



Where Do We Go from Here?

## Where Have We Gone From There?:

### **A Theological Reflection on Economic Justice in Memphis/Shelby County and Beyond Over the Past 50 Years By Rev. Earle J. Fisher**

\*\*\* Please also see- [MEMPHIS SINCE MLK – HOW AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE POOR HAVE FAIRED IN MEMPHIS AND SHELBY COUNTY OVER THE PAST 50 YEARS](#). The report, commissioned by the National Civil Rights Museum, and developed by the University of Memphis Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change, can be found on the website ([MLK50.civilrightsmuseum.org](http://MLK50.civilrightsmuseum.org)) of the National Civil Rights Museum. The MLK50 Clergy Steering Committee urges faith leaders, business, government and philanthropic leaders, community activists and ordinary citizens to use the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dr. King's assassination in our city to consider a serious and sustained call to action which will implement ways for us to move forward on these recommendations and others\*\*\*

Most people of faith would affirm that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was divinely inspired to organize people of goodwill in efforts to achieve social justice and a spiritual redemption of the soul of America during the Civil Rights Movement. While we are mindful of the ways the Civil Rights Movement has been reduced to a series of events in the 1950s and 1960s we also recognize what Dr. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall calls "[The Long Civil Rights Movement](#)" and Memphis's unique positioning in the struggle for freedom, citizenship, and empowerment of black people in the United States. From the [Memphis Massacre of 1866](#) to the rise of the first black millionaire in the United States ([Robert R. Church](#)), Memphis has remained ground zero for full inclusion and economic justice.

Dr. King's assassination in Memphis in 1968 continues to leave a social, political, and spiritual stain that has yet to be cleansed. King's prophetic initiatives – especially around the eradication of poverty, racism, and militarism– are deeply aligned with the themes found in Old and New Testament narratives. If we think about our collective response to King's death in faith-based terms, we must confess we have sinned and fallen well short of the glory of God.

As we stand on the cusp of MLK50, let's not simply commemorate King's death. Let's also concretely celebrate his life. King was both a drum major for justice and a martyr of the Movement. In his honor, as one (of many) seeking to stand on his shoulders and take up his mantle, I want to propose some necessary shifts in how we think about and participate in events and initiatives that purport to reflect King's character and cause.

We cannot honor King if we remain committed more to charity than justice. We cannot settle for tepid appeals for more mentors and individual acts of good will. We have no shortage of people who do good things. What we lack is a comprehensive plan to improve the quality of life for the

majority of our citizens. That takes much more than reading to a child for an hour each week or adopting a block in a blighted neighborhood.

When our government officials and civic leaders offer these options as the way to honor a prophet, it reveals that they do not know or understand who King was. They might call on King's public name, but they do not mirror King's prophetic nature.

We must never underestimate how King's theology undergirded his social and political witness. As theologian [Colleen Wessel-McCoy's](#) dissertation on King's Poor People's Campaign points out, King's actions were a byproduct of the social and political demands of the moment, but King also *"understood that moment theologically and was able to develop a consciousness that was both political and moral, creating a powerful theological social ethic that gave the historic moment vision and spirit."*

This vision led King to Memphis in his quest to advocate for living wages. King understood it is downright sinful for people to work 40-hour weeks and still qualify for federal assistance, as were black sanitation workers in 1968. King stood in physical solidarity with low-wage workers who were being (and continue to be) exploited. The summation of King's quest left him bleeding and ultimately breathless on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

Decades after King's death, the country continues to suffer from severe economic imbalance. "Poverty in the U.S. continues to drop, but it is increasing in the entire Memphis area," writes Dr. Elena Delavega in the [Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet's 2017 Update](#). And, to make matters worse: *"Memphis has reclaimed the unfortunate top spot as the poorest [Metropolitan Statistical Area] in the nation overall and in child poverty."*

In other words, the city where "The Dreamer" was slain remains a nadir for many of the country's inequities. Fifty years later, much of what King died fighting against in Memphis still remains – sometimes in nuanced iterations and other times in plain sight. Racism is still institutionalized. Workers are still being exploited. Government continues to both push against the will of the majority of its citizens and also aggressively usurp, minimize, or erase the contributions of grassroots leadership and organizations. From an economic justice standpoint, advances in Memphis, especially for black people, over the past 50 years have been abysmal.

