

“It’s God’s work: a multiple case study of the use of the Bible in the movement to end poverty led by the poor”

Jessica Chadwick Williams, PhD

"While the Bible is often used as justification for systems that create and maintain poverty and blame the poor for their poverty, within the movement to end poverty led by the poor the Bible is understood as a liberatory text and a guide to organizing to end poverty."

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This qualitative case study researched three geographically, religiously, and culturally diverse poor people’s organizations within the movement to end poverty led by the poor to understand how each group engages the Bible in their organizing. The study was grounded in the theories and praxis of the movement to end poverty led by the poor in the U.S. and situated within social movement learning. Each group focused on different issues including housing and homelessness, tenant rights and immigration, and the right to a living wage and a union. Findings revealed the influence of local historical, religious, and political contexts on how the organizations engage the Bible. Additionally, the three organizations interpret the Bible beginning with the lived experiences of the poor and identification and exploration of characters and conditions in the biblical text with parallels to the lived experiences of the poor within the organizations. The findings suggest poor people’s organizations in the movement to end poverty led by the poor in the U.S. engage the Bible ideologically, materially, and spiritually through pedagogies analogous to those within the biblical text and through a model of dialectical, pedagogical relationships which include learning, education, organizing, and leadership development.

INTRODUCTION

While the Bible is often used as justification for systems that create and maintain poverty and blame the poor for their poverty, within the movement to end poverty led by the poor, the Bible is understood as a liberatory text and as a guide to organizing to end poverty. The purpose of this research was to understand how poor people’s organizations in the movement to end poverty

led by the poor in the U.S. engage the Bible in their organizing. The specific questions explored include (1) how are poor people’s organizations informed by the Bible in the movement to end poverty led by the poor in the U.S., (2) how do poor people’s organizations use biblical passages to organize in the movement to end poverty led by the poor in the U.S., (2a) how do poor people’s organizations interpret biblical passages, and (2b) how do poor people’s organizations integrate biblical passages into their organizing?

METHODS

The research was grounded in the theory and practice of the movement to end poverty led by the poor. A review of the movement literature revealed three main elements of the movement including an understanding of (a) who are the poor and why are we poor; (b) the poor organizing the poor, and (c) the pedagogy of the poor. According to leaders in the movement, the increasing globalization of neoliberal capitalist systems has produced poverty in the midst of abundance as more and more are poor or dispossessed, while wealth and the means to produce wealth is concentrated among the few (Baptist, 2015). Research was conducted through a qualitative case study design. Three poor people’s organizations who engage the Bible in their organizing to end poverty constituted the cases. The organizations include Chaplains on the Harbor (Grays Harbor County, Washington), Union de Vecinos (Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, California), and Raise Up the South (North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia). Chaplains on the Harbor is a ministry

of the Episcopal Church focused on housing and homelessness in a primarily rural White community. Raise Up the South is made up of primarily Black low-wage workers from a variety of denominational Christian backgrounds organizing toward a living wage and the right to form a union. Finally, the members of Union de Vecinos are primarily Latinx and Catholic. The organization's primary foci are tenant rights and immigration. Interviews were conducted with leaders of each organization, in addition to observations and analysis of documents and artifacts produced by the organizations regarding their use of the Bible in their organizing. The data collected about each organization were analyzed through single case and cross-case analysis.

The biblical understandings that inform Chaplains on the Harbor (Chaplains) include (a) the faith traditions and lived experiences of poverty of the organization's leaders, (b) how the Bible is wielded for harm within the local context in which Chaplains operates, and (c) a liberatory understanding of the Bible and poverty. Chaplains' leaders approach biblical interpretation through an historical-materialist and empire-critical lens. In other words, they seek to understand the history of conditions under imperial rule in which the biblical narratives took place. Chaplains integrates the Bible in different ways as they work with various constituencies. For example, in organizing their base they utilize informal pedagogies that demonstrate the leadership of the poor through relationship and conversation, as well as projects of survival to meet people's material and spiritual needs. With faith communities and the public, Chaplains utilizes sermons, prayers, advocacy, and protest to teach others of the conditions of the poor and homeless in Grays Harbor County, as well as of the leadership of the poor working to change those conditions. Chaplains also uses the Bible to organize with people of faiths other than Christian through political education. The organization prioritizes the use of the Bible for the development and dissemination of a counternarrative because the dominant Christian narrative is, at best, disempowering, but usually damaging to the lived experiences and conditions of the poor and homeless.

