

“The Call to Compassion is a Call to Action” by Amber Schollenberger and Alison Henken

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As we prepare to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day tomorrow, let us consider what Dr. King called “life’s most persistent and urgent question, ‘What are you doing for others?’”

All Christians who strive to follow the example of Jesus are challenged to a life of compassion and service to others. In his time on earth, Jesus consistently pushed the limits of

who, when, and how he served others. Despite the rules and expectations of society and the Jewish community, Jesus showed that God's call to love our neighbor should be limitless.

Ultimately, our challenge is to awaken to the reality that God's call to service should be transformative in our individual lives and as a Christian community. In essence, the call to compassion and service is a call to action.

What, then, is our call to action? I believe that God calls us, both as individuals and as a community to see hope in even the most hopeless situations, and to realize our ability to impact change. As individuals, we must recognize that even the smallest act becomes a part of the greater good. As a community, we should embrace the power we have to help those whose ability to change their own circumstances is limited by systematic injustices in our world.

The vision of a church responding to this call to action is the realization of a community where the world's divisions of rich and poor, well educated and poorly educated, black and white, male and female, gay and straight, and insiders and outsiders all fall away. It is one where compassion goes to a deeper level than just the "haves" sharing their left-overs with the "have-nots." It is one where the community works to remove the structural barriers that lead to inequality.

As individuals, this call may come as a whisper or a shout. Regardless, when we feel God's presence in our lives and decisions, we are changed. We think differently. We see and hear differently. If we are wise, we will allow these moments to make us aware of our own potential. We will cling to them

and allow them to truly transform us.

Individual Story – Alison

My transformation began at a very young age. I grew up with the example of my parents. My father is a judge and an advocate for social justice and family violence issues, and my mom is a career volunteer who spent 16 years on the school board. From them, I learned the importance of an attitude and life of service, and I watched as they successfully worked to create a better world.

During middle school and high school, I was actively involved in church and community groups. As I spent time organizing service projects and fundraisers to benefit non-profit organizations, I came to realize that I am most myself when I am serving others. While I didn't recognize it at the time, this was God's call to my life of service.

In college, I chose to pursue a bachelor's degree in theological studies. Through this, I came to understand God, ethics, agape love, and human relationships in a whole new light. I was awakened to my purpose, and decided to pursue a career of service through the public or non-profit sector.

After graduation, I moved to California and began working for the Housing Authority, where I helped HUD Section 8 rental assistance recipients gain education and job skills so they could increase their living wage and decrease their government subsidy. I met many third and fourth generation families

receiving federal aid. I observed the challenge that many low-income adults face: the pursuit of education needed for advancement means less time to work for food and shelter. This realization sparked my interest in educational interventions for youth; with them we have the potential to break the cycle of government dependence.

For the past 7 years, I have worked in educational non-profits, creating and managing mentoring, tutoring, and after school enrichment programs for at-risk youth. I have interacted with students who were smart and energetic but failing classes. Consistently, their schools were located in low-income neighborhoods that lacked resources and struggled to recruit good teachers. Through this work, I have become fully aware of the depth of the inadequacies of our public education system.

At For Love of Children, I am able to continue to fulfill God's call in my life. I have the opportunity to shape programs that help students to succeed academically, recognize their potential, and pursue their dreams for the future.

Individual Story – Amber

I grew up on a farm in rural PA. Although I did not face the same types of obstacles students in D.C. face today, I still saw that youth around me often did not have support and encouragement to consider and prepare for post-secondary education. Many of my peers figured that they would just stay on the farm or continue to work in the small family business; there was no need to obtain more education after high school,

since their futures were already decided. Their parents actually discouraged them from going to college, or they simply had no idea how to access post-secondary education.

I am a first generation college graduate. My father was discouraged from attending college by his high school counselor, who told him that he was too poor of an English student to consider obtaining a post-secondary degree. My mother left her parents' house immediately after high school graduation, at age 17, then proceeded to put herself through nursing school to obtain her Licensed Practicing Nurse (LPN) certificate. She did not receive any encouragement or support from caring adults, and although she loves being a nurse, she still regrets not completing a four-year Registered Nurse (RN) degree.

Despite their personal challenges and obstacles, my parents instilled in me a deep-seated understanding of the importance of education. I was always told that I could "be anything I wanted to be as long as I worked hard." Even though my parents were unable to offer me any financial support through college, they always encouraged me to do my best and to reach for any and all opportunities to achieve my full potential.

I believe education is the key to success – personal, professional, academic – and it is crucial to empower young people to lead to transformative change for them as individuals, for our communities, for our society, and ultimately to break the cycle of poverty.

I went on to obtain a bachelor's degree from Penn State

University in Public Relations, with minors in Spanish and International Agriculture. I maintained a very strong work ethic throughout my four years, completing four internships and two short-term agricultural communications projects abroad. When I graduated I knew I wanted to use my communications skills and abilities to do something bigger and more important than simply promoting a company's products.

