

Racial Reconciliation in Nashville Churches of Christ

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I was born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1974. For 36 of my 37 years I have lived in Nashville. I have been a member of the Brentwood Hills Church of Christ in Nashville since the day I was born. I attended Lipscomb University, a Church of Christ affiliated school in Nashville, from 1992-1996. One of my first jobs found me serving as youth minister at the White House Church of Christ in White House, Tennessee. I have worked in the Lipscomb University athletic department for more than seven years over two stints. I have served as a deacon at Brentwood Hills. I have volunteered many hours with and helped raise money for Youth Encouragement Services, Nashville Inner City Ministry and Disaster Relief, all Church of Christ affiliated ministries in Nashville. In short, most of my life I have marinated in a five-mile wide, Church of Christ flavored box in Nashville.

Growing up, words and phrases like race, racism, segregation, white privilege, prejudice and racial reconciliation were all foreign to me. My family was extremely involved with various inner-city ministries. My dad was a principal in Nashville's Metro Schools for 30 years, serving most of those years in low-income, mostly black schools like Hattie Cotton Elementary School in East Nashville. Combined with my black baseball teammates and the black friends I made at school, I was largely color-blind. Our church congregation at Brentwood Hills was almost entirely white so there was never any opportunity for visible racial conflict in that arena.

Now, as an adult, through various personal experiences, books, online reading and opportunities to learn, my eyes have been opened to the great divide that still exists

between black and white here in my beloved hometown of Nashville. I have been saddened, appalled and angered to learn just how poorly black people were treated by whites going back generations. I have been especially troubled about the racially-motivated actions of ministers, college administrators and Christian schools over the years affiliated with the Church of Christ. I have been awakened to the fact that the ripple effects of those actions still affect Nashvillians in the year 2011 in significant ways.

Nashville is my town. The Church of Christ is my faith family. Knowing what I know now at the age of 37, I can't sit idly by and watch the perpetuation of ignorance, inequality and injustice without doing what I can.

When I was transitioning from my first job as sports information director at Lipscomb University to youth minister at the White House Church of Christ in White House, TN, my athletic director at Lipscomb and former youth minister Jonathan Seamon pulled me aside before I left and said, "Brent, you are a crusader. You can really make a difference as a crusader but you must be extremely careful doing so as crusaders can also leave a great deal of destruction in their wake." I have always taken that admonition to heart. Hopefully with a few gray hairs and a year's worth of training and classes in conflict management, I now possess some of the tools necessary to enter areas that need crusaders without leaving a wake of destruction.

The number one question I have been asked over the last several weeks as I have interviewed dozens of influential leaders on racial reconciliation has been, "Brent, what do you want to do?" I've answered that question consistently with what I believe is the more important question: *What does God want us to do?* Ephesians 2, 2 Corinthians 5,

John 4 and John 17 are just a few of the passages from the Bible that speak to unity and reconciliation.

I would love nothing more than to be able to write a summary paper and offer a roadmap for racial reconciliation among Nashville Churches of Christ with the hope that a unified church could spearhead a larger movement within the city itself. Despite more than 120 hours of hard-core research, reading and interviews with more than 40 leaders from both predominantly white and predominantly black churches, that isn't going to happen.

By studying and embracing the lessons of the past no matter how dark, listening and listening some more, analyzing successful models, considering the teachings of a man named Jesus who came from a little village with a lowly reputation and bringing people together to have honest dialogue, it is my hope that together we can consider tangible, achievable next steps. We should all pray that the Lord's will be done and that we will get out of His way and yield to His Spirit at each and every turn.

