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## **Justice Seeking is Joy Seeking: The formation of faith-informed, community-focused, critical consciousness in adolescents**

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**Summary/Abstract** Seeking justice, understanding what makes for peace and pursuing it, these are integral aspects of the pursuit of the Good life. In this chapter three seasoned youth and community development experts make the case that 1) a vital aspect of development is empowering adolescents with a faith-informed, community-focused, critical consciousness; 2) young people are formed in community and joy cannot be fully experienced except communally and in the pursuit of JustPeace; and 3) the church has opportunities to intervene at critical junctures in youth formation to help them see the importance of pursuing communal JustPeace for their own ability to live the Good Life. In support of these claims, a framework of ***RADICAL Identity*** is postulated and two practices - *The Eight Bowls ritual* for generational identity marking and the *Game of Life*, which is part of a three - week intentional community of the ***Youth Theological Initiative*** (YTI) – are presented. Each practice contributes to formation of justice-seeking identities in adolescents as integral aspects of preparation for the life-long pursuit of God’s joy, God’s good life, and even God’s salvation.

**Key words:** justice; critical consciousness, ritual, intentional community; Game of Life, RADICAL identity.

**Introduction.** I (author #1) attended a well-regarded, public, college-preparatory, high school. Many poor and lower middle-class students like myself were given the opportunity for an exceptional education alongside students from upper-middle class and extremely wealthy families. Our education preparation was probably better than most of the expensive private schools in the area. The folklore surrounding the schools was that admission was merit-based; the best three (3%) percent of test takers in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade throughout the entire city were invited to attend the school. I was, however, angered and disappointed almost to the point of despondency when I learned that the best “test takers” actually meant the “best *able-bodied* test takers,” and that friends, who I judged to be much smarter than myself, were being arbitrarily excluded because they were wheel-chair bound. The presence of this structural and systemic injustice was denying my friends opportunities. I was further saddened when I noticed later how, despite our best intentions, the separation caused by the school admissions policy impacted my relationships with my differently-abled friends. Those relationships, like so many others in society, were damaged and impeded by systemic arrangements, structural factors, and cultural narratives that animated our separation and inequitably distributed opportunities. Those systems and structures impeded our individual and collective flourishing. We were denied the joy that would only be available in a more just community.

At the time, there were no adults around me either in my family or at school or church to teach me methods of responding to injustice in any way other than sullen withdrawal and angry protest. I was injured and disappointed when I did not get any response from adults in my life suggesting that the fight for justice was part of my faith. All of this caused me to question church and God.

The modern church is also deeply inhibited in its effective witness by conforming to the systemically and culturally affirmed separations along lines of race, ethnicity, language, class, and sexual identity. There are certain church practices, such as worship services and business meetings that exclude children and youth, pulpits that exclude women, and full communions that exclude and even dehumanize people based on their sexuality, structurally marginalize various groups and, in effect, teach the young people (who are always watching) to accept structural injustices as part of the operation of the faith. The church sends very

mixed and often misdirecting signals when we do not emphasize justice-seeking as an integral expression of faith.

To be sure, local churches, as an approach to reconciliation, often create opportunities to get along and even to worship together across socially-constructed boundaries. However, I am now very clear that *personal* reconciliation doesn't eliminate *structural* violence. It is justice seeking, peacebuilding, and personal reconciliation *within a just order* that address the deeper barriers to joy. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the Church to create a faith-informed, community focused, justice-orientation in our youth to prepare them to be active agents in pursuit of this JustPeace order.

Discussing my early experiences with my colleagues and co-authors, I was buoyed to learn that I was not alone in these concerns. As we prepared to write this chapter, we shared our own stories of youthful experiences of faith and community, and arrived at three interconnected observations about the relationship between justice, reconciliation, joy, and adolescent flourishing:

- 1) empowering adolescents with a faith-informed, community-focused, critical consciousness is a vital aspect of youth development
- 2) young people are formed in community and joy cannot be fully experienced except communally and in the pursuit of JustPeace; and
- 3) the church has many opportunities to intervene at critical junctures in youth formation to help youth see the importance of pursuing communal JustPeace as a central component to their own ability to live God's Good Life.

