

THE CONFERENCE ON  
**Lived Theology and Civil Courage**



[ a collection of essays ]

**THE PROJECT ON LIVED THEOLOGY**

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**Dexter Avenue Baptist Church**  
Montgomery, AL; photographer, Peter Slade

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## [ Letter from the Director

On behalf of the Project on Lived Theology, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the Conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage at the University of Virginia. The conference is intended to build on the insights and discoveries, and the successes and failures, of the numerous collaborations between theologians, scholars of religion, pastors and activists that have taken place during the past three years, even as it opens up the conversation to a distinguished group of guest speakers and friends of the Project. We are hopeful that the lectures, seminars and small group sessions of these two and a half days will refresh your work as scholar and activist, reenergize your commitment to peacemaking and reconciliation, and illuminate new possibilities for the shared work of theologian, religious scholar and practitioner.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer described civil courage as the conviction of authentic faith worked out in the midst of worldly complexity. He writes, "The important thing is that we should have come to look with new eyes at matters great and small, at sorrow and joy, strength and weakness, that our perceptions of generosity, humanity, justice and mercy should have become clearer, free, less corruptible." It is our belief that the theological life as a form of public responsibilities requires a disciplined and thoughtful attunement to the patterns and practices of lived experience and is always situated amidst the complexities of social existence.

In this letter of welcome and introduction to the conference, I wish to make two contributions toward our work together: (1) to clarify *the Project's main purposes* and (2) to sketch *ten key insights and discoveries*. I offer these contributions as a way of framing the thoughtful responses by the project's participants that follow in this booklet.

## [ What is the purpose of the Project on Lived Theology?

The *purpose* of the Project on Lived Theology is to understand the way theological convictions shape the patterns and practices of particular Christian communities. The Project is based on the rationale that the everyday patterns and practices of particular Christian communities, specifically in their varied displays of compassionate action in service to others and in building peaceful communities, offer rich material for theological inquiry. These patterns and practices are not just ways of “doing things” (as Wayne Meeks has written in one of his studies of early Christian communities), but they are also ways of “saying things”; practices and patterns are “communicative”. We believe that, properly interpreted, these practices and patterns are communicative not only of a Christian community’s collective self-understanding but of God and God’s purposes for humankind.

The Project further endeavors to demonstrate the importance of theological ideas—of confessional and doctrinal commitments—in the public conversation about civic responsibility and social progress. In this manner, the Project has sought to create a space where theologians and scholars with theological sensibilities can work together with pastors and activists in understanding the theological character and depth of Christian communities, and to do so not simply as a pleasing academic exercise but for the purpose of communicating this understanding in analytically instructive and morally edifying ways. We are excited by the prospect that our modest efforts have encouraged a new generation of theologians and religious scholars to embrace theological life as a form of public discipleship and to illuminate models of a more integrated relationship between theologian and Christian practitioner than may currently exist.

## [ What are the insights gained and the discoveries made in the Project?

The ten key insights and discoveries can be summarized as follows:

1. As it developed in breadth, detail and complexity, the Project discovered that its task is not necessarily that of transforming theology into a practical discipline but of understanding the diverse ways theological convictions and commitments in their inner logic aspire toward lived expression and of bringing historical and sociological knowledge of communities into this task. The matter of a Christian social philosophy and sociology is a genuinely theological one, because it can be finally answered only on the basis of an understanding of the religious community, its proclamations and practices. If genuinely theological concepts can best be recognized as established and fulfilled in a social context, then it becomes clear that a social understanding of the church has a specifically theological character.
2. We discovered that Christian community-building and organizing as a social movement must be properly and finally understood in a different light than that provided by social sciences, although sociological description and social theory may supplement and complement theology’s task. Theology must attend to a depth, detail and significance of social existence that often elude sociological description. Theology’s different light is cast from a properly theological hermeneutic, which must show that any human social movement has as its final source, determination and goal the eschatological presence of the Kingdom of God.
3. Further, the Project discovered that the Christian theological tradition contains the resources for a reliable interpretation of the church’s socio-economic and cultural contexts. As lived theology, the challenges of

community building—housing and economic development and the renewal of civic infrastructures—offer stories that can be observed, reflected upon, and received as parables of the Kingdom. Particularly important to our investigations were grassroots communities of faith that pray and read scripture together, while working to ensure decent lives for their neighbors and showing hospitality to strangers. “A life of hospitality is much less about dramatic gestures than it is about steady work...undergirded by prayer and sustained by grace,” writes workgroup member Christine Pohl. In many respects, the future of a vibrant public theology lies in the lessons gleaned from congregations committed to community building and reconciliation, congregations that, “intentionally embody the habits, practices, and convictions of the peaceable reign of God in concrete localities,” explains workgroup director Mark Gornik.

4. We rediscovered the “servant-like” nature of Christian theology and scholarship and the deeply problematic nature of constructing theologies independent of lived experience. By listening and working together across a myriad of disciplinary boundaries, we were able to hear, see, touch and tell of the eschatological presence of the kingdom of God’s peace. In this manner, we discovered that the lived theological practice of the church helps to reshape the agenda of theology and clarify the role played by theologians and religious scholars in the academy and church. The work of lived theology shows theologians and theological students that *to do theology* means to take upon us in grace and gratitude not only the proximate challenges of our immediate situation, but indeed the whole situation of our era, and in grace and gratitude to enter into the complexities of the era and assume a responsible role in the church’s mission in the world.
5. We discovered that the challenges and difficulties of Christian community building offer its leaders and participants a daily education in the eschatological character of Christian social action. A realized eschatology is unlikely to be found in communities of distress and exclusion; and at the same time, any sort of otherworldly or etherealized piety is tempered by the futural hope implicit in all compassionate action. Christian community building, including the work of racial reconciliation, chastens both utopian aspirations and Gnostic detachment. Christian community building, including the work of racial reconciliation, nourishes the proper kind of realism expected of those who inhabit a created order groaning after wholeness. The workgroups discovered that initiatives in Christian community building offer vivid accounts of the way Christians bear witness to the promise of redemption “in the between times” and of the way this promise forms us as communities of forgiveness and reconciliation, communities that do not simply symbolize but make present, in a real though not exhaustive way, the Kingdom of God.
6. With specific attention to the church-based racial reconciliation movement in America, we discovered that the Protestant church in North America will continue to face frustration in its endeavors, not primarily for the most commonly cited reasons—that “racial reconciliation for the sake of the Gospel” fails to consider the way human sinfulness distorts not only individual relations but also social and economic structures—but because the Protestant church in America lacks a vision of what a reconciled community looks like and is thus unable to move beyond sentiment to real change. Racial reconciliation must be relearned by the church as a kind of ascetic discipline, as a “training in longing” in St. Augustine’s words.
7. We discovered that an appreciation for the history of Christian involvement in excluded and distressed communities helps us rediscover the value of theological categories such as creation, fall, and redemption. While

the experience of exclusion can foster false narratives of human dignity, the exposure of these false narratives to a living and socially enacted Biblical counter-narrative of peace and plenty can restore hope to the lives of the underprivileged. Of course, this discovery illuminates the way in which the meaningfulness and efficacy of “faith-based initiatives” is essentially and irrevocably ecclesial and theological.

8. We learned that while the question of power remains problematic in Christian faith and practice, Christian community builders and organizers have reckoned in especially intense and thoughtful ways with the proper understanding and use of power (and the powers) in social existence. Workgroup member Russell Jeung offered a helpful five fold understand of power based on his work in community organizing in Oakland, California:
  - A. The power of God ushered in through daily prayer, listening, waiting and watching what God will do on behalf of the people;
  - B. The power of compassion described by Henri Nouwen as “going to places where suffering is most acute and building a home there”;
  - C. The power of reconciliation, which overcomes cultural differences in personal and group relationships but which may also be seen through the lawsuit efforts of the Oak Park Community;
  - D. The power of narrative, which gives voice to what would otherwise remain hidden and which leads to constructive action;
  - E. The power of righteousness which confidently militates against injustice.

The proper use of power must also reckon with the tension ingredient in all Christian community building of how the other can be loved in confrontational action without vilification or humiliation.

9. In the context of the Congregation and City Workgroup, with its local focus and participation, we discovered that the work of lived theology overflows the conventional boundaries of academic theology; indeed that writing and performing ‘lived theology’ may help foster a shared space in which to peacefully negotiate the complexities and tensions of divided and fractured locales. We discovered that faithful theological inquiry of the patterns and practices of Christian communities asks after the good of those whom it engages and moves always toward the real exchanges, transactions and challenges of persons created in the image of God.
10. Finally, we discovered that theology is storied in “a multiplicity of ways,” as Mark Gornick has said, and that this multiplicity attests to theology’s interdisciplinary concerns. Every Christian community illustrates a unique theological drama, which may be gleaned for insights and lessons. We concluded that lived theology might be considered a probing and careful narration of life inside the movement of God in the social world. Lived theology seeks to foreground the particularities of lived experience and to expand theological reflection to include the wisdom of these experiences. Further, lived theology seeks to illuminate the pathway between reflection and action although not in order to belittle the contributions of philosophical, systematic and doctrinal theological knowledge, or to assert the banal claim that academic theologians live in an ivory tower, but rather to show that God’s purposes are always directed toward the concrete historical person in community. The patterns and practices of Christian community are an essential part of faithful theology. Thus realization of God’s will in the form of Christian community engenders a distinctive social structure: the opening of God’s own heart *in* community. Lived theology’s task is a difficult but critical one, as it must avoid identifying any particular social movement with the Kingdom, and yet in each instance locate social existence inside the story of God’s movement in time and history in Jesus Christ, which cuts through all other movements for human flourishing and social healing “as their

hidden sense and motor, the movement of God’s history” .

I hope these interpretive remarks—which have certainly run too long—help to make our days together as productive, enjoyable and refreshing as the many gatherings and meetings of the past three years.

Thank for you so very much for your willingness to take part in this exciting theological event.

Charles Marsh

## LIVED THEOLOGY AND COMMUNITY BUILDING



"Stop Violence, Build Peace" Banner, Delores Mission  
Los Angeles, CA; photographer, Charles Marsh

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**Manuel Vasquez**

Associate Professor of Religion (University of Florida)

**Heather Warren**

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## [ Wallace Best

I must come clean about my initial thoughts regarding the Project on Lived Theology. Truthfully, I cannot say that I took it very seriously at first. What was “lived” theology anyway? I had heard nuances of theological terminology batted about for most of my adult life. The possibilities of what “lived” theology could mean were very wide. It could mean a great deal of things, or nothing at all. I was leaning toward the latter possibility. But the chair of the department of religious studies at the University of Virginia waxed eloquent about the Project in his effort to recruit me, and I wanted to make a strong impression on him in return. After our discussion, I told him I had a deep desire to participate in the Project. I even suggested (indirectly and ever so carefully) that my long-term happiness in the department could be contingent upon my involvement with it. My responses were a little dishonest given my inherent distrust of most theological frameworks and programs, but it seemed the thing to say in order to fully express my interest in the position at Virginia. Then I read Charles Marsh’s proposal to the Lilly Endowment. In the freshest theological language I had read in a long time, he not only explained the meaning of “lived” theology, but also gave an impassioned call for it as “a new paradigm for public theology in America.” Marsh advocated for an embodiment of “civil courage” in the tradition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr. But this was no ordinary theological framework or call to Christian service. Nor was it directed to the usual suspects. Basing his thinking on the assumption that there exists (or should exist) a vibrant relationship between theology and quotidian experience, Marsh called for a connection between theological or academic communities and communities of practitioners. At this nexus of relationship and interdependency, and perhaps only at this nexus, could the ideals of Scripture and the vision of great leaders like King and Bonhoeffer become fully realized. I had unintentionally stumbled into something that resonated with my long-held conviction about the existence of destructive and socially constructed polarities between those who *do* theology and those who attempt to *make theological sense* of the world by service.

Over the course of two years, I came across a richly diverse group of people who taught me much about my life and work by showing me their lives. My initial inclination that I, as a historian, had little to offer and even less to gain quickly dissipated while on our trips to New York City and Los Angeles, California. I saw people who lived with such abandon that it was nearly frightening. Whether it was defying civic authorities to build affordable housing for the poor, or sheltering Hispanic immigrants in the anti-rooms of a church. I wanted to say it was courage that drove them, but it was something more than courage and something simpler. It was a sense that life is service. Everywhere we went on those tours I got the impression that the practitioners did what they did not because they had to do it, but because it must be done. They acted not out of duty of compulsion, but out of calling. Not a special, particularistic calling, but that calling which we all have as a result of our awareness of the world’s needs. I learned from them that all are called to service and that all occupations must be viewed as service. Whatever our work, it can be in service to the higher ideals of a justice and equality that extends indiscriminately to all sectors of society. Perhaps one works in vain who doesn’t strive for this.

My initial response that as a historian I had little to gain or offer reflected my complacency. I realize that now. My encounter with the practitioners, activists, and pastors reminded me of the public nature of my work as a writer and university professor. My responsibility is not exclusively to the past (this is where I feel safest), it is also to the present and to the future. As one in the public I have a voice. It is a voice I can use in the “responsible shaping of the world,” as Marsh puts it. And as one who teaches African American religion, my chances for encouraging and promoting true social change are even greater. If the history of the black church in America has taught us anything, it is that, in the words of Martin King, “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” So, I take from my encounters with the groups we met that my aim should expand beyond simply to educate. I must participate, and yes, even agitate. This is

life and life is service. In my research and writing, particularly, I have a renewed commitment to “public history.” (I’d like to think I had some of this before my time with the Project.) In the field of history we have our own philosophical polarities, between the theorists and the empiricists; the intellectual historians and the social historians; the history of “dead white guys” and histories “from below.” I’d like to do history that is an accurate reflection of the past. But I’d like to do that in such a way that it is both accessible and relevant. The academy is my world, but I do not write exclusively *for* it any more than I write *about* it. I write about ordinary people living their lives in plain and simple ways. This is who I’d like to reach with the fruit of my research.

I will never be an activist or a pastor, and I’m not sure I could ever call myself a “practitioner” with any amount of conviction. What I’ve learned over the past two years from those who call themselves by these terms, however, makes me see that the distinctions between us are insignificant. But if we view society as a community to which we all share a great responsibility, our similarities are truly striking.

I.1. Engaging the practitioners greatly informed my own understanding of my research in several critical and interconnected ways. First, I perceived from our interactions with these representatives the critical need to integrate discussions of spirituality and lived theologies with social analysis of community life and practice. The times that we spent with various activists and religious leaders underscored the relationship between theological understandings and paradigms with social systems and intentional group behavior. The engagements fully convinced me of what I had at least hypothesized before our visits, that the self-chosen theological worldview of a community greatly impacts and shapes its subsequent community structure, along with its purposes and goals. These structures, which have come into being because of these theological self-understandings, in turn impact social behaviors and intentions, leading to clear ethical trajectories of action and social policies. These trajectories, in their own way then, further confirm and reinforce the theological vision of the communities, creating a kind of systemic sense of the relationship between social practice and theological belief. Seeking to discover the links, therefore, between theological vision and social structure and practice can be illuminating in any research project, whether its purpose is to clarify the sense of the community's vision or to better understand how some discrete practice correlates to its theology.

A second way in which our engagements affected my understanding of my theological research is how they reinforced the need to eradicate untenable dichotomies between theological reflection and social scientific discussion. I am not certain if we encountered a single activist, religious leader, or practitioner who did not understand their responses to a particular social need or issue as a result of their deeply-held theological belief. This is significant considering the breadth of issues and concerns addressed in the various organizations and churches we attended. While the need exists for researchers like myself to express genuine care in assessing the links between the theological affirmations and convictions of a community and their correlative ethical and social practices, to discover links is not only practical but necessary. The only way in which these could be severed is that the researcher ignored the transparently given rationale of most of the practitioners regarding *why* they were engaging a particular situation, as well as *how* they approached it. In all the cases we observed both the *why* and the *how* were grounded in theological affirmations and convictions. This phenomena opens the door for needed research in these areas that could “connect the dots,” so to speak, in reaching an ever greater precision in associating practices of theological communities with social analytical models and structures. Our visits underscored for me clearly the validity of analyzing the lived experience of religious communities from their own theological point of view, looking for moments of congruence and/or dissonance between the belief system and the actual social practices and behaviors of the community.

Above all else, our visits showed me the plausibility of the idea that, whether it is entirely possible to map out the precise relationship between a community's theological worldview and its social engagements, there can be no doubt that religious communities operate *as if* a correlation between the two not only exists but guides their actions. Any attempt to sever a religious community's initiatives for compassion, justice, and the seeking of social goods *from* their theological paradigms and convictions would, in the group's mind at least, seem odd, futile, and foolish. The engagements we had as a group underscored the need to analyze these kinds of religious communities in holistic ways, not abstracting their theological conviction from their social practice, but rather, inducing their theological conviction from their actual practices, and observing how and where the belief and the practice connected. We do this not with a motive to pass judgment on a theological community's worldview, but more clearly to demonstrate the connection between their worldview and their practice, and through this research to open the door to understand how these connections help us grasp the complex social web of religion, social practice, and lived theology in society today.

II.2. The idea that any community's practices might be communicative not only of its own self-understanding but of God and God's purposes is intriguing and dangerous. It is intriguing in that most religious communities assert that God is at once present and active in the midst of its collective relationships and actions. It is dangerous in the sense that many communities, armed and buttressed with this kind of confidence, have practiced great evil all under the guise that their actions were communicative of God and God's purposes. While it is possible to prove the correlation theologically, they can only seldom be sustained with the greatest of care, reservation, and qualification.

In one sense, the ability of any group to claim complete coincidence between its own form of practices and God purposes for humankind is problematic, for a number of reasons. More than likely such a claim would be modified or softened, but if made, would be closely tied a group's meaning of “God's purposes of humankind.” Perhaps we could make headway by suggesting that most groups would be more comfortable with language that emphasized connection of their practices to God without claiming absolute synchronicity with the divine. In other words, most would say that their actions were “inspired,” “informed,” even “moved” by their understanding of God and God's purposes. Informed by God's purposes for humankind in scripture and tradition, groups would seek therefore to engage in certain patterns of living and practices all designed to communicate a *possible* connection to their understanding of God and God's purposes, and not seek to demonstrate *the* connection.

This augmentation of the argument would certainly help, but it does not solve the problem, however. The group would have to establish a viable, recognized, and defensible criteria of what constitutes a pattern's or action's resonance with the divine. Such a claim, to be valid, would have to show how a group's social practices represented a clear theological vision of God and God's purposes. This could only be done through theological argument, where the community sought to show how God demands and mandates were reflected in its experience and social practice.

Of course, we know historically how various communities have struggled in vain in this quest. Neither will it be an easy task to adjudicate among the conflicting claims of religious communities how their particular positions, responses, and actions might correlate to equally compelling claims of their interlocutors! Such conversations could become unanswerable and even ludicrous; does God side with group A or group B in regard to their conflicting practices, say, in regard to the condition of the homeless in X community? Both claim to be of God; both want to resolve the problem effectively but differ dramatically in their proposals of how to do so. In support of their claims, both offer proof-texts from scripture, testimonials from theologians, case citations from tradition, and arguments from reason and logic. Whose case “wins the day” regarding God's purposes largely depends on the audience hearing the cases!

