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THE MINISTERS COUNCIL AS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

By Joe Kutter



The Ministers Council. What is it, and what can it be? Or, from the perspective of a member, what can The Ministers Council do for me? I believe that we are, in part, "A Community of Practice."

As we talked with the Lilly Endowment about the second Together in Ministry grant, the most pressing question from Lilly was, how will you sustain the TIM program? Our answer was, in order to sustain the TIM culture, we must have stronger and more effective constituent councils. If we want to intensify the expectation that the ministerial leaders served by the Ministers Council will participate in collegial covenant groups, then the constituent councils must be the stewards of that expectation.

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It was with a focus on our constituent council leadership that Lilly introduced us to "Communities of Practice" and to one of the primary leaders in its development, Dr. Etienne Wenger. The core concepts of Communities of Practice are these: 1. *Community*, 2. *Practice*, and 3. *Domain*.

Community: The Communities of Practice concept begins with the assertion that all knowledge is social in nature and that the community is fundamentally necessary for the development and application of knowledge. We learn as we interact together.

Imagine this: Several colleagues in ministry choose to test out a new restaurant together. What will almost certainly happen? There will be conversation about the menu, about the service and ambience, about family and politics. And then, because the group has ministry in common, the conversation will turn to issues of ministry. Perhaps there will be a discussion about the season of worship, or Christian Education, or the congregant who is difficult, or church growth or shrinkage.

Sooner or later the sharing will start and, without clear intention, the participants in this group that chose to test out a new restaurant will be talking and listening and learning ministry interpersonally. Each will be teacher and learner with the others.

The Communities of Practice process takes this fundamental insight and gives it a new dimension of intentionality. Conversational arenas are created for the express purpose of shared conversation, with the objective of doing it better. In our case, the purpose is to do ministry better through the application of knowledge.

The Ministers Council is, at times, a Community of Practice at work. Intentionality will make us more effective in our shared goal of doing ministry better. Our Mission Statement says that "we covenant together. . . ." That implies community.

Practice: The primary participants in Communities of Practice are, not surprisingly, practitioners. The practitioner is a person who engages in both the development and the practical application of knowledge. It is in practice that the dividing wall between doing and knowing is broken down. The knower and the doer are the same person; the practitioner is in a constant quest to know more and to do it better.

The practitioner is one who sees the world through the lens of the practice. Just as the attorney is always aware of legal ramifications and the physician can't help but see medical consequences, the minister always sees others through ministerial eyes.

We in the Ministers Council are practitioners. In our practice, homiletics becomes sermons preached, theology becomes a way of engaging the persons and community that God has entrusted into our care, and ecclesiology becomes the practice of congregational leadership. The Bible provides the lens through which we engage the world. To be a ministerial leader is to be a practitioner.

Domain: This may be the least intuitive of the three core concepts, but it is indispensable to the Communities of Practice process. The domain is the cluster of core issues and concerns that shape the community. It is the sun, the center of gravity, which keeps all things in their places.

Our domain, our core issues and concerns, have been defined for us in the Ministers Council Mission Statement. To paraphrase, we are focused on deepening our spiritual journeys and increasing our effectiveness as leaders in Christ's church.

Our core concern is, in the words of the song, "Just a closer walk with thee." We want to discern the Spirit among us and be faithful to that Holy guidance. We know that this is a deeply personal and individual quest. At the same time it is a communal undertaking. Why else did God create the church? So together we engage the issues and concerns that relate to our spiritual journeys.

Our second core concern is that we will be more effective leaders in Christ's church. Our call to ministerial leadership demands the development of a set of skills and abilities that will allow us to be both fruitful and faithful in the practice of ministry. Learning to preach, teach, lead, and discern the culture within which we serve are all necessary skills that must be honed if we are to

faithfully and effectively respond to God's invitation to ministerial leadership.

Our domain then has two foci, spirituality and effective church leadership. How do we nurture ourselves as a Community of Practice? That is a question beyond the scope of this short essay. And yet nurturing is the focus of most of the literature on Communities of Practice. So let me offer the following resources.

