

Reflections on the 'Big Tent

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This July, the PCUSA gathered together at Washington University in St. Louis for the Big Tent conference. This year's theme was "Race, Reconciliation, Reform." The promotion for this event was billed, "The theme, 'Race, Reconciliation, Reformation,' will emphasize the hope of the Gospel and its power to transform society in our current cultural context, marked by anxiety, racial division, political animosity, and economic inequality. Through dialogue, workshops, exhibits, and engagement with one another, participants will engage the Church in its mission of justice-making and peace." But it was SO MUCH MORE.

We began our time with together, not in a formal meeting space or chapel, but around tables, playing games, eating ice cream, catching up with old friends, meeting new ones, and, even, meeting online connections in person for the first time. I spent a good deal of time with others around the table, with Presbyterians from all over the country, putting together a puzzle of our co-moderators, the Revs. Jan Edmiston and Denise Anderson. We then moved into a time of plenary in the beautiful Graham Chapel on the Washington University campus where we heard from three local leaders, the Rev. Clyde R. Crumpton, pastor at Cote Brillante Presbyterian Church; the Rev. Erin Counihan, pastor at Oak Hill Presbyterian Church; and Brittini Gray, lead organizer and founder of Students 4 Change, about what it looks like to do ministry and work in St. Louis — especially around issues of race, specifically in the wake of the death of Michael Brown and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Counihan said it best: "The killing of Michael Brown was tragic, but the uprising was 'holy' as people from all around come together to say, 'NO!'" She continued, "I reject the



notion that there was chaos in Ferguson, it was holy.” All three panelists were honest about the challenges, acknowledging that often the church has been late to these conversations, but all three were convinced that God was at work on the streets in Ferguson, and they challenged us, Presbyterians, to connect to conversations about race and to work together to tear down the systematic racism that has plagued our country from its beginning. Gray said, “The Spirit was moving, whether the church was there or not.”

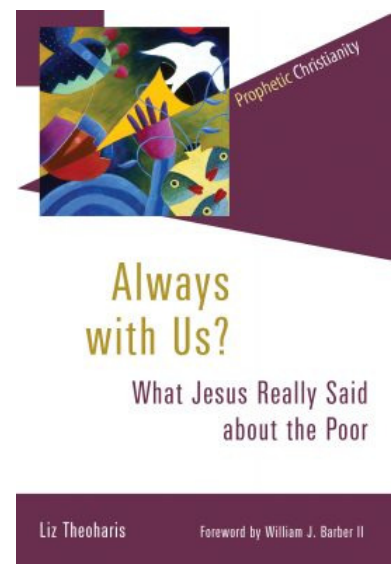


When asked a question about how churches can begin to address these issues Counihan replied, “Sometimes the systematic approach is showing up for the kids in your neighborhood.” It was a real, challenging, and hopeful discussion, which led us into a rousing sermon from the Rev. Dr. J Herbert Nelson calling us to “stop bellyaching about what we don't have and start rejoicing about what the Lord has done through us.” He encouraged us to

remember that we are not dying, we are reforming.

After the stirring opening to the conference the next two days were spent with amazing Bible study with Dr. Eric Barreto, a myriad of options for workshops (I learned about adult education, stewardship and social media), fellowship, conversation, and a visit to Cote Brillante Presbyterian Church to talk with their members about race, reconciliation, and reform. Our co-moderators introduced us to another book that they hope congregations will take up in the coming year, “Always with Us?: What Jesus Really Said about the Poor,” by Dr. Liz Theoharis.

We concluded our time together on Saturday afternoon with a Spiri-filled sermon preached by Dr. Christine Hong. She challenged us to not move so quickly to reconciliation. She



said, “the fruits of reconciliation are watered with confession.” We, Presbyterians, we, white people, need to first confess our culpability in the unjust systems that have chained our country; we must repent, and then, and only then, will there be opportunity for reconciliation.

I cherished my time at Big Tent — the challenge, the hope and the people of the Presbyterian Church always reinvigorate me for the hard work of ministry. If you would like to know more about the specifics of Bible study, workshops, plenaries, or conversations, you are more than welcome to contact me, read the coverage of the event on the PC(USA) website or The Presbyterian Outlook site, or check out the #BigTent2017 hashtag.