This reveals the patent danger of ideological blindness in any discussions of religious justification of social practice. Sad to say, many religious practices, even those done by those who deeply respect human dignity and value, simply mirror the opinion of the powerful and the decision-makers of society. As an African-American theologian, I am appalled at how many white colleagues dismissed the great issues of the Civil Rights era as being either irrelevant or unimportant to systematic, dogmatic, or philosophical theological reflection in the academy. If liberation theology has done anything, it has unmasked the pretense of complete objectivity in the making and consideration of theological claims. Since all are historically-informed and conditioned, both *which* theological projects we select and *how* we handle them are somewhat influenced by our enculturation. This applies to groups as well. It appears the argument will turn on how a group defines its criteria for God and God's purposes, and what evidences and warrants underwrite its view of which practices reveal them. In ways that resonate with Alasdair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?*, I would

## [ Mark R. Gornik

argue that any community asserting that its practices coincide with God must provide access to its criteria for such a consideration, with evidence and reasoning for all to consider. From a Christian viewpoint, the answer relates to how a group could legitimately claim to be members of the Church, which serves as agent of God's purposes in the world.

In other words, those who believe from scripture and tradition that the Church of God represents God and God's purposes in the world, a group would have to provide 1) a sense that they are a historical instantiation of the Church, and 2) a rationale that their actions represent the kinds of practices which reveal God's purposes. This is not necessarily an easy task; for not every group claiming connection to the Church has one, nor are all of the actions of any group that is of the Church communicative of God and God's purposes. Such a claim would be sustained only if a group answers satisfactorily the *identity* question (are they truly of the Church) as well as the *expression* question (do our actions constitute God's communicative action in this instance).

Ultimately, any group making such claims must show coincidence of their practice to historically-orthodox understandings of authentic Christian responses. No group claiming connection could argue their absolute originality; rather, it seems more likely they would say that their actions line up with other authentic Christian practice. Christians of all ages and venues have sought to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God. A link would be shown between *their* actions and that of the broader Christian orthodox practice.

In summary, correlating our actions with God's and God's purposes ultimately depends on our ability to define God's intentions in the world, and our capacity to identify our connections via our actions to them. This is possible but it seems profoundly difficult as well.

**I.2.** From the standpoint of an activist or pastor, theologians and religious scholars have enormous and exciting resources to contribute to the task of community building, organizing and reconciliation. In fact, I consider the potential contribution of scholars to grassroots work to be highly significant.

I can think of many examples from my participation in the Project on Lived Theology. Steve Fowl's reflections on scripture and community are profoundly helpful in enhancing the character of discipleship. Omar McRoberts and Manuel Vasquez open up wonderful links to social theory as it relates to the practice of faith. Christine Pohl's reading of hospitality provides context, stories, and challenge. Charles Marsh's work on the civil rights movement can inspire to recover stories and events that may provide guides for today. Heather Warren's historical precedents helped to frame "faith-based" proposals. Gerald Schlabach provided more good reasons to recover Augustine, and reminded us of Yoder's urban missiological possibilities. Shawn Copeland's thoughts on the cross and discipleship provide much for thought and action. These are but just a few of the people in the project who, through their scholarship, have helped me sustain and grow in my call.

However, my perspective (offered here from a local/practitioner view) also offers cautions on the approach of scholars and theologians. If theology is really lived, then we must begin with respect and honor for what local groups are doing. Scholars and theologians will not always have the right answers to the social challenges facing local communities. Indeed, the opposite may be true. Too many crucial experiences and perspectives will be lacking. Theological reflection at the local level must be honored for its own integrity and agency. This provides a basis for how scholars can be challenged to learn.

Let me pick up some of the language of Wayne Meeks from one of the questions Charles provided. If distinctively Christian communities and social initiatives are "saying things," then what they are saying emerges out of experience and reflection. That is, such activities are theological statements. Therefore it seems to me important to hear what is being said on its own terms before making the jump to critique or offering alternatives. Thus the offering of *descriptions* or *readings* of lived theology will be an important contribution.

One key way, it seems to me, religious scholars and theologians can make contributions is by helping activist/pastors make *connections*. For example, this can be a connection to a text, a theory, a writer, a history. What is done with this can provide feedback to the scholar/theologian, thus making the process dialogical. I see this as opening potentially profound resources for activists and pastors.

Theologians and religious scholars can also contribute by *sharing* in the journey of grassroots churches and movements. Being alongside, listening, encouraging, (perhaps even praying) are some marks of how this might work. If critical reflection is to take place, then this is the relational foundation.

In summary, I am lifting up the practice of scholarship not just as service in the work of shalom, but humble service on behalf of shalom. Thus embraced, learning and scholarship may find itself encountering new and unforeseen opportunities.

**II.3.** As I have sought to indicate in a variety of ways, the Project on Lived Theology has confirmed and challenged my attempt to give reason for the living hope I see present in the inner city. To do so, I have endeavored to display how

## [ Stephen Fowl

theological commitments are embodied in one particular community and shape a way of life that engages exclusionary urban realities. It was a joy to have New Song a part of the story of learning that the Project involved. Critical reflection as offered by group members was important. Thinking about community-based work in light of that taking place in other urban settings was a means of personal growth and development.

The timing of my involvement in the project could not have been better for my research. For, in my current study of African Churches in New York City, “lived theology” serves as an important if not central form of description.

The tools African churches provide that enable people to negotiate the pressures of globalization can certainly be described in social and cultural terms. But it is also imperative to conduct research on African churches in ways that listen to their own stories and to seek to understand theological convictions that they embody. While “listening” is inescapably interpretive, it is possible (at least in part) to faithfully recount stories of theology enacted and lived.

African churches, understood on their own terms, are narratives that in some form have at their center the worship of God, the life of prayer, the direct presence of the Spirit, and the practice of witness. Narrated by African churches, their common life, mission activity, and economic views cannot be told apart from embodied and basic beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit. Religious thought and life are not, for African Christians, reducible to simply cultural practices, but commitments believed to be warranted by the shape of the universe and the revelation of God. Bracketing out religion will greatly reduce our ability to understand African Christianity on its own terms, thus losing sight of crucial resources that are at work and missing profound transformations related to mission and migration.

An example of the way beliefs shape communities is found in the “new Charismatic/Pentecostal” churches, the fastest growing churches in Africa. Analysts have been quick to label such churches as carriers of Western prosperity doctrine. Yet on closer examination, African Charismatic/Pentecostal churches may instead be creating distinctively African expressions of economic life. Certainly Charismatic/Pentecostal churches can be placed on a spectrum of beliefs related to materiality and spirituality, but as the Nigerian scholar Matthews Ojo notes, “piety and power” are perhaps two themes more prevalent. Rather than see the themes of piety and power as Western imports, they may be viewed as theological commitments that distinctively respond to the context and form out of locally developed questions. Certainly dimensions of appropriation will be in play, but that is common to all theological construction.

As African Charismatic/Pentecostal churches have traveled to New York, it is clear that doctrinal beliefs have deeply impacted the journey and the processes of community formation. Piety and power become ways of engaging the city and making a way in the global context. Through theological commitments of diverse expression, African churches (Pentecostal and other types as well) in general provide a significant setting for the formation of identity and the meeting of basic human needs. I think their experience can speak to all of us.

Participation in the Project on Lived Theology enabled me to bring a sense of methodological justification and clarity to my work. In a sense then I would argue that the Project introduces a foundational dimension of mission study – understanding and description of what is taking place in the global church. If narrative describes the way in which churches form their identity and engage the world, then narrative must also be a basic tool for theological/missiological reflection. This essential insight is one of the many gifts that Charles Marsh and the Project on Lived Theology provided me.

**I.1.** In the light of visiting a variety of community development projects in diverse contexts, it can be tempting to think that my research should aim to be of greater and more direct service to such practitioners and activists. I am, however, inclined to resist such temptation. It did not seem to be the case that practitioners and activists were averse to thinking theologically about what they do (though some were). Instead, what struck me was the very limited utility my writing might have in helping with their specific problems of community development. This is not because the people we visited were unread. Rather, they knew their situations better than I ever could. If I could contribute at all to their work it would be through writing that would help them think theologically in any context and thus help them think theologically about the contexts they know so well. In short, scholarly writing that could contribute to the formation of theologically dense practical reasoning would be of the greatest significance in these contexts.

In addition, while I learned much from our site visits, I often felt like an academic tourist. This may have been unavoidable. It did reinforce a sense I have that the work of theologians can best help shape and be shaped by the work of community activists to the extent that the theologian develops a lived familiarity with a specific context and is willing to converse with local practitioners/activists over the long haul about the mission and embodiment of any particular project. The theological book, or article, or consultancy, may have some limited utility. A longer sustained engagement between theologian and practitioner will help practitioners become better theologians and help theologians become better practitioners.

In this respect my engagements with practitioners/activists in the course of our group meetings will probably not have a direct impact on my research. Instead, those engagements recalled and reinforced lessons I have learned (and often forgotten) about living as a Christian, and the ways in which my particular gifts can be offered back to God through the body of Christ in the specific contexts in which I normally find myself.

**II.1.** This is a rather long and complex question. In part, I am unsure what a “distinctive social structure” is. The Church is a distinctive social structure. If that is where the question is leading, then, in addressing the question, it seems important at the outset to indicate that the distinctive social structure of the Church does not directly stem from the fact that holding theological convictions entails that one embody certain practice – though this is true. The distinctive social structure of the Church is most directly dependent on the identity of the God to whose praise and service the Church is dedicated.

In this light, the claim that Christian community engenders a distinctive social structure is relatively less important than the qualities of a Christian community’s attentiveness to the Triune God in worship, prayer and action.

Without question, proper attention to God entails numerous practices, one of which is participation in the body of Christ. One of the primary ways of understanding the body of Christ is as a polity ruled and directed by the crucified and resurrected Christ, whose Spirit enlivens and directs the members of the Body of Christ within the various contexts in which they find themselves. Thus, the Body of Christ cannot help but be a social body. Moreover, the practices entailed by Christian convictions are often, if not primarily, communal practices. These practices are distinctive because of the distinctive nature of Christian convictions about God, the world and God’s desires and plans for the world decisively displayed in Christ. The Church is that body where these convictions are articulated, shaped and shaped by Christian practice. That such a situation would engender a distinctive social structure is not really surprising. What is surprising is that it so often does not.

## [ Amy Laura Hall

I did not want to go to Los Angeles. First, I hate flying. I particularly hate flying long distances, suspended for hours with peanuts and strangers. Second, I assumed that I would hate L.A., that Babylonian birthplace of breast implants and Mickey Mouse. Finally, I had to leave my daughter, and I was certain that God would pick that particular weekend to throw California into the ocean. That does not say much for my faith, I know. The wonderful love of my blessed redeemer quite simply malfunctions at certain points, and I was not so very happy. But our workgroup was exceptionally gracious and engaged, and so, grumbling, I consoled myself that I would see them again.

I arrived in the city ready to find many reasons for proclaiming the imminent — about forty days would work, give me time to get out — demise of that iniquitous region. I expected superficial people, desperate poverty, and really tacky billboards. What I discovered was a city where grace and curse are so intertwined as to preclude a simple call for purification. And who the hell was I, anyway, to predict the need for such a call?

Our initial site visit threw most of us off-kilter. We visited First AME, or FAME, for short. Indeed. While sitting in their hospitality space, I cringed at the prominently displayed picture of the senior pastor embracing Michael Eisner. Doesn't that just say it all? Christianity and Hollywood, together in a deceptively happy world forever and ever. But, as a wasp/yuppie/Gen X/BoBo, was I allowed to cringe? Was my concern aesthetic, or theological, or both? As our group discussed FAME, their impressive economic initiatives, and their glitzy image, we danced around our discomfort, wondering what in the world to make of their entrepreneurial efforts, and whether a group of over-privileged academics had the capacity or license to evaluate what was going on there after a two hour look-around. Probably not.

After very little sleep, unadjusted to the new time, we went to a Roman Catholic parish in Boyle Heights, Delores Mission. Internally besieged by gangs and daily worn by poverty, the neighborhood parishioners extend material hospitality to the new immigrants who arrive there. In the midst of what many have deemed to be a government-subsidized failure, a small parish offers nightly showers, meals, and pews to the men who travel there to make money to send home. Compared to the sturdy initiatives of FAME, the efforts of the Delores Mission seemed dangerously precarious. The lack of Disney authorized fortification was palpable, but the blessing more real for the fragility.

The parishioners at Young Nak Presbyterian Church had the capacity to leave the poor neighborhood surrounding their church, and they did. The Latino families who moved in then became their neighbors. Astounding to this member of a diminishing downtown church — which still idolizes the fabulous fifties — was the fact that the Korean-American children there are learning Spanish, as well as Korean. Rather than build up walls around their church facilities, in order better to preserve their heritage and their hides, Young Nak has encouraged its members to learn the native tongue of the surrounding peoples. The pastors and laity negotiate a complicated matrix of service to the multiple generations of immigrants and citizens and outsiders.

Given the constraints of time and prior commitment, we were merely to glance at these communities, to take away glimpses of grace and of potential error. Ours was a physically safe and morally risky kind of tourism, dipping into the lives of complicated congregations, wondering what then we were to make of them. I have a suspicion that our befuddlement was appropriate. We were not to “make” of them. We were perhaps rather to wonder at the work God is doing completely apart from our own efforts to write and assess true theology/sociology/hermeneutics/ethics/policy. The LA working-holiday was characteristic of the unsettling visits we had with one another for four weekends. If we had spent more than three days in each area, say, three weeks, I might have cultivated a sense of learning and eventual

mastery of the subject assigned “Lived Theology and Community Building.” As it was, I was repeatedly struck by my incapacity to evaluate. God was already doing a new thing, and a vastly more intricate thing than I'd supposed, in Nineveh.

It is terribly trite, but possibly nonetheless true, that visiting elsewhere gives you a new perspective on home. I came back home with a new suspicion of my vocation. My very limited engagement with the practitioners, activists, and pastors in New York, LA, and Charlottesville made me realize more saliently that real community building requires deep reserves of humility and patience, and time. The theological academy rarely rewards or grants such. Encouraged to remain in my office and write, swiftly write, about the distinctively holy practices of “the church,” may I not in fact get it all wrong? Does the endeavor not also require that I be in the messy mix of a neighborhood, a congregation and, sometimes hardest of all, a family? I continue to return to Mark Gornik's entry into Baltimore, not knowing what he was going to do, or whether he was going to be able to do anything useful. He had to spend years in Sandtown, listening, sitting still, being “unproductive,” and learning the contours of God's work there before he was capable of ministry. What was arguably the least effective ministry we visited was beset by a leader who came in, assessed, and sought to implement. May my work not be more of the same.

## [ Omar M. McRoberts

**I.1.** My entire involvement with the Project, and particularly those opportunities we had to engage with practitioners and activists, helped me to make sense of what I had been struggling to produce as a sociologist of religion. Prior to my encounter with the Project, I had never encountered the term “lived theology,” nor had I found such an expansive space in the social scientific world to discuss with others the “inner logics” of faith as it is lived in religious community. I was somewhat familiar with the topography of formal theology. This, however, proved only vaguely useful as I struggled to interpret and present the stories of life in faith that I was gathering in a poor, African-American neighborhood in Boston called Four Corners. A few exceptional ethnographic works in the sociology of religion pointed me in auspicious directions, but much of the social scientific literature was concerned with *causality*: that is, which religious ideas cause which behavior in the world, or in retreat from the world as the case may be. The cause-oriented model of theorizing and research is important in its own right, but given the kind of work I wanted to do, it proved lacking on two fronts. First, it tends to downplay the role of the agent in crafting his or her own faith in the midst of life’s exigencies. Faith is conceived more as a set of tenets that one may either accept or reject. The struggle of faith, the bootstrap *paradox* of faith, is all but lost in the linear logic of causality. Second, this kind of work tends to reify the categories of action and non-action, worldliness and otherworldliness, in ways that actually miss much of what religious people take themselves to be doing. Most of the churches I studied in Four Corners might be called “otherworldly” by many social scientific standards, and by much liberal theologizing as well, but according to the inner logics of faith among people *in* those churches, there could be nothing worldlier than their multifarious modes of manifesting Godliness. In this sense, those who called themselves “secular” and “worldly” were in fact the otherworldly ones, since they avoided being touched by the most potent force operating *in* the world: Spirit. Insights into lived religiosity such as these grew more frequent and intense as my involvement with the Project continued, and as I worked on the book that grew out of the Four Corners study, *Streets of Glory*. Ultimately, and partly as a result of the remarkable conversations and sense-making sessions I participated in during the Project, the book would aspire to a certain groundedness in people’s lived religiosities that would put both formal theology and cause-oriented sociology into proper perspective.

**II.2** My first reaction to this question was to pose a counter-question: Christian community engenders a social structure distinctive *from what?* If we suppose that Christian community creates something distinctive from a broader secular Western culture, we should also recall that organized Christianity had much to do with inventing the latter, and continues to exert great influence over it even (and perhaps especially) in the post establishment United States. If, for example, the classical sociologist Max Weber is correct, then a certain form of Calvinist Christian community had everything to do with the emergence of American capitalism (see his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*). A more pressing question for the Project, I think, is whether there are forms of religious community that stand out *within the broader Christian field* because of their capacity for justice (both internally and in engagement with a “world” full of injustice), compassion, inclusion, prophetic witness, and openness to ongoing debate about the content and purpose of institutionalized religion. In other words, perhaps the work of the Project has not been so much about Christian community in general (with an emphasis on the mere possibility of “community” versus “chaos”). Perhaps this has been about uncovering and lifting up those varieties of Christian togetherness that challenge a *fetish* of community (as it appears in both secular and religious realms) which squelches social critique, denies difference, silences good-faith debate, and justifies injustice in the name of unity and order. This kind of discernment is undoubtedly more difficult than simply drawing a distinction between Christian community and other kinds of social structure. It assumes that Christian forms of community are themselves deeply pluralistic in form, and acknowledges without apology that some forms of Christian community are deeply problematic. It then takes the further step of seeking out the conditions under which authentically liberating expressions of Christian faith are emerging. This in turn implies a good deal of struggle over the definition of “authentically liberating.” I believe, nonetheless, that this is the work that the various subgroups of the Project have been doing all along.

## [ Christine Pohl

**I.1.** I was a practitioner and activist before I became part of the academy. The moral dilemmas I encountered in the process of trying to “do” good propelled me toward the academic study of Christian social ethics. The challenges Christians face, as we attempt to live out our theology, remain the most interesting to me—both intellectually and morally.

*The Lived Theology and Community-Building Workgroup* provided a space within which to reflect on some of these challenges from multiple perspectives. The experience reinforced my convictions that the best theological discussion occurs at the juncture of theory and practice and that sustained conversations among practitioners and academics are essential to the health of the church. Projects like *Lived Theology* help both parties see how fruitful such interactions can be.