Memphis remains guilty of the systemic sins and structural inequities that the New Testament book of James bemoans. Memphis continues to ignore the cries of *"the wages of laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud."* (James 5:4). Many of the exploited workers are ethnic minorities even as African Americans comprise the majority of the citizenry in Memphis. Tom Jones of Smart City Memphis [cited](#), *"the Memphis regional economy would be \$22.2 billion larger if there was no disparity between workers as a result of their race."*

I believe God is displeased with economic exploitation of labor. And, even though Memphis is situated in the Bible Belt, any reading of scripture with a lens of interpretation towards poverty

and justice would leave us damned. Current statistics offer a shrieking “amen” to this indictment. Memphis currently has the highest poverty rates in the country with more than one in every four of her citizens (27 percent) and 45 percent of God’s precious children (45 percent) living below the poverty rate.

The measures Memphis has taken in the past 50 years have not done much to attain the dream Dr. King fought and died for. We have simply used King’s legacy as a placebo to placate the people while minimizing our progress through unjust policies King never would’ve endorsed. The prophet Isaiah warned us of the wrath of those who “enact evil statutes” and “issue oppressive decrees.”

Simply put, Memphis has offered some superficial confessions but no structural repentance. And the blood of poverty and its corresponding violence lies on the hands of every social, civic, and political leader who has had a position or platform of power and influence over the past five decades.

Nevertheless, as people of faith who maintain hope in the face of despair, what we remain resolved in is that Memphis maintains the potential to do better; to do right by its citizens – all of them.

Therefore, we must offer a few recommendations (rooted in theological reflection). These proposals offer the possibility of providing the city and county with a concrete commitment to public policy that uplifts and sustains its citizens. They can cultivate the necessary shifts in the systemic, structural, and institutional landscapes, redeeming the soul of the city and help its citizens obtain, as the Scripture says, “*life...and that more abundantly.*”

In Luke 4:16-18, Jesus articulates his mission and vision for the community drawing from Isaiah 61. The tenants of Jesus’s treatise provide a foundation for us to make recommendations to our government and community leaders to improve the conditions of our citizens and make manifest the desires of Dr. King.

We are requesting that the community works together to accomplish the following:

1. **Institute a living wage ordinance** – We understand the unjust state laws that have prohibited the passage of a local living wage. We also know that Jesus said his mission is to “*tell good news to the poor.*” When Jesus made this declaration, it was in contradiction to the imperial laws that governed his local community. We are requesting that our local government exhibit the same moral courage. The best news we can offer the poor, right now, is that their work will no longer be exploited.
2. **Invest more in education than incarceration** – Jesus said he was sent to “*announce freedom to prisoners.*” We understand the connection between poor education and increased incarceration. The state of [Tennessee currently spends approximately](#) \$75 a day to incarcerate citizens but only about \$5 a day to educate them. The City of

Memphis has allocated over 60 percent of its budget to “public safety” with over 50 percent of that going to law enforcement. At the same time, however, the City of Memphis currently allocates \$0 to public education. Since budgets are moral documents, we must find a way to provide more money for public schools than we contribute to public (and private) jails.

3. **Develop a healthcare plan to supplement inadequacies in federal system** – Jesus said he had come to implement “*the recovery of sight to the blind.*” The healing measures Jesus took articulate a commitment to universal healthcare and a contempt for structures that cause people to be sick and economically exploit their sicknesses. Our city and county governments have the capacity to move us expeditiously in that direction.
4. **Aggressively boost government contracting with black and minority-owned businesses to mirror the demographics in the community.** – Jesus proclaimed that he was anointed to “*preach good news to the poor*” and to proclaim [jubilee](#)— the cancelation of debts—to the masses. King was killed trying to make good on that proclamation. The severe deficit in government contracting with black and minority-owned businesses results in a generational debt born by black workers and business owners. To cancel those debts, the city and county could immediately pass policies that commit at a proportionate amount of its business contracts with black businesses.

We believe these measures would create a community committed to a moral code of reasonable ethics. This would ensure that the site of King’s crucifixion would also become the site of our resurrection. Therefore, we are calling our entire community to work towards making these proposals tangible realities in the lives of our people with all deliberate speed.