God's Mission: Many Faces: A Portrait of U.S. Catholics in Mission
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Introduction

Let me begin by thanking Michael Montoya and the organizers of this Congress for the invitation to share some reflections with you about mission and the U.S. Catholic Church. I’m supposed to paint the contexts of mission. That’s an almost traumatic assignment for me, who can’t even draw.

However, I’m going to give it a shot. I’ve been asked to do this as a Latino theologian. So, I’d like to talk first about the mission of God into which we are invited by reaching into the socio-centric or group nature of Latino cultures. Then I would like to explore with you two particular foci of that mission as we’re called to live it out in U.S. today which are of particular relevance to the U.S. Latino community.

God's Mission

One way of grasping the nature of the mission of God in our world, the work into which God invites us to begin, as Scripture does, with the reason because of which the mission of God has taken the concrete form of redemption. As I’m sure you remember, God’s mission didn’t begin as redemption, but rather as creation, crowned as it is with the creation of human beings.

Unfortunately, this primordial account is too often read through the lens of Enlightenment thinking and its emphasis on the individual and not through the socio-centric cultural lens of Latino and other cultures. In such an individualist, Enlightenment reading God creates each human being in God's image and likeness variously understood, that we have intellect and will, or that human beings are naturally open to the transcendent. And within the creation story so interpreted, original sin is that desire in each human heart to escape the limitations of humanity and to pretend to be like God.

The story looks quite different, I would suggest, if we take off our Enlightenment glasses and attend to the text and what it says as it was produced in a socio-centric cultural context.

The first creation story in Genesis 1 has an interesting emphasis on the plural in the creation of humanity.
Then God said: “Let us make [ADAM] in our image, after our likeness. Let them have
dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild
animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground.”

God created [ADAM] in his image;
in the divine image he created [ADAM];
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, saying: “Be fertile and multiply.... (Gen 1:26-28)

What becomes clear at we look more closely at the text and less closely at the Western prejudice in favor of the individual is that the creation story is not about the creation of discrete individuals, but that it is the story of the creation of a couple. The second creation story in Genesis 2 plays out this same reality in God’s musing that “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him,” which the commentator summarizes in his own reflection “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body.” (Gen 2:18)

Human beings, by their nature (actually by God’s nature since we are created in God’s image and likeness) are communal and relational beings, not autonomous individuals. The sin of this first couple, we are told, is their desire “to be like gods”, not to be God’s likeness, i.e., they want to decide what is good for human beings, what is bad for human beings; i.e., they want to decide what it means to be human rather than accepting that God has already decided that by creating them in God’s own image and likeness as persons in relationship. And they get their wish: they eat from the tree; their communion is broken; they see their difference not their union (they cover themselves). It’s what we see in the “blaming”—when confronted by God, each tries to blame the other; they’ve now become threats instead of partners. Their expulsion from the place of communion continues to play itself out as their own offspring take the next step in what becomes the human story. One kills the other out of resentment and then gives the refrain for salvation history: “Am I my brother’s/my sister’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9)

The rest of God’s mission with humanity can be read as the affirmative answer to that question on God’s part and as the struggling and mixed response on the part of humanity. And at each stage of God’s mission, the emphasis is placed on the re-creation of community. Remember how the story goes? God calls Abraham, bidden to come out from among those whom he calls his own, to found a people who play a role for all. God calls Moses to gather a new people from out of the dispersed tribes and gives them the Law which is the source of their unity, a Law which has three injunctions about the beyondness of God (who remains the likeness in which they were created) and seven injunctions to guarantee the quality of the relations among them [“given that God defines what it means to be human, this is how you are to live with each other”].

Israel’s long history becomes the see-saw between obedience to the Law and infidelity to it. But it is a history always played out on the two fronts contained in the Law: 1) whether the Israelites will allow themselves to be God’s likeness or whether they will make God into their likeness (idolatry); 2) and, at the same time, whether they will recognize their brotherhood and sisterhood in communion (how they were originally created as persons in relationship) or indulge in discrimination and oppression.