Several conclusions resulting from our discussions and our visits to sites of faith-based community-building in New York, Los Angeles, and Charlottesville will inform my on-going research:

1. Theologians and ethicists should engage living communities with the same energy, respect, and academic rigor we usually reserve for written texts. The commitments and practices of such communities provide rich resources for theological and moral reflection. To do this well, theologians and ethicists need to learn some of the basic tools of social research.
2. Our conversations with practitioners were very illuminating. Reflecting on particular community practices with academics from multiple disciplines was similarly helpful. Our workgroup benefited greatly from the insights of the various participants—insights that grew out of our different areas of experience and specialization (sociology, theology, Bible, ethics, church history). Whereas my previous work on hospitality benefited from one-to-one conversations with practitioners, sessions with the *Lived Theology Group* persuaded me that group discussion about specific practices is also very valuable. These observations have led to a distinctive structuring of the research for my next book on “practices that make and break community.” The research will be shaped by a three-year conversation with a small group of pastors, leaders of intentional communities, and theological school faculty. Much of the basis for our on-going theological discussion will be provided by the participants themselves and will be drawn from descriptions they provide of specific incidents in ministry. Thus a book on community will be written in community.
3. The travel component in our group was surprisingly important. It allowed us to meet with practitioners and activists on their own turf. We were able to see the physical and social embodiment of a community’s commitments and to see the relation of that embodiment to the larger community within which it was located. Also, our quite diverse group of academics was able to develop a shared vocabulary and common set of experiences from which to work. This suggests that a research group’s “shared experience” contributes significantly to its ability to engage difficult issues and materials in a constructive manner.

**II.1.** Whether articulated or unarticulated, normative questions infused our reflections on theology and community-building. From Stephen Fowl’s essay on “God’s Beautiful City” to our group’s uncertain but quite strong reactions to our visit with FAME in Los Angeles, we continually struggled with the kinds of social structures engendered by Christian communities.

Surely it is important to claim that Christian community engenders certain social structures; however, I would not necessarily argue that it engenders any one distinctive social structure. Because of the complex relation between theological commitments, sociopolitical, economic and historical factors, as well as social and individual identities, actual structures vary significantly—even when theologically-driven. For example, while each of the projects we visited involved some kind of Christian community committed to a particular vision for society, we saw very different models of community-building. One was highly entrepreneurial, others were oriented toward individual leadership development; some were tied closely to the local church and concerned with institution-building, and others operated at the edges of society, through ministries of presence and accompaniment. The different structures engendered by these communities raise questions about institution-building and formation for leadership. They also provide important substance for theological and moral reflection.

1. If some of the most interesting and vibrant work is being done at the margins of church, academy, and society, how do these organizations understand the nature of the institutions they are building? How do they maintain a critical distance from certain institutions as they simultaneously try to establish and strengthen others? Do the leaders recognize the tensions that arise when their work is embraced by “worldly” powers or by the larger society? What critical tools do community leaders employ to critique themselves and their structures, and to recognize and resist temptations? It is surprisingly easy to create little dynasties “for the sake of the poor,” and to develop empires around doing good.
2. Many community-building projects are tied to the vision and energy of particular charismatic leaders (charismatic in the Weberian sense). It might be helpful to look more closely at the relationship between the social structure of the community-building organization itself and the intended structures of the institutions it is “building.” The tension here might be quite revealing. How do highly charismatic leaders make development projects into community endeavors, and what makes such projects eventually sustainable separate from that leader?
3. While many of the organizations we visited would be comfortable with the idea that Christian community engenders particular social structures, I think there is a fair amount of slippage in the actual connection between commitments and structures. In the crush of daily ministry and human need, models of community development are often imported from other fields without much reflection. While this is not surprising, it raises some important questions for church and academy. Many of the practitioners we met with were Christian lay people. To what and to whom do they turn for their models, guidance, and inspiration? Who helps these leaders think through the models and means they choose? Do any common virtues and commitments undergird all of the approaches to community-building? How do leaders make moral and theological sense of the tensions they encounter daily in their work?
4. A focus on community-building presupposes that something is fractured or in need of development, but how Christian commitments inform understandings of development or excellence in housing, education, business, or health care is not always clear. Particularly when community-building involves the necessity of success within larger societal structures, how this fits with distinctive Christian commitments and prophetic criticism is complicated. Some groups have a strong sense of the Christian commitments their work reflects and can teach theologians much about the fit between community/commitments and social structures. But other community-building projects need the rigor and critique that theological and moral analysis can provide to move toward a closer fit between the theological commitments they articulate and the social structures they create. This suggests the potential fruitfulness of closer relationships between theologians and practitioners.

**I.1.** The workgroup on lived theology and community building has definitely enriched my research by making me more sensitive to the centrality of religious ideas, beliefs, and symbols in the articulation of individual and collective identities. Sociologists of religion are trained to focus primarily on institutional and structural dynamics and to privilege the overt behavior of social actors. While this approach is crucial to the study of routinized power asymmetries, it can be reductive. The sociologist of religion must be constantly reminded of the relevance of the “psycho-cognitive” aspects – the ideas, symbols, moods, and motivations – that accompany and make sense of religious activity. By visiting specific religiously-based community building projects, I was able to see theology in action, as it were, to see how local activists draw from ideational resources in their traditions to tackle complex socio-political challenges. Many of the activists we talked to had powerful utopian visions, visions of agency, transcendence, and solidarity, which often get discounted by the secular mindset of the sociologist. Thus, for me, dialogue with practitioners, activists, and pastors was a profoundly humbling experience, one that pointed to the limitations and contradictions of my discipline.

**II.3.** For me, what was particularly instructive in this project was the close interconnection between questions 1 and 2. Separating these two questions is simply a heuristic exercise to gain some analytical clarity. It is impossible to understand how theological commitments are imagined and put into practice by specific persons and social groups without understanding the overlapping environmental and socio-political contexts in which these actors live. After all, theology is professed by historically situated, flesh-and-blood individuals. Theological tropes and narratives offer embodied and “emplaced” cosmologies – worldviews expressed in the bodies of the believers and in community as a built sacred space – which help make sense of the everyday existential challenges (this is, of course, related to question 7). Conversely, theological commitments guide praxis, transformative action on the physical and social contexts, shaping them in distinctive ways. For instance, at Dolores Mission in Los Angeles, Father Greg Boyle’s liberationist vision of the reign of God leads him not only to offer immediate attention to the needs of poor, recently arrived immigrants and youth gangs, but also to launch a sharp critique of the structures that have marginalized these two groups in the first place. This critical, prophetic stance is expressed in the site’s built environment and material culture, most dramatically, in the evocative murals that adorn the church. In contrast, Mark Whitlock at First AME Church of Los Angeles, which serves mostly middle-class African-Americans, articulates a theology of self-improvement that allows him to work effectively with liberal elites to strengthen his community. The success of his mission is measured by the modern buildings he is erecting, buildings that allow his local community to be wired into global processes. Both Boyle and Whitlock demonstrate that religiously-inspired visions of the common good shape different forms of social action. Both are deploying religious narratives to transform the environment in response to the physical and social realities they confront. My involvement with the Project on Lived Theology, thus, has only reinforced and deepened my intuition that it is necessary to build a strong nexus between theory and praxis, religion and politics, and theology and the social sciences in order to have a holistic understanding of quotidian religious life. When I say holistic, I mean an open-ended, nuanced understanding that avoids the twin dangers of sociology – reducing religion to social variables – and scholasticism – deducing the particular from abstract theological propositions.

## [ Heather A. Warren

I.1. Working with practitioners, activists, and pastors in faith-based organizations (FBO's) has prompted me to consider how we might write the history of American Protestantism differently. The ways we have tended to conceptualize American religious history have been in terms of denominations, movements (e.g., evangelicalism, revivalism, modernism), parachurch-bodies-cum-movement (YMCA, InterVarsity), or "great man" studies. Now I wonder: How will we include FBO's in the story of American religious history? To what extent do FBO's belong to the long history of evangelicalism and the mainline churches? What light might the FBO phenomenon shed on the history of denominationalism? How are or are not FBO's carrying out the churches' historical role in America as Toquevillian mediating institutions? How have "church and community" been preached in American history? How have theologies affected Protestants' ideas about the causes of social ills and their remedies? Because ecumenical participation in the Civil Rights movement was significant, what is happening ecumenically, if anything, in FBO's?

As a member of the community development workgroup, I became increasingly aware of the vital connection between the world's well being and the uniquely Christian witness begged by the answers to the entwined questions of doctrinal commitment, the contribution of theological analysis to civic wholeness, and the importance of a distinctive theological narrative style. Upon further thought, some answers come to mind largely arising from the teaching I have done in American religious autobiography, my work with clinical pastoral education students in theological reflection, and a revisiting of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*.

II. Two features stood out from each of the visits our workgroup made to a variety of church-based community development organizations on the east and west coasts: 1) the theological richness of what was happening and what was envisioned in terms of building up (literally and figuratively) God's people; and 2) the paucity of traditional theological language or the attempt to use theological language to describe what was happening and envisioned. I found myself wanting to press the leaders we met to articulate more precisely just how was it that they understood themselves and their Christian communities to be in relation to the immediate, surrounding culture(s).<sup>1</sup> As I experienced each of the organizations, I realized that the Christ and culture relation I was looking for was transformation. What was different from organization to organization was the targeted range of the surrounding culture that was to be transformed. Apart from two settings, I wanted to ask, Where is Jesus in all of this? Where did you say God is and had been?

I think it would be valuable to work with the pastors, other leaders, and subgroups of the church-based community development organizations to articulate their collective religious autobiographies. In effect this would engage them in narratives of theological reflection. These communities would tell their stories of how they came to start their respective organization, conceive of who they are, and how they grew into what they are now. This would involve facilitation of participants' use of traditional theological language (e.g., sin, forgiveness, atonement, justification, church, baptism). Such a collective "testimony" would be a theological endeavor not only because it would use theological terms, but also because it would consciously tell how God relates to humankind and how humankind relates to God in a way that makes transformation into wholeness possible. It would be reflective because it would explore their corporate experience in conjunction with the long, rich Christian heritage.<sup>2</sup> But theological reflection through collective religious autobiography is not primarily about becoming more adept at theological analysis or church history, rather it goes beyond these, leading those engaged into a different relationship with God because of the new configuration between them that arises from this process. Seen in this light, theological reflection is the cognitive, contemplative corollary of the action of church-based community development, offering the possibility and hope of further transformation. The collective theological autobiographies these church-based community development organizations could generate would

continue the transformation underway in those who tell them as well as those who would read or hear them. These collective stories could take a variety of forms—a compilation of individual's stories, thematic stories on traditional doctrines as enacted in aspects of the organization's life, a chronological narrative of the organization with doctrinal commentary added throughout, and so on. Each community would need to decide upon the form appropriate to itself. Whatever the form, such theologically reflective narratives would continue the ages old tradition of sharing the gospel story which is, after all, the church's story.

<sup>1</sup> Two exceptions to this generalization must be mentioned. One is the Latino Pastoral Action Center in the Bronx led by The Rev. Ray Rivera.

The other is the Delores Mission in Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia O'Connell Killen. and John De Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), viii.

## LIVED THEOLOGY AND RACE



**First Chinese Baptist Church**  
San Francisco, CA; photographer, Charles Marsh

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## [ Victor Anderson

**I.1** The question of how has my engagement with practitioners, activists and pastors informed my academic research is curious. It is curious for several reasons. One, I do not and have never made any sharp distinction between the life of the mind and the active life. Two, any strong distinction between research and action expresses the illusion that “reality” can be neatly divided between “the arm chair ivy tower existence of the academic,” on the one hand, and “the real world of the practitioner, activists, and pastors,” on the other. My own position is that academics, activists, practitioners, and pastors share the same world. We inhabit the shared social realities that make up our life together. The conscious experiment of the Live Theology Project helped to confirm this position. For while we all may share the same world and social realities—even those realities that we recognize from our particular social locations to be alien and marginal—even these social realities reflexively are mine to embrace, weep over, repent of, and transform. These activities done from our choosing, some might say callings to, are different sites from which to mediate social betterment.

I hold profound respect for those who live daily within social locations ministering reconciliation and grace to the marginal and suffering. My experience has only strengthened this respect. Yet, I am more impressed by the critical ways that our practicing colleagues opened their own theological languages to the scrutiny of critical theologians among whom there was little methodological or doctrinal agreement within the group. When discussions grew antagonistic and frustrating over lines of skeptical criticisms about established beliefs, those moments were most revealing. They were revealing because they tested the power of genuine conversation to move us toward mutual understanding and appreciation for the varieties of theological languages we brought to the Project. The variety included deconstruction, post-liberalism, and traditional evangelical theological categories. This encounter and conversation with difference was successful for us where each researcher, practitioner, activist, and pastor came to mutual understanding and appreciation for theological practices and languages as they are practiced in living communities. How these languages can be harnessed for social transformation remains the lively question that brings us back again to the conversation table as partners.

**II.2.** I take the practices and patterns of religious communities very seriously as a basic orientation toward theological and ethical reflection in the church and the academy. This position has intellectually based my own research interests in American Philosophy and Theology. With the early Chicago School and American Empirical Theology, I have proposed in *Pragmatic Theology* that the vitalities of human experience give rise to traditional religious communities and even new religions. This is a pragmatic departure into human interests that seek satisfaction in the development of the religious imagination and its theological ideations or conceptualizations about the world, human existence, totality, and infinity. Attention to the lived experience of religious communities also tests the serviceability of our academic theological languages where philosophical criticisms cannot. In such communities, the affects of our theological languages are tested in the rich resources of ritual or liturgy as these liturgical resources connect provide meaning and value to the everyday ordinary experiences of birth, death, aging, forming families, building institutions, and maintaining them. In the one instance, academic theology provides a critical check on extravagant claims in lived communities about God and the world, human existence and human fulfillment. Here, academic theology may function best as a critical interlocutor with practitioners in religious communities about harmful and communicatively successful ends of religious beliefs and practices. The intersection of academic theology and religious communities teases the vulnerability of our theological languages within the liturgical life of religious communities. However, both academic and lived theologies are fallible before the historical legacies of racism, hate, colonization, imperialism, and totalities that destroy the reconciling power of our theological languages. Neither discourse escapes what H. Richard Niebhuhr described as the sin of racism. In the other instance, academic theologians can track the vulnerability, fallibility, and totalizing effects of lived theologies.

Still, religious communities offer academic theologians moments where racial transcendence occur in forms of reconciliation however tentative, when religious communities remain vital institutions of social change.

This dialectical relation ought not to be understood as competitive or adversarial. Rather, the pragmatics of this dialectic can be best understood as oriented toward: (1) the recognition of mutual sites for social critique and change; (2) mutual understanding of the limits of our languages to satisfy social conditions that both academic and religious communities share; (3) mutual appreciation of our differing labors as mediating institutions for social change; (4) mutual consensus between our mediating institutions on human goods and ends we want to promote; (5) these possibilities 1-4 require that we achieve a level of successful communication on those ends and goods that are best informed by the Gospel. Among interlocutors, coming to such a consensus is no easy task. For evoking the Gospel also evokes the question that has become a moral distraction to getting on with reconciliation and social change, namely, Whose Gospel is normative?

Here, the differences in our theological pictures of the world, God, and the Gospel stands as the background condition that does not only open us to new religious insights among interlocutor. Our commitment to our particular language—in the absence of what Reinhold Niebhuhr once described as a High Religion—also limits our potential for substantive agreement on what goods and social ends are most consistent with the Gospel. Such recognition about the power of our various theological languages to promote mutuality among interlocutors, while limiting our power to arrive at consensus over the social demands of the Gospel, should not be thought of a gridlock between academic theologians and practitioners, activist, and pastors. Rather, in a pragmatic tone of voice, there is as much agreement as there is among interlocutors. And this is enough to keep us talking.

## [ Ellen T. Armour

**I.1.** Engagements with practitioners, activists and pastors did not change the way I think about my research, exactly, but it filled in an important gap in my research. Theology needs to be connected to living religious communities, a connection that my work lacked. I was not altogether sure how to find such communities given that the institutional church remains so segregated. I was not even sure whether Christian communities existed that were deeply committed to longterm work across lines of race and gender. This Project gave me access to a variety of such “communities” (I place the term in scare quotes, here, to reflect the range in organizational structure that we found) who both practiced and theorized about what it meant to work across racial lines, at least. I was a bit disheartened (but not particularly surprised) to see the lack of similar attention to gender and sexuality issues despite the fact that these communities were diverse along those lines, as well.

**II.3.(1).** The 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach argued that theology was anthropology. Our concepts of God are simply concepts of “man” purified of limitations and projected onto the heavens; “God” as such does not exist. Though theologians have rejected Feuerbach’s ultimate conclusion, the notion that we relate to God through projection remains an important element of feminist theology, in particular. The feminist critique of masculine God-talk rests on it, as does the cure some propose of using feminine God-talk instead. Meeting and talking with male and female activists of various ethnic backgrounds whose religious convictions motivated and sustained their work for justice across racial lines confirmed for me the inadequacy of the theory of projection for understanding the way human beings relate to the divine. Commitment to a very traditional Father God impelled and sustained commitments to working with and on behalf of folk defined as racial ‘others.’ This was true even for minority women (who hardly saw themselves in this traditional god). This is not to suggest that masculine concepts and images of God are benign after all; allegiance to this God did appear to have predictable negative effects on activists’ dealing with sexual differences (women’s issues and homophobia). It does suggest, however, that feminist theology needs a more nuanced approach to God-talk than the one-size-fits-all Feuerbachian projection model.

A second insight also emerged from my work with the Project. When I teach the theological tradition, I always aim to show my students that theological ideas emerge out of very specific historical contexts. Since the practice of constructing theology is itself embedded in cultural contexts, the product bears the marks of cultural practices and habits of thinking specific to those contexts. However, I have been caught up short by the degree to which my own writing and thinking practices exceed my mastery of them. My book, *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race/Gender Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) can be read as making precisely that kind of argument to account for white feminists’ problematic practices regarding race. My experience with this group has brought me face to face with my own work’s embeddedness in certain practices of thinking race. Nowhere do I give an account of race’s provenance or its purchase on the world as we know it. I simply assume it as a valid category, as a feature of our cultural landscape. Implicit at least in the last chapter of the book is the recognition that the very category of race is the product of a specific history. However, my practice of writing race in the book belies that implicit recognition. The practice of writing race in the book risks reinforcing its reification as an ontological category (rather than itself a product of a particular history). To be fair, I inhabit a cultural landscape dominated by a binary notion of race as (visibly and audibly) black and (invisibly and silently) white. Fully exploring the terrain of that landscape as it impacts and inflects gender, as I do in the book, is an important and legitimate project. However, insofar as it takes for granted the black/white axis, it risks reifying black/white as the paradigmatic and/or foundational instance of racism. Intentionally or not, this practice forecloses on other significant differences, especially ethnic difference. If such differences register at all, they will do so only to the extent that they fit the black/white pattern. In my future work, I think the category of ethnicity will be more helpful and more historically accurate.

## [ Susan M. Glisson

“Faith,” the poet Kathleen Norris writes, “does not conform itself to ideology but to experience.” As I have understood the goals of this project on lived theology, our purpose was to explore that possibility as it related to faith-based initiatives in community development. We were to initiate a conversation between theologians, practitioners, and faith-propelled efforts to promote positive relations. We did undertake visits with different communities attempting to answer this call and those visits did prompt a high level of theoretical discourse for the group. I’m not sure, however, that those conversations, in turn, enlivened the groups we studied or supported their work in any way.