- Go to Etienne Wenger's website, www.ewenger.com and begin there.
- Read ***Cultivating Communities of Practice*** by Wenger, Snyder and McDermott, published by Harvard Business Press.
- Google "Communities of Practice" and see what you find. I was astounded at the massive amount of literature on the subject.
- Finally, Using Lilly Endowment Grant money, the Ministers Council is offering Community of Practice Workshops that are designed to strengthen our constituent councils. We can make something happen.

Grace and Peace,

Dr. Joe Kutter is Acting Executive Director, Ministers Council, American Baptist Churches USA

The Scattered Becoming a Community

By Carolyn Piper



The Rochester Genesee Region is far flung, and those of us who belong to it find just being together is a challenge. Creating community is an even greater one. For an ordained clergy woman, belonging to one more group is frequently a trial, and given the distance between us, seems almost impossible. And yet, many of us feel the need to belong to the sisters in the group that took us into their fold. Some of us met at other Women in Ministry events and our names were familiar to each other.

Thanks to Susan Maybeck, who first extended the invitation, several of us agreed to form an e-mail group that would meet in person twice a year – once at the annual regional meeting and then at a scheduled retreat.

This has been our approach. Susan poses a monthly question that we ponder and then respond to so others can read our reflections. In between her initiatives we share the thanksgivings, joys, and concerns of ministry, family, and examples our own journeys.

We use our Together in Ministry funds for the scheduled retreat arranged by a participant. This gives us an extended time to share our faith stories, reflect on our experiences, and worship together. The Ohio and New York groups then meet and share the experience with those who cannot be present at the retreat.

The surprise continues: What began as obligation has become an important source of strength “for the journey.” Out of differences in age, experience, ministry, education, ability, needs, and life styles comes a new appreciation for each woman’s story and support for her life – now. When family needs prevent time for a new question we wait until someone writes, “I miss you.” The response is usually immediate, and having experienced the group’s need and desire, a new question appears.

Our journey continues as we thank God for group understanding and healing. We also give thanks for all those who made the TIM groups possible.

Carolyn Piper is a Together in Ministry participant, an ABCUSA chaplain, and a member of the Ministers Council Communications Committee.

The Real Torture of Being a Pastor

By Ken Fong



An essential part of my morning habit is to retrieve my newspaper from wherever it was heaved, and retreat to my spot in the house where I can scan the headlines to see what’s transpired while I was asleep. Perhaps as a sign of my age or life stage, I turn to the editorial pages now before I peruse the sports section.

Given the debate being waged on talk radio these days on America’s use of torture during the just-finished Bush administration, I wasn’t the least bit surprised one recent morning to spy several headlines about this issue. What lured me into reading it, though, was a piece by a for-

mer CIA interrogator who had been ordered to torture captured enemy soldiers during the Viet Nam War. The CIA believed that it had captured a high-ranking NVA officer, but despite subjecting him to all kinds of gruesome cruelty, the soldier kept denying that he was the officer in question.

Finally, after the CIA had moved the prisoner to a small, completely white cell with no windows, the writer got involved. They had kept the suspected officer isolated there for three years, never turning off the bright overhead lights, always keeping the room temperature frosty. He only began to tell the truth when the interrogator became the one person to shatter his enforced solitude. The officer had been well-trained to endure excruciating pain and suffering. What broke him was a combination of extreme loneliness and the eventual inability to keep track of the passage of time.

While being the pastor of a local church is nothing like being tortured as a prisoner of war, it nevertheless often brings with it its own unique kind of torture. Speaking at a recent national gathering of Christian pastors, Pastor Rob Bell of Michigan’s Mars Hill Bible Church described our job as “death by a thousand paper cuts.” Every pastor in that audience immediately thought of the damage done by innumerable and incessant little criticisms, of the impossible-to-meet expectations and demands on the pastor and his/her family.

Years and years of feeling taken for granted or not being respected also take their toll on every pastor’s spirit. Yet like God’s elite soldiers, we pastors are trained to somehow endure whatever punishment our deacons and church members can offer us. The only confession they’ll hear from us is, “Thanks for sharing your concern with me. God bless you for your honesty.”

While some pastors finally succumb, many of us soldier on, seemingly impervious to repeated violations and degradations. However, our ultimate downfall is quite often the same thing that broke the NVA officer. It is not so much the ‘paper cuts’ but the ongoing isolation from meaningful contact with other pastors that, in the end, crushes our will and defeats our spirit.

