

## The Campus Minister as Midwife: Delivering Justice in an Unjust World

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Two of my favorite persons in the Bible are Shiphrah and Puah, the two midwives whose story is recorded in Exodus. They provide a paradigm for justice actions in an unjust world. The biblical writer tells us little about these two women; their story is limited to fourteen verses in *Exodus 1*. The text tells us that the two women, considered weak and powerless by the Pharaoh, feared God. Shiphrah and Puah had no status in society, yet they acted with faith and courage. The Pharaoh ordered Shiphrah and Puah to be partners in his plan of ethnic cleansing, to murder Hebrew boy babies at birth, to turn from their vocation as lifegivers to help Pharaoh in his evil scheme of genocide. In place of words, Shiphrah and Puah responded with actions that spoke loudly of justice and respect for human life. Their actions affirmed their faith commitments. Shiphrah and Puah acted against idolatry and injustice, and they acted together, in solidarity. Their actions increased the justice in their world.

Justice is not an abstract philosophical formula in the Bible. Biblical justice is concrete, creative, and responsive to the needs of the oppressed. Biblical justice grows out of the justice that persons have received from God. Because we have received justice and mercy from God, we are commanded to extend justice to others. The Hebrew people, after the Exodus, were commanded to extend justice to widows, orphans, and strangers. Their acts of hospitality grew from their experiences of oppression in Egypt and from God's acts of deliverance. The eighth-century prophets—especially Micah, Amos, and Isaiah—protested the lack of social justice in their communities. They emphasized that to know God is to do justice. *Isaiah 58* demonstrates the concreteness of Biblical justice. Justice is breaking the bonds of oppression, setting the captive free, housing the homeless, clothing those without clothing, and feeding the hungry.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus affirmed the content of Biblical justice. At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus quoted *Isaiah 61*.

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus demonstrates that there is an ethical dimension to the Kingdom of

God. In the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' teaching on love, disciples of Jesus see how to live the Christian life in a conflict-filled world. Disciples of Jesus who accept the gift of the kingdom respond with certain kinds of behavior, actions of love and justice. Through His example, we see concern for children, acceptance of women and lepers, a priority on ministry to "the least of these." Jesus died because of the radicality of His love, a love that accepted and empowered the marginalized, a love that confronted unjust structures and evil systems. In spite of countless biblical texts affirming the importance of social justice, many Christians still question the centrality of justice in the mission of the Church. At a recent gathering of campus ministers, a campus minister said to me, "If I have to choose between sharing my faith and social justice, I'll choose evangelism every time." If I understand the message of the Bible, we do not have to choose between evangelism and social justice.

In *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, Stephen Charles Mott states that both evangelism and the implementation of justice are the mission of the Church. Mott asserts, "Both arise spontaneously out of love for our fellow human beings who are hurt, who need us, and whose need we feel within us."<sup>2</sup> Ron Sider adds,

It is time for evangelicals to refuse to use sentences that begin with "the primary task of the Church is ..." regardless of whether the sentence ends with evangelism or Bible teaching or social concerns. They are all integral, necessary aspects of the Church's task.<sup>3</sup>

Not only are both evangelism and social justice important because of Biblical mandates but the Church has a more credible witness in society because of a focus on both evangelism and social justice. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that any religion concerned with souls and not concerned with "the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is dry-as-dust religion."<sup>4</sup>

Karen Lebacqz reminds us that injustice, more than justice, is our lived reality.<sup>5</sup> Newspapers explode with stories of abandoned children, escalating violence in schools, gender or race, and a world increasingly divided into "haves" and "have-nots." This world of injustice is not just a world you read about in newspapers and view on television news programs but it is a world that you enter as campus ministers.

Campus ministers have a unique opportunity to educate for justice. Letty Russell says that justice-education happens with "the identification of significant persons, capable of stimulating growth in others by example, caring, and challenge."<sup>6</sup> A campus minister is the "significant person" in the lives of many students. A campus minister is both a catalyst and facilitator of students' spiritual formation.

