

Emory University

**Doing the Pastoral Work of Well-Being with African-American, Male Collegians:
Identity, Context, Rage and Construction**

A final project submitted to the faculty of Candler School of Theology, in candidacy for the
degree of Doctor of Ministry

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by

Adam M. Roberts

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All young adults face particular academic, social and psychological challenges as they enter the college experience. For African-American men, the universal struggle for identity and belonging that the college years present is fraught with even more difficulty. They are immersed in a culture that disparages black manhood, and it is in this context that they discern ways to remain healthy and whole.¹ As a white, male Chaplain tasked with supporting all students on campus, a singular question surfaces regarding the care of African-American, male students: How can a white, male Chaplain bridge the gap of age, race and experience, and develop context-sensitive programming to support the well-being, and academic success of African-American male collegians?

Since beginning my work as Chaplain and Director of Spiritual Life at LaGrange College in 2014, I have taken particular notice of African-American, male students as they encounter not only the typical trials that come with leaving home to pursue a college education, but also as they face the harsh realities of racial prejudice, stereotyping, invisibility and identity loss at a predominantly white college. In the 2014-2015 academic year, African-American males had lower retention and four-year graduation rates than any other student demographic at LaGrange College.² My personal passion for racial justice and equality, and my deep research into the histories of both the city of LaGrange and LaGrange College have convinced me that the greatest leadership contribution I can make as an administrator is to create programming that will improve the well-being of African-American, male students.

¹ Talib Wright, "Counseling Black Men: The Thousand-Piece Puzzle," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 27, 2014, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Counseling-Black-Men-The/149577/>.

² National Survey of Student Engagement. LaGrange College, 2015. The African-American male demographic is also the lowest overall retained demographic at other small, private, religiously affiliated colleges in our comparison group.

As the white, male Chaplain of the college, I am privileged with office, authority, and ascribed cultural privilege. To leverage my position and resources to catalyze for a positive change, in the fall of 2016 I initiated a gathering of seven African-American male undergraduates and one respected African-American, male co-leader from the LaGrange College staff to engage in a series of five focused conversations about identity (who am I?), context (where am I?), emotion (what is rage?) and construction (what will we build here?). In order to foster trust and develop the rapport necessary to facilitate these conversations, it was vital for me to acknowledge my social location and my own privilege as a white male. According to Gary Gunderson, author of *Religion and the Health of the Public: Shifting the Paradigm*, appropriate self-disclosure is a form of “boundary leadership” that gains “participatory knowledge” by being transparent and vulnerable. Further, such leadership listens carefully to the stories shared by others.³ In these initial conversations the students were seen and heard by both the group leaders and one another. These first encounters made it possible to begin healing the destructive forces of invisibility and ostracism facing these African-American male students in a predominantly white setting.⁴ In addition to sharing our personal experiences, I provided the students with an unvarnished look at the realities of our context, the history and demography of LaGrange, Georgia, and LaGrange College. It is my belief that confronting these truths helped us see the surrounding injustice more clearly and created the ground of hope for more generative and constructive dialogue. Through these five sessions, the group evolved into what Gregory

³ Gary Gunderson, *Religion and the Health of the Public: Shifting the Paradigm*, 1st edition. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 122.

⁴ Gregory C. Ellison II, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013). My project takes this work as primary source and interlocutor, and is the theoretical underpinning for the five sessions of dialogue I have constructed. Ellison provides a framework of needs for young adult, African-American males: fearless dialogue, interrupting hope, miraculous solution and life-giving community of reliable others.

Ellison, author of *Cut Dead But Still Alive* calls a, “community of reliable others.”⁵ These five meetings generated action on campus as the students addressed the need for public acknowledgement of antebellum campus buildings constructed by slave labor and worked to establish a diversity and multicultural programming committee within the student government association. College campuses are not immune to the growing polarization of our culture that are often driven by identity politics. For this reason, the importance of practicing leadership across racial and cultural boundaries is critical to the work of campus spiritual life leaders (as well as secular student engagement staff) for the well-being of minority students (in this case African-American men) as well as their campus communities.

Project Theory and Session Details:

The project group of seven African-American male students, one African-American male LaGrange College staff member, and the author met together in five sessions, of three hours each, over a period of ten weeks. Two students were selected because of their status as seniors and campus leaders. The other five were chosen from nominations by these two seniors and other student engagement staff, based on perceived potential for leadership and academic capacity that they have not yet completely fulfilled.

At each session, a meal was served, and the men were given agency over meeting location and food choice. This seemingly small and even insignificant detail was important in its symbolism of the leaders’ respect for the students’ personal agency in this process and their own ability to determine whether and how they would take further steps together after these structured sessions ended.⁶ The format of group “teaching” and self-disclosure from the leaders, followed by facilitated discussion and sharing emerged from the work of James Pennebaker and his

⁵ Ibid., 170, kindle.

⁶ Ibid. 679, kindle.

assertion that a link exists between bodily health, spiritual and mental well-being and intentional self-disclosure, confiding and conversation. “High disclosure,” as Pennebaker calls it, allows those who have experienced traumatic events to find a framework of words to understand and express their feelings through confiding in others.⁷ He has also shown self-disclosure through writing to be equally effective for well-being.⁸

Session topics and their sequence were chosen by the author, and each of the five sessions opened with the author as teacher, serving to communicate the significance of that session’s topic. Topics were explored in the following sequence:

- Session 1, Identity: Who Am I?
- Sessions 2 & 3, Context: Where Am I?
- Session 4, Emotion: What is Rage?
- Session 5, Construction: What Will We Build?

These topics were selected for their particular importance in helping these young, African-American men find common ground with their white group leader, while also engaging them in a quest for self-understanding.

Topics one and two, “Identity,” and “Context,” are about doing the work of gaining orientation and clarity in the midst of the confusing and disorienting experience of invisibility and racial ostracism. According to social psychologist Kipling Williams, the mental distress of ostracism threatens the basic human need of belonging.⁹ For this reason, reflection on identity

⁷ James W. Pennebaker, *Opening up: The Healing Power of Confiding in Others*, 1st edition. (New York: WMorrow, 1990), 26.

⁸ James W. Pennebaker and Joshua M. Smyth, *Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain* (Guilford Publications, 2016), 8.

⁹ Kipling D. Williams, *Ostracism: The Power of Silence*, (New York: Guilford Press, 2001), 941, kindle. Williams outlines four fundamental human needs that are threatened by ostracism: control, self-esteem, meaningful existence and belonging. These needs are then brought forward and transformed by Ellison in *Cut Dead But Still Alive* as they apply to African-American young men.

and context are central to spiritual and personal formation that can help create belonging and counter these effects. Paulo Freire's concept of "conscientisation," is critical for helping an ostracized community understand themselves as worthy of community in the midst of oppression. Conscientisation has been defined as, "the process whereby people become aware of the political, socioeconomic and cultural contradictions that interact in a hegemonic way to diminish their lives".¹⁰ Topics one and two worked in tandem for the purpose of inviting these students to declare their own identities, while also acknowledging the inherent tension between these self-understandings and the images that our local and campus communities might project upon them as stereotypes of young, African-American men. Freire said that:

"One of the distinguishing traits of [humanity] is that only [humans] can stand off from the world and the reality of things around [them]. Only [humans] can stand at a distance from a thing and admire it. As they objectivise or admire a thing (admire is taken here in the philosophical sense of ad-miring, looking at), [humans] are able to act consciously on the objectivised reality. That, precisely, is the human praxis, [humanity's] action-reflection on the world, on reality. And yet, in their approach to the world, [humans] have a preliminary moment in which the world, the objective reality, doesn't yet come to them as a knowable object of their critical consciousness. In other words, in their spontaneous approach to the world, [humanity's] moral, basic attitude is not a critical, but an ingenuous one... To become aware, then, all it takes is to be a [human]. All it takes to be a [human] is to seize reality in the dialectical relations that flow between [human] and the

¹⁰ Margaret Ledwith, *Community Development: A Critical Approach*, 2nd edition. (Bristol, UK ; Portland, Or: Policy Press, 2011), 97.

world, the world and [human]; those relations are so intimate that we shouldn't really talk about [human] and the world, but just about [human], or perhaps [world-human¹¹.]

