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Faithful Witness in Wounded Cities: Congregations and Race in America

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Abstract: Race and racism are urgent matters for the church to address, particularly in the urban centers of the United States. In the last couple of years, a gaping wound has been opened in the middle of American cities. These wounds are evident in New York, Minneapolis, Chicago, Cleveland, Baltimore, Saint Louis, and many other cities across the country. In these places, it is becoming ever clearer that race and racism cannot be ignored. If this is true on a pragmatic, political level, how much truer is it theologically? After all, Christ has called His church to consist of people of all colors and ethnicities, and Christ has called His church to mission in the urban centers of North America. In view of this reality, this paper argues that faithful mission and ministry in urban settings requires congregations to contextualize the gospel, by addressing race in their public ministry, and we describe such faithful ministry with an historical example of First Immanuel Lutheran Church in Chicago.



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It might be a surprise to some, but how to do effective urban ministry is well-established.¹ Actually setting out and doing ministry in the city is more difficult, but there is a general consensus on how to minister effectively in the city. The keys are twofold: love the people and build trusting relationships. Of course, we agree that such things are valid and important in any ministry, but the contention of our paper is that these concerns neglect a basic issue of the urban setting: social sin generally and racism in particular. Our paper will proceed by examining briefly the problem of racism, then showing how the failure to address racism is an ecclesiological problem, the privatization of the church. Next, we will look at the congregation of First Immanuel Lutheran in Chicago as an example of a congregation that publicly embodies the witness of Jesus Christ to urban Chicago. Finally, we will argue for three congregational practices that exemplify Christian witness in the face of social sins like racism.

The 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, highlights just how important the issue of race is, and why the white church especially has ignored it. In the middle of August 2014, the Pew Research Center conducted a national survey that asked whether the shooting of Michael Brown “raises important issues about race that need to be discussed.” Eighty percent of black Americans agreed that the Ferguson situation is about race and that the shooting raises racial issues that need to be talked about. White Americans, however, had a different interpretation of the events. Only 37 percent of whites believed that racial issues were important to the Michael Brown shooting, and 47 percent of whites thought that race was receiving far too much press.² This survey is a microcosm of the situation in the city more broadly; other surveys from the Pew Research Center show the same phenomenon.³ In general, most African Americans believe that racial issues are a central concern of urban life, whereas many white Anglo- or Euro-Americans think that racial issues are a thing of the past. Simply on the level of pragmatics—we will get to the theology soon enough—how can the church effectively minister in an urban setting when it disregards a fundamental concern of so many people?

The surveys of the Pew Research Center show that African Americans believe racial issues are still of the utmost importance; yet congregations, even urban ones, largely fail to attend to such systemic social issues. To be clear, Christians often address social, structural issues as individual Christians, but Christian congregations are hardly the center of Christian social action. We believe, however, that Christ calls His church communities to tackle systemic issues within their neighborhoods, including

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structural failures that implicate society as a whole in sin, such as racism. What do we mean by “structural failure?” Structural failures are systemic problems that exist on a social or institutional level, resulting in harm to human beings or more broadly to God’s creation. As such, structural failures must be understood not only ethically in terms of harm to God’s creatures but also theologically as implicating whole communities in sin. Harm to God’s creatures is not merely an ethical problem but is deeply religious. Sin against one’s sister or brother is sin against God. Just as personal sin against one’s neighbor is a theological problem, so too are harmful structures theologically problematic. Institutions are fallen, and social structures sometimes promote sin. Thus, structural failure results in personal sin and personal guilt.⁴ At the same time, this personal sin is not mine alone, but it is social sin, belonging to a community of people who, whether in sins of commission or omission, are complicit in doing harm to their neighbors. Hence, structural failure results in social sin, for which the church, as the community called to attend to God’s command and admit its guilt before God, is also guilty.

Not only do harmful structures result in sin, but social sins like racism often give rise to the harmful structures in the first place.⁵ Thus, the relationship between social sin and structural failure is complex. Social sins like racism cause and perpetuate harmful structures. At the same time, harmful structures also create and maintain the social sins. Furthermore, identifying a harmful structure is no easy task. Identifying structural failure is a challenge because *from the outside* these structures may not appear to be harmful at all. Structural failure often appears to be just the way things are, and no one is to blame. In fact, with structural failure, it is common to blame the weak for their own situation. Poverty may be blamed on the poor, immigration blamed on the immigrants, and racism blamed on people of color. For example, when racism is not understood as a social, systematic problem, then it is too often conceived merely as a personal problem. As such, racism exists solely when an individual hates or looks down on another because of skin color. As a result, racism may be denied as an enduring problem, since few people hate others *solely* because of skin color. In this view, racism is primarily a problem of perception. Of course, in calling racism a problem of perception on the part of people of color, one places the blame squarely on them.

