Integrating Spirituality and Social Justice

By Rev. Geoff Browning, Campus Minister

One of the elements of our mission at UCCM/PC@S throughout the years has been a commitment to integrating spirituality and social justice. It is probably the single most important element that distinguishes our work from the 20 plus other Christian religious groups on campus. It has been part of UCCM’s mission from the very beginning and was what attracted me to this work as campus minister.

This year we have seen a resurgence of activism on campus, from the “Black Lives Matter” movement to fossil fuel divestment and even a vote by the ASSU undergraduate senate to recommend Stanford’s divestment from companies that support the violation of human rights in Palestine. In light of this activity, we must ask, “What should be our response as a Christian ministry on the campus? How should the church, broadly defined, engage these social activists?”

Should we be distant observers or bystanders? Should we get actively involved in such contentious issues? In other words, what do these movements and activism have to do with “saving souls” or understanding the Christian faith?

The common response is that they have nothing to do with one another, that we should avoid mixing politics and religion at all cost! This has generally been the church’s operational motif for at least a generation. When I arrived on campus in the fall of 2007, our country was embroiled in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Horrendous abuses at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison were still prominent in the media. And yet none of the religious groups on campus was engaging our campus community in a conversation about these realities in the world. I consider this an abrogation of our responsibility as ministers to young adults who will be guiding our country and world into the future.

So what should be the relationship between our faith and the world? This is not an easy question to answer. Archbishop Hélder Câmara of Brazil once said, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” The least that we can say is that exploring the intersection of spirituality and social justice is fundamental to our faith. And so in this newsletter you will find contributions from students and others that help to illustrate how UCCM/PC@S is helping students in these critical explorations and experiences.

This work is vital to our students and we are grateful for your support.

With a bow of gratitude,
Geoff
Militant Nonviolence

It seems like newspaper headlines are all about disease, hunger, oppression, war, or natural disaster, sprinkled in here and there with advertisements, the occasional uplifting story, and politics. I find it exhausting to try to make sense of the global suffering from the safety and security of my Stanford bubble. In fact, I have been so exhausted that this year, I wasn’t able bring myself to be as active as I once was in the social justice causes that captivate me, until now. Pastor Geoff has taken me under his wing and introduced me to Walter Wink, an American biblical scholar, theologian, activist, and author of The Powers that Be.

I found my sentiment of overwhelming helplessness reflected in Wink’s words, and what he calls Jesus “Third Way.” This Third Way is neither violence nor passivity, but militant nonviolence that is practiced with creativity, compassion, and humor. Wink provides convincing biblical evidence that passivity and “just war,” are not the way of Christ, as is commonly believed among Christians. Among the evidence are three common examples used to justify passivity: turning the other cheek, walking the second mile, and handing over ones cloak and coat (Matt. 5:38-42 NRSV; see also Luke 6:29-30). With some insightful context, Wink provides a persuasive argument for nonviolent civil disobedience. I won’t spoil the epiphany here, but I would rather encourage you to Google it and read about it.

What I found most helpful for me was the phrase “the powers are good, the powers have fallen, and the powers must be redeemed.” In these times, it is hard to remember that, in Wink’s words, anyone is capable of violence under the right circumstances. It follows that we must remain committed to embracing the humanity of oppressors, who are also children of God, so that long-term structural and spiritual revolution can take hold. After a couple of years feeling defeated to the Powers that Be, I feel empowered more than ever to challenge our world’s –ism’s, however bleak, violent, or unpopular the struggle may be.

Divestment Gaining Traction  

By Ramah Awad

Last quarter, 19 student groups came together in a unified coalition under the name, Stanford Out of Occupied Palestine, to call on Stanford University to divest from corporations enabling the Occupation of Palestine. After six weeks of campaigning, the coalition brought forth a resolution outlining these demands, supported by over 1,700 student petition signatories, to their student representatives. On February 17, 2015, the ASSU Undergraduate Student Senate voted 10 (for) 4 (against) and 1 (abstention) to pass the resolution.

As one of the student organizers involved in Stanford Out of Occupied Palestine, I believe this victory to be a testament to the power of collective and intersectional organizing. We shifted campus conversation to focus on pressing issues of excessive police brutality in the US and illegal military occupation abroad. We engaged the student body in discussion concerning our University’s complicity in human rights violations. We organized in solidarity with Palestine and marginalized communities globally. As a Palestinian-American, having lived in the West Bank for four years, these issues are personal. After witnessing the bombardment of the Gaza Strip last summer, I returned to campus reinvigorated to organize. My involvement with Students for Justice in Palestine and Stanford Out of Occupied Palestine was a means of using my privileged position as a student at Stanford to bring attention to and take action against the violence and destruction of my communities in Palestine. As a member of the Palestinian diaspora, organizing for divestment has been a source of empowerment and a means of standing in solidarity with my own community living under occupation and siege.

