

Forum-ing: Signature practice for public theological discourse

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This article introduces a unique model for public theological conversation and discourse, which was developed by the Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta (CBC). It was a model developed in response to the problems of poverty, homelessness, and the 'missing and murdered children' victimised in Atlanta, Georgia in the United States of America in the early 1980s. It was originally organised to respond to the economic, financial, spiritual, emotional, employment, housing and resource needs of the underserved poor. This unique practice is called forum-ing. The forum meets every Monday morning, except when there is a national holiday. It has operated 30 consecutive years. The forum has a series of presentations, including the opening prayer, self-introductions of each person, a report of the executive director, special presentations from selected community groups, reports, and then questions and answers. The end result is that those attending engage in a process of discourse that enables them to internalise new ideas, approaches, and activities for addressing poverty and injustice in the community. Key to forum-ing for the 21st century is that it is a form of public practical theology rooted and grounded in non-violence growing out of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. The overall purpose of this article is to contribute to the effort of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria (South Africa) to identify those variables that will assist religious leaders in South Africa to develop public conversational spaces to enhance democratic participation. This article presents one model from the African American community in Atlanta, Georgia. The hope is to lift up key variables that might assist in the practical and pastoral theological conversation taking place in South Africa at present.

Introduction

This article focuses on the practice of a unique model for public theological conversation and discourse developed by the Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta (CBC), beginning in 1983 and continuing up to the present day. The signature practice of this organisation is a public forum, and it can be described as a conversational response to the problems of poverty, homelessness, and the 'missing and murdered children' victimised in Atlanta, Georgia in the early 1980s. Because of the problems of homelessness in Atlanta, as well as the inability of African American poor mothers to find money to bury their murdered children, the CBC was organised to respond to the economic, financial, spiritual, emotional, employment, housing and resourcing needs of the underserved poor.

The goal of this article is to describe one model where the religious community in Atlanta, Georgia, in the United States of America, along with ecumenical, interfaith, cross racial communities, political parties, governmental, non-governmental organisations, civic organisations, and corporate America have linked their efforts for 30 years to assure democracy and full participation of all under the United States of America Constitution. This article is a form of qualitative research using participant observation and interviews to collect data. It was weekly participation in the forums that enabled the writer of this article to describe how the weekly forum attempts to provide a transversal space for public dialogue, reflection and joint efforts to keep democracy alive. The article attempts to describe the variables that are critical for understanding how to develop a public transversal space. Such variables will help in the development of further research, identifying which ones of the variables are essential in facilitating transversal space. The intended outcome of this article is to further the conversation of how South Africa as a nation can continue fostering democratic participation.

The hope of this article is that it will contribute to the University of Pretoria and its Faculty of Theology's goal to describe how facilitating the development of a transversal space in public discourse can help foster and enable the new South African democracy to thrive. More precisely, this article was presented at the conference entitled 'The shifting identities of the rural, urban and virtual poor: Reimagining a discourse of reconciliation and social cohesion in South Africa', held at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria on 07–08 August 2013.

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Whilst the goal of the article was to contribute to the intent of the conference to address the emerging South African democracy, this article is not prescriptive. The model that is presented here is unique to a particular context in the United States. After completing the writing of this article, I realised as an African American pastoral theologian from the United States that South African pastoral theologians will help preserve their fragile democracy by recalling what they did originally to end apartheid and to establish the South African Constitution. Every new generation will have to discover anew solutions to recurring problems that surface repeatedly. These solutions will have to be reviewed, assessed continuously, and improved. This process will be unending.

The focus of this article is the forum. The forum is the signature practice of the CBC taking place at every Monday morning session. It has become the standard expected activity, and it has met every Monday morning since its inception in 1983, except for national holidays. As a signature practice, the forum engages in a series of presentations, including the opening prayer, self-introductions of each person attending the forum, a report of the executive director, special presentations from selected community groups, and reports of CBC standing committees. Following each public presentation, an orderly process of questions and answers takes place. The end result is that people engage in a process of discourse that enables them to internalise new ideas, approaches, and activities as they address community poverty and oppression. At the end of each session, every person attending the forum, who desires to, is invited to join in a prayer circle, and each person is given a chance to indicate any significant activity taking place in the next few days. Finally, a designated person is identified to pray, and the meeting is dismissed. These precise discourse activities describe what is being called the forum-ing process.

