

Does Anybody Care? Issues Related to Church Planting in an Urban, African-American Context

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The African-American worldview has been shaped by persistent racism, the deterioration of the African-American nuclear family structure, and material poverty. The goal of this discussion is to examine in brief how these three issues affect church planting in an African-American context with a special emphasis on the city of Detroit. Material poverty, which is really an extension of the other two issues, will be addressed practically, including some help on dealing directly with the issue of material poverty while church planting.

Racism

"I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind." –Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1787

Racism is the belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities, and that those racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race resulting in racial prejudice or discrimination (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/racism>). It would not be wise to approach ministry in the African-American community naively thinking that racism is a thing of the past. As long as racism exists there will be acts of prejudice and violence against blacks which will stimulate painful reminders of the struggle blacks faced in the past.

The struggles of the black community against racism in our nation have been well-documented beginning as early as 1619 when a Dutch frigate deposited 20 black slaves in Jamestown, Virginia (Dudley 291). Racism has continued past the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Constitutional Amendments, Jim Crow Laws, and the Civil Rights Movement and all governmentally sanctioned affirmative action policies.

Yes, the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s elicited change, but racism continues in subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways. As historian Sean Wilentz notes:

"White attitudes toward race have certainly improved since the nineteen-sixties, more than some liberals admit. Still, centuries-old patterns of prejudice usually take more than a few decades to uproot...numerous, reliable studies show that even while whites voice egalitarian sentiments about integrated schools and workplaces, they continue to discriminate against blacks in hiring and especially housing, and still show a propensity to regard blacks as lazier, less intelligent, and more violent than any other ethnic group." (Wilentz 273, *Opposing Viewpoints*)

The African-American worldview cannot help but be shaped by the evils of racism. While blacks are optimistic with the progress that has been made sensing unlimited opportunity, there are still ugly reminders (sometimes daily) that racism exists. As one scholar notes:

“Racism undoubtedly exists, but it no longer has the power to thwart blacks or any other group in achieving their economic, political and social aspirations. It cannot be denied that African-Americans suffer slights in terms of taxi drivers who pass them by, pedestrians who treat them as a security risk, banks that are reluctant to invest in black neighborhoods, and other forms of continued discrimination.” (D’Souza 283, *Opposing Viewpoints*)

The Deterioration of the Black Nuclear Family

A nuclear family is defined as a father, mother, and children who live in the same household. The deterioration, if not near destruction, of the black nuclear family is an issue with far reaching ramifications in the African-American community. President Lyndon B Johnson understood this problem well. In his speech to the 1965 Howard University graduating class he made the following statement,

*“The family is the cornerstone of our society. More than any other force it shapes the attitude, the hopes, the ambitions, and the values of the child. And when the family collapses it is the children that are usually damaged. **When it happens on a massive scale the community itself is crippled...**So, unless we work to strengthen the family, to create conditions under which most parents will stay together--all the rest: schools, and playgrounds, and public assistance, and private concern, will never be enough to cut completely the circle of despair and deprivation.”*

It has long been espoused that the intact, black nuclear family never had a chance in large part to the abuses of slavery; however, historian Herbert G. Gutman in his book, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, concluded that from the earliest days of slavery until the eve of the Great Depression, the black family was surprisingly close, strong and intact. In fact, 82-92% of black households were what we now call a nuclear family (Gutman xviii)

In a sad twist of irony President Johnson’s answer to the problem was to initiate social programs addressing surface issues, and in the end he only exacerbated the problem for the black family. Under Johnson’s watch a change to welfare (Aid to Families with Dependent Children, AFDC) was instituted granting financial assistance to households where no male breadwinner was present (Schweikart and Allen 687). According to the US Bureau of Census, in 1960, before the change to AFDC, 74 percent of all black families were maintained by a husband and wife, 22 percent were headed by

women, and the remaining 4 percent were families headed by black males (US Bureau of Census 103). Today, in Michigan, **single parent, black households headed by females is an astonishing 74%.**

Money meant to alleviate suffering served only to all but destroy the black nuclear family. What President Johnson meant to protect, he assisted in destroying. In the absence of a father in the household conditions of despair and deprivation have been created and perpetuated.