I believe the hearts of Jesus' followers in predominantly white Church of Christ congregations in Nashville are as open as they ever have been to having this discussion about race and reconciliation. Over the past couple of years there has been a wave of *New York Times* bestselling books about our relationship with Jesus as His followers and how that squares with the current state of the world and those who live in it. These books have found their way into Sunday School lessons, sermons and small group studies in Church of Christ congregations. *The Hole in Our Gospel* by Richard Stearns, *Crazy Love* by Francis Chan and *Radical* by David Platt are just a few of the books that, married with the red letters of Jesus in the Gospels, have caused white Christians to walk to the mirror

and take honest assessments of who they are and how they're living their lives. Countless numbers of believers are taking action as a result of this kind of self-evaluation, study and prayer. Careers have changed. Houses have been sold. Status zip codes have been traded for zip codes of the projects. Children have been adopted. Time has been reallocated. Priorities have been reset. With that kind of backdrop, I can't think of a better window of opportunity during my lifetime to have an honest, open, transparent discussion about where we currently stand on race relations.

The longer we are Christians the easier it is to pass over parts of scripture and miss the true meaning. We've read them literally dozens or even hundreds of times before. One such passage is found in Matthew 27:26 where it says that Pilate "*had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.*" Until I watched the movie *The Passion of The Christ* I had no appreciation for the word *flogged*. Until I saw that movie, that passage read "*Jesus got a whippin*" to my uneducated, unappreciative brain. I'd had and distributed lots of whippins before. What was the big deal? Now I know all about the cat of nine tails and its flesh-extracting capability. I know about the reservoirs of blood it was equipped to tap and how that flogging almost left no need for a cross and nails since those soldiers beat Jesus within inches of his life.

I think the same thing could be said for the word *slavery*. Unlike white Pilgrims and pioneers, most black people came to America against their will. The farther we get away from the days of slavery the more apt we are to read past references to it and not appreciate what it meant to be a slave. Books and movies like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Roots*, *The Color Purple*, *Amistad* and documentaries that are now popping up more frequently on The History Channel hopefully give us a more accurate depiction of the terrifying,

haunting, despicable institution of slavery. People rounded up in Africa because of the color of their skin, sold to the highest bidder, stacked up in cargo ships like livestock without proper food and water, *floggings*, families split up, children ripped from their mothers' arms at auction, chains, murder, cruel living conditions and rape were all part and parcel of slavery.

What may be worse is that Christians largely remained silent and actually used the Bible to defend the institution of slavery and their abhorrent actions. The application of Genesis 9:18-25, now referred to as the "Haminite Myth," was the textual basis for their justification of slavery. It reads: *The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) These were the three sons of Noah, and from them came the people who were scattered over the whole earth. Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father's naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father naked. When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers."*

Prior to the year 1700, blacks were viewed as an inferior race, prone to mischief and sexual sin, not able to learn and not possessing souls.¹ By the 1750's white Christians in America viewed slavery as not only Biblical, but also evangelistic. Enslavement provided blacks with "the opportunity to cast off their heathenism and embrace the Christian

¹ Christian Smith, Michael O. Emerson (2000). *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, Oxford University Press, p. 22.

religion.”² In their minds blacks were ultimately given a chance at eternal life they would never have received in Africa by being captured and brought to the United States. Here they were Christianized, disciplined and ultimately saved.

When President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 it’s been said that the approximately 4 million slaves in the United States owned nothing more than their skin. They owned no land, had few economic resources, didn’t have much formal education and didn’t have even the most basic of cooking utensils.³

Many blacks died in the transitional days after slavery in America. Many of those that survived plodded along as sharecroppers, giving landowners 50% or more of their crops. Blacks were not allowed to vote until 1870 with the ratification of the 15th Amendment to the Constitution. Between 1876 and 1965 several racial segregation laws, referred to as “Jim Crow Laws” were enacted at the local and state levels. These laws led to the segregation of public schools, restaurants, restrooms, public transportation and even water fountains. Signs that read “whites only” or “colored” were found in public places. In most instances, the services and facilities for blacks were far inferior to those of whites.

In 1954, the Supreme Court ordered the desegregation of public schools in its landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. This decision birthed two new phenomena – the establishment of many new white, private, Christian schools and what is now referred to as “white flight” as white families fearing interracial dating among other things moved out of the cities and into the suburbs.

² Ibid. p. 23

³ Ibid. p. 37

It wasn't until 1964, just 47 years ago, that the Civil Rights Act was enacted, putting an end to legal segregation and Jim Crow laws in the work place and in public places. The Voting Rights Act in 1965, just 46 years ago, finally put an end to all legal maneuvering that sought to prevent blacks from voting.

