

Pastoral Care: Developing a Paradigm of Cultural Competency for Black Persons with HIV/AIDS.

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A dichotomy exists in the field of pastoral care training in the ability to provide adequate preparation to individuals who are called to attend to the spiritual domain of Blacks who are suffering from chronic illness, such as HIV/AIDS. Being competent presents an immense challenge that requires a cognizant understanding of the culture of Blacks and a comprehensive understanding of cultural root causes that distort the perception of Blacks. Racism and poverty are the root cultural causes that form a trajectory which moves the causes to influence the environmental and behavioral factors that are expressed at a community level. Lack of an understanding of these root causes colors the ability of pastoral care practitioners to fully become competent to make the most appropriate interaction or encounter with Blacks.

Cultural competency assumes all that is needed to work with individuals in Black communities is sensitivity to another's culture. How far off the mark this assumption is. It presupposes that a person has an understanding of the history, culture, and religion and/or spirituality of that culture. Having even a casual understanding of these characteristics probably causes an even greater disadvantage than having nothing at all! In order to make a paradigm shift in thinking, the following premise needs to be used as the starting point, "*You don't know, what you don't know, so you don't know*".

It becomes very clear from this premise of *not knowing* that we cannot understand the suffering of Blacks by using intellectual categories or generalizations regarding culture that are void of the Black experience. More importantly, unless individuals are not trained with an accurate understanding of the basic relationship between root causes and its resultant suffering, one cannot be competent to fully enhance the pastoral encounter.

Guiding Precept

A guiding precept that must be understood is that Black people need to know where they come from, to know the past in order to gain insight for the present and to formulate a future. If you're in the woods, and you don't have a compass, you'll be lost. Blacks don't have a compass and if they do, it is broken. People who have a sense of history can translate that into knowledge, and out of that knowledge is identity and power. This compass, when applied in an area like helping pastoral care practitioners become more competent, can provide the necessary blueprint for a sense of focus, purpose, direction and sensitivity.

What is the Role of Culture?

For Blacks, culture provides the guideposts that direct daily life. Culture provides a

lens for filtering the internal and external world and community experiences, and guides behavior. Culture provides the framework for observing and identifying problems and orients Blacks toward methods of problem-solving. Forgetting or losing culture is like losing a much needed compass on an ocean voyage. One's ability to navigate is compromised. Individuals who are afflicted by HIV/AIDS posture themselves much like they have lost their compass. Sometimes, the compasses (cultural guideposts, rituals, traditions, and practices) have been abandoned or lie dormant. Cultural dissonance then takes place, which manifests in the dysfunctional behavior of unprotected sex.

As Blacks attempt to survive within the context of the majority culture stressful challenges are likely to be produced by the HIV-infected individual. These individuals that are negotiating acculturate adjustment have no compass available. Acculturation, by definition, threatens their stability, particularly where the boundaries between the host culture and the culture of African origin provide for distant group rules, values, and customs.

Primary training needs to focus on how pastoral care practitioners can involve the reintroduction of abandoned cultural practices and/or the establishment of new practices. Void an understanding of the cultural constructs for Blacks and there is no connection to their past. Without this relationship they can never understand their present.

ROOT CAUSES:

HOW THE COMPASS GOT BROKEN

For the purpose of this article I will focus on what are considered the most significant root causes that have impacted the lives of Blacks in America. These root causes are racism and poverty, and examining them can help pastoral care practitioners understand the scope of suffering that Blacks have experienced and how perception of reality has been

distorted for Blacks.

Racism

The term racism is a very complex phenomenon! Racism can be defined in terms of the attitudes and actions of persons or institutions towards others based upon color or ethnic origins with a view to depriving them of access to the rights and privileges of those holding this view. Central to this definition is the issue of power. In order to maintain a racist position over others, the racist must have some access to power. Racism is the most pervasive and decisive force in the fabric of Black communities that continued to impact the lives of individuals since slavery. It permeates every element in their lives because its nature is systemic to a capitalist society that perpetuates an economy of evil instead of an economy of God.

In order to engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of Black people but with the flaws of American society—flaws rooted in historic inequalities and long-standing stereotypes. How we set up the terms for discussing racial issues shapes our perception and response to these issues. As long as Black people are viewed as a “them”, the burden falls on Blacks to do all the cultural and moral work necessary for healthy race relations and the eradication of the deadly sin of evil that racism creates. The implication is that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American and the rest simply “fit in” (Christian, 1994). The issue that one must face, is how unconditionally one is willing to accept the humanity of Blacks, especially those with HIV/AIDS! People of African descent in America have not been able to address the question of what it means to be human without first wrestling with what it means to be Black.

Race Matters

Blacks and persons with HIV/AIDS, to

the extent they are exposed to the dominant culture, are systematically exposed to negative images of themselves, which become internalized. Such exposure is the chief source of various forms of self-abnegation on the part of Blacks. Self-doubt and self-hatred are only several ways in which negative self-image is internalized and acted out with their behaviors.

Racism is irrational!!! It is based upon images in the mind. But these images, given enough time, can become reality. For those afflicted by HIV/AIDS, these images become more profound. It is extremely important to help these persons trace the origins of these images.

Black folks are still bound by patterns of social segregation, political inequity, and economic disparity that began with slavery. Blacks continue to pay the high price that racism demands. The currency is fear, as well as social and economic dysfunction. The results for Blacks are a moral battlefield, covered with the casualties of alienation, separation, spiritual devastation, and wasted human potential.

