

Urban Promise Case Study Report and Reflection

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This paper recalls an incident that took place during my field education placement last summer at Urban Promise regarding the harmful affects of environmental discrimination on the impoverished citizens of South Camden and its practical, daily implications. The structure of the paper will begin with a brief overview of Urban Promise and my association with it. Then, the proceeding outline of the paper will follow Professor Richard Osmer's "Four core tasks of practical theological interpretation: the descriptive-empirical task, the interpretive task, the normative task, and the pragmatic task."¹ A brief exposition of each task will accompany its application to the case study. Last, a brief response of my personal and professional growing points from this case study will be given.

Urban Promise (UP) is a non-profit, faith-based organization seeking to be an agent of transformation in the lives of at-risk children and adolescents in Camden, NJ, as noted in their mission statement: "To equip Camden's children and young adults with the skills necessary for academic achievement, life management, spiritual growth, and Christian leadership."² Urban Promise began as a summer day camp in 1988 sponsored by the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education (EAPE), a non-profit organization commenced by Tony Campolo. At the time, several 'white' churches either relocated out of the city or closed due to economic hardships primarily caused by federal outsourcing of significant manufacturers. This combined with growing economic depression and subsequent rising crime caused a socio-economic phenomenon deemed

¹ Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2008), 4

² Information retrieved from www.urbanpromiseusa.org on 8 December 2009

the “white-flight,” which reduced a significant economic and socio-political base from the city.

The roots of Urban Promise began growing in the basement of a fledgling Baptist church. Presently, UP extends domestically to Wilmington and internationally to Vancouver, Toronto, Malawi, and Honduras, each a self-sufficient, self-governing entity overseen by an international board of directors. The UP Camden budget alone exceeds over three million dollars annually and directly serves over 500 children per year. The far-reaching extent of UP cannot be fathomed. In the last two years, especially, major news channels and journalists, such as ABC’s “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” and “20/20,” have documented the impact of UP upon its community and children. Its educational emphasis and steadfastness to the Gospel bears witness to the fullness of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in a land seemingly ruled by the powers and principalities of this world.

The incident in question occurred during my 2008 summer field education internship. I served as the UP Workgroup Program coordinator. The UP Workgroup Program hosts short-term mission volunteers from around the world, namely North America, to serve one-week commitments. This fulfills two objectives: one, to expose others to the economic, social, political, and spiritual depression of the city, as well as to the subsequent plight of its people; and, two, to most effectively appropriate funds toward meaningful tasks directly impacting the lives of children and young adults, workgroups provide free and cost-effective labor. The tasks of my position were threefold: liaison, facilitator, and chaplain. First, my role functioned as a liaison to the workgroup volunteers on several levels. On the most basic level, I introduced the volunteers to Urban

Promise, then to the people living in the city, and finally, to the issues concerning it. Second, I facilitated discussions and relationships between the workgroups and the people living in the city through the following mediums: panel discussions with UP kids and staff, small group discussions, and creative expression. Last, my role served as a chaplain. Toward the end of the week, many volunteers began to ask serious questions of God, the Gospel, and the Church. This created opportunities to address questions pertaining to the nature and essence of the church (ecclesiology), the theological predicament of those living in poverty and destitution (liberation theology), the problem of evil (theodicy), and the seeming reality of powers and principalities seemingly wielding illusory dominion over people and structures within the city.

The first practical theological task to be examined is the descriptive-empirical. It asks the question, what is going on? Osmer states that it gathers “information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations, or contexts.”³ Thus, this section will discuss the basic facts of the critical incident report beginning with a brief description of its location.

The incident occurred at Camp Peace, one of several Day Camp sites sponsored by UP. It is situated in South Camden, the city’s most depressed neighborhood, less than 300 yards away from the South Jersey Regional Sewage Treatment Plant. The facility services the townships surrounding Camden, including the city itself, and it receives more than one million tons of raw sewage everyday. In recent years, due to city and state budget cuts, the plant can no longer adequately process all of the sewage that it typically receives in a day, so “holding tanks” store any unprocessed raw sewage until its due

³ Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2008), 4

process. Frequently on hot, humid summer afternoons, the stench from the Sewage Treatment Plant – emanating mostly from the holding tanks – wafts in the direction of the neighborhoods surrounding the facility, including Camp Peace.