The First Testament ends with the original question unanswered: “will we be our brother’s/our sister’s keeper? — will we live the communion into which we were created as God’s image and likeness?” In response to this still open-ended question, God sends Jesus. Jesus who has an image of God as “Abba” (in whose image we are together made as children of the same parent) and who issues a call to put an end to divisions of religious status, class, gender and politics. Both this image and this call equally put him at odds with the leadership of his time as Jesus unmasks the falseness...
of the criteria they have invented to measure the humanity of the other, something we humans do to this day, as we create an almost limitless list of criteria of what it means to be human.

Both parties to the divisions (the Romans and the Jewish leaders) find their self-interest best served by Jesus’ removal, for specialness never lets go of its privilege easily. So they kill him. But I would suggest that it’s how he dies that tells us the true meaning of his death. He is crucified “outside the gates” (cast out of the community whose reinvigoration he preached): and he is deserted by his disciples, the nucleus of a new peoplehood (who in their abandonment made it clear that they certainly were not this brother’s keepers). These disciples they break their communion with Jesus, but he refuses to break the bonds of communion, condemning no one, keeping his relationships intact to the end.

In the perfection with which he lives out into death the communion with others he has preached, Jesus becomes the transparent image of God. He is raised by the One who guarantees the ontological basis of the relational nature of humanity and so, we get our initial glimpse of the God whom we gradually come to know as relational in Godself (as Trinity). Jesus becomes the keeper of all his brothers and sisters, with whom he walks till the end of time.

The small nucleus that gathers together around him begin their journey of inclusion, forced to confront the further barriers of race (Hebrew vs. Greek), and religion (Gentile vs. Jew). And the Scriptural story ends with them poised to move outward to the world they are called to embrace.

It’s this vision of God’s mission, from original communion through broken bonds to renewed communion, that Vatican II embraces as the heart of mission. “[God] has, however, willed to make men [sic] holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness.” (Lumen Gentium §9)

The original communion of humanity (recounted in the creation, not of human individuals, but of the couple) is our likeness to God, who is communion. Karl Rahner, commenting in his book on the Trinity, once remarked that, should we all wake up one day to discover that the doctrine of the Trinity was not true, not very much in Catholic theology or practice would need to change. Rahner’s comment underscores his understanding that we almost always do the “Trinitatian math” wrong. No matter how many times you take “God the Father” plus “God the Son” plus “God the Holy Spirit” you’re not going to come out with one. We need to reverse the equation. Our Christian belief is that to be God is to be Father, Son and Spirit. To be God is to be a community of persons in relationship. And so, if we are made in the image and likeness of God, then “to be human” is “to be in relationship” since “to be God” is “to be in relationship.

And so we discover that acting against that communion is original sin (or better, the sin against our origin) and the pattern of all subsequent sin (it’s no wonder Jesus characterizes the Evil One as the father of lies: for every sin is a choice for oneself against the relationships that ground our nature as human, a choice against reality, an embracing of illusion, a telling of lies).

The two fronts on which salvation history has been played out, love of God and love of neighbor, are now fused into one. As St. John tells us: “to love one another is to love God”; to embrace communion (humanity) is to embrace Communion (God). It’s not by chance that in his gospel, at the Last Supper the washing of the feet replaces the Eucharist, or better said, gives us another version of Eucharist.

God’s mission entrusted to us then is the restoration in history of the communion that perdures as the too-often-unseen reality of humanity. God’s mission is the making visible in the concrete structures of human life the communion we are and the Communion which is God whom we image.
Class and Culture: Two Contexts that Shape Mission Today in the U.S.

While there may be many ways of characterizing the contemporary context of God’s mission to recreate community out of human brokenness, two aspects, in my opinion as a Latino theologian, seem paramount. The first is globalization, understood as an economic system which seeks to instill a particular set of values which feed that same system. The second is cultural diversity, understood not as the romanticized notion of a rainbow of cultures, all mirroring the wondrousness of God, but as a challenge to live in harmony across the cultural differences which divide peoples one from another. Put more simply, what I would like to do in this second part of my reflection this evening is to think with you about two pivotal issues which ought to focus any ministry in which we engage today: social class and cultural difference.

Social Class

Survey after survey indicate that the gap between rich and poor in the United States is growing at a rapid pace. Writing already back in 1995, Benjamin Schwarz noted that "With the wealthiest 20 percent of households receiving a greater and greater share of national income, American society is more unequal now that it was 25 years ago."¹ John McCarron in an op-ed article in the Chicago Tribune pressed Schwarz’s point:

We are now the world’s most economically stratified industrial nation, with 40 million of us living at or below the poverty level. Just above on the income scale, the working poor have seen their incomes drift into slow decline.²

The current debate about whether or not to extend the Bush tax cuts to the wealthy as well as the massive number of home foreclosures in the past two years only serve to underline the economic divisions which so typify American life today.