It is not simply enough, however, to realize an interaction with the world. This sequence of five sessions and any actions that flow from it must be grounded in both realization and practice, and this rooting begins in a deep, clear knowledge of self and the oppressive world as it is:

...Conscientisation goes deeper; it is the critical development of a “prise de conscience.” Hence, conscientisation implies going beyond the spontaneous phase of apprehension of reality to a critical phase, where reality becomes a knowable object, where [humanity] takes an epistemological stance and tries to know. Thus conscientisation is a probing of the ambience of reality. The more a person conscientises himself, the more [he or she] unveils reality and gets at the phenomenic essence of the object [he or she] stands in front of, to analyze it. For that same reason, conscientisation without a praxis, i.e. without action-reflection as two paired, dialecticised elements permanently constituting that special way of being the world (or transforming it) is peculiar to [humanity]¹².

The students were encouraged to “stand apart,” from their context and reflect critically upon both college and community. To this end, the work of the first two sessions focused closely on self-disclosure, self-identity as we currently understood ourselves, and deep learning about the history, sociology and current demography of the LaGrange College and LaGrange, Georgia communities. Declaring “this is who I am,” and “this is where I am” were key for dispelling the confusion and disorientation caused by ostracism and lack of belonging.

Session I: Identity (Who Am I?)

¹¹ Paulo Freire, “Conscientisation,” *Cross Currents* 24, no. 1 (1974): 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

We gathered for Session I at my home, a short walk from the LaGrange College campus. Later, some of the young men would tell me that they were nervous about being seen walking through my white, north-of-Broad-street neighborhood. We took turns making official introductions and shared what we hoped the group might mean for each of us. Since self-disclosure in Christian community is encouraged throughout scripture, one such scripture was the beginning place for our group in this first session. I asked a student to read Romans 12:15-16, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are” (NRSV). I explained that it was only fair and right for me to put down my “persona,” from the Greek for “mask,” and share my authentic self with them. I believe that such honesty, trust and vulnerability are the currency of authentic relationship. Such honest disclosure can build rapport and trust between a group and its members¹³. Would it be possible to build a sense of shared experience, when my own experience was so different than that of the group members? Would I risk too much by telling my own experiences of race from the point of view of oppressor? According to Brene Brown, failure to embrace public vulnerability is one of the biggest mistakes therapists, leaders and pastoral caregivers can make:

“Masks make us feel stronger even when we grow weary from dragging the extra weight around. The irony is that when we are standing across from someone who is hidden or shielded by masks and armor, we feel frustrated and disconnected. That’s the irony...vulnerability is the last thing I want you to see in me, but the first thing I look for in you. A leader must show up, take risks, and let themselves be seen.”¹⁴

¹³ Lynn Palmberg and Onas Scandrette, “Self-Disclosure in Biblical Perspective,” *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 5, no. 3 (1977): 6.

¹⁴ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2012), 116.

In Session I, I would unmask myself in the hope that the students would take that same risk and respect my authenticity and vulnerability.

And so, Session I began with my taking a huge risk and an extreme point of personal privilege to share why I feel called to this work, and why I think I can offer something to it, even as a white male. If members of this group were to possibly trust me as a caregiver, they would have to know that I would not silence them, and that I was aware of my own past and capacity for racial prejudice and insensitivity. In short, one question needed to be answered: “why me?” Why would a white man believe that he could convene a group like this one?

Once initial introductions were complete, I began my own story with a short description of James Cone’s classic work, *God of the Oppressed*. The book was challenging for me during my seminary experience, making clear the truth that even the most well-meaning and empathetic whites can never divest themselves of the privilege that comes attached to white skin. I shared with these young men that Cone even goes so far as to say that white people can never really be part of the civil rights movement, and that the best whites can hope to do is to “become black” by speaking out in such a way as to meet with severe oppression themselves. “White people must be made to realize that reconciliation is a costly experience. It is not holding hands and singing ‘Black and white together,’ and ‘We shall overcome.’ Reconciliation means death, and only those who are prepared to die in the struggle for freedom will experience new life with God”.¹⁵ I believe this is true, and right, and shared with the group my desire to continue experiencing this kind of death of the “old self” (Romans 6:22 NRSV).

In addition to reading scripture and exploring my transformative encounter with James Cone’s work, I told the stories of my childhood, and of my earliest memories of race. I

¹⁵ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Revised Edition (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 218.

recounted how my grandfather's world was skewed by the terrible Jim Crow teachings that he had absorbed, and I confessed how I wanted to do all that I could to make up for his legacy by creating a new one. I shared that as a follower of Jesus, this project is nothing less than a religious pursuit for me, a living out of my faith. Later, my co-facilitator, and students told me that my openness helped to break the taboo of racial conversation right from the start. The setting of my living room and my vulnerability as the only white person in the room seemed to go a long way toward at least inviting these men to the idea that I am being open and authentic.

As our conversation continued in the first session, I shared more of my experience and openly explored and re-evaluated my own racial identity formation for the purpose of modeling and encouraging the students' own, similar self-analysis. I include here a detailed sharing of this conversation as an example of the depth of radical self-disclosure I practiced as a boundary leader working across a cultural divide.

As a child growing up in the 1970's and 80's in West Tennessee, I witnessed many evil vestiges of the Jim Crow era South. Certainly, key role models sought to instill within me their accepted world view of white superiority and power. In his address given on the steps of the Montgomery, Alabama statehouse, after a five day march from Selma, Martin Luther King, Jr., described the way this evil mindset was intentionally introduced to poor, Southern whites:

It may be said of the Reconstruction era that the southern aristocracy took the world and gave the poor white man Jim Crow. He gave him Jim Crow. And when his wrinkled stomach cried out for the food that his empty pockets could not provide, he ate Jim Crow, a psychological bird that told him that no matter how bad off he was, at least he was a white man, better than the black man. And he ate Jim Crow. And when his undernourished children cried out for the

necessities that his low wages could not provide, he showed them the Jim Crow signs on the buses and in the stores, on the streets and in the public buildings. And his children, too, learned to feed upon Jim Crow, their last outpost of psychological oblivion.¹⁶

In the days of my youth, I, too, “ate Jim Crow,” and I was taught that I was better than black men and women. I am the child of poor, white, working class, West Tennessee cotton farmers and preachers. I have always been fascinated by the role of race in our society because of the cognitive dissonance I experienced in what I was taught as a child. In ways both implicit and explicit, I was encouraged to believe that my white skin was superior to black skin. At school, in my neighborhood and on my recreational sports teams, I encountered African-American adults and peers who shattered this teaching. I felt the weight of this contradiction when I listened to authority figures at home and at church teaching something I came to believe untrue, morally wrong and reprehensible. And yet, like every other white child in my community, I was forced to chew and sometimes swallow Jim Crow.

