



CHRISTIANS for
SOCIAL ACTION



ECONOMIC INJUSTICE

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO SYSTEMS THAT HARM OUR
NEIGHBORS

A FOUR-PART SERIES + REFLECTION GUIDE

ARTICLES AUTHORED BY DR. TERENCE LESTER

INTRODUCTION

Economic injustice is not an abstract policy debate — it is a daily reality shaping the lives, futures, and dignity of our neighbors.

In this reflection guide, Dr. Terence Lester invites us to see how systems formed over generations continue to harm communities today, and how the church can recover its public witness by stepping into the work of repair.

We created this guide to help you move more deeply through Lester's insights — whether you're reading on your own, discussing with a small group, or using it as a teaching tool in your congregation or classroom. Each chapter is paired with reflection questions to help you pause, slow down, and listen:

- What is the Spirit drawing your attention to?
- What aligns with your experience — or unsettles you?
- What would faithful action look like in your context?

Our hope is that this resource helps you move beyond information toward imagination — toward seeing, lamenting, and acting alongside those most harmed by unjust systems.

May you read these chapters slowly, openly, and expectantly, trusting that the work of justice begins with paying attention.

KEY THEMES

1. ECONOMIC INJUSTICE IS SYSTEMIC, NOT ACCIDENTAL.

From educational redlining to funding cuts, book bans, and weakened protections, today's inequities are the predictable outcomes of policies shaping neighborhoods, schools, and opportunities for generations.

2. POVERTY FUNCTIONS AS TRAUMA.

Students and families navigating food insecurity, unstable housing, and chronic underfunding do not lack ability — they lack the supports required for flourishing. Trauma shapes identity, possibility, and long-term outcomes.

3. CHARITY ALONE CANNOT REPAIR WHAT SYSTEMS BREAK.

The church often celebrates compassion but stops short of naming the forces that create need in the first place. Charity without justice can unintentionally reinforce distance, dependence, or silence.

4. PUBLIC THEOLOGY MATTERS.

Faith is not merely personal devotion — it is lived in public. Biblical justice requires both *tsedeq* (right relationship) and *mishpat* (right action). Jesus's ministry models a faith in the streets, not just the sanctuary.

5. PROXIMITY CHANGES EVERYTHING.

Real transformation begins when communities move closer to those who are harmed — listening, learning, and partnering in ways that resist performative service and cultivate mutual dignity.

6. REPAIR IS BOTH SPIRITUAL AND STRUCTURAL.

Reparative communities refuse to turn away from suffering. They rebuild trust, confront harmful policies, name injustice, and stay committed to long-term healing.

7. SMALL ACTS CAN CATALYZE SYSTEMIC CHANGE.

Zion's Closet is one example: a simple act of compassion became a movement integrating community, schools, policy awareness, and structural imagination.

8. THE CHURCH HAS A CALLING — AND A CHOICE.

It can remain silent, participating in the status quo, or it can embody the Good News by standing with those whose futures are threatened by inequity. Reparative churches choose the latter.

CHAPTER 1

EDUCATIONAL REDLINING AND THE FIGHT FOR FUTURES

HOW SYSTEMIC DISINVESTMENT SHAPES STUDENTS' LIVES BEFORE
THEY EVER REACH ADULTHOOD



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In Chapter 1, Dr. Terence Lester exposes the spiritual and structural crisis of educational redlining — the decades-long practice of underfunding schools in Black and Brown communities. He traces how policy rollbacks, book bans, and weakened protections compound harm for students already carrying the weight of poverty and instability.

In 1963, James Baldwin shared a very important line in his article “A Talk to Teachers”[1] that I believe is still reverberating through the portals of time, speaking directly to our present moment when it comes to education and the recent political decisions that have rolled back support and dismantled protections for students who come from impoverished, redlined communities like mine, communities that are hard to navigate and often lack the necessary support and resources needed to overcome limitations.

To know that both the Supreme Court’s decisions and the current administration’s decisions will impact future scholars disturbs me in ways that breaks my heart deeply. Baldwin says,

“FOR THESE ARE ALL OUR CHILDREN; WE WILL ALL PROFIT BY, OR PAY FOR, WHATEVER THEY BECOME.”[2]

Baldwin’s words help frame what we are seeing with the recent shifts in the way education has been handled over the last few years.

And since we often hear about these shifts in passing or read articles that don’t fully connect the dots, I believe it is helpful to see them laid out in a chart to understand their connectivity, intersection, and impact in real time. This way, we can see clearly that these aren’t exaggerations or hyperbole but decisions with tangible consequences, effects that should move us toward awareness, empathy, and action.

Following is a timeline of events that helps us understand these shifts and what they actually mean for Black students who live in communities shaped by the long history of redlining, communities affected both in terms of housing and education.

TIMELINE OF KEY EDUCATION POLICIES AFFECTING BLACK STUDENTS

YEAR	POLICY	IMPACT
2018	School Discipline & Policing Policies (Rollback)	In the current U.S. President’s first term, the administration rescinded Obama-era guidance meant to curb racial disparities in school discipline. This decision, announced in a 2018 “Dear Colleague” letter, came despite evidence that Black students continue to face suspensions and expulsions at disproportionately high rates, feeding the school-to-prison pipeline.[3]
2020-2022	Book Bans & Curriculum Restrictions (State-Level)	Dozens of states passed laws restricting teaching on race, gender, and history. Black students lose access to curriculum that affirms Black history and our collective lived experiences.[4]
2023	Supreme Court — Affirmative Action Ruling (Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard/UNC)	Race-conscious admissions were struck down by the Supreme Court, a decision framed as progress beyond race but one that failed to consider its impact on students facing systemic discrimination. Removing this tool means losing a way to help offset the long history of exclusion Black students have faced in college admissions. Early data suggests a drop in Black enrollment at elite universities, which also places additional pressure on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to absorb displaced applicants.[5]
2024	Escalation of Book Bans & “CRT” Restrictions	Additional state-level restrictions on what schools can teach are increasingly targeting books by Black authors, narrowing access to diverse stories and perspectives. This narrowing is rooted in the false idea of colorblind meritocracy, an ideology that pretends history and racism do not matter, while also ignoring that not everyone starts from the same place. The result is that the result of inequities are actually personal shortcomings instead of being recognized as the outcome of systemic barriers.[6] [7]

TIMELINE OF KEY EDUCATION POLICIES AFFECTING BLACK STUDENTS, CONT.