In order to execute the goal of this article, the following sub-topics will be explored: A literature review on the CBC; the meaning of transversal rationality; forum-ing as a collective narrative practice; the story behind the Monday morning forum; forum-ing and training in non-violence as a civil rights legacy; signature practices of forum-ing; meta-narrative practice: a case study, and the summary and conclusions.

A literature review of the Concerned Black Clergy

One major research article contributed to the development of this article. It was published by Harvey K. Newman at Georgia State University in Atlanta. The article is titled 'Black clergy and urban regimes: The role of Atlanta's Concerned Black Clergy' (1994). Newman points out that the major success of the CBC over the years has been its ability to influence the political regime in Atlanta city politics, particularly when it came to the needs of the poor. According to his study, this was primarily done because the CBC brought together different stakeholders in the city of Atlanta into dialogue, including the churches, the government decision makers, the educational institutions, the business community, the

corporations, and the foundations, along with the poor, in order to address the problems of the city.

Based on the participant observation of the writer of this article, as well as the interviews with key stakeholders in the CBC, the Monday morning forum that has met every Monday for over 30 years has been a significant place for influencing the decision makers. In short, the CBC and its forum have played a significant role in impacting the political policy decisions made on behalf of the poor.

The meaning of transversal rationality

As already mentioned, the purpose of this article is to examine the forum-ing model of public discourse from the point of view of transversal epistemological space. The key understanding of the practice of forum-ing as public conversation is the notion that God is a participant in the conversation. God's participation is to draw each participant into God's significant ongoing liberation and justice activity. In short, forum-ing becomes a novel re-creation of past and ongoing discourses, where the focus is on discerning what God is presently doing and revealing. This discerning understanding of God's present and ongoing activity in public theological discourse is derived from the model of revelation discussed by H. Richard Niebuhr (1941), in his book *The meaning of revelation*.

Niebuhr's description of God's historical and ongoing activity in forum discourse has implications for understanding transversal epistemology. The reality is that God is engaged in public discourse and is seeking to enable all participants to discern what God is doing. It assumes that current conversations have to encounter God's perpetual activity every Monday morning anew.

God's transforming presence in ongoing forum discourse is a key to understanding transversal rationality (Schrag 1992). It is a form of knowing that enables participants to transcend the differences existing between them. In fact, it is also God's presence in the discourse that helps those present to hear and to be empathically present to the stories of the other participants. Moreover, it is God's presence that makes every Monday a new experience, and it facilitates new occasions for meaning and innovative public discourse. Concisely, public theological discourse at the CBC means attending to what God is currently doing to help the CBC carry out its mission to provide leadership, advocacy and service to the homeless, helpless and hopeless in the metropolitan Atlanta community.

The meaning of transversality related to forum-ing is that it is the arena where God enables participants to communicate in ways that help them to transcend their religious, racial, gender, and ideological differences. Moreover, the meaning of transversing is closely related to the concept of interpathy. Interpathy is an intentional way of getting to know and relate to the experiences and stories of others, as well as their values, moral reasoning, and feelings of others who are of a different

cultural, racial, and gender orientation (Augsburger 1986). Interpathy is seeking to put aside one's own way of thinking and reasoning temporarily, in order to relate to those who come from totally different cultural, religious, gender and experiential backgrounds and orientations.

With regard to God's ongoing participation in forum-ing, the concepts of interpathy and transversality enable openness to all creation, cultures and human differences, and it enables the CBC to carry out its mission to provide leadership, advocacy and service to the homeless and helpless in the community.

