

Alan Abrams

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[The view from Orlando -- the struggle to preserve identity in the age of Obama](#)

Barack Obama may have been many miles away, but his presence was very much felt at the Racial Ethnic Multicultural network (REM) meeting of chaplains in Orlando over the last couple of days. Obama's election has certainly given much hope to African-Americans and other ethnic minorities. But it has also posed challenges -- if an African-American can rise to the highest office in the land, does that mean America is past racism, and that therefore there is no longer a need to discuss racial discrimination and how it can be corrected? Have we become a color-blind society?

The conference's keynote speaker -- [Stacey Floyd-Thomas](#), an African-American college professor and feminist whose passion reminds me a bit of my hero [bell hooks](#) -- addressed this "color blind" issue. "I don't want to get past race; I want to get past racism," she said. "My race isn't the problem, your problem with it is."

This was my second REM conference, and it was again a privilege to be a part of it. Although I am most certainly a member of a minority group myself as a Jewish person in the world of interfaith chaplaincy, REM has a predominantly African-American feel to it, and so I feel a bit more like a guest than a participant (I especially felt like a non-participant when the keynote speaker began her morning talk with a prayer in the name of Jesus!).

But I am most happy to be a guest here. The incredible passion and thirst for justice that can come from America's black preachers -- the passion that once all of America knew in the presence of the great Martin Luther King -- is something that I almost never have a chance to see in my current life. Here at REM, however, I got to see some of it still burning bright. Floyd-Thomas' expression of deep pride in being a black woman was just one part of that.

There is another side, however. At one workshop for people, like myself, who are training for certification as chaplaincy supervisors, the issue of *privilege* came up. What happens when I start to become one of the privileged, one of the participants, asked. Am I going to no longer be recognized as "belonging here," she continued.

In reaction, another participant shared a story about coming to the neighborhood where he grew up and where his mother still lived. He overheard a conversation between two workers in a passing garbage truck. They were questioning what he was doing in the neighborhood because he didn't look like he belonged there.

I certainly do *not* think racism in America is over, but these accounts tell an important story -- many African Americans, like Barack Obama, have managed to lift the worst of the chains of racism off of themselves. They have become more privileged than oppressed.

For Jews, this transition to become more privileged than oppressed has brought great challenges along with its blessing. Oppression -- for all its evils, none of which I would wish back -- guaranteed that a Jewish person could never forget for a moment that he or she was a Jew. It guaranteed that Jews would continue to identify as Jews. And it guaranteed that Jews would create and maintain their own distinct and unique culture amid the American melting pot.

With the lifting of the worst of the oppression, Jews who are interested in the survival of a Jewish culture and identity in this country have had to work hard to find new ways of preserving that precious identity.

REM reminded me once again that African-Americans -- especially in the traditions of their churches -- have their own great, distinct and unique identity. It is my prayer that they will find new ways to maintain it, just as they find new ways to reach for the rungs of opportunity that have been appearing before them.

**Chaplain A. Paulette Birchett**  
**The Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania**

**February 11, 2009**

**How my ministry has been informed by the REM meeting**

I was appreciative for REM's invitation at the Summit and value the connectedness between all people from diverse groups. Also, I engaged in planning quality time to build and rebuild meaningful relationships. I especially was empowered by the black female clergy who share similar pastoral experiences. Being a chaplain is my calling that gave me a rebirth of my pastoral identity. It brings new meaning for my pastoral work to not focus on the injustices in society.

I raised many questions but I left the REM meeting with a renewed conviction of becoming a board certified chaplain. The pivotal moments were in the sharing our variety of stories that I felt were so sacred. My rich ancestry and family history are just as sacred and apart of me. My sacred stories bring life to inform others of who I am. These stories helped form me into the African American queen that I am, today. I like the motto "too blessed to be stressed." Being highly favored of the Lord has birth in me the will to celebrate not tolerate my uniqueness. In my pastoral identity, it is healing for me to not focus on the injustices but the victories. I refuse to feel victimized by the abuse of the past, like a second class citizen. For I know that I am fearfully and wonderfully made by God.