The odor is nearly indescribable. It affects the entire health of the mind and body; symptoms associated with the odor: stomachaches, headaches, vomiting, and nausea, along with attention deficit, aggression, and anger. It disrupts the daily life for many South Camden residents, namely the children and their families.

The hour had come that day for me to visit the workgroup assigned to serve at Camp Peace for the week. Within six blocks of the camp, I could begin to smell the all too familiar odor of the regional sewage plant. Regrettably, it had become a tolerated staple of South Camden. People grew accustomed to expect it. On this day, however, the odor was particularly pungent. Given the high humidity, walking outside felt like wading through a dirty toilet. I entered the building, and I immediately noticed that all of the kids, leaders, and workgroup volunteers seemed lethargic and disgruntled. The collective demeanor of the once jovial and lively camp had radically changed. I sought out the director of the camp, and before I had a chance to ask him the obvious question, he said to me, “We’re dying here.” He continued to tell me that the kids had been erratic, coughing phlegm, and at times, a bit loopy. Additionally, he and the other camp leaders suffered from chronic coughing fits, spitting up dark phlegm, and frequent respiratory infections.

Following my conversation with the camp director, I sought out the leader of the assigned workgroup to ensure their health and safety. I learned that many of the student volunteers and adult leaders had been complaining of stomachaches and headaches. I

asked them if they wanted to leave, but their leader spoke on behalf of the group saying, “If these kids cannot leave, then neither can we.” I commended them for their boldness, which encouraged me to stay, as well. We tried hard to play with the children, hoping to distract their young minds and bodies from the odor. Instead, the children put their noses in their shirts, sat down, and rested, for the intensity of the odor made it too difficult for them to run and play. In fact, I even began to feel nauseated and achy. I sat with the kids a little while longer, but after an hour of inhaling the ubiquitous stench, I became so nauseated that I sprinted for the restroom thinking that I might vomit. My heart raced, and my head spun. Until that day, I had not known the *true essence* of the ill-famed “South Camden Odor.” I had not witnessed its awful affects upon the residents and workers of South Camden. For the first time in my life, I realized both the affects of environmental discrimination and the disparity that exists between the ‘rich’ and the ‘poor.’

Upon returning to UP, I entered my Supervisor’s office, and I asked him if he had ever smelled the intense odor of the South Camden sewage plant. He said that he had, but after sharing with him my experience from that afternoon, he looked at me with utter shock and disbelief. He admitted to me that he had never experienced anything like I had described. Before long, his shock morphed into anger, and my emotions quickly followed suit.

We decided to pursue answers. How could the City of Camden, State of New Jersey, and more generally, fellow human beings, allow such a travesty of oppression to exist? We attempted to contact the sewage treatment plant, the City of Camden, and the DEP, but all to no avail. Finally, the secretary from Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church

– located directly across the street from Camp Peace and involved in advocating on behalf of those living in poverty in South Camden – provided us with some direction. We asked her about the odor and its history. She replied, “When things get bad, we call a lovely young gentleman at the plant, and he tells us that he will take care of it.” We then asked if the odor recedes after contacting this man, and she admitted that it does not.

Together my supervisor and I conducted research into the issue, and we learned that many of the children and adolescents living in South Camden grow up developing acute respiratory infections, asthma, chronic bronchitis, and varying lung cancers that far surpass the national average, even those of other comparable urban centers. My supervisor subsequently toured of the sewage facility a couple of months later. The plant manager seemed very open and willing to answer his questions. He admitted responsibility for the odor, but he confessed that only so much could be done right now. Questions still loom for me over the definition of that statement. Several civil law suits have been filed, but all of them are submerged under bureaucratic paperwork, which may require years of litigation before taken to court. Presently, none of the lawsuits have a scheduled hearing, and the City of Camden still has not returned our phone call.

My internship concluded a month later, and the odor still remains.