Forum-ing as a collective narrative practice

According to David Denborough (2008), collective narrative practice is a term applied to narrative ways of communicating or storytelling, and it is applied to a number of activities related to individuals, small groups, and to communities that have come together in order to respond to trauma. The gift of narrative practices is that they provide an audience for people who have been traumatised by life events, whether as the result of natural disasters, abuse, terrorism, oppression, segregation, domestic violence, and a whole host of others misfortunes. The key to collective narrative practices in the CBC is that it brings the stories heard in their original and different settings into the public forum, where they will be heard and respected. These stories when reflected on, become 'communal wisdom', and wider audiences can learn from and profit from being exposed to these stories.

'Communal wisdom' is not just stories retold for the purposes of entertainment or vicarious participation in people's lives to pass the time away on a boring day. Rather, communal wisdom in collective practices has as its goal to respond to the trauma of others in such a way that healing of persons and transforming of communities take place. It is people coming together and learning from each other how they have gotten over the difficulties of life in order to encourage each other to 'keep on keeping on' and help rebuild their lives in the midst of community. In other words, the ability of people to learn from each other requires the abilities of both transversality and interpathy. More precisely, it requires the ability to bracket one's own preferred way of reasoning in order to be present to those who are different.

The story behind the Monday morning weekly forum

In this section, the story of how the weekly Monday morning forum helps the CBC to help its attendees to transform their feelings of being traumatised by injustice into positive actions. Albert Love, Chair of the Voter Registration and Education Committee and a former staff member of the Christian Council of Atlanta, points out that behind the idea of the forum practices was the desire of the CBC to be inclusive (Rev. Albert Love, personal comm., 2012).

In an interview with Rev. Love, I listened to his story of the origins of the CBC. In 1973, there was an economic down

turn in Atlanta, and the white community was concerned about the crime that was happening. They wanted to have some black people in place to help deal with the crime. They wanted the Christian Council to deal with this.

Rev. Love observed that whenever there was a problem in Atlanta, the Christian Council was the organisation that the Atlanta community turned to in order to address the problem. There was no ecumenical vehicle for black churches to come together in order to deal with community problems. Dr Cameron Alexander, the pastor of Antioch Missionary Baptist Church North, began to ask questions about not waiting for others to get the black churches organised to deal with critical issues. Moreover, other black ministers were also raising this same concern. Thus, Rev. Love felt that this was the impetus and moment that helped to move toward interdenominational cooperation of black churches.

Because Rev. Love was a staff member of the Atlanta Christian Council, he had already compiled a list of Atlanta's black clergy. He brought this list of black ministers to a meeting at Paschals Restaurant, recognising that this was a Kairos opportunity for getting black ministers organised. This was between 1974 and 1979. Rev. Love felt that this list would help spur the enthusiasm of the other black clergy attending the meeting at Paschals to organise.

Rev. Love pointed out that the critical emphasis of the black ministers was to respond to the economic downturn of the middle 1970s. The homeless situation escalated during the down turn. In 1980 he was hired as the national administrator of the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) from 1980 to 1988 by Dr Joseph Lowery. Rev. Tim McDonald, pastor of First Iconiun Baptist Church, also came on the staff of the SCLC. This was when the homeless situation began to be addressed.

One of the first practices was to address the businesses and how many employees they were hiring. Fred Taylor, a prominent community activist, called a Breadbasket meeting at Paschals, and there were nine or 10 ministers present. The issue of homeless people came up. Many white churches were dealing with people who were homeless. St Luke, Central Presbyterian, Trinity, and Catholic Church downtown were opening their doors. This spurred a conversation amongst black ministers to deal with homeless people.

Amongst the young ministers, there is a concern that homelessness was the reason for the existence of the CBC. However, Albert Love believes that there was a real need for black clergy and community to discuss issues like homelessness but not exclusively homeless concerns.

Inclusiveness was a major emphasis of the CBC from its inception. This inclusiveness included gender, denominational, interfaith, and interracial. Female pastors were prominent in the origination of the CBC, including Rev. Cynthia Hale and Rev. Barbara King. Consequently, the

emphasis on inclusiveness has been the dominant signature practice characterising the forum-ing model of the CBC.