In this chapter, we make the case both theologically and sociologically that *justice-seeking is joy-seeking. We argue that the development of a faith informed, community-focused, critical-consciousness is or should be an essential aspect of youth development and faith formation. Such a critical consciousness will result in what Author #1 characterizes as a RADICAL identity.* We then present two personal vignettes from our various experiences of faith formation that highlight the interrelatedness of justice, joy, and the critical role that the church can play in the type of adolescent faith formation and

development of a critical consciousness toward the life-long pursuit of God's joy and Good Life. Each vignette serves as an introduction to a faith-formation practice that can be used to reinforce the integral relationship between justice-seeking and joy-seeking.

### **The Joy of JustPeace**

God's plan and vision for Joy and the Good Life include interpersonal and communal relationships that are founded in justice and pursued within an environment of peace; this combined contextual experience is described as JustPeace, and has its roots in three biblical terms.

The Hebrew terms for justice as they appeared frequently in the Hebrew and Christian literature are *mishpat* and *sedeq* (Hemphill 2015). *Mishpat* was the term invoked for justice when the primary focus was expressing concern for marginalized populations including the poor, the widow, the alien, and the orphan, and the command to act on their behalf (Jer. 9:23-24; Ps. 10:17-18). Justice in this sense is constructed as "the juxtaposition of God's Law against God's love. By abiding in love, we allow the justice (*mishpat*) of God to prevail in our lives" (Nworie 2016). The other term that is most often translated as relating to justice is the Hebrew root word *sedeq*, which is a relational reference most often translated as right, righteous, and righteousness. Joy involves abiding in God's love, which involves creating communal spaces that align with God's concern for the establishment of the types of relationships that reject marginalization, alienation, and other injustices.

The Hebrew word *shalom* is generally translated in English as peace. This simple translation obscures much of the complex nature that is expressed within the scriptural references to *shalom*. In addition to states of non-violence and non-domination, *shalom* refers to a sense of completion, wholeness, integrity, and well-being. More than an absence of war, *shalom* "ensures good physical health as well as the absence of deprivations [and] is illustrated in relationships that embody personal harmony with others, and harmony with God" (Nworie 2016, 51).

These biblical constructions of peace and justice both point to the same end: God's love is expressed in right relationships and God's joy is available in some measure proportionate to the extent of the widespread availability of justice and peace. Liberation theology and Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel both invoked these biblical understandings of JustPeace in an effort to incite the church to pursue justice as a central aspect of pursuing God's Good Life and even God's salvation.

## **Injustice as Inhibitor of Joy**

Joy is the complex of emotions, thoughts, and transcendent, often unspeakable, experiences that come from living both personally and communally in alignment with God's plan and vision. Individual and group identities are formed in reciprocal relationships with the people, groups and systems (including the environment) within our developmental ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1977). "Joy involves the construal of the object as good; it is tied to how we perceive things rather than what things are in themselves" (Volf 2015, 129). Joy emerges as a measure of the sense of reciprocal well-being present in such an ecosystem. As such, seeking justice and understanding what makes for peace and pursuing it are integral aspects of the pursuit of God's Good life. This pursuit requires a critical consciousness to reflect on the present state of being and "a holistic aliveness in order to know right from wrong 'in our bones' in order to be able to understand, know and defend basic human dignity, and promote human flourishing" (Moschella 2015). The opportunities exist to develop this consciousness and holistic aliveness as part of youthful faith formation.

Joy is not an all-or-nothing proposition; rather, there can be degrees of the experience of joy. A life well-lived in pursuit of justice and peace contributes to personal experiences of joy. In this way, even in the absence of fully just and peaceful communities, a measure of joy becomes available when we know that we are living our lives in accordance with God's plan by contributing to the establishment and sustaining of JustPeace in the ways we are capable.

