. They struggle to contribute their limited resources to the faith community and receive nothing in return. This project of hope is needed to assure both economic and social justice.

Day promotes the ideology expressed by the Poor Peoples Campaign (PPC). The endeavor to resuscitate the PPC is well suited for the Black Church because the Black Church has the "moral resources to act courageously, creatively, and imaginatively about prospects for the least of these

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[12] Ibid., 7.
[13] Ibid., 9.
[14] Ibid., 15.
[15] Ibid., 17.
[16] Ibid., 22.
[17] Ibid., 25.

within their own communities."[18] The work of the PPC is in part the "unfinished business" that

Day is referring to in her title. While far from perfect, "a critical retrieval of the PPC movement

can help revive a class-based movement that works with and for the poor."[19] However, as these

efforts will serve to "move the bar", continued focus is needed to forge ahead with the mission of

the church in addressing policy and sentencing practices as well as garnering resources to address

matters of mental health that serve as limiting agents.

Justice – the Mission of the Church

> **"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,**
> **because he has anointed me**
> **to bring good news to the poor.**
> **He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives**
> **and recovery of sight to the blind,**
> **to let the oppressed go free,**
> **to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

Luke 4:18-19 NRSV

Admittedly, the major evangelical undertakings of the past have been closely tied to biased

imperialistic endeavors. The motives driving the actions of those that spread a gospel message of

deliverance were thinly veiled with rhetoric that called for a separation of church and state. Thus,

spiritual deliverance was stressed, but abolishing physical oppression is deemed a political issue.

Justo Gonzalez writes:

> *What is usually meant by "mixing politics and religion" is very selective,*
> *depending on what kind of politics is actually being mixed with religion. To*
> *pray at the U.S. Congress, to preach in the White House, or to "give the*
> *blessing" at a stockholders' meeting is not political and is therefore*
> *acceptable. But to speak at a farm workers' rally, to bless their efforts to*
> *organize, or to criticize the Immigration Service is political. To attend a*

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[18] Ibid., 89.
[19] Ibid., 90.

prayer breakfast with the governor of Puerto Rico is not political. To protest the presence of the Navy in Vieques is political.[20]

Thus, issues that cross the lines between church and state are subjective. While this shadow of unjust motives might linger, it should not prevent the church from pressing forward with new vigor.

I understand a mission as defining what an organization is, why it exists, and its reason for being. What is the purpose of the body of persons who gather regularly under the banner of Jesus? Historically, the church has embraced the idea that our chief role in the human experiment is to "make disciples." The field in which we labor at this task is "all the world" or "to the ends of the earth." Over the span of time the "church" can be seen moving in and through strange lands sharing the salvific message of Jesus the Christ followed by extreme efforts to assimilate those communities into the "main stream" western theological image of a Christian. However, in Luke 4:18-19 Jesus reveals a divine mission for both His ministry and, I believe, for the Church. Let me first offer a clearer picture of what I mean by the Church.

Granted, in this text I doubt that Jesus has in mind the church as we have organized and propagated the faith. While Jesus made it a regular custom of His to faithfully attend temple worship, His ministry and most poignant moments are captured as He moved throughout the communities of 1st Century Palestine and engaged the persons who found themselves existing within the margins of a society with an agro-based economy and an oligarchy that had harnessed control of both the religious and political leaders. This toxic mix of leadership had abandoned the

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[20] Justo L. Gonzalez, Manana Christian Theology form a Hispanic Perspective (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 83.

practice of building a community that assures that there would not be generational poverty amongst their fellow citizens as laid out in Leviticus 25. Instead of holding to the scriptural edict of Jubilee, leaders had embraced a celebratory emphasis for commemorating the event without relinquishing their hold on the land. The end result was a society where power and financial resources were centralized to a small group of land owners, and political and religious leaders court those who are on the top end of the socio-economic strata. On the other spectrum of society are those who fend for their lives without the financial resources to engage in a life of dignity and hope. The marks of a hopeless existence are embodied in Luke's writing – they are poor, blind, held captive, and oppressed. Society's systems of government, justice, education, and religious practice offered no relief for the poor, no healing for the blind, no release for those in bondage and no escape for those who are oppressed. It is against this backdrop that Jesus would offer the purpose for His incarnation and reveal a mission statement for His followers who would eventually offer embodiment to the Church.