In our view, however, racism is not only personal; racism is a social sin that pervades the nation and especially the city. Racism is embedded within the city’s deepest structures, including the structures of commerce, such as access to food and medicine, the structures of education, the structures of transportation, and the structures of security.⁶ In Saint Louis, many have identified racism as the underlying problem contributing to the structural failure that occurred in the shooting of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson.⁷ The response to the shooting has been so intense because it is an instance of the broader problem of racism as a social sin. Despite the prevailing problem of social sin, conservative churches tend to focus on “hearts and

minds,” that is, interpersonal relationships and individual lives. Liberal churches may highlight structural failure, but they often address the problem only ethically, trying to solve structural failure through partisan politics. Neither attends to the congregation as a concrete community in which Christian political activity takes place. Why have congregations received such little attention in how Christians affect society?

In the recent monograph, *To Change the World*, James Davison Hunter argues that all of American society has succumbed to an ethos of political power. In other words, partisan politics forms the matrix for how Americans understand public, social issues. The church has also been caught up in the overwhelming aura of partisan politics. Hunter observes, “Politics is the way in which social life and its problems are imagined and it provides the framework for how Christians envision solutions to those problems.”⁸ Hence, both the Christian Right and the Christian Left have focused on effecting social change through partisan politics. The political positions are polar opposites, but the fundamental strategy is the same. From the now defunct Moral Majority of Jerry Falwell to Jim Wallis’s *Sojourners*, conservative and liberal Christians alike work to change their communities through voting and public policy rather than through the public life of congregations. *Sojourners* may fight against poverty, while the Christian Right fights against gay marriage, but the strategies are the same.⁹ Partisan politics is the way for Christians to change the world.

What is the problem with this “witness” of partisan politics? At the level of politics, the church becomes caught up in a battle involving political parties, and no matter which side Christians choose, they lose.¹⁰ Political parties embody power that is anything but Christian. Most importantly for the church, this focus on partisan politics largely neglects Christian congregations as communities through which Christians embody the Gospel in the face of social sin and publicly witness to Christ in their neighborhoods. In other words, this primary witness of partisan politics ignores congregations as public, visible actors in their locales.¹¹

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One may argue that the political witness of the Left and Right is indeed the problem, and the solution is to focus on interpersonal relationships: loving individuals, building trust, and shaping the individual for public life. In this view, the

church must stress the proclamation of the Gospel to individuals and build relationships in order to make individuals good public actors. The problem is that such a view makes the congregation alien to the public realm except through individual Christians. The congregation has little role to play as a community that embodies the Gospel, confesses social sin, and works to reform structural failure issues through the church's common life. Ironically, a solely interpersonal approach to the church is the other side of the coin of partisan politics. Both the interpersonal and the partisan position share the same fault: the privatization of the church. In both of these views, the task of the congregation is to form the *individual* in his or her Christian life. For those politically minded, the pastor's job is to address political issues and help show how individuals should vote. Or, for those focused more interpersonally, the pastor's job is to preach the Gospel and build trusting relationships between people so that people are converted and live as Christians outside of the congregation. In both cases, the congregation as a community is treated as private, and the focus is on the individual.

Certainly we affirm that the church *must* proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to individuals, but the church's mission is also a public witness of the visible community. A privatized understanding of the church, however, practically removes the congregation from the public realm; and this privatization distorts the church's witness, especially in matters of structural failure and social sin. Structural failure and social sin are easily neglected in a privatized church life because

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they do not fit in the private sphere. Both are public and systemic, without a single guilty party. Whole communities and societies are complicit in this sin. As such, a privatized understanding of the church has trouble addressing such problems of the public sphere, which are dismissed as "too political." The church is supposed to stress individual conversion and individual Christian life, not the political matters of the public sphere. The result is exactly what Hunter observes: social issues like racism, poverty, and immigration become exclusively matters of partisan politics to be solved by the state, since the church deals only in the private sphere. To return to the urban context, a privatized understanding of the congregation easily neglects the fundamental structural issues of urban ministry, especially the matter of race and the pernicious effect of racism on people of color.