Over the years, congregations of Churches of Christ have added their own chapters to the ugly history of race relations. Although Churches of Christ have no official structure or national office, Nashville is widely viewed as the unofficial headquarters for Churches of Christ with more than 100 Church of Christ congregations in the city.

There are many, many dreadful stories and first-person accounts I have taken in over the last couple of months related to Churches of Christ. While seeing no real benefit in tying specific names to the actions, I do think it's important for my generation and younger generations to know that these things did happen in our churches – and not too long ago.

A black man responded to the invitation at a Gospel tent meeting. Some of the white members of the church sponsoring the meeting agreed to let the black man be baptized at their church building. Upon hearing about what was about to transpire, some of the other white members of that congregation called the police who promptly showed up at the church building, interrupted the baptismal service and prevented the man from being baptized at the white church building.

At most gospel tent meetings, blacks were not allowed to sit under the tent. They had to sit outside the tent or at the very least behind a roped-off section. One account of a

gospel meeting described the seating for blacks as only being in the dressing rooms on either side of the baptistery.

A prominent white Church of Christ minister finished speaking for the evening at a gospel meeting. When some young black men approached him and wanted to shake his hand, he refused.

After offering to let a young black preacher sleep in the same bed with him instead of sending him home in a torrential storm, one young preacher was written up in one of the Church of Christ journals. It was pointed out that he had broken Jim Crow law but more importantly what he had done was disgusting and unChristian.

A white family in Nashville adopted a young black girl. They were then told they were no longer welcome at their home congregation. Men were posted at the door to keep them out.

Upon seeing blacks being served communion at a local congregation in Nashville, several white members got up and left. They never came back.

Another local congregation in Nashville planned an ice cream social to coincide with the first night of their gospel meeting. Upon seeing blacks enter their auditorium, many whites “got up in a huff,” left the auditorium, went and got their ice cream, left, went home and never came back.

One local minister spearheaded an effort to bring in young black children to a congregation’s Vacation Bible School in Nashville. He was confronted by a church elder who told him, “*Them niggers gotta go.*”

All of the Church of Christ affiliated colleges (Abilene Christian, David Lipscomb, Freed-Hardeman, Harding and Pepperdine among them) were slow to

embrace desegregation. Some did not desegregate until 1964, a full 10 years after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. I spoke with one man who remembers being at chapel the day the announcement was made at his school. He remembers vividly the announcement beginning with the words, “*With regret*” and ending with an explanation that the reason the school was desegregating had to do with the fact they had taken federal funds to construct a building on campus and had to comply. At another Church of Christ affiliated college the president stood before the student body and made the proclamation, “*God made blue birds, black birds and red birds and he did not intend for them to mix.*” The annual lectureships held at the various colleges took on the stance of the colleges hosting them, meaning that the subject of race was largely avoided and kept quiet.

Church of Christ related publications did very little to address the issue of race in the 20th century. When articles and letters did appear they could be characterized as primarily racist in nature.

One of the new words that I have learned in the course of this research is *ahistorical* – meaning without concern for history. When it comes to race relations I have it in mind that many whites in America and many older white Church of Christ members would just as soon us be ahistorical. In my mind there is absolutely no way you can appreciate the present state of things or offer any legitimate ideas for where we go in the future without knowing and acknowledging the history.

That brings us to today. With a historical context, we can better understand and begin to digest certain statistics and trends that affect society as a whole and come to our attention as Church of Christ congregations in Nashville.

