

Faith in Action—From Brandeis to Nicaragua, From Boston to Sudan

Excerpts from Dr. Ray Hammond's presentation on the underground railroad in the Sudan

From the Christian story of the Good Samaritan, to the Jewish commitment to “*tikkun olam*” (repair the world), to the Islamic practice of caring for the poor—almost every faith tradition has a call to help those who are in trouble. The question becomes, “how do you convince people to spend resources raised by the members of the congregation on people who will never, most likely, come to that congregation; whose problems are very different? How do you get people to look beyond their own immediate needs—or the needs directly around them—to understand that they have a commitment to go beyond that?”

My wife, Rev. Gloria E. White-Hammond, wrote, “After 21 hours of almost 9,000 miles in the air, I arrived (along with a team from Boston and Switzerland) in a small village in Southern Sudan. The next day, I participated in the redemption of almost 2,000 slaves—all of them women and children. Over the subsequent days, I interviewed many of those women. I repeatedly heard stories of abduction, murder, gang rapes, people being sold like property, genital mutilation, forced religious conversions, beatings, arson, and unimaginable sexual abuse. I went to the Sudan a concerned woman and I returned from the Sudan an angry woman. Angry that a peaceful people have had to endure almost two decades of persecution at the hands of a government in Khartoum. Angry that the world would turn its head while millions were killed and hundreds of thousands were enslaved.”

In the face of the needs that are out there, the resources that are available from the faith communities are, quite frankly, pretty puny. The resource that I think the faith communities do have, which is unbelievably powerful, is the moral

authority that they bring when they are engaged with the problem. It is not powerful when they are on the sidelines telling the government what they ought to do; rather, power comes from being directly engaged with the problem. From that platform, they speak on behalf of those who often have no voice.

That is when they are at their best, at their most powerful. In a very real sense, that is what we are trying to do in Sudan. It was great to be a part of seeing 2000 people set free, but the problem is that there are another 98,000 still in northern Sudan. Many more are going to be enslaved unless something can be done to change policy in a world that, by and large, has fallen asleep on the issues. That is true in the work that we do locally. It is also true of the work that we do globally.

It is a tough balancing act between one's own faith community and reaching beyond the congregation. It is not either/or; both are important. If I do not do the kind of community-building needed and discharge my responsibility to my local community, I do not have a platform to stand on when I go to Sudan. One reason that my wife and I do this is because we have a community that stands with us.

People often say, “in the face of so many needs out there, how do you choose?” I want to recommend to you what I call the “three C's” of this process: conviction, community, and circumstance. There are convictions that you have to arrive at because something touches your heart and ignites a certain passion, maybe a sense of indignation—righteous indignation. It then also has to be filtered through the community of people of which you are a part. They are going



■ An engaged audience listens to Dr. Ray Hammond.

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to be the people who support you in the process, who hopefully give you wise counsel about how to approach the situation and how to work it through. Finally, there are circumstances. I did not plan to be in Sudan in 2001. Somebody invited me, and I recognized it was time and we had to respond. It was not enough to deal with it in America. We had to go to where the problem was. What started as a conviction became a driving passion. Convictions, community, and circumstances often help you to decide on your calling in this huge ocean of need. ■