Our first meeting highlighted a great many interesting questions for exploration: was there a way for the group to connect to other organizations/publics/lay leaders? Is racial reconciliation possible given the genesis of “race” in sin? If race isn’t a cultural category, can/should it be reserved for use as a political category? At what point do we as Christians offer a higher standard that is not about power? How do we take individual relationships into the realm of public policy and social structure? Who gets to define what reconciliation looks like?

We had two interesting site visits after we delineated these questions. The first, in Mississippi, examined Mission Mississippi, a Christian organization promoting racial reconciliation. Self-described as “Racism 101,” its paradigm is predominantly black and white and primarily Protestant. Through prayers groups and revivals, the organization seeks to promote dialogue that crosses racial lines. As explained by its director, Rev. Dolphus Weary, Mission Mississippi always saw itself as a first step on a long, arduous process, to be turned over to another organization for further progress. At the time, there did not seem to be an appropriate partner to sponsor the next stage. This visit was examined alongside the experience of the Voice of Calvary, a ministry in which one of our workgroup members participated. He provided an excellent summary of the challenges of “racial intimacy” and raised disturbing questions for the group and for an analysis of Mission Mississippi: how do we apply the lessons of religious reconciliation to communities not based in faith? Who is our audience? What about the seemingly unavoidable bifurcation of justice versus love? the relational versus the political? What are the theological or religious tools that change systems?

In our second visit, we met with the pastor of the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco. He spoke of his membership as “hyphenated people, who are comfortable with the in-between, and able to sit with dilemmas.” He referenced sociologist Peter Berger’s sacred canopy: the family is more important than the peculiarities of belief. You can’t take what you learn in the classroom and apply it here; it’s too complicated. Most moving of all, he described the church’s decision to relocate in Chinatown instead of moving to the suburbs. They removed the bars from the church windows because, as he put it, “if you communicate the stance of the battlefield then you’ll always be at war.” We were also able to visit a community that has been able to translate theological imperatives into systemic change by improving the housing of a small neighborhood.

These personal interactions with individuals working on a local level were the most invigorating part of our journey for me. While our group sessions raised important and necessary questions, I am unclear where in the process those questions can be answered unequivocally. Our brief visits could inspire only surface observations. Thus, it seemed that the visits were far more useful to our group, if they were at all, than to the practitioners in the field. For this project to be valuable, that conversation must become reciprocal. The heady discourse of the academy must be infused by the real day-to-day experiences of individuals and communities working out these complex questions and, in turn, the expertise that the academy gleans from these efforts needs to be expanded in ways that are meaningful and accessible to folks ordinarily without the luxury of our contemplations.

We have just scratched the surface and in many ways our group disagrees on what the “surface” even might be. There are far too many questions and no real sense of any answers. The larger purposes, as I understand them, are worthy but the two groups, to simplify it—theologians and practitioners—too often do not share the same language even while they may share similar goals. I am unclear who/what can become a translator to make a conversation possible and useful.

## [ Barbara A. Holmes

**I.1.** My engagement with practitioners, activists and pastors gave me a broader perspective on issues of race. The pressures of teaching, research, and writing afford little time to consider the lived experiences of other ethnic groups. The Lived Theology Project provided unique opportunities to interact with Christian activists and theologians who are engaged in the difficult work of creating an egalitarian society. In many instances, our site visits challenged facile theological paradigms by introducing historical and current issues of poverty and race. In each instance, activists and theologians were struggling to bring about God's reconciled and beloved community in a violent and alienated society.

I particularly enjoyed our visit to the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco. Some of the testimonies of faith were particularly poignant and evocative. The church, which was organized on October 3, 1880, was a haven for immigrants and an emerging Chinese-American community. During our visit, I heard the stories of transition from "cultural neglect to cultural affirmation" as a counterpoint to my own journey in African American contexts. We also met activists living in the midst of a housing project. They were applying their theology in lived contexts, using their academic prowess and their willingness to live in the midst of poverty, to reclaim those who have fallen through the cracks in society. It was a stunning example of the nexus of theory and praxis that will never be forgotten.

During the Mississippi meeting, I came to the uncomfortable realization that I had complacently assigned the entire State to the refuse pile. As a participant in the Civil Rights movement, I had my doubts that progress in race relations could be made in Mississippi, where the roots of racism seemed to be deeply sedimented into local culture and into my own historical memory. However, the discussions and debates gave me a different view of the ongoing struggle to reconcile a painful past and a hopeful future. For those of us who were engaged in the struggle during the 1960's, it was invigorating to hear of the commitment of those who continued our efforts. My own research continues to benefit from conversations with group members and from shared resources.

**II.3.** I will address number (7) of question (3) as a way of summarizing my own discoveries during the Project. The lived experiences of Christian communities are best interpreted in a variety of narrative theological styles. With regard to race, one of the key areas of dispute is the control of narratives, perspectives, language, and liturgy. It is human to want predictability, but the gospel offers its most transformative options to those who can receive the "good news" with open hearts and minds. For those of us who have participated in this Project, I believe that the task is to broaden the spectrum of resources by diversifying the lived experiences that inform our reading of Christian narratives. Perhaps then, the voices of those who have been marginalized historically will be recovered.

The voices that are missing from the narratives of most Christian communities are often the voices of children and the elderly, the homeless and those who are alienated from the mainstream by virtue of differences of gender, sexuality, race, disability and status in society. Sometimes we are missing the voices of those who have been declared enemies of society because of their crimes. We will be enriched and enlightened when we can hear one another, even when we vehemently disagree. During the Project, I gathered vignettes of lived experience, a virtual kaleidoscope of welcome and unwelcome perspectives that should have a place in the narrative.

Question (7) also engaged the issue of interpretation. It is one thing to enjoy a site visit, and yet another to incorporate learning, frustration, and insights into distinctive narrative styles that are also theological. To begin this difficult enterprise, I would urge an expansion of our understanding of the word "theological" to include the gritty work of being human together in the midst of escalating challenges. Theology in lived contexts offers narratives that are infused with struggle, hard decisions to be present to those who are least like us, and a willingness to seek the basilea of God in unlikely places and persons. Certainly, this is a monumental task, but one that is worth our effort. When the narratives of Christian theology are infused with the lived experiences of the excluded, those narratives will resonate with an authenticity that we will recognize and embrace.

## [ Luis G. Pedraja

### **I.1. & II.2.**

As the only Latino theologian in the workgroup, engaging practitioners, activist, and pastors through *The Project on Lived Theology* did not change the way I think about research—it simply helped validate it to the broader academic community. As a theologian, some of my interests do include traditional research methods that engage philosophy and other disciplines, the results of my academic training. But I also realize that these disciplines do not emerge in a vacuum. They evolve from specific contexts, cultures, and people. Thus, I have sought in my research to understand the different forces that shape our thinking and practices.

In particular, as a Latino theologian, my research and theological work has always acknowledged its connection to our community of faith. For almost two decades, Latino/a theologians have given serious attention to the lived theology, faith, and praxis of the people we represent. Because of this and other research interests, our research methodology necessitates a vital connection to our faith community. For instance, *Mujerista* theologians such as Ada María Isasi-Díaz have constructed a theology based on ethnographic analysis of the experiences and stories of Latinas based on a process of dialogues and encounters between the theologian and the people. Through these encounters new sources of theological reflection were recognized and explored, sources such as *lo cotidiano*, the everyday experiences and practices of these women.

In *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Abingdon, 1990), Justo L. González argues that theology should be grounded in the practices and lived experience of the people, fashioned in a way that includes "aching bones and dirt under the fingernail" (p. 129). By the same token, in an article entitled "A New Vision: Ministry Through Hispanic Eyes" (*Apuntes* 16/2, Summer 1996), I argue that for theology to survive beyond the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "it must listen to the people who pray to a living God, and kiss the feet of a dead Jesus" (p. 58). Latino/a theology is grounded in the lived experience, faith, and praxis of the people—just as many other marginalized theologies, including Womanist, Black, and Latin American Liberation theologies.

I think that encountering pastors and practitioners through the Project on Lived Theology is essential for its purpose and helps introduce to the broader academic community the importance of this methodology and approach to theology—an approach that many of us had already embraced and advocated for some time. I am glad and quite appreciative that my esteemed colleague, Dr. Marsh, and others have brought to the table the importance of lived theology and the engagement of practitioners, pastors, and activist as a method. However, it saddens and troubles me that it has taken so long for this approach to be embraced by the broader academic community. Why were our voices not heard from before? Why did it take the voice of people from a dominant cultural and racially privileged group for this approach to be embraced with enthusiasm? I think such questions of how power and racial constructs affect academic privilege and methodologies merit further discussion.

While I agree that there exists a hunger for a connection between the academy and the church for theological work that reconnects the enterprise of theology with the lived experience of particular Christian communities, I would disagree that the Project on Lived Theology discovered this need. It has been said many times before by many of us, but it was not recognized. That said, the work of the project is important in that it calls attention to the importance of recognizing how everyday practices of Christian communities offer rich material for theological insight—as Latino/a theology has maintained all along. In the work of Latino/a theologians, there is a sense that these patterns and practices of people of faith are not just modes of self-expression, but that they also represent the faithful intuition of the God's continuing work among us.

## [ Stephen G. Ray Jr.

Latino/a theologies emerge out the lived theology of our people, developing a theological methodology and language grounded in those experiences. One of the main sources for our theological reflection is popular religion, a term which does not refer to what is in vogue, but to the grass-root practices and faith of the people. In the works of Latino theologians such as Orlando Espín, Sixto García, and Roberto Goizueta, there is recognition that through these practices the people of marginalized communities are able to give voice to their *sensus fidelium*, or faithful intuition of the Gospel and God's ongoing work in the community. But they are also a vehicle through which they can actively resist heteronomous impositions from dominant cultures and institutionalized religion. Now, while Latino/a theology recognizes the value of these approaches as theological sources for deepening our insights, I suspect that this is not something limited to Latino/a communities of faith, but common among all communities of faith, even if not readily recognized. As a result, I believe that using these theological methods and concepts already found in Latino/a theology, further research on these aspects of our lived theology in a broader setting would be an important contribution of the ongoing work of the project.

**I.1.** During the initial meeting of our workgroup, I expressed my belief that racial reconciliation is an unattainable goal in the context of American culture and society. I believe(d) this because in my estimation race, as a socio-cultural reality, has come to function somewhat like one of the powers and principalities that Paul talks about in Ephesians 6:12 and is, hence, irredeemable. While I may still have suspicions that true reconciliation lies beyond the world of race my engagement with project participants (fellow workgroup members and practitioners in activism and ministry) has helped me to develop a more complex understanding of how human doings engage, contest and sometimes subvert the sway of this particular power. Specifically, my encounter with the historical and contemporary practices of Asian-American communities in California, which engage the stultifying effects of racial oppression and its institutions of dominance, has helped me to see beyond a "black and white" world. As well, the rhetoric of the changing face of America was given new meaning to me with our group's introduction to the largely invisible yet increasingly pervasive Latino/Hispanic community in Memphis, Tennessee. Together these experiences have broadened my perception of the way race insinuates itself into the lives, and fortunes, of distinctly different communities.

As I consider how my increase in understanding will manifest itself in my theological work two points immediately come to mind. First, I appreciate the illusive character of race in American life a bit better. By which I mean that I am less likely to look for static paradigms for thinking about how race is structuring social and material relationships. Rather, I am more looking for traces of the workings of race by viewing and understanding the creative responses of Christian communities to its wake. This leads to my second learning: namely, I think I will take much more seriously the strivings and activities of Christian communities as they muddle through the morass created by race. While I have always appreciated the importance of good-will in dealing with matters of race and racial oppression, I don't think I quite took seriously enough the contextual nature of good-will. Hitherto, I do not think I have taken seriously enough that the positive transformative value of acts of good-will must be judged in their context. That is to say, I have come to appreciate that an act of good-will in the midst of a Hmong immigrant community may look very different than one done in the Mississippi delta, and this difference bears notice.

**II.2.** Christian practices are found wherever Christian communities and persons are living and doing. Here is the rub; demonic practices are found wherever Christian communities are living and doing. How do we interpret this paradox? First, we affirm that it is in the *lived* experiences of Christian communities that God is disclosed to the community and to the world. Yet, as Tillich reminds us, the propensity of human persons to concretize that which is by nature epiphany, we continually risk transforming the encounter with the holy into an invitation and opportunity for the demonic to be made manifest. So, a theological reflection "communicative" of Christian practices must take seriously the moment inherent in that communication when the demonic can be mistaken for the divine. Certainly, we can never have final assurance; yet, I believe there is a provisional measure that is useful in intuiting the distinction. Posed as a question, that measure is: To what extent does a "communicative" practice exemplify a dependence on the power of God, and to what extent does it rely on the accrual and exercise of privilege by those doing the practice. Here, within the idea of relative dependence on privilege, lies, I think, a way to provisionally assess Christian practices as exemplifications of God's presence and working in our midst.

A central claim of Christian reflection on the fallenness of humanity is that human persons are always, consciously and unreflectively, engaged in a continual grasping for privilege in whatever context they may occupy. This search for relative privilege has two characteristics that this project has helped me think about. Foremost, this quest leads us to be formally expansive, yet substantially diminishing of the place and experience of others. That is to say, I have learned that reaching out to other Christian communities engaged in the struggle against oppression, while imposing upon them the paradigm of my particular community's struggle, is a way of replicating the very oppression against which we all struggle. The privilege I receive by being able to name our "common" oppression is very like the privilege exercised to create the social and cultural meanings that give legitimacy to oppression in the first place. As well, assuming a posture of allowing others to name their own oppression and express how God gives them life in the midst of it is an important step toward eschewing this quest for relative privilege. These are two small points, but I believe that are helpful in divining the presence and work of God in the communicative acts of Christian communities.

## [ Chris Rice

**I.2.** Coming into the Project, I spoke the language of activist, not scholar, and at times found myself wondering how much more time was going to be wasted on endless, pointless discussions of seemingly obscure subjects that never got to “Let’s get busy: So what are we gonna DO about it all?”

Yet my involvement in the Project was timely, coming during a jarring personal life transition where I had detached from seventeen deeply-embedded years in activist racial reconciliation work in Mississippi and entered (Duke) divinity school, a new space to deepen theologically and intellectually. The Project’s contribution to the intellectual dimension of my life’s work of racial reconciliation was significant in ways that will forever change how I think, live, relate, and do.

Project discussions helped identify what I have come to call “the sin of activist impatience,” a tendency to leap into action and get busy as if, first, the world depends on human action alone, and, second, without adequately describing what is going on—which for those who root their work in the church must mean, above all, to theologically describe what is going on. Our work in the Project helped confirm for me that everything is at stake with our language about God and our descriptions of the world.

Two particular paradigm shifts began to occur, the first with regard to the use of Christian Scripture in our conversations about theology and race.

The evangelical, non-denominational tradition I come out of says that if Christians would just read the dadgummed Bible more, salvation cannot be far away. My reading of Scripture, and my understanding of God’s activity in history had been something like this: First comes Moses, then Jesus, then Acts and Paul, then ... BIG BAD US. Call me naïve, but the wide range of theological perspectives around the Project table helped hone a more discriminating eye for how readings of Scripture inform the racial discussion. The best we could get out of some sessions was a good argument about an idea—again, not satisfactory from an activist bent—and yet extremely fruitful for grappling with “what is going on?” which must precede the question “so what are we going to do?”

The second paradigm shift was seeing within such discussions how my own theological language about race was informed by powers not of my own choosing. As an activist primarily concerned about building ecclesial communities that overcome America’s historical racial divide, I became particularly convinced of how I have taken race for granted, how I have accepted the classifying of people into black and white without asking: “Is race a theological category? If so, on what basis? What historical process has ‘performed’ me to assume ‘race’ as essential to human nature and to categorize people with its terms, and how did that history come to (dis)form my reading of Scripture?” Particularly provocative were conversations concerning the fluid and non-essential character of racial identity. The conclusion is startling: If racial identity is fluid, then why can’t a radical, new, interdependent “racial” community come into existence between peoples formerly estranged in history— visible communities shaped not by the boundaries of “racial loyalty,” but the common life and new creation inaugurated by the cross and resurrection?

**II.3.** I became aware and convinced of the power of ideas and language, of the priority of seeking to faithfully see and describe the world, and of how deeply-imbedded powers of which we are not conscious determine the way things are—including race. Congregations must build such hard work into their leadership and life.

In visits to on-the-ground ministries, I witnessed the transformative power of embodiment which congregations must open space for: The ability to see a different world of Christian unity grows out of tasting and touching communities where divisions are being broken down in extraordinary ways. In our case, this was seen especially in Russell Jeung’s incarnational ministry work in an Oakland housing project, where the life and love of Jesus is shared in living among the people and organizing them into a voice for just housing conditions.

In the enormous abilities of this workgroup to deconstruct and tear apart ideas, I came away warned of the temptation of settling for hard analysis. The activist’s gift is teaching us that we must not resist being willing to fail, to build the road as we walk, to jump into the reconciliation journey without knowing in advance how it will all turn out, and to see what God has for us along the way.

At the same time, I am more persuaded that congregational life is constantly in danger of a dearth of critical theological reflection. A cross-pollination and intersection between the worlds of practice and reflection is crucial—bringing together practitioners and scholars to shape transformative theological visions of social reconciliation. The activist temptation, I have learned, is a deep life and shallow theology; the academic’s is a deep theology and a shallow life. In a common life and conversation, the two worlds both offer their gift and became more able to resist their tendency to idolize themselves. Such a common life is crucial for strengthening Christian congregations in their mission of reconciliation.

## [ Timothy Tseng

**I.1.** Since the beginnings of my academic career, I have always viewed research as a lived praxis. I may not have continued in my academic career if not introduced to Antonio Gramsci's concept of the "organic intellectual" whereby my research is intimately connected to the lived praxis of the community from which I emerged and for which I advocate.

My dissertation examined how the missiological assumptions and interests of American Protestants shaped and nuanced their perception of and ministry towards Japanese and Chinese immigrants prior to the Second World War. My subsequent research has concentrated on the Chinese American Protestant experience with some attention to the impact of racialization, the Diasporic and Trans-Pacific experiences upon it. Furthermore, my interest in advocating faith based community organizing among the evangelicals and Pentecostals have led me to become engaged in this form of interfaith and interracial community empowerment. The Project on Lived Theology has reinforced my interests by putting me in touch with the lives and practices of activists and pastors whose vocations and ministries are, in my opinion, legitimate expression of theological articulation. I have been directing the Asian American Center at the American Baptist Seminary of the West where our focus on supporting Asian American evangelical leaders for healthy and prophetic ministries is an expression of this concern for integrating theory and practice.

**II.2.** The connection of theology to the lived experiences of particular Christian communities has been at the heart of my vocational calling, though I have approached this task from a historian's perspective. Furthermore, I "bring historical and sociological knowledge of communities into the service of theology" by underscoring the significance of theological discourse and popular piety in my studies of the Chinese American Protestant and other communities. These dimensions are often missing in Asian American studies and American history and sociology. In part, this is due to the lack of theological training among scholars in these areas. But there also tends to be a bias that views religion as an epiphenomenal factor in the analysis of communities and social structures.