Consider the following statistics taken from Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro's award-winning book *Black Wealth/White Wealth*. When you compare net worth average (assets minus debt) blacks have \$3,700. Whites have \$43,800. When you compare net financial assets (net worth minus equity in home or vehicle) blacks have \$0. Whites have \$7,000. For college graduates, whites have an average net worth of \$74,922 compared to \$17,437 for blacks and net financial assets of \$19,823 compared to \$175 for blacks.⁴

Researchers in Massachusetts found that whites were 89% more likely to be given coronary bypass surgery than blacks.⁵ Black babies die at a rate over twice the frequency of white babies. Black mothers are four times more likely to die in childbirth than white mothers. Young black males are six times more likely to be murdered than young white males.⁶

Because of desegregation and the associated white flight that sent white people and churches along with their time, treasure and talents to South Nashville, neighboring Williamson County and other suburbs, Nashville's predominantly black inner-city is in an advanced state of decay. Violent crime rates in predominantly black zip codes like 37115 and 37207 are astronomically higher than predominantly white zip codes like 37204, 37215, 37220, 37221 and 37027.⁷

Public schools in predominantly black neighborhoods like Maplewood High School, Stratford High School, Schwab Elementary and Tom Joy Elementary struggle to recruit and retain top performing teachers. More and more families are opting for private schools or moving to Williamson County to take advantage of some of the nation's

⁴ Divided by Faith, p. 13

⁵ Ibid. p. 14

⁶ Ibid. p. 14

⁷ Nashville.gov, *Annual UCR Report: Violent Crime Rates*, 2008, http://www.police.nashville.org/docs/stats/2008_Annual_UCR_by_Zipcode.pdf

highest achieving schools. More than 70% of all Metro Nashville school children are now on free and reduced lunch.⁸ Nationally, black students in the class of 2009 scored an average of 1276 on the SAT compared with an average score of 1581 for white students.⁹ In Tennessee, black students in the class of 2010 scored an average of 17 on the ACT compared with an average score of 22 for white students.¹⁰ In 2007, only 8% of black fourth-grade students were proficient in reading compared with 33% of white students. In math, 7% of black fourth-graders and 30% of white fourth-graders were proficient. That same year only 62% of black high school students were scheduled to graduate on-time compared with 73% of white high school students.¹¹

All of these statistics point to Nashville being a good example of a city that can be characterized as a “racialized society.” The definition of a racialized society as given by Smith and Emerson is one in which intermarriage rates are low, there is residential separation of races, socioeconomic inequality, you are never unaware of the race of a person with whom you interact and intimate associations reveal racial distinctiveness.¹²

Over the years, attempts have been made at facilitating communication between predominantly white and predominantly black Church of Christ congregations in Nashville with the hope of reconciliation. David Jones, minister at the Schrader Lane Church of Christ in Nashville, a predominantly black congregation, organized a race relations workshop in March of 1968 but it wasn’t well supported by white congregations.¹³ Coming out of that workshop, Jones published a 32-page transcript of all

⁸ Tennessee Educators Association, Free & Reduced Lunch Profile, 2006, <http://www.teateachers.org/cms/Free+or+Reduced+Lunch/95.html>

⁹ http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2009-08-25-SAT-scores_N.htm

¹⁰ <http://www.act.org/news/data/10/pdf/profile/Tennessee.pdf>

¹¹ http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/Tennessee_0.pdf

¹² Divided by Faith, p. 7

¹³ Ibid., p. 137

of the presentations and speeches. As recently as the summer of 2011, Jones referred to “page 10” of that document that contained the following 15 suggested guidelines for improving race relations:

1. Call an interracial meeting of church leaders to discuss and implement remedial actions as soon as possible against obvious practices of racial discrimination.
2. Preachers should immediately begin to preach some Biblical sermons on the subject – not sermons to justify our sinful positions but sermons telling the truth of the matter.
3. Conduct interracial work projects such as personal work teams, workshops, community service projects, etc. so Christians can come to know each other as persons and not simply as “members” of a racial group.
4. Prepare congregations for integration. Since segregation was planned we must plan to get rid of it. Too often elders and ministers will welcome Negroes to a white congregation if they come, but they do nothing to prepare the church for this. A serious educational program on the truth of the gospel on race relations should be launched immediately in every congregation.
5. Have more race relations workshops at other congregations, especially white churches. We realize that this is but a small start, and we must all continually work at the problem.
6. Correct existing segregated church-related establishments, such as the “Hobby Shop,” camps, church-related businesses such as publishing houses and bookstores. It is not a sin to hire a Negro clerk in church-related bookstores.