One must consider the question, why is this going on? It refers to the second practical theological task: interpretive. Osmer states that the function of this task draws “on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring.”⁴ Such dynamics involve knowledge of the systemic issues related to this matter, such as environmental discrimination and post-industrialism, as

⁴ Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2008), 4

well as poverty, homelessness, and poor economic standing, each contributing to uninsured patients, malnutrition, and insufficient health care; thus, requiring inquiry into the sociological and economic factors of the city. Competency in knowledge of these issues also requires research on the medical effects of harmful airborne toxins on the human brain and body.

The 2000 US Census Bureau offers a wealth of information pertaining to pertinent sociological and economic data. The age demographic of Camden is startling. It is known as the “City of Children.” Nearly half of its population (46.5%, based on a 100% scale) is 24 years old or younger, and over a third (34.6%) is 18 years old or younger, whereas less than one quarter (24.8%) of New Jersey residents are under the age of 18. Only 7.6% of the population comprises people over the age of 65, half that of the rest of NJ (13.2%).⁵

Several interpretations can be drawn; two of which will be examined. First, the city lacks stable adult presence. The vast majority of literature on the subject of adolescence and emerging adulthood describes this period as volatile and unstable. Jean Piaget contends that the human capacity for intellectual growth does not fully develop until late adolescence, and in some cases for males, early adulthood; the period of formal operations climaxes for both genders during the twenties. According to Piaget, then, nearly half of the population of Camden functions below formal operation, which *Child Development* describes: “Thought becomes more abstract, incorporating principles of formal logic. The ability to generate abstract propositions, multiple hypotheses and their

⁵ Information retrieved from http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/OTTable?_bm=y&-qr_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_DP1&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U&-lang=en&-geo_id=16000US3410000 on 10 December 2009

possible outcomes is evident.”⁶ Functioning on this level necessitates stability.

Adolescents need a safe home environment and a resourceful education. A stable family counters the turbulence of adolescence, but few children in Camden live within these standards. Many students do not acquire the tools necessary for achieving formal operational thought. This accounts for a socio-educational phenomenon known as the “Brain Drain,” as Bruce Main states. The census reports that only 51% of Camden citizens 25 years or older have received a high school diploma or its equivalent, while only 5.4% have earned a Bachelor’s Degree.⁷ A deficiency of education leads to unsatisfactory critical thought development and poor judgment, which may contribute to conflict and crime.

Second, the city lacks adult supervision and mentorship, especially from males. Many children grow up without a father or male role present in the household. The census reports that one quarter (26.1%) of total households in Camden consist of married couples, and less than half of them have children, resulting in more than eighty percent of children growing up without at least one parent present in the household.⁸ Elizabeth Marquardt explores the implications of divorce on children through differentiating between low- and high-conflict divorces. Low-conflict divorce occurs when a couple amicably decides to end their marriage because they are unfulfilled, unhappy, or have some other problem not seriously threatening the life of the couple or child. Conversely, high-conflict divorce results from either abuse or other potentially life-threatening

⁶ Information retrieved from <http://www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/development/piaget.shtml> on 10 December 2009

⁷ Information retrieved from http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/OTTable?_bm=y&-qr_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_DP1&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U&-lang=en&-geo_id=16000US3410000 on 10 December 2009

⁸ Ibid

situation. In these occurrences, children fare better *during* the divorce because either the child understands it to be beneficial or it removes the child from impending harm altogether, but the trauma of the event significantly threatens the long-term emotional well-being of the child, causing Post-Traumatic Stress or other serious psychological disorders in the years following.⁹

The economic statistics received by the census bureau reveal disturbing insights into the reality of poverty in Camden. Over one third (35.5%) of Camden residents live below the poverty line compared with one in twelve (8.5%) of New Jersey residents—four times greater than the state average. Moreover, the median household income of Camden residents totals \$23,421 compared with the median income of New Jersey residents amounting to \$55,146, nearly twice as much as Camden residents. Perhaps surprisingly, 46.1% of Camden residents own their home, but the median value of owner-occupied housing units only amounts to \$40,700 compared with the median price of \$170,800 for New Jersey residents.¹⁰ Thus determining that though many Camden residents own a home, the worth of the building and its lot amounts to negligible equity in the overall scheme of the housing market. In fact, many Camden residents live in dilapidated row-homes left over from the industrial boom of the early twentieth century, depicting visible scars of post-industrialization.

