A Tale of Two Conferences

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice...to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?...Then your light shall break forth like the dawn!”~ Isaiah 58

Over the past few months, I’ve had the opportunity to attend two national conferences in the areas of social justice and mission with ecumenical faith communities. The first conference is a two years running conference called “The Justice Conference.” This conference is geared towards predominantly younger generations of Christian faith leaders, the majority are laity who identify as non-denominational evangelicals, many of whom participate in incarnational ministries that are not housed within a traditional church setting. There are also a number of conference attendees who came because of the theme of justice, who did not necessarily identify with faith communities or church and a handful of mainline denomination folks blended in with the mix. Although the theme of the conference was generally focused on justice, the different speakers addressed social issues as diverse as inclusivity of people from all faith groups; the role of the church in social justice work; human trafficking; poverty issues; and reducing government spending on military weaponry. As diverse as the topics, so too were the theologies and backgrounds of the speakers ranging from well-known theologians Walter Brueggemann and Miroslav Volf; to Rev. Ken Wytsma and Rev. Francis Chan; John Perkins; Rachel Lloyd; and Richard Twiss to Shane Claiborne and Ben Cohen (co-founder of Ben & Jerry’s ice cream) amidst other speakers. (To see brief clips of pre-conference interviews with the keynote speakers, workshops, and videos of the event, go to http://vimeo.com/thejusticeconference/videos/page:1/sort:date. The Justice Conference group is charging a few dollars to download videos of the keynote speaker presentations—to watch, go to http://the-justice-conference.myshopify.com/).

The second conference is the ten years running, National Ecumenical Advocacy Days, which is a conference geared towards an intergenerational group of mainline faith leaders, with a blend of pastors and laity who represented mostly Protestant and Catholic traditions. The speakers included seminary professors and experts in the areas of budget issues: Dr. Margaret Aymer, Dr. Gary Dorrien and Dr. Ellen Nissenbaum; Dr. Arturo Chavez; Sister Marge Clark; and Rep. Emanuel Cleaver II. The theme of this year’s conference centered on Isaiah 58, “Is this the fast I seek?” with emphasis around national budget priorities, tax justice, and issues of poverty. During much of the conference, time was spent in workshops that added depth and valuable
resources for budget issues and that provided the foundations for the advocacy visits with Congressional leaders that would happen on the last day of the conference. There was also time spent meeting by denomination to connect with other participants and General Agency staffers as well as time to meet other people attending from your state to plan and prepare for the Congressional advocacy visits. (To watch videos of the keynote speakers and get resources, go to http://advocacydays.org/).

Although both conferences focused on issues of faith and social justice there are striking differences between the two. While the Justice Conference had great strengths in inspiring people to awareness of the realities of justice issues and the calling we all have as members of faith communities to respond from our heart and faith, there was not much given in the way of how people can begin putting that awareness into action in basic ways in their churches and communities (aside from some breakout sessions that people could attend the first day) or resources adding depth and breadth to specific issue areas in terms of the numbers of people impacted by a given issue. This conference had outstanding visuals, music, and artistic mediums that speak to many young adults including anything from spoken word poetry interludes to well-designed video clips that mixed music, art, and theology. Likewise, while the National Ecumenical Advocacy Days conference had great strengths in providing well done resource and research materials that gave statistical information on the realities of the specific issue areas of federal budget priorities and a myriad of other areas related to the intersection of faith, justice, and advocacy ministries, the presentation of these materials in lecture-style, heavily theological and academic language that included power points seemed to miss some of the personal narratives and heart components of why to get involved in these advocacy and social justice issues in the first place. Interestingly, the majority of attendees at the Justice Conference were people forty years of age and below while the majority of attendees at the Ecumenical Advocacy Days were forty years of age and above.

As more and more critical social issues arise in our communities and world today, there is a deep need to live out our faith in both personal and prophetic ways that transform hearts and minds so that we are able to honor the personal narratives that are amongst hundreds, thousands, and millions of other narratives of people that we may never encounter. As Christian communities, congregations, organizations, and groups begin to do more intentional collaborations across diverse theological, political, and social perspectives to make a difference, concretely, in the transformation of the world, there may one day be a conference that joins together the strengths of the Justice Conference with the strengths of the national Ecumenical Advocacy Days so that we can come together to work for changed lives and realities for all people in a world yearning for signs of hope, love, and justice. As the theme of the Justice Conference notes, “justice is a garment, a billion threads, interwoven, interlocked, knit together with strength and integrity. Pull one thread from the fabric and the garment begins to fray. Pull ten million threads and justice unravels into injustice” (See a video on “justice” at http://vimeo.com/37413455).