7. Hold smaller interracial group fellowships on a regular basis (monthly).
8. Plan teaching ads on the race problem on radio, TV and newspapers.
9. Encourage Christian school officials to have a lectureship with race relations as a theme and invite a cross-section of Negro and white speakers.
10. Provide a speaker's bureau, making available a group of men to conduct race relations workshops in churches.
11. Plan to worship at a church of another race, either as a visitor or permanently.
12. Clearly indicate that the church is open for men of all races. Many leaders will not agree to this, but it is quite embarrassing for a Christian to go to a church where he is not wanted. Negro Christians do not wish to force themselves upon anyone – so a clearly marked “White Only” sign would be sufficient. Another way would be for congregations in an area to publish a full-page ad in the newspaper to affirm their position.
13. Negroes should develop plans to be independent – building their own buildings, buying their own songbooks, refusing to buy church buildings vacated by the “white brethren.”
14. Compile a suggested book list on the subject of race relations.
15. Show disapproval by withdrawing fellowship from those congregations and/or individuals who refuse the Christian way in this matter, in keeping with New Testament principles.

According to Jones, “many of those suggested guidelines were never touched.”

Jones remains the minister at Schrader Lane to this day.

In the late 90's Jones and his predominantly black Schrader Lane congregation along with Dr. Rubel Shelly and the predominantly white Woodmont Hills Church of Christ congregation joined forces to launch Christian Community Services, Inc. (CCSI) in an effort to address weaknesses in public assistance programs. Their goal is to help families become independent of government assistance. Through tutors, mentors, workshops and food teams, to date CCSI has graduated 503 participants. 106 of them are off public assistance completely. 66 have purchased their own homes, spending \$9.5 million in home purchases alone. The graduates paid \$104,000 in taxes this year and saved the government \$1.5 million this year alone. 22 have graduated from college. 19 got married. 60 are faithfully attending church services.¹⁴

In November of 1999, Abilene Christian University (a predominantly white Church of Christ affiliated school) president Dr. Royce Money traveled to Southwestern Christian College (a predominantly black Church of Christ affiliated school) in Terrell, Texas where he offered a formal apology to African-American members of churches of Christ.

“Abilene Christian University has been a Christian institution of higher learning for more than 90 years,” said Money. “Its doors were not open to African-Americans for well over half that time. We are here today to confess the sins of racism and discrimination and to issue a formal apology to all of you, to express regret and to ask for your forgiveness.”¹⁵

Knowing the issues, the background and some of the history of the conflict that exists between black and white members of Churches of Christ in Nashville, the question

¹⁴ David Jones, *Lipscomb University Summer Celebration keynote address*, June 2011

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138

becomes how to move forward with the hope of a real, meaningful, lasting reconciliation. What can churches do from here in the year 2011?

According to George Yancey, we must first begin by understanding human depravity, or sin nature, and how it affects racial issues. Human depravity causes us to protect our racial group's material interests while being blinded to other people's points of view.¹⁶ This is a two-way street. Because of our sinful nature, majority groups will look for both overt and subtle ways to maintain advantages of racial status. That same human depravity will motivate people of color to use their victim status to gain whatever they can.¹⁷ Once we realize our racist tendencies are part of our sinful nature, we can allow the salvation of Jesus Christ to cover those same shortcomings.¹⁸

According to Yancey, we can't use the fact that we personally didn't own slaves or deny admission to Christian colleges or segregate society as an excuse to not be involved in finding a solution to racial reconciliation. While majority group members didn't directly participate in past racial sins, they have benefited from those sins. They enjoy their present economic standing partly because their ancestors were spared from racial discrimination.¹⁹

Whites are not going to trust blacks if they suspect blacks will play "the race card" on them. Blacks will not trust whites unless they think whites show real repentance and genuinely care for their interests.²⁰ According to Yancey, this is possible, where one group is not always victimized, when we die to ourselves as we pursue Christian solutions to racism. Yancey is a proponent of interracial congregations that have racially