Years ago I came to the realization that I—and no one else—was cutting myself off from regular, meaningful contact with other local pastors. Consumed by the boundary-less expanse of pastoring, my days, weeks, and months blurred into one continuous ball of concerns, meetings and messages.

To remedy this, I called together an eclectic bunch of pastors to meet over lunch on the 4th Tuesday of each month. A few were already friends of mine; others were from nearby churches. Some of the originals are still here, others have dropped out, and each year we add a few more. The only prayer we utter is over our fast-food or leftovers.

The rest of the two hours is reserved for sharing concerns, examining personnel issues, discussing trends, or seeking advice from peers. Being together has been meaningful if only because there is no need to explain what you do or to convince each other of the unique joys and sorrows of our shared calling. We have walked each other through the dark night of a church split. We have tried to parse the underlying issues surrounding ministering to homosexuals and their families. We have enjoyed plotting each other's upcoming sabbaticals. Currently, we are weighing bringing our churches together to assist homeless families year-round.

Although I host our gathering, no one is 'in charge.' It's really a circle of equals, regardless of the size of our budgets or the state of our churches. It's become one of those unique groups where pastors aren't trying to impress each other with factoids that rarely get at what matters to God. The time together goes by quickly. At two o'clock we part company and scatter back to the broken people and fractured communities that Jesus has called us to love and shepherd. We return to worlds that haven't been altered by our time with each other. But somehow it makes a huge difference to know that someone really understands and that we are not alone.

*Rev. Dr. Ken Fong is pastor of Evergreen Baptist Church, Los Angeles, and is the author of **Secure in God's Embrace** (Intervarsity Press, 2003).*

Change Has Come

By Rick Messana



Maine is a wonderful place. From the rocky coast to the ski slopes near where I live to the numerous and beautiful beaches and lakes, we've got it all here in the Great State of Maine.

You really haven't lived until you've seen autumn here. The colors are so bright and varied they almost hurt your eyes. American Baptist Churches of Maine (ABCOM) has served and evangelized this great state for over 200 years. Established as the Maine Baptist Missionary Society in 1804, we have a long and storied history in this denomination. The first minister of the church I pastor in Livermore, ME was Sylvania Boardman, whose son, George Dana Boardman, joined Adoniram Judson in his missionary work in Burma, becoming the "apostle to the Karen."

ABCOM is a region made up primarily of small churches. In fact even our largest churches have average Sunday morning worship attendances of little more than 200. Most of our churches serve less than 100 parishioners and many have less than 50. As our history shows, we are a region very much invested in missions. As hard as times have been recently, 2008 was 4th best mission-giving year in the previous decade. Since 1995 giving has remained level even with the loss of many churches that have left the denomination over a variety of issues.

While this is good news, the financial picture for ABCOM is bleak. These hard economic times have brought some hard changes to ABCOM. The China Lake Conference Center, our regional conferencing and camping center, had to be closed and may be put up for sale. There have been massive staff layoffs leaving us with a staff of just three, the Executive Minister (Dr. Al Fletcher), a business manager, and a part-time secretary. There are no Area Ministers on paid staff though some former area resource ministers are working on a volunteer basis when churches have emergencies or need help with finding a pastor.

There are fewer and fewer full time pastors in the state. Many churches have cut their pastoral ministry to half or even quarter time. Churches have closed their sanctuaries during the harsh Maine winter to conserve oil, meeting in fellowship halls or Sunday School rooms.

The ABCOM Ministers Council is rising to this challenge. Leadership Transformation Groups (LTG's), Together in Ministry groups, and other clergy-led fellowships are helping to fill the gaps left by a lack of area ministry resources. The Ministers Council Executive Committee is working hard to plug the other holes in the dike as best they can.

For example, the Ministers Council of Maine held a "Celebration of Ministry" in recognition of the 20 years that Rev. Alan Shumway served as a member of the national ABC staff and the regional staff of Maine. Alan was our last full-time

area resource minister, and when the axe came down it seemed as if the twenty years in which he served so faithfully would go unrecognized. That did not happen.