The US census data also reveals unsettling insight into the racial demographics of those considered living in low socio-economic status. Of the 79,904 residents reportedly living in Camden proper, 96.1% claim affiliation to one race, 83.2% consider themselves

⁹ Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds*, (NY: Three Rivers Press, 2005), 13-16

¹⁰ Information retrieved from http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/QTTable?_bm=y&-qr_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_DP1&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U&-lang=en&-geo_id=16000US3410000 on 10 December 2009

non-white, and the Black/African American group composes the largest racial group (53.3%). In South Camden, however, the sociological and economic statistics slightly differ. 85.4% of the population is non-white, while the Black/African American racial group constitutes 57.8%. In addition, the median household income lowers for South Camden residents to \$22,417, a full one thousand dollars less than those living in the rest of the city.¹¹ These statistics bear witness to the inextricable linkage between non-white races and poverty.

The affects of poverty, however, extend beyond acquiring money or possessions. A recent study conducted on the qualitative assessment of stressors in South Camden revealed that low socioeconomic status is “associated with many elements that can adversely impact human health. These include inadequate or nonexistent health care; urban blight; poor health and nutritional status; low education level; pesticide exposures; the lack of information on risk from exposure to environmental contamination; and how risk-promoting lifestyles and behavior effect health.”¹² Moreover, children growing up in South Camden experience “a greater level of socio- emotional problems (that is, multiple physical problems, from factors such as inadequate housing, noise, crowding) and psychosocial problems (family turmoil, early childhood separation, community violence) than their middle-class counterparts.”¹³ People living in poverty endure much greater hardships and obstacles obtaining simple quality of life measures than other higher class members of society. The study conducted several community outreach meetings to hear

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Information retrieved from http://www.columbia.edu/~tsn2102/web-pages/statistical_analysis.html on 10 December 2009

¹³ Ibid

directly from South Camden residents. It learned, “Camden Waterfront South residents often complained that they did not have any medical clinics in the immediate neighborhood. They also mentioned that other barriers to obtaining proper health care include having to take public transportation and making appointments.”¹⁴ Neighborhood clinics should not be considered a luxury. Rather, they should be fixed points in all communities, especially those whose residents are unable to afford adequate healthcare.

The poverty-stricken, minority population of South Camden endures the most threatening medical effects from the airborne toxins emitted by the surrounding factories and plants. A recent study highlighted census data to draw a correlation between low-income communities and high-risk air pollution. The study concluded, “lower poverty levels in minority communities often translates into higher risks of pollution-related diseases and a greater lack of healthcare.”¹⁵ The study also concluded that every company charged with emitting Hazardous Air Pollutants (HAP) is located in South Camden, each within a half a mile from the neighborhoods surrounding Camp Peace. In South Camden, the EPA estimates that residents suffer from air pollution over 700 times the legal limit. The pollution affects the lungs, which can irritate the respiratory and circulatory systems, causing “coughing and feeling irritation in the throat and/or uncomfortable sensation in the chest.”¹⁶ It restricts oxygen to the brain, which causes impaired judgment, attention deficit, and general destruction of bodily tissue. The chemicals comprising South Camden smog include Arsenic, Cadmium, and Nickel, each cancerous carcinogens and constituting the majority of toxic chemicals found in the air. Furthermore, an additional

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

31 chemicals, each harmful and some cancerous, emitted by Camden factories also have been identified in the South Camden air; more egregious evidence attesting to society's sub-human perspective on poverty.

The third practical theological task involves examining the question, "What ought to be going on," referring to the normative task.¹⁷ Osmer states that the normative task involves "using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from 'good practice.'"¹⁸ What is going on in Camden is far from what ought to be going on. The systemic issues previously discussed in the aforementioned sections portray the *illusory* rule of the powers and principalities of the world holding sway over the city and its people. Theologian N.T. Wright notes that even in a world marked by postmodernity, an age uplifting the ability for one to use rationality and reason, society still defers to 'powers' and 'principalities' acting cruelly upon the world. He says, "Who runs our world? The politicians? Forget it. They profess themselves helpless; they are the victims of 'forces' beyond their control."¹⁹ Certainly, one reads facetiousness in Wright's tone, yet his thesis proves true. Powers and principalities still seem to exist, though only under the mask of delusion, for in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God conquered the power of their rule.