These facts are probably not surprising to most of you since many of you work in areas where the population is classified as lower middle class to poor. However, I would like to put up against these statistics about the American population in general another set, this time about American Catholics. In a book published already in 2000 and entitled American Catholics: Gender, Generation, and Commitment, the following profile appears:

Two-thirds of Catholics are white-collar workers (35 percent are executives, managers, or professionals). Forty percent have family incomes of $50,000 or more. Catholics are now well above the national average in educational achievement, occupational status, and family income. Still a bit behind the most elite Protestant groups, they are among the nation’s most prosperous religious groups.³

The economic divide which we might decry in the American population in general is not an “out there” phenomenon, but rather is mirrored in the class divisions which exist within our church as well. Underscoring this divide, a recent studies indicate that 70 percent of American Catholics are white, while 3 percent are African Americans and between 20 and 30 percent are Latino. These last two populations are among the nation’s poorest. So, while American Catholics in general (read “white”) may have moved solidly into the upper middle class in this country, a substantial and growing number of their co-religionists have not enjoyed the same economic upward mobility. Nor can one argue that it is the great number of Latino immigrants in recent years that accounts for the percentage of Latinos and Latino Catholics who remain among the lower class since the figures of the 2000 Census, even when adjusted for undercount, continue to show that more that 60% of Latinos living in the United States were born here.
A church which was once made up predominantly of poor immigrants and which developed ministerial strategies to first provide a safe haven for these immigrant Catholics in the face of a hostile national ethos and then to facilitate their integration into the American mainstream, now stands as a church economically divided between rich and poor.

While I make no pretensions to be an economist, few I think would disagree that the economic polarization present in U.S. society and in the American Catholic Church is not an accident of fate. The neoliberal capitalist economic model and motor which drive the U.S. and global economies is built on the premise that it is money that makes money. The strikingly large investments made by middle and upper middle class Americans in mutual funds begun in the late 1980’s and continuing into the present have been the preferred strategy of these classes to benefit from neoliberal capitalism. The embracing of this strategy validates the fact that longer working hours, even at higher pay, cannot duplicate the multiplication of capital that is produced by financial investment. However, it is precisely capital that those on the lower rungs of the economic ladder lack. Work as they might in the manufacturing and service sectors of society, they are unable to accumulate the capital necessary to benefit from the current economic system. This fact would seem to indicate that we should expect no radical change in the gapping economic divide between rich and poor in our nation and our church. In fact, we are witnessing today the reality of the saying we Americans used to apply to countries in the two-thirds world: “The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.”

While none of the facts that I have outlined here are new, I am not sure that we Catholics in the United States necessarily appreciate the theological aberration which they represent nor the challenges to mission they present. A church radically divided by social class is a counter-sign to the coming of God’s reign. The community which should be a living glimpse into the divine promise of a world of sisterhood and brotherhood has instead become a baptized version of society’s economic disparity.

It’s as if we were reliving the experience of 1st century Corinth about which Paul writes: “...I hear that when you meet as a church there are divisions among you.... .... When you meet in one place, then, it is not to eat the Lord’s supper, for in eating, each one goes ahead with his own supper, and one goes hungry while another gets drunk. .... ...do you show contempt for the church of God and make those who have nothing feel ashamed? What can I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this matter I do not praise you.” (I Cor 11: 18-22).

The object of Paul’s outrage is not mistakes in liturgical propriety. It goes to the essence of the community’s sign value, encapsulated in the eucharistic celebration. And the dire warning that follows Paul’s description is not focused on belief in the real presence of Christ in the eucharist (even though that’s the way it was interpreted for me in Catholic grammar school) but is focused rather on belief in the real presence of Christ in the community’s shared life together: “A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.” (I Cor 11:28-29)

It is discerning that we are the Body of Christ and are meant to witness to that reality in our relationships with each other on which the question of judgment hangs. How do we American Catholics stand before that judgment today when still, to again quote Paul, “each one goes ahead with his own supper, and one goes hungry while another gets drunk”?

