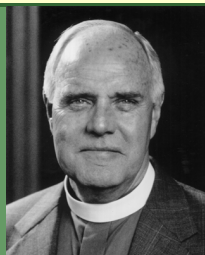




**A Disturbing Approach to Social Justice Ministry:
Challenging What's Comfortable
An Interview with Doug Bailey**



Creating and sustaining urban ministry can be daunting and—says Doug Bailey—it should be. Urging the church to balance pastoral ministry with prophetic ministry, Bailey invokes the 16th century prayer by Sir Francis Drake to "disturb us" from our comfort zone into bold ministry. This call comes as the church has lost its prophetic voice—in deference to consumer-based, inward-looking ministries.

• **Overview**

With over 25 years experience in urban and social justice ministry, the Reverend Doctor Douglass M. Bailey is the Founder and President of the [Center for Urban Ministry, Inc.](#) at Wake Forest University Divinity School. The Center offers conferences, consulting services, and workshops designed to assist congregations discern, envision, and create urban ministries while balancing pastoral and prophetic ministry. He also serves as an Assistant Professor for Urban Ministry at [Wake Forest Divinity School](#) where he leads courses such as "Radical Jesus, Radical Justice" and "Urban Ministry by Immersion." He served as the Rector of Calvary Episcopal Church in downtown Memphis, Tennessee for twenty-three years. During his tenure, he founded ten separate 501(c) (3) non-profit urban ministries connected to [Calvary Church](#). Calvary is a Jubilee Center parish renowned for its urban mission and ministry to Memphis and the Mid-South.

• **Interview**

John Dale, on behalf of the Congregational Resource Guide, interviewed Doug Bailey from Boston.

CRG: What do you wish people in congregations knew about your work and ministry?

Doug: The American Church desperately needs a conversion experience—to undergo "metanoia"—a Greek word for “radical, major turn around or change, to go in a different direction.” Our churches today have been largely co-opted by an American folk Christianity, based on a nationalistic, prosperity theology. There is hardly a distinction any longer between the church and popular culture. The slide into a consumer church mentality versus the servant/prophetic church has been steep in the recent decades. It’s all about church shopping—what meets our individual, personal needs and convenience.

Today's churches need to be biblically challenged by authentic Christianity. We need to be challenged and disturbed by the Jesus of the Gospels. One of my favorite prayers (attributed to Sir Francis Drake, 16th century) contains these petitions, "[Disturb us Lord](#), when we are too pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have become true because we dreamed too little, when we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore." Our churches need to be disturbed to become more faithful.

After my forty-three years of Episcopal priesthood, I am convinced that we prefer to "believe" in Jesus rather than "follow" Jesus, primarily because "belief" is easier and more comfortable. If we are disturbed by the authentic Gospel, we will always be counter-culture to the prevailing comfortable cultural current. We will be "magnificent misfits."

To be a "misfit" in today's dominant culture of success, power and control always demands a heavy risk and cost and extraordinary courage. Jesus is a misfit! Is the Church prepared to be also?

CRG: Can you speak to how and where leaders are learning about urban and social justice ministry?

Doug: Much of the energy of my ministry has been working with others to encourage the Church's conversion. One of my concerns is the scarcity of urban and social justice ministry emphasis in our churches, beginning in our seminaries.

The staff at [The Church of the Saviour](#), a legendary, ecumenical congregation in the Adams-Morgan section of Washington, D.C., tell me they are astonished and perplexed by the scores of seminarians who flock to their "church"—which is actually a collection of individual ministries—to observe its various forms of urban ministry in action. The staff says these seminarians (from many different denominations) will talk enthusiastically about structural or liturgical issues—but very few of them talk about Jesus.

A survey conducted not long ago at my former seminary, Virginia Theological Seminary, polled its graduating seniors and discovered that the overwhelming majority wished to be cherished and thought of as "good pastors." That is an important and good part of ministry—but what happened to being a prophet? Whatever happened to "standing with" the oppressed and "standing against" the domination systems in the Church, the Nation, the world?? Yes, the "disturbed need to be comforted." But, does our unjust privilege and comfort not need to be disturbed by the radical Gospel? So, I continue to work to keep the prophetic voice of the church alive to be an instrument for God's justice and compassion and peace and reconciliation in the world.

CRG: What advice or specific suggestions do you have for lay leaders and clergy in congregations?

Doug: For a congregation that is more inward-looking than outward-looking, more concerned with "being comfortable with a safe, cerebral experience," perhaps largely driven by trying to meet the needs of its consumers (members)—there needs to be a serious effort to be prophetically challenging. Our churches need strong doses of subversive Christianity. To be Christian in our national and global culture is to be a praying participant in an underground non-violent resistance movement that will, hopefully, liberate us, and others, from our cultural addictions.

