

# **Bridging the Rural-Urban Divide**

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I wish to thank you for this marvelous opportunity to address the Town and Country breakfast. I have so appreciated being at this conference and am most grateful to Stephen Peifer for this invitation. I also want to thank Stephen for being such a gracious and hospitable host. This breakfast offers me a very welcome opportunity to reflect with you in preparation for our annual conference, Bridging the Rural Urban Divide held in Johnstown, New York, July 18 to 20, 2017. At that conference, it will be our aim to create spaces for good conversation among not just people of faith but among politicians, activists, business people, public school teachers, and labor leaders about how to bridge the divide. We will seek to offer tools, resources and perspectives to help us do good ministry regardless of our political tilt or geographical location.

The idea for this conference had its birth shortly after the presidential campaign. The campaign seemed to go on forever. I think many of us felt bereft and confused. For many Christians, everything we had been taught about what was moral, just or kind, seemed to come into question. This was not a Mr. Smith goes to Washington sort of campaign. Parents could be forgiven for turning off their TV sets for fear that their children would be exposed to lewdness, loose talk, and gross prejudice. By the time we got to election night, however, we had a brief moment when we could simplify and organize our world into neat categories as the networks told us whether a state went red for Republican or blue for Democrat. It also happens, we were told, that the urban areas were more blue while the rural areas were more red. These very simple color categories could lead us to generalize as to what people were thinking and why they voted a certain way. After the election, we hunkered down to watch our favorite news channels where pundits would explain for hours what happened. They used red and blue, rural and urban, conservative and liberal categories as handy ways to order our world and political discourse.

Sadly, however, these categories, while consuming our national consciousness, are very misleading and can distract us from what is really going on in our communities and the hearts of souls of our neighbors, fellow parishioners, and even people in our own families. In some families, a bit after the election, we have relatives announcing they would be un-friending other family members because they did not want Facebook to be a place for messy political discourse. Instead, it needed to be a place where they could share pictures of their pets and describe what did last weekend (as long as it was not a protest march). Churches might not be much better. We have people in our pews who, out of their fear and insecurity, un-friend their pastor so to speak or even their church. These actions paralyze the church from having thoughtful and nuanced conversation about what is happening to us and our country and acting accordingly. In the process, we find ourselves dining not on Jesus, the bread of life, but on a thin secular political gruel that leaves our democracy malnourished

and our churches void of spiritual substance. On the one hand, we worship partisanship as we generalize about whether a church leans left or right. On the other hand, we ascribe to a morally vacant doctrine which holds that in church we don't talk about politics. Tragically, our neat political categories or our complete avoidance of politics can shield us from what is really going on in our communities or our own lives.

As we get caught up in the craziness in our society and how it gets mirrored in our congregations, I think about my early efforts to bridge the rural-urban divide. I grew up in Berkeley, California which is a city that gets all kinds of labels of its own. I confess that I consider the company I am in before I state too clearly where I am from for fear that people will make assumptions about me. In Berkeley, I grew up in the First Congregational Church. Drawing on their faith, my Mom was a Christian educator at the church while attending seminary and my Dad was head of the redevelopment agency advocating for the building of affordable housing and sustainable development. I was bused and went to integrated schools. Reflecting its commitment to diversity, Berkeley public schools actually recognized Malcolm X's birthday as a school holiday. It seems also that the Berkeley City Council actually formulated its own foreign policy with Cuba. Some of my Berkeley relatives did not groove on the political culture in Berkeley and adored Ronald Reagan and proudly voted for Nixon. Others in my immediate family had no use for either. My father, who fought for so many Great Society programs and the war on poverty, had a disdain for Nixon although he admitted that the Great Society saw its largest expansion under Nixon.

I left Berkeley for a good stretch of time. I first graduated from high school in suburban Maryland and then Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. In later years, however, I returned to my roots by attending Pacific School of Religion which was the seminary where my mother had gone and my grandfather before that. When I was in seminary, I left the liberal urban environs of Berkeley to spend a summer interning at two churches in rural Oregon. I remember the night I drove into Condon, Oregon. It was so remote and so dark that I was little frightened. The fear, however, dissipated as I was warmly welcomed by people who offered kindness, patience, and hospitality. I spent my summer making a whole lot of pastoral calls on farmers, teachers, and ranch hands.

As I made those pastoral calls and did a lot of listening, I learned a lot about farming wheat. In Oregon, they grow soft white wheat which is used for ramen noodles and cake flour. Growing this wheat is a very sophisticated business which relies heavily on overseas markets. I learned that, in order to succeed, farmers had to have a much better grasp of what was going on in the economic and political life of different countries than most Ph.D. candidates in Berkeley. It's a little funny but when President Reagan slapped a trade embargo on Pakistan he cut 25% out of the export market for Oregon farmers—a lot of whom likely voted for Reagan. The phone lines of Republican Congressman Bob Smith from Eastern Oregon were burning up with angry phone calls from constituents who wanted the embargo lifted.