**How the conference contributed to my CPE experience**

As an African American female, I seek to celebrate my African American heritage while embracing all people's culture and differences. Living in community is a way to share our common threads. Although, our stories may be different we know what it feels like to experience joys and sorrows. My CPE experience gave birth to my pastoral identity. Serving as a professional chaplain is a pastoral calling. Many clergy prefer to be pastors of church buildings and preach in the pulpit, or perform weddings and funerals. However, I see myself as one with a prophetic voice that transcends the common path. God called me to empower and rebirth all people in the church, "a sacred sanctuary without walls".

## A CRISIS OF COMPASSION

*A bird does not sing because it has an answer  
It sings because it has a song.  
- Chinese proverb*

### ***Reflections during the REM Network Invitational***

Chaplain Jun Cacho, BCC Supervisor-in-Training, Catholic Health Services of Long Island, NY

The challenge posed by Dr. Stacey Floyd-Thomas during the conference evoked two recent experiences that had created an undefined disturbing gap in my practice of pastoral ministry. In December of 2008, while I was waiting for my bus, a young Latino who was ruggedly dressed approached me. It was an early, bitter winter morning. “*Por que?*” I asked, noticing that he was carrying a child bundled up in a printed pink fleece blanket. He was frantic. “*donde es la clinica? donde es la clinica?*” I pointed to the community health center, just a stone’s throw away from where we were standing, and gestured to accompany him. He hesitated and declined. He hurriedly walked away, almost like running, through the snow-covered pathway, presumably towards the direction where the doctor’s clinic was. Despite the urgency in his face, he ignored my help nor went to the nearest health center. A month earlier before that incident, I visited a hospice patient. He was a Filipino who migrated after his daughter petitioned for him. He worked hard as a farmer, growing onions to send his children to school. Each child took turns to send the next sibling through college. He had accepted the inevitable but expressed his fear not of dying but of going through it alone. In this country, he surmised, old people die alone. He could not tell the hospital staff how he felt or if the pain became unbearable. He was scared that no one would listen. His English was poor and regarded himself as an inferior peasant farmer who will be ignored when his final call comes.

Why was there so much sense of alienation? Why has deep-seated distrust, often cloaked in fear, created an invisible cleavage between men of race, religion and education? Both men were migrants. Both struggled to survive in this society, yet even at the point of despair, of death even, there was reluctance to reach out for help. In our village of care, the weakest link seemed to be that among the minority groups, those who belong to the periphery of what is marginal. They maybe grouped categorically as ‘illegal, undocumented migrants’ who are, under various circumstances, unorganized. They have no rights to any benefits of health care. Perhaps they feel that no one truly cared. An apathetic environment may have contributed to this feeling of being unwanted. In a culturally diverse society that boasts of democratic principles, what is the standard of ‘moral correctness’ and who dictates it? How does one become assimilated in a society that rebukes him? Perhaps, herewith lies the borderline between what is perception and what is reality.

This was what the challenge meant to me, to us in this ministry. It may take a huge step to fill in the shoes of ‘the other’. A step, nonetheless. The marginalized group is our neighbor. They came here out of hope; they came in fear. They came here with a dream. Regardless of skin color, language, religion, education, shouldn’t there be a universal code called compassion?

## Fear and Courage

By Thomas Chirido, NACC Cert., ACPE Supervisory Candidate

As a first time participant of a REM conference, I wondered what it would be like. Everybody I asked said they weren't going to REM. Would I know anyone? Would I be the only white person there? Would I be accepted? I felt afraid as I approached the REM conference room.

I acknowledged my fear and consciously pressed-on knowing deep in my gut that even if my fears were to be realized, justice needed my active presence. Then I wondered if my experience of fear resembled in some way the experience of people of color as they navigated in and out of white groups. Much to my relief, my fear dissolved the moment I stepped through the door. I was welcomed, and heartily so.