Forum-ing and training in non-violence as a civil rights legacy

Forum-ing in the CBC is indeed a communal practice of wisdom, which has links with the civil rights movement. One practice that took place in the civil rights movement included the training in non-violence. Dr Thomas J. Pugh, Professor of Pastoral Care and later the Vice President of Academic Affairs at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), served the ITC from its founding in 1958 to his death in 1994. He would tell stories to his students and colleagues about how he was called on by civil rights activists to bring his training in group dynamics and pastoral care to preparing the marchers to respond non-violently when doing lunch counter sit-ins and freedom and justice marches.

Dr Pugh's telling of these stories of the training had purpose and intention. He was passing on communal wisdom that acknowledged that non-violence was an intentional act of liberation for which human beings had to be prepared and trained. In order to practice non-violence, it required constant practice, given that non-violence is not a natural instinct. Rather, it is a practice which requires intentionality, and our natural instinct to strike back needed to be channelled. If it were not channelled, the entire movement toward justice would have been undermined.

What was learned from Dr Pugh about the civil rights wisdom tradition of non-violence was the fact that training in non-violence was a form of forum-ing. That is, it provided people a safe space and audience where they could have supportive caring relationships. As result, they were enabled to transform and channel their strong feelings of anger into purposeful directions. Not only did channelling take place, but the channelling also took place by using the wisdom of the Jesus tradition of non-violence and biblical stories of love to buttress non-violent protests.

In narrative therapeutic terms, the civil rights wisdom tradition of non-violence helped them connect their non-violent action with Niebuhr's understanding of God's current activity. In other words, forum-ing is an audience practice where people's feelings can be brought in line with what God is also doing to bring about freedom, justice and liberation. Without such story-linking communal practices in a supportive audience, it will be hard for people to transform their anger toward a purposeful end. In short, the CBC provides a forum space for helping its members connect with God's ongoing effort to end oppression, racism and segregation. Indeed, forum-ing is an occasion for story-linking with God's ongoing liberation activity (Wimberly 2005:21).

Forum-ing is also related to a place where the hermeneutics of engagement takes place. For example, forum-ing took place in the slave brush harbours of safety, away from the

sight and hearing of the slave masters. The hermeneutics of engagement is described in the following quote, referencing how forum-ing was practiced during the enslavement of African Americans in slavery:

The hermeneutical method enabled us to move from an analysis of the past to its significance for the present. This method is concerned to lift up (1) the central, dynamic activity of God in the past, (2) the continuation of this activity in communities of faith today, and (3) the impact of the dynamic activity of God on events and experiences in communities of faith (Wimberly & Wimberly 1986:22).

Linking with God's ongoing liberation activity in the secret brush harbours through biblical stories, praying, and preaching became a wisdom tradition, as well as a source to encounter God's ongoing activity. In other words, forum-ing as a liberation practice of linking community participants to the justice and liberation to God's activity is an important historical legacy for the CBC, originating during slavery.

Signature practices of forum-ing

Practices are activities in which people participate, and they orient people who practice them to the language and conversational environments (Wimberly 2003). The CBC forum practices help to orient attendees to its rules, and this gives order and meaning to objects, activities and relationships. Thus, the practices of the CBC intend others to perceive reality in a certain way, and conversations and human discourses are practical bases for forming these expectations.

To understand the forum practices of the CBC, it is important to state the CBC's mission and self-understanding. The 'Concerned Black Clergy of Metropolitan Atlanta (CBC) is the primary, proactive and principle-centred organisation comprising mostly of African-American ministers and laity. Our mission is to provide leadership, advocacy and service to the homeless, helpless and hopeless in our community' (Concerned Black Clergy of Metro Atlanta, Inc.).