YEAR	POLICY	IMPACT
2024-2025	Supreme Court Decision on Agency Authority (Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo; Relentless v. Department of Commerce, June 2024)	In Loper Bright, the Court curtailed Chevron deference. Analysts warn this weakens agencies’ ability to interpret and enforce education rules connected to Title I and IDEA, creating legal vulnerability and uncertainty for student protections, particularly funding support for students in impoverished environments and those needing extra support while living with a disability.[8]
2025	Department of Education Layoffs & Funding Cuts	The Department initiated a reduction in force that affected nearly half its workforce and later proceeded with layoffs of around 1,300 employees after the Supreme Court allowed the action to move forward. Observers warn that these cuts will disrupt student aid support, civil rights enforcement, and research capacity, further straining Title I and IDEA implementation in already under-resourced schools. [9] [10]

What we are witnessing is not simply budget trimming. It is a decision that could possibly impact the dreams and potential of students long before they even have an opportunity to flourish in their lived environments, let alone in higher educational spaces.

Therefore, when Baldwin places the future of students on us as a collective, he is essentially saying that the dreams of students rest upon the work we put in to ensure they can access them. This is not about policy abstractions but about the deliberate harm caused to Black students who are dependent on supports that strengthen their educational futures.

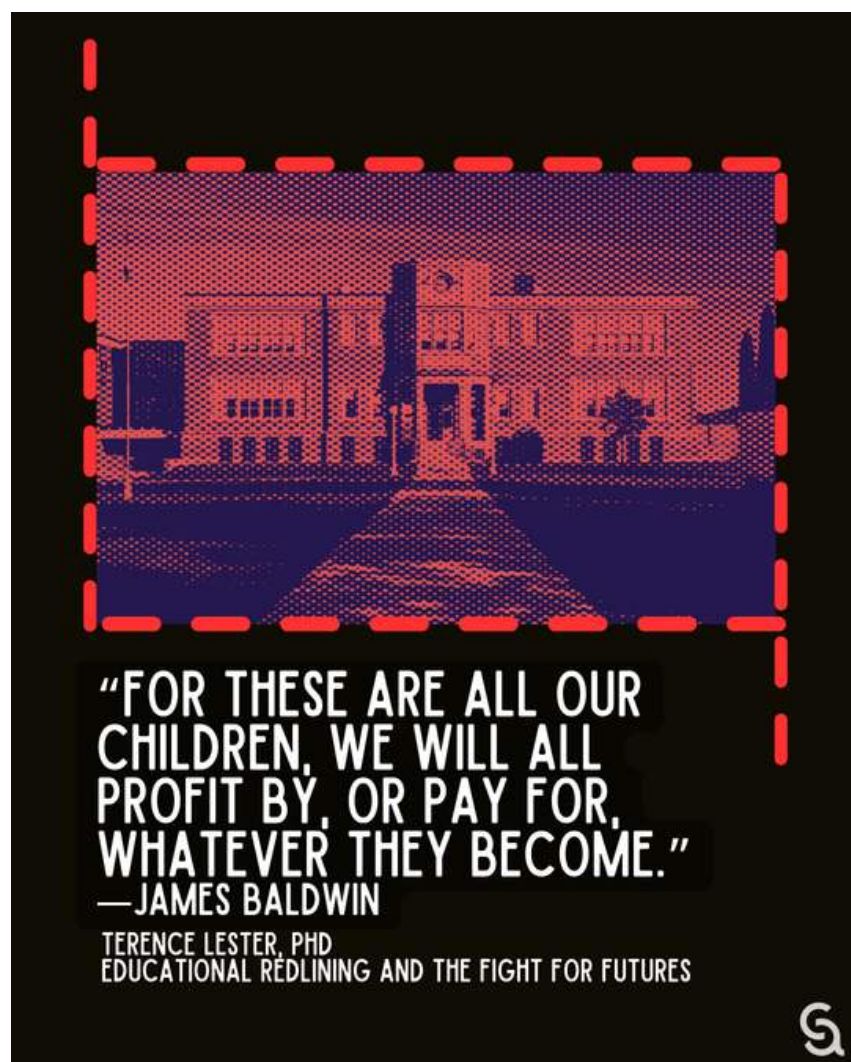
Take, for instance, students who face poverty in urban settings, may be experiencing social conditions that are detrimental to their development, and also have to deal with the personal pressures as a result of their redlined communities. I call this educational redlining.

I define educational redlining as the systemic practice of underfunding schools based on the wealth of their surrounding neighborhoods, which are themselves shaped by the legacy of housing redlining.

Because public schools in the United States are funded largely through local property taxes, schools in historically redlined and disinvested communities receive fewer resources, outdated materials, and less support staff, while schools in wealthier and often whiter districts benefit from higher per-student funding and stronger infrastructure.

This practice locks Black and Brown students into a cycle of limited opportunity, reinforcing intergenerational poverty and perpetuating gaps in college access, career preparation, and upward social mobility.[11] [12]

I know this because I was that student. I grew up in a single-parent household, watching my mother struggle as she navigated not having enough, and I felt the pain and weight of the environment with all the systemic barriers that shaped why I struggled in school.



I remember sitting in classrooms where the lesson had nothing to do with what I was experiencing — poverty, instability, and the fear of not knowing how to manage the trauma I carried to school each day.

Those pressures did not just affect my grades; they weighed on my spirit and how I saw myself. It got so heavy internally that I eventually dropped out of high school and experienced brief moments of homelessness as a teenager after running away from home.

Now think about students today facing the same challenges.

They are growing up with food insecurity, housing instability, and environments filled with stress, yet they are still expected to perform academically as if those realities do not exist. That disconnect is not only unfair but also traumatizing. Poverty itself becomes a form of trauma that shapes how you see yourself, your future, and even your worth.

And here is the part too many policymakers ignore: Those barriers do not stop at K–12. They carry into higher education. Students from impoverished families face structural hurdles in affording application fees, accessing test prep resources, navigating FAFSA, or even finding mentors who can walk them through the process.

Research shows first-generation Black students are less likely to graduate, not because of ability, but because of systemic inequities like lack of financial aid, hostile campus climates, and gatekeeping in admissions.[13]

For students who are unhoused or food insecure, these barriers multiply. When you do not know where you will sleep or how you will eat, finishing a degree becomes a near-impossible mountain. It may not even part of the conversations you have with those around you, because survival replaces dreams of college.

I know this personally. When I returned to school, I had to navigate not only the classroom but also the weight of being a fifth-year persister (a fifth-year senior), the shame of dropout status, and the lack of belief from educators who labeled me. I was not even thinking about a future in college.

That journey required community intervention and faith, but it should not require a miracle to access education. I eventually overcame many of the challenges I faced with the support of my community and earned a PhD. However, I recognize that my story is a rarity, and that shouldn't be the case.

For instance, did you know that over 1.4 million students nationwide currently rely on protections under the McKinney Vento Act, protections now threatened by proposals to eliminate dedicated EHCY funding and fold it into broader block grants? Removing that dedicated funding would decimate essential supports like homelessness liaisons, transportation, and enrollment assistance, which are critical for keeping students in school.[14] [15]

Does this bother you? Does it break your heart the way it does mine? Do you think it breaks the heart of Jesus? When I reread Matthew 9, where it says that Jesus was moved with compassion because people were weary and hopeless, like sheep without a shepherd, I can't help but reimagine that verse in the context of education today.