I understand that mission to be two-fold. The first is to address the needs of the marginalized persons under society's care such that they are able to live a life of dignity and hope. The class of persons spoken of in Luke 4:18 all share a common theme for their lives. They are all in a state from which there is little to no social mobility. Granted, the poor may occasionally receive a token from a person of wealth that reflects their limited beneficence. After which, poor persons are left to navigate life in their continuing state of poverty. The effects of which remain within the family of poor individuals across generations. The same could be said of the persons in the other classifications in verse 18 – the blind, captive, and oppressed. There conditions are such that they are not just experiencing poverty, blindness, captivity, or oppression, these labels define who they are. It reveals something of their history, their geographic location, and their

family lineage. A view from those who sit in the upper balconies of life reveals individuals, families, and even entire communities of persons that both deserve the state that they are in and who offer no value for the societal fabric of life. These are the individuals who bare a heavy weight on society's ability to continue to rise. However, Jesus offers a different perspective on the purpose for society's collective body and ultimately for the Church. Society's purpose and that of the Church is to both pay attention to and offer real, substantive relief for those who exist in the margins.

I find it interesting when I hear of individuals who offer kind deeds "out of the goodness of their heart." It is equally disturbing when individuals push a socio-political and religious agenda that focuses on issues like abortion or the church's stance on LGBTQA matters, but are silent when it comes to issues that address eliminating poverty, providing quality health care, reforming criminal justice systems, or creating a system of taxation that is fair and equitable. These are matters that must be addressed by the Church. It is within the DNA of the Church from the beginning to shape, not just our religious practice, but also our faith praxis to engage, influence, and change societal norms that leave persons, families, and communities marginalized into an oasis of hope and dignity. But the mission has a second component. That is to provide interpretation.

In verse 19 Luke writes "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" – Jubilee. Jubilee was instituted as a means to assure that there would not be generational poverty amongst the Hebrew people. At the time of Jubilee, families who had either lost their ancestral lands were permitted to again take ownership of those lands. Since the basis of the economy was agriculture, those families no longer had to suffer the sting of trauma and shame offered by a life of poverty. Families and individuals experienced both freedom from captivity and oppression and liberation from poverty.

However, by the time Jesus arrives in 1st Century Palestine the understanding and practice of Jubilee was understood differently. It was no longer a time of freedom and liberation. Rather, it was now just a time of celebration. Let's come together, sing, praise, and just talk about the change that is needed amongst our people. Jesus offers to the listening generation a different interpretation of Jubilee that is fitting with God's divine hope for humanity. This is that we not only celebrate Jubilee, but that we also embody the ethic of its creation. To put it bluntly, Jesus says in verse 21 "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, this year, we are going to do Jubilee as it was intended. For those who were land owners and those who sought to gain their favor, this was a threat. For those who were marginalized, it was an interpretation that offered hope. In my own feeble attempt to embody the mission of the Church, I lean on the latter.

I did not always believe and act in this manner. I grew up in a, predominately Anglo, Roman Catholic Church in South Louisiana – St John Bosco. It was there that I learned to embrace the church as a worshiping community. My mission in life and as a member of the worshipping community was to keep the sacraments and to live a life without sin. The evidence of lives lived in sin were all around me. They were those caught up in a life of drugs, crime, alcohol, and poverty. We were taught that we did not have to live that way. However, we were not taught about our responsibility for changing the systemic ills that hold persons under those conditions. Individuals who spoke up to shed light on these issues were considered radical and found it difficult to find members of the worshipping community who would stand in solidarity with them for these causes of justice. The emphasis that re-formed my understanding of the Church's mission came after a reading of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter From A Birmingham Jail*. In it King writes:

> But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to

the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.[21]

While addressing the concerns of white religious leaders, King makes it clear that his cause was to fight injustice. This is not only a personal cause of his, but also reflects the true mission of the Church. As such, it is incumbent on those who embrace the Church as the hope of salvation to stand in solidarity with those whose work seeks to lift the marginalized – the least of these – and to break the chains of oppression.

