

CLMPI Pre-Meeting Work Hub: Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, Inc.

The Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference Hub of the Lilly “Called to Lives of Meaning and Purpose” has been honored to serve clergy and congregations in the work of improving their capacity to serve by providing resources and education. These cohort members, in return, have created and are continuing to create new models of ministry that reflect their own growth, their expanded understanding of what ministry is and how far it reaches, while at the same time addressing the specific needs of African American clergy and congregations in the 21st century.

The pandemic forced both congregations and clergy to pivot, i.e., to deviate from their initial plans in order to meet the crisis afforded by the pandemic. “Our mission and ministry look different,” offered one “Called” cohort pastor. Another said, “In a lot of ways, the pandemic was a blessing. It forced us to look at ministry in a different way.”

Other comments:

- Churches used to be full time. Now, we have adjusted hours and things work better.
- You have to be forced to change; I realized that our congregations have talent within them that we had not tapped.
- The necessity of using technology forced people who had previously refused to consider technology and who were actually afraid to learn it, to step out of their comfort zones. As a result, our members are present with each other and in ministry in different ways.
- We have found that hybrid worship works; it increases our numbers and our offering, and it is perfect for our sick and shut-in, and our older members who had difficulty getting to church, especially in bad weather.
- We found that we take our worship experience more seriously.

In 2021 we hosted:

- Called and Black Clergy gatherings. Clergy were invited to participate in six calls, held once a week, to discuss their issues and struggles, as well as their victories, in an environment in which they felt safe to share. Led by the Rev. Dr. Melinda Contreras-Byrd, the sessions proved to be a fertile space for bonding for clergy who might otherwise not have even known each other. The initiative was led by the Rev. Dr. Janae Moore and the Rev. Marcus Tabb.
- Daily services of song and prayer, beginning the Monday after Easter and remaining a daily (Monday-Friday) event until October of this year, where we moved to make it a weekly (every Friday) event. Held on the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference Facebook page, this was seen as necessary to attend to the anxiety and suffering clergy, lay people, and churchgoers were experiencing as a result of the isolation caused by the pandemic. Each day, clergy from congregations and ministries from around the country offered a prayer and music was also included, as music is such an important component of Black worship and spiritual healing in general. It was a ministry of presence in a time where presence was difficult to achieve. The prayer

call was careful and intentional about including all people to offer prayer – from disabled, to Jewish, to Muslim, to LGBTQIA. There was actually a month where members of the LGBTQIA offered the prayers - every day, and the response was bigger than we ever expected.

- Held sessions on leadership for all cohort members, teaching the Baobab coaching/leadership model. The session was led by Dr. Itihari Touré. Those participating in the training were identified as “Wisdom-Bearers” and were charged to take the training model into their congregational settings.
- Held monthly meetings of the MICAH and Called Congregations cohorts in order to foster community building, understanding of the expectations, and deeper knowledge of the importance of work they were doing.
- Held a virtual retreat for both the MICAH and Called Congregation cohorts in August. The event included instructions for the MICAH and Called Congregation cohorts that are ending their grant period, and in-boarding for the new MICAH and Called Congregation cohorts.

Congregation Activities

The congregations that are a part of the Called Congregations cohort have been innovative and creative. Some of them have created ministries within their traditional church environments, but others have pushed away from what has been traditional. Others began with what might only be called expanded and newly defined congregations. For one cohort member, who is the chaplain at the United Nations, her “congregation” is, literally, the world. Her work is eclectic, but one of the ways she participated in the daily prayer call was by bringing attention to the plight of gender-based violence against women which is a global problem. She made a pitch for people listening to the prayers to remember these women every Thursday with her “Thursdays in Black” campaign. Another cohort member, who has a congregation on the north side of Chicago, ministers to the entire North side of the city with her food cooperative. And yet another cohort has a congregation which includes, they say, “the South,” because their work is involving them researching the Christian wing of the United Church of Christ (UCC) and Black people within that wing. The “Afro-Christian” churches have been mentioned but basically ignored by the UCC in its teaching about the origins of the denomination, but these cohort directors are visiting Black UCC churches throughout the South and getting their histories. They have realized that the Afro-Christian “wing” of the UCC is actually a denomination! Their work will culminate in a book they are writing and has caused the UCC to alter its descriptions of the denominations and add Afro-Christian as one of the denominations which merged to form the UCC.

One particularly exciting cohort member is Trinity UCC, Gary Indiana. They write:

The most significant change in the congregational perception about calling and vocation is that pastors, ministers, and deacons are called by God to do the work of God but the work can't be done without the congregation and the assistance of community partners. They are starting to understand that ministry work is done outside the four walls of the church in the community. They understand the importance of the vertical arm of the cross that reaches up to heaven and gives us Holy Ghost power but they also understand that the horizontal arm of the cross is just as

important because it allows us to do the work of the Lord on the horizontal axle of the cross in the community we serve.

