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Title Repairers of the Breach and Restorers of the Streets: The Role of the Faith Community

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Background In this presentation, Dr. Smith laid out the challenges facing many African-American communities in the United States as both a public health and spiritual problem. He outlined both the challenges and the possibilities for another way of living and relating through the work of religious communities.

While it is being gradually conceded that violence should be considered a public health problem and not just a public safety or criminal justice concern, there has been little discussion of the spiritual dimensions of violence and the role of the faith community. Yet, violence is a spiritual, moral, and social economic issue. Violence represents a cultural and spiritual crisis. For many, violence has become a way of life, a rite of passage, a source of spiritual empowerment, a means of moral judgment, and a way of dealing with morbidity and mortality. In *Engaging The Powers*, Walter Winks claims: "Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world. It has been accorded the status of a religion, demanding from its devotees an absolute obedience to death. Its followers are not aware, however, that the devotion they pay to violence is a form of religious piety. Violence is so successful as a myth precisely because it does not seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It is what works. It is inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts."

In other words, within this general ethos it can be argued that violence has become a form of religion and spirituality for Americans. To understand the faith community's role requires a different kind of understanding of violence, and the approach to resolution must be holistic, and address the social economic, moral, and spiritual components. We must cease to label our children "at risk" or "high risk." Each child is born with an innate potential or promise. Adults create communities that either nurture the potential within each child which is the promise they are

born with, or put them at risk. The goal of the faith community is to transform communities of risk into communities of promise, into beloved communities.

The Problem

The at-risk environment that adults have created for children of promise is characterized by three kinds of poverty: social economic, moral, and spiritual.

1. Social economic poverty in America begins with children still in the womb. A third of the mothers in our country do not receive prenatal care because our nation's health-care system does not provide universal basic coverage for mothers and children.

2. Moral poverty occurs when a young person grows up with physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and/or abandonment, and does not have the presence of even one caring adult to teach him or her right from wrong.

3. Spiritual poverty is characterized by hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness.

The damage done to the so-called children at risk is the absence of love, scarcity of hope and a lack of meaning. The common scenario is an absent father and a drug-addicted mother who leave their child without the nurturing necessary for spiritual development. When it seems as though we have exhausted all our potions and that there is no hope, it is the church's task to call the people to new hope, to have faith that "the unthinkable" could well happen.

The Goal

"The unthinkable" in our age is to transform a violent community into a beloved community. This is the unfinished agenda of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. Building a beloved community requires commitment and sacrifice. It is based on the following seven promises made to our nation's children that will help them fulfill their innate potential:

- ☐ We promise to love you by creating a community in which every individual is loved regardless of status in life.
- ☐ We promise to teach you by providing a caring adult who will help you understand right from wrong and who will share values by which you can live a moral life.
- ☐ We promise to protect you by providing you with sanctuary and a safe haven. We will monitor dangerous or unwise behavior and protect you from those who would do you harm.
- ☐ We promise to give you a head start by making sure that every mother receives prenatal care and every child receives early-childhood education. We will minister to those of you who need help coping with abuse, neglect and victimization.

- We promise to empower you and give you the opportunity to choose behaviors according to values rather than circumstances. We will give you opportunities to give back to the community.
- We promise to forgive you and help you take responsibility for your actions, to give you the opportunity to make restitution and face victims (when possible and to the best of your ability), to help you choose another path that will restore you to the community.
- We promise to save you and liberate you from the oppressive forces of institutional and personal sin.

One Solution

Recently, I was asked to lead a men's workshop on "the role of men in the mission work of the church." I began the session by relating to these men, who represented a consortium of 30 black Baptist churches in Atlanta, an experience I had earlier that morning. I told them that I had been invited to speak to a group of women who attended an affluent, predominately white university church. Just before I took my place at the podium, the women had completed a motion to monetarily support a program that helps grandparents who are raising their children's crack babies. After delivering an impassioned talk about how people of faith need to be involved in the lives of children who have been ravaged by the surge of crack cocaine, one of the elderly white ladies politely asked me, "And where are the black men?"

A few hours later, I posed the same question to these dignified stately deacons of the Mount Calvary Baptist Association of Churches. I suggested to them that their role in the church's mission work is to be the "repairers of the breach and restorers of the streets to dwell in," (Isaiah 58:12). The breach, I told them, is between our baby-boomer generation and the so-called "lost," "X," "Hip-Hop" generation. And that the breach is characterized by a generation of children who are often forced to raise themselves because of fathers who have abandoned them and mothers on crack who have forgotten them. This breach occurred because a generation of young people are growing up without even one adult who is willing to teach them right from wrong. The streets are not fit to dwell in because we have a generation of angry, cold-blooded young people growing up without meaning, hope, or love.

I asked the group, "What can men of faith do?"

"If the Nation of Islam can call a million black men to march on Washington, D.C.," one replied, "we can call a million men (of all colors) to mentor this generation of children. And we can start with the men in this room."

Imagine it: one million men recruited, trained, and matched with young people by Oct 6, 2000. One million men mentoring, repairing the breach and restoring our streets so we can live in them. What the faith community can do better than any

other segment of society (perhaps with the exception of the government) is to take a good idea to scale. Imagine the outcome if the government, community organizations, civic and fraternal organizations, and the faith community joined forces to recruit, train, and match mentors to young people who do not have at least one caring adult. What would our nation look like if every church, temple and mosque (with public/private support) adopted families that are in trouble?

Turning around the decay of our families and communities will require a movement with spiritual force. Movements are what faith communities are good at; we have houses of worship in every neighborhood ready access to impacted populations, armies of dedicated volunteers and experience in addressing social problems. Almost every great social movement this nation has experienced, including the Abolitionist movement, the Social Gospel movement, the Temperance movement, and the Civil Rights movement, had the faith community at its center.

What role does the faith community play? We can help reconstruct the damaged psychic structures of young people who have been dehumanized by their oppressive environment. Faith communities can create indigenous community structures that provide a new set of role models and a new set of status symbols. We can provide an alternative process of resocialization to prison, schools, and streets. Faith communications can work to create new subcultures for youths. The prophetic task of faith communities is to be the conscience of society. Faith communities are called to be a fellowship to serve the larger community. Congregations are mediating structures standing between the people and environmental structures that destroy lives through advocacy and activism.

Works Cited

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