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A challenge to elder prophets: Help empower the next generation

Jamie Manson | Nov. 18, 2010

If you attended the Call to Action conference earlier this month, you no doubt came in contact with Shane Claiborne. He offered a Friday evening keynote address that was at turns affecting and entertaining.

If you didn?t attend the conference, you may have seen Tom Roberts?s recent profile of this urban monk [1].

Claiborne became the highly visible figurehead of the ?new monasticism? movement after starting a community called The Simple Way with a group of friends from his Evangelical college. The Simple Way is one of many faith-based communities that live among those in need in the hope of creating positive change and transformation through service to the surrounding neighborhood.

Those who planned this year?s CTA conference were intentional about making the conference intergenerational, which is why Claiborne, a thirty-five year old Evangelical Christian, was invited to offer the keynote.

Though I have appreciated Claiborne?s work for some time, I was somewhat saddened that, on this rare occasion that a keynoter was from my generation, the chosen speaker was not a born and bred Catholic. There are so many young Catholics who have honored their Catholic faith and education by doing extraordinary work in homeless shelters and feeding programs; peace and justice organizations; community centers; hospitals and hospices; universities and parishes.

But as more than one CTA planner explained to me, none of them is ?big? enough to ascend to the same podium that would be shared by luminaries such as Episcopalian Bishop John Spong and Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister that weekend.

This is sad and true. And I think it is important to ask why.

Though Claiborne and his community members have worked feverishly to build their movement and effect positive change amid urban decay and desolation, Claiborne?s success is a helpful study in the power of having the support of influential elders.

While Claiborne credits his reading of Dorothy Day and a brief stint with Mother Teresa as a source of influence over his work in The Simple Way community, the majority of his adherents share his Evangelical faith.

Born in the Bible Belt state of Tennessee, Claiborne attended Eastern University -- a Christian college where he came under the mentorship of Tony Campolo and also served as an intern at Willow Creek Community Church, a wealthy mega-church outside of Chicago.

Though lesser-known in Catholic circles, Campolo is influential and prolific in the Evangelical world. He?s authored more than thirty books and offers over 400 speaking engagements a year. He specializes in youth ministry and generally sides with more progressive Evangelical Christian points-of-view.

Claiborne has had the gift of being encouraged and promoted by Campolo. This no doubt helped him to publish a spiritual memoir by the age of 30, with a forward written by another influential elder: Jim Wallis. Also a progressive Evangelical, Wallis is *The New York Times* bestselling author of *God?s Politics* and editor-in-chief/CEO of the *Sojourners* magazine and community.

As Tom Roberts reports, Claiborne has an earning power well into six figures. Though Claiborne only takes a salary of $800 a month, gaining this kind of income from speaking and writing suggests that there is an exceptional number of admirers and advocates behind The Simple Way.

There is no question that Claiborne is uniquely gifted and his ministry is inspired. But I do wonder whether what started as a small group of Evangelical college students looking to live and work among the poor would have acquired so much acclaim and influence without the profile-raising power of men like Campolo and Wallis.

For decades many Catholic young adults? communities similar to The Simple Way have done extraordinary work, yet they have never garnered the media attention or visibility of Claiborne.

When I was a divinity student, we had the opportunity to host an event that drew together several of the women and men who worked closely with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. In their recollections, they pointed out that these great prophets of the civil rights and social change did not arise out of a vacuum.

Though their prophetic roads were sometimes lonely, King and Parks gained their courage and strength from their communities of supportive, passionate people. The same could be said of Dorothy Day, Simone Weil, and Oscar Romero. Claiborne?s rise to prominence is no exception to this rule.

Many young Catholics are as much a force for good as Claiborne is. What they lack, however, is the guidance and backing of their elders.

College professors and thesis advisors often offer critical formation and inspiration for young Catholics, but typically there are no mentors to fill this role after graduation. Most are left to flail in a rootless, post-communal culture -- unable to find a parish where they feel at home spiritually and theologically.

Young progressives have an added disadvantage when it comes to gathering the support of church communities: many view gay rights as an extension of the fight for a just church and would either defend a women?s right to choose or call for a more nuanced church teaching on abortion.

Like Wallis and Campolo, Claiborne is pro-life and still struggles to view same-sex relationships as sanctioned by God. There is little doubt that holding up these conservative teachings helps him to maintain a larger, steadier following.

Young Catholics face significant obstacles as they strive to incarnate their own form of the emerging church. They are growing into adulthood during a time when older generations feel burned out and betrayed by an institutional church that failed in its promises of renewal and inclusion. They also face being ignored by a church hijacked by ultraconservatives and overlooked by a society that values celebrity over substance.

The progressive Catholic movement has given birth to a number of remarkable prophetic voices. As we all know, these voices are aging. Perhaps it is time to think creatively about how these elder prophets can use a portion of their time, gifts, and influence to form and support new generations of prophets.

Some of our elder prophets publish prolifically and speak all over the world. Why not help to raise the visibility

of the work being done by young Catholics or integrate younger voices in panel presentations?

Some of our elder prophets live in religious communities. Why not invite young Catholics to come and learn about the ways in which the wisdom and spirituality of their founders have guided them through the challenges of a prophetic spiritual life? Even though many young Catholics feel more called to marriage than religious life, they are still eager for the presence, guidance, and formation offered to those pursuing a vocation.

Progressive Catholics have something to learn from the ways in which progressive Evangelicals reach out to and raise up their emerging activists and ministers.

Prophets do not arise out of a vacuum. They emerge out of nurturing, committed communities. If we truly wish to ensure that our church will have prophets from every generation, we must seek ways in which today?s prophets of the progressive Catholic movement can empower those to come.

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