

- Identification of a clear, concise, creative, and tangible plan of action to address the issue at the local community level.

### Instructional Resources for Teaching and Learning

1. Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins, *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, 9<sup>th</sup> edition (Kentucky: Cengage Learning, 2015). This anthology offers concise insight into race/racism, class/economic inequality, and gender/sexism, and is an ideal source for teachers seeking to discuss these issues.
2. Donn C. Worgs, “‘Beward of the Frustrated...’: The Fantasy and Reality of African American Revolt,” *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 1 (2006): 20–45. This article considers political, artistic, and religious/spiritual figures and their role in influencing revolt and resistance to oppression.
3. Gören Olson, director, *Concerning Violence* (Final Cut for Real, 2014), DVD, 78 minutes. This award-winning documentary focuses on African resistance to colonial rule in the struggle for African Liberation.
4. Gören Olson, director, *The Black Power Mixtape: 1967–1975* (Independent, 2011), DVD, 100 minutes. This award-winning documentary focuses on key figures in the Black Power Movement.
5. Deb Ellis and Denis Mueller, directors, *The FBI’s War on Black America* (CreateSpace, 2007), DVD, 47 minutes. This documentary examines the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program and its role in compromising the Black Power Movement.
6. Mike Gray, director, *The Murder of Fred Hampton* (Facets, 2007), DVD, 88 minutes. This documentary attempts to document the work of Black Panther Fred Hampton, who, in the middle of the film shoot, is killed by Chicago police.
7. Liz Garbus, director, *What Happened, Miss Simone?* (Netflix, 2015), online video, 101 minutes. This documentary traces the life and activism of Nina Simone.
8. Reggie Turner, director, *Before They Die!* (Mportant Films, 2008), DVD, 92 minutes. This documentary chronicles the stories and narrative of the survivors of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riots, articulating their quest for justice.

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## A LIBERATING MESSAGE OF HOPE: A YOUTH MINISTER’S TESTIMONY FROM THE UPRISING

By **Russell St. Bernard**

Christian theology is a theology of liberation. It is a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ. This means that its sole reason for existence is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God’s activity in the world, so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

This edict sets the tone for all youth ministry leaders, but especially those who shepherd African American youth. In the African American community, the church has functioned as a movement-building vehicle by meeting cultural, social, economic, political, and spiritual needs amid grave societal inequality and created spaces of refuge, nourishment, and hope in the face of overwhelming obstacles. Dr. James H. Cone is clear that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for those who have been oppressed and seek more out of life, and his theological understandings were rooted in early experiences in the Macedonia African Methodist Church.

I am an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, whose core mission is to “minister to the spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and environmental needs of people by spreading Christ’s liberating gospel through word and deed.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout the Bible the word *gospel* is used, and the Greek word is *euangelizo*, which has a translation of “the Good News.” I remember very early on in my Christian walk reading through the Bible and getting to the section of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), but seeing the title “Good News” instead of “Gospel.” The true meaning of the Gospels and what has been recorded of the work that Jesus did in those books is truly the Good News. For the Good News proclaims to those who have no sight that one day they will see; to those who are lame that they will be able to walk; to those who are sick with a disease that they will be healed; to those who are deaf that they will hear again; and to the poor that they will not always be poor, but God has more in store for them!<sup>3</sup>

Simply put, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is Good News for every man, woman, boy, and girl that where they are now is not where they will stay, but their Heavenly Father has true liberation planned for them from whatever their issue or situation might be. Dr. Cone speaks of the Good News of liberation as an inner thrust toward not only what is just and right, but what is God. As a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I am called to remind everyone, whether in my church or not, about this thrust toward liberation for all people, which is “housed” (lives) in Jesus Christ. This is what drives my ministry.

In this testimony essay, I will share my experiences as a youth minister in the Maryland area by spotlighting the events leading up to the Uprising; how our work as ministers contributed to the movement; and how I view youth minister activism in my work as a spiritual leader. My experiences are written in a first-person voice, similar to the style of a testimony, in that I explain the events I witnessed through my lens as a participant observer and leader.

### **The Social Context of Baltimore and the Uprising**

I was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY, and moved to Maryland in 1998 to attend Morgan State University. Outside of a short three-year period when I lived in Florida, I have been in the Baltimore/Washington area ever since. For many of those first years while attending Morgan and working, I lived in Baltimore, so I am clear about the state of the city as it relates to drugs, crime, and poverty. I remember one night after a church service in Baltimore as I was driving through an area known for drugs, I literally saw drug deals happening while I was waiting for the red light to change. That night I must have circled that block in my car three or four times, praying, looking, and not understanding how I could see this and no police officer had shown up. Then I came to my senses and realized that I needed to stop circling the block and keep driving home before the drug dealers thought that I was someone I was not.