Clergy and laity of the entire region were invited to attend the celebration, contribute to a book of letters, and/or bring a financial offering of appreciation. The event was held on a Sunday afternoon in February and was attended by a good representation of pastors and lay persons with whom Alan had shared ministry over the years. It was a time of expressing appreciation for what had been, and looking forward in hope to the future unfolding before us. Alan's sense was that though this was held for him, it wasn't all about him.

It was a recognition of the twenty years of shared ministry among American Baptists in Maine with whom he had the privilege of serving. It was about encouraging one another as we face the reality that the denominational life we have known is no more. It was about recognizing that this was a new beginning as we seek ways to connect with one another in ministries of support, encouragement, inspiration and assistance. In a recent e-mail to me Alan wrote; "I was impressed by the leadership and vision of the Ministers Council executive committee in providing this time of recognition, celebration, inspiration and fellowship for all who gathered that day."

This event is an example of how the Ministers Council is more important now than ever before. Dr. Al Fletcher, the Executive Minister of ABCOM, said in a telephone interview, "The ministers role is changing so rapidly that if we don't help each other we will all be in real trouble."

But the role of the Ministers Council is more than just filling gaps and plugging dikes. As times get tougher and the end of the tunnel seems to be growing farther away rather than closer, we need the mutual love and support we get from the Ministers Council. We share a common goal, the proclaiming of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We come from different backgrounds and differing theological outlooks but we are nonetheless brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. If we don't look out for one another in times like these, who will?

If you aren't a part of a Ministers Council in your region, now is the time to join. If you are a member and have been inactive or "too busy" to attend retreats and meetings there is no time like the present to recommit yourself to the fellowship and support that the Ministers Council can

provide. And who knows? Perhaps it isn't you who needs the support, but a colleague who needs *your* support. Possibly you are like Esther as she faced the question, "Who knows but that you have come to (ministry) for such a time as this?"

I don't know what lies ahead for ABCOM. I am certain that great change is in our future. In fact great change has already come. We don't like change here in Maine. We don't like it at all. How many Mainers does it take to change a light bulb? None. We don't like change. But change comes whether we like it or not.

Change *has* come and the measure of any organization is how it rises to the challenges brought by hard times and rough roads. The Ministers Council in Maine is facing these challenges head on. We are more than just an organization; we are an organism, the living breathing Body of Christ, and we do not fear what the future holds, because our God holds the future.

Rev. Rick Messana is the pastor of the North Livermore Baptist Church. He has been a member of the Ministers Council for nearly 30 years and currently serves as Senator from Maine. Rick is married to Valerie Carpenter Messana. They have three grown children, and they are expecting their first grandchild in July.

AnamCara—Collegial Clergy Communities

By Mahan Siler

Reviewed by Margaret J. Marcuson



An important focus for Ministers Council in recent years has been Together in Ministry groups— collegial covenant groups in a wide variety of formats. Veteran Baptist pastor Mahan Siler has written a booklet, **AnamCara: Collegial Clergy Communities**, outlining a model for clergy to engage in collegial groups to the benefit of one another and their ministry.

What does *AnamCara* mean? It's a Gaelic phrase which means "soul friend." Siler said in an interview that he used this phrase because he wanted to make clear that this model went much deeper than the typical "support group."

He says in the book, "This is about friends, soul friends, with whom you share the passion of common calling....AnamCara would be a small circle of your choosing, friends of your excitements, companions you could risk trusting, colleagues with whom you would enjoy practicing the art of ministry."

Siler said he was motivated to work on a model for clergy groups by his own experience. "I had early on a really classic burnout in my first pastorate in Northern Virginia – I just ran out of gas. It was a time of a lot of turmoil in Washington, DC, back in the late 60s. I resigned without a place to go, and recouped." He worked as director of a pastoral care department, but always wanted to get back into the pastorate. When he accepted a call to Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, he said, "I figured out next time I'd take better care of my own need as a pastor to stay alive." He said that during that time he also observed other pastors not doing a very good job of self-care. He said, "Among all the professionals, we have less collaboration, and we need it the most."

