

# Personal Reflection on Theology and Ministry

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*Reverend Samuel K. Atchison, is a leading social entrepreneur who has pioneered several successful faith-based initiatives and other community-serving programs. He served for more than a decade as the Chaplain at a New Jersey maximum-security prison and was President of the Trenton Ecumenical Ministry. Formally educated at Rutgers University, The Lutheran Theological Seminary, and Princeton Theological Seminary, he reflects here on his more than 30 years of experience serving deeply disadvantaged communities, including prisoners and their children.*

In a variety of roles, I have worked with at-risk and imprisoned populations for more than 30 years. This includes working as a policy analyst and a social services administrator; consulting as both a criminal justice researcher and a family therapist (under clinical supervision); pastoring two prison churches; helping design a federally-funded, multi-state, multimillion dollar prisoner re-entry demonstration; and publishing hundreds of articles in newspapers, magazines, religious journals and media blogs.

The values that form the basis of my ministry have contributed to and been shaped by all of these experiences. I also have been challenged by the moral conviction of Martin Luther King Jr., the incisive brilliance and common touch of Malcolm X, and the courage and intellectual honesty of the late social activist Carl Upchurch, to name a few.

At bottom, however, it was the testimony of John Perkins that proved seminal to my thinking. Perkins, an evangelical pastor and social reformer from Mississippi, believes that

social change must be both biblical and practical. In his book, *Let Justice Roll Down*, which recounts his personal journey from Horatio Alger success story to Christian advocate for the poor, he records his own observations of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. He notes, for example, that Christian evangelicals, while being rightly concerned about people's souls, were nonetheless strangely missing from the movement. As a result, their ministry was out of touch with the people they purported to serve. They failed to have what Martin Luther King Jr. referred to as "a relevant ministry."

Christian liberals, on the other hand, while in the vanguard of social reform, failed to pay proper heed to the spiritual needs of the poor. To really be effective, Perkins writes, one must minister to the needs of the entire person, serving the individual's physical and spiritual needs.

To accomplish this kind of integral service, Perkins argues, three things must occur:

(1) Pastors must first *relocate* to the communities in which their congregations live; (2) The racial, economic, and social barriers created by racial discrimination must be broken by the forgiveness and healing made possible through the ministry of *reconciliation* proffered by the Christian gospel; and (3) A radical *redistribution* of resources must take place through the sharing of education, skills, and technology.

The result of Perkins's vision was Voice of Calvary Ministries, through which his church provided educational programs, job training, housing and healthcare assistance, and recreational programs to the people of his Mendenhall, Mississippi community.<sup>1</sup>

Perkins's vision struck a chord with me, largely because it contrasted so greatly with what I observed in many black churches. I often struggled with the fact that many of the wealthiest African-American churches were located in the poorest urban neighborhoods. As Phyllis Shippy, a Cincinnati-based pastor, noted in her seminar series, "Harvesting Our Samaria," such congregations often made little-to-no investment in the communities surrounding them. Made up largely of middle-class suburbanites, such congregations are often self-absorbed, showing little regard for their neighbors.

Yet many of these same church members will wring their hands with worry, wondering aloud why the streets are so violent and why there is so little respect for the church. Many pastors eloquently – and publicly – bemoan the paucity of men in the church. Yet they will not even deign to go to the street corners and prisons where many men are, and tell them of their need for the Lord.