Why did this scene upset me so much? First, I was upset with the police officers and how they were not doing their job, which was to protect and serve. For the corner to be turned into an open market is not protection, nor is it service to this community. I still cannot understand how in this Baltimore community, there can be known corners or areas where drug dealers can work without being interrupted or even bothered by police. This just should not be the case. But I was upset with myself and other clergy for not helping young brothers find another way to feed their families or meet their needs. I honestly do not know what bills they had to pay or what they needed the money for, but I do know that I was not part of the solution, and I, like many other clergy members, was just on the sidelines watching.

While this may sound like an extreme example to some, or typical to others, this is the sociopolitical-economic context of Baltimore. But the lack of solid opportunities for employment and advancement for this community is the real issue, not drug deals or negligent police. Baltimore is a city of great history, but, I believe, of even greater purpose. However, for many people across the nation, their first time seeing Baltimore outside of hearing about it through a sports game was during the Uprising.

Here are a few backstory notes on the events leading up to the Uprising:

- During that week, and in particular that day, on social media and the streets, it was clear that the students wanted to protest in their own way. Up until this point, many of the protests were led by adults. On this day, the students were supposed to walk out of school in a peaceful manner and march downtown.
- Each protest, whether led by students or adults, had the goal of marching and ending up in downtown Baltimore. This is because Baltimore, like many cities, has a very strong divide in look, feel, and comfort level as you leave the business district and head out to where the majority of the minority population lives (i.e., the hood, which represents the disinvestment of resources and exclusion of disenfranchised communities). Each march leader understood that in order for them to be heard and seen, they needed to disrupt the city for a few hours where the financial interests were located.
- On the first day of the Uprising, the buses that were supposed to pick up the students and take them to the communities where they lived did not come. There were some rumors that the city wanted to protect the school buses from being damaged by students wanting to cause trouble. Others thought that schools were going to be on lockdown, not allowing any students out, in order to keep them from starting trouble. There were also reports that police officers were stopping school buses from picking students up at the Mondawmin Mall (this area is a hub for the school buses and was where the rocks were tossed). At the end of the day hundreds of students were left in one area trying to find their way home, and yes, a small few were trying to find a way to cause trouble. This was how the scene of the rock throwing and the burning of the CVS began.
- Now, there can be fault listed on many sides, even the side of the church, as some of us (clergy) could have been more proactive. As a youth minister, I looked on with millions of others that day and that night to see a city on the national news for all of the wrong reasons. While I will agree that the coverage was not great and, honestly, embarrassing, in some ways it did bring light

to a city that was not understood.

## Responding to the Uprising: A Movement-Building Service

During the days that followed the burning of the CVS, our youth ministry held a special youth service that weekend with a few other youth ministries in the area to speak about what was being labeled “The Uprising.” I have always believed that in ministry and in life, I can do more if I do not do it alone. As a result, I knew that if I was going to do a service during this time it should not be alone, but with some other youth ministries. The issue was the citywide curfew, which would be enforced during the time we would have service. I called a few police officers from our church to check the rules, spoke with my pastor, and connected with youth ministries who were willing to conduct a service. My goals for this service were as follows: (1) allow students to come to a safe place where they could hear and sing praises to their God even in the midst of what was happening outside; (2) give a message from God that informed them of the history of this type of unrest when enduring oppression; (3) empower them to trust God for the next steps for positive change starting with them; and (4) give the students a platform to speak during this season so that they were not just heard, but understood and helped through the process.

We wanted the students to understand how much power and authority they actually had. This Uprising was started by young people and took the city by storm. The prayer was that we as leaders could instruct and direct our students to turn this Uprising into a movement that would last beyond this moment of current events: a movement that would create ripple effects through this community and our nation. That night I wrote letters for all of the parents and leaders to drive home with in case the police stopped them, but thankfully no one was stopped after leaving the service. In preparation for the “Uprising” service, the youth ministers pondered this question: if students who were part of the so-called “riots” had a positive and focused direction to channel their energies, what they would have been able to accomplish?

After all, they were just working out their inner drive for liberation, which is the Gospel. We encouraged the students to understand that their liberation is something that God desires and they have the power and authority to take charge of it, with or without adults. We reminded them that those who were considered to be young people started the majority of movements in the Bible. There was David, called to be king as a young boy and able to defeat Goliath. There was Esther, who was young when she was named queen and called to speak up on behalf of her people, knowing fully that it could mean her life. And Jesus, who is the ultimate example, was only thirty when He started His ministry, and He was in the church speaking and leading at twelve years old.<sup>4</sup> We also reminded them of the Scripture, “Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe.”<sup>5</sup> God has called our youth, and us as adult youth ministry leaders and educators, to be an example to lead in all areas of life.