I in turn embrace the Church's mission to those whose struggle it is to escape the bond of oppression and to fight injustice in all of its forms. This is not only the call on the Church, it also reveals the hope of God for humanity. With this understanding I've sought to shape my life and

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[21] Martin Luther King, Jr., African Sutdies Center – University of Pennsylvania, Accessed January 21, 2021, Letter from a Birmingham Jail [King, Jr.] (upenn.edu).

my ministry such that it reflects the image of one who stands in solidarity with the hopeless and boldly takes on systemic ills in society that hold persons in hopeless conditions.

Opening our Heart to Mental Health

The church has for far too long had a negative view of individuals who suffer from mental health issues. Mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, psychotic, or personality disorders often manifest themselves in behaviors that are cast as either sin or possession as opposed to symptoms of an underlying health issue. The relief offered from the church is usually prayer as opposed to proven professional forms of mental health treatment. If/when prayer doesn't yield desired results; we then turn to our other weapon, apathy and ostracism. Thus, we condemn the "broken" to the tombs of society leaving them void of dignity while denying their families the joy of "wholeness."

Undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues have negative consequences on the individual, the family, and the greater community. These consequences are as much financial as they are social and in many cases legal. While there are many issues that face the contemporary church today, none are greater than that of mental health. If the church is to effectively own up to her call as caregivers of the soul, she must address the dilemma with a comprehensive plan for ministry that leads to diagnosing, treating, and supporting individuals and families plagued with mental health issues.

I cannot fathom any stigma that weighs heavier on the psyche of a family unit than that left by a member of the family that suffers from some form of mental health illness. Actor and comedian Robin Williams, whom we loss to suicide, suffered from depression most of his adult life. His battle with depression was known to his family but was almost fully veiled from the

public. The comedian was known instead as a person who brought great joy and laughter to all who knew him.

What must be known is that depression is a complex physiological condition with psychological and spiritual components. It does not discriminate and cannot be constrained into a neat and tidy box. Robin's condition did not happen in a vacuum. His, like all who suffer from depression and other mental health challenges, is part of an intricate web of biological systems, including the nervous, digestive, endocrine, and respiratory systems. Approaching mental health issues with a holistic view would lead to better health in our homes, churches, and communities. It is for this reason that healing must come from a myriad of dedicated and professional sources. It is the stigma attached to such a disorder that cages its victims in the dungeons of solitude. Those who are not versed in the reality of the disease find it easy to utter – "pull out of it."

The reality is that diseases of the mind are both pervasive in society and bear a significant cost burden on our economy.

> Mental illnesses account for a larger proportion of disability in developed countries than any other group of illnesses, including cancer and heart disease. In 2004, an estimated 25% of adults in the United States reported having a mental illness in the previous year. The economic cost of mental illness in the United States is substantial, approximately $300 billion in 2002. Population surveys and surveys of health-care use measure the occurrence of mental illness, associated risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol and drug abuse) and chronic conditions, and use of mental health--related care and clinical services. Population-based surveys and surveillance systems provide much of the evidence needed to guide effective mental health promotion, mental illness prevention, and treatment programs. [22]

The awareness of mental illness within ordered society is not a recent revelation. Robert H. Albers writes: "The phenomenon of mental illness with its various manifestations is chronicled

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[22] Guerino

far back into antiquity. Papyri from ancient Egypt have described in rather graphic detail the symptoms of mental illness and the varying attempts that were made to deal with it."[23] Albers goes on to say that those who suffer from mental illness are akin to "modern-day lepers" who suffer from a socially "unsanctioned illness." Thus, they continue to be misunderstood and mistreated by society and by religion. This leads to a sense of uncleanliness weighing on the psyche of individuals and families of those individuals who suffer with mental illness. They become stigmatized by the label of the condition that besets them and fall to a being that is less than human. This fall from grace has a profound effect upon both the person and the family that "prompts a devaluation of the whole family system's sense of worth and value."[24]