Racism is perpetuated in ways that are unconscious as well as conscious, unintended as well as deliberate. However, unintended, consciously or unconsciously done, the end result is the same: *the subordination of Blacks and other people of color.*

Poverty

Poverty is the most significant characteristic in the Black community's infrastructure, because of its systemic ability to disenfranchise and marginalize individuals who reside within its boundaries. What makes poverty so profound as a characteristic is its ability to cross intergenerational rites of passage and become engrained into the mindset of those that it affects. The poor are systematically excluded as actors on the stage of life.

Poverty has resulted in a lifetime of suffering, deception, and exclusion that has been internalized by Blacks in a way that results

in their no longer knowing who they truly are or why they were created. This is the deepest and most profound expression of poverty.

Those who are Black and infected with HIV/AIDS come to believe that they are and were always meant to be without value. They begin to feel nonexistent, valueless, and humiliated. When an individual becomes so deeply embedded in the poverty of being, it mars their Black identity. The idea of a marred identity becomes the root of fatalism! This is spiritual and psychological poverty of the deepest kind. The "good news" is no longer believable.

Poverty is a complicated social issue involving all areas of life – physical, personal, social, cultural, and spiritual. Articulating one's understanding of the causes of poverty is important for the reason that it is what determines how we respond to those who are poor! Two of the causes that I would like to mention briefly are mental causes and bad relationships.

One of the causes of poverty is the mental condition of the poor. At the simplest level, it is obvious that poverty is caused in part by lack of knowledge and technical information. Debilitated mental states due to poor nutrition, illness, alcohol, or drugs also create and sustain poverty. Compound these states with HIV/AIDS and we have a very deadly situation to deal with! But we need to dig deeper. We are all familiar with the feeling of hopelessness that is so often deeply embedded in the minds of the poor. Where does this debilitating attitude come from?

First, we need to remind ourselves that poverty can exist within the mind and spirit in the form of poverty of being. Jayakumar Christian (1994) is right to call our attention to the reality of the web of lies that the poor believe and, by believing disempower themselves.² Melba Maggay (1994) provides a highly literary description of this kind of poverty:

"It is the spirit that always denies, the

annoying yet darkly seductive doubt that constantly questions the best we believe. The result for some is a creeping disillusionment, an intemperate realism, that in the end takes away the spring and lightness in our step, stoops our shoulders and makes us bitterly huddle in corners.” (Maggay 1994, 97).

The identity of the poor is marred on the inside. This is the deeper, more insidious, cause of poverty. We need to be careful, however, lest we imply the poor make themselves mentally poor. This is not the case. Walter Wink (1992) reminds us that powerlessness is not simply a problem of attitude... There are structures – economic, political, religious, and only then psychological – that oppress people and resist all attempts to end their oppression.

Second, Christian (1998) suggests that this hopelessness has its roots in the distorted history of the poor and in the actions of the non-poor in making and writing history. What has happened or not happened has the power to shape what we think can happen in the future. The way the poor remember their history shapes the day-to-day life of the poor today. In this way the past can become a limitation on the future. This is exacerbated by the fact that history is usually written or told by the non-poor or “the winners”, and they do it in a way that legitimizes their role while often writing the poor out of the story. Being dismissed to the sidelines of their own history increases the poverty of the poor to those who “do not make history” (Mills 1993, 162).

Poorly thought out social interventions can exacerbate this distorted view the poor have of their history. Paulo Friere (1990) has exposed the negative contribution that educational systems can have if they teach the poor to read their world and their past through the lenses of the powerful, the history makers and writers, lent to them in the form of the educational system. Friere’s *conscientization* strategy for literacy and education was designed to

allow “each man to win back his right to say his own word, to name the world”.

The second cause of poverty that I would like to speak about is bad relationships. The nature of poverty is fundamentally relational: Poverty is a result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of love and blessings in all its meanings. Understanding poverty as relationships that don’t work as they should is consistent with the failure of our human relationships. It is as if the scope of “evil” affects every one of the relationship areas in which humans live: within ourselves, with community, with those we call “other or them”, with the environment, and with God. Each of these broken relationships finds expression in the manifestation of our everyday life. Jayakumar Christian (1998) is right when he asserts that, at the core, poverty is relational.

At the center of this relational understanding of poverty is the idea of the poor not knowing who they are or the reason for which they were created. When people believe they are less than human, without the brains, strength, and personhood to contribute to their own well-being or that of others, their understanding of the “calling” is distorted as well. With marred identities, the poor cannot play their proper relational role in their community, either within themselves or with those around them.

ADJUSTING THE COMPASS

Pastoral care educators need to be attuned to greater care and responsibility in order to challenge the consciousness of individuals who intend to work with Blacks and within communities of color. Becoming competent requires rigorous study, research, and devotion. It calls for an unconditional willingness and desire to open windows that have been closed and that may challenge everything

that has been learned thus far. This requires an openness to want to change the lenses that you see through, in order to see past the surface of what is visible. Being competent means understanding the possibilities of how consciousness can be a bridge, and the connection between the evolution of the brain and the world. When conscious we are aware of what is about us, or of certain actions and reactions, and of what might be the case in the future.

Pastoral care educators need to recognize the limitations imposed by the concepts they choose to consider important and by the assumptions they make about the logic of inference and the techniques of observation. How can pastoral care educators achieve the flexibility of approach required to become better equipped to train effective practitioners to better understand cultural competency? A few strategies could include:

- Developing sustainable and meaningful relationships with Black community-based organizations and Black churches.
- Developing strategies for greater capacity-building linking less experienced individuals and teams with greater experienced ones and developing formal and informal mentoring opportunities.
- Encouraging community folks to provide input and feedback as it relates to the dynamics of their community.
- Being willing to say that you were wrong — because it is the right thing to do.

Lastly, let me close with a quote from Martin Buber:

“The way to God is through humanity, not withdrawing from it, but by walking with it and dealing with it. It is not by withdrawing from the world but by engaging the world that one sees the Divine.”

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