So what are we to do? Certainly there is need for social ministries to those who are in need and I know many of you are deeply committed to and involved in these ministries. But if my analysis is even remotely correct, ministry to individuals is ultimately a grossly inadequate response. The problem whose results we experience in the class divisions within our church is a systemic one, not one whose source is to be found in individuals. And it is that system that we must engage. As is the case with every system, it exists not as a theory but embedded in institutions, large and small. In
his book *The Good Society*, Robert Bellah argues forcefully that Americans are intentionally unaware of the effect that institutions have on their lives. Americans prefer to live in the unreality that life is based on individual choice and on individual initiative without attending to the effect institutions such as media, business, government and church have on the range of those choices and the priorities of our initiative.

I would suggest this evening that efforts to close or at least to stand against the economic and class divide which defies our life as church begins at home. The lifestyles of each of us and of our communities must witness against the consumerism that gives value to every comfort and which defines worth by possessions. For it is that value system which creates the needs on which neoliberal capitalism feeds. If we would serve the poor, we need to re-engage them in the strategies of our immigrant ancestors who pooled their resources in self-help groups to accumulate the capital needed to improve the economic life not of isolated individuals but of the whole community. Accumulation of capital must be linked with community organizing in which the people we serve learn how to hold political institutions accountable for the choices they make to aid the powerful at the expense of the poor. Christian communities need to link themselves to one another in economic and community organizing enterprises since power for change comes either from money or from numbers and it’s our numbers that are our riches. Diocesan structures that placidly accept the economic disparity among our church communities must be forcefully challenged to engage in integral evangelization of the wealthier Catholics of the diocese and not allow economic self-sufficiency (read “autonomy”) to justify the existence of some parishes with large well-paid staffs and more than ample facilities while inner city schools are forced to close. We must engage in constructive political debate to repeal the foreign policy that allows our 5% of the world’s population to consume over half of its resources. God’s mission speaks to us from the systematic economic disparity which characterizes both church and world. And only intentional blindness to the church we are not can keep us satisfied with one-on-one ministry and complacent with the counter-sign we as a church have become.

**Culture**

Closely entwined with the issue of social class is another significant context which shapes mission in the U.S. today, that of culture. The eventual suburbanization of American Catholics which crowned the economic efforts of our immigrant ancestors and which placed them solidly within the ethos of the American middle class also homogenized their original cultural diversity. By and large, except for some of those precious family traditions that lingered, by the mid-1960’s Catholics had become American economically and culturally. The mission of the Catholic Church in the United States, to first provide a safe haven for immigrant Catholics in the face of a hostile national ethos and then to facilitate their integration in the American mainstream, appeared to be over. However, it has always seemed to me that, when one way of entering into God’s mission ends for a local church, God finds a way to invite that same church into a new understanding of mission.

The rapid and large immigration of Latino and Asian Catholics to the United States over the past thirty years, and particularly in the past decade, has set the stage for just such a new understanding of mission. Ironically, however, at first blush this new mission looks much like the old one. Its protagonists again are immigrants. However, there, it seems to me, the resemblance ends. My reasons for saying this are twofold.

First of all, these new immigrant Catholics have not arrived by boat from Europe as was the case through the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Some arrive by plane and many on foot. The journey they have made, though perilous for some, is a journey that is repeatable in ways that were not true for the earlier European immigrants. For example, for many Latino Catholic immigrants, particularly those with documents, a return to their land of origin is a yearly event as they renew family ties, but even more importantly as they re-immerse themselves in their original
cultural heritage. Immigrating to the United States for these recent arrivals no longer means a life-long farewell to their land of birth, with its particular linguistic and cultural traditions. It is a change of geographic location, but one accompanied by continued contact with their country of birth. In addition, in their new land they have been identified as a lucrative market by media and business. They have available to them newspapers in their native language, radio and television programs that reflect the patterns of their cultural background, all originating from this new land. They have the means available to retain much of their culture of origin.