In the book, Siler points out another aspect to life in ministry today: that we are part of a huge cultural shift going on right now. He calls this the Great Turning, a profound transition taking place around us. (See also Phyllis Tickle's new book **The Great Emergence** for a brilliant articulation of our current cultural experience and the implications for ministry.) Old ways of being in ministry will not work any more, and it's easy to find ourselves at a loss as we struggle with the anxiety and change around us.

What is the *AnamCara* model? Siler is expressing a vision, a hope for "a network of small collegial circles each of six to eight clergy leaders of congregations who meet regularly to offer mutual support, collaboration, and accountability in their practices of theological reflection, leadership and Spirit awareness." He says, "AnamCara communities are practice groups. The common praxis – theological reflection and discernment, leading, and soul nurturance – is the unifying thread." He says that each group will develop its own unique shape and that methods and content will vary, but he does have a suggested form.

"AnamCara is for you who see yourselves as resident theologians, leaders of congregations, and Spirit-persons yet readily *confess* that you cannot practice theological reflection, leadership, or spiritual awareness by yourself or under your own strength. It is for you who want to *profess* more intentionally a practice of ministry that challenges the individualism that isolates us, under-

mines our communities, and sucks the breath out of the very Gospel we preach."

The AnamCara model includes four elements:

1) *Practicing community*. Siler suggests that there is a necessary aloneness that comes with the job. There is also an isolation that "starves our spirit," and is not inevitable. Siler feels that collegial connection on a deep level is both an antidote to the destructive isolation that can lead to frustration and burnout and a way to ease the aloneness that goes with the territory.

2) *Practicing theological reflection and discernment*. He suggests that we are resident theologians, doing theology inductively, often serving congregations with a wide variety of perspectives. We need time and space to think through our own views. "The resource of peers within a learning community such as AnamCara is a place in which to ponder the big questions, enter into deep listening, and think critically about the vision of our call."

3) *Practicing leadership*. Siler says it took him some time to see himself as a leader of leaders within a congregational setting. Today, he says, there is no option to gradually become aware of this. "You are leaders. The times demand it." It's essential to understand the difference between leading and managing, and when each is required. He suggests that an AnamCara group can serve as a collegial consultation group for leadership challenges, "not to analyze or fix, but to listen and ask clarifying questions within a circle of mutual respect."

4) *Practicing soul making*. He says, "The most serious danger I faced as a pastor was losing my soul in fulfilling the role." Practices that enhance our spiritual formation and transformation can help us both professionally and personally. These could include prayer and meditation as well as exploring our family of origin or using tools such as Myers-Briggs to learn more about ourselves.

Siler's model is time-consuming: he suggest an initial two-day retreat, and then one full day a month to address the four areas described, coffee or a meal weekly (or conference calls or other ways to keep in touch), and then a four-day annual retreat. He acknowledges that most pastors would say, "I just don't have the time to do it." He says that much of what we do for continuing education is content-based. We may learn something, but the experience is not transformative. He argues that true transformation requires a deeper commitment.

Siler has his own theological perspective, and most of his work around leadership has used a systems approach. Yet he doesn't want the model to be dependent on a particular theology or theory of leadership. He says, "Each group would within those four areas come up with different forms of perspective."

Siler's book is a quick read, but the implications are far-reaching. What if Together in Ministry groups, as they move away from dependence on the Lilly money, read this book, and think about the ways they do now and can continue to work together on community, theological reflection, leadership and spiritual growth?

His model fits well with what we are learning about Communities of Practice as developed by Etienne Wenger, the focus of the next Lilly grant. Wenger suggests that "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. ("Communities of practice: a brief introduction," p. 1).

For Siler, ministry comprises both doing and being, and the AnamCara model helps support both critical aspects of ministry life. As pastoral leaders, we need to have a passion both for our work and for ourselves.

The booklet is available from Catawba Publishing (www.Catawbapublishing.com). Siler is also writing a revised version. A network of pastoral counseling centers in his area is training facilitators and will be developing groups and researching the impact the groups have.

AnamCara is a short though meaty read. Read it and think through: how are you finding connection in your ministry? How might your Together in Ministry group go deeper? Where do you want to grow as a pastor and human being? Do you have a "soul friend" or friends? How do you find a way to develop your doing and your being in your ministry?