Students are weary because of a lack of funding, lack of school lunches, lack of housing, lack of clothing, lack of support teachers, and all the other things that funding cuts take away.

“WHEN HE SAW THE CROWDS, HE HAD COMPASSION FOR THEM, BECAUSE THEY WERE HARASSED AND HELPLESS, LIKE SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD. THEN HE SAID TO HIS DISCIPLES, ‘THE HARVEST IS PLENTIFUL, BUT THE LABORERS ARE FEW; THEREFORE ASK THE LORD OF THE HARVEST TO SEND OUT LABORERS INTO HIS HARVEST.’” (MATT. 9:36–37, NRSV)

These are not just numbers on a spreadsheet. They are real students, carrying the weight of poverty and instability, often showing up to school with all they own in a backpack. They want to learn, but they have to navigate hardships that no policy safety net has ever fully addressed. Funding shifts to cut protections like equitable access to college, IDEA, McKinney-Vento, and Title I are not just policy debates. They are moral decisions about whose futures we believe are worth protecting.

Theologically, this should matter to those who follow the teachings of Jesus. As James Cone reminded us,

“ANY TALK ABOUT GOD THAT FAILS TO MAKE GOD’S LIBERATION OF THE OPPRESSED ITS STARTING POINT IS NOT CHRISTIAN.”[16]

If people claim to follow Jesus yet withhold support from the vulnerable, I believe they have missed the story and the good news. Isaiah calls us to “seek justice, correct oppression”[17], not to stand by while students lose more ground. Particularly in a moment when the federal Department of Education is being downsized and its authority contested, we must remember that historically marginalized students rely heavily on those protections. Educational justice is biblical justice.

So when I talk about cutting futures, I am not just speaking as an advocate. I am speaking as someone who almost lost his own future and dreams because of everything I had to overcome.

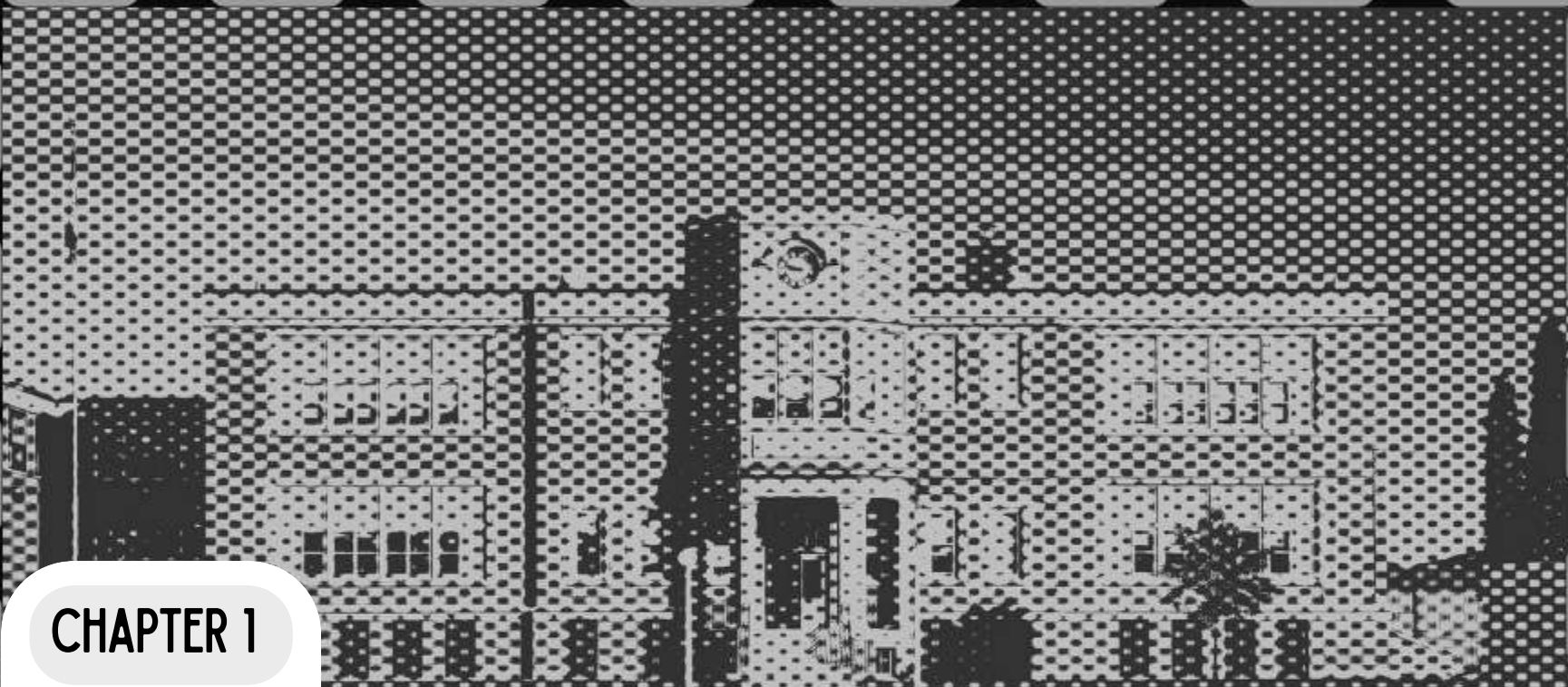
The barriers that once stood in my way — poverty, lack of support, and systemic disinvestment — are the same barriers being reinforced for students today.

But now there is even less of a safety net. I believe that if we do not act, we are complicit in producing another generation of students who drop out, when we should be cultivating doctors, teachers, thinkers, innovators, servant leaders, and people who will change this world for good.

The work is urgent. Baldwin was right:

“FOR THESE ARE ALL OUR CHILDREN; WE WILL ALL PROFIT BY, OR PAY FOR, WHATEVER THEY BECOME.” [18]

Let’s commit to advocate for different outcomes and futures.



CHAPTER 1

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Where have you seen “educational redlining” at work in your own city or context — through school funding, discipline policies, or access to resources?
- How does Baldwin’s line, “For these are all our children; we will all profit by, or pay for, whatever they become,” challenge the way your church or community thinks about students from marginalized neighborhoods?
- What is one concrete advocacy step you (or your church) could take in the next three months to support students in under-resourced schools?

CHAPTER 2

WHAT CHARITY CAN'T FIX: MOVING THE CHURCH FROM COMPASSION TO JUSTICE

WHY COMPASSION ALONE CANNOT CONFRONT THE SYSTEMS THAT
PRODUCE POVERTY



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In Chapter 2, Dr. Terence Lester draws a distinction between personal theology and public theology, showing why charitable acts alone cannot repair the systems that keep people trapped in poverty. He unpacks the biblical frameworks of tsedeq and mishpat, calling the church to move beyond seasonal outreach toward courageous truth-telling and systemic action.