¹⁶ George A. Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility*, InterVarsity Press (2006), p. 77

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 143

diverse leadership, inclusive worship and the ability to change. He also recommends expanding social networks to become thoroughly multiracial.²¹

John Perkins, born in Mississippi, former New York gang leader Tom Skinner and Samuel Hines, from the Caribbean, were three of the founding fathers of reconciliation in evangelical churches in America. They were all black, all influenced by Martin Luther King, Jr., all committed to mentoring future leaders and all sold on the idea that reconciliation is God's "one item agenda." They preached a reconciliation doctrine of "admit, submit and commit."²² They preached that believers must admit there are racial problems, submit by recognizing problems are spiritual and only solvable by surrendering to will of God, submit to each other by building loving relationships across racial barriers, commit to relationships as in marriage and commit to overcoming division and injustice.

Perkins, Skinner and Hines developed four major steps to achieve racial reconciliation²³:

1. Individuals of different races must develop primary relationships with each other (close friendships, worshipping together). This exposes whites to the United States seen through the eyes of those experiencing its injustices.
2. Recognizing social structures of inequality. All Christians must resist them together. This includes unequal access to quality education and housing. Whites must come alongside blacks in opposition to inequality.

For step #2 to occur, two other steps are necessary:

²¹ Ibid., p. 145

²² Divided by Faith, p. 54

²³ Ibid. p. 55

3. Whites, as the main creators and benefactors of the racialized society, must repent of their personal, historical and social sins. If historical and social sins are not confessed and overcome, they are passed on to future generations, perpetuating the racialized system and perpetuating sin.
4. Blacks must be willing, when whites ask, to forgive them individually and corporately. Blacks must repent of their anger and whatever hatred they hold towards whites and the system.

In *The Church Enslaved*, Tony Campolo points out some successful measures white churches in America have taken to address racism. The Southern Baptist Convention now offers a retirement to black pastors that is better than anything they might have in historically black denominations.²⁴ The Southern Baptists are also making significant financial resources available to black churches for their inner-city social, youth tutoring and economic development programs.

Campolo also states very simply that churches should learn to pray against evil forces including structural evil and that when we do so we should do so fully equipped with the armor of Christ as described in Ephesians 6:12-18. He also acknowledges some of the positives of the split between white and black churches. All-black churches have nurtured black leadership within their walls. The black church has raised up leaders in the Civil Rights Movement like Martin Luther King, Jr.

Campolo says the best way for racial integration in churches to take place is for white Christians from upper and middle class congregations to attend black church worship services and eventually become members of those churches. White churches

²⁴ Tony Campolo, Michael Battle and Anthony Campolo, *The Church Enslaved*, Augsburg Fortress Publishers (2005), p. 54

inviting talented and affluent blacks to attend their congregations is not going to help as some blacks view that as a way to steal their best and brightest talent. Those bright, talented people are oftentimes the financial underpinning of the black church.²⁵ White churches should welcome black worship leaders since white churches largely find black worship services to be much more fulfilling.²⁶

In *With Justice For All*, John Perkins advocates relocation as one of the main ingredients for bridging racial and socio-economic divides. By relocating to a less desirable location, we instantly feel the needs of the people that live there and respond accordingly. Improving education, starting a tutoring program, a preschool, a summer enrichment program or even an elementary school all grow out of relocation.²⁷ Perkins also advocates working with existing ministries to the poor and sending two or three couples from a church for special training in issues that matter to the people they are trying to reach. He suggests starting a neighborhood Bible study, working with neighborhood children and establishing a church in the neighborhood if one is not there.