Indeed, I found that many inner-city congregations would not even lend assistance to the outreach efforts of others. In an article for *Christian Century* in 1992, I related the following experience:

As the administrator of a program that

offered jobs, housing assistance and the message of the gospel to homeless black men, I served a very hardcore population. Many of the men I worked with were ex-convicts, and most of them were addicted to drugs. Our organization, a parachurch ministry in the inner city of Trenton, New Jersey, was dependent on the support of area churches. Admittedly, it was a shoe-string operation, yet our agency and our work were widely respected... . Strangely, however, we got minimal support from black churches. With rare exceptions our support came from white congregations, many of them outside the city. Explaining this to our white supporters was quite embarrassing.<sup>2</sup>

This, of course, was many years before the creation of the federally-funded "faith-based initiative," through which public funds were made available through competitive grants to faith-based organizations that provided social services. The inception of the faith-based initiative corresponded with the explosion of so-called black "megachurches," i.e., churches with 2,000 or more members, the overwhelming majority of which are located in the suburbs. As Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs noted in "Black Megachurches and the Paradox of Black Progress": "Black mega-churches are...the result of an extensive Black migration – the 1980s and 1990s suburbanization of much of Black America. During the 1980s and 1990s the African American population declined in urban areas but increased in suburbia. In fact during this time period the African American suburban population doubled from 6 million to 12 million. ...Black suburban migration is not only a geographical shift, but also reflects a "class migration" – an expanded Black middle class that is clearly the result of the opening of society. ...It is the result of the gains of the civil rights movement and is a manifestation of class upward mobility."<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, this "class migration" to the suburbs of the black middle class was followed a few years later by the migration of, among others, the black urban poor to many of the same suburban communities. Studies con-

ducted in the early 2000s by the Brookings Institution and the National Poverty Center documented the migration of millions of poor inner-city residents to inner-ring suburbs, a development researchers have termed “suburban poverty.” Indeed, some have contended that the largest poor population in the country now resides in the suburbs.

Ironically, this relocation of a critical mass of both the poor and the middle class positioned black megachurches to leverage the diverse education and professional skills of their congregants and create innovative social service programs, many of which received public funds through the faith-based initiative. According to Tucker-Worgs, in addition to distributing food and clothing to the needy, “[a]bout 77 percent are in voter registration and education, and 68 percent of them have participated in some type of organized social issue advocacy. Forty-three percent have built or renovated affordable housing and 28 percent have a church credit union. Interestingly, over 50 percent of Black megachurches have established a nonprofit community development organization (CDO) that they use as a vehicle to do much of this public engagement.”<sup>14</sup>

Yet as a pastor whose work was largely among both the unchurched and the poorest of the poor (i.e., those unable – or unwilling – to leave their inner city neighborhoods), I was forced to wrestle with how best to serve those left behind. In so doing, I found myself questioning what it meant to be both black and Christian in this society. As a child of the civil rights/black liberation era, I was nurtured on the doctrine of black pride. According to this credo, to be *black* meant carrying oneself at all times in a manner that befit the dignity of our people. It meant taking full advantage of every opportunity to ensure that the doors to advancement would remain open to those who followed behind. Most of all, it meant bolstering the weakest links in the chain, the poor – especially the incarcerated and their families – thereby strengthening the entire chain.

Similarly, to be *Christian* meant offering redemption – body, soul and spirit – to those for whom Christ died, regardless of their station in life. Yet, as I heard my experiences repeated in the testimonies of countless others, I realized that a large segment of the black church did not practice what it preached. To the extent to which that was true, it was neither truly *black*, nor truly *Christian*. Nor, in the minds of many, was it relevant.

Indeed, the notion of relevance has been for many years a challenge for the black church in particular. As Martin Luther King, Jr. noted on the eve of his assassination in April 1968, "It's alright to talk about 'long white robes over yonder,' in all its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's alright to talk about 'streets flowing with milk and honey,' but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and His children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's alright to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do."

Fifty years later, in the wake of a rash of police shootings in which literally dozens of black citizens have been killed across the country – thus giving rise to the aptly named Black Lives Matter movement – the issue of relevance still haunts the church. For example, I recently conducted a study examining the role of the church in police/community relations. I chose to undertake the project because (1) I was concerned about the social and cultural dynamics associated with the relocation of poor and often formerly adjudicated urban transplants to previously prosperous suburbs; and (2) I was troubled because my experience – as a pastor whose work has always been at the nexus of religious faith and criminal justice – told me that many of the young men being killed were rejecting the church as irrelevant.