*Rev. Margaret J. Marcuson works with clergy who want to be better leaders and churches who want to develop their ministries. She is the author of **Leaders Who Last: Sustaining Yourself and Your Ministry** (Seabury), and is the Senator from Oregon. Her website is www.margaretmarcuson.com.*

Healed, Redeemed, Made Whole

By Michaele Birdsall



"Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage. Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hill-top, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven."

Matthew 15:13-16 (The Message)

I serve as a member of the ABC General Executive Council (GEC). For the past five years I have been a part of this group as we have wrestled with issues of covenant, dwindling resources, stewardship and structure. At times our discussions have been quite tense. Voices were raised, people walked out, others checked out mentally. Undoubtedly we'd all return, place our hands to the plow and begin again. Why? Because at the center of this peculiar community is a deep love for God, for the American Baptist Churches, and for a world so desperately in need of "light-bearers" who are able to "prompt people to open up with God," that they might be healed, redeemed, and made whole.

I began my ministry with ABC eleven years ago. I came with both a deep love for the church and a deep disillusionment with what I had experienced in church life. I was not a member of a local congregation at the time. The intimacy of a local church setting was too frightening back then. I knew I needed the connection with a body of believers. But at that stage of my healing journey I needed to maintain an intentional "safe" distance. I figured that if I kept the nature of my connection to the church as primarily "career" focused, I could at least begin to quell my fears of intimacy. Denominational work provided the perfect setting.

I'm a CPA by training but an artist at heart. On Myers-Briggs I test at the intersection of INFJ and INTJ. I've been told that "off-duty" when I am more relaxed and at home I am a "feeler." However, when I am "on-duty" and interacting with others, particularly at work, I am a "thinker." In short, I've learned to hone my thinking and analytical skills to survive in a world where "feeling" is a liability.

We serve an incredibly patient and loving God. Even as I was constructing my "safe" little world of denominational ministry, God was at work setting the stage for the next leg of my healing journey. In 2002 the Ministers Council launched Together in Ministry. The goals of the initiative were to:

- Overcome pastoral leaders' sense of personal and professional isolation
- Enrich pastoral leaders' perspectives of themselves and their congregations
- Provide a supportive network of peers who will pray for one another
- Offer opportunities for disciplined focus through specific study
- Create a climate for checking in and mutual accountability
- Enhance the current network of Ministers Councils to become more supportive

I am not an ordained minister and prior to the launch of TIM, I was not a member of the ABC Ministers Council. I am grateful to God for the inclusive nature of the vision that was birthed in the heart of Kate Harvey for the denomination she loved. It was a vision that included me – a Black woman, a lay leader, a wounded disciple, a soul in need of community.

I joined my first TIM covenant group in 2002 with a group of women who came together to explore what it means to be "Sisters Made in the Image of God." We affectionately call ourselves the "SMIGS," and to this day, we share a special bond of friendship and spiritual connection. This special group of women provided the first Christian community setting since 1994, when I left the church, where I dared risk intimacy again. We prayed together. We laughed together. We nurtured a safe space where our souls could come out of hiding and speak the truth in healing and transforming ways. Through the support of these women I found the courage to seek a more integrated life.

I joined my second TIM covenant group in 2006. This group is made up of the women members

of the GEC. It grew out of the recognition that God had given us, as women, unique perspectives on the challenges facing our denomination. And that it was imperative that we find effective ways of having our voices "heard" in a male-dominated setting, so that our gifts, our light, might be able to "bring out the God-colors" of the ABC.

It is fascinating to experience first-hand the power unleashed through a renewed sense of belonging. In April of 2009 the GEC Women met for our second annual TIM retreat. Our retreat was held on the front end of our regularly scheduled GEC meeting. Our male colleagues began arriving after we had spent two and a half days together praying, talking, laughing, worshipping, and sharing our personal stories.

As each woman entered our meeting sessions, we did so not as Lone Rangers, but as leaders buoyed up by the support of companions who had taken the time to walk with us, listen to our personal stories, and see beyond the professional roles that had given us a seat at the table.

I think there has been an undeniable shift in the tone of our meetings. We still have strong disagreements. And there are still moments of intensity. But little by little, I sense a growing appetite for a deeper expression of community. And with that comes an increased willingness to be vulnerable with each other, to share our stories and come out of hiding.

