

YORKMINSTER PARK REFLECTS

Friday, June 28, 2015

A Reflection by Noel Davidson

Stewardship should make us Our Brother's Keeper

I have always taken the literal definition of "Stewardship" personally, and by Stewardship, I mean the caring responsibility for your fellow-man. In North America today, the diminishing positive presence of men of African and First Nations ancestry in Canada, is masked by a few things: the election of an African-American President, the prosperity of a few rich black entertainers and sportsmen, the profitability of First Nations casinos and, finally, the First Nations Land Management Regime. According to the survival and prosperity index, the forecast for Native and Black male children in the USA and Canada betrays ominous signs of a lost generation of men. There is also mounting evidence that the African male in the Americas should sooner qualify as the more endangered of the two.

One promising sign has been the long legacy of Baptist advocacy against injustice and for social relevance. So, I was pleased to hear from Rev. Dr. Peter Holmes about his support for our Native Canadian families and the victims of the residential school system.

To watch in a trance-like manner, the "guns of justice" extinguish the life of unarmed citizens and to witness the stony silence of the seemingly indifferent and unaffected, is not only heart wrenching, it is enough to shake the foundation of hope.

As someone with close family members in the Canadian law enforcement ranks, I understand some of the many challenges that come with protecting our at-risk communities. However, it is traumatic to witness young men being gunned down at the hands of those sworn to serve and protect them. The frightening conclusion, it seems, is that if you match a certain 'narrow' profile you are not considered worthy of living.

I am reminded of the eulogy for the four girls who were murdered in the Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. cautioned us to be mindful of the comforts of indifference and apathy. He said the victims had something to say to every one of the ministers of the gospel: "I want to believe they have something to say to us in their death. They have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained glass windows..." Regarding all the murdered, missing and mistreated children, Dr. King has left several messages to all of us today.

"It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people."

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Mis-Education: From Dropout to Missing Man

According to a 2006-2008* PR News Wire report, nearly 23 percent of all young Black men aged 16 to 24 who have dropped out of high school are in jail, prison, or a juvenile justice institution in America – this from a disturbing new national report released very recently, on the dire economic and social consequences of not graduating from high school.

Students who drop out of school are more likely to end up as criminals. Black students were three times more likely to be suspended than White students in the 2006-7 school year, according to data released to the Star newspaper by the Toronto District School Board. Black students make up only about 12 per cent -- about 32,000 -- of high school students in the Toronto public school district, yet account for more than 31 per cent of all suspensions. In recent years, the Toronto board recognized that Black students were not doing as well as others, and were dropping out at a higher rate. It is somewhat encouraging that, once pegged at about 40 per cent, their dropout rate is now down to about 23 per cent (Quan, Toronto Star).

Many men of African ancestry find it extremely difficult to secure the tools to participate in a productive and meaningful way in their homes, with their families, and in their communities. While there are many studies that assign causes and effects, blame and responsibilities to this tragedy, I want to reference this complex issue through the bite-size lens of personal and collective investments in education. Education for all children is essential, but to rescue the endangered ones -- the ones at risk of giving up on finding productive means of earning their living; the ones most desperately trapped by a lack of options -- requires a Christian mission similar to the one that saved me.

Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. – 1 Peter 4:10

I am a Baptist today because of the body of work executed by missionaries in the field, who were truly fishers of men: efforts that, through Christian stewardship, engaged a community and a country in exerting themselves to save all children at risk, particularly children in poverty.

Missing

In New York City, almost 120,000 African-American men between the ages of 25 and 54 are missing from everyday life. In Chicago, 45,000 are missing; and more than 30,000 are missing in Philadelphia. Across the US South, hundreds of thousands more are missing. They are missing largely because of early deaths or because they are in prison. The scale of this combined toll is jarring. It is a measure of the deep disparities that continue to afflict African-North Americans. In addition, due to the high incidence of