Joy occurs as we come to see that God is neither arbitrary nor capricious, that God is concerned with the details of not only our lives and the lives of those like us, but the lives of others not like us. The blessing and presence of God is most observable in contexts where we witness the well-being of others or at least notice that the lack of well-being does not target specific groups because of some arbitrary socially or politically determined aspect of their identity. While there is certainly a truth associated with the faith axiom that describes God's wisdom as unsearchable, this neither explains nor excuses any arbitrary and obviously politically motivated injustices in the world. The presence of this type of injustice or cultural violence should, at least, create a sense of dis-ease and produce an anxiety that robs one of the possibility of the fullness of joy.

The capacity to a) reflect on power dynamics that establish and sustain domination, b) read literature from the perspective of the oppressed, and c) unveil and deconstruct the socializing myths and societal narratives that normalize difference and affirm hierarchies and

oppression are all critical capacities for those who would work towards the development of a just and peaceful world order. This critical consciousness also creates an understanding of how one might act prophetically in response to injustice, regardless of whether they are beneficiaries of the unjust order. The process of faith formation and education that highlight critical reflection and action is a *critical pedagogy*.

### **Empowering youth with a faith informed, community focused, critical pedagogy**

*Critical Consciousness* is a theoretical approach to education that focuses on the role of oppression and privilege in creating and sustaining social and individual dysfunction (Freire 1973). It is the *conscientization* or awareness-raising from this approach that allows people to creatively and effectively respond to the sources of unwanted marginalization and oppression regardless of whether they are in the marginalized or privileged position. Critical consciousness, which consists of both reflection and action, results in an ability to read literature and read the world in a manner that supports transformation of oppressive systems. It would seem almost tautological that the way youth should be taught to read literature, especially Scriptures, is in support of transformation of an oppressive world. However, simply developing a critical consciousness is not enough. Freire describes critical consciousness as consisting of both reflection and action geared toward transformation of social systems and conditions (Freire 1970/2002). It is a kind of critical literacy that involves reading written words and reading the world (Freire and Macedo 2013).

Critical consciousness is employed in support of normative propositions about the way that the world ‘ought’ to be. For Christians, the narratives that define the world’s “oughtness,” should be drawn from the images of a JustPeace world order as described in the Holy Scriptures. No gender bias, no ethnic division, no war machinery, people living full and healthy lives, no economic exploitation—these are all moral propositions contained in Scripture that should animate and guide the critical consciousness efforts of the Church’s adolescent faith formation. Further, faith-informed critical consciousness should have as its unit of focus the larger collective and not the individual actor. When Jesus was presented with a question about individual salvation “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”, his response was “care for your neighbor” (Luke 10). In his eschatological parable of sheep and goats concerning the end of time and the inheritance of the blessings of God, Jesus described those who cared for the sick, the poor, and marginalized as those who would receive God’s

inheritance. (Matthew 25:31-46). If critical consciousness is faith-informed, it will necessarily also be community-focused.

A faith-informed, community focused, critical consciousness would allow all of us in the face of multiple and intersectional injustices to recognize Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s profound wisdom when in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail he proclaimed that:

“In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... This is the inter-related structure of reality.” (King, Jr. 1963)

#### A RADICAL Approach to Identity Formation

Our identities are formed within the contours of societal narratives, most of which are hidden from our plain view. These narratives are relational in the sense that they have the effect of distributing power and possibility, establishing societal hierarchies and either rejecting or normalizing all forms of marginalization, domination, and exclusion. The formation of youth identities will reflect whether those charged with this responsibility held the conscious intention of acting as a counter-balance against the socializing institutions, systems, and narratives that will try to persuade our youth to pursue individualistic, materially measured life path. Ultimately, successful youth formation occurs when youth develop a healthy, hopeful, agentic sense of themselves. As a theoretical approach to identity formation, I (Author 1) follow an acronym – **RADICAL: Relationally- constructed; Authentic; Dignified; Inter-Connected; Affirming; and Legitimated** - that should inform intention for all faith formation activities.