I chose to work with FLOC because I want to make sure that children in D.C. have the resources, tools, and support to awaken to their potential and achieve their dreams.

FLOC History & Mission

Amber and I both work at For Love of Children, a non-profit organization founded by Fred Taylor in 1965. One of the primary goals when FLOC was founded was to close the Jr. Village, which was essentially a warehouse in DC for wards of the state. Over the last 40 years, For Love of Children has provided a variety of social service programs to address the needs of the children of DC.

In 2005, FLOC recognized that we did not have the capacity as an organization to continue to grow in all of our service areas. Therefore, the organization made the difficult decision to

re-structure, with all of our housing services becoming a new non-profit, and other social service programs being transitioned to be the responsibility of another partnering

agency. FLOC

re-focused to provide services for youth in the warehouses of today – our public schools. Children simply do not have the power to change a poor school system. FLOC's educational programs allow us to provide the additional support that students need to be successful.

Today, FLOC's mission is to provide our students with the resources they need to achieve educational and personal success through a continuum of services that prepares them to become confident life-long learners and contributing members of their communities.

Why We Do What We Do

Many DC children grow up in difficult conditions – violent neighborhoods, chaotic home lives, and entrenched poverty. We like to think of public education as the great equalizer, but in DC, this is not the reality.

DC is one of the most troubled public education systems in the country. In fact, DC's average scores in reading and math from the 2006-07 National Assessment of Educational Progress ranked DC the lowest in the group of 11 major urban areas.

“We look across a threshold...” at the darkness of illiteracy, lost hope, and opportunities out of reach for under-served children who have fallen through the cracks of the DCPS system. Only 43 of every 100 students that enter DC Public Schools will graduate high school within 5 years. Of those 43,

only 29 will enroll in post secondary education, and of those, only 9 will attain a post secondary degree within 5 years.

Let us recall that the civil rights movement got its legs by challenging inequities in educational opportunities for African Americans. Today most children in this country, particularly low-income children of color, do not receive the quality of education that they deserve. So, in the wake of these realities, what would Dr. King say?

Perhaps Dr. King would champion all innovations that put parents and their children's interests truly first – far above those status quo interests that now reign supreme.

I feel that Dr. King would put more faith in our children. At his core, despite the challenges of his time, Dr. King was a man of hope. Found throughout his greatest speeches from “I Have a Dream” to “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” Dr. King spoke positively about the future and optimistically about our youth. He would castigate the subtle and overt suggestions made by many today that some of our children don’t have the capacity to learn.

And, I truly believe, that Dr. King would laud the accomplishments of For Love of Children and encourage us to continue our work to ensure that all students – regardless of race, ethnicity, or neighborhood – receive the support they need to achieve their dreams.

At FLOC, we recognize the need to catch students early and provide long-term support so they can thrive. Our goal is to

be sure that every one of our students remains connected to their education, stays on grade level, and grows as a student, a citizen, and a leader. We want to see each of our FLOC students graduate from high school, pursue college or vocational school, and arrive at adulthood positioned for success.

FLOC's Programs

We help students achieve this through a continuum of services – that teaches them important concepts and skills, empowers them to realize their potential, and transforms them into confident, inspired, dynamic young adults.

We have three main programs that provide students with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive.

Neighborhood Tutoring Program (NTP)

We start by helping kids develop a solid foundation in reading and math through our highly structured tutoring program.

The Neighborhood Tutoring Program serves 300 students in 1st through 12th grades. When they begin in the program, each of these students completes an educational assessment that identifies their competency level so we can ensure they receive services based on their individual needs.

Students receive one-on-one assistance from a trained tutor every week who guides them through a step-by-step, back-to-basics curriculum. Students are able to see their progress as they master each concept. And tutors are able to recognize their impact when they experience unexpected glimpses of hope – the “aha!” moments when a child finally grasps a concept that he or she has been struggling with.

These moments add up to a strong educational foundation for students who, on average, improve 1 year in their reading and math abilities after receiving just 22 hours of service.

Leaders in Action (LIA) / Outdoor Education Center (OEC)

The next step in our continuum of services is the Leaders in Action program, which provides weekly workshops for middle school students. The program focuses on leadership, diversity, environmental education, and community service.

Students are offered unique experiences that allow them to expand their knowledge of themselves and their place in the world, including service trips with the Anacostia Watershed Society and cultural exchange projects with schools in Turkey, Kenya, and Haiti.

Our Leaders in Action students also have the opportunity to spend time at the FLOC Outdoor Education Center (or OEC). The OEC is a 350-acre site between the Appalachian Trail and

Shenandoah River in West Virginia, just 65 miles from DC. At the Outdoor Education Center, we facilitate activities that promote teambuilding, leadership, and character development through adventure challenges and environmental education in a powerful outdoor classroom.