Marva Dawn begins her exposition into this subject with an inquiry into naming the powers. She orders several biblical references in an attempt to build an argument that coincides with the overarching drama of Scripture: creation, fall, exile, redemption, and

¹⁷ Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2008), 4

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 15

reconciliation. She contends that the powers follow the same cycle of creation as the rest of the world. Her first point argues, “The powers are created for good.”²⁰ This point refers to Colossians 1:16 and notes that God created the powers in the goodness of God’s creation. They do not co-exist alongside God nor wield authority and might in the same way as God. When powers and principalities seem to rule over the creation of God, they do so because of sin, disguising their acts as God’s. Dawn states, “As part of the fallen creation, the powers share in its brokenness, participate in its destructions, overstep their proper bounds, and groan for release.”²¹ In reference to Romans 8:19-22, like all of creation, the powers of this world long for redemption from sin and reconciliation with God. Dawn furthers her argument, saying: (the first two passages have already been mentioned: Colossians 1:16 and Romans 8:19-22, respectively)

“*Romans 8:38-39* – No matter how strong, the powers cannot separate us from God’s love for us in Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:25-26 – Death is one of the cosmic enemies to be subjected to Christ²²

Colossians 2:13b-15 – Christ disarmed the powers, exposed them, and triumphed over them.

1 Peter 3:22 – Powers and authorities are made subject to Christ.

1 Corinthians 2:8 – The other side of the dialectic is given here: that earthly rulers (principalities) crucified the Lord of glory. This text also underscores the power’

²⁰ Marva Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 6

²¹ Ibid 4

²² To which I will also add disease and sickness leading to death, although these implications are inherent within the connotation of ‘death.’

functioning in religious, as well, as political spheres. This alerts us to the disturbing fact that *churches* today can similarly be principalities for evil instead of good.

Ephesians 6:10-20 – We must stand against the powers and resist them by means of the armor of God.”²³

Dawn asserts a faithful description of the biblical witness for powers and principalities. Her New Testament summary expresses the heart of the matter. She states, “The invariable mentioning of the powers in a decisive place in all of the earliest formulations for faith must cause us to recognize the importance for the early Church of Christ’s victory over the powers.”²⁴ The present church stands in this long tradition. Perhaps the most important reference comes from Colossians 2:13b-15: “God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having *disarmed* the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, *triumphing* over them by the cross.”²⁵ Paul asserts that Christ removed the ‘regulations’ of the powers and principalities and nailed them to the cross, giving all of humanity freedom and abundant life. The powers and principalities have been disarmed. Their rule is no longer valid. The cross triumphed over them, and nullified any enjoyment of their dominion on Earth. Those who confess Christ crucified and resurrected must bear witness to a different reality than the one that others choose to believe; yet, one must

²³ Marva Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 7

²⁴ Ibid 7-8

²⁵ Colossians 2:13b-15 NIV, emphasis mine

discern what a faithful witness to Jesus Christ looks like in a world still living amidst illusory powers and principalities.

Given the biblical foundation that powers and principalities were once created by God as good but have been corrupted by sin, Romans 8:19-22 demonstrates why powers seem to continue to assert dominance over the world. It states,

“The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”²⁶

All of creation, including powers and principalities, cry out for the ‘glorious freedom’ found only in God. Yet, because sin will exist until the world is put back to right in the Parousia, creation – powers and principalities – will continue to overstep its bounds, rebel against God, and set itself in opposition to God. Sin instills within creation the compulsion to be godlike, which compels creation to dominate over itself and undermine God, the true and right ruler of creation.