While I cannot speak for the theological field, among American Religious historians there is a corresponding neglect of particular sociological and cultural studies theories that are relevant to the 12.5 million Asian and Pacific Islander residents in the United States. In the 1970s, American Religious historians added the study of ethnicity to a historiographical tradition that emphasized intellectual and economic analysis and favored a denominational approach to history. As a result Roman Catholic and Jewish religious historiography as well as the study of ethnic Protestants has received greater attention over the past few decades. Since the 1980s, more attention has been given to gender and marginalized religious communities (Buddhist, Shakers, etc). During this period, African American religious history has also received increased attention. In recent years, there have been more studies of Latino religious communities as well. However, it appears that American Religious historians have not yet engaged in sustained studies of Asian and Pacific American communities.

In part, this is related to paucity of scholars in the field who are interested in Asian and Pacific religious communities (Martin Marty made this observation in 1993, but the situation remains the same ten years later).<sup>1</sup> But it is also related to the tendency for American religious historians to view Asian and Pacific Americans through "ethnicity" or "comparative religious studies" lenses. When Asian and Pacific Americans are viewed through the lens of "ethnicity," they tend to be identified as "assimilable" or "assimilated" ethnics. Consequently, the European immigrant paradigm often becomes the template applied to the Asian and Pacific experience. Like most white ethnic communities, Asian Americans are expected to assimilate and lose their cultural distinctiveness during the second and third generation. Asian American religious communities therefore tend to lose the racialized quality of their experience in the narratives of

American Religious historians. Here recent racialization theory could be useful, but it has rarely been applied to Asian and Pacific Americans. For instance, Emerson and Smith's recent sociological study of white evangelical attitudes towards race utilize "racialization theory" but deliberately dissociate Native Americans, Latinos/Hispanics, and Asian and Pacific Americans from their field of analysis. It seems that both theologians and religious historians would benefit from appropriating racialization in their studies of Asian and Pacific American religious communities.

More recently, American religious historians have also tended to view Asian and Pacific Americans through the lens of "comparative religious studies." While this perspective is making a tremendous contribution to the field by broadening the landscape of American religious historiography, it tends to ignore Asian American Christianity. Because Christianity is identified to be essentially a Western religion, Asian American Christians do not "fit" the analytical framework very well. So though the 2002 American Religious Identification Survey (conducted by the Graduate School of the City University of New York) estimated that 43% of Asian Americans identify themselves as Christians, this approach's tendency to identify Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam with Asians glosses over the complexity of Asian American religious communities. It also undermines opportunities to "hear" genuine theological voices of Asian American Christian communities.

Both of these approaches belie an "Orientalist" presupposition in the field of American religious history. In the Asian and Pacific American case, "Orientalism" (as coined by postcolonial theorist Edward Said) is an Euro-American approach towards Asian "difference" that seeks to exterminate (or control) or to exoticize (or celebrate) such "differences."<sup>2</sup> In both cases, Asian American subjects are spoken for and cannot speak for themselves. The Occidental "gaze" becomes the predominant lens by which "Orientals" are perceived.

Given all this, it is necessary for Asian American Christian communities to understand that they are part of and "engender a distinctive social structure." Discussions about racialization and Orientalism are not simply an intellectual exercise for American religious historians (or theologians), but a necessary means of understanding the lived experiences of Asian American Christian communities. But because the great majority of Asian American Christians identify with evangelical theology and piety, they share with other evangelicals the inability to integrate such socio-historical theories into their self-understanding (as Smith and Emerson have pointed out so clearly). Indeed, the exegesis of concepts of race, race theories, and racism in the fabric of American history and theology is a much-needed theological task that is directly linked to the lived experiences of all Christian communities in the United States. The Project on Lived Theology has been a good starting point for me to engage these critical matters.

<sup>1</sup> Martin E. Marty, "American Religious History in the Eighties: A Decade of Achievement," *Church History* 62:3 (Sept., 1993): 335-377.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Robert Lee, *Orientalism: Asian*

*Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

## LIVED THEOLOGY AND POWER



Voter Registration Mississippi

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## [ M. Shawn Copeland

The basic theological position that I brought to the Project on Lived Theology is this: Given our cultural and social (i.e., political, economic, technological) decline, the takeover of our spiritual and moral life by the coarse, the corrupt, and the commercial, theology must get involved in public affairs. But, that involvement may tempt theology to ideology. In order to meet the demands of authenticity set down in the 'way' Jesus taught, theology must hand over its praxis to the service of the poor and excluded; oppose any misuse of faith for political purposes; interrogate the religious, cultural, and moral values of the society from within which it thinks; unmask all theories and practices that undergird exclusions of the human 'other'—sexism, homophobia, imperialism, colonialism, and anti-black, -red, -brown, -yellow, anti-Arab, and anti-Semitic forms of racism; and protest the draining of transcendent potential from truth.

The practitioners and activists we met shared the general lines of this commitment. They understood immediately and sharply that Christian identity must have authentic public relevance; they also grasped quite astutely that a critical interrogation of power ought to go hand-in-hand with that commitment in its concrete lived expression. Their insights, along with our workgroup's reading, conversations, and debates, confirmed my effort to work out a responsible public or practical-political theology. Crucial to that attempt is an understanding of the political, a rethinking of power, a transcultural notion of the human person, and a reconsideration of 'the good.'

First, our conversations and encounters reinforced my hunch that theology needs to gain a clear understanding of the meaning of the political. The political can never be defined as how we operate out-there-now as if that operation were independent of our decisions and choices. To understand the political, we need an adequate and differentiated set of categories by which to analyze what is going forward (progress or decline) in the dynamic human relations that constitute and order our society. And, that analysis ought to make evident just how our institutions, collaborations, tasks, roles, and skills result from our attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility—or not.

Second, theology needs to revisit its understanding of power. Power as coercion shows itself in that lethal guise through the domination of whole groups of human persons—especially, the poor and excluded. Economic exploitation and psychological marginalization expel these women and men from meaningful participation in the creation and maintenance of the human common good of our society. But the poor and despised possess the skill and capacity not only to recover their autonomy, but also to redeem and transform power. At the heart of their discovery rises the cross of the crucified Jesus. The cross of Jesus turns up the ground in which any effort toward public theology must stand. Jesus made the cross an undeniable condition for discipleship (Luke 9: 23, 14: 27). And, by his own death on the cross, he demonstrated God's unyielding solidarity with abject and despised human persons. At the same time, the cross hallowed in him the capacity for radical resurrection-life and, thus, disclosed that the power of God in the cross is the power to live and to love—even in the teeth of violence and death.

Third, a responsible public or practical-political theology recognizes the need for a more adequate answer to the question, 'what does it mean to be a human person?' Modernity's dominant, and continuing, notion of persons depicts us as terminally egoistic, isolated, passive, individualistic, and acquisitive. We need from theology something very different—a response that is, at once, theoretic and transcultural, yet properly grounded in the concrete. That response retrieves and affirms the notion of the person as a dynamic acting human achievement, rather than as a passive consuming human being whose very self has become the product of economic exchange.

A transcultural notion of person both appeals to self-transcendence as immanent in human existence and embraces the concrete diversity of human beings. It does not substitute what is substantive of human nature for what is accidental, although never insignificant, but precious and distinctive—class or gender or group affiliation or ethnic or racial-cultural heritage. To substitute these precious and distinctive accidents for what is substantive of human existence surrenders human reason. To dismiss these precious and distinctive accidents as irrelevant disregards humanity and erases the concreteness of persons. This substitution, disregard, and erasure are tantamount to a blatant refusal to understand. And, that refusal lays bare the derailment of intelligence by the biases that spawn and execute exploitation, elitism, imperialism, sexism, and racism.

Fourth, to ask, 'what is good, and how do we know that that is good?' may seem unnecessary and, even, pedantic. But asking and proposing an answer to these questions entails taking on a vigorous role in interrogating and promoting meaning and value within our socio-cultural matrix. Moreover, to do this without our theology dissolving into ideology or mere political activism requires us to grapple with our own knowing. We need to navigate a path between the reduction of knowledge and values to what is merely subjective, on the one side, and restriction of knowledge and values to the out-there-now objective on the other. To take 'the path less traveled by' invites us to an attentive understanding that is prior to the formation of our concepts or ideas, that admits thinking as hypothesis, that pauses to marshal and weigh evidence, that reflects to grasp the sufficiency of evidence preceding judgment. An explicit grasp of how concepts result from understanding instead of the common mistake that understanding results from concepts is of utmost importance. We theologians do not get our categories for analysis unintentionally or unconsciously; rather those categories emerge from the real questions asked about concrete social situation under scrutiny. This re-thinking of our very knowing can assist us in a wise mediation of the Christian soteriological and redemptive message within the dialectic of meanings and values that constitute our way of life.

## [ Russell Jeung

As a sociologist and as an Asian American Christian activist, I found that the Project on Lived Theology has redirected both my research focus and my own sense of calling. The readings and discussions with theologians and activists opened up new ways for me to think about power, activism, and my role in my community. In particular, I've become interested in community organizers' conceptions of power and its use in building the Kingdom of God.

To revitalize our neighborhood in Oakland, California, my church community saw that power had to be wielded in three ways—to transform and heal each of our individual lives, to mobilize a community against structural injustices, and to challenge the spiritual authorities that held us captive personally and corporately. Through prayer and the work of the Spirit, we have been able to forge a multi-ethnic coalition in our low-income community and to establish a multi-class congregation. Yet other organizers whom I've met through our working group have accomplished even more remarkable things, from developing hundreds of units of affordable housing to propelling the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. These dialogues have raised several questions regarding our community organizing and our church plant efforts:

- Faith-based community organizers, such as PICO and IAF, identify an individual entity or politician, to target and occasionally rally against. Who do we target when addressing broader issues such as gentrification or global capitalism? How do we “love our enemy” and avoid vilifying this target as the enemy?
- A related question relates to the fact that organizers mobilize congregations in order to secure the power of numbers in our political system. How does the church avoid becoming another interest group fighting for its piece of pie and for its particular constituency? Is the source of their power only their numbers? How can moral rightness and a desire for the common good be articulated and used powerfully?
- In the Christian use of power, we value humility, meekness and turning the other cheek. Yet our system calls for competition, assertiveness and pursuance of individual rights. How do we develop local leaders and make use of their cultural capital in this American system? As we also seek racial reconciliation and diversity, can we avoid assimilating people into our current power structure and its pitfalls?
- Finally, community organizers seek to change the system while also building community. I have wondered how outside organizers avoided using congregations for their own political agendas and how organizing has built up the church's sense of unity and purpose.

In my next writing project, I hope to address these questions. They are particularly relevant as our church now transitions from organizing our neighbors to becoming a multi-class community with our neighbors, where we share common interests and work more interdependently. This project aims to articulate my Cambodian and Latino neighbors' perspectives and how they understood our multi-ethnic efforts to fight a slumlord. By listening to their voices, I want to see how God teaches us across cultural and class-bound viewpoints. I am grateful for the support of working group members who have greatly encouraged me to pursue the telling of our story.

In addition, dialogue with my group and the Lived Theology and Race work group motivates me to share my Asian American perspective on organizing and urban church work. As these workgroups reviewed the literature in these areas, few works have mentioned the growing number of Asian Americans in our cities and in our churches. My church

is multiethnic with a majority being Asian American. We established a Christian community that was intentional in our efforts to share possessions, to hold each other accountable, and to share intimately. Yet our unintentioned “Asianness” aided these efforts as we managed conflict differently, felt a higher loyalty to the group, and often were more concerned with our relational status than our achieved status. We saw God's salvation deals not only with our guilt, but also with the shame that we felt more keenly. And we made use of our privileged class position while we faced racism at the same time. These Asian American practices and patterns are our unspoken and taken-for-granted ways of doing things and understanding our relationships. I hope the particularity and the universality of these stories will be examples of “lived theology” that are gifts to the broader church.

Does our multi-class, multi-ethnic church community engender a distinctive social structure? We certainly hope to be distinctive as we pursue what we believe is a higher calling. We want to be truly reconciled to God and each other rather than just being tolerant of differences. We organize against racism and economic injustice with a desire for the Holy Spirit's peace. Yet as a social institution, we need to survive amidst a corporate, consumer culture that promotes self-interested individualism. We recognize the sociological tensions between members of different economic classes and the political games that need to be played to secure power. To recruit members and to secure funding, we find ourselves acting like other groups in attempting to cater to needs and interests. On the surface, our ministries do not seem to be much different from the work of secular non-profit organizations.

I hope the story of our church does reveal that God's community is indeed a different type of institution and our organizing work does have different kind of power. Clearly, our faith has provided motivation and sustained longer commitment than our secular counterparts. And a major part of our story is that we wait, expect and see God at work in our neighborhood. In fact, the telling of our story is incomplete without seeing it through our members' eyes of faith. I have seen others in my group write eloquently about other groups and individuals in a manner that is sociological, historical, and theological. The Project on Lived Theology has emboldened me to write our story with this faith perspective.

## [ Eugene McCarragher

Participating in the Project on Lived Theology has been a gratifying, enlightening, and frustrating experience. I've met scholars and activists whom I otherwise might never have encountered, and our personal and intellectual exchanges have been a great source of knowledge and hope for me. It's always heartening to know that others share, if not one's particular concerns and "solutions," then one's faith that the gospel really bears the light of the world.

Understood in that light, these meetings have illuminated a number of issues while leaving others in the shadows. Aside from a few marches and door-to-door campaigns, I've always been a scholar and not an "activist." While I won't be abandoning my office for a tenement walk-up, I have come away with an even greater admiration for the selflessness and dedication of the activists I've met. They've convinced me that Christian faith remains an abundant and vigorous source of energy and direction. As for the scholars, their work and their readings have confirmed, not only that Christian activism is a subject worthy of academic attention, but that we can draw on traditional and contemporary theology as resources for the social gospel. In light of the recent decimation of the "welfare state," such as it was, Christian activism and reflection are going to become even more indispensable, as I suspect that "faith-based initiatives" of some sort are going to become the major venues of "social services." Indeed, we might look on the exhaustion of welfare-state liberalism as a chance for church communities to reclaim duties they should have been doing all along. Rather than bewail the demise of state-funded compassion – which was always, in the end, a way to control the needy — we can grasp the opportunity to force our sisters and brothers to put their money where their mouths have been. It's also a chance, if we'd realize it, to force those same sisters and brothers to confront the political economy that makes poverty and toil necessary.

Precisely because the activists and scholars have given me such hope, I offer the following remarks as criticisms in the best sense of that much-abused word. That is, the future work of the Project should live up to the standards to which the booklet questions allude. It's indisputable, for instance, that Christians must claim that "Christian community engenders a distinctive social structure." If that's meant in what I believe theologians call a "proleptic," anticipatory sense, then that claim merits not only our assent but our action. But it can also be a classic piece of ideology in the Marxist sense. I certainly can't extend too much credit to this claim since, as I see it, Christians in America certainly don't have a "distinctive social structure." Alluding to the issue of class that I'll take up more in a moment, Christians still hire and fire, and get hired and fired, for profit. What makes us "distinctive"? Is there a distinctively Christian way to hand out pink slips? What's more, I'm not certain that theologians who write about "distinctiveness" really know what they're envisioning. Parishes? Co-operatives? Intentional communities? Networks of Christians who, while separated geographically or professionally, somehow create bonds based on faith, hope, and charity? God's kingdom has many mansions, to be sure, but the roads and walkways that connect them are also undoubtedly in better repair. If the social, cultural, and especially ecclesial dislocations produced by modernity are much greater than we admit, then the imaginative and reparative work we would need to do to produce distinctive Christian communities is much more extensive and difficult than we imagine. Again, there's an abundance of possibility in the demise of secular progressivism for the resurrection of the body of Christ from a tomb of lethargy and irrelevance.

That's the source of the frustration I still feel, and which the Project has made more acute but also, by the same token, more potentially fruitful. My frustration is both practical and intellectual. The guiding model for Christian social activism seems to be one derived from work with the poor and the marginalized. There are obvious and imperative reasons for this, and any Christian activism must retain and highlight this mission. But how, then, do we address the powerful – that is, people more or less like us – with access to at least a modicum of material, cultural, and political

power? The corporate rich and the professional middle classes need redemption, too, and require an equally fervent prophetic mission. If this is a project on lived theology and power, then go to the power. Why do we not encounter the powerful? What can we learn in suites and boardrooms that we can't learn in church and tenement basements? What is the lived theology of the privileged? And while we're at it, we could also move a bit farther down the social scale and meet that group once called "the working class." What does theology have to do with labor, considered both as a social class and as a vital element of human identity? (I've been reading Richard Sennett's *Respect* lately, and I'm struck by the quasi-theological quality of his insights into the perils of meritocracy, as well as his celebration of what used to be called unashamedly the dignity of labor.) In tandem, I think that the churches need to revitalize what links they still have to the labor movement (now there's a faith-based initiative any progressive can love), and the Project could be a vanguard in the rejuvenating a relationship that's been in the doldrums, arguably, since the 1960's. Thus, the Project needs to invite to the table labor leaders such as John Sweeney, or students of work such as Sennett, Barbara Ehrenreich, Arlie Hochschild, and Jill Fraser.

But even if we do encounter the professional and working classes, I'm afraid that the "prophetic" language we've inherited – which has degenerated, I'm afraid, into a rhetoric of high-decibel accusation, indictment, and self-righteousness – has become an unimaginative and self-deceptive bore. How much longer can tenured, mortgaged, and medically insured prophets condemn "materialism"? How much longer can we demonize "power" when power is what we want for the underprivileged? I think that a lot of our reflexive reliance on a (secular) lexicon of "materialism," "racism," "sexism," "homophobia," etc. – a reliance with, let's be honest, increasingly diminishing returns – stems from a reluctance, even an inability, to think theologically about matter, sexuality, and difference. While I would argue that the theologians associated with "radical orthodoxy" have pointed us in the right direction on this score, their work remains far too academic in style and audience to make an impact outside the seminar room.

If our critical language needs to be recast, I would contend that the most urgent assignment for Christian intellectuals in the new century is the recovery and re-creation of theology as the conceptual architecture of our scholarship, our social and cultural criticism, and our many varieties of activism. A large part of any future work in the Project should be devoted to this task. What would history, sociology, or cultural criticism look like if it were written in a theological idiom? How could we make it distinctive but not arcane, prophetic but not platitudinous? I'd wager that if we go back to Augustine – the fountainhead of all Christian cultural and historical philosophy – we'd find that his study of the love of mastery, *libido dominandi*, provides a point of departure for our own examinations of power, its nature and its perversion. The only way we'll ever know is to sit down and do it.

## [ Ted Ownby

**I.1.** For reasons I am still trying to understand, I have long had difficulty with self-righteousness and claims to moral certainty. Thus, I have long had problems understanding the many activists who, especially in their public discussions, lead through claims to high moral principle. Will Campbell's short summary of his own theology, "We're all bastards but God loves us anyway," strikes me as both accurate and moving. Campbell's statement also strikes me as a belief not too many scholars share. As a historian living and working among historians, I am especially troubled by the tendency of so many scholars to treat with disdain the ideas and people they find objectionable. I frequently find myself, especially among historians who do not write from religious perspectives, urging them to a greater sense of respect and decency in studying people they do not like, urging them to an understanding that the people we study, like the people who study them, are "all bastards."