Material Poverty

“The poor you will always have with you”—Jesus Christ, Mark 14:7 NIV

Black poverty is a complex issue and is as old as African-American history in the United States. It is far beyond the scope of this discussion to address the many causes of poverty. The fact of the matter is that it exists disproportionately in the black community. Historically, African-Americans as a whole have always lagged behind other ethnicities with respect to income.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 27.4 percent of blacks are living below the poverty line in our nation (the city of Detroit is a staggering 36.4 percent). A family is counted as poor if its pretax money income is below the poverty threshold. Money income does not include noncash benefits such as public housing, Medicaid, employer-provided health insurance and food stamps.

2010 Poverty Thresholds, Selected Family Types		
Single Individual	Under 65 Years	\$ 11,344
	65 Years & Older	\$ 10,458
Single Parent	One child	\$ 15,030
	Two children	\$ 17,568
Two Adults	No Children	\$ 14,602
	One Child	\$ 17,552
	Two Children	\$ 22,113
	Three Children	\$ 26,023
U.S. Bureau of the Census, Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010, Report P60, n. 238, p. 61		

Family of 4 Poverty Threshold per U.S. Government = \$22,113	
Median Household Income in Michigan	\$ 48,435
Median White Household Income Hamtramck	\$ 23,520
Median Black Household Income Hamtramck	\$ 10,849

The numbers do not lie. Material poverty is rampant in the black community, especially in the inner city. The issue of material poverty, however, goes far beyond the lack of material resources. One of the most devastating results material poverty is a sense of being trapped. In the words of President

Johnson, “[material poverty] is a world of decay, ringed by an invisible wall... [where] escape is arduous and uncertain.” In other words, the materially poor feel trapped and in bondage to their situation.

In their work, *When Helping Hurts*, Corbett and Fikkert argue that “the material poor are trapped by multiple, interconnected factors—insufficient assets, vulnerability, powerlessness, isolation, and physical weakness—that ensnare them like bugs caught in a spider’s web” (70-71). No matter how hard they try the impoverished cannot seem to break free. The struggle goes on until they grow tired of it and accept impoverished entanglement as the status quo—hopelessness wins.

The African-American Worldview

“Men are shaped by their world. When it is a world of decay, ringed by an invisible wall, when escape is arduous and uncertain, and the saving pressures of a more hopeful society are unknown, it can cripple the youth and it can desolate the men.”—Lyndon B. Johnson

As Lyndon B. Johnson noted, “men are shaped by their world.” Racism, the absence of an intact nuclear family, and poverty all affect how African-Americans relate to themselves, whites, authority structures, the church, and God. While it is never good to generalize, there are consistent patterns of behavior, thought, and emotion that have been identified in the black community associated with all three of the areas noted above, especially poverty. In his work, *Race Matters*, Cornel West, an African-American scholar, summarizes the black worldview as it relates to poverty:

The most basic issue now facing black America [is]: the nihilistic threat to its very existence. This threat is not simply a matter of relative economic deprivation and political powerlessness—though economic well-being and political clout are requisites for meaningful progress. It is primarily a question of speaking to the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America” (West 19-20).

Imagine a world where you are taught to mistrust whites and authority structures in general, especially the police. Imagine a world where your older brother suffers a gunshot and bleeds to death in front of your very eyes. Imagine a world without a father at home to follow, learn from, play with, and run to for protection. Imagine world where you are forced to move every three months from empty apartment to empty apartment sleeping on the floor, because your mother never uses the rent money for the rent, rather the money was wasted on alcohol. Imagine a world of tenth-grade, high school dropouts with an eighth grade reading level. Imagine a world where your dad sells pills on the street so that he can buy your eighteen month old step-brother a pair of Nike basketball shoes, and then he gets caught and thrown in prison for 6 years. Imagine a world where going to church on Sunday involves hearing about the social problems of the city and what the government needs to do to change things, or imagine a world where you hear the pastor say that things would be better for you if

you only your faith were strong enough. Imagine a world of wanting to do better, but you just don't know how. Imagine a world where everyone expects you to live the same life your parents did, alone, in despair, and hopeless. This is the world that shapes the African-American mind, a world of hopelessness.