I even ate Jim Crow at church, where the teachings of Jesus and the “kingdom” of justice and grace were supposed to rule the day. Martin Luther King, Jr. also knew that white Christians had an appetite for Jim Crow:

They segregated southern money from the poor whites; they segregated southern mores from the rich whites; *they segregated southern churches from Christianity*; they segregated southern minds from honest thinking; and they segregated the Negro from everything. That’s what happened when the Negro and white masses of the South threatened to unite and build a great society: a society of justice

¹⁶ Martin Luther King Jr, *A Call to Conscience the Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Intellectual Properties Management, in association with Warner Books, 2001), 124.

where none would prey upon the weakness of others; a society of plenty where greed and poverty would be done away; a society of brotherhood where every man would respect the dignity and worth of human personality [emphasis added]¹⁷

Although Jim Crow did separate many of my childhood church experiences from Christianity, the powerful voice of Jesus in the gospels could not be silenced. I did not lose the message of Jesus at church, but in fact must say that somehow I actually found him there. But, why was his message in such conflict with the people who taught me and their ways of thinking about people of a different race?

As I have now grown well into my adulthood and ministry career, I have found myself less able to give quiet acceptance to the subtle, and sometimes intentional, ways that racist attitudes and beliefs are taught, approved of, and reinforced within white faith communities. I was raised, in part, by my church-going grandparents who were socialized in the South, during the great depression. Although they are still heroes in my mind, in so many ways, I remain acutely aware of the terrible Achilles' heel of racism that plagued their otherwise exemplary Christian morality.

Nothing in my grandparents' faith formation or religious experience called into question their belief that whites were always superior to blacks, and that such an order had been established by God. In fact, many of the very church leaders they looked to reinforced this belief. In a 1924 debate over what role African-Americans might play in a reunified Methodist Episcopal Church, southern Bishop Edwin Dubose Mouzon typified this kind of thinking: "It is God Almighty who has drawn the color line himself, in indelible ink, and for all time."¹⁸ In similar fashion, my

¹⁷ Ibid, 125.

¹⁸ "MH-1980-April-Mariner.pdf," accessed March 12, 2017, <http://archives.gcah.org/pdfpreview/bitstream/handle/10516/5030/MH-1980-April-Mariner.pdf?sequence=1>.

grandparents were able to place the “fault” of racism on God and not themselves. White superiority was simply the natural order that He Himself had decreed.

My grandparents even considered themselves kind and progressive because my grandfather would build homes for African-American families and church facilities for African-American congregations, even when other white builders refused. Even so, he seemed to have no second thoughts in referring to these projects as the “N--- house,” or “N--- church.” In working through my ancestry, I discovered that his grandfather, my paternal great-great grandfather, was listed in the 1860 census as an “overseer.” These good people, my dear grandparents, were infected by fear, racism and self-justification. Like so many millions of others throughout the Jim Crow era south, they allowed these cultural mores to normalize their hateful words and actions.

The cotton field culture of my ancestral, west Tennessee homeland shares a common history with my present home of LaGrange, Georgia. In places LaGrange, Georgia, this violent, oppressive past is not completely gone from us, as fear still permeates through hearts and minds of racially divided communities. After sharing my story, I asked the group to join me as I prayed for healing in my life and gave thanks to God for people who would hear my story. I invited others in the group to introduce themselves.

My co-leader was “Rick,” Head Athletic Trainer and NCAA Athletic Compliance Officer for the College.¹⁹ We have become good friends, and he helped give leadership to a community mapping project during my Doctor of Ministry course work in the spring of 2015. The work of this mapping team helped set the direction for this stage of the project. As the head of athletic training, Rick comes into contact with almost all of LaGrange College’s varsity athletes, and is

¹⁹ All names used herein are pseudonyms for the protection of personal identities.

one of the most respected African-American men on campus. He is a fellow United Methodist who attends Warren Temple UMC in LaGrange, and has many connections in the community. He has lived in LaGrange since coming to work at the College 14 years ago.

The group counted two seniors, “Chris and Will.” They are heavily involved in campus leadership and have had excellent student experiences at LaGrange College. Chris has a charming personality and generally seems to get along with everyone. He is from Albany, Georgia, soft spoken but deeply admired and respected in the group. Chris holds the office of Student Government President. He has anticipates working with the Department of Public Health in Troup County after graduation. Chris is engaged to a local woman, and LaGrange College alumna and they plan to stay in LaGrange long-term.

Will is from Birmingham, Alabama, and serves as President of the Black Student Union. He is a Political Science major who is both outspoken and politically active in local campaigns. Rep. John Lewis serves as one of his great heroes and provides a role model for this young man with political aspirations. Will plans to go on to law school after graduation from LaGrange College.

“Julian,” is a Junior who came to LaGrange to play football. He no longer plays, but has remained at the school. He originates from Southwest Atlanta, and his clothing choices and musical tastes range from hip hop to country. Known as “DJ OJ,” he loves to deejay parties and often performs publicly with another student who is an aspiring rapper. “OJ,” may be seen on campus in Jordans or cowboy boots, and seems equally comfortable in each. He drives a pickup truck, and joined a predominantly white campus fraternity (all LaGrange College fraternities are predominantly white as there are no historically African-American fraternities on campus). He is outspoken about justice issues on social media but I have never heard him speak out on campus.

For me, it has been important to call him “Julian,” and let him be himself in our relationship, not one of the roles he chooses to play on campus.²⁰

“Jamie,” is an amazingly polite, patient, empathetic and thoughtful sophomore. He is also heavily involved in a predominantly white fraternity on campus and has been a boundary crosser in that way. He is from Griffin, Georgia, and says that LaGrange reminds him a lot of his hometown experiences. He is a biology major who wants to go to medical school and eventually practice in pediatrics.

“Kevin,” is a sophomore from Savannah, Georgia and plays on our junior varsity men’s basketball team. He was in the section of “Cornerstone,” our freshman orientation course that I taught in the fall of 2015, and I got to know him well while serving as his first year advisor. Kevin was very quiet and reserved at first, but has really opened up to me and counts me among his mentors. He is struggling academically and has not socialized much beyond basketball. He has just changed majors from Exercise Science to Education and this semester may be a pivotal one for him as his grades determine whether he will be allowed to continue basketball in the varsity program next fall. Kevin was recruited to play high school basketball at an almost all white private high school, but has seen engaging the white population at LaGrange College as “not really worth it.”

“Brandon,” is a freshman from the poorest area of LaGrange. He is a man of deep faith and has expressed a call to ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church. I was assigned as his candidacy mentor by the LaGrange District of the UMC even before he enrolled in LaGrange as a student. He is a non-traditional student, in that he is a 23 year old sophomore, just got married, and is less than full-time in our evening college program. He is a man doing many different

²⁰ Gregory C. Ellison II, *Cut Dead but Still Alive*, 1553 Kindle.

things. He currently serves a small United Methodist church as a student pastor, works in a men's clothing store, and works weekends at a residential program for troubled youth.