Among my findings: Relatively few houses of worship engage in congregationally-based strategies designed to facilitate community stability and reconciliation. Notwithstanding the effects of changing demographics – including the advent of “suburban poverty”; urban gentrification (including dislocation of the poor) caused by white middle-class professionals migrating back to the cities; and increasing poverty in poor city neighborhoods occupied by those who have been left behind – congregational response, across racial and denominational lines, remains woefully insufficient.

To be sure, as revealed in the 2012 National Congregations Study, “[m]ost congregations (83%), containing 92% of religious service attendees, engage in some social or human service activities intended to help people outside of their congregation. These programs are primarily oriented to food, health, clothing, and housing provision....” Yet beyond addressing the emergent financial and social service needs of the needy among them, “the typical and probably most important way in which congregations pursue social service activity is ... by organizing small groups of volunteers to carry out well-defined tasks on a periodic basis.”<sup>5</sup> This means that such service, while somewhat effective in addressing the short-term needs of the newer and poorer residents in the community, nevertheless does little to transform congregational culture. This is crucial because, according to religion researchers, congregational transformation is important for societal transformation.

Congregational transformation – defined by one church consulting group as “the collective process, practices and methodologies of change for congregations and churches that lead to re-discovering” the true purpose of the church – happens as the church begins to understand and flesh out its role in society.<sup>6</sup> “Disconnecting from God’s will means that we quite likely have disconnected from those outside of the walls of the church and those not in our own faith community; we nurture only our brothers and sisters inside our congregations but have ceased to care

or even engage with those on the outside. In doing so, we lose our mission and our way.”<sup>7</sup>

This holds true even of congregations that provide a modicum of service to neighbors who are at risk. According to Harold Dean Trulear – Associate Professor of Applied Theology at Howard University School of Divinity and co-editor of *Ministry with Prisoners & Families: The Way Forward* – work with at-risk persons should not be viewed as *outreach* but *pastoral care*, utilizing the resources of the entire church. Such ministry, he and his co-editors argue, “is the essence of church itself.”<sup>8</sup>

This understanding of pastoral care (for members and non-members alike) as reflecting the true mission of the church comports well with the Roman Catholic idea of “Respect for the Human Person.” As set forth in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, this teaching recognizes the intrinsic value and dignity of the individual as proceeding from Creation. Individuals are created by God, in the image of God, and thus have a dignity that is derived from reflecting the divine image and being the object of divine love.<sup>9</sup>

With respect to social justice, this means that the individual has “rights that flow from his dignity as a creature. These rights are prior to society and must be recognized by it. They are the basis of the moral legitimacy of every authority: by flouting them, or refusing to recognize them in its positive legislation, a society undermines its own moral legitimacy... It is the Church’s role to remind men of good will of these rights and to distinguish them from unwarranted or false claims.” (CCC Paragraph 1930)

The “men of good will” referred to in the passage includes “every authority,” for failure to recognize the inherent, transcendent rights of each creature makes the offending authority null and void. Thus, the effect of the passage is to make the church responsible to remind those in authority of the “better angels

of their nature,” based on the equality of all humanity before a holy God.

Even more, it makes social justice synonymous with *pastoral care*. This is underscored in the next two paragraphs: “Respect for the human person proceeds by way of respect for the principle that “everyone should look upon his neighbor (without any exception) as ‘another self,’ above all bearing in mind his life and the means necessary for living it with dignity... The duty of making oneself a neighbor to others and actively serving them becomes even more urgent when it involves the disadvantaged, in whatever area this may be. ‘As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’” (CCC Paragraphs 1931-32)

I found further grounding in two familiar but often inadequately understood (and thus inadequately applied) passages of Scripture. First, in Matthew 28:19, as part of what Christians call “The Great Commission,” Jesus instructs His followers to “make disciples of all nations.” The word for “nations” is the Greek word “ethnos,” from which we get our term “ethnic.” Jesus is thus calling His followers to make disciples of all ethnic groups. This is a radical departure from the tradition in which Jesus’s disciples were reared, because it placed everyone – Jew and Gentile, oppressed and oppressor – on the same level, i.e., as sinners in need of salvation.