With two-thirds majority approval, the ASSU Undergraduate Senate answered our call and affirmed our efforts. This was only the first step. With broad student support, as demonstrated by 19 student groups, 1,700 student signatures, and the Undergraduate Senate’s vote, we will continue in our organizing to pressure the Board of Trustees to divest - to hold our university accountable to its own ethical standards and to end our complicity in human rights violations in Palestine.

Ramah Awad is currently a Sophomore at Stanford and has been involved with Students for Justice in Palestine for two years now. She has served the group in the capacity of Co-President for a year. You can read more about Stanford Out of Occupied Palestine at www.soopalestine.org.

Students organized a “die-in” in downtown Palo Alto as part of “Black Lives Matter” campaign

Students for Justice in Palestine group that organized the divestment resolution campaign
Student Reflections on the Class and Trip to Nicaragua

Editor's note: This is the 6th year Professor Tom Sheehan and the Rev. Geoff Browning have taught this class on liberation theology and El Salvador. This year the Rev. Abby Mohaupt assisted them. As part of the course, the entire class travels to El Salvador over spring break to live with and learn from Salvadorans. This year we had 9 undergraduates and 2 graduate students in the class. However, this year, because of increased violence in El Salvador, we were diverted to Nicaragua instead.

From Alexis Kallen: ('18)
Throughout the class, we had the opportunity to learn about the idea of liberation theology in Latin America, and to completely immerse ourselves in the Nicaraguan culture, which has been greatly affected and changed by the call to action set forth within the ideals of liberation theology. By definition, liberation theology is the humanization of the struggle and the centralization of the poor. Through this ideology for me, it deepened my understanding of liberation theology, having long since dismissed it as a belief system that was too far removed from my experiences. The idea that struggle is spiritual can be seen as a universal notion that transcends the rituals or dogma of any particular religious practice. Unlike many of the other ideologies, liberation theology allows us to make faith relevant to our own lives and to the broader struggles we dedicate our lives to. The trip to Nicaragua came at a very important time for me; I have been questioning the importance of my own faith, Islam, in my life and how relevant it is to my work in healthcare. I have become frustrated by the rituals and doctrines that can have the effect of making faith spiritual and seem like a chore. However, interacting with people in Nicaragua, from Rafael and Tatyana at the Christian-based communities, to the wonderful priest we met on our second to last night, coupled with many conversations with Tom, I felt this trip to Nicaragua had a profound impact on how I think about my own religious background and faith.

The idea that struggle is spiritual can be seen as a universal notion that transcends the rituals or dogma of any particular religious practice. Unlike so much in religious practice, it is not exclusionary. It allows us to make faith relevant to our own personal, unique struggles rather than some standardized notion of what religious practice should look like. It challenges orthodoxy, which is often a critique I have of how my own religion is practiced. One of the core tenets of Islam is Jihad – the very idea that struggle is spiritual; that without struggle, we cannot have deep faith. The trip made me realize how deeply connected the core tenets of Jihad and liberation theology are. Thinking of struggle as spiritual means that my own work in healthcare, or others' struggles in their personal lives, in different parts of the world, are all connected in that they all are spiritual experiences, regardless of any particular person's background, faith, or nationality. It brings a degree of humility to all of us – we don't need to fight about whose version of religion or doctrine is the "truth". Rather, we all believe that there is no such thing as a universal truth, only a universal experience of struggle.

Liberation Theology class in Nicaragua

From Linda Madrid: ('15, Masters in LA Studies)
After being in Nicaragua for only a few hours, I quickly noticed that one learns so much more through practical experience rather than through books. After we met with our first church based community—San Pablo Apostol, I felt as if I finally understood the true meaning of liberation theology. I no longer knew the definition alone, now I could put faces to it. Talking to people about their experiences painted a completely new image of this ideology for me. It deepened my understanding and my appreciation for it grew. As mentioned in Brown's Liberation Theology: An introductory Guide, the church based communities where inspired by a conviction that the world should not be this way, a rediscovery of the biblical notion of the preferential option for the poor, a new accent

on hope and a possibility of liberation..." (Brown 71). I find this interpretation of the church extremely inspiring. To believe that change is mandated by the gospel and to challenge the institutions, especially the hierarchical church, and tailor ideologies to fit one's needs is a liberating experience. One of the members of this church based community shared that when they were building their church the military showed up and attempted to stop them. She said that to prevent them from derailing their project, the church members sat on the foundation rocks of the building for hours to show that they weren't going anywhere. I was so blown away by their bravery and dedication. Listening to their experiences was incredibly inspiring and I would have loved to talk to them longer.