To sum up our argument thus far, we contend that urban ministry is not only about loving people and building trusting relationships on an interpersonal level, but congregations also need to address systemic issues in their communities, especially social sins such as racism and the corresponding structural failure. Some may argue

that our position sounds like liberal politics. To be clear, though, we are *not* advocating for liberal politics against a conservative politics, nor are we suggesting that churches should stop preaching the Gospel in favor of social justice. Instead, Christ calls the church to live from the Gospel in its public, visible life, which includes speaking truthfully about social sin and working to heal broken structures. In other words, the Gospel entails a particular kind of life, and the church fails to live out this calling of Christ in the city when it does not address the fundamental structural issues that affect the city. With regard to the matter of race, Christ calls His church to speak truthfully, to confess and repent, about the ways that we are complicit in racism, even in its less apparent structural forms.

Other Lutheran pastors have called for this same honest, public witness of the Christian church. One notable example within the LCMS was Rev. Andrew Schulze (1896–1982), who served black mission churches in Springfield, Illinois (1924–1928); St. Louis, Missouri (1928–1947); and Chicago, Illinois (1947–1954).¹² He was an early advocate for integration, especially to get black students admitted to Lutheran schools, and wrote several treatises on race relations in the church. His 1968 *Fire from the Throne: Race Relations and the Church* is dated but still relevant in that Schulze confirms the importance of the church’s public witness and its relationship to the Gospel. He writes,

At any given time there is no aspect of human existence that can be bypassed by the church if it is to fulfill its God-intended purpose in the world. . . . When theology speaks of man’s relation to God and God’s relation to man, there are always implications of man’s relation to man.¹³

We agree with Schulze that the relationship between God and humanity takes shape in church communities that Christ has called to witness to Him in their common, public lives.

This paper is not the place to develop a comprehensive, theoretical account of the necessary ecclesiology, but a few comments are in order. Our basic ecclesiological thesis is that ecclesiology needs to understand the church as a concrete, visible community called to witness to Christ in its common life together.¹⁴ This witness to Christ must address social sin and structural failure of the public sphere, as well as personal sin, so that a congregation embodies a Christian public witness, which is an alien politics compared to the power games of political parties. Congregations embody this alien politics both in their worship and in their work of service. The difficult question for us today is: What does this look like? What does

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it look like for a church-community to live out its public calling to Christ in view of social sin? This is a particularly difficult question because our imaginations have been captured by the framework of partisan politics. Hence, the example of First Immanuel in Chicago can be helpful as a first step to reimagining church politics in North America today. We first look at First Immanuel during the 1950s and 1960s when the congregation was engaged heavily in the civil rights movement. Although First Immanuel is hardly unique in this regard, it is a helpful example for reimagining public witness today, particularly in addressing racism as a social sin. Although times have changed in the past fifty or sixty years, First Immanuel is an illustrative example in part because of this historical distance. This distance gives us an opportunity to evaluate more clearly First Immanuel's witness and see how it has affected the congregation to this day. After this historical sketch, we will draw out three specifics for how congregations can witness to Jesus Christ in the face of social sin and the accompanying structural failure.

First Immanuel: Learning to Embrace the City

First Immanuel Lutheran Church was established in 1854 on the west side of Chicago. During its first hundred years, First Immanuel reflected its neighborhood of predominantly German immigrants and Americans of German heritage. But by the mid-twentieth century, the neighborhood around First Immanuel changed significantly as increasing numbers of African Americans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans entered the community. When the neighborhood first changed, First Immanuel was paralyzed. Racist attitudes, clashes along class lines, and a Lutheran parochialism hindered the congregation's engagement with its surrounding community. As a result of urban residents' migrating to the suburbs, First Immanuel experienced a significant loss in membership. In 1890, First Immanuel had peaked with three thousand baptized members; but by the 1940s, membership had dropped to a two hundred, with much lower Sunday worship attendance.¹⁵

Consequently, First Immanuel took a hard look at whom God had called them to be. Two plausible options were relocating to the suburbs or closing the doors for good. Instead, the congregation decided to refocus its efforts on its own neighborhood. To do this, the congregation had to take seriously its identity and mission as a church. To be sure, contentious questions emerged about race and religious identity related to the mission and purpose of the congregation. Sometimes these debates were complicated by language that too

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easily pushed aside concerns about race, ethnicity, and class. But, in the end, the congregation rediscovered God's call to the local neighborhood. Furthermore, they committed themselves by word and action to all the residents of the neighborhood—old and new, rich and poor, German American, African American, Mexican American, and all other ethnicities.