Moreover, powers and principalities, according to 1 Corinthians 2:13b-15, extend beyond the corporations and nations of the world. They also include people, including the Christian community and its leaders, for they, too, incur the consequence of sin and long for final redemption, even though it knows the reconciliation of Christ. Certainly, the Christian community recognizes its place in between the inauguration of the Kingdom of

²⁶ Romans 8:19-22, NIV

God in the resurrection and the final reconciliation of the Parousia. The reconciliatory event of the cross and empty tomb initiated a new reality present for the entire world. The task of the Christian community is to witness to this truth. Yet, like all of creation, it falls short of accomplishing this task when it oversteps the bounds given to it by Jesus Christ. Sin compels the Christian community to become an institution that asserts power and dominance over its call to be an organic gathering of followers who assert an ethic of love and obedience to its humble Lord. Its leaders can become captivated by the illusion of wealth and notoriety. Its followers can succumb to the delusion that their gospel supersedes the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. These forces are not ethereal or abstract. Rather, they are the state of the fallen human condition. They derive from within, not from some devil prodding us to sin. The Good News of Jesus Christ, however, is that God redeemed us from the consequence of our condition. The mission of the Gospel is to proclaim this Good News in such a way that lives a life similar to Jesus Christ that directs others to this new reality.

The hope for a fallen people, a depraved power-hungry creation rebellious against its creator, is found in the weakness of its Savior. He does not advocate for cowardly Christians or followers who flee at the presence of injustice. Instead, he calls for a third way, as Thompson calls, “courageous and creative resistance.”²⁷ This way faithfully imitates the life of Jesus. The witness of Jesus Christ in the Gospels depicts a man ‘fighting’ against injustice through love, compassion, and forgiveness. He draws in the sand rather than casting the first stone. He uses creativity to ‘battle’ against the

²⁷ J. Milburn Thompson, *Justice and Peace: A Christian Primer*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 184

oppression of the powers and principalities. He ‘bears arms’ against injustice using means that uphold the dignity of both the oppressed *and* oppressor. Dawn states,

“In fact, God has more need of our weakness than our strength. Just as powers overstep their bounds and become gods, so our power becomes a rival to God. As the Psalms and Isaiah teach us, God’s way is not to take us out of tribulations, but to comfort us in the midst of them and to ‘exchange’ our strength in the face of them. By our union with Christ in the power of the Spirit in our weaknesses, we display God’s glory.”²⁸

In humility, God grants the Christian community strength out of weakness to become friends of the poor, oppressed, and powerful, for only through friendship can one be a witness to those who wield power against Christ. Even servants risk becoming lord-like. The notion of service can become idolatrous to the servant, if authority and strength becomes the end one seeks. Lupton states, “Servants are people who know the mysteries that can control those to whom they give ‘help.’ Friends, on the other hand, are free to give and receive help from each other.”²⁹ Christ calls us to humility through friendship in the same manner that he calls us friends. Thus, the Christian community must become friends to the poor.

The last practical theological task refers to the pragmatic, which answers the question, “How might we respond?”³⁰ Osmer states that the pragmatic task involves “determining strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable

²⁸ Marva Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 47

²⁹ Robert D. Lupton, *Compassion, Justice, and the Christian Life: Rethinking Ministry to the Poor*, (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2007), 67

³⁰ Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2008), 4

and entering into reflective conversation with the ‘talk back’ emerging when they are enacted.”³¹ The pragmatic task incorporates practical reflection from the responses of the three previous tasks.

First, the Church, the ecclesial community called into being by Christ, bears partial responsibility for the plight of the people of Camden. Though systemic issues such as environmental discrimination, poverty, ageism, and racism each have a role in the inhumane treatment toward Camden residents, the onus falls upon the church. It is a harsh indictment, but it is the responsibility to which Christ calls his followers. No one denies whom Jesus took under his care, sought, and healed. Scripture boldly confesses: the least of these. Upon Jesus’ resurrection, he constitutes all those who follow him to rise up, assume their cross, and go to the places he went, befriend those for whom he searched, and repent from selfishness so that others may live. This radical and extreme obedience to the call of Christ demands the Christian community to act in a manner that imitates the life of Jesus.