In order to carry out its mission, the CBC established eight committees. Included in these committees are the Beltline, Economic Development, Education, Health, Juvenile Justice, Membership, Political Issues, and Public Policy and Safety. The Beltline Committee gives forum updates relative to the status of the Belt-Line Project, inclusive of community engagement, design and construction projects, transit, trails, arts and other events impacting the Atlanta community.

There is the Economic Development Committee, and this committee educates the CBC constituency in economic development through partnerships and collaborative efforts with the business community. Additionally, this committee addresses the issue of financial independence, entrepreneurship, African-American trade, and minority business networking with specific strategies and identifiable resources.

The next committee is the Education Committee. This committee researches and educates the clergy and constituents in matters directly impacting students. Members of this committee monitor the policies and practices of the school boards and school systems. The emphasis is on assuring that the proper learning environments exist in the schools. This committee makes recommendations that assure that schools take the necessary actions to improving the learning outcomes of students.

The Health Committee organises and coordinates health initiatives for clergy, congregations and other constituents. Concern is for the health disparities that impact the health of underserved and neglected communities. The task of this committee is to inform and educate in lay terms the people in these underserved communities about their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health to promote better health care. The focus is on both preventive care, as well as treatment.

The Juvenile Justice Committee studies the prison system practices that relate to juvenile justice, and it makes recommendations for monitoring policies of juvenile justice concerns, prevention of juvenile problems, updates and information related to juvenile problems and how the justice system is working to handle juvenile problems.

The Membership Committee solicits and recruits individual, church, organisational and corporate memberships in the CBC. It maintains an accurate database of membership, and acknowledges and rewards the participation of members.

There is also the Political Issues Committee. This committee oversees the political process and objectivity discusses the political realities impacting the poor community in Atlanta. This committee is ever mindful of governmental guidelines for not for profit organisations. The practices of this committee are on voter registration and education, legislative recommendations, and political candidate forums.

Finally, there is the Public Safety Committee. This committee oversees the acts of injustices committed in communities. It makes the community aware of what is taking place with regard to community safety issues, and it makes the community aware of public safety legislation and regulation.

Before selective committees make their reports, there are self-introductions by each attendee. It is a signature practice, and its goal is to foster inclusiveness. No matter how large the forum, following the opening prayer, every person is asked to introduce him- or herself, tell his or her title, religious group affiliation, and relationship to the CBC, if any. This practice is an effort to help people attending the forum to feel welcomed and included as a valuable member of the gathering. The practice of hospitality and openness to the stranger is a very important extension of the pastoral legacy of the CBC presidential leadership.

Not only are people encouraged to introduce themselves, it is also a practice at every Monday morning forum. In addition, *there is a question and answer period* following every presentation. Anyone who wants to ask a question can; no one is forbidden from asking questions.

There are rules when asking questions, however. For example, making speeches is discouraged. A short introduction to the question is allowed, but those asking questions will be encouraged to get to the question when introductions to the questions are too long. Moreover, those wanting to ask questions must raise their hands, and they are assigned a number. Those asking questions will ask their questions one at a time, and once the speaker(s) answers the question, the next person in numerical order will ask his or her question.

Other practices in the forum-ing process include the weekly update of the CBC president, the committee chairs report, political issues updates, public safety updates, and membership updates. There are new people attending the forum every Monday, and they are encouraged to join the CBC. Those attending include clergy, students, interested laity, business representatives, community organisers, and representatives from corporations, government representatives, politicians, and many others. At the end of the meeting, the attendees form a circle, hold hands, make short announcements about upcoming events, and these announcements are followed by a prayer from the CBC's chaplain.

Meta-narrative practices: A brief case study of meta-narrative practice

The most significant practice that takes place in the Monday morning weekly forums is what is called meta-narrative practice. Meta-Narrative practices are those communication strategies and conversational activities that help to influence the thinking of those attending the forum. It is the practice of helping those present to see the issues being addressed in light of the legacy of wisdom that comes out of the CBC's history. A brief case study of the presentation by the head of Political Issues Updates follows, concerning some injustices related to African American juvenile offenders. The updates were given by Mr. Joe Carn, Vice Mayor of the city of College Park, Georgia.

