

Confronting Privilege in Congregational Service and Outreach

REA Colloquy

Anne Clarke, Graduate Theological Union/Church Divinity School of the Pacific

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Main concepts/issues:

Outreach and service projects are important aspects of many religious communities, and people of faith often see some kind of service as crucial to their spiritual life. This seems to be particularly true for younger people, and service projects or religiously-associated nonprofits are often the first or only contact that people have with a religious organization.

In the particular religious context that I examine, the Episcopal Church, activities like food pantries, mission trips, or community organizing are often the primary site of a faith community's reflection on and response to social justice issues in their local areas or in the world; however, they also each teach participants different understandings of race, class, and social dynamics. The sense of obligation and desire to work for justice often intersects in complicated ways with the congregation's demographic realities; Episcopal congregations and the church as a whole are often largely comprised of white people from middle- or upper-class backgrounds. An examination of congregational service in conversation with critical race theory reveals ways in which these projects succeed and fail in creating spaces for liberative education about systemic violence in our society.

Without reflection and intention, even attempts to work toward greater justice and equality can fall into learned but unconscious patterns that reinforce the embedded logics and theologies that inform structures of oppression.. Reflective and critical pedagogy and practice in religious institutions can help to avoid these pitfalls and equip people with the words, tools of understanding, and practices needed for a more liberated world.

Outline of Colloquy Presentation:

Brief Outline of Methodology and Research Areas:

- Summary of interview findings with service project participants:
 - o Descriptions of intentional reflections on social, political, or theological issues as part of the service project
 - o Categories or understandings of self and others that emerged from service experience
 - o Comparison with larger body of research on congregational or other service settings
- Analysis of current practices, in particular untangling an understanding of the other kinds of important work they are accomplishing (community building among participants; exposure to travel, discomfort, and practical skills; filling a real community need; etc.)

- Critical race theory's contributions to an analysis of current practice:
 - o Critical whiteness, class, gender, and intersectionality
 - o Identity formation and service/being served

- Proposals:
 - o Potential pedagogical proposals to encourage agency, awareness, reflection, and transformation

Topics for discussion:

- Contexts: How do the demographics of faith communities and larger geographic locations of service and engagement affect the experience and awareness of serving and being served and inform the best ways forward?
- Religious Traditions: What tools do different religious traditions already have to address these issues? How does this task of confronting privilege in service work vary among traditions, and how is it similar?
- Pedagogy: What are some good practices for beginning this transformation among congregations with few resources, or where this type of work is already the work of only a few people?
- Development: How might this type of education take place intergenerationally, and how might adults, children, and teenagers have different educational needs?
- Models and muddles: Some models of community engagement (for example, community organizing or food co-ops) have reflection on some of these issues built into them from the start. However, communities with models of service that tend to be more problematic are still often engaged in work that is filling a need and would be missed if it were to be abruptly ended. What are some ways to build practices of continuing discernment and creativity (and the discomfort which often accompanies such practices) into these pedagogical proposals?

Sources grounding the presentation:

This research will draw on the work of scholars of critical theory, such as Jack Mezirow and Stephen Brookfield, as well as scholars focusing on whiteness and white supremacy, such as Andrea Smith, Zeus Leonardo, and Henry Giroux. Authors like bell hooks and Paulo Friere, who provide suggestions for pedagogy relating to oppression, are also important sources for this work. The need for a wide view of curriculum that considers the entire life of a congregation is grounded in the work of Maria Harris. Donald Schon's work on reflective practice informs the ways in which guided experience can provide the site for learning, and emphasizes the advantages that service experiences can provide in learning about issues like critical race theory and privilege that are often left entirely to the realm of the academy.