

The Black Church and the Violence of Urban Education

By Larry T. Crudup

Welcome to the life of many students in urban education systems. These systems target for prison planning and growth, drug trafficking, gang violence, domestic abuse, racial profiling, rape, and advancement of the military as the only means of getting out, and they do violence to the image of the Imago Dei that has been implanted within each of us. These systems not only feed the violence that occur within their spheres, but they are also centers of violence for many members of the Beloved Community. The Beloved Community continues to send its children into systems that are slow, painful killers. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan says that violence is “any oppression, anything that violates and separates us from the truth and sacred within ourselves, our relationship with Spirit, and community.”¹ This indeed describes the atmospheres of far too many of our urban educational systems.

Urban education allows for a level of violence that denies the dignity of the individual. It operates schools that could be named Hoodlum Elementary, Left Behind Middle School, and Drop Out High School. There are no resources, there is no safety, and everyone is falling behind, both teachers and students. What violence! This violence effects and affects the confidence of its participants. This violence all but forces students to lose hope in themselves. And the loss of confidence and hope helps build the twenty-first century school of hard-knocks where Waka Flocka Flame and Lil’ Wayne are the instructors and Jay-Z is the principal. The textbook is unedifying music and dumbed-down TV shows, and the lab is the street corner.

Urban education is no longer just education in a run-down school building but is discipleship into the street life with little to no correction from the black church and many black homes. Urban education pulls up-and-coming leaders into a public stoning of the cloud of witnesses that helped pave the way for blacks to gain basic rights and educational training. Urban education knows why the caged bird sings but clamps shut its main means to sing and erases its last vestiges of freedom by bricking up the windows and forcing it to stare in the mirror. The caged bird only sees prison, only sees clipped wings that cannot fly, only sees its beak that has been clamped, and now the caged bird wants nothing but a death-offering reality.

When we look at the lack of necessary resources and good teaching methods within the educational systems in our urban centers, we soon realize the violence that is being done to children who dream of better life. We see the lack of respect and care for students and teachers stuck in a system that overlooks them. We see the urban education system, both state-supported and street-supported, as a place that perpetuates violence by not recognizing the Imago Dei in each person, thus making urban education centers places where churches must be involved and seek justice for those who are the victims of this system. And justice will require speaking truth to power as well as restoring the knowledge that the image of God is within each person to the educational system. Molly Marshall writes: “Bearing the Image of God, then, must mean that one is committed to ethical activity on behalf of the oppressed. As one’s life gives evidence of genuine concern for just relations with others, she or he is reflecting the justice of God.”²

The Black Church must be an active voice in recognizing what the policymakers don't always recognize: that every human being was created in the Image of God. It is a basic principle of the concept of biblical righteousness that people, whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated, first or last in society, must be valued enough in society to have their basic needs met and a chance at an abundant life. In Colossians 3:12, we see the righteousness of God as that which removes class, ethnicity, economic status, etc., and replaces these categories with those that matter most: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. In other words, a clear understanding of the Image of God (how God operates, what God sees as important) informs us that a level socio-economic playing field for all is required for all to achieve their best life. This can only be done by treating people compassionately, with kindness, gentleness, and patience. This is surely needed in our urban education centers.

The Apostle James speaks of the tongue as a device that blesses God and curses humankind, which is made in the image of God. He later says that this should not be. James recognized that if we were to be fully human, we would have to treat all others justly. No one should live a cursed life, especially not aided by the Church.

However, as we look at the landscape of the systems that are operative in America, we see too many church folk blessing God and cursing those made in the Image of God. This is done through our allowance of the Prison Industrial Complex that is bursting at the seams with people of color. It's done through wars for oil and other resources. It's done through mean-spirited immigration measures and through allowing the public educational system in our urban centers to rot. This further curses communities that already struggle with multigenerational poverty and multigenerational welfare. Now they have urban public education as another multigenerational guaranteed-dream-killing apparatus with which to contend.

But if the Black Church could just remember that it used to be the multigenerational encourager, the multigenerational advocate, the multigenerational peacemaker, and the multigenerational truth speaker, there would be newfound vigor to save our urban schools! Then people would not only rally around churches that care for them, but they would also care for the churches that rally around them. So whether you are a large church or a small church, your role is to reconcile the community to the Imago Dei that is present there.

The question is how? While I could discuss the implications of charter schools in urban America, the need for school systems to have apprenticeship models for training new leaders, or tutoring programs operated by churches, I will focus instead on suggesting that as Black Christians it is keenly important that we reconcile our communities back to Christ by recognizing the Image of God that is within our children. One of the ways we can do this is by beginning to place greater emphasis on Black history and culture in our churches because people who do not know their history are directionless. Then, from arts to the sciences, we need to teach that there is more to our history than sports players who made it out of the ghetto. We need to teach that we have helped change the landscape of America even if it means attending school board meetings when new textbooks are to be selected.

Also, a big part of the problem with the urban education system is that we act as if the struggles that our youth and teachers are facing are uniquely theirs and our only concern (if we

show this much) is making sure our biological children and grandchildren at least survive the system. But our history is replete with those who understood that they were part of a village and responsible for every child with whom they came in contact.

Churches should hold teacher appreciation days for all the teachers in their community. Students are not the only ones burdened with the struggles of the urban educational system. Today's teachers are called upon to do much more than teach intellectual content. They have to teach life skills, maintain discipline, counsel abused and bullied children, and encourage children who feel hopeless. But if good teachers feel uncared for, how do we expect them to care for the children of the community?

We also need to create support groups to help teachers and parents. If you are an inner-city church you know that many of the students in the neighborhood do not have the support they need at home to do well in school. This may be due to ill-equipped parents, unknowledgeable parents, or even parents who had bad experiences in the public school system when they were students. You can be a voice for them and their children. Consider setting up a ministry that will be active in the PTA of your neighborhood school and will assist parents in learning how to support their children toward educational success. You may even have members who can participate on the local school board and speak on behalf of your community.

While I know the need for a political activism relative to urban public education, I am equally aware of the overwhelming need for Black churches to do whatever they can do to aid schools in our communities. While we need to participate in the political sphere, we also need to be active in the religious sphere. Since I know there are many churches that will never be particularly politically active, there is no excuse for any church failing to participate in the education of our children as religious advocates, especially since there are so many things that every church can do. Each act, big or small, counts.

Also, although political activism is needed, the problems of urban education are too serious and numerous for us to sit and wait for the right legislative policies to occur before we help our children. We must begin to ask and answer, How can we bring the students and teachers who are struggling with the systemic violence of urban education justice at the grassroots level/local church level? How can we once again instill in our students and teachers stuck in the urban education system that they are valued and important?

The Triune God thought it good to get his hands dirty while shaping and forming us. We must get our hands dirty to help save our urban schools. A church that speaks about redemption and reconciliation but never seeks to bring about redemption and reconciliation by addressing the major problems of its day is not a church at all, but rather another source that is adding to the violence.

Notes

1. Kirk-Duggan, Cheryl. Misbegotten Anguish: A Theology and Ethics of Violence. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001. p. 21.

2. Marshall, Molly. What It Means to Be Human: Made in the Image of God. Macon: Smith & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 1995. p. 51.