Brandon's role in the group has been important as a local voice that can help bridge the gap between The Hill and the community south of Vernon Street.

"Rod," is a freshman from rural, largely white, Hartwell, Georgia. He is quick to point out that he is of mixed race, his mother being African-American and his father being Mexican. He calls himself "Blaxican" and always looks for the big laughs that follow that line. He was a standout high school quarterback and came to campus looking to be the star. He has a huge personality and is very popular. College football has been a wake-up call for him as he struggled to secure playing time as a freshman and did not take any varsity snaps at quarterback this season. He has been the most vocal critic of the black community of LaGrange and tends to say that "racism is there, but you just have to get over it and do your best and know that people will accept you." He, too, has pledged a majority white fraternity.

Section II: Context (Where Am I?)

The events and people who have gone before us continue to shape the realities that we encounter today. Many whites struggle with the immediate discomfort that comes with any discussions of race. Intimations that racism drives much of our collective past and shapes our present are often met with resistance and even hostility. It is important that the young, African-American men involved with this project's work could look fearlessly at the fear and rage inducing realities of race, poverty and privilege of their own campus and the city that produced it. LaGrange College has been beneficiary of the city's history of slavery, Jim Crow oppression and textile mill profiteering. It is my belief that our small town's history of oppression, income inequality and textile mill villages has bathed both local residents and LaGrange College in a

culture of paternalism that extends from slavery through the massive income inequality seen today.²¹ Just as wealthy planters “cared,” for their slaves, mill owners controlled the capital and “provided” for their workers. LaGrange College must be vigilant that outside forces do not continue to “provide” and “decided what is best for us” as an institution, and we must not undermine the agency of our own students in similar fashion. In Session 2, I acted as teacher, sharing the following history and modern demography of LaGrange, Georgia with the project group.

LaGrange, Georgia, is a city of borders and boundaries, located about an hour’s drive southwest of Atlanta. The city’s physical and psychological borders are formed on the east and south by I-85 as it continues toward Auburn, Alabama. The western and northern edges of LaGrange touch the many fingers of West Point Lake, created in the 1970’s by the damming of the Chattahoochee River.

LaGrange College is located in the city’s downtown “historic district,” with the campus serving as both a geographic and metaphoric city center. The college provides a boundary zone between the affluent, white communities north and northwest of Broad Street, and the predominantly African-American, working class communities found south of Vernon Street.²² The architecture of the campus, its colloquial name (the Hill) and the topography (the campus sits on the highest site in the city, rising up over the rest of downtown), all work to distinguish the college as physically separate and literally “above” the immediately surrounding area. South of Vernon Street lies a portion of LaGrange that was developed in the first half of the 20th

²¹ “Textile Mill Villages, Evolution of,” accessed April 18, 2017, <http://www.ncpedia.org/textiles/mill-villages>.

²² A LaGrange, Georgia “community resource map” was produced by the author as research for DM 711 and may be accessed at the following link “Google Maps,” *Google Maps*, accessed March 13, 2017, https://www.google.com/maps/@33.3138386,-85.0101469,10z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!6m1!1s1gY2tztmFTL9LF17K9RjI3_L3wBg.

century as a series of textile mill villages. The last mills closed about forty years ago, and now these neighborhoods are populated largely by African-Americans who live at or below the poverty line. The campus continues south down the newly named, “Panther Way.” For many decades, this street was named “Nathan Bedford Forrest Avenue,” in honor of the confederate general and early supporter of the Ku Klux Klan who perpetrated the mass execution of African-American, Union soldiers at Fort Pillow, Tennessee.²³ The site of this egregious massacre is now situated within a state park that also carries his name, and is located within a short drive of my childhood home in West Tennessee. Honoring Nathan Bedford Forrest with a street name speaks to the historic strength of LaGrange’s white power structure and sent an explicit message of hostility to the city’s African-American citizens. Just a few months ago, our City Council voted unanimously to change the street’s name to Panther Way, a celebration of our school mascot, at the College’s request.²⁴ Though small and symbolic, this change was received without pushback from white LaGrange citizens, and may be taken a sign of changing attitudes and racial progress.

While the work of trust building and racial reconciliation is being done today, the daily realities of life in LaGrange, Georgia betray the truth that the antebellum world is still with us in ways both tangible (buildings) and invisible (thoughts, attitudes and world view). The founding story of LaGrange, Georgia is one of boundary trespass, and is inseparable from the suffering and bloodshed of both native and enslaved peoples. As is true throughout the American South, our town’s story is not unique, but shares a history of white oppression and violence. By 1825, the Creek Indians had been pushed west out of the Georgia frontier and into Alabama and

²³ Will Hickox, “Remember Fort Pillow!,” *Opinionator*, 1397260833, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/04/11/remember-fort-pillow/>.

²⁴ Alicia B. Hill, “College Seeks New Road Name,” accessed March 13, 2017, <http://www.lagrangenews.com/2016/09/28/college-seeks-new-road-name/>.

beyond.²⁵ During the 1830's, the "Indian Removal Act" would see the Creeks forced onto the "trail of tears" along a path of disease and death, all the way into present day Oklahoma.

Georgia's Governor George Troup (for whom Troup County is named) organized these former Creek lands into counties and opened the areas for settlement by whites and their slaves in 1825. Immediately, capitalists with the means to invest in cotton farms began to pour into the area from the east.²⁶ As the cotton gin became more widespread, western, virgin lands like Troup County, Georgia, became highly desirable for cotton propagation. With this increased cotton production, the population of enslaved Africans as a labor force swelled.

According to the 1860 U.S. Census, just 35 years after Troup County was opened for settlement, it was home to 19,000 people. 9,000 of those people were whites, and 10,000 were African slaves, working the cotton crops and serving in the large homes that were rapidly being constructed. By 1860, 30 white, wealthy, Troup County planter families owned over 3,000 slaves, nearly 1/3 of the entire slave population. Another approximate 700 white families owned 10 or fewer slaves, and about 1/3 of the white population did not own any slaves at all. These poor whites worked on small, family, subsistence farms of 30 acre land lottery plots without the labor of slaves. However, that did not mean that these poor whites opposed slavery, they were simply too poor to own slaves.²⁷ The racial demographics of LaGrange, Georgia, have changed remarkably little in the past 150 years with African-Americans still constituting the majority group. 2012 census data showed that Troup County was 49% African American and 47% white, a near perfect parallel to the final census before the Civil War. Today, African-American

²⁵ Forrest Clark Johnson, *Histories of LaGrange and Troup County, Georgia* (Sutherland-St. Dunston Publications, 1987), 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

families living in LaGrange continue to be very poor, with a 2015 average per household income of only \$17,584.²⁸

To understand much of the LaGrange College campus culture of today, it is important to understand the soil of southern, antebellum mores in which it was formed, and the desires and motives of those who formed it. By 1828, enough Methodists had entered the area to form what would become the First United Methodist Church, which stands today on Broad Street, only a few blocks from LaGrange College. By the early 1830's, many of these families were also seeking a refined education for their daughters. These affluent families became the base of support for the founding of a young women's school. In time, LaGrange College evolved from the original, "LaGrange Female Academy," which was chartered by the Georgia legislature on December 26, 1831. LaGrange College is the oldest private college in the state of Georgia today.²⁹

Historian Clark Johnson speculates that while the local families felt that their sons could receive enough education to become successful plantation owners, they wanted their daughters to receive at least a "finishing school" type of education that could connect them to literature and culture outside of the isolated "frontier" town of LaGrange.³⁰ By 1843, school ownership had changed hands twice, finally being bought by two brothers, Joseph and Telemachus Montgomery. These entrepreneurs' primary contribution to LaGrange College history was their further purchase of "the hill," property (the highest elevation in the city of LaGrange, where a part of today's campus is still located.) The mansion home known today as "Smith Hall" had

²⁸ "LaGrange, Georgia (GA) Poverty Rate Data - Information about Poor and Low Income Residents Living in This City," accessed March 13, 2017, <http://www.city-data.com/poverty/poverty-LaGrange-Georgia.html>.