- **Relationally- constructed** identities exist when we recognize that we are not independent units free and distinguishable from every other person. A relationally constructed identity would recognize that as a member of a larger collective our contributions, successes and capacities are directly connected to all others, not in a metaphysical and ethereal sense but in actuality (I Corinthians 12: 12-26). This is what Archbishop Desmond Tutu refers to as the principle of Ubuntu;

- **Authentic** identities emerge from a place of wholeness and hope not tragedy and despair. Jeremiah 29: 11-12;
- **Dignified** identities emerge when a person recognizes that they are worthy of honor and respect in every aspect of their being; not superior but wholly loved and appreciated. This will often require paying the type of attention that becomes necessary to counter the damaging societal narratives that establish superiorities and inferiorities. In many of our churches, this will also require an internal assessment to notice the ways in which our theological narratives, systems, structures, and relational practices create space for certain but not all identities;
- **Inter-Connectedness** implies that it is not enough to know that we are shaped by the existence of the other, God's just order requires that our relationally constructed, authentic, and dignified existence also be one of co-existence (Ezekiel 37: 15- 20);
- **Affirming** is the flip side of the same coin as dignity. Our youth identities are formed in their ecology by the interaction with all other socializing institutions such as the school, family, law enforcement, and so on. It is not enough that the youth experience a personal sense of worth (dignity), as an expression of our faith, we have to actively engage all the systems the youth will interact with to assure that the treatment in those contexts affirms their sense of dignity and worth; and
- **Legitimated** is to say that it is not enough to rely on the intentions of the people who work in and manage all the systems and institutions that the youth will engage with to assure the presence of dignity and affirmation, the church should advocate so that these practices, attitudes, and values, become woven into the institutional fabric.

The church today is presented with the challenge and opportunity, especially during adolescent faith formation, to help youth construct a faith-informed, communally-focused, critical consciousness during the foundational years. If this is not done in adolescence, youth will likely reproduce the marginalizing systems and affirm the capitalist domination logic that contributes so greatly to their own experiences of alienation (Ross and Vinson 2006, 148) and leave this as an inheritance to the next generation.

So how can the church work to develop a faith-informed, community-focused critical consciousness within congregational practices of faith formation? In the next section, two

personal vignettes are presented to demonstrate the possibility. Each vignette serves as an introduction to and anecdotal rationale for a faith formation practices that has been developed and refined over decades to achieve the type of faith formation we advocate in this chapter. Each vignette and practice is offered to reinforce the following principles:

**Situated learning as Situated Flourishing** young people are formed in community; one central aspect of how communities are established and maintained is through the ritual practices that span across generations; and

**The church has opportunities to intervene at a critical juncture** in youth formation to help youth see the importance of pursuing communal JustPeace; communal JustPeace has to span across the bounds of diverse communities.

### **Principle #1: Situated Learning as Situated Flourishing**

I (Author 3) was born and raised in South Los Angeles, California in the late 50's and early 60's, a time in American history steeped in Black political activism, African cultural renaissance and social rebellion. I am that child, the one who watched and wondered, the one who held on tightly to big sister's hand at the community rallies, and the one who wore an "Afro" when it wasn't considered a "respectable Christian hairstyle." I was that girl who learned to sing freedom songs to the younger children eating breakfast at the community freedom school, the one to ask my mother to find us a black flocked Christmas tree or nothing at all.

My learning and understanding about God, church, family and community was all situated in this spirit of rebellion and in the spirit of cultural worth. I remember watching the nuns of Regina Caeli High School where I attended make "an example" out of the African American senior class students who defied the rules and wore natural hair styles. I recall myself wondering what was more important to them than graduation? Asking a few of them this question gave rise to naming a belief that I would later understand as *self-determination*. In the context of a catholic school education, I began to see it, this belief in self-determination in the way the Catholic schools existed in our poor neighborhoods, upholding what they believed was the will of God. It was in this social location before I knew what to call it, that I saw this Black girl standing up for her community.