Often, the church operates under the fallacious illusion that the burden of Camden’s restoration falls upon the state and its governing body. Under this mindset, the church succumbs to the role of an unfaithful institutional principality. The state needs places like Camden to exist; it functions as a dumping ground that allows the rich to remain rich without the responsibility of sharing its wealth and resources. The wealthy exploit cities like Camden, sending their sewage, services, and criminals to such places. This typifies the intention of powers and principalities, each one existing for the sake of itself. Conversely, the Christian community exists for the sake of bearing faithful witness

³¹ Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2008), 4

to the risen Lord Jesus Christ in the world. It exists to be a light to the nations, not an extinguishing presence. It gathers the least of these, equips them to serve through providing for their real, basic needs, and sends them out into the world to do the same. The church must consider the needs of Camden and respond accordingly. If people are hungry, then the church must discern a way to feed them. If people need shelter, then the church must discern a way to house them. If people need clean air to breathe, then the church must discern a way to stand up against the powers of major corporation and government to speak on behalf of people whose God-given right mandates clean breathable air.

Second, the Christian community cannot act as the lone Savior, and UP occasionally acts as such. A situation of this magnitude and scope requires the full participation of every member of the Body of Christ. Though UP understands and strongly adheres to its mission within its proper bounds, it lacks in networking and building relationships with other churches and organizations faithfully serving Camden, resulting in over-worked, under-funded, and misappropriated resources. Urban Promise and organizations like it could do so much more if each shared its resources, connections, and relationships with one another. The body must work together, for the hand, though separate from the foot, cannot accomplish its task without it. The separateness of the body creates awkwardness and can result in failed endeavors. These actions also further splinter the Body of Christ. It lifts other communities up, while discouraging the faithful work of others. The lone Savior complex conveys that only this particular community rightly understands the Gospel and can meet the needs of a particular people. This

mentality alludes to the illusive nature of powers and principalities rather than the all-inclusive saving work of Jesus Christ.

The most significant *personal* aspect that I learned about myself through this process is my tendency to operate under the artificial guise of the Savior-complex. I adhere closely to a theology that emphasizes the call of Jesus Christ to urgently go into the world, proclaiming his Good News through radical, pious obedience and risk. Piety is not evil; rather, it must be combined with grace and mercy. I sometimes dissolve boundaries for the sake of others hearing the Gospel of Christ. I often fall under the false notion that I alone have the responsibility for proclamation, edification, and salvation. I was made aware of this tendency while living and working in Camden. I arrived thinking that I was going to save the city. About an hour into my internship, I discovered that I could only be a witness to the redemptive and salvific work of Christ within the larger scope of the Body. In fact, nothing happened on my own apart from the corporate Body – my friends and co-workers at UP. As I wrote this report, I revisited feelings that I experienced over two years ago, and in doing so, I relearned those lessons all over again. I still hold to a theology that emphasizes the call of Christ to urgently go into the world, proclaiming his Good News through radical, pious obedience and risk, for this corresponds to the mission of the Gospel set forth in Christ. Yet, I now know not to go about fulfilling this task alone; doing so bears an unfaithful witness to the community Christ set apart for service in his name.

The most significant *professional* aspect that I learned about myself is to be mindful of the looming danger of powers and principalities both outside *and* inside the church. Smelling the awful stench of the regional sewage treatment plant and watching

plumes of black smoke waft over playgrounds and basketball courts boldly shrieks, “Powers and principalities!” Not much discernment takes place before realizing that a grave injustice is being committed against innocent children and adolescents. Yet, interpreting the subtle actions of a member of the Body as toxic and destructive may not be as readily identifiable. Moreover, noticing those tendencies within myself, as a leader within the Christian community, can be even more difficult and complicated to recognize. Determining powers and principalities at work within the community and, especially, us requires both the trusted discernment of other wise members of the Body and prayerful guidance from the Holy Spirit. Prior to this assignment, I relegated powers and principalities to outside systems, governments, and corporate structures, but Dawn compelled me to think more “inside” the box. Sin infects all parts of life, including those within the church. Powers and principalities exist everywhere. May I learn to recognize when a power or principality attempts to co-opt the mission of the Gospel for destruction rather than life, not only within an institution, but within my own life.