²⁹ Johnson, *Histories of LaGrange and Troup County, Georgia*, 126.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

just been built in 1842 by slave labor. No acknowledgment of the contributions of these enslaved craftsmen exists on campus. This slave era plantation is still the largest and most important building on the LaGrange College campus today.

By 1850, with the Civil War on the horizon, the Montgomery Brothers were about to lose their investment in the Female Academy to creditors. The wealthy Methodists of LaGrange seized the opportunity to join the wave of Methodist higher education institutions that were being planted across the state of Georgia, and rallied to the cause of buying the property. They quickly raised \$50,000 (equivalent of \$4-\$6 million in today's money) with help from the other Methodists of the Georgia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. LaGrange College has remained a United Methodist-related institution ever since.³¹

As the 19th century ended, LaGrange, Georgia found itself deep in the American Reconstruction period. Although the Civil War had emancipated LaGrange's slave population, poor blacks and whites continued to struggle with the realities of survival by any means possible. Since 1825, power had been in the hands of those who controlled the land and the labor of Troup County and LaGrange. The end of free labor and the burned out soil of the south caused cotton to begin to fade from the forefront of agriculture in Georgia. However, a new cotton-related endeavor proved to be more profitable than ever for an elite class of investors. Power would now be squarely in the hands of those who held capital that would fuel the coming industrial period. The early 20th century saw the rise of the cotton textile mills and in LaGrange, the increasing prominence of the Callaway family. In 1900, Fuller Earle Callaway, Sr., and several business partners opened "Unity Mill," the first large textile mill in LaGrange.³² By 1930, there were over a dozen mills in and around LaGrange, with Callaway holding a controlling interest in

³¹ Ibid., 88.

³² Broadus Mitchell, *The Rise of Cotton Mills in the South* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1921), 232.

8 of them.³³ By 1933, Callaway had built multiple “mill villages” to house his workers and several entirely new neighborhoods had arisen in the city. In these places, it was he, not the county or city government, that supplied the people with needed infrastructure like schools, libraries and recreation centers. While these neighborhoods were eventually annexed into the city government structure, the social amenities remained in Callaway control and racially segregated well into the 1990’s.³⁴ This secured Fuller E. Callaway, Sr.’s reputation as a “giving” man in the white community’s eyes and forever linked the Callaway name with philanthropy and generosity in LaGrange.

The 20th century textile mill culture of LaGrange, Georgia, shaped a strong system of paternalism and deference from the “common people” toward those who control capital. Both white and African-American mill workers were totally dependent upon the mills for housing, food, clothing and disposable income. Their lives were kept officially and legally segregated, however, and they were in no way treated as equals. African-American mill jobs were limited to custodial, grounds keeping and base manual labor. These jobs did not pay as much, and African-Americans were never promoted to supervisory positions over whites. Their housing was inferior to whites who worked at the same mills, and their schools and recreational facilities were sub-standard. Whites found entertainment on the athletic fields and at the swimming pools that Callaway had built. Their children were educated at better schools and they were afforded privileged enrichment opportunities like free music, dance and visual art education programs. These “gifts” engendered gratitude from whites, while the African-American workers risked their safety if they dared to speak out about the unfair, racially motivated practices of separate

³³ Scott Smith, *Legacy: The Secret History of Proto-Fascism in America’s Greatest Little City* (LaGrange, Georgia: self-published, 2011), 121, Kindle.

³⁴ Smith, *Legacy*, 54, Kindle.

and unequal.³⁵ This cycle of engineered dependence and expected gratitude seems pervasive in LaGrange, still today. This is true not only for the city, but in some ways for the College too, impacting staff, faculty, and student expectations and relationships.

In 1919, at the “First Industrialists’ Conference,” Fuller E. Callaway, Sr., said, “We have tickets which entitle the holder to admission to the swimming pool, the ball fields, and the dance halls. Now you take a little doffer boy (a mill worker), and if he does not behave, we take his swimming tickets away from him. It has more influence upon him than the very fear of God does.”³⁶ The withholding of such “gifts” from workers was not Callaway’s only means of control. Racial segregation aided Callaway in his efforts to keep his workers from uniting and unionizing. A well-documented attempt at unionization in 1935 ended with the National Guard coming to LaGrange and injuring several protesters, while arresting many others and even killing one.³⁷ It is possible that this incident caused “respect” for Callaway power to turn into fear. If the company had the power to bring military force to bear on the town, where could a millworker turn? Eventually, this fear would become normalized, and mill families came to see their lack of freedom to unionize as the necessary trade-off for the kindness of Mr. Callaway.

I heard this sentiment of normalization echoed in a conversation with a long-time member of LaGrange First United Methodist Church who grew up in the “Hillside” mill village: “LaGrange is a fantastic place to live. We have so many nice things and a lot of resources for such a small town. There are a lot of people who have worked hard to make it what it is. You just don’t want to cross them.” Additionally, a member of another local “mill village” church, shared some of her recollections of growing up with a father who worked “for Mr. Callaway.” “I get upset,” she

³⁵ Mitchell, *The Rise of Cotton Mills in the South*, 72.

³⁶ Smith, *Legacy*, 35, Kindle.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 537, Kindle.

said, “when I hear people say nasty things about Mr. Callaway. We had everything we could have ever wanted. He gave us a pool and dance lessons, and a place to play basketball. We had swimming lessons every summer. We had the best schools and churches. Of course people said that outsiders could never come in, but that was alright because we didn’t need anything else. And it is true that the black folks couldn’t use our pool and our gym, but that was ok because Mr. Callaway made sure that he took care of them, too.” She went on to repeat an often-heard mantra from the older adults of LaGrange, that the town, “wouldn’t be anything like what it is today if it weren’t for the mills and that family.” Even today, community leaders echo this defense of the Callaway name, and are clear that institutions which continue to benefit from the Callaway Foundation’s gifts would do well not to bring up the history of segregation and racism with which it has been associated. Such hesitation and fear around upsetting the powerful patriarchy is alive and well in the town’s culture today.

