

Justice at Union Theological Seminary (NYC) *Legacy of Justice, Lens for Action*

By Thia Reggio

Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York was born out of a concern for justice. By 1895, it had founded the Settlement House to engage social justice on the ground as well as from the pulpit. Union fostered the environment in which the Social Gospel of Rauschenbusch was nurtured, providing clergy with a framework for engaging city and state government on its treatment of the poor and disenfranchised.

Justice is the heartbeat of Union. Students come here with passions that run high and alumni treasure the legacy of justice of which they are a part. Justice, by definition, is the practice of examining structures and systems for their flaws, by remaining vigilant to their effects on those who do not have power and who, therefore, deserve all the more to be treated equitably—and lastly, holding those systems accountable beyond the standards they have set for themselves. This vigilance to fight against oppression is the mission Jesus mentioned in Luke’s account of his ministry, when he quoted Isaiah saying, “the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to the let the oppressed go free” (Lk 4: 18).

As much as we may wish to believe that justice is a function of our institutions, justice always has a countercultural voice—an inherent tension with institutionalized power. Wherever there is unequal power, the potential exists to obscure the prophetic voice, which so often comes from the minority perspective. Justice seeks to lift up those who are oppressed by that power. As one group accedes to power, justice seeks to ensure that those left behind will be made visible and brought into a just and equitable place. So the mission of justice is never completed.

Union’s many caucuses champion disenfranchised groups within and outside the academy, seeking justice for those who are oppressed due to race, gender expression or identification, economic status, perceptions of “ability,” and religious convictions not traditionally supported by seminary curricula. These caucuses keep the conversation fresh and engage the community in many actions on campus and off.

The Poverty Initiative at Union, led by Presbyterian Ph.D. Candidate Liz Theoharis, is carrying on the work of Martin Luther King Jr.’s Poor People’s Campaign, which cuts across the boundaries between many diverse groups, uniting them in their dedication to human dignity for all people. The Poverty Initiative works with communities affected by a wide range of justice issues in a reciprocal relationship between the academy, churches, and disenfranchised communities and organizations.

Union students bring justice to the fore in myriad ways. They express their convictions artistically with richly provocative performances and art installations. They organize around real human concerns such as access to healthy food through The Edible Churchyard: a White House sponsored food justice project involving Union students, faculty, and staff with participants from

a local synagogue and mosque. Union students eat and celebrate, march and protest, speak out and stand silently on the side of justice.

Just this spring within the Union community, the commitment to justice has translated into student protests and ensuing dialogue among the administration, students, and alumni regarding the ways in which justice issues affect the school's practices and our daily lives together. The most important and poignantly hopeful aspect of these events is their demonstration of the depth of genuine commitment that springs from the deep well of Union's past and flows through the current student body. The waters of this well carry the bitter aftertaste of Union's flaws and failures, as well as the cool refreshment of real discipleship in the painful process of bringing forth God's reign on earth. In Romans 8, Paul describes the groaning of creation as it longs to give birth to the sons [and daughters] of God. It is a privilege to be a part of those labor pains here at Union and the hope that they signify.

The primary obstacle to justice movements within the context of an institution, particularly one whose ethos and reputation are built on justice advocacy, is the difficulty in perceiving and facing our own shortcomings. Justice cannot be an aspirational goal of the oppressor. It must become the lived experience of the oppressed. The difficulty is that no one wants to claim the role of oppressor. We would rather claim our intentions and desires as explanation for the gaps in others' perceptions of injustice. And yet, where there is oppression, there is a force for that oppression. Union will need to continue in self-reflection to create greater alignment between the aspirational goal of justice and the reality of justice as a part of our identity.

As Union struggles with its own identity, so the Church is struggling. We, the body of Christ, face the same dilemma: we want to point to all our good efforts, our hard work, and our best intentions. These are very real and meaningful. However, if we wish to move forward and remain relevant—that is, continue to be of service to God and God's children—we must also be honest with ourselves about our shortcomings and look for new ways to serve.

Every program, every prayer, every liturgy should be viewed from the perspective of those whom Jesus came to serve: the poor, the prisoner, the forgotten by society, the hungry. We need to relocate ourselves with relation to one another, which may mean a painful dislocation as a starting point. But God will provide the healing and reconciling power so long as we seek to do God's will.

In America today, sources of "optimism" are failing people. This is the perfect opportunity for the church! What the church has to offer is not a superficial optimism, but real hope: hope that is not based on what we see in front of our faces, but hope that sees the world through God's eyes, as worth living and dying for. Jesus doesn't call us to the upwardly mobile climb. Jesus calls us to reach out to one another and experience the abundance God has already provided.

I have seen the groundswell of awareness about the need for justice run through Union's campus and out onto the streets of New York. Occupy chaplains' groups, advocates for the homeless, networks for the prevention of intimate violence and human trafficking, environmental and anti-war activism, are all alive here at Union. The real presence of injustice that touches too many

lives and is communicated with lightening speed through digital media is giving rise to responses from the faith community, and there is evidence that the world is listening.

As I go out into the field of ministry, I carry with me that hope. God is leading us still. God knows our shortcomings and anticipates our needs. I know that opportunities to minister in congregations are fewer, but God's love is just as great as ever, and the work of mission has never been more sorely needed. It will take a lot of listening. We need to listen to the earth, to those whom the church is called to serve; we need to listen to each other in love.

It has been exciting to see the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) cropping up in nearly every place where I have been involved with justice issues. Whether it is at the UN Commission on the Status of Women, discussing Rural Women's experience of poverty, domestic violence, and human trafficking; or at the site of disasters like the tornados in Kentucky; or working for the Living Wage campaign or at Occupy events in New York City, the Church is where it needs to be—in solidarity with those seeking justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. May it continue to be so.