I once heard an elder say, "It's hard to end racism without white people doing something about it. It's hard to end sexism without men doing something about it."<sup>\*</sup> As a member of multiple dominant identity groups, I've learned that there are many things I must do in the common struggle to dismantle oppression. One of these is listening – deeply listening – to the story of the other. REM offered me that opportunity amid a vibrant, celebratory and prophetic community. I requited the love by listening, witnessing, participating, being there, acknowledging my unearned privilege, and allowing myself to be disturbed, again.

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\* That elder was Mr. Jack Gant

**Julianna Lipschutz's brief report of how my ministry has been informed by the REM meeting. This report will speak to how the conference contributed to my CPE experience.**

As a Chinese Buddhist chaplain in a Christian hospital in Philadelphia, the Opening Ritual of the REM meeting led by Rev. Dr. Snorton helped me to deepen my resolve to embrace and unite with people of different cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds. In a sense, I could better understand the relation and unity of people as I understand the unity of the four elements—earth, air, fire and water. Dr. Floyd-Thomas, the plenary speaker, helped to remind me that there remain many differences and injustices existing in this country which we cannot ignore. Her words were a powerful reminder that I have to work harder to build a bridge through my spiritual care to the others and to help bring harmony to this multicultural country.

As a second-unit CPE student, I am grateful to the REM Network which provided the means for me to attend the *Spiritual Care Collaborative Summit '09*. I was helped to learn skills of spiritual care from other chaplains from different ethnic groups and different traditions. This conference invited distinguished speakers like Dr. Benjamin W. Corn, MD to share his practices with us. Dr. Corn described models of care demonstrating how he and his medical teams combine medical and spiritual care to serve patients. The conference provided many inspiring workshops led by experienced and open-minded chaplains. I learned a great deal from “Zen Catholic” Reverend Dennis McCann’s, “On Being a Healing Presence”; from Rabbi Eliot J. Baskin’s, “Chaplain, I’m not religious, but I am Spiritual”; from American Buddhist Jennifer Block’s, “Ten Stories, Three Streams: Teaching Tales from Buddhism” and from sociologist, Wendy Cadge’s, “Reaching Out and Reaching In: Hospital Chaplaincy as a Profession.”

At the conference I attended the NACC (Catholic) Celebration of the Eucharist/Anointing of the Sick and connected to the Buddhist Chaplain Network. Before the conference, my knowledge from my CPE experience was limited to learning from my contacts with patients, chaplains in training and supervisors. This conference has helped to considerably broaden and expand my CPE experience to learn from many experienced and knowledgeable chaplains. I look forward to using and to sharing with others what I have understood and learned, and look forward to learn more in future conferences.

February 15, 2009

## Dawn Snell

### "What's Going On?"

As a Clinical Pastoral Educational Intern, "Newbie" (first time attendee @ the Spiritual Care Collaborative Conference and REM Meeting), I held high expectations upon what I would encounter @ Summit09 that would influence or allow me to take a critical look at the ministry of which God has called me to. Although I have attended numerous conferences and seminars prior to the Summit09, this was the first time that I anticipated gleaning information that would enhance that which I am already gifted with.

The REM Meeting was very informative as well as intense, inclusive of the Guest Speaker's (Rev. Dr. Stacy Floyd-Thomas) admonitions and exhortations to the awaiting "congregation" that if we are to be true encouragers and authentically empower those that we encounter and minister to in the ministry of healing, we must be true to our call. Thus, we must not deny the divine calling within us that stirs up the masses. In doing so, we must not put on the spirit of narcissism or pride, but humility as we enact our testimonies to others by starting out with our deficiencies, by owning up to them. This is redemption in the best paradigm, which then leads to self-love, and not being the perceived elephant in the room. It is then that we become the elephant, acknowledge your weaknesses and ask, "*where are the peanuts?*" Thus, we become viable healing agents of transformation by the power of our testimonies and our ministries of presence.

