



The GUM Letter

Reflections on Congregational Witness in an Urban Context

Summer-Fall 2004 – Volume 2, Issue 2

Our 1st Community Health Fair!

Earlier this year, Reverend Mauricio Chacon of Iglesia Presbiteriana de la Mission raised his concern for the growing incidence of diabetes among immigrant families in the Mission District. Out of this came our first community health fair hosted in partnership with his congregation and nonprofit, Manos Unidas, along with Grace Fellowship Community Church. This health fair provided glucose screening, blood pressure checks, dental examinations, or other services to over 300 people, many who were receiving medical attention for the first time in a long time. We were joined by over 25 community service nonprofits offering a variety of social services. The event also included voter registration and educational activities (made possible by the San Francisco Foundation). Encouraged by this partnership, we look forward to further congregation-based collaborations of this kind.

Seeking a Deeper Dialogue

At the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) 2004 conference, I was given the opportunity to address the ministry of racial reconciliation today (see article). Of deep concern for me is the lack of a fuller and more theologically-driven reflection on the part of the Church regarding the social issues of the day. Such conversation was essentially trumped by the divisive and partisan nature of the political landscape during this contentious election year. Please join us in praying for a

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Racial Divide and a Crisis of Theology & Will

Panel address by Craig Wong at the 2004 CCDA Conference in Atlanta

Earlier this year, I had the incredible opportunity of visiting Atlanta for the very first time. My top priority was to visit the Martin Luther King Center and learn about a man clearly characterized by the ministry of reconciliation we're here to discuss this morning. That day, I set out to soak in as much as I could about Dr. King's legacy and the life of the black church that rallied around his leadership during this remarkable period of our nation's history. As would be expected of anyone taking in the countless displays and watching the historic footage, I was deeply moved and impressed by the events that took place during a time I was too young to appreciate.

However, I also left with the haunting realization that from a gospel perspective, there actually wasn't anything heroic or radical at all about Dr. King's life and message. He was simply acting out of what he knew to be faithful to the Word of God. By his reading of the scriptures, things were not the way they were supposed to be. He knew, with biblical clarity, that the preservation of economic prosperity for *one* group by structurally oppressing *another*, was an abomination to the God of Heaven. Therefore, in speaking truth to power, he was merely giving voice to what the gospel proclaimed as true. In other words, Dr. King was simply being *Christian*.

This is by no means to diminish the greatness of Dr. King, for indeed he was. But I wonder if we as the American Church prefer to revere Dr. King as a champion of civil rights rather than an obedient servant of the gospel. Do we choose to put him on a pedestal as a way to lessen our own responsibility to speak truth to power in our own day? Could it also be that we have succeeded in reducing the truth to something safe and manageable, absolving us from the kind of risk and sacrifice that the Black Church in Montgomery, Birmingham and Selma endured in Dr. King's day?

I want to suggest this morning that how we answer this question has serious implications for the ministry of racial reconciliation as the Church in America today. I am grateful for Dr. Raymond Rivera's message last night from the book of Amos, not only because of its power, but also because it serves to illustrate a concern that I have for the theological health of the Church today. What do I mean by this? As Christians who care deeply about race and poverty, we love the book of Amos. We love it because it is packed with great verses that we use to proof-text our position that

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Racial Divide and a Crisis of Theology & Will, continued

God cares for the poor and oppressed. But rarely do we look to Amos to expose our *infidelity* the way Dr. Rivera did so powerfully last night. In other words, we have become so accustomed to using the scriptures to *serve* our agenda, that we no longer expect it *challenge* our agenda. We have settled for a “sound-bite theology.” We have lost our theological curiosity, running the serious risk of assuming that we know all there is to know about the gospel. Which is why I believe Dr. Samuel Chand’s admonishment to us on Wednesday was so prophetic, particularly in our current climate of national arrogance. As followers of Jesus, we desperately need to practice saying “I don’t know.” Apart from such humility, our theology will remain shallow. And shallow theology leads to shallow ministry.

