



## The Roundtable on Religion & Social Welfare Policy



*Rev. Dr. Albert Sampson,*

*Pastor of Fernwood United Methodist Church*

*Rev. Dr. Albert Sampson is the senior pastor of Fernwood United Methodist Church and presiding elder of the United Methodist South End Cooperative Parish in Chicago. The church and cooperative conduct community outreach programs designed to increase resources in the community. The programs include government-funded computer training and a variety of services to help seniors.*

*Ordained by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. Dr. Sampson is also known for his leadership in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.*

*He spoke to the Roundtable about government partnerships with faith-based organizations. But first, Rev. Dr. Sampson asked to read a statement that he said sets out his ideas about what needs to change to empower the poor. He spoke in Biblical terms, comparing concepts he calls "Crucifixion Christianity" -- the idea that the poverty will always exist -- and "Resurrection Reality" -- which involves taking responsibility for creating productive economies in impoverished neighborhoods.*

*Rev Dr. Sampson's statement is in italics below . It is followed by the Roundtable interview.*

Statement of Rev. Dr. Albert Sampson:

*From Crucifixion Christianity to Resurrection Reality:*

*Crucifixion Christianity puts a warrant on poor people, sentencing them (through) governmental policies and religious classism, manipulating the poor and not managing poverty. It is crucifixion by asphyxiation.*

*When you hang poor people on the cross with a sign of dependency - "the poor you shall have with you always" - then responsibility is (neglected). This sign of Crucifixion Christianity leaves a tomb in the economy, rolling a rock of social and economic grave forces -- so poor people won't breathe -- in the holes of exploitation. This process breeds cemeteries in our economy, with grave clothes wrapping poor people away from creativity and responsibility. ...*

*Crucifixion Christianity of poor people is an Old Testament Ezekiel 37 (perspective) -- scattered bones in the cemetery of poverty, social dependency and societal liability. ... This approach reduces the power of responsibility and creativity, and doesn't produce the power of opportunity and possibility. This is called scattered bones, scattered economy, calculated poverty. ...*

*The Church must take its faith and base it on initiatives of economic independence and not institutional*

*dependency. The word economics (comes from) a Greek word - ekos -- which means the House of God. In Psalm 8 we receive permission to have production and responsibility for the resources on this planet. The government and faith-based organizations must accept wounded poor people from the holes of economic exploitation and social asphyxiation to a New Testament Resurrection Reality. ...*

*If you're familiar with the (resurrection) story, Peter comes to the tomb (of Jesus) and says I'm going home, because he has a poverty of spirit. Mary stands and talks to the gardener, which is the symbol of production. And she becomes one of the most sacred people in history, because she wants to know what happens when you rise up out of your condition and move to another level. So the first person she meets is a gardener, who is the symbol of production. And she raises a fundamental question: "Where have you borne Him? I want to know where He is. I want to take Him." Which is responsibility, creativity, a proposition from what we would call Mother Earth - the woman being classified as Mother Earth - she wants to know, how do I find the power to create (and) be responsible with a gardener who is creating and being responsible.*

### **Roundtable Interview:**

#### **The Roundtable:**

Is this the kind of message you bring to other pastors to encourage or inspire them?

#### **Rev. Dr. Sampson:**

What pastors have a problem with -- I argue that there are four types of churches in our community. The first church is called the "entertainment church," where we jump up and down with the Holy Ghost on Sunday and our people live with Caspar the Ghost on Monday. If your God is as awesome as you say he is on Sunday, then there ought to be some transformation in the community on Monday morning, which bursts forth to a seven-day-a-week church, and not just a Sunday church.

The second church in our community is called the "containment church," where all the intelligentsia is locked up in the church, just on Sunday, with no social and economic responsibility to the community on Monday.

And then the third church is what I call the "prosperity and pain church," where people ride in and they ride out. They have worship, praise dances, they're filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. And they move right on out, driving past the people of poverty with no institution of economic responsibility for Resurrection Reality.

Then the fourth church is what I called the "Martin Luther King church." When Martin was alive, he took the church out of the church, into the community. When Martin got assassinated, the church left the community, and went back to church. The struggle now is to take the church out of the church, into the community, which is called the "liberation church community."

#### **The Roundtable:**

Does the Fernwood United Methodist Church aspire to fall in the fourth category?

#### **Rev. Dr. Sampson:**

Most definitely. We operate off of the three-plus-one plan: education, economics and evangelism for everybody.

#### **The Roundtable:**

Can you give me some examples of how you're doing that?

#### **Rev. Dr. Sampson:**

We have a program for example that helps folk with lights and gas. It's called the CEDA program. The money gets appropriated from Congress, goes to the state, the state created a Community Economic Development Agency, and our church participates in helping people with lights and gas.