In fact, this fear of the patriarchy has ripened into a culture of full-blown paternalism. Authority is to be respected, and in return, the authority figures and organizations will “care for” the needs of the “little” people. No large church, civic or community project is undertaken in LaGrange, Georgia, without first asking the questions, “has anyone talked to the Callaway Foundation about whether they might help with funding?” The result has been a loss of personal agency in the LaGrange community, and a culture of dependence and inequality. One powerful proof of this phenomenon is the startling level of income inequality that exists in Troup County today. According to the Census Bureau’s 2013 American Community Survey, Troup County, Georgia, was the 9th worst county in all of the United States in terms of income inequality.³⁸ A

³⁸ Emily Cohn, “Here Are The Most Unequal Counties In America,” *Huffington Post*, September 23, 2014, sec. Business, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/22/most-unequal-counties-in-america_n_5860964.html.

quick drive around downtown from the college campus reveals both perfectly maintained, antebellum mansions, and rows of old mill house shacks now in complete disrepair. As the mills grew in the 1920's and 1930's, uneducated workers flocked to towns like LaGrange to escape the harsh realities of the Great Depression. Even with the rapid growth of the textile industry, workers remained easily replaceable since up to 50% more labor force was available than was needed.³⁹ This historic environment of disparity has created an income gap that has left LaGrange with a huge group in economic crisis and despair and a small group with excessive resources.

LaGrange College stands as a primary beneficiary of the LaGrange, Georgia patriarchy. Even though the jobs and benefits have long since ended, the Callaway Foundation continues to exert significant power through its willingness and ability to fund selected community projects. Today, LaGrange College is deeply aware that its relationship with the Callaway Foundation is critical and must be nurtured. Just last year, the Callaway Foundation contributed \$7 million toward the construction of our newly opened, state of the art, \$21 million "Ida Hudson Callaway" Laboratory Sciences building.⁴⁰ It is even possible that the College itself has replicated these paternalistic, care-and-control types of relationships with its own students. "We will take care of you," is sometimes heard and often implied to prospective students and families. Taking care of students is only bad if that "caretaking" becomes manipulative, controlling and serves to mute student voices, particularly those who are already vulnerable to being silenced. There is not and never has been any culture of advocacy or demonstration on the LaGrange College campus. The college takes a strict line on student discipline and seems to expect

³⁹ Mitchell, *The Rise of Cotton Mills in the South*, 42.

⁴⁰ Alicia Hill, February 17, and 2017, "In the Name of Science | LaGrange Daily News," accessed March 13, 2017, <http://www.lagrangenews.com/2017/02/17/in-the-name-of-science/>.

students of all backgrounds to be well-behaved, compliant and willing participants in campus initiatives. This culture can be a challenge for African-American students in particular, in that they specifically need to experience agency that allows them to make independent choices for the purposes of building their own self-worth.⁴¹

Session III: Context. Looking and Listening, Contemplative Practice as Leadership

Session 3 brought leaders and students into direct confrontation with our city's heinous history of white dominance and black oppression. We talked about the ways that LaGrange College benefitted from the labor of enslaved Africans, even though African-Americans were excluded from attending until 1968. We saw the lines of wealth and poverty, white and black that segregate our community on the map. We had been wounded by the truth, and now it was time to go away from campus, get our bodies into the larger community, and see the wounds with our own eyes. "Wounds generate new thinking. Disjunctions birth invention – from a disjuncture in logic, where reasoning is compelled to find new connections in thought, to brokenness in existence, where creativity is compelled to search for possibilities of reconciliation."⁴²

Session 3 had students walk to various downtown destinations together from the LaGrange College campus, stopping to practice Lectio Divina together at each location.⁴³ Each participant received a handout sheet of instructions as we left the Chapel to walk together in silence to our destinations.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Gregory C. Ellison II, *Cut Dead but Still Alive*, 679, Kindle.

⁴² Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11.

⁴³ Anthony Campolo, *The God of Intimacy and Action: Reconnecting Ancient Spiritual Practices, Evangelism, and Justice*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 182.

⁴⁴ Appendix A.1. *A Contemplative Exercise in Looking and Listening*.

Together, we walked from the LaGrange College Chapel, through wealthy white neighborhoods to the Bellevue Mansion (a fully restored antebellum plantation house just two blocks from campus), and into the First United Methodist Church sanctuary (highly ornate with design and architecture connoting power and wealth). We then travelled through the poor, largely African-American neighborhoods south of Vernon Street to the “Callaway Memorial Clock Tower,” a 250 ft. tall obelisk structure, built in 1925, in memory of Fuller Callaway, Sr. From there, our next stop was at the Warren Temple UMC sanctuary (an African-American congregation), a building much less ornate than that of First UMC. At each location we read scripture from that week’s lectionary texts, and talked about what God might have us do. The scriptures were prophetic and powerful, and as we practiced group lectio divina, project members took turns reading the scripture through, aloud at each site. They were asked to consider and share what words or phrases stood out for them, and what they felt God might be calling them to do. After going to all of the sites, we asked what group members had seen or heard. We joined together in Holy Communion. I was admittedly unsure what result this might have for the group. I was concerned that I might be seen as a white man trying to tell these young men “what it’s like to be black in LaGrange.” And, while all of the men claim Christian faith, only 4 of the 7 claim regular church attendance. At the same time, religious practice and spirituality has shown to be a vital component for African-American men in college. According to Lemuel W. Watson:

“Ignoring the spiritual component of the individual is not a beneficial practice for the development of African American college students. It is through faith development that the individual is able to reflect on his or her own existence and process of development and begin to self-define and self-construct roles and relationships with ideas and people.

Holistic development in the African-American man is facilitated by the ability to go into a place of consciousness where he can find strength to deal with the stresses of life.”⁴⁵

This spiritual power has been thought of as, “resistant soul force,” which “enables one to handle barriers and constraints that enforce complete domestication...that enables one to overcome human oppression through creating, transforming and transcending, so one’s spirit can survive and thrive.”⁴⁶

The group members’ feedback was both meaningful and powerful, and exhibited these spiritual attributes. Kevin said, “thank you for showing us LaGrange in a way that nobody else has, and maybe nobody else would.” Brandon, life-long LaGrange resident, said that the trip was important to him, and that even though he is now preaching at a UM church, he had never been inside those two churches. Jamie told the group that he had learned to be even more aware while travelling in LaGrange. Both he, Kevin and others mentioned their fear of living in LaGrange. “I sometimes go out late at night with my friends and it really does scare me,” Jared said. “These people don’t know me here like they do back home. They may think I’m just another black guy. I’m afraid of what will happen if I go to the wrong place at the wrong time.” Kevin said, “I have only ever driven the two roads that go to the interstate in LaGrange, and that’s just when I’m going home. I’m so scared that if I go out with friends and I think they don’t know where they are going, I just tell them to take me back to campus.” I was naive and ignorant of the fear that these young men feel living in our city. Chris added, “that’s one thing we all have in common. Even though we come from different cities, when you grow up as a black man you learn to pay attention to your surroundings, and watch yourself all the time.” I

⁴⁵ Michael J. Cuyjet, *African American Men in College*, 1st edition, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 122.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

took these statements as sacred gifts, a shared window into a world I have never personally known. Their collective feelings of fear were heartbreaking for me, but were not without cause.

Session IV: Emotion (What is Rage?)