In rural Oregon that summer, I got a little guidance on how to lead worship. On one Sunday, we had the annual church in the country. I was reminded not to do what another Berkeley seminarian had done. He suggested that the congregation sing an old 60s Christian

folk song, which contained the phrase “it only takes a spark to get a fire going.” Bad idea. Singing that song would offer little comfort to farmers who were worried about wheat fires. So, we did not sing that song. That summer, I learned many rural people are not terribly ideological unlike some of my Berkeley classmates who often measured their ideas against a fairly rigid politically correct construct which did not allow for a lot of nuance. For many rural people, staying close to earth and each other informed their thoughts, political opinions, and a refreshing pragmatism which was not so rigid. Little did I know that several years later my sister would end up marrying one of those farmers, raise their children on a wheat and cattle ranch and serves as a high school English teacher which she does to this day. For good measure, my nephew is a professional cowboy and my niece is Gilliam County’s Rodeo Queen. For this Berkeley kid, that rural community has become part of my family.

As I think about my personal effort to bridge the rural and urban, it does not strike me as particularly unusual or unique. I suspect, contrary to what we hear in the media, we are reaching across the rural urban divide all the time as we encounter far more complex human stories which cannot be described using red and blue, liberal and conservative, rural and urban categories. In our time, the church needs to reclaim its authority, engage public life, and introduce into the public square a moral vision. But that vision can’t be narrow. Instead its witness must spring from our willingness to do good theological reflection, learn from our history, reach out our communities to listen well in order to do justice, and extend a very bold hospitality to strangers.

So let’s talk about theology, history and reaching out and we endeavor to bridge the urban rural divide.

### **A Theological Basis for Bridging the Divide**

First, from a theological perspective, we need to embrace our incarnate faith. We cannot become like the second century Gnostics who hated the body and thought it was evil or something to be controlled or manipulated. The church thought otherwise. The wonder of the Christian faith is that God is made known to the world through a very human Jesus. Fully human and fully God is the concept which the early church offered as its counter to Gnostic sensibilities. Through the God-child, God lovingly encounters the messiness of the human condition. One of our Conference speakers will be Dr. James Evans, Former President and Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, who is the author of We Have Been Believers, an African American Systematic Theology. In that book, Evans embraces the incarnation when he says that:

“God’s revelation is multidimensional for African American Christians because they were the “other” to whom God’s self-disclosure had been presumably denied. However, they knew differently. African Americans have always resisted ideas of revelation that confined to pure abstract knowledge. Evans, paraphrases Blaise Pascal, who said revelation has more to do with the reasons of the heart than the reasons of the head. This is why black testimonies are full of specific personal and topographical references when

speaking of an encounter with God in Christ. African American Christians will often cite the date, time and place of their conversion/revelation experience as a sign of authenticity. In addition, many will affirm that God called them by name. God's revelation is multi-dimensional because it is essentially a personal encounter. That revelation concerns whole persons and whole communities in their particularity. It is the loving and gracious giving of Godself to the world."<sup>1</sup>

In our political discourse, I believe we daily defy the incarnation by making big generalizations about groups of people without bothering to know or even care about the particularity of their story. It is well for us to remember as we get "tough on crime", debate the place of immigrants in our common life, speak disparagingly of young people, underfund our public schools which are the life blood of rural communities, cast aspersions on the homeless, deprive both our inner cities and rural communities of infrastructure improvements, or compromise people's health insurance, that we run the grave risk of treating people as nameless and faceless objects to be manipulated for political gain. Instead of turning people into objects, it might be well for us to remember that the son of God was born to two itinerant parents, one of whom was a teenager. These parents struggled to comply with a Government registration and found no place in the inn. Those parents and that child were not ministered to by professionals, but by shepherds, some of whom had dubious reputations and questionable citizenship status who, out of their brokenness, shared with Mary, Joseph and the Christ child the good news of God's blessing which the angels had just shared with them. Categories and formulations, of course, have their place. It is impossible to live humanly without them. But the categories and formulations must be measured against the birth narrative and a sturdy incarnational theology which takes seriously real lived experience—a lived experience which is inadequately described when we use simplistic red vs. blue, urban vs. rural, and liberal vs conservative constructs.

