

Freedom Church of the Poor

By Adam Barnes

For the past two months, leaders from the Kairos Center's Reading the Bible with the Poor Cohort have been convening a weekly online gathering called the Freedom Church of the Poor. This formation brings together leaders from different frontline battles like the fight for living wages, immigrant rights, healthcare, and housing. We are Christian, Jewish and non-religious; leaders with the Poor People's Campaign, scholars and clergy; and we come from every region of the country. By taking the name of Freedom Church of the Poor we join a much longer history and tradition of resistance to ideological and religious forms of control and domination.

"Non-Cooperation in a Death Dealing Society," was the theme of a recent Freedom Church of the Poor service. The guiding Biblical text was Exodus 1:15-22, which tells the story of two Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puha, who defy the orders of Pharaoh to kill newborn Hebrew boys. Jacob Butterly, a leader with Put People First! PA, opened the service with a song he had learned from the South African Shackdwellers movement (Abahlali baseMjondolo). The song was a simple repeated phrase, "my home is far away," but when sung it carried both a hopeful note of assurance that we will one day find our home, and at the same time a weariness that knows the home (and perhaps the world) we long for is indeed so very "far away."

After Jacob sang, Aaron Scott, a leader with Chaplains on the Harbor in Grays Harbor Washington, introduced the Freedom Church to our online audience.

"We are a raggedy group of regular people: workers, poor folks, pastors, thinkers, and fighters. We have no particular creed or dogma, except our relentless faith in and pursuit of justice for everyone who is being hurt by this oppressive political and economic system we are living under."



Freedom Church of the Poor Sunday, May 17th

Projects of Survival
Past and Present

(Picture: Ron Casanova, leader in the National Union of the Homeless cuts the bolts on a door before a housing takeover.)

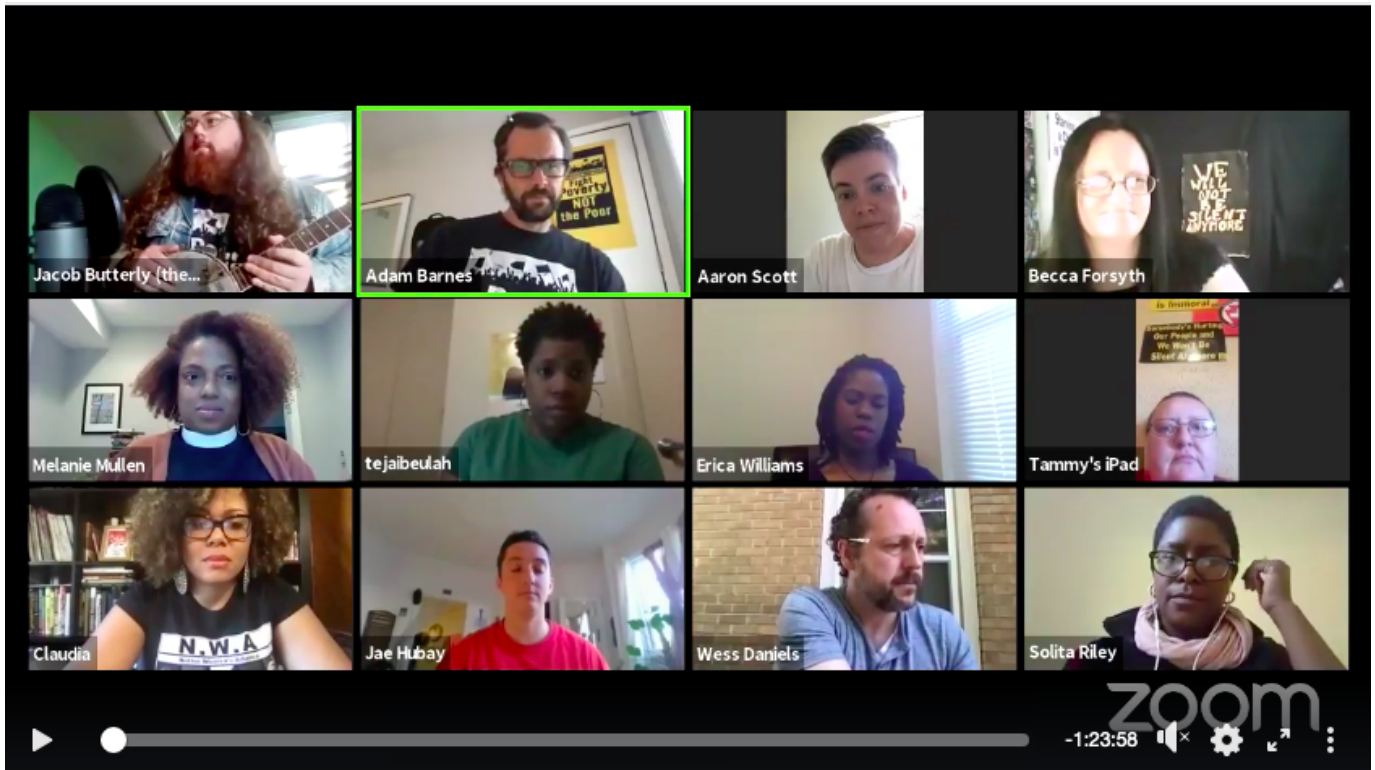
KAIROS
THE CENTER FOR
RELIGIONS' RIGHTS
AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