We first look at how the congregation's pastors raised the support and took the risks to re-purpose First Immanuel as an urban Lutheran congregation. But these pastors did it with the commitment and courage of its lay men and women. In fact, a more complete account of First Immanuel's history would emphasize the tremendous work of the congregation's Sunday School, the involvement of students from Concordia College in River Forest, and the neighborhood networking of First Immanuel members with African American mothers living in the nearby public housing units. Yet, for the sake of space, we will focus on the work of the congregation's pastors who, together with lay men and women, grew to realize that Christ was calling them to serve the city where they were. They were convinced that the message of Christ meant that the people of their neighborhood needed a church where Christ's reconciliation actually takes place, especially between people of different races, ethnicities, and cultures. The pastors didn't have all the answers—an important admission for pastors to make—but they did work faithfully to understand the issues in their community and to share the Gospel in their neighborhood.

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The pertinent history of First Immanuel begins in 1952, under the direction of a new pastor, the Rev. Ralph Moellering. With Moellering's arrival, First Immanuel began to make more intentional efforts to connect with the area's African American and Mexican American residents. Moellering wrote this in his memoirs about his ministry at First Immanuel:

Lutherans, as well as most other organized denominations, preferred to "keep their hands clean" and not "become involved." By retreating into our citadels of "spirituality" we could pretend to be about "the Father's business." In our self-righteousness we could even denounce the do-gooders who seemed to be striving for salvation by "good works." . . . A

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misapplication of Reformation doctrine . . . tended to make Lutherans impotent and irrelevant in the changing city.¹⁶

Moellering thus describes what might be called the “standard story” of Lutheran congregations in the city. For its first hundred years, First Immanuel easily fit the above description. But when Moellering was called to be pastor at First Immanuel, he made his acceptance of the position contingent on the congregation’s acceptance of African Americans in worship and as fully vested members of the church. In 1953, First Immanuel took a bold step by becoming the first LCMS congregation in Chicago to voluntarily integrate with African Americans and other people of color. The congregational resolution stated: “We will certainly not refuse anyone of any race or color who would apply for membership.” Thus, one year before the Supreme Court overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* in *Brown v. Board of Education*, members of First Immanuel demonstrated a willingness to break down the racial divide at a time when many in the church and across the nation opposed integration. The African Americans living in the neighborhood took notice of such a decision by a white Lutheran congregation. Furthermore, First Immanuel’s effort was based on three articles of faith emphasized by the congregation in a published statement:

The first is that a congregation should serve its immediate neighborhood with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The second is that a congregation should celebrate racial inclusiveness as the most complete expression of the church of Jesus Christ. The third is that the larger church body should assist such ministry with resources of people and money.¹⁷

Delegates at the 1956 LCMS national convention adopted this mandate and demanded further support for urban congregations regardless of race.

Following these congregational statements, efforts to integrate at First Immanuel proceeded at a steady pace. While Moellering waged a principled fight against the endemic racism in the Lutheran church and especially against the mission board of the Northern Illinois District for the LCMS, members of the congregation simply attended to the needs of those in their community. In May 1954, First Immanuel opened its new member instruction classes to African Americans. Many families in the community also brought their children to First Immanuel’s Sunday School. In 1955, Samuel Hoard, an African American student from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, served as vicar at First Immanuel. As a result, integration was not only allowed but actually began to take place in this congregation. In fact, Hoard spent the majority of his ministry serving the older, white, and mostly German American members of the congregation, while Moellering led the congregation in doing ministry among African Americans. Other ministries and efforts began to include the Mexican Americans in the congregation, including the calling of a Spanish-speaking pastor, Rev. William Puder, in 1956. In the mid-1960s, First Immanuel would further

its connection with the neighborhood by direct participation in the Chicago civil rights movement.