This cultivation of community priority in conjunction with individual aims has been the path of existence for my work and my life. It made the research on and practice of rituals as community learning and generational identity a natural consequence of my lived experience. An unexpected revelation was to discover that this dual principle of life - community learning and generational identity formation - was exactly how African people survived the great interruption (enslavement) to our African spirituality, family life and identity. African traditional philosophies embrace the complimentary nature of joy and sorrow. Consequently, the conditions of segregation and Jim Crow sustained this worldview in us as a pragmatic response to the racism as well as attributing it to the character of serving justice. My continued study in and practice of African ways of being provided the lens to identify this complimentary perspective of life in Negro spirituals, African American literature, and in the activism and protest movements of the 60s and 70s. "This joy that I have the world didn't give to me. The world didn't give it, so the world can't take it away" was (and still is) a battle cry. African American workers sang this song to remind ourselves of a sense of joy that could not be altered by the vicissitudes of racism and white supremacy. Despite the daily assault, there is joy to experience.

What resulted from adopting this African worldview of complementariness is a community of memory workers, a circle of apprentices as ritual keepers who work with youth, families, community leaders and organizations to recapture and resituate the learning of community joy and wholeness in the midst of adversity through ritual. The *eight-bowl ceremony* is one such manifestation. While the ceremony is developed from an understanding of African principles of community and generational identity formation, the values instilled are universally applicable to those seeking justice and seeking joy.

### **Practice # 1: The 8 Bowls of Life Ceremony in Generational Identity Formation**

This is a life cycle ritual developed as part of the initiatory education in the House of Umoja, a Black nationalist and cultural activist organization of the 70's that was modeled after the Secret Societies of traditional Africa. It is the blending of traditional African culture and cosmology with the experiences of resistance movements by people of African descent to frame what is referred to as the "New Afrikan." The House of Umoja still exist today within the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM) and was also known as the Revolutionary

Action Movement (RAM) Black Panther Party of Northern California (Akinyela, 2012). It reflects an African and African American belief that life is “both/and” never “either/or”. Consequently, acknowledgement of the sweet and bitter or the hot and cool aspects of life as a part of life, shifts one’s interpretation of life towards balance as an ideal instead of one of “more and not less” which is often associated with aspirations towards material gain.

**Preparation:** The bowls are prepared for tasting by those involved in the ritual. This ritual has been performed at every significant life passage: birth, adolescent to adulthood, organizational initiations or apprenticeships, marriage and eldership and transition from this physical life. An explanation is given for the element and everyone takes a taste from each bowl after each explanation. Depending upon the size of the group, multiple settings of the eight-bowl can be prepared. The language of the bowl is changed to fit the occasion. Dr. Akinyela, a member of the House of Umoja explains the 8-bowl in this manner:

1. *Wine* - **Appreciation for Tradition and Family:** To learn strength in racial/ethnic pride, commitment to household and extended family, reverence, value and appreciation for the foundation for life chances which those who came before have laid.
2. *Honey* - **Joy in Relationships:** To learn to appreciate the sweetness and goodness of life experienced through positive interpersonal relationships.
3. *Lime* - **How to Overcome Bitterness:** To develop a sense of expectation that betrayal by human beings will occur in life (healthy paranoia) and to learn to retain dignity, composure and self-worth even when feeling hurt by the words, actions or inaction of other people.
4. *Salt* **Wisdom and Balance in Making Life Choices:** To learn flexibility, creativity and moral balance in making choices and decisions.
5. *Red Pepper (chili)* - **Resilience in Critical Situations:** To learn to expect the unpredictable circumstances in the form of crisis situations and tragedy and to develop the ability to be resilient in the face of crisis.
6. *Water* - **Willingness to be Renewed and Changed:** To learn spiritual depth, and to know “where your help comes from,” and how to go about receiving spiritual renewal.
7. *Oil* - **Reliance on Community Power:** To learn to move towards inevitable death with confidence and grace. This is a confidence born out of the learned appreciation of the power of a cohesive family and community where each person is valued for their

*contribution. To be able to reflect this confidence and grace as wisdom and encouragement to the youth as an example of true power.*