In other words, my work with the Project has reinforced a point I already believed—that I am not an activist, at least according to most definitions, and that the activists I tend to admire most are those who are willing to doubt themselves. Thus, I am drawn to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s private writings more than his public statements, and to Reinhold Niebuhr's warnings. I continue to worry about any religious activism that does not explicitly call on its participants to evaluate their actions, to doubt the righteousness of their own perspectives, and especially to doubt the authority of any organization claiming to speak in the name of God and humanity.

The Project on Lived Theology has helped my own scholarship primarily by encouraging me to take theological statements more seriously. Most specifically, in my continuing research about the various uses of the concept of family in the twentieth-century American South, I have encountered consistent references to the notion of brotherhood. By about any standard, "brotherhood" is a vague concept, perhaps as vague as any virtue except perhaps "good." But my research is suggesting that the language of brotherhood moved from a few somewhat marginal groups in the early twentieth century to somewhere near the center of public discussion in the 1950s and 1960s. I am at work now trying to figure out different uses of the concept of brotherhood, which to most people seemed to mean recognizing all people's shared humanity under the fatherhood of God, treating all people with decency, and working for racial desegregation. For most people who used it, brotherhood referred especially to the need for white people in the South to become better human beings. It offered a family-based Christian alternative to white supremacist assertions of parental, especially paternal, privileges on the issue of school desegregation. For a short time, many discussions of civil rights issues pitted claims for brotherhood against claims for fatherhood as the most basic human relationship. Increasingly in the mid-twentieth century, brotherhood was also important as a call for African Americans to forgive their enemies or former enemies. The concept was crucial in the language of CORE, the sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the ideals of SNCC in its early years.

As a concept, brotherhood seems to have declined in significance since the 1960s. Since then, many people have decided it was not relevant, or at least not helpful, in addressing more specific questions of economic relationships, many activists began to reject any suggestions that the civil rights movement was ultimately about improving the moral character of white people, and many people see the concept as only offering anything useful to males. The concept now seems to many people on the left, as it did to me when I began this project, empty rhetoric. The concept of brotherhood is also important as something conservatives have rejected as being open ended and perhaps as not recognizing the ultimate authority of God first and parents second. I am investigating ways that the conservative turn toward religious idealization of parenthood, most notably in movements such as the American Family Association that use the language of family values, hope to guarantee a place for hierarchy in religious discussions of family.

I doubt that I would be thinking about these topics if I had not been part of The Project on Lived Theology. Doing research on the civil rights years while participating in the Project helped focus attention on religious language in ways my training as a historian might not have encouraged. Much of my training as a historian suggested that scholars should try to reject broad statements of ideals as mere rhetoric and instead discuss the more concrete goals behind them or, more specifically, that we should doubt Theology and study what is Lived.

These two points, doubting claims to righteousness while trying to do more to study religious claims to truth and good and brotherhood, may seem contradictory. Perhaps they are. But it is that basic uncertainty about claims to certainty—along with the desire to understand all of us bastards—that fuels my interests as a scholar.

**II.2.** So much of the excitement of experiencing and studying American religion comes from recognizing its dynamic quality. New churches and new religious organizations start all the time, only to inspire people who spin off from those churches and organizations to start over again. Some of the novelty derives from independent congregations wanting to start over; much of the novelty comes from the new shape of established churches as they change their thinking, their look, their music, and the rest by meeting with new people, ideas, technologies, and challenges.

Thus, it is difficult to discuss "the church" or "Christian community," and I suspect we should not use those terms. Groups of churches tend to lead to other churches, and Christian communities are always spawning new sub-communities. Individual congregations or groups of congregations change as well to become something new under older names. This dynamism is both wondrous and exciting, and considering its power seems essential to any consideration of how to relate theology to social issues. Pluralism and change are such central, ongoing realities in American religion that the suggestion that "Christian community engenders a distinctive social structure" seems likely to fail. The pluralist asks whose community, and whose vision of Christianity, and worries that such a suggestion calls for us to pick the right one before we can move on to a distinctively Christian social structure.

Much of the challenge of thinking about using a lived theology perspective to make the world a better place lies in negotiating relationships between religious thinking and religious pluralism. Many people who want to use religion to further justice, peace, and other big positive goals have wondered what it might be like if most American churches, or even most American Christian churches, could get together and work together. Tendencies in American religious history suggest they are not likely to do that—at least not for long.

The reality of religious pluralism means that religious groups considering social action must consider the basic religious goals, especially the theologies, of the people they hope to be part of that action. Everybody I know likes pluralism, or at least they say they do. But pluralism does not simply mean celebrating diversity in language, ethnicity, background, sound, look, feel; recognizing religious pluralism means dealing with the reality that for various groups, the whole point of religious life can be dramatically different.

For example, my own religious background—whether I like it or not—stresses that personal transformation through religious experience is simply more important than any issues of social organization. Poor or wealthy, powerful or powerless, those questions pale before the questions of saved or damned, inspired or uninspired. Countless opponents of this apolitical tradition have claimed otherwise, arguing that a good and caring religion must address the whole person and not just the soul, and worrying that a salvation-centered religion is too otherworldly to address worldly

## [ Gerald W. Schlabach

problems, whether that means feeding the hungry, fighting social injustice, or opposing war. But the salvation-centered tradition lives on, and it's not going away.

Likewise, many of the fastest growing religious movements are Holiness and Pentecostal groups who seek the power of the Holy Spirit as a force that, once again, believers often see as more important than issues of social organization. Feeling the beauty of God and the possible beauties of life, healing pain, and disease, and enjoying a community of fellow believers—these often have the power to trump any card that civic activism might be able to play.

Also, at least in the region of the country that I study, many of the clearest, loudest, best publicized trends in the convergence of religious and political life are tending toward conservative activism that fight against the organized forces of individual sinfulness rather than fighting for justice or an enriched community life.

Finally and most obviously, millions of the world's people are understandably suspicious of any discussion of "the church" or "Christian community," because they do not belong and do not choose to.

Considering these and many other perspectives on religion and the world, how can we discuss potential projects for applying Christianity to issues of social structure and community life when so many people, Christian and non-Christian, apolitical or politically conservative, are not interested in such projects? How might it be possible to inspire greater discussion about changing social structures when so many people don't define social justice or an enhanced community life as primary objectives of religious life? Do we just look for congregations with an activist side, do we just look inward and try to inspire more activism within our own church groups? Do we keep arguing against theological perspectives we find objectionable—those that do not address social issues or encourage social engagement—by writing, teaching, preaching, and trying to live alternatives in such a powerful way that we hope more people will come along?

Or are there other options in which activist religious groups and other groups that reject most of such activism as liberal, or political, or irrelevant, might work toward **some** shared goals? Would it be helpful to give up on City on a Hill notions of a **true Christian community**, or does the idealistic theology behind such notions inspire people to work together to improve communities?

Certainly, models of religious people working together without a shared notion of a Christian community exist: groups of ministers, support organizations for community groups, prayer breakfasts, and the like. Some are exciting, some seem staid or corporate. Other models have appeared at moments of crisis, when various people of various groups apply various theological perspectives to address the same problem. Action from various theological perspectives, serving shared ends, seems essential to improving things in a pluralistic society. That seems an appealing way to envision the future: one where we start not with clear models for how life should be but instead where we recognize shared goals in addressing problems. Finding ways to fight poverty and war that also involve the potential to get saved or get sanctified or fight sinfulness seems essential. This may sound horribly pragmatic, and perhaps it is. But sharpening how to think about life in a multi-theological society, how to think about how some groups may identify problems when some people do not see them as theologically important, and how to work toward similar ends from different beginnings, may help clarify ways to consider the relationship between pluralism and theology.

I. Pausing to write an essay on my participation in the Project for Lived Theology, I am briefly putting aside or putting off various projects: revision of a study on "Just Policing: How War Could Cease to be a Church-Dividing Issue;" preparation for a service-learning class in Guatemala on the Church in Latin America; writing a memo to mediate between my denomination's and my congregation's official positions toward homosexual members; and planning the second conference of the "Bridgefolk" movement for grassroots dialogue and unity between Mennonites and Roman Catholics. The point is, I would be hard-pressed to identify any of my on-going work as a Christian theologian as anything but "lived theology."

Of course, since my specific field is "moral theology," this is easy enough for me to say. And yet I wonder: Is there any theology that is not lived theology? Certainly there are branches of systematic theology, in its more speculative and metaphysical mode, that may require freedom from the demand for immediate and practical "relevance" to be carried out at all. Still, every theology reflects and is embedded in social practices grounded in implicit ecclesiologies. Continental theologies that might seem to suggest the very antithesis of "lived theology" have nonetheless embodied social practices of establishment. American theologians who have defended academic freedom against ecclesiastical oversight have nonetheless engendered ecclesiologies consigning the church to cultural chaplaincy. Theologians, activists and historians gathered in Project on Lived Theology workgroups have nonetheless enjoyed fine dining as a perquisite for helping corporate philanthropists contribute to the common good. Theologies can be bad or good, lived well or lived poorly, and still be lived theologies all.

The contribution of the Project, therefore, may mainly have been to name (not create) "lived theology" — and to buy time. I mean this in two ways. First, most literally, and not insignificantly, the Project has paid the expenses and stipends needed for a few dozen scholars and activists to carve out the time they need to gather and converse. This should probably not be eventful except that the better scholars and activists do at "living theology" in ways that are accountable to their churches and integrated into their communities, the less time they have to practice sabbath by regrouping and reflecting on their work. Second, buying time for others to live out the quietly daring quest that theology names is the most —yet the best— that we should expect of academic theology. Let me explain:

II. At the second meeting of the Workgroup on Power, I opened a discussion on the late John Howard Yoder by arguing that key to his thought is a recovery of true cruciform power in the face of Niebuhrian accounts of what it takes to exercise social responsibility — and by comparing Yoder to J.R.R. Tolkien's account of hobbits. The first of Peter Jackson's cinematic renderings of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy had come out a few months before. With it came a string of dubious commentaries comparing epic wars of Middle Earth against the forces of evil with the U.S.'s "war against terrorism." Ironically, such commentaries fall in the very trap into which fall Tolkien's evil lord and seduced wizard. For the power that the world knows as power, the power of violence and domination which tends to blind those wielding it to other powers, is in fact a diversion and at most a holding tactic. The best that the many battles in Middle Earth can do is buy time while the real and decisive plot of history proceeds elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> To notice the real plot we must look not to the battlefields but to the Shire and its "little people." These are the hobbits who love simple, unglamorous pleasures but have the courage of quiet gumption needed to give up those pleasures, face Mount Doom, and relinquish the ring of domination. Likewise, insisted Yoder, the true plot of history proceeds through those who trust not in swords but instead bear crosses and do the steady, creative work of building new and nonviolent communities.

## [ Sondra Wheeler

Likewise also (I would now add) the intellectual battles we wage in the academy may be somewhat more creative and humane than those waged on other battlefields, but we should not be surprised when the most we can do and the best we can offer is to buy time for the real plot of lived theology to proceed among ordinary churches and unheralded community organizers. With Gandalf we may decipher the runes of ancient lore, but must heed the warnings we find there that wielding the ring of domination always undoes the best of intentions. With Aragorn we may sometimes wage intellectual battles, but only to shield the work of Frodo, Samwise and other hobbits with the respect they feel little need to win for themselves. With both we may roam the wilds in an age bent on risking doom, but always for love of Shire folk and their green ways of peace. By which I mean the church.

What dominates in our culture is not even always violence — though its lure is far too strong. Rather what dominates is the glamour, celebrity and prestige that distracts many of us from our neighborhoods, tempts us to impatience with civic discourse, tells us to seek fulfillment in something more (always more) that is always somewhere else, and thus incites violence both overt and respectable. Too often the academy itself becomes that alluring somewhere else that distances us from the ordinary life of the church. The real challenge for this Project and those of us whom it has intrigued with the notion of lived theology, then, may have less to do with promoting it in the academy than with practicing it in partnership with churches. Promoting it in the academy is important, but is ultimately a matter of buying time and winning respect so that lived theology can happen more vigorously and confidently where it matters most.

**I.1.** One of the surprises for me in the observation of various kinds of church ministry sites and forms of community engagement was the way in which, again and again, vigorous and well-articulated accounts of the character of Christian calling and the mission of the church animated the work of the leadership with whom we spoke. Received wisdom often divorces serious theological reflection from the hands-on work of ministry, especially from the challenging and unpredictable ministries of those engaged in urban settings, with their array of social problems. Not uncommonly, there is even a degree of mutual disdain between theologians and practitioners or activists, each conceding the necessity of the other's work, but each basically convinced that he or she is doing the real thing, whichever form that work takes. Since I teach in a seminary, I spend a fair amount of time trying to convince students that the work we force them to do to obtain a degree is not beside the point: not just a bar their various denominations make them jump over, not even simply a separable preparation for ministry. Thinking through the puzzles of biblical interpretation, tracing the vicissitudes of the church's struggle with perennial questions and recurrent corruptions, struggling with the hard intellectual work of making sense of the paradoxical proclamation of God's demanding mercy: all this is part of the actual living of Christian life, the mind's share in the all-embracing task of speaking and living out the truth of the gospel. It is, nevertheless, something of a shock to hear women and men who are deeply and constantly engaged in the challenges of practical care-giving in harrowing circumstances speak so deeply *theologically* about the identity and mission of the church. It highlights the fact that what they are doing is not running a social service agency, or doing community organizing, or even planting an inner city church for denomination X. They are proclaiming the faith they believe in action, speaking the truth of the gospel with their hands and feet, and because that is what they are doing, they are naturally sustaining themselves by theological reflection and critique.

The impact of this observation on my work is more than confirming the truth of what I had thought must be true. It has also fueled an interest in probing both contemporary and historical Christian communities for the character of theological understandings that have nurtured both piety and what we are wont to call social engagement. My intuition, somewhat confirmed by the Project visits, has been that these must be conceived not as alternatives, not even as complementary, but instead as parts of one dynamic whole in which faith is practiced, and practice both nurtures and informs faith. This takes me to the other question I want to engage.

**II.3.(5)** On this front I am just beginning to think somewhat analytically, fueled partly by a long-term interest in the theology of Methodism's founder, John Wesley. It is commonplace to say that Wesley had no theological originality, and there is truth to that assertion. Certainly, he aspired to none and would have been delighted to hear his modern critics find the source of each aspect of his thought in this or the other strand of the antecedent Christian tradition. But Wesley did achieve a unique and particular synthesis, which, while not without its difficulties, did serve to ignite a genuine reform movement that spread across Britain and the New World. Moreover, that movement was the inspiration for countless long-term mission projects which became institutionalized as hospitals, schools, job-training programs and so on for many decades to come. My interest is in what it was about the theological thinking of both historic and contemporary Christian groups that nurtures a sustained engagement with the broader social world in the name of gospel fidelity. How do we form people who are not only led by their convictions out into the society of which they are part, but who are fed and nurtured by that social practice of the faith in ways that deepen and solidify their confession, rather than cleaving apart proclamation and service, evangelism and mission? Here my intuition is that what Wesley contributed was the synthesis of a genuine Protestant soteriology with a catholic understanding of the growth in actual holiness. His account of Christian life draws not just upon the theology of sanctification, but also upon the rich tradition of the practice of spiritual disciplines ranging from devotional reading to "the works of corporeal mercy." Key to his synthesis is the

1. Cf. Gandalf's counsel at the end of *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, book 5, chapter 9, "The Last Debate."

## [ Lauren Winner

account of divine grace as the activity of God the Holy Spirit in the human person, foreclosing (in his view at least) both quietist and Pelagian takes on the role of human activity in Christian life. It seems to me that the contemporary church, continually vacillating between devotion to God and service to humankind, between the interiority of piety and the externality of missional engagement, badly needs such a synthesis today.

I.1. My engagement with practitioners, activists, and pastors shaped my thinking about my own work in three key ways.

First, I felt encouraged about the potential audience for intellectual and academic work. Perhaps this is because I am in dissertation throes – and constantly angsty about the fact that I am spending years writing hundreds of pages that only 6 people (my committee + my parents) will read. The professional structures of the academy, of course, reward academic work that will be read by academics. But I saw among the activists and pastors whom I met in the Workgroup a real hunger on their part for relevant and accessible scholarship. I left these meetings feeling both challenged and encouraged — encouraged in that there seemed to be openings, ways to connect scholarly work to the real world; challenged because the practitioners seemed to be calling us academics out of the ivory tower. They were asking us to ask other questions. That asking feels possible because I now have the sense that there might be an audience and a conversation on the other side of the new questions.

In her book about writing, Anne Lamott encourages writers to think about audience. When you're stuck, she says, you can envision your book or short story or poem as a letter to a specific person. My scholarly writing has changed in the last year because I have been able to think of pastors and activists as potential recipients of my letter. When I approach my dissertation with them in mind, I begin to ask very different questions than those I ask when I only think of academic interlocutors.

Second, the way I think about my more popular writing has changed. My involvement with the Project coincided with the release of my spiritual memoir, *Girl Meets God*. After the book was in press, and in large part because of my Workgroup meetings, I found myself rethinking the focus of *Girl Meets God*. The focus is very interior—not, I hope, narcissistic, but nonetheless concerned principally with one person's inner, spiritual development. The book considers prayer, hanging out at church, reading spiritual texts, etc. Because of the Workgroup meetings, I found myself regretting that I had not paid more attention to the ways conversion to Christianity shapes a believer's encounter with the world. Indeed, one reporter asked me, "Your book is, in fact, very much girl meets God. When are we going to get girl meets world?" That question resonated with me in a large part because of my participation in the Power Workgroup. Put differently, I felt challenged both in my popular spiritual writing and in my own walk with God to pay more attention to the structures and people of the world around me.

Third, the most autobiographical response. My involvement with the Project coincided with a year in which I seem to have been in real vocational transition—transition, possibly, out of a traditional academic mode, though transition to what, I am still not entirely sure. The Power Workgroup was, for me, an important place of vocational reflection and discernment. On the one hand, I felt very sanguine about the historical discipline after leaving these meetings (because the historians in my group were all so exceptionally insightful and creative!). But the Group also proved to be a context for me to think about other vocational avenues: ministry, activism, and so forth.

Finally, I want to add a word about how my involvement with the other scholars in our Workgroup has reshaped how I think about my scholarship. In our very first meeting, when no one other than Charles really had a handle on what "lived theology" was or what task our group was charged with undertaking, Russell gave a presentation about his activism in California. At the end of the presentation, Ted offered a reading, in effect, of Russell's presentation and activism. In trying to discern the theological vision that underpinned Russell's organizing, Ted noticed that the word "peace" appeared frequently in Russell's talk. This is a simple point, but I find it to be a very helpful example of what it

means to read sociological and historical texts for theological content. In my dissertation, I am trying to read a set of Anglican material artifacts. Ted's reading of Russell's presentation has been a very concrete model of what I am trying to do when I examine eighteenth-century baptismal gowns and mourning jewelry.