When I hear the word “charity” in the context of the church, I cannot help but think about the difference between personal theology and public theology.

Personal theology is how faith is lived out and experienced on an individual level where one develops what many would consider a personal relationship with God. Out of that sacred commitment and journey one engages in spiritual practices that deepen belief: devotion through reading sacred texts, prayer, fasting, worship, confession, solitude, or acts of service through the church that is sometimes called outreach.

Those acts often take the form of compassionate acts of charity: giving food to those who are hungry, clothing to those who are unhoused or impoverished, or meeting immediate needs. Some churches even dig wells so people in other countries can have clean drinking water. Scripture affirms this work:

“IF A BROTHER OR SISTER IS NAKED AND LACKS DAILY FOOD, AND ONE OF YOU SAYS TO THEM, ‘GO IN PEACE; KEEP WARM AND EAT YOUR FILL,’ AND YET YOU DO NOT SUPPLY THEIR BODILY NEEDS, WHAT IS THE GOOD OF THAT?” (JAMES 2:15–16, NRSV)

Churches celebrate this — and they should, because it is good. I believe that these acts are important and deeply meaningful and that we need more of them. Someone will go to bed hungry tonight. Some children live in shelters. Many impoverished neighborhoods, like the one I grew up in, lack grocery stores with access to fresh produce.

But on their own, these charitable acts of service do not address the systems of injustice that create those needs. In many cases, these compassionate acts can even create distance between giver and receiver, making it transactional and leaving injustice unaddressed altogether.

I have worked alongside and consulted several predominantly white churches that had good intentions, but the distance created by their charitable acts often undermined the dignity of the person or community they served.

The giver (the church) remained in control, while those receiving support (those experiencing poverty) were kept dependent. All the while, no real relationship was established. Too often, no one took the time to ask the deeper question: Why are these acts of service needed in the first place, and what needs to be corrected or addressed?

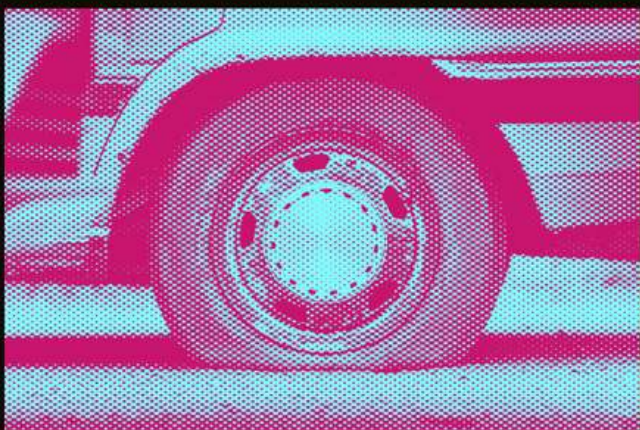
Public theology, on the other hand, asks what God has to say about what is happening in the world and what we should do about it. In *Social Justice Handbook: Small Steps for a Better World*, Dr. Mae Elise Cannon unpacks the meaning of righteousness and justice to frame biblical justice.[1]

In the Hebrew text, righteousness translates from *tsedeq* (צֶדֶק). According to Strong's Concordance, it refers to rightness, integrity, justice, or moral order.[2] This meaning goes beyond moral correctness to point toward the "right posture of the heart," a relational integrity and covenant faithfulness rooted in God's character that shapes how we live and interact justly.

On the other hand, justice comes from *mishpat* (מִשְׁפָּט). Strong's defines it as judgment, justice, legal decision, or ordinance.[3]

It speaks to "right action lived out," the societal structures, laws, and judgments necessary to uphold fairness, equity, and justice for all oppressed. The prophet Amos said,

**"LET JUSTICE (MISHPAT) ROLL DOWN LIKE WATERS,
AND RIGHTEOUSNESS (TSEDEQ) LIKE AN EVER-
FLOWING STREAM" (AMOS 5:24).**



**"PUBLIC THEOLOGY IN THE
CHURCH DOESN'T JUST HAND OUT
THE SANDWICH; IT ASKS WHY
PEOPLE ARE HUNGRY."**

TERENCE LESTER, PHD
WHAT CHARITY CAN'T FIX: MOVING THE CHURCH
FROM COMPASSION TO JUSTICE



Micah wrote that what the Lord requires is to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” Biblical justice always holds heart (tsedeq) and action (mishpat) together.

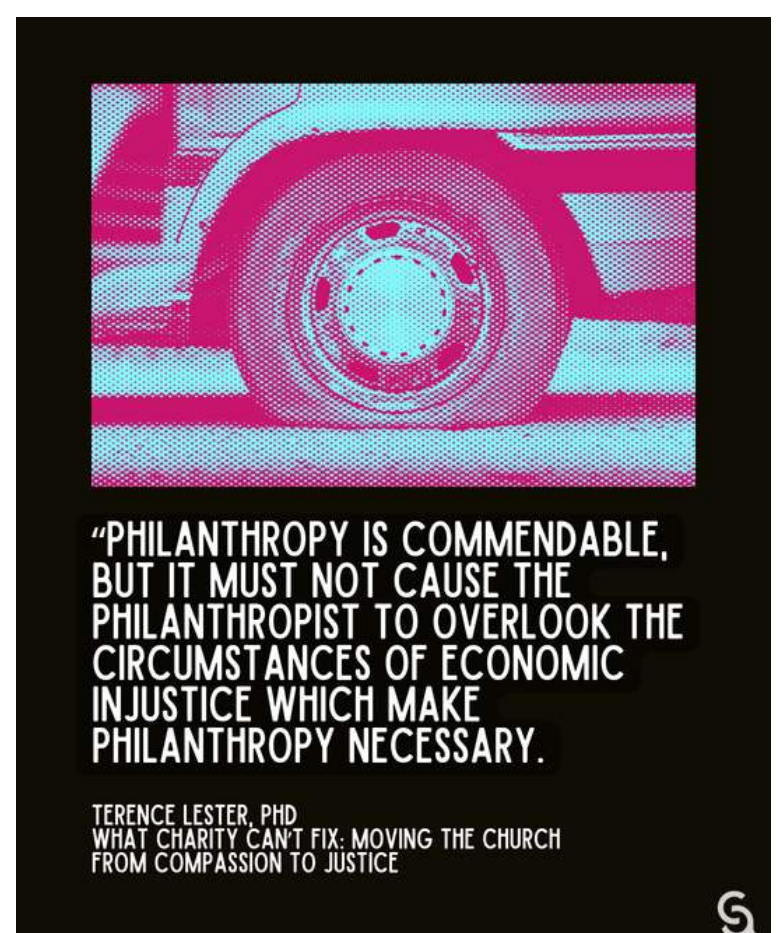
This deeper understanding moves the church to consider how it might respond to unjust actions in the world that literally harm people. I believe that public theology has the power to move our personal beliefs into how we show up in the world, or as Jesus puts it, in “the highways and byways...” (Luke 14:23) — not just to give hand outs to people in need without connection, but instead to stand with and truly know the people who are harmed by injustice, walking alongside them in real time and addressing the wrongs that create their need.