8. ***Coconut - Assurance of Inevitable Blessings:** To learn reliance on One greater than one's self and with age and wisdom to recognize your blessings and good luck as life benefits which have nothing to do with your own intelligence, skill, or power, but is solely due to the unpredictable goodness of the God. (Akinyela 2012, 8)*

Like people in community and like communities in relationship to other communities, these life lessons are interdependent of each other. They are in some life context, complimented by at least one of the other bowls. The foundation of the principles as emerging from a place of resistance and survival reminds the participants that the Christian narrative also emerged from communities living at the margins. The assurance of a dignified quality of life for these communities – a preferential option for the poor – emphasizes the continuing commitment to justice as a continuing embodiment of the faith.

The balance of bitter and sweet and challenge and triumph reiterated at each stage of life development and transition reinforces the understanding that concern for community is appropriate at all stages of life. This also emphasizes the notion that there are several critical developmental junctures where the church as community has the opportunity to intervene for good. The next vignette and practice serve to highlight this point as well.

***Principle # 2: The church has many opportunities to intervene at critical junctures in the lives of youth.***

I (Author 2) was a child of the 70s and 80s, and a white middle-class person growing up in ethnically and socio-economically diverse Toledo, Ohio. As a cradle Methodist, I do not have a story of conversion to Christianity, but rather a story of conversion to social justice, which I attribute directly to the youth ministry programs I attended in the 1980s. Our church was too small to support a paid youth minister, and our “youth group” consisted mainly of my sister and myself, and 2 other sets of siblings. In true Methodist connectionalism, our local band of youth traveled regularly to attend district and conference youth gatherings, including the annual “Peace with Justice Youth Retreat.” At these retreats, surrounded by youth and adults who loved the church and took their faith seriously, I first came to understand the complex dynamics of race, class and gender, as well as my own vocation as both an activist and youth worker.

One particular retreat is seared in my memory. In 1984, our leaders led us in a simulation game in which different youth were given the various identities of race ascribed in South Africa, at that time still fully operating under Apartheid laws. Some of us had full movement and privilege, others were crowded into a small space with limited movement, and others had some privileges but not others. I will always remember the moment I realized that a great injustice—structural in nature—was occurring on the other side of the world, and that I was called, not only to do something about it, but to learn from it in order to understand United States culture as well. Deep within the center of mainline Protestantism, at the heart of its youth ministry, I was lucky enough to learn about structural oppression and told I was meant to be part of transforming it. I was 13 years old, entering fully into adolescence. At this critical moment, I found my vocation as a Christian, and it has been my life’s work ever since. As director of the Youth Theological Initiative, a summer residential program for high school youth at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, GA, I have drawn on my church youth group experience of more than 30 years ago to adapt a simulation game for youth that introduces them to the concepts of structural injustice and intersectionality, while connecting them to expanded definitions of sin and grace and to a vision of Christian vocation as transforming injustice through nonviolent action.

### Practice # 2: Exploring Structural Oppression and Intersectionality: The Game of Life

In the *Game of Life*, students are assigned multifaceted identities—generally, quite different from the ones they have in real life—that include class, race, immigrant status, affectional orientation, disability and gender. Not knowing the specific combinations of identities they carry with them, the students are given different amounts of play money and told simply to go out and “live.” The adults in the roles of bank tellers, government workers, salespeople, police officers, wardens, court judges, and church pastors are instructed to treat students differently based on the social location codes on their nametags. While the way these identities are treated are concentrated in a short amount of time, most of the actions are not greatly exaggerated from what different groups on the margins attest to experiencing regularly. In training the adult volunteers how to act, we tell them to use “microaggressions.” Microaggressions are “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group memberships...They have also been described as ‘subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically and unconsciously’ (Sue 2010, 24). Participants discover quickly that some are treated warmly,

while others are ignored or even harassed, and that the same person can receive some benefits in one space while be denied certain benefits in other spaces.