The great Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, wrote: "If the Gospel of Christ ever loses its capacity to shock us, it will then lose its capacity to authentically heal us." I have experienced this to be very true. I am convinced that our congregations need to be "shocked" by the authentic, radical Jesus. As much as we need quality pastoral care in congregations, we surely need prophetic congregations.

CRG: Do you have ideas about a specific means to create this prophetic congregation?

Doug: Small Groups. The best starting point can be in small groups. Start a small group ministry for the congregation where you can take a look at the authentic Jesus. American Christianity has so watered down Jesus that he no longer shocks us. For example, talk about the difference between believing in (which is a cerebral thing) and following Jesus.

It's two very different things: to follow Jesus is more of a cost, a risk. Luke is my favorite Gospel because we are shown a very public Jesus who is very much involved in a public ministry. He is very much involved in confronting issues of injustice, poverty, disease, militarism, and the oppressions of classism and racism.

What is our response to this shocking Jesus? Small groups are good building-blocks for congregations. They can also be the places where people can begin to really be challenged biblically and grow in their understanding of contemporary discipleship. In the Calvary Church, Memphis congregation, where I served for over twenty years, one of the most compelling and community building parts were our regular "Journey" courses which truly shaped the congregation and the city.

CRG: What is the congregation's particular call?

Doug: Every congregation needs to be asked to profoundly wrestle with its calling or vocation. Congregations need assistance in coming to understand that as individuals, and as congregations, our conversion is an on-going process. We will never arrive. We are always in process. Every congregation needs to be consistently in process, on a journey, a journey both inward and outward at one in the same time, in order for there to be a journey forward.

CRG: Do you have any specific examples of places where a "prophetic, authentic Christianity" can be experienced today?

Doug: There are numerous Anglo, African-American, and Hispanic American congregations around the country that are really seeking to live this out. I suggest referencing a text that I use in my Urban Ministry immersion classes at Wake Forest Divinity School: [*Urban Churches, Vital Signs*](#) by Nile Harper.

CRG: What other suggestions do you have for those guiding the church today?

Doug: Instead of concentrating on organizational and structural issues, the conversation might be refocused around some burning questions around these issues.

- **What does it mean to be an authentic faith follower rather than a leader?**
- **What does it mean to be a "disturber" in the public square or culture today?**

- **What is the risk and cost and promise of radical discipleship in today's contemporary emphasis upon "prosperity" Christianity?**

Additional resources Doug Bailey recommends to congregational leaders:

[The City of God for American Cities: Reinventing the Urban Church™ \(Conference\)](#)

Douglass M. Bailey, Co-sponsored by the Center for Urban Ministry at Wake Forest University Divinity School and the Cathedral College of Washington National Cathedral (formerly the College of Preachers), Washington, DC.

Held annually, Doug Bailey leads a national program offering an intense, five-day immersion into the issues critical for urban congregations in all denominations. This "learning laboratory" includes visits to urban ministries and conversation with urban ministry leaders and scholars from across the country.

[The Cost of Discipleship \(Book\)](#)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Author. First published in German 1937: Touchstone, 1995.

This classic from Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor and theologian who was arrested and executed for resisting the Nazis, considers the nature of humanity, sacrifice, grace, and Jesus as elements of faith. The book includes an extended meditation on the Sermon on the Mount and Bonhoeffer's famous exploration of the incarnational Jesus and His relationship to humanity in the "The Image of Christ." chapter. Bonhoeffer offers new models of servant leadership based on Christian humanism and civic responsibility.

[Doing Justice \(Book\)](#)

Dennis Jacobsen, Author. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001.

Written for congregations and others seeking to do social and justice ministry, this book offers an introduction to the theology and practice of community organizing. Based on the early organizing principles of Saul Alinsky, theology and scripture, Jacobsen presents concrete strategies for creating justice ministries that address the needs of disenfranchised members of society. Jacobsen draws from his experience as an ELCA pastor and director of the [Gamaliel National Clergy Caucus](#), a network of over 1000 clergy who offer training in congregation-based community organizing.

[The Heart of Christianity \(Book\)](#)

Marcus J. Borg, Author. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003.

At the heart of Christianity is discovering a relationship with a loving God and then, drawing from that relationship, transforming the world's values to reflect and affirm that love. Traditional Christian practices—prayer, worship, Sabbath, pilgrimage, and others—facilitate and nurture the individual's relationship with God. Borg writes for those disaffected from their Christian faith, those reclaiming and reinterpreting outdated ideas, or those espoused by fundamentalist and evangelicals. Terms such as "kingdom of God" and "born again" take on new meaning when their power to transform society are considered.