Could the church that is silent in times of political harm, war, genocide, social and political violence and division, racism, and white supremacy rely too much on personal theology, hoping that injustice will correct itself through personal devotion?

This, in many cases, has been seen as the opposite witness of the Good News to many people who actually question the church and its motives. The silence of the church is unsettling in the face of public injustice when it should speak out and direct people to God’s love, which has a different standard that is greater than the injustice and harm that impacts the lives of everyday people.

I believe that the difference between the personal and the public witness is what happens beyond a charitable outreach moment that the local and universal church engages in.

Public theology in the church doesn’t just hand out the sandwich; it asks why people are hungry and what needs to be corrected to ensure that everyone has access to food.



It doesn't just give hygiene kits to those who are unhoused; it questions why cities sweep encampments and close shelters without offering access to housing-first programs. It doesn't just sit by and watch Black students lose funding, healthcare support, after-school programs, and school lunches. It speaks out with a moral witness and stands with those who are in need of love when injustice is loud.

Why? Because God loves those who are harmed by wrong actions and injustice. When we rely solely on personal theology in the church without public theology, the church fails to be the light on the hill and finds itself sitting silently while suffering continues in communities harmed by injustice, leaving people to wonder if the church is complicit. Theologians like Howard Thurman described Jesus' ministry as a faith for those with their "backs against the wall," because Jesus himself lived that reality, being born a minority under Roman occupation, impoverished alongside his earthly parents.[4]

In Jesus' own life we see that the gospel is public, not just private.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. warned that "philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary." [5] King was right, and the church must watch itself.

We are living in sensitive times that will require another form of witness that is still rooted in the Good News—whether that be praying and protesting against injustice, singing in worship and signing petitions to push back against unethical voter gerrymandering, worshiping and watching and listening in on political council meetings, or reading the text and being committed to resistance.

It is the both/and of the theological witness that moves the church beyond charity. And in this moment in time, some churches are recovering this public theology. For instance, Faith in Action, a national network, organizes congregations to push for immigration reform, police accountability, and housing justice.[6]

Similarly, the Poor People's Campaign gathers churches, allies, and individuals across traditions to confront poverty and systemic racism through lobbying, public witness, and direct action to fight against poverty and for livable wages.[7] And while these are organizations, churches from all walks of faith are joining in.

Today, as many forms of social injustice — including educational injustice, and an anti-intellectualism that is masked as patriotism — continue to rise, the church could choose charity rather than step up to fight the injustice that creates the need for that charity.

If our love stays locked inside sanctuaries defined by personal devotion, expressed only through seasonal outreach, then the church must ask itself why its theology isn't more public. Jesus declared in Luke 4:18–19 that he came to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom for the oppressed. That is not charity; that is liberation.

I believe what we need right now are reparative churches. Reparative churches cry out for equitable education. They cry out for access to housing. They cry out for a living wage. They cry out for disability protections. They cry out against harmful immigration practices.

They fund scholarships for first-generation Black students, create tutoring programs when Title I schools experience funding cuts, and stand with unhoused families in the fight for housing and dignity. They repair social wrongs by acting; reparative churches see injustice not as political but as a fight for biblical justice during social moments that create social and spiritual crises.

I believe the choice before the church is clear. It will either remain silent or it will move from an exclusively personal and charitable approach to the truly Good News of Jesus — a living, active, justice-engaged public theological stance.



CHAPTER 2

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- In your experience, where has your church (or where have you personally) stopped at charity instead of asking deeper questions about systems and root causes?
- How do the biblical ideas of righteousness (*tsedeq*) and justice (*mishpat*) expand your understanding of what Christian faithfulness looks like in public life?
- What might it look like for your congregation to become more of a “reparative church” in one specific area — education, housing, wages, or immigration?

CHAPTER 3

BUILDING FUTURES FROM THE GROUND UP

HOW ZION'S CLOSET IS TRANSFORMING TITLE I SCHOOLS AND
REIMAGINING COMMUNITY CARE



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In Chapter 3, Dr. Terence Lester traces the story behind Zion's Closet, an innovative initiative that brings dignity, resources, and wraparound support directly into underfunded Title I schools. Lester shows how one child's compassion grew into a program that unites families, educators, churches, and community leaders for systemic impact.

In 2016, with the support of my family and board of directors, I launched a campaign called MAP16 (March Against Poverty) to walk from Atlanta, GA, to the White House to raise awareness about homelessness in the U.S. At that point, I was growing tired of political discourse that excluded the terms poverty and homelessness. Even today, although we are beginning to hear about homelessness more often, it is usually mentioned only from a punitive standpoint.

I launched the campaign in partnership with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) at its national headquarters in Atlanta, the same organization founded by Martin Luther King Jr. The journey took over 800 miles and 2 months to complete. I walked through multiple states, using digital technology to bring attention to the issue. This was turned into a documentary called "Voiceless" [1] that chronicled my journey.

Around that time, my daughter Zion was in second grade. That is when she began to understand what compassion, advocacy, and even community service look like. Some days, she would bring newspapers to school, telling her classmates about the walking journey. Instead of setting the newspaper aside, her teacher took the opportunity to educate the class on homelessness.

Eventually, Zion launched a campaign to raise awareness and collect spare change alongside other students. Her classroom made posters, rallied peers, and brought in teachers. Together, they raised \$52 worth of change. That might seem small, but it was significant. Students were impacted, made aware, and even supported, as some in the class were experiencing homelessness themselves.

As a father, I was deeply moved by my daughter's growing compassion.

That simple act planted seeds that years later became the inspiration for our children's book, *Zion Learns to See*, which tells the story of how Zion learned — from going to work with me every week at Love Beyond Walls — the importance of humanizing, honoring, and showing compassion to those who may not have housing. We wanted children to understand that age does not matter when it comes to service — anyone can make a difference.

After the book's release, Zion and I began to dream about launching another initiative that could directly impact students in real time, especially those who might be unhoused, while also bringing communities together. Families, businesses, local political leaders, school board members, churches, and educators could unite to resource schools when funding fell short.

That dream grew into something much larger: Zion's Closet. Zion's Closet is a program through Love Beyond Walls to retrofit classrooms into community resource centers with wraparound services that support educators, counselors, and social workers as they show up for students needing resources.