The Hope of the African-American Community: The African-American Church?

"I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy." Psalm 140:12
NIV

"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners." Isaiah 61:1 NIV

For years the black church has held out a picture of Jesus as the one who would right the social wrongs of the past ushering in economic stability and future material prosperity for African-Americans. For the radical left in the black community Jesus was black, meaning Jesus was *the Oppressed* and the One who came to free those in bondage from the oppression of the whites. This concept of God as the Liberator and Jesus as the means of liberation became known as black liberation theology (Bradley, pp. 38-39). Though radical in many ways black liberation theology perpetuated the African-Americans cry for social and economic liberation and equality which was being preached in the main. In her work, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit*, Angela Dillard expresses a common mindset among black churches: the gospel of Jesus Christ is a social gospel that will reverse material poverty. As a result, the focus of the African-American church, in general, has been to address issues of economic and social injustice, which in turn transformed many gospel preachers into political-social activists, or even worse, false prophets of the health and wealth gospel. Consider the following:

"The hope of the world today is the African-American preacher...not white wealth, not white culture, not white America, not white academic institutions, not the white Republican Party, not white corporate America, not General Motors, not IBM, not Harvard University... can't the [African-American] churches do for economic development today what they did for educational opportunity 150 years ago?"(Dillard xv-xvii)

The same social gospel has been preached for the past 80 years in Detroit and economic conditions for blacks have not changed; in fact conditions have gotten worse.

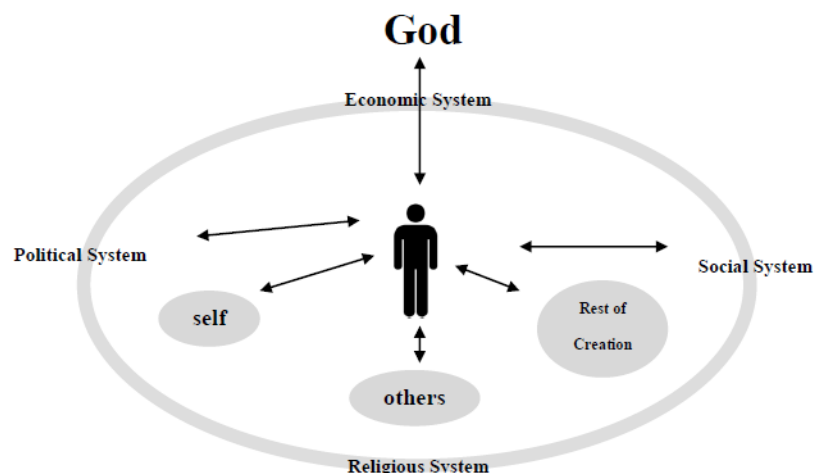
The Hope of the African-American Community: The Gospel of Reconciliation

“We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” –Paul of Tarsus, 2 Corinthians 5:21, NIV

The hope for the world is reconciliation with God through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The hope for the black community is no different. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the answer, not more money or more programs.

When planting churches in an inner city, black context material poverty is the greatest issue one will face. Urban pastors are frequently called upon to address issues related to material poverty—a late power bill, no gas, a need for groceries, a bus pass etc. When addressing the issue of helping with a material need the question that should be asked is, “Am I helping or hurting this person?” Like a skillful physician pastors need to diagnose the situation at hand and decide whether providing aid is addressing a symptom or the underlying condition. If only the symptom is being addressed, then the problem will resurface again and again. If pastors want to actually treat the underlying disease, then the root cause of the illness must be understood. The disease is not material poverty. Poverty is a symptom of the disease called brokenness (Myers 86).