There are a number of ways in which people can conceptualize particular illnesses. Anthropologist Z.J. Lipowski argues that illness can be conceptualized as "irreparable loss or damage, a value, an enemy, a challenge, a strategy, a relief, a weakness, or a punishment."[25] Lipowski demonstrates the ways in which people can define situations and attribute meaning to illness. An example would be the perspective of the family member whose loved one is suffering from severe mental illness. John Swinton notes that this "narrative is often one of irreparable damage or loss."[26] Swinton goes on to say that "from their viewpoint, the person they knew and loved, along with the dreams, hopes, and expectations that they may have had for that individual, are shattered and destroyed by the illness. In their eyes, very often the person – that is, the person they knew – is lost to the illness."

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[23] Robert H. Albers, William H. Meller, and Steven D. Thurber, eds. Ministry with Persons with Mental Illness and Their Families, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 2.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Z.J. Lipowski, Physical Illness, the Individual and the Coping Process," Psychiatry in Medicine, Vol. 1 1979: pp. 91-102.
[26] John Swinton, Resurrecting the Person, Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 62.

Historically the church has taken a somewhat darker view of the person. Christian writer Jay Adams takes the position that mental health problems are merely strategies employed by people who have a desire to avoid the admission of personal sinfulness.

> What, then, is wrong with the "mentally ill"? Their problem is autogenic; it is in themselves. The fundamental bent of fallen human nature is away from God. Man is born in sin, goes astray "from his mother's womb speaking lies" (Psalm 58:3), and will therefore naturally (by nature) attempt various sinful dodges in an attempt to avoid facing up to his sin. He will fall into varying styles of sin according to the short term successes or failures of the particular sinful responses which he makes to life's problems. Apart from organically generated difficulties, the "mentally ill" are really people with unsolved personal problems.[27]

I cannot help but to recall with shame the sermons that I have both heard and preached from Mark 5:1-13. In practically each case more attention is given to the daemon in verse 9 and the swine in verse 13 than is to the person in verse 2. This was not a "Gerasene Demoniac" as the NRSV labels him. This was a person, a citizen, a son, a father, and a brother. The church cannot continue to bear the guilt and shame of robbing persons who suffer from mental health problems of their humanity. It is also important for the church to understand the constraints that mental health problems place on a person's ability to reason.

Swinton points out that a severe mental health problem will "affect the most basic mental functions that give people their sense of personhood, individuality, uniqueness, and direction." Feelings and thoughts are disordered and lead to a person taking disordered actions. Psychotic disorders are characterized by a "distortion in the person's perception of reality, giving rise to misinterpretations of the environment in such a way that logical responses appear to fail." (Swinton

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[27] Jay E. Adams, Competent to Counsel Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 29.

64) Characterizing a person's condition as either sinful or daemonic can have disastrous adverse effects on both the person and the faith community as a whole.

At the core is the claim that the person is either at fault, (sin), or of a lesser being, (possessed). My hope for the church is that in all cases we might embrace the call to Grace and "see the person."

The act of seeing the person is inextricably tied to the act of separating the person from the illness. In other words, the religious community must be actively engaged in educating and voicing the language of mental health juxtaposed against mental ill health. Better stated, it is imperative to build avenues that open opportunity for and provide resources that empower individuals and families to pursue and obtain services and support that promote and lead to sound mental health and to advocate for policy that ceases to criminalize those who are encumbered by mental health challenges. It is of equal importance to not categorize persons with the disease that besets them.

What Questions Linger

I hope to give more attention to framing and extending an invitation for those who are resting on the margins of the work of the church to flow into the main body of the congregation. The membership at Hill Chapel expresses a deep sense of care for their neighbors and fellow members. However, that expression of care lacks potency when directed at individuals beyond our local context. I hope to develop skills at leading my congregation to a place where there is an expressed concern for the human condition of all persons. For Hill Chapel this will be a cultural shift. I intend to continue to ponder the skills, partnerships, and strategies for leading a congregation through a major cultural shift. For Hill Chapel it will be in terms of embracing the call to serve for social justice. However, for other congregations or settings that I may land, the cultural shift may be in terms of giving, worshiping, or engagement with the larger organization to which the entity belongs.

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