While many Americans were engaging in civil rights activism during the 1950s and 1960s, the impetus for the change among this Lutheran congregation was deeply theological. Moellering summarizes, “Lutherans would say they must invoke both Law and Gospel . . . the all-inclusive love of Jesus Christ, whose sacrificial death atones for the totality of human guilt, must be proclaimed at every level with full understanding of the people to whom it is directed.”¹⁸ Moellering’s point about the *totality* of human guilt includes what we have called social sin. Additionally, Moellering, like Andrew Schulze, stresses the need to proclaim salvation at every level and for all people.

In 1958 Moellering left the congregation to pursue a doctoral fellowship at Harvard and was replaced by Rev. Don Becker. Becker continued the efforts of his predecessor by advocating for civil rights and ardently pursuing social justice in Chicago. The insufficient urban housing, especially among African Americans living in the city, was a central rallying point of the civil rights and religious leaders in Chicago. First Immanuel was no exception. Insufficient urban housing was another structural failure that Becker and his congregation addressed. This was not direct racism, yet there was a clear connection between racism and unequal housing in Chicago, making this another structural failure that largely affected people of color. As a result, Becker became involved in addressing the deplorable conditions of neighborhoods, in which city aldermen had neglected the basic needs of neighborhood infrastructure. Together with other members from the church, Becker worked closely with the West Side Organization (WSO), an organization that was committed to fair and equitable housing in Chicago and helped orchestrate local rallies and protests. One way the WSO advocated for equality was by sending black couples and then white couples to the same real estate agents on the same day to see which houses and neighborhoods were shown to prospective buyers based on race. Six years later, in a Chicago rally against housing inequality, Martin Luther King described what these activists experienced. He said:

We sent Negroes in large numbers to the real estate offices in Gage Park. Every time Negroes went in, the real estate agent said, “Oh, I’m sorry, we don’t have anything listed.” Now, you can find something somewhere, but it was always back in the ghetto, but they didn’t have anything. And then soon after that, we sent some of our fine white staff members into those same real estate offices, and the minute the white persons got in, they opened the books, “Oh yes, we have several things. Now what exactly do you want?”¹⁹

Becker, his wife, and other couples from the congregation, both black and white, were involved in this type of activism in an effort to draw much needed attention to the racial inequalities in Chicago urban housing.

Then, in 1966, First Immanuel continued its civil rights activism through direct participation in the Chicago Freedom Movement when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., came to Chicago to lead the city in a series of demonstrations to highlight the housing crisis for the people of Chicago and the watching nation. King sought to expose the hypocrisy of the northern United States, including politicians such as Mayor Daley, who supported civil rights in the south but did nothing for equality in the north. King's visit to Chicago was controversial for First Immanuel, in particular, because King was planning to speak at a rally hosted at the church. Prior to King's visit, Becker had promised the use of the church building to the West Side Organization as needed. But the specific request for King to speak at the church was a bit more controversial. Instead of deciding the issue behind closed doors, Becker had the issue taken to the entire congregation for a vote.

The issue was complicated because some members believed that King always stirred up trouble. In fact, many of the area African American churches were themselves reluctant to host King because they did not want to oppose Mayor Daley and city hall. Many members at First Immanuel were also concerned about getting involved in such a controversial political issue because they thought it might bring bad press for the church. In addition, the fact that King was a Baptist preacher caused concern among some members. But for Becker and several African American members, hosting King to make a public stand against the inadequate city housing was an opportunity not to be missed. In fact, the inequalities over city housing directly involved some of the African American members at First Immanuel who lived in the public housing units in question.

To resolve the congregational debate about hosting King for a rally, the issue first went to the church council. For the first time, the church council was split along racial lines. White council members spoke of the possibility of violence, while black council members saw the rally as an unprecedented opportunity. The black vote narrowly won, five to four. Having been approved by the church council, the issue then went before the congregation to vote on this recommendation. Again, the vote painfully fell along racial lines with just a few whites advocating for King. Becker did not have a vote in either setting, but his support for hosting King for the rally was readily apparent. The decision to host King narrowly passed, again by one vote. For a short time, the congregation was split and members were embittered toward one other. Many of the white members opposing the decision blamed Becker. But despite the backlash of some angry members, including threats from a member to blockade the doors on the day of the event, the narrow majority of the congregation maintained its support for hosting King. By the time of the actual event, most

members of the church had been convinced that hosting King was an important event for supporting the people of color in their neighborhood and across Chicago.