**II.2.** The answer to this question must be not only “yes,” but “of course.” It seems to me that if the answer to this question is “no,” then the Project is not, in fact, properly theological, but rather only sociological. In other words, if Christian practices and patterns are communicative solely of a Christian community's self-understanding, then studying said community is not normatively or ontologically different from studying any other community. Further, if a working premise of the Project is a normative assertion of the truth of the Gospel story, then one would hope that—though Christian communities exist in a fallen world and though there is no one-to-one correlation between the visible and the invisible church—there is some relationship between the Christian community's collective self-understanding on the one hand, and God's purposes for humanity on the other hand. (My impulse is to ask, “If these communities are not communicative of God and God's purposes for humanity, why bother studying them?” But that may be merely an indication that my own interests have become decidedly normative, not descriptive.)

There is something, of course, particularly incarnational in the project of “lived theology.” It is not only that the Project on Lived Theology wants to pose theological questions to communities and collectives. It is also that Christian theology in particular gives us the resources to make sense of the project of posing those questions. For, Jesus came and dwelt among us and transformed mere human collectivities into the Body of Christ; so, understanding God's self is inseparable from understanding the communities that understand themselves as being organized around Him.

## CONGREGATION AND CITY



7 1/2 Street, with First Baptist Main Street in the background  
Charlottesville, VA; Holsinger Collection, the University of Virginia

### **Bruce Beard**

Senior Pastor (Transformation Ministries, First Baptist Church)

### **Gardenia Beard**

Director of Missions Services (Central Virginia Baptist Association)

### **Laura Brown**

Social Justice Minister (Church of the Incarnation)

### **Nicole Hurd**

Assistant Dean and Director of the Center for Undergraduate Excellence  
(University of Virginia)

### **John Kiess**

AmeriCorp VISTA Worker (Charlottesville Abundant Life Ministries)

### **Jennifer McBride**

Ph.D. Candidate (University of Virginia)

### **Rydell Payne**

Executive Director of Charlottesville Abundant Life Ministries

### **Peter Slade**

Ph.D. candidate (University of Virginia)

### **George Telford**

Director of the Institute for Reformed Theology

### **Brian vander Wel**

Assistant to the Rector (Christ Episcopal Church)

### **Richard Wills**

Ph.D. candidate (University of Virginia)

## [ Bruce Beard

Grateful for the invitation to become a part of the project, I must admit that the old nagging question of relevancy was present in my affirmation to serve and share. I had thought that question was resolved for me after several years of reading and pondering the world theologically. With few exceptions, I had concluded that most theologians were great thinkers but were somewhat detached from the realities of the world's communities. While it is clear that many theologians found their thinking shaped by their experiences in communities, they seemed to have struggled with interpreting and reshaping those theological constructs into usable tools to affirmatively impact those same communities. Even those well intentioned academics and theologians who struggled with the issues of power, politics, wealth and the oppression of the socially impotent often seemed hard pressed to find the needed social connectors between the philosophical and the practical. Liberationists who wrote Black theology, Womanist, Feminist, and Hispanic theologies seemed to have had a keener sense of certain social realities, yet also appeared to slip into the temptation to engage in apologetics rather than seeking those all important bridges or connectors that transform realities. The value of the theologian and academic cannot, however, be denied nor ignored. There is a saying that sometimes one cannot see the forest for the trees. This implies, of course, that there are times when we may be too deeply involved in some cause or endeavor that we are unable to see the full width and breadth of the matter. Such is the caution for the practitioner.

The day-to-day, hands-on work of the pastor/parish or para-parish worker can often deny them the opportunity or time to seek the deeper theological and philosophical insight that could help inform and enhance their work. The theologian/philosopher is therefore able to provide such helpful insight where appropriately applied. Yet, the question of relevancy lingers. Perhaps it is a reflection of the many ways in which Christians as a people embracing a common faith in Jesus the Christ have grappled with its fragmentation across racial, cultural, socio-economic, and denominational boundaries. There would appear, however superficially, to be a divide between the pastor/activist/practitioner and the theologian/philosopher/academic.

The worth of the Project on Lived Theology is in its recognition of the strengths, value and interdependency of each discipline. Many practitioners think and write theologically while many theologians and scholars think and write with an eye toward practicality and indeed often employ these skills in churches and other organizations that directly impact lives. The Project on Lived Theology reaffirms that practitioner/activist and scholar/theologian are a part of the same team, with different areas of expertise used to achieve the common goal of bringing the healing power of Christ to a broken and hurting world.

In the fourth Gospel (John 18:37), John records Jesus responding to the questioning of Pilate by saying that He had come to testify to the truth. Pilate in turn responds with the rhetorical question, what is truth? Such has been the quest of thinkers through the ages. The tension between perception and truth on the one hand and fact and truth on the other has left many with more questions than answers regarding how to be an authentic community in light of God's original design and intent. There are those who may argue that God created the earth and all there is in it but left it to humankind to work out what it means to be in relationship and in community with one another. Others may argue that God is intimately involved in the affairs of humans, guiding them toward His design for authentic relationship and community. Yet, most would agree that community is by God's design and intent. The scholar, practitioner and theologian not only engage the quest for ultimate truth but also seek ways to bring that truth to a lived reality.

Throughout the Scriptures there appears to be an underlying theme of God's intent for humankind's relationship with each other and with God. In Genesis 2:18, God sees the human he made and said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." We were created for one another, to be in relationship and community. Throughout the Scriptures there is the language of community: through narrative, poetry, parable, history, prophesy, etc. Jesus declares that the two greatest commands are that humans first love God and then their neighbor as themselves. In the third Gospel (Luke 4:18), Jesus is recorded to have read from the prophet Isaiah as He visited a local synagogue, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, set at liberty the oppressed, recover sight to the blind, release the prisoner and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The point is that none should be excluded from community and within community each individual finds wholeness. The Christian community engenders social order as it comes into the understanding of truth through the scholar, theologian, and practitioner and as it searches for harmony that in turn will bring community to all. To be sure, a lofty goal, but without such a quest toward God's intent for the created order, the world will remain broken.

## [ Gardenia E. Beard

When I was first invited to participate in the Project on Lived Theology, I must admit that I had no idea of what I was getting myself into. “Lived Theology,” while being something that I do daily in my work as a Community Outreach Minister, at the same time presented itself to me as a foreign concept. In my opinion, those who work in various areas of social ministry, including pastors and activists, are the ones who live out their theological convictions in the work that they do. The problem that often exists with such persons, however, is that many have a limited understanding of the connection between theology and practice.

On the other hand, my perception of “theologians and religious scholars” has been quite different in that I have viewed such persons as having a head-knowledge of theology, but lacking in interest and understanding when it comes to practical application of such knowledge. It is wonderful to be knowledgeable about the things of God, but if you are not putting this knowledge into practice, then what good is it? I once heard a preacher say that “it’s hard to be spiritual without involving your emotions” which, in my estimation, speaks to this issue of theology and practice itself.

This is why I am excited about marrying the seemingly polarized concept of “theology” and “practice”. Being a part of this workgroup has truly been a blessing, and has given me much hope in terms of bridging the gap between the academic and activist aspects of theology. Through ongoing communication and dialogue between the religious scholar/theologian and the religious leader/activist, there can be a collaboration of efforts that will facilitate the presentation of God to those to whom we minister more effectively. My prayer is that this is not one of those efforts that start off with a sense of excitement but eventually fizzles out due to lack of interest.

**I.2.** There are many resources that theologians and religious scholars can provide those of us involved in social ministry. One such resource would be the availability of persons that can offer a theological perspective to various issues that we face in our work, which would be helpful in terms of addressing the “where is God in all of this?” question. An ongoing provision of forums to facilitate such discussions, as well as the availability of individuals to council with social activists on a one-on-one basis would be an invaluable resource in my opinion. The development of some periodic publication, such as a newsletter or website, that would offer suggested reading materials, information on workshops and conferences that might be of interest to those who practice in the field, and other such information is another resource that would be wonderful to have at our disposal. Moreover, it would be helpful to both activists and scholars if theologians and scholars could periodically get involved in some aspect of practical ministry. This would communicate to those who practice theology the sincerity of those who understand theology.

Every meeting/gathering of our workgroup has been instrumental in providing fresh resources for thinking, preaching, and organizing. The presentations to the workgroup, both by community members and scholars, have been most enlightening. Hearing from authors of books that speak to this subject, as well as those who have been actively involved in projects and movements that embrace this “lived theology” concept, have been inspirational and challenging. And the ability to participate in conferences that encompass all aspects of this subject, meeting individuals and being introduced to groups that are actively involved in theological ministry, has engendered ideas of how we can be more effective in how we do ministry in our area.

The dialogues that we have had as a group have both confirmed the work that I do as a community outreach ministry as well as challenged how I carry out such work. The confirmation has come in terms of the intent by which outreach ministry to the community is done in the first place, which is to extend the hand of God as a continuation of the work that Christ began over 2000 years ago. Although I already knew that this was the purpose of outreach ministry, my convictions were strengthened every time we came together as a group to discuss various issues. The challenge presented to me involves the theological implications of my work in terms of research and application. I previously mentioned religious scholars and theologians having a head-knowledge but lacking a heart-understanding of social ministry; I must admit that I, to some extent, have been guilty of a bias towards heart-understanding. Now I feel that both aspects are equally important and am determined to incorporate such head-understanding in the work that I do.

**II.2.** I definitely believe that the patterns and practices of every Christian community are communicative of both its collective self-understanding and its understanding of God and His purposes for humankind. This rings true for every aspect of human existence in that the things that we do on an individual, as well as a collective, basis speak to our understanding of God. The task is to illuminate such understanding to the Christian community as a whole, as well as to the individuals that comprise it. The potential for this group of participants to do further research in an attempt to bring theological meaning to the patterns and practices of Christian communities in this particular locality can be the beginning of many things, including “authentic” urban renewal, “authentic” racial reconciliation, “authentic” social justice, and so on. In helping Christian communities understand why they do what they do by using a theological basis for such understanding, we will not only have a positive effect on that particular community, but we will spill over into the greater community. It is my belief that once a people understands why they think and act in a certain way, why those who are “different” from them think and act another way, and how this all relates to our understanding of God and God’s purposes for humankind, the religious community, the community at large, this nation, and this entire world will begin to actualize God’s original intent when He created humankind in His image.

## [ John Kiess

As a community worker in Charlottesville's Prospect neighborhood, a low-income community within walking distance of the University of Virginia, I have often found myself yearning for a conceptual framework robust enough to make sense of the difficult realities that characterize life for my neighbors. I've wanted to situate events and conversations within a larger nexus of meaning that has the power to illuminate, expose, or even redeem forces at work in the neighborhood and the larger city. In this sense, I've been seeking a counter-narrative, one that not only penetrates to the core of reality, but provides the practical steps for living in light of this reality. With pastors, activists, students and teachers in the City and Congregation Workgroup, we have been trying to explore what this counter-narrative might look like.

This process of exploration has been rich. It has involved hearing from a number of voices that offer a glimpse of Charlottesville from alternative perspectives, often from below, from the view of excluded or outcast members of society. We heard from Dr. R.A. Johnson, pastor of thirty-seven years at Pilgrim Baptist Church, who shared his struggles in local civil rights efforts, from sit-ins at Buddy's restaurant in the 1960's, to massive resistance, to contemporary frustrations with racial profiling. Our explorations took us to Vinegar Hill, a once thriving African-American community that was demolished in the late 1960's as part of a local urban renewal project. Here we encountered the anguish of lost culture and opportunities, a lost neighborhood whose memory and emotional burden continues to exercise a profound influence on the imagination of so many Charlottesville residents today.

Activists Karen Waters of the Quality Community Council and Audrey Oliver of the Public Housing Alliance of Residents drew us into the life of Charlottesville's low-income communities, sharing the inequalities and injustices they've confronted, but also the incomparable joy their unique contexts have offered them. Joe Zsakos of the Virginia Organizing Project crystallized for us a number of underlying economic and social tensions at work in Charlottesville, providing a compelling case for the immediacy of a living wage for the city's working poor.

The voices of workgroup members themselves have added considerable depth and nuance to our emerging view of the city. I recall with fondness when the workgroup traveled to the Christian Community Development Conference in Pasadena, where during a late night conversation, Pastor Bruce Beard of First Baptist challenged us to re-phrase the conference's main question, "What are we going to do about it?" to "What are we going to do about *what?*"—calling for deeper discernment of our unique historical moment and the causes of today's most pressing crises. He challenged us to read history not for insight only, but for the purposes of healing and reconciliation. In February, workgroup member Rev. George Telford moved us with inspiring power in recounting the role First Presbyterian Church played in debates surrounding integration and the Vietnam War, outlining the necessity of the church's prophetic voice in the larger society.

Providing a space for these various voices to be heard and reflected upon is not what has made our task theological, however. Theology prompts us in certain directions, creates priorities, takes sides on injustices, but so does political science, sociology and even biology. As a member of the City and Congregation workgroup, I have learned that theology offers much more than new voices, characters or metaphors for storytelling. Theology alters the very way stories are told.

Our desire to speak God's word and to tell the story of his dramatic unfolding in Charlottesville has required that we re-orient our understanding of language itself, from a medium that merely communicates content, or slaps on conceptual frameworks, to a means of human interaction that is ethically charged and disposed toward the needs of the

world. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 1932 essay "On the Theological Basis of the Work of the World Alliance," a text to which we have recurrently returned in our conversations, he writes:

The word of the church to the world must therefore encounter the world in all its present reality from the deepest knowledge of the world, if it is to be authoritative. The church must be able to say the Word of God, the word of authority, here and now, in the most concrete way possible, from knowledge of the situation. The church may not therefore preach timeless principles however true, but only commandments which are true today. God is 'always' God to us 'today.'

Implicit in Bonhoeffer's powerful charge to the church is an understanding of language—and narrative—that is social, concrete and embodied. Speaking and storytelling takes place not in a vacuum, but in ethical relationship with others. The first word in a theological narrative of Charlottesville comes in response to our encounter with the neighbor in Prospect, or Garrett Square, or the pews of historically unreconciled churches.

Brewing among City and Congregation Workgroup members and other participants in the Project on Lived Theology is a sense that we are gradually discovering a new way of speaking, uncovering a new mode of discourse, a *new language*. Our words are not new—they are the same liturgical words of the carpenter—but what we are doing with these words, where they are spoken, to whom they are addressed, the cost they exercise on our lives and choices—this is excitedly new. We write not because we know, but in order to know, in order to act and more fully live. The narrative that is emerging in Charlottesville and other communities across the country is one that provides penetrating insight and plenty of concepts, but more importantly and distinctly, it is one that is necessarily being enfolded, worn on the sleeves of its writers, a language that is lived because theology is re-discovering its neighbor.

## [ Jennifer M. McBride

In August 2001, I arrived as an entering graduate student in the University of Virginia's Religious Studies department starving for a renewed, rigorous life of the mind. Actually, to say I was *starving* is somewhat melodramatic given that I was feeding myself on thinkers like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothy Day and engaging in stimulating discussions with my pastors and fellow workers. Still, my previous two years working in a Washington D.C. inner-city community-building ministry were so full in terms of raw experience, barrier breaking relationships, awakened spiritual insights about poverty and privilege, Christian community, the reality of social-systemic sin, etc., that any lack which threatened the integrity of my new understanding of the Church's all-encompassing role in society felt severe. I wrote in my application to graduate school that the theological and socio-political questions inherent in the work I was engaging in were as palpable as the neighborhood's faces before me. I couldn't ignore the questions—in fact, I was convinced that the articulation of the questions and the attempt towards answers would propel me into future hands-on, grassroots work—but I also didn't know how to begin to go about doing this on my own. I started interpreting my calling as a bridge (albeit, let's admit, a flimsy and shaky one, like rope suspended across a canyon!): my vocation involving bridging the privileged and the poor / the powerful and the powerless across socio-economic and/or racial barriers, as well as bridging the raw reality of the Church and society with the intellectual rigor of the academy. The Project on Lived Theology has provided a necessary framework in which to theologically explore Bonhoeffer's "civil courage"—the Church's role (and my own as part of that body) within the public realm—and has given me a hope that my presumed vocation is not in vain.

At present, I am a fledgling scholar and activist, so my discoveries are quite basic. Still, I believe, they are profound convictions that form one foundation upon which constructive academic work can be done: the linguistic framework perhaps most theologically appropriate when understanding our contemporary moment is that of narrative. The life embodied in time and sociality is always already theologically imbued. The interconnection of dogma and praxis, then, is not a creative addition to theology; rather, it is fundamental to its nature. And so, in one simple turn from the horizontal to the vertical, so to speak, we may enclose our understandings of justice and injustice, community and segregation, societal participation and inactivity within a theological framework. The incarnation validates materiality and makes our history God's own. The Son's descent into humanity's depths through the incarnation, crucifixion, and the hell of Holy Saturday, his ascension to the Father, and the Spirit's consequent descent into the believer's soul, reveal our goals of reconciling solidarity already as divine work, and eschatologically speaking, as divine triumph. Understanding Trinitarian life and love, to any degree, is itself a complex enterprise. What is still more difficult, I believe, is translating such understanding into participation with the divine in our own concrete, existential situations.

Particularity, then, must be essential to the narratives we both observe (or perhaps live within) and theologically write. As a research assistant for the Project on Lived Theology, I have had the opportunity to sit in on various workgroup meetings of which I am not formally a part; there I have been exposed to the vast array of questions and discussions concerning lived theology and community building, power, and race, all of which relate to some degree with my involvement in the Congregation and City workgroup, which is theologically examining these worldly complexities locally, while articulating a narrative of Charlottesville, Virginia. The Congregation and City workgroup's narrowed focus on Charlottesville has allowed us to immerse ourselves in our own city's detailed particularities. We have encountered pieces of Charlottesville's past and present story by listening, for example, to Legal Aid staff representing the county's significant yet seemingly invisible and hidden migrant population, the Virginia Organizing Project's community activists fighting, among other inequities, the minimum wage on behalf of specific hotel workers, and both retired and active pastors describing that which has and does divide our town. Again, if theology is lived, it must be so amidst the details of our ordinary and complex life.

Therefore, the Congregation and City workgroup is an academic project that should not be divorced from the reality that I am a player in this drama. I am attending Christ Episcopal Church, a wealthy, white parish historically comprised of Charlottesville's socially elite and previously involved in Virginia's "Massive Resistance" against school desegregation. I have written a theological narrative critiquing Christ Church's participation in Massive Resistance by examining, with the help of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr., this church's previous conception of its Christian duty in relation to Charlottesville's school closings in 1958. As a layperson with this narrative in hand, how do I engage my congregation in dialogue about the present state of race relations in the Charlottesville Church and the need for confession and reconciliation forty-five years later?