As an arena and backdrop to all that Dr. Floyd-Thomas had to offer through ethics as the focal point of dealing with a racially and ethnically diverse faith community, her power point presentations background music was the renowned recording of "What's Going On", by the late blues, rhythm and soul singer, Marvin Gaye. I always related to this prophetic song, one that has stood the test of time. This song, which was released in 1971 and chosen as one of 50 recordings in 2003 by the Library of Congress to be added to the National Recording Registry sums up for me in more ways than one, the question that I not only have for God in my private communion with him, but also for those whom I would like to call, "pimping and prostituting" the Gospel of Jesus who is the Christ. In addition, included with them is the government and all the oppressors under the leadership of various "Pharaohs". It is through this songs lyrics that my ministry has been engulfed in and the REM Meeting confirmed it in more ways than imaginable.

In conclusion, there are so many other facets that I can go into, but space will not allow me too. I left the REM meeting assuring myself that I have been confirmed and affirmed as a role model, counselor and teacher in my vocation and calling in the realm of chaplaincy.

# Investing in My Ministry

A reflection from the 2009 REM Conference

Presented by: Algernon A. Williams, M.Div

The 2008 REM conference held in Orlando, Florida provided a great opportunity for me to reflect deeper on broader issues that presented themselves in the beginning of what is now, my second trimester of my first year residency program. Throughout those two-days in which I was involved in the conference, it brought me together with some of the brightest minds in our profession; some familiar individuals (past supervisors, former senior hospital chaplain (retired) and fellow seminary graduates) and also new individuals whom I will now have the opportunity to forge lasting bonds (CPE supervisors, residents (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> yr), seminarians and lay persons).

I attended a couple breakout sessions and an excellent presentation by the keynote speaker Dr. Stacey M. Floyd -Thomas (Vanderbilt University) on “Where’s the Moral Outrage: The Crisis of Race, Religion and Education. She accomplished the mission of raising our conscience about confronting the interdisciplinary and intercultural ills of our Community. Dr. Thomas by posed the question for consideration, the various ways in which “I” can be outraged, but more importantly, the price I am willingly to pay to help change by being changed? I continue to discover in CPE an emergent need for self reflection and self diagnostics to faithfully embrace the criticisms necessary for transformation. Moreover, increased attention on perspectives of improvement echoed through the presentation that challenged not only the individual, but the world to do diligence and walk humbly before our God. Thus by suggesting these approaches, the perennial reflections upon the self in light of our moral outrage, will as Marvin Gaye sings, “find a way to bring some loving here today.”<sup>1</sup>

Arguably, racism and intolerance in society has reflected its muddle upon us since the writing of the biblical scriptures. Even before the work of the likes of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the twentieth century or his work on moral outrage and social injustice, unmasking racism has fashioned the elaboration of religiosity. A crossing point and drawing upon courage has introduced not only empowerment but also awareness of self-identity. As in critical reflection and care, the broader conception of investment has come to refer to not only the individual interrelated in the community to be reconciled, but this concept also refers to the emerging negotiations within the religious communities to critique the cultural structures that form the dynamics of the functionality of racism.

The theme of assessing theologies and theories of change, also expressed methodological concern. It was marked by the recognition that theological reflection is rooted within the particularities of endeavors for uncovering truth and claiming authentic relationship of self. Moreover, the theology of inspiration should explore the faithfulness and willingness to commit and be accountability of change. In other words, self- reflection

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<sup>1</sup> Benson, Renaldo/Cleveland, Alfred w/Gaye, Marvin P, *What’s Going On* (Tamia Records 1971).

within spiritual dimensions of discourse is part of the fabric of CPE; CPE is a part of the rational discourse of self-reflection.

This conference explored such questions and themes from various perspectives, especially from the perspective of creating space to do reflective work in theology. The central focus for me was the relationships and the private moments shared and the styles of conversation discovered in communicating approaches. While operating in the framework of calling those moral outrages out like I see them, calling people into community and inter-connectedness. This would call the attention to the motivation for individuals to dialogue with one another, to be free and frank with honesty, bold, open, and vulnerable.

In conclusion, the REM conference challenged all of us to find a way as Marvin did to find a way to bring some loving here today. Even if you are challenged to embark on the journey alone, that it is imperative that you confront racism, injustices, and poverty at every turn. In that our intentionality must be in inspiring others in the pursuit of creating something out of nothing.