That evening we had a full service, complete with our Evidence Core Choir leading us in praise and worship, and guest dance teams and choirs from other ministries. I preached a sermon about the Uprising titled “I Rise Up,” using 1 Timothy 4:12 as my scripture, to encourage the students to take the lead and be the new example: God’s example. We also spoke about the oppression in the city. Why did students on a normal city street have access to rocks large enough to hurl at police officers in such a volume that the police officers were forced to back up from the students? Think about it for a minute. Do you have these kinds of large rocks just readily available outside of your home or church? For many of the students in the service that night, their answer was yes. We pushed the students to ask why they had access to these rocks. The answer is that Baltimore, like many other urban cities, has been neglected for decades. Many homes are either empty or occupied by drug addicts or drug dealers, although some are occupied by hardworking people who are living paycheck to paycheck and cannot afford to relocate. Baltimore can and should keep these homes free of debris, or force the negligent owners to do something with the homes. Unfortunately, neither has happened, and the result is hundreds of homes abandoned with pieces of rock coming off and students who live in the community seeing this as normal. When I asked a friend who was in the real estate business about abandoned homes, he explained that once the communities started to change, homeowners decided to rent, and when renting did not go well, or when some homeowners lost their properties because they could no longer pay the high mortgage rates, these homes became vacant. The banks and other property owners allow these homes to stay empty until the market turns and the community demographics shift before they begin to invest dollars into the homes and the community.

Despite these challenges, we encouraged the youth to remember that even though they live in an environment where in some ways it seems like no one cares, the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that He not only cares, but He has a plan to change it and change it for the better. The key understanding we attempted to convey that night was that God will work through us as we are obedient to Him in doing the hard work of standing and fighting back using spiritual weapons. Students were also encouraged to think and pray through ways they could lead cleanup efforts in their

communities (we eventually did a service day). They were also encouraged to think and pray about how to reach out to their elected officials; even though many of them could not vote, they could still use their voices. We asked the students to think through questions like “What programs and events would you like to see in your community? How would the programs help your lives?” We asked these questions because programs and events could be created and funded by elected officials who were willing to listen to youth in their governing communities.

In youth ministry over the years, I have learned that we do not give students enough credit for their energy and insight. We should harness and direct this energy in positive and productive ways. So we reminded them to trust and believe that God was not pleased with what happened, yet God was also expecting them to play a major role in their own liberation. Jesus told us that we shall do greater works, and the “we” includes all youth.<sup>4</sup>

### After the Uprising: Youth Minister Activism

As a youth minister, it is my role to bring the life and the witness of Jesus Christ to young people—to help them realize that even though their environment looks one way, they are not locked into this experience and they can rise above it. During the season of the Uprising and the weeks following this service, our students went to serve in the areas hardest hit by the violence. As youth ministry leaders, pastors, and educators, it is our role to move our students toward a true sense of liberation for themselves and their local communities. Councilman Nick Mosby is a great example of someone who sought liberation beyond himself. Councilman Mosby and I went to Morgan State University together, and now he represents District 7 in Baltimore, the same district where Freddie Gray was killed. Mosby was raised in Baltimore and has seen it at its best and worst, but now serves to improve it for the better. He was one of the leaders that our students partnered with to serve the community.

The liberation that Dr. Cone speaks of and that youth ministers preach does not start with the parents of the students, but with the students themselves being loved by the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ. I mention parents here because it is often thought in the youth ministry context that if change is going to happen, it has to happen through the parent or the adult. But the truth is that change can and should happen through the students. They are the ones who are clear on their needs. They are the ones who have the energy to commit toward the Uprising. They are the ones whom God has called to take charge of the movement. My prayer is that each student feels the same sense of urgency Jesus did when He quoted the Prophet Isaiah in the Gospel according to Luke: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, Because he anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor, He

has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.”<sup>7</sup> Each student should feel this sense of urgency that Jesus felt, and they should know that it can and must start with them.

In order for the students to have this sense of urgency, they must be encouraged and prepared. Often it is hard to find Christian resources and materials that work to train and develop our students, especially students of color. As a result, a few years ago I created After the Music Stops, LLC, a full-service youth ministry company created to help students and leaders grow in Jesus Christ “after the big event.”<sup>8</sup> We developed the concept of “after the big event” because so much of youth ministry and ministry these days is focused on big services or events, and we lose the students and their connection to Jesus Christ after it is over. We created youth ministry devotionals, youth ministry leader trainings, tours, and coaching options to answer this need, as well as resources that work for our youth, because many of the materials were not culturally relevant to their experiences and needs. The creation of resources to fill the void is another arm of our ministry work—not only organizing and teaching youth, but also building and distributing resources that inspire the next generation of youth primed to know and live the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, that is our call, to lead the Uprising through the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ!



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#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 1.

<sup>2</sup> African Methodist Episcopal Church, “Our History,” <http://ame-church.com/our-church/our-history/>

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 11:2-6 (New American Standard Bible).

<sup>4</sup> Luke 2:49.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Timothy 4:12.

<sup>6</sup> John 4:12.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 4:18-19.

<sup>8</sup> “After the Music Stops LLC,” <http://www.afterthemusicstops.org>