In Franklin, Tennessee, a suburb of Nashville, Pastor Scott Roley continues to put into practice what he's learned over the years about racial reconciliation, relocation and redistribution. In *God's Neighborhood: A Hopeful Journey in Racial Reconciliation and Community Renewal*, Roley outlines the work of Franklin Community Ministries, a non-profit he helped form in the early 1990's. Roley warns against his initial top-down approach which didn't take into account any kind of ownership on the part of the people he was trying to serve. He advocates mixing youth ministry with what he calls "mercy ministry" in serving minority groups, focusing on their immediate as well as their

²⁵ Ibid., p. 75

²⁶ Ibid., p. 123-124

²⁷ John Perkins, *With Justice For All*, Regal Publishers (1981), p. 91

spiritual needs.²⁸ Roley describes his ministry in Franklin as one that can't be measured in normal fashion. He tells the story of some of the boys he worked with the most in the early days ending up in jail and some of the girls that his youth worker worked with the most getting pregnant. Instead of admitting defeat, a prison ministry and a ministry to pregnant teenagers emerged, producing fruit in new, unexpected ways.²⁹ Roley worked with local ministry leaders to start a school, New Hope Academy, for preschool children up through sixth grade. In their charter they designated that no less than 40% of the seats in the school be reserved for low-income, minority children. Roley describes the first ten years of his ministry in Franklin as “meeting people, discovering through the relationships their prevailing needs, and then working on ways to meet those needs through the resources of combined churches, fellowships and Christian societies – connecting people across race, denomination and economic divides.”³⁰

At first glance, Wayne Howell might seem like an unlikely candidate to be a major player in racial reconciliation. The bib overall wearing, bald-headed, bearded plumber in his 50's is a recovering alcoholic, now 25 years sober. When he was serving in the military in Louisiana in his 20's a man slid a card across the bar to him that read “The eyes of the South are upon you.” It was an invitation to join the Ku Klux Klan. Howell didn't join the KKK. What he did do was help found Franktown Open Hearts ministry in Franklin, TN. The ministry now serves 149 black boys and 15 black girls from Franklin's housing projects. Franktown ministers to many of the single mothers as well. Only 10 of the boys have fathers who live in their homes. Each Thursday night they

²⁸ Scott Roley, James Isaac Elliott and Michael Card, *God's Neighborhood: A Hopeful Journey in Racial Reconciliation and Community Renewal*, InterVarsity Press (2004), location 1001, Amazon Kindle.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, location 1057.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, location 1074.

come to the Fourth Avenue Church of Christ building where they enjoy a meal, recreation time and hear a message about Jesus. Recently they started a hunt and fish club. 25 of the 149 boys are now licensed to hunt and fish in the state of Tennessee. Several bagged their first deer or turkey in 2011.

All of these men are living examples or bring up excellent points and ideas for bringing reconciliation to racially-scarred landscapes. The question becomes how those points and ideas square with the current state of race relations and the opportunity for reconciliation among Nashville Churches of Christ. Which ideas transfer? Which ideas wouldn't stand a chance of working? Which ideas if implemented could serve as a catalyst for radical change for good in Nashville and beyond? Where does difference in doctrine and theology come up in these discussions?

It's hard to look in the mirror in 2011 and admit you're part of the problem. We do have to die to ourselves and "consider others better than ourselves."³¹ One of the most difficult exercises for white churches and members will be to take stock of where they are now economically and what may have been at the expense of black people from past generations. Is my economic standing, the Crieve Hall neighborhood in which I reside and even the house I live in partly due to racism? If the answer is yes, then that presents an entirely new set of questions related to what I should do about it. Of all the concepts Yancey presented, the idea of thoroughly making my social network interracial is the most compelling. I think most white Church of Christ members in Nashville would be eager to expand their circle of friends to include blacks. Facilitating the first meeting would be the most difficult part. There are groups already in place like the Davidson

³¹ HOLY BIBLE, Book of Philippians, chapter 2, vs. 2-3, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION (NIV) ®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 Biblica.

Group that have made this a ministry, pairing up a white person with a black person for the simple purpose of having lunch once a month for a year.

Campolo has some great evidence of programs and initiatives that are working for the Southern Baptist Convention as they reach out to black churches. Many of the ideas that are working for the SBC don't seem to readily transfer to Churches of Christ simply because there is no governing body for Churches of Christ. Each congregation is governed independently by its own group of elders or shepherds. Unlike the Southern Baptist Convention or other national denominations, Churches of Christ do not pay any monthly or yearly tithes back to a national headquarters. There is no national pool of money. There is no national health or retirement plan for ministers.