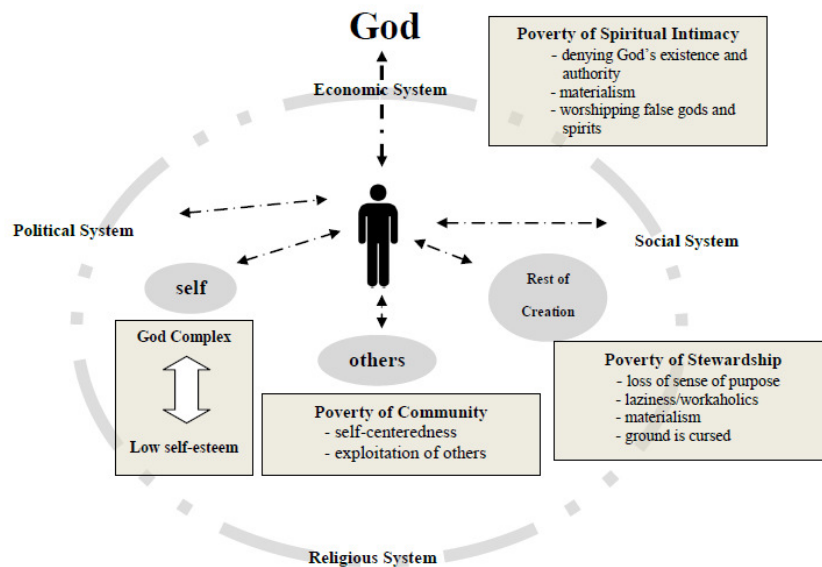
Myers notes that the Triune God is inherently relational and as beings created in His image we are relational as well. God has established four foundational relationships for each person: a relationship with God, others, self, and the rest of creation (see diagram). When these relationships are functioning properly we are able to fulfill our responsibilities for what it means to be created in the image of God, to glorify God. The various systems (economic, political, social and religious) come into play because we affect systems and systems affect us.



Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, p.27.

Much of our relational life is spent interacting with systems, so these relationships must be maintained as well.

The Word of God tells us that all of these relationships were broken when Adam and Eve rebelled. The relationship Adam and Eve had with God was broken; their relationship with self was marred as they developed shame and a continual god-complex; the relationship they had with one another was broken as Adam blamed Eve immediately for their sin; and their relationship with the rest of creation was distorted as God cursed the ground (Corbett and Fikkert 61).



Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, p.27.

Poverty is the absence of intact, God-ordained relationships (62). Another way of saying it would be that poverty is the result of broken relationships. According to this definition of poverty we are all experiencing poverty. The fall of Adam and Eve which plunged all of mankind into sin rendered every person unable to fulfill their responsibilities as God's image-bearers. We are broken people. This is why any attempt to address the issue of poverty must begin with the gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel of reconciliation. Like the apostle Paul we must implore others on Christ's behalf to be reconciled with God, because none of the other foundational relationships can be reconciled until reconciliation with God is realized.

Conclusion:

The struggles faced by the African-American community, especially in an urban environment, are complex and daunting. The lingering issues of racism, the tragic deterioration of the African-

American family unit, and oppressive poverty have crippled scores of blacks in urban areas. Government programs and the social gospel in many black churches, while meaning well, have only served to misdirect hope. The hope for the African-American community is not the federal government and sadly it is not in the black church that preaches health and wealth, rather the hope of the black community is found in the true Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of reconciliation.

Jay has been serving the Lord in Hamtramck, Michigan (a city within the city of Detroit) since 2006. What began as a Bible study at dining room table has slowly grown into what is now Grace Baptist Church of Hamtramck. Jay is burdened to see the African-American community of Hamtramck and the surrounding city of Detroit glorify God as people hear the Gospel and respond to its radical, life-changing call.