Which leads me to racial reconciliation. My concern is that the prevailing discourse on racial reconciliation has remained entrenched in a theology that addresses sin at the *personal* but not the *systemic* level. As a result, racial reconciliation gets largely reduced down to a personal discipleship project. We try to make it practical, like identifying a “person of color” and trying to “befriend” them. Or we organize multi-ethnic worship services, making sure that everybody’s ethnic and cultural heritage is somehow recognized and validated. We develop training materials to help individuals explore and confront their personal prejudices and bigotry. And we establish benchmarks or thresholds to measure our progress.

I am not against these things. However, to address racial reconciliation at a purely interpersonal level leaves us blind to the larger powers and principalities that Dr. Rivera spoke of last night. We may love to celebrate diversity and culture, but we’re reluctant to unmask cultural idolatries. We seek to *bridge* the racial divide, but we fail to confront the powers that *propagate* it. We cannot claim to embrace racial reconciliation if we are not willing to speak truth to the larger systems and institutions that divide and destroy.

If it matters that blacks and whites worship in the same room, does it also matter that 50 years after the civil rights movement the economic status of African Americans remains at 56% of that of White Americans, or that jail sentences for African-Americans average six months longer than a white-American’s for the exact same crime? As those called to welcome the stranger in our midst, can we remain silent while lawmakers draw up legislation that judges immigrants, whether Hispanic, Asian or otherwise, solely in terms of whether they benefit or threaten the U.S. economy? Does our theology of creation allow us to treat fellow

human beings as mere economic commodities?

And lastly, as brothers and sisters in Christ, can we raise questions about U.S. foreign policy and the use of force without being immediately written off as un-patriotic or anti-American? Last year in New Orleans, criticism surfaced for what was perceived as the “blatant politicizing of the Iraq war.” This deeply disturbed me, not because there exist different points of view about war within the CCDA community, but rather that, somehow, we have gotten to the point where our partisan identities have sabotaged our ability to bring our collective Christian conscience to the looming issues of the day. We must ask ourselves why we as the American Church have so much to say about *sex*, but so little to say about *violence*.

I would argue adamantly this morning that it would be a huge mistake to deny a connection between our US foreign policy and racial injustice. We cannot remain apathetic to the disproportionate representation of poor, ethnic minorities in the military, or the fact that bipartisan legislation was passed to give the military unimpeded access to the contact information of all public high schools, which is made up of 88% ethnic minorities in the urban centers of the United States. Also ironic is that this piece of legislation was quietly embedded within an education bill we now know as *No Child Left Behind*.

And we cannot claim to love our neighbor as ourselves while turning a blind eye to the thousands of Arab-American citizens who continue to be racially profiled, questioned, deported, or detained without legal representation. A House bill, H.R. 10, is now being considered that if passed will make conditions even worse for Arab-Americans and immigrants of color. Lastly, we must as Christians reject the notion that governments can define for us what *evil* is, or determine who our *enemies* are.

As a Christian, Dr. King refused to draw an artificial line between civil rights and foreign policy. He said, and I will close with this, before a group of concerned laity and clergy leaders during the Vietnam War: “Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed is the vocation of sonship and brotherhood and because I believe that the Father is deeply concerned especially for his suffering, helpless and outcast children, I come tonight to speak for them. This I believe to be the privilege and burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nation’s self defined goals and positions. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless victims of our nation and for those it calls enemy... for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers.” ■

Confidence in *Christ's* Work in us *by Kentaro Iwasaki*

Embracing the fundamentally relational nature of ministry in our summer youth job-training program.

“Is *relationship* enough?” This question comes up often when we discuss the essence of ministry, particularly among youth. Every time, however, my gut responds with a resounding “NO!” How about the one-on-one discipleship curriculum, the small group Bible discussion formats, rousing worship sessions and other well-honed youth development strategies?

Relationships leave us exposed and vulnerable. It's *just* us. We have nothing else to hide behind. We're not the ones in control when it comes to relationships. People (i.e. *other* people) do the strangest things--we never know what to expect when it comes to dealing with *them*. It's much easier to hide behind our areas of expertise. To our detriment, we put our confidence in putting good programs together, complete with nifty acronyms. But Jesus isn't about calling experts who can produce effective programs. He's calling ordinary folks who are certain of their lives only because they are following the One who holds all things together.