### **Historical Basis for Bridging the Divide**

As we affirm an incarnational theology, we also need to be attentive to how history shapes our perspective. At the Conference, we are excited to welcome the historian, Dr. Alison Collis Greene, Associate Professor at Mississippi State University. Dr. Greene wrote an award-winning book, No Depression in Heaven: The Great Depression, The New Deal, and Transformation of Religion in the Delta. In that book, Dr. Greene recounts how in the Mississippi Delta during the Great Depression, churches and the communities in which they dwelled experienced unimaginable levels of poverty. There were very rural churches, urban churches, white churches and black churches of every tradition and theological stripe which came to a shared conclusion that the charity they provided was insufficient to address human needs at their door steps. Destitution and immense poverty was not a political abstraction but something very much felt in the wake of the stock market crash. It was out of this struggle that churches came up against the limits of volunteerism. While they believed the church should do something to meet human need, government intervention was also very much

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<sup>1</sup> James Evans, Jr. We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012, E Book Location, 578.

required. This practical realization grounded in the real pain of citizens, led churches across the theological, racial, and economic spectrum to become fierce advocates for the New Deal. In a lecture at Millsaps College Dr. Greene, using this historical analysis, challenges a current prevailing view hawked in some circles that we were better off as a society when churches handled social welfare work all by themselves before government programs came and messed things up.

As Greene states in her lecture:

“This work to dismantle the welfare state rests on the myth of this redemptive depression. You can’t do that unless you create a story. It’s a careful and reassuring packaging of 20<sup>th</sup> Century’s greatest economic crisis which infused Americas faith in the contemporary private sector and skepticism of the Federal Government. In this retelling, people could always turn to their families and church until Roosevelt stepped in and messed things up with state aid to make people hopelessly dependent. One of those catastrophic moments in modern American life, got rewritten as this idyllic world where the deserving poor, left to their own devices, could find themselves out of their misery with just a little help from their churches and the government.”<sup>2</sup>

This view, offered up by a lot of preachers, is used as a way to demonize the legitimate role of government to lift people out of poverty. An overly romanticized view of Christian charity, however, is dangerous because it grants permission to politicians to cut away at the safety net. What Dr. Greene suggests is that churches in the Mississippi Delta then and churches across the country now, can draw on a sturdier, and less mythical, historical narrative to call on the government to do address poverty whether that be a rural or urban setting.

### **Hospitality, Outreach and Welcoming the Stranger as Way to Bridge the Divide**

Finally, as we embrace an incarnational theology and seek to learn from our history, churches communities must do an excellent job in reaching out to their communities to do justice. I served as a pastor for 26 years. I first server in one small church and then two large churches. We did a lot of reaching out to towns we served. But we were better served in our work when more parishioners got out into the community to become better acquainted with people in our towns and immediate neighborhoods and sought to do outreach and justice work based on what they learned. Research on church revitalization suggests that being really present in the community is essential. At our conference, we invited The Reverend Karina Felize to speak because of her pastoral and outreach work on the pastoral team of the United Methodist Church of the Highlands. She is also Co-Chair of the Immigration Task Force for the New York Conference of the United Methodist Church. Karina is formulating a model for how we become better neighbors. For instance, she invites churches not to presume they know the situation of immigrants and undocumented workers. Instead she invites us to get

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<sup>2</sup> Alison Collis Green, Southern Religion During the Great Depression, Lecture at Millsaps Forums, October 7, 2016.

out into our communities to listen. Churches, struggling to survive, become so preoccupied with their internal concerns that they fail to go out into their communities to listen and get better acquainted. To listen well and to be present is a powerful way of extending hospitality. It is also a basis for the renewal of the church. In our ministry, we need to constantly emphasize the importance of hospitality, kindness and generosity which stands up to harsh rhetoric and actions which turn people into objects and inflict emotional and spiritual and physical damage. When we make hospitality our aim, churches do not become fortresses. Instead they become open and accessible community centers that invite caring and thoughtful public and political conversation on issues that affect the whole community which leads to action and justice work that improves the human condition.

In closing, as we endeavor to consider how to bridge the urban – rural divide, it really just becomes an occasion for us to think more seriously about what it means to do good ministry. We are called to embrace the incarnation and learn from our history by engaging in healing ministries, showing hospitality to strangers, and doing justice. Perhaps we would be well to draw on the image from Corinthians where there are many gifts but one spirit. All institutions in our society have different strengths and different gifts to offer that they might improve the common good. To use the apostle Paul's imagery from scripture, one spirit animates many different gifts that are used to strengthen the body of Christ and I might add the body politic. We might engage in faith-based initiatives. That initiative does not mean churches taking over what is the proper responsibility of the government. Rather, taking faith-based initiative is about congregations encountering real human needs and then pragmatically asking how best to meet that need through the most effective tools available. Sometimes charity and volunteerism is what is required and other times government intervention is what is mandated. Such work must be grounded in being in touch with deep human suffering. We acknowledge the place of the cross which, through Jesus' own rejection, acknowledges that suffering and injustice does exist in the world. And yet our faith leads us to find hope in the resurrection which explodes all our rural-urban, conservative-liberal and red-blue constructs and beckons us into a present and a future that is far more expansive than anything we can imagine.