However, I would also suggest that the attempts of many of these immigrant Catholics to retain their cultural distinctness is not simply a matter of either convenience or preference. History tells a quite different story. These new immigrant Latino and Asian Catholics are not the first waves of their peoples to come to the United States. Latinos were present in what today is Florida before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. Asian-American history began in the late 1500’s with the arrival of Filipino sailors on the coast of California. Yet, in counter-distinction to the waves of European immigrants that have become part of mainstream U.S. society, Latinos and Asians (not to mention African-Americans) have not been successfully integrated into mainstream U.S. society, despite their long-standing presence in this country. Is the difference that Latino and Asian Catholic immigrants’ conscious retention of their cultures of origin has obstructed their integration? The opposite appears to be true. Non-white cultural minorities hold on to their cultural identity precisely because they have not been allowed to enter dominant U.S. society. Their emphasis on and preservation of their cultures of origin is due in the main to U.S. society’s discrimination against racial difference.

While the first invitation to mission of the Catholic Church in the United States might have aimed at providing safe harbor to culturally diverse immigrant groups as a holding tank strategy leading to their eventual mainstreaming into dominant U.S. society, the new invitation to mission of the American Church needs to rethink the final goal of its service to non-white Catholic immigrants since “disappearing” into the U.S. mainstream will not happen for those who are not white. This leads me to my second reason for believing that the new invitation to mission of the U.S. church is different from the originating one. While eventual “Americanization” may have been the goal during the first half of the 20th century, “catholicization” will need to be goal for the 21st century. Let me explain what I mean.

As suburbanization took immigrant Catholics of the 20th century out of their inner city cultural enclaves and homogenized their cultural diversity into the quintessential American Catholic parish, parish was conceived of as a single community of believers, geographically defined. Uniformity in worship became a hallmark of Catholic parish life, only the times of the Masses were different. There was a single religious education program, conducted in English and reflective of “American” youth. Some ethnic confraternities survived, but these too were expected to dedicate their efforts to the upbuilding of the single parish community. American Catholic parishes were in their main reflective of American social polity, the melting pot in which cultural diversity was sacrificed on the altar of “the American way.”

The presence of non-white, culturally diverse Catholic immigrants presents us with a significant challenge, particularly as these immigrants move out of their cultural enclaves and into the uniform cultural space that has been the American parish. Are they renters, who use the parish facilities for their culturally distinct forms of worship and popular religion? Is it our job as pastoral ministers to provide them with safe spaces while we bank on a hope which has no historical foundation, that they’ll eventually “blend in”? Or should we reconceive the objective of our ministry, should we reconceive the notion of parish or Christian community in whatever setting we do our ministry?

Is there any advantage to thinking about a parish or whatever group ministry we’re engaged in not as the making of the many into one, but rather as the making of the one into many? We call our
church “catholic”, but we can be tempted to minister as if our church were a monolith, uniform in color and in texture of life.

Again, I would suggest that we American Catholics have accepted without critique the example offered us by American social life. It's not by chance that *e pluribus unum* is the motto found not just on our national seal but also on our money. It’s the Latin translation of “globalization,” effecting a uniformity of values which can be converted into economic felt-needs which then fuel the neoliberal capitalist economic model, whose consequences are to divide American society and humanity into the two uneven camps of the “haves” and the “have-nots.”

What if we thought of parish not as a community, but reconceived of parish as a community of communities, where the goal is not uniformity but diversity, but where difference is not synonymous with division? Now that would be a witness worthy of a church! For perhaps nothing so characterizes our world today as does division, whether that be economic, religious, ethnic or racial. The front page of our daily papers are rife with stories of ethnic cleansing, of interreligious hatred, of racial discrimination. And while we might wish to believe that those stories are of peoples far distant from our shores, our own ministries, not to mention what we've witnessed in this country in the aftermath of September 11th, force us to face the fact that those divisions and the violence they inspire are the stuff of life of those among whom we live.

If we read with honesty the pages of human history, we cannot but see that the statistically normal way in which human beings deal with difference is to make the other disappear. In the most traumatic of situations this disappearance is achieved by killing the other. The more subtle strategy for achieving disappearance is to mask real difference and so to pretend that the other is really more like us than they seem and so not really “other” after all.

This latter strategy both in American society and in our church bears the politically correct label of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism would have us believe that what makes these new immigrant Catholics appear to be different is simply a matter of their peculiar cultural traditions, usually perceived (although this is a very superficial understanding of culture), as issues of language, folklore and religious devotionalism. Their differences are not so different from the cultural traditions of our forbearers who immigrated to this country. So, we incorporate elements of these newcomers’ folklore, religiosity and language into the uniform worship style of the American parish, for example, but without radically changing the basic rhythm or ritual of our worship. We do the first reading in Spanish and have a Vietnamese hymn during the offertory, but we don’t recast or reshape the liturgical experience itself to reflect their historically conditioned understandings of God or of community. By keeping their cultural folklore on the periphery of the Roman ritual we trivialize their difference and make the reality of their otherness disappear.