**"IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT HANDING
OUT SUPPLIES—IT'S ABOUT
NAMING INEQUITY FOR WHAT IT IS."**

TERENCE LESTER, PHD
BUILDING FUTURES FROM THE GROUND UP:
HOW ZION'S CLOSET IS TRANSFORMING TITLE I SCHOOLS



We mobilize volunteers to enter Title I schools and transform classrooms into fully stocked community hubs inside the school. The goal is simple but deeply impactful, because students navigating poverty and housing instability have their needs met in real time. Their dignity is affirmed daily through social and emotional support.

What makes Zion's Closet distinct is that it goes beyond filling immediate needs and gaps. It brings together local businesses, political leaders, school board members, churches, and community organizations — not only to stock resources like laundry facilities, computer stations, refrigeration for healthy food, uniforms, and hygiene kits, but also to engage in meaningful dialogue about systemic change.

Each Zion's Closet is designed in direct collaboration with principals, social workers, and counselors so that resources align with the school's unique needs. Families receive emotional support in spaces where parents can apply for jobs, support social-emotional learning, wash clothes, and participate without shame.

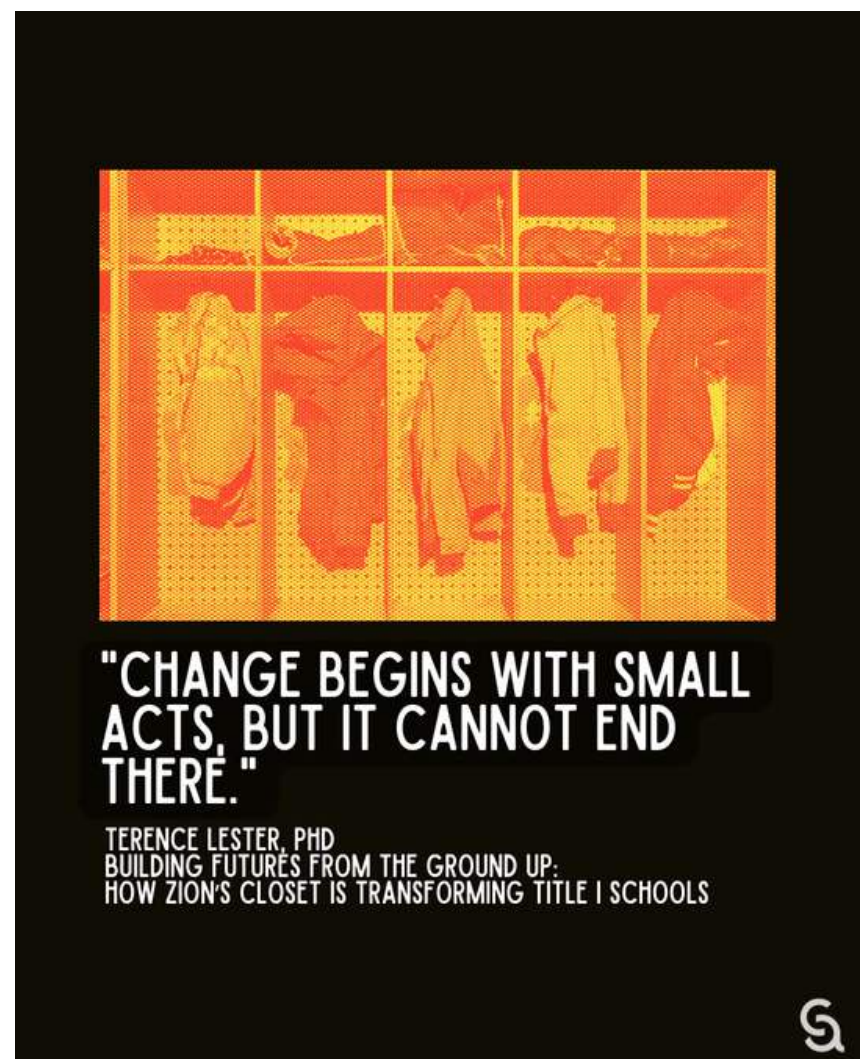
This matters, because many school social workers manage multiple campuses and face enormous caseloads. They often spend hours searching for solutions outside the school only to encounter resource shortages. Zion's Closet addresses this by bringing supports directly into the school environment with direct impact among students and families.

From the beginning, we knew we had to move beyond one-time book-bag drives. Those are helpful, but they are not enough. A year-round closet and resource center embedded in the school means that when a teacher notices a student struggling because of worn-out shoes or stained clothes, supplies are immediately available, and it helps to create dialogue in the school among the helping professionals about what the county or school system needs to do to address these concerns.

That moment not only restores dignity and helps students reengage with instructional learning, it also forces us to ask structural questions:

Why are children arriving at school in these conditions? What must we change as a community to address the roots of the issue? How are funding cuts impacting students?

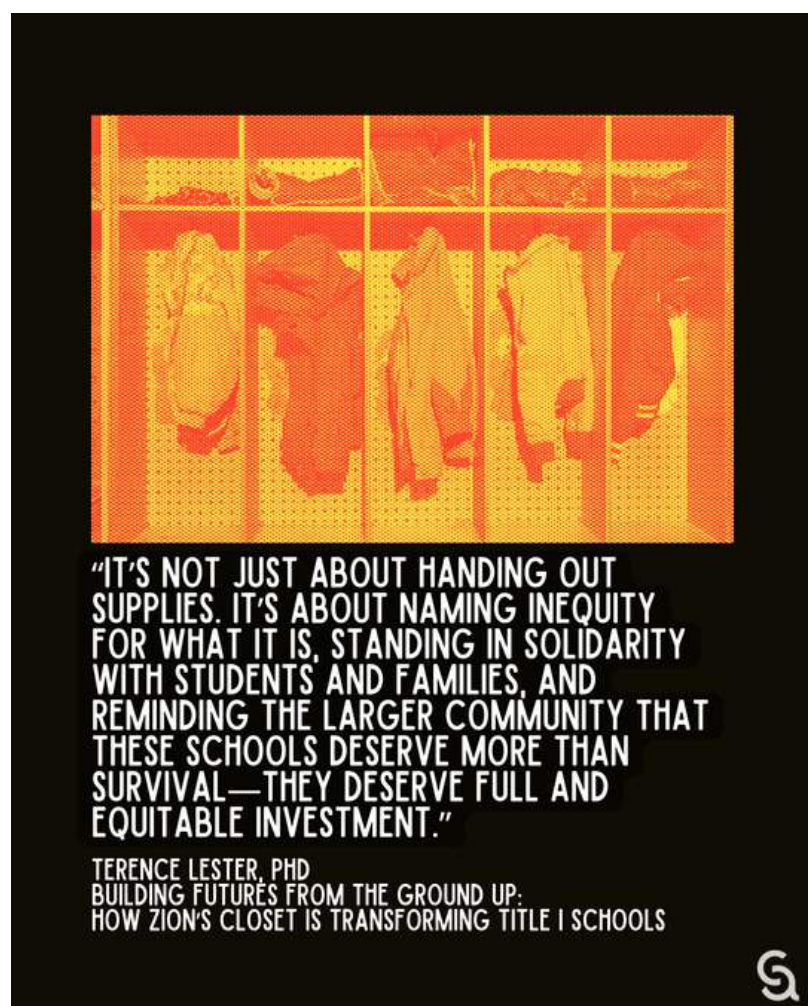
Although we are working with Title I elementary schools right now, it's important for people to understand what Title I represents for students and families. Title I schools serve a high percentage of students from communities that have been historically underfunded and marginalized.