The bulk of the people who have these utility challenges are seniors. What we found out was there were no African American organizations working on behalf of the needs of seniors. So last year, on May 25, we had a senior resource network conference. We brought out 10 agencies from the state that had an impact on

senior benefits. And then we also had folk in the private economy - lawyers to help with the wills, (for example).

We're the only Black Church in America that has a Department of Agriculture, where we receive soul-food vegetables from farmers down South. And 50, 60 miles from here, they have been growing vegetables for our church community for 30 years out of my 32 years at the church.

**The Roundtable:**

You're in Chicago. When you say down South ...

**Rev. Dr. Sampson:**

I polled my church and found out that we had people from five southern states: Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Arkansas and Louisiana.

**The Roundtable:**

You mean that's where they were originally from, and now they're in Chicago?

**Rev. Dr. Sampson:**

Yes. Our congregation is Southern-based. I went back through the black colleges, like Florida A&M, Tuskegee Institute in Alabama -- the home of George Washington Carver. I went into those schools and hooked up with the teachers who worked with the farmers for management and quality control of the soul-food vegetables. The farmers are in cooperatives with the black land grant colleges that have agricultural programs.

People come from all over the city on a Saturday (for the farmer's market). I'm just showing you (what we do for) the senior population. Now they get the vegetables and they preserve them, because in the winter the price of vegetables increases and the seniors (must) make decisions between food and prescription drugs.

So we looked at, OK, a person needs food, a person needs their house, a person needs their utilities. At the same time, we have about 40 or 50 computers, and we have a senior program where seniors now are learning how to use the computer

And we're moving (forward) with the program, "the doctor in the house." What we found is a child goes in the house and locks himself in the room. Then you've got seniors being challenged with not only high price of prescription drugs but they also have the added problem of how many drugs are they taking for how many different ailments, and when did they go to the doctor. And so you've got two people living in the same house, but the young person is not the doctor in the house on behalf of grandma who pays the utility bills.

From ages 6 to 17, we have an after-school program.

What I am saying in my (statement) is that we have to have a "Resurrected Reality" -- that you can't have this premise, "the poor you shall have with you always." It's got to be: They're not here, they have moved toward a level of what I call creative responsibility.

**The Roundtable:**

At least one of the programs you talked about - the CEDA program - gets government funding. Do you think there should be more partnerships between faith-based organizations and government?

**Rev. Dr. Sampson:**

The church has to always be free. Because the government lots of times is bound by other priorities.

There's always the argument about the domestic budget. One writer said, I'll only be happy when the day care centers or the Department of Human Services has the budget of the Defense Department, and the Defense Department has the budget of the day care centers. There are too many groups that ... use those dollars to keep the poor in poverty and not develop economic and creative responsibility.

I think that a lot of faith-based organizations would just have a CEDA program and that's it -- just help the people with their lights and gas and go out the door. And not develop a base of 5,000 to 7,000 seniors across the city, metropolitan Chicago, and then begin providing benefits.

Let me just give you a simple project. We're doing a study now where seniors will be able to tell us what problems they're having with their house: Do they need plumbing? Do they need their basements cleaned out? Do they have just a little roof problem, where they need patching of their roof? Well, what happens in a town like Chicago and other major cities - a contractor comes in and rips them off, or puts a lien on the property. But you've got a base of 4,000 or 5,000 seniors. You can get some contractors or some unemployed tradesmen and put them in a consortium to do work on behalf not only of churches, but on behalf of seniors.

We try to say that you have to have people economically responsible for their destiny and not keep them locked into how many times they come back in a dependent kind of position.

**The Roundtable:**

I'm wondering what you think about the federal Faith-Based and Community Initiative in light of this? Do you think government officials understand the issue of encouraging economic independence?

**Rev. Dr. Sampson:**

I think that the problem with the governmental process is that it doesn't get to the local community. All politicians get elected by the precinct, but the resources don't get back to the precinct. There is no Black Church lobbying arm in black America.

What happens is groups like Catholic Charities or (the) Jewish Federation or Lutheran Children and Family Services, those organizations have lobbying arms right in Washington. Everyone knows that the problem is (a government contract) has to be done based on RFPs (requests for proposals). But who knows when they come out? They don't advertise in black newspapers. They don't advertise on black radio stations. So the locking out of the information puts you in a position where you're locked out of resources, and the community doesn't get the kind of real serious access because there are special interest groups.

**The Roundtable:**

What you're talking about is similar to the premise of the Faith-Based and Community Initiative - small, locally based congregations are not getting the funding to help the people in their communities. The idea, as federal officials say, is to level the playing field. Do you think that's happening?

**Rev. Dr. Sampson:**

We don't know when the RFPs are coming.

**The Roundtable:**

Things are still the same, then? Is that what you think?