Activities this congregation is doing, has done, and will continue:

- Formed the **Baobab CDC**, a community asset-based community development initiative seeking to engage in economic development, education, community organizing, and real estate development throughout the city of Gary;
- Created the “**Real Talk With E3 Teen Pregnancy Outreach Ministry**, a ministry that provides services to the pregnant and parenting teen population in Gary in order for them to receive the education, health care parenting skills, and additional support needed to have healthy babies and to be better parents. The ministry provides caring adult mentors who guide the teen moms through the challenges of parenthood and partners with community agencies for the purpose of providing education, support, and referrals. This ministry is reaching out to a group that no other church or organization in Gary has attempted to serve.
- Formed **Surviving the Storm COVID-19 Support Group Ministry**. This is a space for those who have had to deal with a positive diagnosis of COVID-19 and for those taking care of someone who is ill with the disease.
- **Hosted a luncheon with the Henry Luce Foundation**. It was billed as a collaboration between public theology and racial justice work and was sponsored by Vanderbilt University Divinity School. The event connected local churches with funding agencies. Partners included the SDPC MICAH Institute and Fund, the Lilly Foundation, and the UCC Church Building and Loan Fund.

In addition:

The SDPC has been and continues to be committed to finding and sharing the truth about Black history in this country and sharing it as widely as possible. There were no events in 2021, but it is important that this work be highlighted, as it will go forward in 2022. From Rev. Tiauna Webb, the director of this initiative:

Giving the growing urgency of what is taking place in our country in reference to miseducation, voter disenfranchisement and the growing overarching culture of violence, truth telling and sacred memory will be a part of our 2022 agenda beginning in January, highlighted in our annual Clergy and Lay Leadership Conference in February and culminating with an in-person Commission Hearing in July.

The opening plenary session of the 2022 Samuel DeWitt Proctor Clergy and Lay Leadership Conference will highlight the imperative of a national truth telling movement to address the imperatives of a painful, but necessary, racial reckoning in the U.S. With eyes to see and the spirit to discern, SDPC proclaims that America is at a crossroad and its spiritual and material fall or rise from its legacy is fueling the current war within. National truth telling and consciousness raising is also more essential as this nation moves out of a global pandemic and into new realities of its global geopolitical positioning. To that end, a

pedagogy of theological, historical, and sociological analyses to illuminate the ecclesial and communal choices of reconstituting American “democracy” is essential. Ultimately, newness requires spiritual and material healing being demanded by a process of reparatory justice.

Thriving in Ministry Work

Led by the Rev. Marcus Tabb, the Thriving in Ministry (TIM) projects are ongoing. This work is intentional in designing and implementing intergenerational peer-to-peer mentoring as a way to broaden the depth of knowledge and skills needed across the continuum of their ministry careers and in the process, create ministries that thrive.

This component of the SDPC work includes Focus Topics and Issues Forums. In 2021 TIM identified two **Focus Topics**:

- Called and Black
- Environmental Justice

Three Issues Forums were also identified:

- LGBTQIA
- Reparatory Justice
- Christian Education

Activities implemented in 2021:

- Trained in the Wisdom Bearers on the Baobab Coaching Model.
 - Dr. Melinda Contreras-Byrd for Called & Black
 - Rev. Tiauna Webb for Environmental Justice
 - Rev. Jeri Wright and Dr. Michael Elam for LGBTQIA issues
 - Rev. Dr. Iva Carruthers and Rev. Antonia Coleman for Reparations
 - Rev. Colleen Birchett and Rev. Marcus Tabb for Christian Education
- Planned upcoming tables and gatherings
- Worked with Environmental Justice teams and with Called & Black

Focus Table Work/Activities in 2021

Environmental Justice:

- Began engagement with 10 churches/cohorts in Chicago on the subject of environmental justice
- Held weekly grass roots meetings with said congregations
- Conducted “Listen, Lead, and Share” gatherings in Chicago on the subject of clean energy
- Engaged BIPOC subcommittees on jobs, training and solar energy

Called & Black:

- Identified Black clergy and formed a cohort, led by a Black psychologist
- Scheduled six weekly sessions, 1.5 hours each
- Identified critical topics for clergy per their input, which included rage, pastoral care, and COVID-19
- Created a new cohort of Black female chaplains; they will begin to meet in 2022.

Issues Forums

Issues forums are being led by those who were trained in the Baobab coaching model. In the spirit of empowering congregations, they will be coaching persons in congregations on the model so as to make the model the standard used in all participating congregations. The coaching model is considered to be a tool of empowerment for church leaders.

Christian Education:

- Created a survey for religious educators
- Created an email list from the Proctor Conference and Mbongi network
- Scheduled gathering for religious educators which will begin in 2022
- Began the creation of content for the Digital Assets Library.

Reparatory Justice:

- Began identifying the issues that need to be addressed

LGBTQIA

- Began working on the development of a program called “Pathways to Proctor”
- Began organizing and planning “Rainbow Table Talks
- Began scheduling gatherings for 2022

The Thriving in Ministry component has begun developing a “Just Church Model,” which will show how the faith community and the philanthropic community might better align their shared missions. The conversations have been identified as fitting into one of three contexts:

- Articulating the “Just Church” initiative as a specific way to support sustainability, reimagining mission and community economic development initiatives of churches
- Expanding conversations around the needs of our ECPRL programs and partners and connecting that to targeted resources associated with those goals, including the Proctor Raven Fund, and
- Relationship-building with specific philanthropic leaders, networks, and opportunities.