Malachi Dray: ('18, History major)
Among the more moving experiences in Nicaragua was a discussion with Melisa, a prostitute, on the last night in Córdoba. She told me about being a mother of two, not wanting or choosing that life, but selling herself only to try and to gain a better future for her children. The stoicism she displayed trumped that of Marcus Aurelius, her defiance matched that of Allende, and her empathy validates Christ's admonishment to the haughty: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you."…

It was the concept of structural sin that brought me to liberation theology, having long since dismissed my own faith, Islam, in my life and how relevant it is to my work in healthcare. I have been questioning the importance of my own faith, Islam, in my life and how relevant it is to my work in healthcare. I have become frustrated by the rituals and doctrines that can have the effect of making faith spiritual and seem like a chore. However, interacting with people in Nicaragua, from Rafael and Tatyana at the Christian-based communities, to the wonderful priest we met on our second to last night, coupled with many conversations with Tom, I felt this trip to Nicaragua had a profound impact on how I think about my own religious background and faith.

The idea that struggle is spiritual can be seen as a universal notion that transcends the rituals or dogma of any particular religious practice. Unlike so much in religious practice, it is not exclusionary. It allows us to make faith relevant to our own personal, unique struggles rather than some standardized notion of what religious practice should look like. It challenges orthodoxy, which is often a critique I have of how my own religion is practiced. One of the core tenets of Islam is Jihad – the very idea that struggle is spiritual; that without struggle, we cannot have deep faith. The trip made me realize how deeply connected the core tenets of Jihad and liberation theology are. Thinking of struggle as spiritual means that my own work in healthcare, or others' struggles in their personal lives, in different parts of the world, are all connected in that they all are spiritual experiences, regardless of any particular person's background, faith, or nationality. It brings a degree of humility to all of us – we don't need to fight about whose version of religion or doctrine is the "truth". Rather, we all believe that there is no such thing as a universal truth, only a universal experience of struggle.

Worshipping with a Christian Base Community in Nicaragua.
Why the Presbyterian Church (USA) Chose Boycott and Divestment

By The Rev. Geoff Browning

This op-ed was published in the Stanford Daily on February 8, 2015.

As the Undergraduate Senate prepares to vote on whether to ask Stanford to divest from companies supporting the occupation, I thought it might be helpful for you to know a little about another boycott and divestment campaign. The denomination of the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted in 2012 to recommend a boycott of all Israeli products coming from Palestinian occupied territories, and in 2014 to divest from companies supporting the occupation. This decision followed a prolonged conversation and process of education within the denomination, and included more arcane procedures than we have room or patience for here. But there were basically two reasons for their decision.

First, this was a response to a call from Palestinian civil society and the Palestinian Christian communities. In their Kairos Palestine document of December 2009, thirteen Christian denominations shared with the world, “A moment of truth: A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering,” which described the ongoing tragedy of the occupation. Just as the churches of South Africa published their own “Kairos South Africa” document in 1985 calling for help from the international community, so now Palestinians are pleading for our help. Some have said that the BDS movement is a cabal of anti-Jewish or anti-Israel extremists but this document shows that it is composed of a broad spectrum of Palestinian civil society that, for all their differences, seek reconciliation and peace through justice.

The second reason for supporting boycott and divestment was very simple: We do not want to profit from the suffering of others. How we spend and invest our money says a lot about our values. This is true for individuals, institutions and governments. It is a barometer of our values. For this reason, the PCUSA has long since divested from military contractors, alcohol, tobacco, gun manufacturers, etc. The PCUSA was part of the divestment campaign from South Africa. The PCUSA also divested from a Canadian oil company working in Sudan because of that country’s human rights violations. And in the summer of 2014, the PCUSA voted to divest from three companies supporting the occupation of Palestine. The PCUSA voted to divest not because we thought it would prove efficacious, but because we refuse to benefit from the suffering of others.

The current divestment campaign at Stanford challenges us to consider where the money that supports our institutions comes from. Just as we don’t want to profit from blood diamonds of Africa or from harming the environment, we also don’t want to profit from the demolition of Palestinian homes and orchards and the destruction of so many lives because to do so would contradict our values. Those of us who support divestment do not want the endowment of this great university to be tainted with the blood of Palestinian suffering. A vote for divestment is a vote for nonviolent resistance to oppression and suffering, to liberate not only the Palestinians, but also our Israeli brothers and sisters from the scourge of injustice.