How can campus ministers interpret the world to students and help bring about more justice in an unjust world? If we agree that to know God is to do justice, what are the proper means to that end? Should we lecture or preach on

the evils of racism or tell pointed stories with obvious ethical conclusions? Should we conduct experiments like the elementary school teacher who taught her students about racism? Believing in the effectiveness of experiential education, the teacher subjected the blue-eyed children in her classroom to discrimination. She ignored those with blue eyes, treated them with contempt, made derogatory remarks about their abilities. The children's responses varied. Some pretended that nothing had changed in the classroom. Others cried or were openly angry. The children learned that injustice and the pain that accompany it are painful.

How can we increase the justice in an unjust world? First, you can act as a willing learner, an observer of the injustice on your campus, in your community, and world. Part of this awareness means education of yourself, viewing the world through eyes that are justice-oriented, looking for those who are hurting, the victims of alienation and oppression. Liberation theologians call this process "conscientization." Conscientization involves becoming critically aware of the roots of human suffering. Is hunger the result of natural disasters or overpopulation? Are people poor because they are lazy? Are policies on world trade, aid, and investment structured to the advantage of the first world and to the disadvantage of the third world? Conscientization leads to the formation of a critical consciousness. Social scientists report that the majority of persons convicted of murder who receive the death penalty are African-American males. Are African-American males inherently more evil or are these systemic injustices? Conscientization involves the questioning of structures and systems based on the recognition that sin is not only personal and individual, sin is also structural and corporate.

Justice education, for me, began with a personal understanding of oppression. Growing up Southern and Southern Baptist, I was never aware of oppression and injustice, except as a phenomenon "out there." But BSU community missions in a predominately African-American housing project in Natchitoches, Louisiana opened my eyes to racism and the economic injustice that accompanies racism. Through small incidents in college and later in seminary, I realized that as a woman in a patriarchal culture, I am oppressed. This was affirmed to me during my first Executive Board meeting, when as a seminary-trained Associate BSU Director, I was called "a little helper." As one of the few females in two state conventions and two Southern Baptist Seminaries, I have experienced anger when in the midst of males, I have felt compelled, or actually been compelled by the system, to think and act as if male thinking was not only the norm but the best way of thinking or acting. Granted, my oppression pales in comparison with many persons and groups in the United States and the world, but it has given me a greater sensitivity to the needs of Asian and Hispanic students, handicapped persons, women, the elderly, and other victims of discrimination in our society.

As a result of your education, you can educate students about justice concerns. Much of this education happens through your example; students

learn sensitivity to others by watching a campus minister's example. Movies can provide an excellent catalyst for discussion about justice concerns. Several years ago I compiled a list of movies for world issues and social concerns. Each year my Ministries with College Students class views movies in a particular category (i.e. war and peace, third world, farm issues, racism, domestic violence, environment) and discusses how they would use the movies with college students in their church or BSU. David Hollenbach calls direct involvement with people "education of the heart." Mission trips, community missions, and summer missions are "education of the heart" with students and campus ministers learning experientially about justice and injustice.

Second, we can help students to tell their own life experiences and to listen to the life stories of other people. Silence is an enemy of justice. Beverly Harrison speaks of silence as the enemy of authentic change.<sup>7</sup> Silence reinforces the status quo and masks injustice. We ignore conflict and pretend that injustice will "get better" if given time. Often we penalize those who cry injustice; they receive blame and anger, not compassion and understanding. To combat the silence, campus ministers can encourage students to break the silence. We can break the silence by encouraging students to tell their stories. Both the listener and the storyteller are transformed by the gift of a story.