On the day of the rally, King arrived late, exhausted and worn-down after visiting five churches in one day. Nevertheless, the public rally, speech, and unity of black and white members, together with people from the surrounding neighborhood, spoke highly of the congregation's commitment to address the darkest realities of urban Chicago. It was also a telling example of Christian solidarity in the face of suffering and oppression. Before King arrived, members from First Immanuel and residents from the neighborhood sang Gospel songs and had several local leaders speak. Becker also shared some words on behalf of First Immanuel, explaining that the congregation "is speaking about this issue [civil rights] because it relates to our identity as Christians. It is not just about civic duty . . . we are supporting it because this is where we belong."²⁰ In short, Becker was arguing that the reason for Lutheran involvement was a direct result of the Christian faith in recognizing the inclusive message of the Gospel to all people regardless of race and the Christian view of the church as the body of Christ for all people.

Embodying a Public Witness to Jesus Christ

How did the members of First Immanuel embody the Gospel in their city? To be sure, the Gospel was paramount for both the members and the pastors of First Immanuel. They were enacting what Andrew Schulze called for when he stressed: "God's relation to man and man's relation to God—while emphasizing man's relation to man."²¹ The work of First Immanuel was not primarily about the Social Gospel or civil rights; First Immanuel's first concern was God and the good news of the Gospel. The Gospel is not for white or black people alone; it is for all people, regardless of ethnicity or color. Since the Gospel is for all, members of First Immanuel recognized that their congregation too must be for all people. This inclusiveness could not be just lip-service; but rather their public life had to embody this reality. Thus, First Immanuel worked to bring reconciliation between whites and blacks within their congregation and to bring justice to the broader neighborhood. This was life in the Gospel.

How did First Immanuel go about its urban ministry? Three factors stand out. First, the congregation was attuned to the urban realities facing the neighborhood. This meant that First Immanuel drew no hard lines between church and world or between public and private. Instead, the public problems of their neighborhood were the problems of the church, and God's reconciliation between all people regardless of color was enacted in the church's public life and mission in the community. It was essential that First Immanuel first recognized the problems within their congregation and the problems in their neighborhood.²² As part of Chicago's West Side, First Immanuel heard God's call to address the social sins of racism and unequal housing

that were afflicting their people. By hosting King, First Immanuel recognized that the structural failures facing Chicago were not merely ethical, but they were also deeply theological. God had placed First Immanuel in this location to love and serve these neighbors, which required that First Immanuel step outside of the norm and work with King to bring about racial reconciliation and housing equality. As a result of First Immanuel's public witness, the local community recognized the importance of First Immanuel as a crucial part of the neighborhood and the city.

Second, the pastors at First Immanuel were leaders committed to their neighborhood and working for change in their congregation, their church at-large, and their city. Moellering was outspoken, Becker mild-mannered, but both shared a commitment to the neighborhood and the people of Chicago's west side. They went everywhere the people went, lived, worked, or played. They also went with their members on civil rights marches and public housing visits. They lived out what Walt Wangerin describes in his book, *Ragman*. In a commencement address to seminarians, "Time in The City," Wangerin gives graduates two assignments by which they are to earn their "higher degrees" in the urban environment. He says:

Pastors [Christians] must . . .

1. Learn The City. Learn the language of its people, its secular means of communication, the flicker of eyes, the gesture of hands, the postures of contempt, servility, pride, protection, love. Learn The City. Learn the laws that shape it, both hidden in society and open in the books of government. . . . Learn its hierarchy, the levels of its power. Learn to read what hurts are real and what their symptoms are. Discover first the human dramas already being enacted in The City before your arrival—for the Holy Spirit is ahead of you, already establishing his work, already directing his purposes. Learning The City, you begin to learn of him.

2. Earn your right to be heard by The City. This is not bequeathed you with your graduation nor even with an ordination. It comes of a very specific labor. It comes when you—to your own sacrifice—commit your ways to the people of The City; and they shall believe that commitment only over a period of time. Stand with them in the courtroom, if that's where their lives take them; sit with them in hospitals, in jails, in the streets, in their places of business, in their bitter and brighter moments. It's a hard thing to do . . . but it shall earn you the right to speak when the Spirit gives you the power to speak.²³

Lastly, members of First Immanuel were not afraid to speak the truth about their congregation and their neighborhood, even when it exposed them as caught in the web of sin. The pastors and leaders of the congregation were engaged with the contentious social issues of the day, both outside and inside First Immanuel, e.g.

racism, segregation, and unequal housing. They did not try to bypass or ignore public, structural failures, or their complicity in them. They addressed such social sin head on. More than that, by being truthful about their sin, personal and social, they were also truthful about Jesus' justifying work for sinners. Trusting Christ, they could admit their own faults, biases, and complicity with inequality, injustice, and sin.