[Jesus and the Disinherited \(Book\)](#)

Howard Thurman, Author. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, reprint edition 1996. First published in 1949.

Howard Thurman (1900-1981)'s premise is that the Gospel calls for justice for the poor and outcast and offers the means to achieve that justice: resistance. Martin Luther King, Jr. was deeply inspired by this book and its author. Calling for the redemption and empowerment offered by love of self and others (God's justice), Thurman denounces hate as a destructive force.

Doug Bailey says, "Thurman incorporates aspects of Franciscan spirituality to describe what the church must do today to stand beside the poor. I have worked at being in solidarity with and practicing Franciscan spirituality which would say something like this: 'I cannot be *of* the poor (or any of the forms of oppression), because I am not poor. I cannot speak *for* the poor, because that is just another form of dominator arrogance. But, I must stand *with* the poor. My very salvation depends on my solidarity with the poor.'

Therefore, I would suggest the universal reading of Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, that congregations today might learn to stand with 'those many who stand with their backs against the wall' (Thurman)."

[Jesus Before Christianity \(Book\)](#)

Albert Nolan, Author. First published in South African 1976. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 25th anniversary edition, 2001.

Nolan explores Jesus' ministry in the context of his life and time—Palestine in the first century. He immerses Jesus in the real problems of his social, political and urban context and draws parallels with the problems faced in the world today.

[Scarred By Struggle, Transformed by Hope \(Book\)](#)

Joan D. Chittister, Author. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003.

Writing from her experience with cycles of depression and renewed hope, Chittister uses the story of Jacob wrestling with God to explore her own story. She shares her understanding of how struggle stretches and enriches the soul which culminates in hope. In a series of essays, she describes common struggles: the loss of certainty, change, isolation, darkness, fear, powerlessness, vulnerability, exhaustion, and scarring. She then complements these with the related gifts of conversion, independence, faith, courage, surrender, limitations, endurance, and transformation. These meditations are presented in the context of real life, as Chittister considers consumerism, technology, grief, the role of women, and September 11, 2001. This book offers neither self-help nor pat answers, but rather offers companionship that ends in hope.

[Seek the Peace of the City \(Book\)](#)

Eldin Villafañe; Douglas Hall; Efrain Agosto; Bruce W. Jackson, Authors. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995. (Possibly out of print but widely available as a used book.)

A call to renew urban ministry, this series of essays urges churches to buck the current trend away from urban ministry and, instead, reclaim the power and opportunity offered by serving the city.

A good alternative if Seek the Peace of the City is not available

[Beyond Cheap Grace: A Call to Radical Discipleship, Incarnation, and Justice \(Book\)](#)

Eldin Villafañe, Author, Foreword by Howard John Loewen. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006.

In three "sermonic essays," Villafañe uses scripture to explore the concept of obedience in faith through discipleship, incarnation, and justice. He urges Christians to choose "the costly Christ-life," citing the discipleship as presented in Philippians 2. He recounts six early church visions of the incarnation as alternatives to current understanding which emphasizes theological rather than experiential interpretation. Lastly, citing the book of Amos, he describes a just model for international leadership. Commentary from Richard Peace, Juan Francisco Martinez, and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen enriches the work.

[Send My Roots Rain: A Spirituality of Justice and Mercy \(Book\)](#)

Megan McKenna, Author. New York, NY: Doubleday, 2003.

Drawing on legend, story, and poetry from a variety of traditions—Judaism, Christianity, Hindu, Zen, Native American, popular culture, and others— Megan McKenna offers a series of reflections on the spiritual foundations of justice and mercy. Considering justice and mercy in terms of the Divine is an important first-step in understanding how they can be achieved in the world. Is the Holy One just or merciful? Which do we want for ourselves? For others? These and other questions are inspired by these reflections, which are ideally suited for group discussion and personal meditation.

[Urban Churches, Vital Signs \(Book\)](#)

Nile Harper, Author. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005.

This book showcases the thriving urban ministries of 28 churches from across the religious landscape, including Mainline, Evangelical, Roman Catholic, and African American churches located in fifteen different cities. Focusing on creative initiatives developed in response to social issues such as economic development, housing, health-care, and education, this book offers examples for other congregations wanting to provide justice ministries and play a vital role in their urban communities. In addition to details about the specific ministries developed, the book includes discussion of how theology, worship, pastoral leadership, partnerships, racial identify, family life, funding, and imagination influenced these congregations in their transformation to urban ministry.

This interview is part of the "Wise Voices" effort, which gathers thoughts and essays from people who know congregations. These are leaders with know-how—through first-hand knowledge, academic study, or practical experience. If you are or know of a "Wise Voice" we should include, please contact us at info@crg.org.