Therefore, we sought a more relational approach to PrYSM, our youth job-training program, this year. If you looked at it from a structural point of view, you would see many similar pieces from past years: workshops on interviewing, resumé writing, and etiquette; field visits at tech firms, hospitals, and airlines; externships at law offices, non-profits, and design firms, etc. We are, after all, a youth job-training program and we take that mission seriously.

However, our *Christian* perspective on work and the very essence of who we are as Jesus' disciples is what we offer that is distinct from other job programs and that can only be lived out in relationship. No job seminar, externship, or field visit can do that.

So, we spent more time just *being* with the youth. We had long lunches together where we just hung out with one another and ate before heading off to field visits. We valued our commute times, not merely as a way of getting from point A to B but as opportunity to get to know the youth and for them to get to know us. We took walks to Jamba Juice, talked about their lives, their work experiences and what they were learning. Probably the most memorable experience all summer was not a seminar or field visit but rather lunch and bowling at the Yerba Buena Gardens.

Once, our program director told me that we had a few hours “free” after a morning field visit and he asked if

I wanted to plan something fun for the PrYSM group. It sounded like a great idea until I began panicking. “What are we going to *do* with ten urban adolescents for four hours on a limited budget in a very expensive city? We have to somehow keep them entertained and engaged! What if they get bored?” Suddenly our noble goal of building relationships with the youth became a task or goal that I needed to accomplish and make happen. I was stressed out, “Googling” on-line for ideas and calling around town. I asked “fun” people that I knew for suggestions. I seemed to have forgotten what we were hoping to be about this summer, and lost perspective. The gift of this “free time” with the youth had, for me, become a curse.

“Relationships leave us exposed and vulnerable. It's just us... It's much easier to hide behind our areas of expertise.”

This reaction showed me, once again, how vulnerable I feel when left with the prospect of simply *relating*. When left with a bunch of youth with no carefully planned program in place, the insecurities start to settle in. All we have to offer them is ourselves. But then we're reminded that Jesus influenced his followers not through sophisticated programs, but by simply hanging out with, and leading his disciples in and through the day-in, day-out ordinary stuff of life.

Do we believe that relationship is enough? Do we have confidence in the gospel's transforming work in our lives, believing that others might actually taste and see the gospel *through* us? Please pray that we might believe this more fully, that God would be honored and made visible in our relationships with youth, whether it be through a job-training program, or any other ministry endeavor we do. ❖

PrYSM is a job-training program serving high-school teens primarily from the north Mission District of San Francisco, and staffed by congregation members of Grace Fellowship Community Church. Through PrYSM, youth prepare for service in the marketplace through on-the-job training, workshops, field trips and adult mentoring. For more information, contact Craig Wong at (415) 703-6094 ext 16, Pam Chao at ext 17, or email to prysm@gum.org.

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The GUM Letter is a seasonal publication of Grace Urban Ministries (GUM), Inc., an ecclesio-centered 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation serving children, youth and families in San Francisco, seeking to bear witness to the just and compassionate reign of Jesus Christ. GUM works in partnership with the local congregation to serve communities that face significant social and economic adversity. Such service includes after-school tutoring, youth job-training, dental health screening, adult education, technical assistance, and other activities that engage the complex challenges unique to the vulnerable of the San Francisco Bay Area. Whether you wish to get further acquainted, receive our mailings, converse about church-centered ministry, or explore funding or ministry partnership, we hope to hear from you. Contact Craig Wong or Pam Chao at (415) 703-6094, email to inquiries@gum.org, or write to the address above.

*You are all deeply a part of
our Thanksgiving. God bless you!*

Craig Wong, Executive Director, Pam Chao, Associate Director, Jenelle Denson, Program Director, Amy Hong Program Associate, Margaret Low, Administrative Staff, Dick Huey, Board Chair, Galen Hong, Board Treasurer, John Talbott, Board Secretary, Cindy Jew, Board Member, Marilyn Paik, Legal Counsel.