Yet at its heart, their otherness is not a matter simply of cultural difference, even if this were more profoundly understood than it usually is; their real otherness comes from Americans’ using these peoples’ cultural difference as the basis for making judgments on the quality of their humanity. And that, my friends, is the social construct we call “race.” Race is not primarily the genetic differences in the physical appearance of people. What creates racial difference and gives rise to racism is the decision to attribute certain unsavory characteristics to those who look different and who behave differently than we do. Racism is the process by which we turn cultural difference into division.

I would suggest that we need to unmask the trivialization perpetrated by multiculturalism and face head on that the difficulties we experience in our ministry sites with growing numbers of non-white Catholics and in the predominantly non-white communities we serve which are forced to exist on the periphery of our dioceses are due to the racism which has been endemic to American society since the time it chose to count Blacks as two-thirds of a human person and which has seeped into the fiber of the American Catholic Church. If we can’t name the enemy, then we can’t confront it.
If it is racism, like economic disparity, that tears at the Body of Christ which is the church, then our participation in mission must be directed at the heart of this division, the generalized and unfounded judgments that white Catholics make about non-white Catholics in the bosoms of the Christian communities we serve. And that participation in mission cannot simply be a matter of denouncing, of preaching against the evil of racism. It must also be an announcing, enfleshed first in our own relationships with those who are other than us. For white and for non-white participants in this Congress and in the organizations we represent that means initiating and nurturing personal relationships across the cultural and racial divides. On the basis of that example, we need to invite others to cross over, not through the too often trivialization of difference in multicultural liturgies, but in common projects that touch the enlightened self-interest of whites and non-whites alike. It may be the struggle for better schools in our neighborhoods; it may be forcing the city to put up that stop sign on the corner where the lives of white and non-white children are equally endangered by fast moving traffic; it may by leveraging businesses that now divest our neighborhoods of their financial resources to invest in those neighborhoods; it may be by struggling for more humane conditions in our prisons. Whatever the issues, the unfounded judgments one people makes about another people can be changed only by coming to know the common humanity we share with the other, without denying their differences.

By coming together across our differences, the communities in which we live God’s mission become models of a society where difference can be recognized without dividing us one from another. Our parishes and other places of ministry can be homes to a variety of culturally different people where their difference is allowed to play itself out in worship, educational programs, and social life, but where these communities also come together around the central values of justice and human dignity which we share across our differences. The groups of people we minister to become a community of communities as a model for a nation that will no longer be defined by e pluribus unum, but by plures et unum.

This struggle for a community of communities will put us against the uniformizing tendencies of our diocesan structures and of the political establishment. But what value have we as a church, if we are not salt for our earth and light for our world?

Mission

What I am suggesting in teasing out the issues of class and culture as two contexts that shape our involvement in mission today is that our primary roles as missionaries are that of teacher and bridge builder. Both as individuals and as members of parishes and organizations, we must do the focused critical social analysis that will unmask in ways that are clear to us and which fit our concrete locations the systemic reasons that our church today is a counter-sign to God’s reign in its complacency about the sin of economic disparity and in its aversion to name the racism that divides our people. Then we must teach those tools of critical social analysis to those with whom we are in mission. And that is real empowerment, unmasking the systemic deceit that robs people of the opportunity to engage their faith in the work of social transformation. With those tools in hand, both we and they can begin the construction of bridges that cross over and narrow the divides of class and culture and begin to reshape our church in service to our world, re-creating human community which has always been the work of God’s mission among us.

Being teachers of social analysis and bridge-builders at home and among the people whom you serve might seem to be a far cry from what we may have thought it means to be a missionary. But as is so often the case, what seems so “ain’t necessarily so.” To lead others to a new vision of how the world can be and to teach them the skills to realize that vision is to free their spirits from the shackles of systemic deceit and to allow them to soar toward a new heaven and a new earth, and that work, I believe, is worthy of God’s mission.