Raise Up the South (Raise Up) is informed by the Bible in three distinct ways including (a) the history of southern freedom struggles' use of the Bible, (b) the moral authority of the Bible, and (c) hope found in the Bible. From how they are informed by these understandings of the Bible, leaders in Raise Up integrate the Bible into their organizing through (a) culture building, (b) political education, and (c) projects of survival. The organization's integration of the Bible in informal as well as intentional ways facilitates building a culture of hope, collectivity, solidarity, and encouragement to help workers through the daily grind of working in poor conditions and the grind of standing up to managers and companies. Leaders also integrate the Bible in strategic and planned political education. A pedagogical technique leaders utilize when integrating the Bible into political education is study and discussion of the use of the Bible within the history and freedom struggles of the south. The organization also engages in projects of survival to meet people's immediate needs while organizing them toward building a movement to end poverty led by the poor. Finally, Raise Up integrates the Bible pedagogically through (a) the influence of political and religious history and culture, (b) the dialectic of unlearning and learning, and (c) understanding organizing as ministry.

Union de Vecinos is guided by an understanding of the Bible as a living text and as a moral authority which flows from the history and context of the organization's origins and members. Leaders integrate the Bible through building community and building consciousness as they organize in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles. Leaders engage in biblical reflection and then respond to that reflection through actions such as (a) ritual traditions, (b) projects of survival, and (c) resisting authority. Leaders integrate the Bible in their organizing by utilizing pedagogical techniques of action and reflection and pursuing ongoing organizational learning.

"The organizations confronted false moral narratives directly through building counter-narratives, culture, community, and consciousness in the integration of the Bible in their organizing. To do so is counterhegemonic and in direct opposition to the white Christian nationalism and other false moral narratives which claim to be based in the Bible while justifying poverty and its interlocking injustices."

Cross-case analysis showed that all the organizations are informed by the Bible because of how the Bible is used within their local context, due to an ongoing battle for the Bible, understanding the Bible as an organizing guide, and recognizing the Bible as a moral authority. These elements led each of the organizations to interpret the Bible beginning with the lived experiences and analysis of the poor which led to the identification and exploration of parallel characters and conditions within the biblical text. Leaders of each organization found within the biblical text similarities to their own lived experiences and organizing struggles. Within the data of all three organizations were 118 biblical references spanning from Genesis to Revelation. While not every book of the Bible was represented, each of the major genres of biblical books were present. The Exodus story and stories within the Gospels were cited most frequently by the three organizations. These findings show that the organizations utilize and interpret biblical passages from a variety of biblical genres and not just in passages that explicitly reference poverty. Instead, the organizations find parallel characters and conditions throughout many books of the Bible.

There were two pedagogical findings about how the organizations use the Bible. An unexpected finding was the significance of shame in why and how the organizations engage the Bible in their organizing work. Each organization, for example, expressed how the Bible had been used by others to shame the poor in their communities. For each organization, though, engaging the Bible in organizing is a way to counteract the shame that the poor experience elsewhere. Additionally, the strategic importance, as well as challenges, of multiracial organizing was a theme across all three cases. Though the racial makeup and context of each organization differed, the importance of organizing across racial divisions, and using the Bible to do so, was part of each case.

