

Fulfilling Martin Luther King Jr.'s Dream of Healing the Racial Divide Through a Reconciled Church

Like most Americans, I have tracked with great interest recent developments in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City and resulting racial tension, but was only able to process them through the diffused prism and unfocused lens of my limited experience.

But three events the week leading up to the annual Martin Luther King Jr. holiday facilitated a paradigm shift for me, providing several “aha” moments on the subject of racial reconciliation.

First, my wife and I went to see *Selma* on opening weekend to learn more about that turbulent time in our nation's history and how one man's dream could bring about changes in our world.

Several days later I was invited to an advance screening of Kevin Costner's upcoming theatrical release, *Black or White*, hosted by Bishop T.D. Jakes, pastor of The Potter's House in Dallas. Opening nationally on Jan. 30 this film—based on a true story—tells the compelling personal tale of a family forced to confront their true feelings on race, addiction, forgiveness and understanding.

On the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s actual birthday I participated in “The Reconciled Church: Healing the Racial Divide.” This unprecedented summit, hosted by Bishop Jakes and convened by Bishop Harry Jackson from metro-Washington, D.C., was attended by a racially, denominationally, geographically and generationally diverse

representation of more than 100 pastors and faith leaders from across the nation.

Among these were legendary civil rights leader and former U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young, a prominent figure in the Selma story; Dr. Bernice King, CEO of The King Center in Atlanta and daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; and Dr. King's niece, Dr. Alveda King.

"Most people, when they think about my father, often forget that he was a pastor," Bernice King said, explaining that the civil rights movement originated in the church, and that it was a fitting tribute to her father's legacy that faith leaders were once again taking the lead in the area of racial reconciliation. "The church's role and responsibility is always to be on the ground, connecting to and leading on every issue in our nation and our world."

According to Ambassador Young, Selma was 50 years ago, but this is a new day and a new dynamic. "We have come together to give a pastoral assessment, and I am amazed by how much agreement there was," Young said. "The challenge of the Church from the very beginning, and the spirit in which we have gathered, is: How do we deal with the 'least of these,' God's children?"

In sharing his vision, Bishop Jackson—who was in Ferguson the day the Grand Jury decision was announced—challenged, "The church really has a lot of the answers, and is already operative in doing great work to address the problems of our day. A group like this can shake the foundations of the nation—for God and for good."

Bishop Jakes agreed. "The heart of our faith centers around giving, serving and helping people; what we wanted to do was to see that love take human form," he said, noting the Gospel of John references "the Word was made flesh."

Bishop Jakes continued, "We want the Word we preach to be made

flesh and influence not only our congregations and communities, but also the national conversation—around solutions, rather than pain and frustration.”

As I listened to the robust discussion and dialogue, including a spirit of repentance from many Anglo pastors who came in humility to listen and learn, I realized my own need to acknowledge and examine attitudes of privilege and actively seek to understand the unique experiences, challenges and viewpoints of individuals with differing identities.

According to writer Cathy Reisenwitz, “Acknowledging privilege isn’t putting people in categories or discriminating against them. It’s recognizing that one’s identity shields oneself from firsthand knowledge of others’ oppression. This isn’t a description of how things should be. It’s an admission of how things currently are.”

My take-away on the opportunity of the church to lead in effecting change further crystallized in church yesterday while listening to a sermon on the difference one person can make amid the fear, resignation, sense of powerlessness and denial in the wake of everything from recent shootings to stopping Ebola, ISIS or poverty.

The text for that sermon on Jesus’ response as to whether or not any of us can make a difference was from Matthew 9:35-39. “But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd.”

Earlier in that chapter, Jesus had been going through cities and villages, healing every sickness and disease among the people. Just that day, He had already forgiven and healed a paralytic, restored a young girl to life and healed another woman from an issue of blood. Obviously, He had already seen individuals among the multitude, physically.

But as He looked into their hearts, not with judgment or

shame, but compassion, He saw their condition as they were—the abused, the abuser, the dying. He turned from the crowd to his disciples following Him and made a distinction between the plentiful harvest and the scarcity of harvesters.

That is what happened at the Reconciled Church summit last week. Despite our different life experiences, the church has a common mission and language. Like Jesus, we can see beyond physical characteristics and crises to focus with compassion on the hearts of individuals in need, and develop practical solutions to make a difference in their lives.

As David McCasland wrote, “The words of Jesus compel us to act and to move, beyond business as usual ... Jesus’ death forgave my past sins and inspires my present obedience.”

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