In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness – The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, Parker Palmer says that "when community unravels and we lose touch with one another, the self atrophies and we lose touch with ourselves as well. Lacking opportunities to be ourselves in a web of relationships, our sense of self disappears, leading to behaviors that further fragment our relationships and spread the epidemic of inner emptiness."

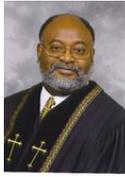
Through the gift of TIM covenant groups my feelings of isolation are dissipating. I am finding the courage to be more generous with my life and to release my fears and anxiety when God commands me to "Shine!" To God be the glory!

With gratitude and praise,

Michaele Birdsall is Treasurer/CFO for National Ministries, ABCUSA

Children Now

By Thomas Gilmore



Transforming Cleveland Communities For Children in Poverty

What does a nation do when it faces a crisis that, if left unchecked, could have devastating affects on the quality of life for its people? Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region of our nation in 2005. The hurricane brought massive property destruction, homelessness, loss of income, destruction of business and industry, social/emotional disorder, and death. The overall quality of life for the region was threatened. Hurricane Katrina was said to have created a massive crisis.

The response was far from adequate to meet the need of the devastation. However, the response was national in scope. The state of Louisiana as well as Mississippi enacted emergency assistance legislation. The federal government responded through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

There was also federal legislation and involvement through the Army Corps of Engineers. Religious organizations of every faith responded with prayers and by sending millions of dollars to relief organizations. Some religious organizations sent volunteer workers or missionaries to work directly with the victims of the crisis.

Most recently our nation has responded to the national economic crisis that has caused millions of people to loose their jobs, their homes, their healthcare, their pensions and retirement, and their sense of security and hope for the future. The current recession has brought massive loss of property, homelessness, loss of income, destruction of business and industry, and social/emotional disorder.

The overall quality of life for America has been threatened. Massive bailouts and billions in stimulus money have been pumped into the economy, and legislation and laws have been passed to change the way we do business. This response, like the response to Katrina, is far from adequate to meet the need of the devastation. However, the response is again national in scope.

The above crises were highly visible and demanded an immediate response. But what does a nation do when the crisis is ignored long enough to become systemic, and boldly sits in our living rooms like an elephant, daring us to try to move it? Why is there not a national response to 28.6 million U.S. children living in low-income families? The health of the economy and the ability to ensure national security is threatened in proportion to the prevalence of poverty, and yet we have not made addressing it a national priority.

Over the next 10 years, federal spending on children under current law is scheduled to shrink (Urban Institute, *Kid's Share 2007: How Children Fare in the Federal Budget*, 2007). The proportion of investment in children has declined from 20% of the national GDP in 1960 to a projected 13% in 2017, if the current landscape remains unchanged. In sum, the analysis of historical and future trends in the federal budget reveals that children are a diminishing national priority. In a country where the number of billionaires has reached an all-time high at 407 (Forbes Special Report: *The World's Billionaires*, March 8, 2007), it is simply unconscionable that we are allowing our children to suffer in poverty.

Do we back away as the did people of Israel, when they faced the giants of Canaan, and assume that we are like grasshoppers, incapable of overcoming the problem? Do we assume that the problem of children in poverty is as great as the walls of Jericho and can not fall apart from a miracle from God? If we continue to ignore the elephant, then who cares for the "least of these" who are among us?

In response to recent census reports identifying Cleveland as the poorest major city in America, the Ministers Council of the American Baptist Churches Cleveland Region determined that someone had to take up the prophetic voice and speak about how poverty affects children in Cleveland. Specifically we determined that the many problems associated with poverty deserved a multifaceted response from our community.

The Ministers Council issued a statement declaring "Poverty as a Crisis" in Cleveland. We understand that if poverty is not perceived as a crisis, then there will be no meaningful response to remedy the situation. Members of the Ministers Council then joined National Ministries and participated in a Future Search Training Workshop

to begin a process of addressing this issue. Future Search is a method of action planning that enables significant dialogue in a short period of time, and a high level of participant cooperation and responsibility for action.