Vice Mayor Carn reported on several injustices occurring in the juvenile court system at the CBC on 17 June 2013. After presenting them, the question and answer period occurred. There were many questions, but one of the former presidents of the CBC, Rev. Timothy McDonald, Pastor of First Iconium Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, stood up and began to comment on the need for juvenile defendants to know their civil and United States Constitutional rights. He also commented on how important it is for the school system, parents, adults, teachers, churches and preachers to provide youth with a copy of the United States Constitution so that

they know their rights. Providing youth with the Constitution will do several important things, he said. Firstly, it will let the youth know that they are not forgotten. Secondly, it will get them thinking about their own lives and how important they are as human beings. Finally, it will let them know what true citizenship is all about.

Of course, the former president of the CBC talked about efforts to make sure that the laws and the courts for juvenile defendants are administered fairly. The point, however, is the practice in which the former president was engaging. It is called meta-narrative reflection. Meta-narrative reflection is the thought process where the big story embodied in the South African Constitution and United States Constitution needs to be read, told, studied, taught, and distributed to all persons. The Constitution provides the big picture or story that every citizen must know and understand. Moreover, it is the story through which justice, equality, and fairness are defined. In short, discourse in the transversal space should not only be shaped by our religious scriptures and doctrine; they should also be informed by our constitutions.

Summary and conclusions

This article began as an attempt to describe how the Concerned Black Clergy of metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia emerged as an organisational response to the problems of poverty, homelessness, and the Missing and Murdered Children that were victimised in the early 1980s. The intent of the article was to provide one example to the University of Pretoria in South Africa for its effort to address how the practice of transversal epistemological space could contribute challenges that are threatening to dismantle the 'gains made by the fragile South African democracy'. The goal of this article has been to demonstrate how the signature practices of the CBC of Metropolitan Atlanta have executed a model called forum-ing. It is only one comprehensive model that addresses the concerns that are similar to the South African situation.

The basic contribution of this article was an attempt to describe one model of transversal epistemological space that has existed 30 years in a major city in the United States of America where ecumenical churches, interfaith communities, government, non-governmental organisations, political parties, and corporate America work together to sustain our fragile democracy.

I have tried to define the forum model as a relational space in which God is involved historically, helping those involved in the forum to discern how God is at work, shaping our efforts to God's own ends for justice, equality, freedom, and liberation. Although the results of the forum activities are hard to measure, all who attend the forum are convinced that they are called to participate and are blessed as a result.

My basic recommendation, based on the execution of the goal of this article, is the following: It is extremely important for those who wish to re-enforce the fragile South African democracy, and who draw on the religious community, need to revisit tested past practices, including the religious

practices, that helped to end apartheid. After these past practices have been identified, reshape them in light of a discerning process of where God is at work securing the South African democracy. Such an effort requires creating a transversal secure space for discernment, reflection, and discussion involving all the stakeholders in the South African democracy, including the church. Such an approach draws on Niebuhr's view that significant cultural changes take place historically when the activity of God in the present helps us to renew and re-enforce our significant past achievements.

Finally, the article also proposed to identify salient variables emerging that might prove to be salient practices appropriate to the South African conversational context. The six following variables may be worth examining for their appropriateness to public theological conversation in the South African context:

- The practices of attending to the participants' stories that they bring to conversation.
- The practice of interpathy or the effort to attending to the stories of others who are from a different culture.
- The practice of cultivating communal wisdom for fostering conversation across cultural differences; Critical here is identifying and evaluating those conversational practices that helped to bring apartheid to its end. In other words, begin to examine the role of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's conversational practices.
- The practice of pastoral imagination, which enables the participants to develop creative programs as a result of entering into conversations with the poor and underserved populations.
- The practice of organising special committees to address the particular issues and solutions for improving democratic participation.
- Finding ways to provide safe structures, rules of dialogue, and venues for participatory democracy.

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