Session IV began with a review of what we had seen, heard and shared during our downtown walk and lectio divina practice in Session III. As conversation unfolded, I introduced the concept of “invisibility.” Over two years ago, I attended a session of LaGrange College’s Black Student Union. The topic that night was “being black and female at LaGrange College.” As I overheard the holy conversation the women openly shared, I was struck by one young woman’s description of her experience. “Black guys want to date white girls,” she said, “and white guys don’t see us. Really, they don’t even look at us, or notice us. It is like we are invisible.” Such experiences engender rage in those who are going unseen. Ellison calls rage, “the wicked fruit of invisibility left unaddressed.” He asserts that the 19th century idiom, “cut dead,” describes this experience of being, “ignored deliberately or snubbed completely.” “If no one turned around when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did...a kind of rage and impotent despair would before long well up in us.”⁴⁷ We witnessed rage beginning to show its head in our process during Session II, when we looked at the realities of black poverty and income inequality in LaGrange, Georgia. “Doesn’t anybody care about this?” Will asked. Julian was incredulous and asked, “Why is it this way? Why does everyone assume that being black in LaGrange means being poor and being dangerous? Why can’t I walk downtown without scaring people?” In Session III, we sat on the steps of Bellevue mansion. As we looked past magnolia trees, down the lane that once served as the plantation’s gated gravel drive, we read the words of Psalm 119. When asked, “what words stand out or speak to you in this scripture,” Kevin

⁴⁷ Gregory C. Ellison II, *Cut Dead but Still Alive*, 207, Kindle.

responded from the text, “anger...help me understand.” The sense of rage escalated when we returned to the campus Chapel. During Session 4, as we stood beneath LaGrange College’s iron entry gate, I shared the history of the iron with them, and showed them a photograph dated 1910, of these very same uprights and iron pickets standing as part of the Bellevue mansion entry gate. The iron likely dates to Bellevue’s construction, around 1840, and was donated to the college in 1915. While it is very likely that enslaved humans passed beneath these uprights onto the plantation, no historic marker on campus tells this story and very few even know it. The truth of this reality triggered intense feelings of muteness and invisibility in Julian, in particular. He clearly described how this history had been silenced and hidden from view. “I want this gate gone,” he said. “But this whole place was a plantation,” Jared said. “There is nowhere we can step that slaves weren’t growing cotton. Taking down the gate doesn’t change that.” Rick, my co-leader, took the lead and guided the young men through a conversation about their feelings. Consensus was that while the iron should not necessarily be removed, the college must be moved to own its history and tell its story.

As our group moved further into Session IV, “What is Rage?” we began to explore Christian Parenti’s concept of “social dynamite” that Ellison points to in his work.⁴⁸ While the word “dynamite” does suggest volatility and danger, it also connotes dynamism and an energy that can be used to bring about creation. “Social Dynamite” want more from reality than they are experiencing at present. This is “rage” full of constructive possibility. To understand rage as intense anger is overly simplistic and views righteous and just emotion as a pathology. Rather, rage that brings transformation is appropriate, “acknowledging a deficit and intensely pursuing a remedy.”⁴⁹ As his mentors, neither Rick nor I sought to mute, or contain, Julian’s rage. We did

⁴⁸ Ibid., 247, Kindle.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 539, Kindle.

seek to help him and others channel their rage into constructive action, but never told the group what they should or must do. Even as they moved toward constructive solutions, we were careful to allow them agency in how those actions would come about, and what they would ultimately be.

As their mentors, Rick and I have worked hard to truly know and listen to the men of this group. We have seen them. We listen and learn their stories. We attend their campus sports and events. Rick, however, can offer the gift of shared experience and true knowing as only another African-American man can. He has experienced the same rage they feel, while I can only imagine it. He is more readily able to gain their trust and has extended credit by vouching for me. I cannot know their experience first-hand, but I can offer something different, and valuable to the group as a trusted white person. I can understand “white rage,” as defined by Carol Anderson, from the inside, and seek to translate it for these men and help them prepare for it: “White rage is not about visible violence, but rather it works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies...it’s not the Klan. White rage doesn’t have to wear sheets and burn crosses...it works in the halls of power.”⁵⁰ Because of my race, position and office in the LaGrange College community, I can enter the halls of white rage and open doors that allow the group to work its agency for campus and community transformation. The young men of this project help me better understand and work with many of the white men on campus as well. In his popular book, *Hillbilly Elegy*, J.D. Vance draws parallels to the black experience of muted invisibility for poor, working class, uneducated whites. “To many analysts,” he says, “terms like ‘welfare queen’ conjure unfair images of the lazy black mom living on the dole. I have known many welfare queens; some were my neighbors, and all were

⁵⁰ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA, 2016), 3.

white.”⁵¹ With the November, 2016 election of Donald Trump as the backdrop to this project, issues of anger among young, white men cannot go overlooked. The morning after the election, Will, Chris and Jamie found their way to my kitchen table. Rick and I invited the whole group for coffee and conversation, and they quickly took us up on the offer. We shed tears, struggled to understand what had happened, and asked the question, “why?” Knowing these young men and their stories has helped me to become more patient with angry young white men who also need to turn their rage into something constructive before it explodes. Perhaps it is not too naïve to believe the seemingly unthinkable: that black and white rage can have a conversation with each side learning something painful but important from the other’s experience. “Instead of placards dedicated to the confederacy or statues hewn in the images of confederate military, and the civic strategists of Jim and Jane Crow, could we celebrate Southern culture through the images of human and civil rights activists like Henry McNeal Turner, Ida B. Wells, and Fannie Lou Hammer?”⁵² As Christians, we believe in the power of repentance, forgiveness, transformation and resurrection to new life. Perhaps these miracles could yet happen, and we could see King’s vision become reality: poor blacks and whites joined for common cause instead of separated by the resentment of Jim Crow.

Session IV: Construction (What Will We Do?)

As the group makes its transition through this spring semester and into year two, they are eager to go to work, applying what they have learned this year. I believe that these men have become an example of Peter Block’s “restorative community.” “Restoration,” he says, “comes from the choice to value possibility and relatedness over problems, self-interest and the rest of

⁵¹ J. D Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2017), 7.

⁵² Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Wiley-Blackwell, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 404.

the ‘stuck community’s’ agenda. It hinges on the accountability chosen by citizens and their willingness to connect with each other around promises they make to each other.”⁵³ Our core question must now become, “what can we create together?” While this does not mean that the process of community building is perfectly linear, it does mean that our relationships and work together will be marked by a clear sense of progression. Without doubt, rage will not be silenced, but rather sustained and channeled in its full energy toward change and transformation. Muteness and invisibility steal energy, visibility and voice create it. Because we are building and nurturing trust, “restorative community is created as we use the language of healing and connection and belonging *without embarrassment* (emphasis added).”⁵⁴ We create positive social space when we join hearts and minds, declaring our intention to live into a better future. Block says that restorative communities must “make the shift” from “conversations about problems to ones of possibility; from conversations about fear and fault to ones of gifts, generosity and abundance; from a bet on law and oversight to a preference for building the social fabric and choosing mutual accountability; from a focus on leaders to a focus on citizens.”⁵⁵

Already, these men are making plans, together, for what they will build in coming semesters. Our first task will be addressing the history of the college gate, to bring its history out of the darkness and into the light. The group is meeting soon with LaGrange College president Dan McAlexander and will engage him in conversation around how this goal can be accomplished. Chris is Student Government President for another six weeks, and the group plans to draft a resolution for marking the site and present it to the Student Government Association.