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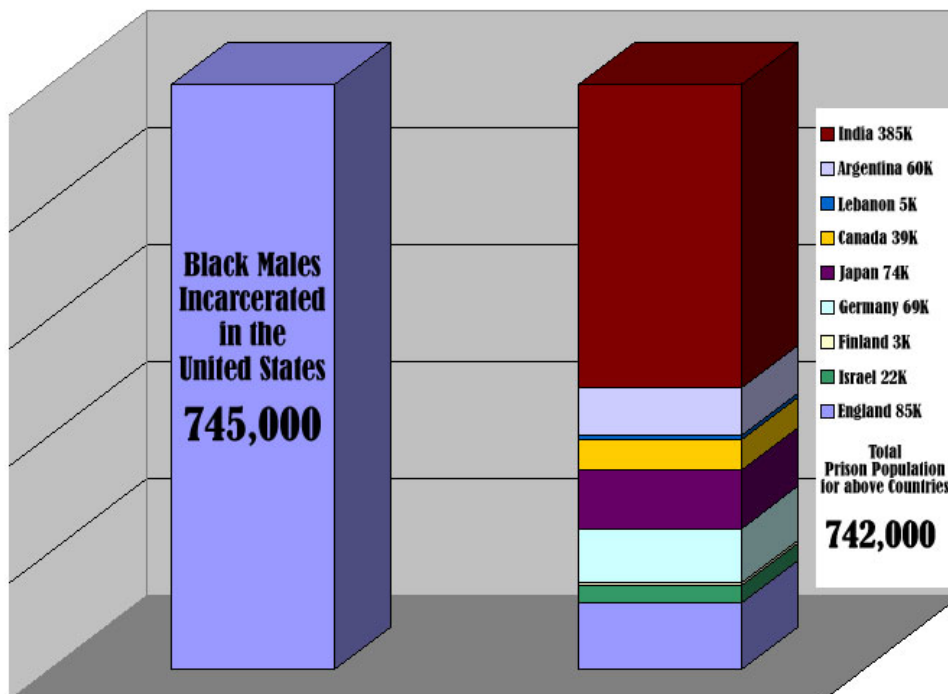
African-Americans killing one another and being killed by the police, many homes are being parented by only a mother, and entire communities now find themselves with insufficient men to be husbands, fathers, and mentors.

The United States has 5% of the world's population but 25% of the world's incarcerated population, with over 7.3 million on parole, probation, in jails, in prisons, or under some form of correctional supervision.

Discarded

"The Census estimates that approximately 18.5 million people in the US population are Black males, of all ages... The Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Prisoner Statistics Program reports that [in that same year,] 526,000 were in state or federal prisons and, as of mid-year 2013, 219,660 were in local jails, making a total of about 745,000 behind bars."

To give a lens for viewing this data: India is a country of 1.2 billion people, with a total prison population of only around 380,000 prisoners. In fact, there are more African-American men incarcerated in the US than the prison populations in India, Argentina, Canada, Lebanon, Japan, Germany, Finland, Israel and England combined.



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Stewardship Activism and Action for 2015

Maybe you don't know how to, or want to, engage in any of these issues at the moment; but if you should feel an urgency to help, please consider at least one of the following ways in which you could be part of the solution:

1. Volunteer at Youth Unlimited (Jane & Finch) to be a mentor for a child in need of a role model.
<http://www.yunorthyork.com/our-team/staff/>
2. Visit a young person in prison looking for someone to care.
3. Support or join our mission team to Oneida First Nations Reserve be a part of the healing.
4. Volunteer as a support teacher at my high school alma mater (Calabar High School founded by the Baptist Union of Great Britain 1912) in Jamaica, where the efforts of Baptist missionaries afforded me an opportunity to succeed. www.calabar.org
5. Speak up and speak out against the Toronto Police Services practice of "Carding" young men of colour in Toronto.

Carding is a practice in which police officers stop people, primarily young men and take their personal information, even when they are not suspected of a crime. "Black" and "Brown" young men resident inside economically depressed communities, or visiting affluent areas of Toronto say they are frequently and disproportionately targets of "carding". While we must support the difficult effort of the police to keep all of us safe, and to serve and protect all citizens in very challenging circumstances. There must be an alternative mechanism to gather vital information about criminal activity without removing the dignity of the law-abiding.

"The police have implemented a carding system where members of the police forces stop, question and document people during non-criminal encounters on the streets. The information is stored in a database. This in the eyes of many young people, this is the creation of a criminal record. Statistics about carding in Toronto tell us that people who are black or brown are more likely to be carded than whites. Essentially this means that a brown or black person is more likely to be seen as suspicious by the police than someone who is white.

During our meeting on visual minority youth and the criminal justice system, Emma Rhodes of the Canadian Council of Criminal Defense Lawyers told us that "rates of carding are highest in racialized communities, and these youth report that they are often searched during these stops and that they feel criminalized by this process."

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Research conducted by Robin Fitzgerald and Peter Carrington suggests that there has been a disproportionate visible minority youth contact with the police. Their paper on the issue concluded that racially discriminatory policing may explain why visible minority youth are more likely to come into contact with the police. The consequence of having a segment of the youth population that is untrusting of the police and other authority figures is that it can lead to feelings of alienation and despondency for young people.” Senator Mobina Jaffer March 26th ,2014 – www.huffingtonpost.ca