After the training was complete a steering committee was formed, first met in August of 2007, and met again continually to organize and plan a course of action. It was confirmed that the goal would be to target eradicating poverty in five regions of Cleveland; Glenville, Fairfax, Hough, St Clair, and Central. These areas were identified as having high concentrations of children in poverty. The theme, in congruence with the National Ministries theme, was identified as "Children Now: Transforming Cleveland Communities for Children in Poverty."

The committee then chose a broad range of stakeholders to create a collaborative ARE-IN - (We are all in this together!) - network, to truly transform the lives of children. Dozens of people from several sectors in our community (faith, government, healthcare, business/financial services, education, child advocacy, and community) were asked to participate in a conference on children in poverty, all focusing on creating prosperous lives for children. The participants were carefully selected based on their ability to bring authority, resources, expertise, information, and need to the table.

The conference was held in Cleveland from Nov. 20-22, 2008. Thirty-nine of Cleveland's most influential leaders came together for the sake of our children. The participants also included members from the targeted communities. Their perspective and view on the issues greatly increased everyone's awareness of the problems of poverty as expressed by those who experience it first hand.

By bringing the whole system into the room, exploring the whole before acting on any part, and focusing on the future, the conference enabled the group to do productive work in improving systems and to take responsibility for planning for the future of our children.

Individuals were energized, new relationships were made, and plans were initiated to change the future for our children in Cleveland. There was great synergy within the group as we worked through our history and discovered our common ground. Several objectives were identified that everyone wanted to accomplish:

- Provide youth opportunities for employment

- Clarify existing resources
- Provide better education and funding for education
- To establish accountability for individual education
- Provide positive change
- Inspire hope
- Make our message human
- Provide stronger families
- Make a paradigm shift from wants to needs
- Provide comprehensive health care for both children and families
- Provide collaboration and networking between organizations and individuals

After careful review and dialogue the list was narrowed down to five critical areas: increasing safety, improving education, providing jobs, adding comprehensive health care, and strengthening families.

All participants were asked to commit to the above areas and to consider what they (not others) are able and willing to do now. It was agreed that the group would narrow our focus further and target children living in one ward of Cleveland. Since the conference, four subgroups have been meeting and working on short range goals for each of the above areas. Each group is self-sustaining. However, a follow-up meeting is being planned that will bring everyone back together to review our progress.

One of the above groups is composed of pastors from the Ministers Council of the Cleveland Baptist Association. Our task originally was to facilitate the conference and to ensure that plans would be developed from the conference that would be self sustaining.

Our task now, as one of the subgroups, is to work towards strengthening the families of our targeted group. Working together in ministry, our goal as pastors is to work together to do what none of us can do alone. Using our own churches, some of which are located in the targeted area, we will work towards providing the prophetic voice that is needed to give direction to families, and to coordinate the efforts to provide the maximum care for the least of these, our children.

The Ministers Council views the work of Children Now as vital to the future of Cleveland. We can think of no other challenge more urgent than the

elimination of child poverty in Cleveland and in our nation. Working together, we can make a difference for children in poverty, for the future is often determined by what we do, or do not do, today.

Rev. Dr. Thomas W. Gilmore is pastor of Fidelity Baptist Church, Cleveland, OH.

Minister

Published occasionally as a forum for issues and events that pertain to ministry as observed and practiced by ministerial leaders of the American Baptist Churches USA

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The Ministers Council
PO Box 851
Valley Forge PA 19482-0851
1-800-222-3872
X 2333, 2334
FAX: 610/768-2066

Mission

The Ministers Council is the professional association of ministerial leaders within the American Baptist Churches. We are colleagues working together to:

- Connect colleagues through Together in Ministry collegial covenant groups
- Establish and maintain professional and ethical standards of the Christian ministry
- Give support to the members of this body and be an advocate for them in their professional associations
- Resource ministry through www.ministerscouncil.org
- Interpret the appropriate roles of professional ministerial leadership to the constituent parts of our denomination and to the local American Baptist Churches
- Encourage the recruitment and nurture of candidates for the various church vocations
- Provide a means for expression and debate by members of this body on issues that affect the professional ministerial leadership of the American Baptist Churches in the USA
- Cooperate with the appropriate units of the American Baptist Churches in the USA in matters of mutual interest and concern, including: recruitment, placement, compensation, continuing education, and counseling