⁵³ Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco, Calif.: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009), 47.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

Chris has taken further initiative and opened the original project group to other African-American men on campus, and another 12 have already joined. We are exploring the work of the Georgia University System's "African-American Male Initiative," and have already had initial meetings with the tutoring center, academic and psychological counselors on the LaGrange College staff about the ways we might pattern our own program on the ones in place at institutions like Georgia Tech, Georgia State and the University of Georgia.⁵⁶ Our much smaller size works to our advantage as relationships are already likely to exist between faculty, staff and students at LaGrange College in ways that they do not at large universities. Goals for the LaGrange College African-American Male Initiative could include:

1. Developing a network of peers and accountability partners to support students' academic, professional and personal goals through regular small group meetings
2. Academic support through regular attendance at tutoring center sessions
3. Regular meetings with staff counselors and Chaplain for mentoring; minimum GPA standards
4. Attendance at fall African-American Male Initiative retreat
5. Work with Career Development Director beginning second semester of freshman year for vocational discernment.
6. Serving as mentors for high school students who have been placed in Troup County's alternative high school, Hope Academy⁵⁷

If the men of LaGrange College's newly emerging African-American Male Initiative can reach out to these younger, predominantly African-American males and mentor them, they will make

⁵⁶ "AAMI | OMED | Georgia Institute of Technology | Atlanta, GA," accessed March 14, 2017, <http://omed.gatech.edu/content/aami>.

⁵⁷ "The HOPE Academy," accessed March 14, 2017, <http://www.troup.k12.ga.us/19/Content2/20956>.

great strides toward feelings of significance and accomplishment in their own lives. Best of all in my view, the students have demonstrated great desire and self-authorship in accomplishing this work and setting the agenda for the future.⁵⁸ The African-American Male Initiative at LaGrange College will have staying power if its strength is grounded in the energy of rage harnessed for construction, through relationships of openness, trust and mutual accountability.

Conclusion

It is indeed possible for leaders to cross borders of race, power and privilege, but as James Cone says, one must be willing to die, at least to self, in order to do this holy work.⁵⁹ Invulnerability must die and vulnerability must rise in its place. Certitude must die, and questions must rise. An unwillingness to have hard conversations must die, and an openness to difficult truths, hard to accept, must rise and live. There must be commitment to search out the truth in the belief that it can bring freedom. Fear of conflict must die and the embrace of constructive rage must rise. The success of this initiative began with seeds of trust and has grown in the sunlight of true seeing and listening. Perhaps the most important leadership lesson on this entire experience has been the power of focused attention. I have learned that I must have a plan of action, but I must also move slowly enough, and be flexible enough to really focus my attention on the needs and concerns of the person right in front of me. Each of these men now know that they are seen, at least by two mentors and six reliable others. At every turn, we have been diligent in nurturing control, self-esteem, meaningful existence and belonging. They have gained clarity about their own identity and looked with critical reflection at their campus and extended communities. They have come to the realization that while they may not have

⁵⁸ Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, *Creating Contexts for Learning and Self-Authorship: Constructive-Developmental Pedagogy* (Vanderbilt University Press, 1999), 39.

⁵⁹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 52.

control of the cultures in which they live, they can still enter courageously into “fearless dialogue.” They trust their Chaplain, and have a window into my life, mind and soul that they did not before. Most of all, they are entering into a plan of action in which they may be mutually supported and held accountable. Many questions remain to be explored. How will this program grow and change at LaGrange College? Could it be replicated at similar institutions? What core pieces may remain the same while other incidentals may change according to context? I know that my own rage against injustice compels me to action, and working with these men has been the action that I needed. We will tend the flame and let God work the fire within their bones.

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Appendix A.1

“A Contemplative Exercise in Looking and Listening”

This exercise will serve as Session 3, and the transitional geography that the LC campus occupies in the city. The historical divide between groups of people, rich and poor, white and black, that happens on the north and south sides of the campus will be explored, seen and heard rather than talked about. We will visit 5 key sites, and participate in Lectio Divina at 4 of them, ending with reflective conversation and communion at the LaGrange College Chapel.

1 North of Broad Street: What do you hear, see and feel as you pass through these neighborhoods?

2. Site #1, Bellevue Plantation

In front of you is the home of Benjamin Harvey Hill, built in 1853. Ben Hill served as a US representative from Georgia, and in the Senate of the Confederate States of America. Walk down to the house and around the property. We will gather together on the front lawn for the practice of Lectio Divina.

Psalm 119:137-144 CEB

137 Lord, you are righteous,
and your rules are right.

138 The laws you commanded are righteous,
completely trustworthy.

139 Anger consumes me
because my enemies have forgotten what you’ve said.

140 Your word has been tried and tested;
your servant loves your word!

141 I’m insignificant and unpopular,
but I don’t forget your precepts.

142 Your righteousness lasts forever!
Your Instruction is true!

143 Stress and strain have caught up with me,
but your commandments are my joy!

144 Your laws are righteous forever.
Help me understand so I can live!

- Silence
- First Reading
- What word or phrase captures your attention
- Sharing
- Second Reading
- What is God calling you to do?
- Silence

3. Site #2, First United Methodist Church

Take some time in silent reflection. What do you see, hear, smell and feel? Gather between the pulpit and lectern on the worship platform for Lectio Divina:

Habakkuk 1:2-4, 2:1-4 CEB

2 How long, Lord, must I call for help,

but you do not listen?

Or cry out to you, "Violence!"

but you do not save?

3 Why do you make me look at injustice?

Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.

4 Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.

I will stand at my watch
and station myself on the ramparts;

I will look to see what he will say to me,
and what answer I am to give to this complaint.

The Lord's Answer

2 Then the Lord replied:

"Write down the revelation
and make it plain on tablets
so that a herald[b] may run with it.

3 For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
it speaks of the end
and will not prove false.

Though it linger, wait for it;
it[c] will certainly come
and will not delay.

4 "See, the enemy is puffed up;
his desires are not upright—
but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness

- Silence
- First Reading
- What word or phrase captures your attention
- Sharing
- Second Reading
- What is God calling you to do?
- Silence

4. Walking, South of Vernon:

What do you see, hear and feel as you pass through these neighborhoods?

5. Site #3, Callaway Memorial Clock Tower

Take some time in silent reflection. What do you see, hear, smell and feel? Gather on the concrete area just beneath the clock tower for the practice of Lectio Divina:

2 Thessalonians 1:3-12 CEB

3 We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. **4**

Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the

persecutions and trials you are enduring. 5 All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. 6 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 7 and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 8 He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might 10 on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you. 11 With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. 12 We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

- Silence
- First Reading
- What word or phrase captures your attention
- Sharing
- Second Reading
- What is God calling you to do?
- Silence

6. Drive to Site #4, Warren Temple UMC. Pay close attention to the people and places that you see along the way. Take some time in silent reflection, both inside and outside of the church. What do you see, hear, smell and feel? Gather in sanctuary for Lectio Divina.

Luke 19:1-10 CEB

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. 2 A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. 5 When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." 6 So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus. 7 Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." 8 Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much." 9 Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. 10 The Human One came to seek and save the lost."

- Silence
- First Reading
- What word or phrase captures your attention
- Sharing
- Second Reading
- What is God calling you to do?
- Silence

7. Return in van to LC campus Chapel. Pay careful attention to the people and places you see along the way.

8. Closing Conversation in Chapel:

What did you see?
What did you hear?
What do you feel?

9. Closing Communion (UM Hymnal)

10. Closing Reading

Matthew 13

31 He told another parable to them: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and planted in his field. 32 It’s the smallest of all seeds. But when it’s grown, it’s the largest of all vegetable plants. It becomes a tree so that the birds in the sky come and nest in its branches.” 33 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, which a woman took and hid in a bushel of wheat flour until the yeast had worked its way through all the dough.”