**Rev. Dr. Sampson:**

And it doesn't make any difference what party is in -- Democratic or Republicans -- you don't know when the RFPs are coming out from the Department of Human Services. And that's the avenue of acquisition.

**The Roundtable:**

The federal government has held trainings and offers some capacity-building grants to let smaller churches increase their ability to do government contracting. Do you feel that it's getting down to the level that it needs to get to?

**Rev. Dr. Sampson:**

It's the government's philosophy locked into the faith-based philosophy: "the poor you shall have with you always." There's no plan. Where is the plan for young people to have serious summer jobs, to produce what? Where is the plan for seniors who have ... got this time, energy and creativity? Where do they go for the quilting company that they could put together? The government doesn't see poor people as new markets.

**The Roundtable:**

Do you think that the faith-based community sees them that way?

**Rev. Dr. Sampson:**

No. they don't have a plan. There's been no economic conference with the mortgage bankers. It wasn't until we had Richard Nixon - he said, for the first time, "Black Capitalism." That was the time more blacks, more construction companies, more on-the-job training programs, more mortgage companies were created and more homes were built, more senior citizens developments. More went on under the Nixon Administration, for Black Capitalism, than at any moment before or (since).

Because it's easy to keep the poor with you always, rather than develop economic initiatives.

We all were poor once and we became middle class. We did it because we were responsible for something, to something. Those initiatives are drying up, because there is no plan.

### **The Roundtable:**

What do you think needs to happen? And who needs to do it?

### **Rev. Dr. Sampson:**

My argument about "Crucifixion Christianity" and "Resurrection Reality" is saying that as long as we stay with Ezekiel 37 -- scattered bones means scattered economy -- and we don't see that people have the capacity to rise from the holes that the government, with the church, puts them in, if that happens, we're still going to have the plight of the poor.

I want people to go back into the resurrection story, because the fact of the matter is that the power of being able to rise up and produce under the conditions is what makes humanity, humanity. How did our people in the African American community produce a George Washington Carver -- slave, orphan, he discovered 300 goodies out of a sweet potato and a peanut. How could that happen?

I'll tell an interesting story about Popeye -- he was my guy as a kid. I always encouraged him when he was getting beat up to get the spinach. I was young, I didn't know that television characters didn't talk back. "Eat the spinach, Popeye." My momma said, "I want you to eat spinach, come eat your spinach, so you can be as strong as Popeye."

But the interesting thing is, I never saw Popeye give Olive Oil spinach. Somebody didn't want her to be strong.

In our community we have restaurants now, franchises -- a Popeye's franchise, chicken and biscuits -- but no spinach. Somebody does not want us to be strong. When you go and work with the farmers who work with spinach, it's to make people strong. So you have to have what I call this "Resurrected Reality" -- that people can get resources and be strong -- over allowing a system to crucify them with the sign on the cross -- "the poor you shall have with you always."

### **The Roundtable:**

My question is, who do you think has to do it? Is it the people, the churches?

### **Rev. Dr. Sampson:**

According to the story, it ultimately rests in the hands of the people who do not have a poverty of spirit. And you might find some governmental leaders that don't have a poverty of spirit.

Your question is a "rich young ruler" question. You're familiar, I assume, with the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and said, "I would like to have an eternal policy on being rich, young and a ruler." And Jesus said, "Well, let me do an assessment of your capacity to handle that. What have you done?" "Well, I've been with Moses and I've kept all the commandments." Jesus said, "But Moses is dead now, I'm alive ... what I'd like you to do is develop your assets that you have for the poor." And the scripture said that he went away sorrowful, because his emotions were tied to his assets. And then he became a liability because he did not want to put up the risk. In the New Testament gospels, you get three things lost in the stories that Jesus tells: One is the woman that loses the coin, which is our assets. The other is the loss of the sheep, which is our economy. And the other is the loss of our humanity - the prodigal son. Now the problem is the story (of) the prodigal son. The prodigal son says, "I've been having some midnight conversations with my elder brother. I'd like to get my inheritance now that you're alive, Daddy." He goes out and flings his resources from his father. He's down with the pigs. The father every day kept looking out the window for his son. Ultimately he finds the son and he says to the son, "Great, we now can fix you a thanksgiving dinner. You get a robe, you get a fatted calf." The eldest son comes to the daddy and says, "You know you

never gave me a thanksgiving dinner; I've been with you all the time. Why didn't I get equal opportunity?" The father says, "Because you never went to look for your brother."

You never went to look for your brother. So you have nothing coming. And the problem is, if we don't go look for our brothers and our sisters, we have nothing coming.

So we have to find people who are willing to be in the Father's house, taking the resources from this great earth, and go find our brothers and our sisters and bring them to thanksgiving dinner.

**The Roundtable:**

Thank you for speaking with us.