6-7:30 pm ET
Facebook Live Gathering

<https://www.facebook.com/povertyinitiative/>

An invite to a recent Freedom Church of the Poor gathering

Throughout history religion has been used by powerful forces to divide, exclude, and oppress people. Whether it is the Roman Empire in Jesus' time or the globalized forces of domination we face today, religion and institutions like the church have played an integral part in the capacity of the powerful to maintain control and justify violence. In the US, Christianity has been used to bless the genocide and colonization of indigenous people. It was twisted to say God approved of slavery and sanctioned racism. And it has been deployed to defend the rights of a few to accumulate massive amounts of wealth and power and at the same time blame the poor for their poverty. Given this history (and ongoing reality) it is perhaps hard to understand why anyone would want to rehabilitate religion and the institution of church in particular. This is especially true if you count yourself among those who are on the receiving end of this long history of oppression and/or are currently fighting against it.



A screenshot from a recent Freedom Church of the Poor Gathering

The Freedom Church of the Poor is not an attempt to save any particular religious institution or even to try and make any of them better. It is a rejection of all of the distorted forms that religion has taken now and throughout history. Freedom Church is an expression of a belief in a fundamentally different way of being religious. It is radical only in the sense that it is much closer to how most, if not all, religious traditions originate in the first place - through an organized fight against the forces of domination and death that seek to destroy and degrade life.

In 1967, as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was preparing the Poor People's Campaign, he described the Freedom Church of the Poor as a "non-violent army of the poor." His vision of church was one in which the poor united across lines of difference to take action together against the forces of injustice. King was Christian and he drew heavily from the Bible, but his understanding of Church was informed by the material reality around him and his active participation in fighting for the world of justice that God promises.

In a Freedom Church people are united by their common experiences of injustice and their common commitment to take action to change it. A Freedom Church does not turn to the Bible to find ways to defend and prove the righteousness of our fight.

It reads the Bible out of an active participation in that struggle. It reads the Bible out of what Dorothee Solle called a “hermeneutics of hunger,” or what a student of Marx might call the material reality. It is a reading that believes in a God that is very much concerned with whether people have clean water, housing, and everything else they need to live dignified lives. By reading the Bible in this way it is no longer a confusing and potentially oppressive set of texts and traditions, and instead a set of documents with a common theme—the ongoing struggle of the impoverished for justice and liberation.

During Passover the Freedom Church of the Poor heard from Dan Jones, a leader in the Poor People’s Campaign, Put People First! PA and the Reading the Bible with the Poor Cohort. Dan offered some reflections on the book of Exodus, which he explained is a story that has often been misused and misinterpreted to serve the interests of the ruling classes.