Moreover, the process of “making disciples of all ethnic groups” meant that Jesus’s followers – and all who would follow in their footsteps – were forced to come into relationship with people of different races, cultures, languages and traditions. Not just over yonder, but *in their own communities!*

This meant that, at least as far as Christian believers were concerned, all grudges, biases, prejudices and hatreds were to be set aside – laid at the foot of the Cross, so to speak – in order to serve the people trapped by those biases and

help set them free by leading them (by example) to salvation and life in Christ.

Within this context, the idea of “baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt. 28:19, KJV) becomes all-important. To baptize (Gk., *baptizo*) is to identify. The baptized individual is publicly identifying himself/herself with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. This new identity supersedes all other identities – race, ethnicity, gender identity, gang affiliation, etc., because the baptized individual is now a “new creature” in Christ. “Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new.” (II Cor. 5:17, KJV)

In ministering to gang members this becomes crucial, because their “flag” (gang color, tattoo or other insignia) is emblematic of their identity. In the minds of many, their flag is *who they are*.<sup>10</sup> Many young African Americans, in particular, see this choice as justified because the gang was there when no one else was, not even the church! Hence, many have no use for the Christian church. This doesn’t mean that they are not curious about God, or even about the Scriptures. They just don’t want the church.

During my ministry at New Jersey State Prison, we addressed this issue by developing a Bible study specifically targeting such men. Taught by a former corrections officer-turned-pastor (he was also a former gang member who had been a devotee of Malcolm X in his youth), this class became the best-attended Bible study in the prison, regularly attracting 50 or more adherents from a variety of gangs and quasi-religious security threat groups (STGs): Bloods, Five-Percenter, New World Africans, etc. Several actually became Christians, got baptized, and began to attend the Sunday worship services regularly.

Another equally eye-opening encounter

occurred in reading the Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 4: 23-25; 5:1-16; Luke 6:17-49)<sup>11</sup> The Scriptures record that within a historical context of Roman occupation resulting in oppression – morally, spiritually, economically and politically – Jesus attracted hurting people of every stripe: Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, worshippers of Yahweh and devotees of other religious traditions.

Among the facts that struck me was that those whom He attracted had their own religious traditions. The lion’s share of His followers – including the twelve – were reared in Rabbinic Judaism. However, those who hailed from Tyre and Sidon (Luke 6:17) were Phoenicians and thus worshippers of a multitude of gods, including Baal (mainly in Sidon) and Melqart (chief god of Tyre), while the inhabitants of Decapolis (Matt. 4:25) were immersed in a hotbed of Greco-Roman culture and thus steeped in their own religious tradition.

Yet, in coming to Jesus, they were all seeking relief – from illness, paralysis, disease and demonic possession (Matt. 4:24) – that their religious traditions *could not meet*. No matter what powers were ascribed to the deities of a particular faith, they were insufficient to meet the needs of the multitudes. Thus, when the multitudes met Jesus, they were meeting Someone with a power and authority that was beyond their experience. (As it says in Matt. 7:29, “He spoke as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”) As such, they saw in Him one who could meet their needs.

Moreover, Luke’s statement that Jesus looked on His disciples before beginning his address revolutionized my understanding of the focus of His message: Jesus wasn’t just speaking to the multitudes, He was also speaking to the disciples *on behalf of the multitudes*. In so doing, He lifted up a standard for all who would follow Him, saying in effect, “If you’re going to be My disciple, you’ve got to bring something different. It doesn’t matter what they look like, what their language is, what their issues are, or what

they’ve done. They’ve got to see Me in you.”