These schools carry double the weight of other schools. First, they are expected to meet the greatest needs. Second, they must do so while operating with fewer resources than wealthier districts that have long benefited from structural advantages, such as being situated in neighborhoods with greater economic investment and access to resources.

Here's the reality that we must consider that many do not understand: Districts with the lowest incomes in the United States receive about 5 percent less state and local funding per student — roughly \$800 less — than wealthier districts. Schools serving the highest proportions of students of color often face even larger gaps, receiving up to \$2,700 less per student.[2]

Title I is designed to step in here, and it currently supports over 26 million students across nearly 90 percent of U.S. school districts, including almost 60 percent of all public schools.[3] This data is not just hard to digest, it is also a moral and political statement about where this country has chosen to place its resources—and where it continues to fall short.



This is why our presence in these schools matters. The presence of all of us. It is not just about handing out supplies. It is about naming inequity for what it is, standing in solidarity with students and families, and reminding the larger community that these schools, these students, and these future scholars deserve more than survival. They deserve full and equitable investment.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act was designed to provide protections for students experiencing housing instability, ensuring they could remain enrolled in school, access transportation, and receive support services.[4] Yet underfunding and uneven enforcement have weakened its impact.

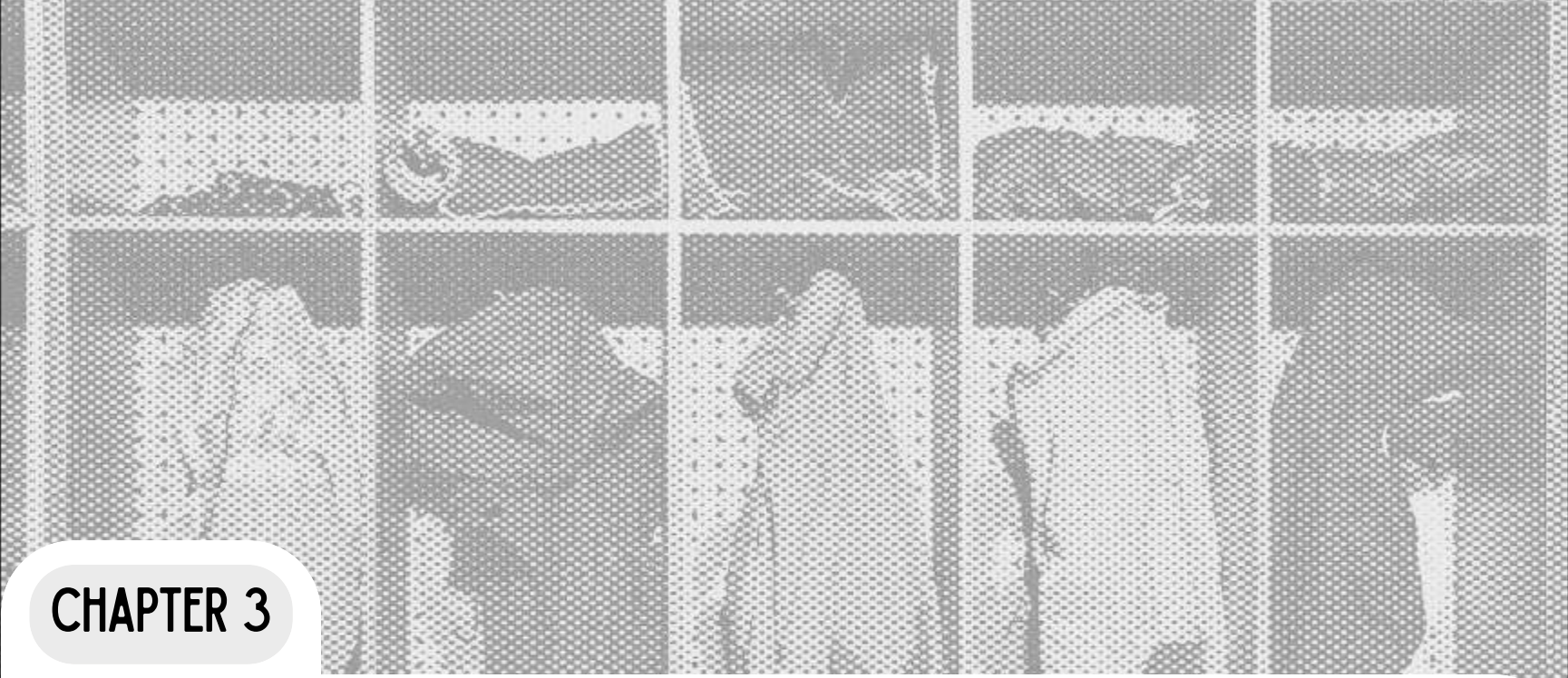
In the 2022–2023 school year, 1.37 million public school students were identified as experiencing homelessness, a 14 percent increase over the previous year.[5] These students are disproportionately Black, Latinx, and Native youth, and without fully resourced protections, they fall through the cracks.

When community spaces like Zion's Closet bring resources directly into Title I schools, we are saying to every student, You are seen, you belong here, and you deserve the same dignity and opportunities as anyone else. It reminds us that while laws like McKinney-Vento provide a framework, lived justice requires presence, proximity, and real support inside the very schools where inequities show up daily.

Zion's Closet not only provides immediate support but also points us back to these issues that need to be addressed. *Why are Title I schools chronically underfunded? Why is McKinney-Vento not fully resourced? Why must children rely on in-school closets or community hubs for basic needs in the first place?*

As I reflect on Zion's journey, from bringing newspapers to her second-grade class, to sparking a campaign of children donating change, to co-authoring Zion Learns to See, to helping inspire Zion's Closet, I see a thread of possibility and hope to continue organizing to display compassionate acts while also bringing people together to create change.

Because change begins with small acts, but it cannot end there.



CHAPTER 3

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What part of Zion's story, or the vision of Zion's Closet, stays with you most vividly? Why do you think that is?
- How does the data about Title I schools and student homelessness reframe the way you think about "back-to-school drives" or one-time acts of generosity?
- Who are the students, schools, or families near you that might need a sustained, relational presence — not just seasonal support? What could that presence look like?