Thirty-five students from Northeast Louisiana University learned about storytelling on a mission trip to Washington, D.C. The BSU group lived in the Baptist Center in the shadow of crack houses, with police helicopters flying low over the neighborhood each night. They worked and listened—to children afraid to walk home after Backyard Bible Club, to senior adults struggling to live on a fixed income, to men unable to find a job, to women in homeless shelters hoping to break out of poverty. The lessons of the trip were many. The students learned lessons about how our society devalues the elderly, lessons about economic injustice—why groceries were more expensive in the inner-city but salaries were lower, lessons about the homeless—what led to homelessness or why some homeless women fear men. As students heard stories, they began to question myths and assumptions because of their contacts with the persons experiencing injustice. They saw the injustice as more than an issue. They saw the injustice in a person. In nightly share sessions, they processed experiences, often punctuated by tears and anger at injustice. The gifts of stories helped them to minister with compassion and to look for injustice not only in Washington, D.C. but in their communities in Louisiana.

Third, you can be an advocate for justice. As an advocate, you are called to articulate gospel values, to share a gospel that is inclusive rather than exclusive, to take seriously the commission to service to the least as expressed in *Matthew* 25. You are called to balance the scales in a world with injustice, to speak for victims and change systems that create victims. It is not enough to cry over a nation with 1.5 million people without homes or thirty-seven million people without health insurance. As Christians and advocates for justice, we have

both the privilege and the responsibility to feed the hungry, speak for the powerless, and minister to those who are weak and helpless.

Martin Luther King, Jr. acted as an advocate for justice. Throughout his life, he was aware of the reality of racial discrimination. He moved beyond awareness to action, actions to alleviate the oppression and discrimination suffered by millions of African-Americans. His actions were firmly grounded in biblical justice. King understood the connection between the Gospel message and the church's actions. He understood that our faith commitments should result in an absolute refusal to accept injustice as the norm. King said:

There are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted, to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism. I call upon you to be maladjusted to such things.<sup>8</sup>

Christians should not become adjusted to racism, sexism, poverty, or other injustices. Our response should not be passivity. God's love for humanity is an active love; our love for the world should result in actions that create and sustain justice.

To be an advocate, you must become involved. Our world is filled with the pain of injustice; justice begins when we take actions to make a difference in the world. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., we listen to the voice calling us to action and we respond. For some, the response will be organizing dialogue between Christians and Muslims. For others, the action will be participating in an annual Bread for the World Offering of Letters. Students can organize a support group for the families of prisoners or victims of substance abuse. They can work to end homelessness with letters written to the State Legislature about transitional housing or a work project with Habitat for Humanity. Some students can volunteer at a soup kitchen, women's shelter, or job training program. Other students can volunteer at Head Start and write letters to the President for more funding for Head Start. Whatever the issue and whatever your action, your actions make a difference in the world. Justice is ultimately about inclusion, inclusion of those who have been victims of discrimination, the forgotten of our world, those without voices. One way to bring about justice in an unjust world is to be a listener, an assertive listener who listens not only with the ears but also with the heart, listening to feelings and listening to silences. And because we care about justice, we listen first to those with small voices or voices that are not heard by the powerbrokers in our society—children, minorities, women, senior adults, the homeless, victims of abuse, international students. We listen not only to nurture them but to learn from them. As Christians, we listen because all persons have a place at the table of God and we are less if we are not in conversation and community with others. As campus ministers, we act as midwives, helping to birth justice on our

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campuses, with our students, in our communities, in our world, knowing that as we go, we act in the grace of Jesus the Christ who empowers and equips us for the journey.

## Endnotes

- 1 Luke 4:18-19.
- 2 Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 122-123.
- 3 Ronald J. Sider, review of *The Evangelical Renaissance* by Donald G. Blosch, *Christianity Today* 18 (1974), 1161.
- 4 Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted in "The Testimony of Scripture and of Martin Luther King, Jr." *Baptist Peacemaker*, Fall/Winter, 1992, p. 16.
- 5 Karen Lebacqz, *Justice in an Unjust World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), p. 7.
- 6 Letty M. Russell, in "Pedagogy for Oppressors" *Growth in Partnership* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 134.
- 7 Beverly Harrison, *Making the Connections* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 243.
- 8 King, *Baptist Peacemaker*, p. 16.