This last point about truthful speech in confession and forgiveness opens up divine worship as a space and time of public witness. In worship, the Spirit opens our hearts and minds to our sin, Christ's forgiveness, and to God's will for our lives, shaping our imaginations and our attitudes toward the world. In the booklet *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about confession:

We cannot find the Cross of Jesus if we shrink from going to the place where it is to be found, namely, the public death of the sinner. And we refuse to bear the Cross when we are ashamed to take upon ourselves the shameful death of the sinner in confession. In confession we break through to the true fellowship of the Cross of Jesus Christ, in confession we affirm and accept our cross.²⁴

Following Bonhoeffer, we see how Christ calls His church to confess our deepest guilt and complicity in all sin, including social sins, and follow Christ in accepting our own crosses by bearing the burden of guilt and sin in confession.²⁵ In so doing, the Spirit forgives our sins and opens our eyes to see injustice and to begin to work for more just structures in our cities.

Collaboration in combatting social sin is not an academic exercise; it is something the church is called to do. As such, we wish to point out an existing liturgy that does what we are talking about. The Litany of Reconciliation comes from England's Coventry Cathedral, which was bombed in 1940 during World War II.²⁶ After the bombing, Provost Howard had the words "Father Forgive" inscribed on the wall behind the altar of the ruined cathedral. The words "Father Forgive" are the response of the congregation in the Litany of Reconciliation, which is prayed every weekday at noon by the Coventry congregation and is used throughout the world by the Community of the Cross of Nails. Praying this prayer of confession is a practice that leads to repentance for all sins, personal and social, and places the church at the mercy of God for forgiveness. After confessing in such a way, Christ's word of full absolution works peace, hope, and joy in His people, opening the eyes of the church to see structural failure and social sin for what it is and calling the church to faithful witness in the face of such sin. The Litany confesses:

Collaboration in
combatting social sin is
not an academic exercise;
it is something the church
is called to do.

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class,

Father Forgive.

The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own,

Father Forgive.

The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth,

Father Forgive.

Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,

Father Forgive.

Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee,

Father Forgive.

The lust which dishonors the bodies of men, women and children,

Father Forgive.

The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God,

Father Forgive.

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Endnotes

¹ For example, see Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012); Rev. Steve Schave, LCMS Director of Urban Ministry, "Urban & Inner-City Mission White Paper: Community Development and Caring for the Marginalized," accessed September 30, 2014, <http://www.lcms.org/citymission>; John Nunes, *Voices from the City: Issues and Images of Urban Preaching* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999); and Clifford J. Green, *Churches, Cities, and Human Community: Urban Ministry in the United States, 1945–1985* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

² Pew Research Center, "Stark Racial Divisions in Reactions to Ferguson Police Shooting," August 18, 2014, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/08/18/stark-racial-divisions-in-reactions-to-ferguson-police-shooting/>.

³ For example, see Pew Research Center, "Views of Law Enforcement, Racial Progress and News Coverage of Race," March 30, 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/03/30/blacks-view-of-law-enforcement-racial-progress-and-news-coverage-of-race/>.

⁴ For an excellent discussion of social sin which appropriates social sin critically, see Derek R. Nelson, *What's Wrong with Sin: Sin in Individual and Social Perspective from Schleiermacher to Theologies of Liberation* (London: T&T Clark, 2009). Although Nelson's subtitle names only "liberal" theologians, Nelson makes it clear that social sin is a theological reality that the whole church must address: "I intend to show that the issue of unjust and sinful social

arrangements is a matter of universal human concern. It is neither a ‘liberal’ hobbyhorse nor a ‘conservative patsy.’” *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ For an insightful analysis of the enduring consequences of slavery, Jim Crow, and racist housing policy on African Americans, see Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 21, 2014.