The prologue to this answer and to that of many other questions regarding Charlottesville is the Congregation and City workgroup itself. This group, composed of area activists, UVA graduate students, and local pastors from both black and white churches, creates space for what Bonhoeffer calls the "community of the cross," the fellowship of confessed sinners bearing the burdens of each other's sin and the sin of Charlottesville's past and present, and in turn becoming a vehicle of transformative power. We are an amalgamation of students profoundly enveloped in Charlottesville's monolithic power structure, which is riding like a freight train through the town's lower income neighborhoods; of pastors and members of a church slowly opening its eyes to the wounds of its neighbors; of neighbors enduring these injuries; of community builders trying to translate deep theological convictions into responsible praxis; of individuals trying to grow in Charlottesville the love, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation that is the Kingdom of God. We ask with Bonhoeffer, how do we speak the concrete word of God in Charlottesville today? Our work together has just begun.

## [ Rydell Payne

What kinds of resources can theologians and religious scholars provide Charlottesville Abundant Life Ministries (CALM) that might strengthen or enrich our work? As I reflect on this question, it is clear to me that a particular Lived Theology Project member, John, has provided immeasurable resources to the work of Christian Community Development in the Prospect Avenue community. CALM provides programming to help families grow holistically in hopes of grooming leadership within the community to encourage redevelopment and renewal. The critical resources that have been cultivated through him for our community are like King to the American Civil Right movement, Bonhoeffer to “Cheap Grace” or “theology in action”, or the voluptuous meal to “Babette’s Feast”.

Isak Dinesen’s tale, Babette’s Feast offer many parallels to John’s work. Babette, a French refugee escaping a civil war in Paris, finds her way to a small Danish fishing village that had experienced revival as a result of teachings from Martin Luther and Phillip Melancton. The Lutheran sect had lost its meaning of vibrant Christian community as witnessed by broken relationships, contrived joy and an aged congregation that was dwindling. For twelve years Babette served this community by cooking, cleaning, caring for the sick and other domestic tasks in exchange for food and lodging. Babette’s Feast is about people embracing the heartfelt choices and decisions that would profoundly impact their lives over time.

John, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate, chose to bring his theological convictions and God-given talents beyond the UVA classroom to the local community in at least three major ways. The first way was through the Quality Community Council (QCC), a grassroots organization developed by the City of Charlottesville to develop long-term solutions to quality of life issues. Through QCC, John has helped develop community leadership that has taken on vital roles such as starting a neighborhood association and serving as basketball coaches in the Prospect community.

Christ Episcopal Church is a second place where John has left his mark. Prior to John’s input, Christ Church had identified Abundant Life as a place to serve, but not with real definition. John helped Christ Church to develop an after-school homework/tutoring program for 25 youth from our community in middle school.

Thirdly, here at CALM, John served his first year as an intern and is currently serving his second year as a volunteer through a program sponsored by the National Corporation for Community Service called Americorp-VISTA. Actually, John spearheaded the grant proposal for us to become a VISTA site. We have had the pleasure of having him and another VISTA worker develop programs, write grants, and nurture community leadership. One leader in particular, Eddie, has co-lead with John a program (5-8 Club) teaching middle school students life skills through the Virginia Tobacco Settlement Foundation which is another grant CALM was rewarded via John. John and Eddie have developed a unique relationship that has provoked Eddie’s leadership beyond programming to being part of the core relationships needed to establish a local church in our community. The 5-8 Club has a monthly meal called “The Feast” where teens celebrate one another’s company, stressing God’s heart for fellowship and nourishment. In addition to cooking, John has taken twelve to fifteen teens on three road trips: to Atlanta twice and once to New York/Niagra Falls. He has also coordinated our summer jobs program one summer for about 20 teens, mediated countless conflicts among participants, and responded to many crisis that families have faced with practical help.

John has been a prophet by initiating discussions regarding power as demonstrated by our organization. His questions of what does increased solidarity and community look like in our neighborhood and what steps should we

began to take to get there have been extremely helpful. Our first Martin Luther King Day celebration, co-lead by John, was very successful because of the discussions about community and the theological underpinnings that King expressed concerning the “beloved community.” We saw more adult participation from our community than ever before on King Day.

Babette’s meal provided an opportunity for the guest to celebrate the choices they had made. The guest did not earn this very expensive meal; it was an act of grace towards them. The feast allowed Babette to be the artist that she was created to be and express gratitude toward the community.

During the past two years, John’s choices have been celebrated by fruitful labor. He has been grateful to serve this community and ministry, seeing it as an opportunity to learn and yet be what God has made him. We have been graced by his incarnate presence and through him as his gifts have been demonstrated. We have not deserved or earned him, but it has been an expression of God’s grace. A guest said at Babette’ Feast, “grace my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude.” I only hope that we appropriately express our thankfulness for the added health and strength he has given to God’s work. In John, truly “mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another.” His service has taken our ministry to a new place and has brought to completion a more solid foundation that has been under construction for seven years.

Another guess at the feast said “...Through all the world there goes one long cry from the heart of the artist: Give me leave to do my utmost!” He has been allowed by God, family, faculty, and residents to respond to the longings of his heart. His choice to be a community development artist, immersing himself in the tapestry of our community has been enriching. I wonder if we will look back at John in the years to come and ask did we entertain an angel? It has encouraged me personally and validated the choices I have made and that God is in our work beyond measure.

## [ Peter Slade

I waited until the last possible moment to write this piece; this proved a bad decision. Now the clamour of war contends with memories of the last three years for a place on the page. The three years with the Project on Lived Theology also mark my first three years in the doctoral program in Religious Studies at the University of Virginia. I have had the privilege of participating in all of the workgroups and my own theological research has grown up alongside these conversations. My attraction to the Project came from a desire shared with and influenced by Marsh: to reconnect “the enterprise of theology with the lived experience of particular Christian communities.” While the Dictator in his green uniform defies the Emperor in his new clothes, my own particular Christian community, guided by bishops, retreats to the therapeutic – we share our concerns and anxieties about the war with each other in the sanctuary and pray that it will all be over soon — and avoid the possibility of uttering a prophetic word.

Struggling to find a coherent thought from the these of impressions of war and workgroups, I stumbled across a quote from the 1930’s. Here the radical Christian socialist Howard Kester attempts a synthesis of his social gospel and the theology of his boss, Reinhold Niebuhr:

. . . we believe that Jesus was the greatest realist of all times. In his life we find that way of life for which man in his moments of sanity and in his evening of dreams longs and yearns. In his life we find the only certain answer for the injustice and brutality, the sham and hypocrisy, the evil and sin about us.<sup>1</sup>

Today, as the hawks spin an ideology that embraces a staggering vision for “American global leadership”<sup>2</sup> and propose a practical course of action to achieve it, we have a special need for a theology that offers a contrary vision. I find in Kester’s realist Jesus, who appeals to us in our “moments of sanity” and “evening of dreams,” just such an antidote.

The Project’s workgroups include, and have met with, people whose faith in Jesus inspires both new dreams and empowers practical action. We have heard new dreams for rundown and abandoned communities, new dreams of reconciliation between racially segregated congregations, and new dreams of opportunity for immigrants. We have heard of housing cooperatives, community organizing, church planting, and bus boycotts. It seems to me that this thing we are calling “lived theology” could do worse than aspire to incarnate the hopes and struggles of activists and communities of faith in our theological work. We can aspire to draw conclusions as well as strength from these communities, spinning what Kester called a ‘priestly and prophetic’ theology.

In only studying these inspirational examples, however, are we not in danger of overlooking those Christian communities that fail to have a prophetic voice? To avoid an elitism which separates the broken body of Christ into the more or less worthy, we must consider all “particular Christian communities” as sites of lived theology worthy of study. Perhaps we will find that these churches are not simply disobedient to their own theological traditions but actually misled by them. Perhaps we will discover deep-seated patterns within our own established theologies that collude with this desire to avoid the prophetic word.

These questions, coming in part from my involvement with the Project, have led me in my own particular research. My dissertation studies the lived experience and theology of just such a congregation. Looking at the history of a large Southern Presbyterian church in Mississippi, I am seeking to understand how their commitment to certain doctrines—namely their ecclesiology and the doctrine of election—in a particular socio-historical context may have a symbiotic relationship with the secular doctrines of white supremacy and segregation. I hope to consider those theological, as well as social, forces that gag the prophetic voice of the Church.

This realist Jesus who appeals to our sanity as well as our dreams opposes the madness and blindness with which we are all too familiar. In response, too often we see a compliant and pathological religion rather than an inspirational and transformative faith at work in the pews. Just maybe in this project of “lived theology” we can offer a tool to activists, scholars and congregations to enable the formation of practices and beliefs that are both priestly and prophetic.

<sup>1</sup> Howard Kester, “The Fellowship of Southern Churchmen: A Religion for Today,” *Mountain Life and Work*, (April 1939), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> [www.newamericancentury.org](http://www.newamericancentury.org)

## [ Brian Vander Wel

I.2. The Project on Lived Theology can play a unique role in my ministry, as a priest in the Episcopal Church — and, I can imagine, other church ministries — by offering an above-the-crowd view of issues like civic action, social justice, urban redevelopment and racial reconciliation in four key ways. First, the Project brings an understanding of the significance of history. As Hegel once said, “What we learn from history is that men do not learn from history.” Without a proper view of what has been tried, what has succeeded and what has failed, we are very often in danger of repeating the mistakes of the past. Second, because of the scope of the network that the Project has created as well as the Project’s work to link with existing networks, a host of creative possibilities present themselves. When one community does solid advocacy work, for instance, the links in the network can help other communities either establish healthy advocacy programs, bolster existing efforts or simply help them see possibilities they knew nothing of before.

Thirdly, because the Project is committed to rigorous thinking and discussion, it can help communities establish solid intellectual and theological foundations for the work they wish to do. When things go awry or become shaky in the work of the Church, a thoughtful, articulate theology acts like a mooring to ground the community to the significance and *raison d’être* of their task. As the Project says about itself, it can give guidance in “the way theological convictions shape the everyday patterns and practices of particular communities.” Finally, the Project can play a “prophetic” role in my life as a minister as well as in the life of the whole Church. Proactive work is not quickly rewarded in church ministry, and as a result “pastoral” or “programmatic” concerns tend to present themselves as needing immediate attention. A pastor’s ministry which is focused on responding only to these concerns is a ministry out of touch with its central task of cooperating with the Spirit to usher in the Kingdom of God. The Project for Lived Theology can serve as a way to hold the Church’s feet to the fire because it has made its business issues that are central to ushering in the Kingdom of God.

### II.2.

The New Testament theologian N. T. Wright asserts that the full texture of a worldview is found in four elements of any given community: its story, questions, praxis and symbol (The New Testament and the People of God, pp 122-139, Fortress Press: London, 1992). When one examines any given event within the life of the community, each of these elements relate to and inform one another in helping one understand the underlying worldview of that community. So then, the story a community tells about itself will demonstrate how it answers the basic questions of life: who are we, where are we going, what is wrong with the world, what is the solution, etc. And in addition, the way those questions are answered are embodied in the activities of the community (praxis) or its cultural symbols (symbol).

So, when a Christian community establishes ministries of mercy and justice in a broken-down, urban neighborhood, they likewise express a portion of their worldview. The story of a God who delivers the poor and needy from oppression finds its way into the community in pragmatic tangible actions. But regardless of any measure of the success of their ministry, their very engagement stands before a world of cruelty, hatred and violence and says, “You have no place here. You are encroaching in a world that is not yours.” In this way, the ministry itself is a symbol of something much larger. It is like Jeremiah buying the potter’s field: a tangible, concrete action which points to a reality much deeper and much more significant than the action itself.

At the end of the day, then, the “practices and patterns” of Christian community do communicate much more than their own self-understanding, but they also illuminate that fullness of the whole story itself and the purposes of the God who tells it.

## [ Richard W. Wills

As one commissioned in the enterprise of Christendom’s high call, the Project on Lived Theology offered me an opportunity to seriously reflect upon the interrelatedness and interdependence that potentially exists between how theology is formed and how it is then ‘worked out’ within the context of Christian community, the relational quality that should exist between the two and why. Perhaps the most obvious value, in allowing for this dialogical intersection between practitioner and theologian, is to be found in their capacities to mutually inform each other’s work in ways that are communicative of God and God’s purposes.

One of the great challenges of the practitioner, activist, and pastor, is, I think, in remaining sufficiently informed of and interested in current theological critiques, given the multi-task nature of the ‘commitment’ and the challenge often presented in processing theological conceptions in such a way that it remains relevant to the ‘work of ministry’. A number of clerical colleagues, with whom I’ve remained in touch, are hard pressed in their preparation of a Sunday sermon given the schedule demands of the preceding week. Needless to say, opportunities to share in meaningful discourse about the theological thoughts provided by a Katie Canon, Josef Pieper, Kathryn Tanner, or Peter Gomes, to name a few, are rare indeed; which perhaps accounts, at least in part, for C. Eric Lincoln’s statistics with respect to pastor’s and their modest theological considerations.

This can be a troubling reality, when in fact one’s practice is based on a purpose that is prescribed by a given theological outlook. The practitioner’s purpose, in such a case, is rarely expanded beyond the horizon of one’s accepted theological view, thus potentially limiting the scope of one’s involvements. Given the swift currents of our high tech era and the complexities of socio-political shifts, rich theological conversation may serve to facilitate the task of keeping pace in a manner that is both socially relevant and theologically sound. A textbook case in point of this sort of promising interchange is to be found in the influences of theological reflection upon the life of M.L. King, Jr. The influences and correlative impact of Walter Rauchenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Harold DeWolf, upon King’s practice are clearly attested and thoroughly documented. Regrettably, few, beyond the context of academy, are granted the occasion to frequent conversations that similarly engage theology at the boundary.

Equally challenging, is the infrequency with which theologians are afforded the opportunities to engage the ‘material’ of which theology is often comprised. Theology, Howard Thurman has suggested, grows out of the material substance of what is. Theological formation, as in the advent of the Negro Spiritual, is oft times hinged upon our various life experiences and their attending circumstances. If, in fact, theological thinking is contextualized, then it remains the sincere task of the theologian to remain attune to life’s material, so as to develop the capacity to speak authentically to a given event or situation. Short of actual ‘engagement’ in the trenches, meaningful interaction with those who dwell in the trenches on a daily basis, such as practitioners, pastors, and activists, provides invaluable insight and clarity to the task of theological formation.

Engaging the practitioner of Christian faith may circumscribe presumption and invite a process whereby that which is theologized is both challenged and confirmed by those who are called to the task of translating theology into lived terms. At bottom, engagement with those who engage the material, that shape and inform theology, may heighten the theologian’s capacity to remain relevant and accessible. It is, therefore, incumbent upon the serious theologian, to listen with an appreciating ear to the stories, struggles, and experiences of life’s practitioners, as a means toward interpreting the event in a manner that is theologically accurate. The forging of this interrelatedness and interdependence for the purpose of innovative discourse may be essential to the continued vibrancy and vitality of a given practice and reciprocal in its mutual benefit to the work of the theologian and the overall duty of faith.

By and large, 'doing things' and 'saying things' become "communicative of a Christian communities collective self-understanding." In this sense, the community's practices and patterns become the 'fruit' by which a 'tree' is observed. Authentic Doing and Saying, may thereby point to the essence of community and in this respect provides an account of self such that what is said and done reflects who they are. It communicates a community's collective self-understanding. But more than that, it reflects the community's ground and source of being. While the fruit of one's labor may communicate a truth about the tree, the tree communicates a larger truth about the Creative Genius that exists beyond the tree. In this regard, one might suggest that Doing and Saying do not simply communicate self-understanding, but also an understanding of God and God's purposes for humankind. That which is communicative conveys and discloses both horizontal and vertical meaning. When Doing and Saying are exercised independent of Being, the result is that of gross contradiction in what is said and done. Being allows saying to meet doing in a fashion that is complimentary to authentic Christian faith and duty. In this regard, Saying and Doing become respective expressions of self-understanding as well as our understanding of God. It could be that Saying and Doing, that which constitutes orthopraxi and orthodoxy, become expressions of the God's presence, in God's world for God's redemptive purpose via the individual and collective efforts of Christian community, the agency of human hands. As theologians and practitioners of the faith meet in dialogue, it not only says something about our work together, but the work of God in our midst. Perhaps the most obvious value—in allowing for this dialogical intersection between practitioner and theologian—is to be found in our capacities to mutually inform each other's work in ways that are communicative of God and God's purposes!

#### **APPENDIX: The Workgroup members responded to the following:**

Some of these questions are more applicable to scholars, others to activists and pastors: Summing up your experience in the project by including lessons learned, frustrations had, and tasks left undone, please respond to one of the two questions in section one and to one of the three paragraphs in section two, in a 750-1000 word response.

I.

1. In what ways did your engagement with practitioners, activists and pastors inform the way you think about your research?
2. As an activist or pastor, what kinds of resources can theologians and religious scholars provide that might strengthen or enrich your work? In what ways has the project provided you, as a religious leader and/or activist, with fresh resources for thinking, preaching, and organizing? In what ways have our dialogues confirmed and/or challenged your particular work?

II

1. The Project on Lived Theology discovered that there exists a national hunger in the academy and the church for theological work that reconnects the enterprise of theology with the lived experience of particular Christian communities. Importantly, we discovered that our task as it develops in breadth, detail and complexity is not that of transforming theology into a practical discipline; not telling theologians that the work they do in systematic, philosophical and dogmatic theology is irrelevant or socially irresponsible. Rather, the task of lived theology is that of illuminating the various ways in which theological convictions and commitments in their inner logic aspire toward lived ends and to bring historical and sociological knowledge of communities into the service of theology. Furthermore, this work does not properly belong to the discipline of sociology of religion, but to theology. That is to say, the matter of a Christian social philosophy and sociology is a genuinely theological one, because it can be answered only on the basis of an understanding of the church, its proclamations and practices. If genuinely theological concepts can best be recognized as established and fulfilled in a special social context, then it becomes clear that a social understanding of the church has a specifically theological character. How important is it to claim in turn that Christian community engenders a distinctive social structure?
2. The Project on Lived Theology is based on the rationale that the everyday patterns and practices of particular Christian communities, specifically in their varied displays of compassionate action in service to others, offer rich material for theological inquiry. These patterns and practices are not just ways of "doing things" (as Wayne Meeks has written in one of his excellent studies of early Christian communities), but they are also ways of "saying things"; practices and patterns are "communicative". Can we also say that, properly interpreted, these practices and patterns are communicative not only of a Christian community's collective self-understanding but of God and God's purposes for humankind?
3. In the work of the first three-year cycle of the Project, a set of seven questions generally guided the members' research, writing, conversations and observations as we engaged a broad geographical and denominational range of religious leaders, community builders and pastors: (1) how are theological commitments displayed, professed or embodied in observed social contexts? (2) how do these views shape the patterns of everyday living, including, economic, political, and social organization? (3) what are the various elements that secure internal coherence or "orthodoxy"? (4) what factors determine exclusion, opposition, conflict or dissent? (5) how do doctrinal commitments shape the community's relationship with the larger social world? (6) what lessons can be learned from these analyses (i.e., what should be emulated, what ought to be avoided?) that may strengthen Christian congregations in their mission and in their contribution to civic wholeness and human flourishing? and finally (7) how can the lived experiences of Christian communities be interpreted in distinctive narrative style that is also theological? Please use one or more of these questions as a means of summarizing your own discoveries in work of the Project.



**Dexter Avenue Baptist Church**  
Montgomery, AL; photographer, Peter Slade

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