Finally, the cross-case analysis depended on theoretical propositions drawn prior to conducting the research. These propositions were analyzed based on the data across all three cases and revised as needed to provide a summary of findings. The final theoretical propositions include:

Theoretical Proposition 1: *Poor people's organizations engage the Bible because of individuals' faith expression and the role of the Bible within the organization's local context, as a resource for organizing a movement for social change.*

Theoretical Proposition 2: *Use of the Bible by poor people's organizations provide a means for leadership development.*

Theoretical Proposition 3: *Poor people's organizations engage the Bible as a means of organizing not just with people of the Christian faith, but also with those who are not Christian.*

Theoretical Proposition 4: *The Bible is integrated in different ways for people who are entering the movement work from different contexts (for example, for faith leaders and for activists who have been hurt by the church).*

Theoretical Proposition 5: *Poor people's organizations' use of the Bible exemplifies dialectical relationships between learning, education, organizing, and leadership development.*

CONCLUSIONS

Poor people's organizations confronted hegemonic ideas of the Bible and poverty internally, both individually and collectively, as well as externally as they encountered the harmful ideologies from churches and in the public sphere which were justified using the Bible. The organizations confronted false moral narratives directly through building counternarratives, culture, community, and consciousness in the integration of the Bible in the organizing. To do so is counterhegemonic and in direct opposition to the white Christian nationalism and other false moral narratives which claim to be based in the Bible while justifying poverty and its interlocking injustices.

Further, the pedagogy of poor people's organizations' use of the Bible offers a Model of Dialectical Relationships of Pedagogical Praxis of the Organized Poor. Within this model the practices of learning, education, organizing, and leadership development were each

"The findings of this study offer an implicit strategy, embedded in the organizing and pedagogy of these poor people's organizations, for combatting white Christian nationalism."

dialectically linked to each of the others. While previous social movement learning literature had revealed connections between learning, education, and organizing, the organizations in this study also employ leadership development as pedagogical praxis.

Finally, the organizations integrated pedagogies of organizing found within the biblical text itself. In using pedagogies analogous to those in the Bible, the organizations have the moral authority of how to organize society around the needs of the poor and dispossessed. Further, in mirroring pedagogies within the biblical text, leaders affirm their understanding of organizing as ministry and the Bible as an organizing guide which leads them not only to new interpretations but also to action as exemplified in the Bible.

RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

White Christian nationalism poses a current and grave danger to democracy within the U.S. Each of the organizations in this study acknowledged the impact of white Christian nationalism and the need for more analysis and organizing to oppose it. The findings of this study offer an implicit strategy, embedded in the organizing and pedagogy of these poor people's organizations, for combatting white Christian nationalism. For example, building multiracial organizations of the poor and dispossessed offers not only a counterhegemonic narrative, but counterhegemonic praxis. The implications for the field of adult education, from higher education to nonformal community or congregational programs to theological education, are to engage with multiracial organizations of the poor and dispossessed toward not just antiracist education, but also active antiracist organizing to overcome the forces of white supremacy and white Christian nationalism. The same example and line of reasoning can be applied to poor people's organizations' efforts to unite across historic lines of religious divisions. Even though the organizations in this research engaged the Bible in their organizing, each of them do so through means which not only honor but also organize people of other spiritual and faith traditions. As white Christian nationalism perverts the prospects of religious freedom in the U.S., organizing which unites communities across various faith and racial lines in the political struggles of the poor and dispossessed may be a primary form of educational praxis to overcome white Christian nationalism.

REFERENCES

Baptist, W. (2015). It's not enough to be angry. University of the Poor Press. <https://universityofthepoor.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ItsNotEnoughToBeAngry.pdf>

Baptist, W., & Rehmann, J. (2011b). Pedagogy of the poor: Building the movement to end poverty. Teachers College Press.

Theoharis, L. (2017). Always with us? :What Jesus really said about the poor. Eerdmans.

Theoharis, L. (Ed.). (2021). We Cry Justice: Reading the Bible with the Poor People's Campaign. Broadleaf Books.

CONTACT INFORMATION

To learn more about this research brief and other research endeavors in the College of Education at Kansas State University, please reach out to the Office of External Funding and Research at: coeresearch@k-state.edu

Major Professor: Dr. Susan Yelich-Biniecki

To view the full Dissertation, go here: <https://hdl.handle.net/2097/42546>