⁶ For evidence of the impact of racism specifically in St. Louis, see Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). For two seminal scholarly works on race and the American city, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 2005); and Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 2005). For a historical analysis of religion, race, and the city, see John McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁷ Several news articles and editorials have covered the events related to the Michael Brown shooting as a symptom of a much larger, systemic problem of racism. See especially Julie Bosman, “Bruised and Weary, Ferguson Struggles to Heal,” *New York Times*, October 6, 2014; Travis Scholl, “Trying to see clearly in #Ferguson’s haze,” *St. Louis-Post Dispatch*, August 19, 2014; and Kimberly Norwood, “Why I fear for my sons,” CNN, August 25, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/25/opinion/norwood-ferguson-sons-brown-police/index.html>.

⁸ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: University Press, 2010), 168. We do not use the word “politics” in the same way as Hunter. Hunter defines “politics” in relationship to the nation-state (*To Change the World*, 102), whereas we use “politics” to refer to the public, common activity and goods of various communities and not any particular overarching one, like the state.

⁹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 111–149.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 148–149. According to Hunter, both the Republican and Democratic parties seek to use Christians for the sake of political power.

¹¹ Even a good Lutheran ethicist like Robert Benne, who understands the complexity of the relationship between religion and politics, neglects the congregation in this sense. For Benne, the two options are direct influence from a congregation on society in partisan politics or indirect influence in forming individual Christians for the political sphere. This misses a third option where the congregation avoids *partisan* politics and instead acts as a community to publicly witness to Jesus Christ in its neighborhood. This is a kind of politics focused on common, public activities and the common good, but not as defined by the state. See Robert Benne, *Good and Bad Ways to Think about Religion and Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), especially 81–113.

¹² See the excellent biography: Kathryn Galchutt, *The Career of Andrew Schulze* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005).

¹³ Andrew Schulze, *Fire from the Throne: Race Relations in the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968), 11.

¹⁴ For a comprehensive account of the church that develops along a similar trajectory, see Jennifer M. McBride, *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* (Oxford: University Press, 2012). For a specifically Lutheran account, see Cheryl M. Peterson, *Who is the Church? An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

Peterson's ecclesiology does not go far enough in describing the church's mission as the *public* work of the Spirit in service and proclamation, but her ecclesiology is a helpful development in the direction of this paper.

¹⁵ For written accounts of First Immanuel Lutheran, see congregational histories: "A Brief History of First Immanuel Lutheran Church of Chicago," "First Immanuel Lutheran Church of Chicago: 125 Years (1854–1979)," "Here is Immanuel: Isaiah 8:10 (1854–Centennial–1954)," Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis, MO. Mark Koschmann also interviewed and corresponded with Rev. Don Becker, Rev. Harry Therwanger, and George Manning from 2011–2014. See also T. H. Hartman, "Men on a Mission: Lutherans Who Come to Grips with the Problems of the Inner-City Church," *AAL Correspondent* 58, no. 427 (Winter 1960): 2–6, 13.

¹⁶ Ralph L. Moellering, "The Beginnings of Racial Integration at First Immanuel Lutheran Church: 1954–1958." First Immanuel Lutheran Church, Chicago, IL, 1964. File on First Immanuel at Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis, MO.

¹⁷ Donald Becker, "A Brief History of First Immanuel Lutheran Church of Chicago."

¹⁸ Ralph Moellering, "The Beginnings of Racial Integration at First Immanuel," 16.

¹⁹ *Eyes on the Prize*, "Two Societies," Blackside, Inc., 1987. Transcript for *Eyes on the Prize* made available through www.pbs.org. This excellent documentary aired on PBS and is also available on DVD (2010).

²⁰ Donald Becker, Interview by Mark Koschmann, Chicago, IL, November 23, 2011.

²¹ Andrew Schulze, *Fire From the Throne*, 11.

²² This points toward ecclesiology as a contextual discipline, which should guide specific congregations in witnessing to God in Christ through proclamation of the gospel, service in the community, and forming faithful disciples. For references and a more thorough discussion of ecclesiology understood in this way, see Theodore J. Hopkins and Robert Kolb, *Inviting Community* (Saint Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2013), 9–17.

²³ Walter Wangerin Jr., *Ragman: And Other Cries of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), 69–70.

²⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954), 114.

²⁵ For an account of confession and repentance as Christian public witness, which employs Bonhoeffer effectively, see McBride, *The Church for the World*, 119–146.

²⁶ The history of the Litany and the text of the Litany come from the website of the Coventry Cathedral. See "Coventry Litany of Reconciliation," accessed October 7, 2014, <http://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/about-us/our-reconciliation-ministry/coventry-litany-of-reconciliation.php>.