“They take a story about poor, exploited and oppressed people winning the freedom to remake society, with God on their side, and turn it into an account of nationalist triumph or spiritual superiority.”

In the Freedom Church Exodus is studied and read through the experience of those held captive. By doing so we gain not only a different view of history and the Bible, but a means to break apart and organize against the myths that hold the dominant and dominating power structure in place today.

Dan went on to explain how the Hebrew word used to describe the group that came out of Egypt, *ayrev*, translates as “a mixed multitude.” The Hebrews or Israelites in the Exodus story were not simply an exclusive tribe of people. It is more likely that they were a diverse band of poor and oppressed people, “who took advantage of a time of widespread economic and social crisis to break free.”

This “mixed multitude” were united in their common oppression from Pharaoh and through their struggle against that oppression came to see a different vision of God and community. They were a Freedom Church of the Poor. This understanding of God and community (church) did not magically emerge as an idea out of Moses’ or any other leader’s mind, but as a collective response to the material reality of oppression. Violence, death, and hunger, drove people together and into resistance,

which in turn allowed them to discover a new way of being in the world and a new (old) understanding of God as that force that binds us all in love and justice and deep value for all life.

The Freedom Church again emerged in Jesus' time when the vast majority of people were impoverished and oppressed under the domination of the Roman Empire. Jesus led a group of people in resistance to Roman domination in part by re-reading and preaching the Hebrew scriptures and stories from the perspective of the poor in his day. Jesus' first sermon in Luke 4:18 references the prophecies of Isaiah and echoes the Exodus story, challenging the poor and the powerful alike to see God's word and God's will anew in the context of the Roman Empire: "God has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free."

In another recent Freedom Church Service, Dr. Colleen Wessell-McCoy offered this description of the early Jesus movement and the Freedom Church they helped to establish:

"Two millennia ago, the apostles and disciples... brought word of a messiah and savior who was assassinated by the kingdom of Caesar. This Christ was tortured and crucified for proclaiming the coming of a kingdom of God that would lift and heal the poor by casting low the Roman Empire. Caesar and his apostles and disciples were right to fear Jesus and the poor. The first freedom churches took the cross - the very symbol of Roman power and deadly control - and made it a symbol of the power of the poor and the inevitable ordering of the world around our needs."

A Freedom Church rejects a reading of the Bible as a document that supports a particular regime of power and instead reads it as the history of the struggles of the poor. From this perspective the Bible endures not just because it helps reinforce the superiority of the ruling class, but because it actually documents subversive, anti-imperialist, pro-poor stories. In every age and in every struggle for justice these stories are given new life and serve to bind us in the continuing fight for justice and freedom.

Indeed throughout history as people have organized and fought the forces of domination and violence Freedom Churches have necessarily arisen. They have

served to develop a moral critique of society and implement a new way of walking with God and being in the world. In the US this form of “church” was central to the struggle to end slavery, the industrial worker’s struggle, the Black Freedom struggle, and many others. These Freedom Churches drew on Biblical, predominantly Christian texts and traditions, not because there was anything exclusively Christian about those struggles, but because these were the inherited traditions and texts of liberation in that particular culture at the time. The Bible was not read into or forced to fit these struggles, rather the struggles themselves breathed life into those religious traditions and drew out of them the lessons and history of the poor fighting in a different time.

Those gathering for Freedom Church today are dealing with a society that sacrifices life for profit. In the US in just two months almost 100,000 lives have been lost to a virus that was unleashed by the unfettered drive for profit, spread through global channels of transport and commodity circulation, and took hold of a population that was made vulnerable through decades of deepening social inequality. The experiences of suffering in and fighting against this system is what brings people together today in the Freedom Church. The Freedom Church of the Poor is where leaders share their experiences and commune with the struggles and freedom fighters of the past. It is where we ground ourselves in a different vision of society and prepare ourselves with the moral and spiritual leadership required for the fight ahead. In the words of the song that Jacob and the Shackdwellers shared, the Freedom Church of the Poor kindles the light of the “far away” home we all long for.