Though the exercise is only a game, all participants—both adults and youth—become caught up in it quickly. Within 30 minutes, the system is in full swing. Wealth inequality grows with each “payday,” and the difference in how people are treated at each station becomes increasingly pronounced. Real emotions emerge: those at the bottom become frustrated, even angry or despondent, while those at the top run from station to station, continuing to amass more material possessions, degrees, and higher ranking jobs, with visible glee. The adults become consumed by their roles, and begin to see only the codes, as individual people become mere categories they size up quickly in order to do their jobs. Some even start to innovate new ways to enforce the system of which they are a part.

In our reflective conversations after the game, several insights emerge indicating the development or heightening of a critical consciousness. The students who begin the game with the most social and financial capital always amass more capital and are rarely even aware of the fact that their peers are struggling to keep up or play the game at all. The students at the bottom of the social hierarchy, cycling in and out of jail and unable to find work because of their criminal records, realize how difficult it is to get ahead when so much is stacked against them. The adults playing the bureaucrats are amazed at how quickly they take on the mentality of prejudice and suspicion—and how seductive the abuse of power becomes. Resistance to the injustice is minimal, episodic and confined to only a few people; on the whole, everyone assumes that the point of the game is to amass wealth and wield power as isolated individuals, and very rarely does anyone try to organize, share power or wealth, or stand in solidarity with others. Because of the multiple layers of the assigned identities, a particular student might experience respect in certain spaces yet be treated with suspicion or condescension in others. Life, it seems, is complicated, and swirls around us even as we try to move forward along our own trajectories.

At the conclusion of the game, I introduce two concepts, one sociological and one theological. “*Intersectionality*” -- the idea that multiple social identities overlap and oppression is multidimensional -- helps the students make sense of their experience of participating in a complex world in which they have more power in some spaces than others and can indeed benefit from the oppression of others even as they also experience oppression themselves (Crenshaw 1989). “*Principalities and powers*” -- the Pauline phrase theologian Walter Wink draws

on to explain how human systems, created good yet now fallen, can be redeemed through Jesus Christ's liberating grace -- helps illuminate what is at stake for the students as Christians (Wink 1992). We are all participants in human institutions and systems that can become demonic when they destroy the *imago Dei* of both the oppressors and the oppressed caught up in them. The powers are bigger than any one individual and therefore cannot be blamed on any scapegoat individual or group. But they do operate with the complicity of each individual, and we therefore have the power and the responsibility to act to transform them.

In our program, this workshop happens early on, so that we can continue to process the experience and draw on it as we venture out into the city to see how structural injustice operates in the real world, and as we venture inward to see how each of us suffer from and participate in systems that create division and inequality. We look at examples of people of faith who are working to transform these systems through nonviolent action, and take inventory of our own skills and interests with an eye towards empowering ourselves to contribute our gifts to effect meaningful change. This activity, and most crucially, the critical reflection afterwards, helps students understand that we as Christians are caught up in systems that cause harm to others -- sometimes even without our realizing it -- and that these principalities and powers are under the dominion of God and are therefore redeemable when we use what power we have to be Christ's hands and feet in the world. This approach both raises awareness of injustice and sin and offers specific pathways to action. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by the seemingly insurmountable problems in the world, students are inspired to act because they know they stand in a tradition of brave, faithful people whose personal piety propelled them into social transformation. These are the seeds of joy: to move out into the world, bolstered by the great cloud of witnesses, to join in where God is already working in the world for justice and peace.

### **Conclusion:**

The *Game of Life* demonstrates in action the practice of helping youth form a faith-informed, community-focused, critical consciousness. The action cycle of a) reading a situation, b) reflecting on the situation in light of the JustPeace centric narrative of the faith, and c) building strategies for transformative action is exactly the process urged by Freire (1973), Rossatto (2006), Hooker and Potter-Czajkowski (2012) and others. Combining practices of daily conscientization, such as the *Game of Life*, with periodic rituals such as *Eight Bowls* to reinforce the communal nature of identity will result in adolescents who have

***RADICAL identities.*** This will set them up for the lifelong pursuit of justice-seeking, joy-seeking, and the experience of God's Good Life.

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