Based on the success of the Leaders in Action Program, we recently expanded to include a West Virginia Leaders group, with weekly workshops facilitated by FLOC's OEC staff at a Jefferson County middle school. Despite their different environments, students in West Virginia face similar challenges as our DC students, including poverty, violence, and a lack of education. During a week-long joint summer camp at the Outdoor Education Center, our DC and West Virginia Leaders groups are able to find common ground and develop strong relationships.

We believe that the life-changing experiences that students have in the Leaders in Action program will keep them engaged in positive behaviors, help them develop leadership skills, and keep them connected to the empowering nature of education.

Educational Guidance & Advocacy (EG&A)

As our students enter high school, our Educational Guidance and Advocacy Program helps them discover their own potential. We open the doors to new opportunities & help them develop new ideas about what is attainable.

Our high school workshops begin with the notion of meaningful service in the freshman year, as our student's transition from

middle school and into high school. The sophomore year focuses on career exposure and life skills education.

In the junior year, we are attentive to the college exploration process, while still building on the critical skills of ACT and SAT preparation. To help juniors fully consider their post-secondary options, they are taken on a 5-day college tour to give them the opportunity to experience first-hand a college or university and understand what they truly want and need in their school of choice.

Finally, in the senior year we focus on helping students navigate through the college application process, financial aid, decision making, and conclude the year by planning for their transition into post-secondary education.

Our approach is very successful – 100% of the students who have completed the Educational Guidance and Advocacy Program within the last 3 years have graduated from high school and are currently pursuing higher education.

One of the things that makes FLOC truly unique is that we don't stop there. We continue to support students even after their graduation from high school. To ensure that our students succeed in college, the FLOC Scholars Program provides financial, educational, and emotional support to our students until they complete their degree.

At FLOC, we live for the moments when youth are awakened to their full potential and say, "I CAN DO THIS!" I can go to

college, do better than my parents, leave my neighborhood, and change my future. Dr. King described these moments well when he said: "Occasionally in life there are those moments of unutterable fulfillment which cannot be completely explained by those symbols called words. Their meanings can only be articulated by the inaudible language of the heart."

Durrell, one of FLOC's scholars, described the impact that FLOC has had on him. He said, "It's self-explanatory in the acronym: FLOC- For Love of Children- provides immediate rewards and benefits; it's about uprising and uplifting children; and keeping kids close and down to earth... FLOC kept me challenged and kept me going and is the reason I'm in college I'm at now. It makes a difference to know that there are people who are concerned with how I'm doing."

Durrell's story is one that truly epitomizes what FLOC is about. He joined the FLOC family as a 1st grader and got involved with every possible opportunity FLOC provided from 1st grade all the way to 12th. In high school he played football, was president of the chess club, and worked a part-time job. He graduated from high school and is currently attending Bowling Green University and pursuing a bachelor's degree in Sports Management. He is sure of his ambitions and on track to academic success and personal fulfillment. That is our hope for our students – that they are able to awaken to their potential, and obtain the resources and support they need to achieve their dreams.

Conclusion

In a recent speech on education, President Obama said:

“In pockets of excellence across this country, we’re seeing what children from all walks of life can and will achieve when we set high standards, have high expectations, and when we do a good job of preparing them.”

I truly believe that FLOC is one of these pockets of excellence. We see the potential of students everyday and provide services to help them reach that potential.

But our work is far from complete. We need to continue to develop new programming – so the continuum starts earlier. Our elementary school students need more comprehensive programming, so they get more than just the fundamentals and we begin to instill a college-going mindset as early as possible.

Our middle school and high school students need even more experiential opportunities, more community service projects, and more role models.

And we need to continue to develop stronger ways to interact with college student scholars to ensure their success.

In the next 5 years, we hope to expand our services. Our dream for FLOC is to have centers in different neighborhoods throughout the city where students will find open doors and the support they need to pursue their passions.

Get Involved

But we can't do it alone.

So we ask you to consider how you will respond to God's call to service and action. What does it mean to show compassion? How does God's call affect each of us as individuals, and what are our responsibilities as a Christian community?

Dr. King might remind us, as he said in his speech "The Drum Major Instinct," that "like the sons of Zebedee, the greatest among you shall be your servant."

Our hope, then, is that each of us will recognize the surprising opportunities to serve – the times when things happen that put us in touch with a much bigger picture, outside of our day-to-day hustle and bustle, changing our overall perspective and stripping away our blinders.

The Seekers Church community has already responded by providing ongoing support to non-profit organizations, including FLOC. Now we challenge each of you to consider your individual response. If you are interested in becoming more engaged with For Love of Children, as a volunteer, a tutor, or a supporter, we encourage you to contact us.

This week's Call to Worship is your call to action –

Find Good News in unexpected places,

See surprising opportunities to serve,

And respond when God calls out “Who shall I send?”

more information about FLOC may be found at
<http://www.flocdc.org/>