Within a social context where the police are deemed to be the enemy and clergy are often viewed as “poverty pimps,” I understood this to be a call to accessibility and authenticity. In other words, I had to be *real* – that is, willing to be honest about my own vulnerabilities, failures and struggles in life – while simultaneously being intentional about recognizing the God-given abilities, talents and graces present in the lives of those I served.

Moreover, in light of the high recidivism rate among those released from prison, I felt led continually to pray for and pursue spiritual healing for my inmate-congregants. The need for such healing is all-important because, in my experience, most inmates are emotionally and psychologically scarred, which is directly related to reoffending. (Indeed, during my chaplaincy years a typical psychological diagnosis among inmates was Antisocial Personality Disorder, where, according to DSM-IV, individuals “frequently lack empathy and tend to be callous, cynical, and contemptuous of the feelings, rights, and sufferings of others. ...[Such behavior] may be particularly distinguishing of Antisocial Personality Disorder in prison or forensic settings...”)<sup>12</sup>

Equally important, from my discussions with the prison’s small psychology staff it became apparent that their caseloads rarely permitted them to establish therapeutic relationships with any of the prison’s 1,800 inmates. Their work consisted largely of facilitating group therapy sessions on different cell blocks and conducting the psychological evaluations required annually to update each inmate’s file and ascertain his appropriate classification/security status (e.g., maximum, medium, etc.).

Thus, my pastoral approach became that of a therapeutic facilitator – researching their case histories, interviewing and providing individual counseling, while simultaneously utilizing the prison church and its governmental

structure as a means of facilitating their gifts and developing leadership. Writing for *Patheos* in 2011, I discussed this approach:

Most prisoners are given few opportunities for self-discovery and little hope of redemption for an array of reasons: cutbacks in prison education and training programs; increasingly restrictive policies regarding family visitation and other privileges; and political campaigns portraying them as animals not worth saving.

Enter the prison church, with its emphasis on personal atonement and the intrinsic value of the individual, its ritual cleansing through baptism, its intellectual stimulation through Bible study, and its opportunities for self-expression through testimony and ecstatic worship.

In the church, a man hungry for recognition can be recognized in a positive vein. Known elsewhere by his last name, inmate number and housing unit (prison mailing address), he is embraced in the church as “Brother So-and-So,” and treated with a dignity shown virtually nowhere else in the prison.

Similarly, to hold a position in the prison church confers upon the office-holder a level of trust he likely has never before experienced. Given both the training and the opportunity to demonstrate responsibility (within appropriate parameters), an inmate will often rise to the occasion, developing an understanding of leadership and mutual accountability in the process.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, my ministry has been about serving “the least of these” by any (legal and ethical) means necessary. As with John Perkins and those who have followed in his wake (and there are many), my reading of the Scriptures is both evangelistic and practical. I want to see

souls saved, for that is why Christ died. However, I also want to see them positioned for success – that is, living a life that is dignified, responsible, and contributing to society. That, too, I see in the Scriptures.

To be sure, I’ve taken the road less traveled in pursuit of this vision. But with apologies to Robert Frost, it has truly made all the difference.

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- [11] Because of textual differences, there is some debate among scholars as to whether the texts in Matthew and Luke reflect two different events or two different accounts of the same event. There is general agreement, however, that the same basic message is conveyed in both texts.
- [12] American Psychiatric Association (1994). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author. (NOTE: The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual – DSM – has since been revised; DSM-V is now the standard diagnostic reference source. The quote from DSM-IV was employed because (1) that particular volume was in use during the years of my chaplaincy ministry; (2) it served as the basis for the clinical diagnoses of inmates, as determined by forensic psychiatrists and psychologists; and (3) it informed me, as a clinically trained chaplain, in my therapeutic engagement with inmates.)
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