Campolo does offer suggestions I think do apply to Nashville Churches of Christ. Obviously all of us can pray. There is probably nothing more significant that could happen in Nashville than for a group of church leaders, black and white, to come together under the banner of prayer and ask their congregations to do the same for a specific period of time. Messages from the pulpits could center on the recognition of sin associated with racism that each of us must address as well as the spiritual warfare that engulfs all of us. I agree with Campolo that the onus is on the white churches to go to the black churches when reaching out. The power in white Church of Christ families going across town to worship with predominantly black churches on a regular basis and possibly even placing membership at black churches would be transcending. Predominantly white churches adding black worship leaders would be another intentional step towards reconciliation and one I think would be welcomed by most white congregations in Nashville who seek a more energetic worship service.

It was interesting to me that both Perkins and Roley highlighted the role of education in racial reconciliation. This surprisingly came up multiple times in my interviews with church leaders both black and white. As one gentleman who works closely with Metro Nashville Public Schools put it, “Metro Schools will improve only when the white church people get angry.” To me, this could be the underpinning of a long-lasting, meaningful reconciliation between black and white Churches of Christ in Nashville. White churches and black churches alike would agree that Nashville has to not only survive but thrive. Downtown Nashville must thrive. Nashville must be safe. All of these goals hinge on quality public education.

Harpeth Hills Church of Christ started a pilot program during the 2010-2011 school year at Napier Elementary, recently listed among 10 failing schools in Nashville. According to the assistant principal at Napier they have transformed the school. In his words they are “family” and an integral part of every single day. Harpeth Hills members volunteer in the classrooms, read to children, host parties, mentor struggling students and have added tens of thousands of dollars of technology equipment to Napier’s classrooms. Madison Church of Christ has a similar partnership with Madison Middle School. Would sending a flood of white church volunteers into predominantly black schools with the goal of building long-term relationships with students and their families, largely single-mother situations, show the black churches that the white churches are serious?

What about Roley’s idea of starting an elementary school like New Hope Academy in a place like downtown Nashville? Starting black and white children at a young age, learning side by side from the beginning seems to be one of the most

sustainable, far-reaching ideas presented. As Truett Cathy, the founder of Chick-fil-A, once said, “It’s easier to build boys than to mend men.”

From this 37-year-old white Church of Christ’s perspective, the black church leaders have every reason not to want to work with white churches and their leaders. They have every reason to be suspicious or cynical about any effort, including this one, to bring people together for honest, open, transparent discussion. They have been burned so many times and come to the table of potential reconciliation only to have whites abandon them. Many are talked out. They will believe it when the actions of whites are so loud they can’t hear what they’re saying.

With that said, and this has probably been said before, this time I really believe the white churches are ready and sincere about being reconciled. They just don’t know what to do. They, like most whites, see racism as an individual issue. Their suggestions therefore become individualistic in nature. They need help from black church leaders in seeing the structural issues that are at play. They need to hear from black church leaders on what structural ideas for reconciliation might work in Nashville.

The best next step and recommendation in my mind came from an older black minister in another city who has a history of bringing groups together across racial lines. It is ultimately the next step I decided to take on this journey.

When I asked him, “What’s your best advice on where we go from here?” he said, “Get some key church leaders in Nashville together in a room at a neutral site for a closed-door meeting. Ask them two questions. First, why is this true? Second, what can we do about it? Let them teach you.”

Lord willing, next Tuesday, August 23 at 6 p.m. we will do just that. Seven black Nashville Church of Christ ministers, seven white Nashville Church of Christ ministers, a young black Church of Christ reconciliation visionary friend and I will have a meal together and ask those two very questions.

Jesus of Nazareth, who as my good friend Russ King says “wasn’t white.....but he wasn’t black either,” has the power and is eager to bring healing to Nashville Churches of Christ. If we are willing to confess our sins on both sides, ask for forgiveness and pray that the Lord Himself would heal our churches and our city, reconciliation is not only possible, it’s likely.

May it be so.