CHAPTER 4

BECOMING REPARATIVE COMMUNITIES

A VISION FOR CHURCHES THAT HEAL, REPAIR, AND STAND WITH THE MARGINALIZED



CHRISTIANS for
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In Chapter 4, Dr. Terence Lester brings the series to its moral heart: the church's role in confronting economic injustice. Lester casts a vision of reparative communities — faith communities that refuse silence, embody public theology, and practice repair in both spiritual and social ways. Rooted in Scripture and grounded in proximity, Lester names the traits Christians need in this moment.

Over the years, after working within many denominational spaces — from UMC to Baptist, Lutheran to Presbyterian, Anglican and beyond — I've come to love what ecumenism has done to expand my theology and faith. Serving alongside churches with diverse expressions of worship, racial identity, and cultural understandings of the gospel has changed me.

I am better for having been proximate to others who follow Jesus and express that journey differently from myself. I have also witnessed the power of God in communities that dare to step beyond lines, connect, and become both symbols and agents of repair.

In fact, I've come to see a common thread. What truly makes a difference is not the type of church building or the denominational label — it's the people. It's the community embodying a reparative, justice-centered witness within and beyond the church walls. These communities understand that repair can happen wherever people show up.

They see the church not as a building but as the people who gather — the biblical vision of community.

Reparative communities live out a faith that doesn't stop on Sunday. It moves into the rhythms of daily life, showing up in overlooked neighborhoods, among excluded people, and in places crying out for the shalom of God.

Reparative churches break down barriers, speak truth to power, and stand for justice even when it's unpopular. They make room for everyone, because they believe everyone belongs. They take John 3:16 seriously — that God's love is wide enough for whosoever will come — and they refuse to draw lines where God has not.

These communities also hold a deep, integrated theology — personal and public, head and heart — that equips them to offer the care the world desperately needs. When churches embrace this reparative vision, it becomes clear that those truly living out a public witness are the ones who refuse to gate-keep belonging. They create spaces of truth-telling, justice, and bridge-building that uphold the dignity of all. As divisions widen through voter suppression, housing crises, and political polarization, the church cannot retreat into silence or comfort.

Reparative communities must step into this moment — showing that the Good News is still good, still for everyone, and still powerful enough to bring healing and repair. This piece might read more like an epistle than an article — and that’s intentional.

The urgency of this moment demands it. The church must embrace the slow, patient work of healing fractures caused by harm, injustice, policy, racism, violence, and all the -isms that have pushed people away from trusting the Body of Christ.

This is not quick work. It is the sacred calling of the church — to stand in solidarity, name what is broken, lament with those who suffer, and stay until wholeness begins to overshadow brokenness

Reparative communities live in the tension of the “already and not yet,” the holy work God calls us to in Isaiah 58:12:

“YOU SHALL BE CALLED THE REPAIRER OF THE BREACH, THE RESTORER OF STREETS TO LIVE IN.”

Isaiah reminds us that repair is both spiritual and social. It means rebuilding the ruins left by systems that exploit the poor, marginalize the unhoused, and neglect the vulnerable. It calls the church to a faith that is public, visible, and engaged where people are hurting.



“REPAIR DOESN’T COME THROUGH POWER OR CONTROL, BUT THROUGH COMPASSIONATE ACTION—REBUILDING TRUST, RESTORING BELONGING, AND STANDING WHERE SYSTEMS FAIL.”

TERENCE LESTER, PHD
BECOMING REPARATIVE COMMUNITIES



As we look ahead, reparative communities and churches will need:

Eyes that see dignity: Every person bears the image of God (Gen. 1:27). No qualifiers. Reparative communities don't see unhoused neighbors, poor families, underserved students, or marginalized people as projects but as beloved image-bearers deserving of equity and love. Where the world sees lack, God calls us to see dignity.

Hands that repair: Jesus modeled repair when he washed his disciples' feet (John 13:14–15). Repair doesn't come through power or control, but through compassionate action — rebuilding trust, restoring belonging, and standing where systems fail. These hands repair through food, housing, education, and health care — tangible expressions of love.

Voices that speak up: Proverbs 31:8–9 calls us to “Speak out for those who cannot speak.” Reparative communities do not stay quiet when injustice is loud. Silence protects the status quo. Truth-telling, even when uncomfortable, is an act of repair. It challenges harmful policies and names injustice when dignity is on the line.

Hearts that persevere: This work requires endurance. Systems of injustice do not crumble overnight. Galatians 6:9 reminds us, “Let us not grow weary in doing what is right.” Reparative communities stay faithful even when progress feels slow, showing up again and again because love that lasts is the love that repairs.

Together, these practices help faith communities resist performative charity and move toward the deeper, harder work of justice. Becoming reparative is not just about meeting immediate needs — it's about dismantling the structures that create those needs in the first place.



**“THEY MAKE ROOM FOR EVERYONE,
BECAUSE THEY BELIEVE EVERYONE
BELONGS.”**

TERENCE LESTER, PHD
BECOMING REPARATIVE COMMUNITIES



This is the invitation: to embody the gospel in ways that affirm dignity, pursue justice, and make belonging real.

I leave you with this liturgy of repair.

LITURGY OF REPAIR

GOD OF REPAIR,
YOU SEE WHAT IS BROKEN.
YOU CARE FOR THE WOUNDED.
YOU ARE THE SOURCE OF REPAIR.
BUT YOU CALL US TO STAND IN THE GAP.

MAKE US PEOPLE WHO REPAIR.
PEOPLE WHO EMBODY YOUR WITNESS.
WHERE THERE IS DIVISION, LET US SOW PEACE.
WHERE THERE IS INJUSTICE, LET US SEEK YOUR JUSTICE.
WHERE THERE IS DESPAIR, LET US EMBODY HOPE.

FORM US INTO A COMMUNITY THAT DOES NOT TURN AWAY,
BUT STAYS, PRESENT, PROXIMATE, AND FAITHFUL, UNTIL YOUR KINGDOM COMES ON EARTH AS IT
IS IN HEAVEN.

AMEN.



CHAPTER 4

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Where do I see the effects of harm or exclusion in my own community — and what might repair (not just relief) look like there?
- What assumptions do I hold about responsibility, worthiness, or “fairness” that might prevent me from imagining reparative action?
- What is one practice — personal or communal — that could help us move from charity to repair over time, even if it feels slow or costly?

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Dr. Terence Lester is a storyteller, public scholar, community activist, and author. He founded Love Beyond Walls, a nonprofit committed to raising awareness about poverty and homelessness, and teaches public policy and social change at Simmons College of Kentucky. His latest book, *From Dropout to Doctorate: Breaking the Chains of Educational Injustice* (IVP, 2025), traces his journey from high school dropout to PhD and issues a bold call for equity. Through his life and writing, he uses narrative, policy insight, and faith to challenge systems that leave people invisible and to inspire practical change. Lester is a Christians for Social Action (CSA) pundit, helping Christians make sense of the world's most pressing injustices with clarity, courage, and gospel hope.



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