



# The Church in the Urban Crisis: The Los Angeles Riots

CORNISH R. ROGERS

*School of Theology at Claremont  
Claremont, California*

**T**WO YEARS AFTER THE LOS ANGELES RIOTS OF 1992, THE STREETS STILL BEAR THE scars of its ravages. Empty lots, littered with debris, still dot the landscape, which from the air gives the appearance of having just survived an air strike. The high promises by government and corporate and religious groups to rush in with massive aid programs show little evidence of having been kept. A suffocating malaise has settled over the area.

On the second anniversary of the riots a modest renewal of commitment by governmental and corporate agencies was voiced, but several religious bodies appear to have lost interest in keeping their high-blown promises, apparently bored by what they consider to be last year's program. One prominent African American pastor observed: "We've experienced two massive earthquakes, but only one was responded to."<sup>1</sup>

Initially the churches responded in the way they have historically responded to crises — through relief efforts. Grassroots churches, both inside and outside the riot area, poured food and other relief supplies into hastily organized dispensing centers for riot victims who had little or no access to groceries after the stores in the community were destroyed.

Denominational judicatories, including the Roman Catholic Churches and

<sup>1</sup>Pastor Cecil Murray, in the Kilgore Lecture at the School of Theology at Claremont (April 19, 1994).

*CORNISH R. ROGERS is the E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism, Ecumenism and Mission. He was the founding director of the school's urban ministries study program.*

Jewish synagogue councils, all made themselves visible through eloquent statements of condemnation of the rioters, sympathy for the victims, and promises of long-range efforts to deal with the root causes of the disturbance. All of them also uniformly denounced the court decision that sparked the riot—acquittal of the police officers who savagely beat Rodney King, a combative speeding motorist.

The Lutherans formed a “New City Parish,” a cooperative effort of five inner-city congregations committed, with help from synodical and national church resources, to empower their community economically and educationally. The national church Bishop, Herbert Chilstrom, visited the area along with others and pledged financial resources for the parish: he donated \$5,000 to an ecumenical and interfaith “Hope in Youth” program designed to combat youth delinquency. Recognizing that economic development is the crying need of the community residents, the NCP initiated a “New Day Maintenance and Supply Service,” a residential and commercial custodial business, hoping to create new employment opportunities for the community. And in conjunction with Lutheran Social Services, the NCP plans to continue its food distribution program and job referral service. Educationally, after-school tutorials, Head Start, and other pre-school programs, as well as primary schools, are sponsored by NCP, with financial assistance and donations from many Lutheran churches in the area. The guiding vision of NCP is the spiritual and social enhancement of the community’s quality of life through worship, fellowship, and self-determination, both economically and educationally.

The Episcopal churches concentrated on economic development by establishing a credit union with a goal of \$1,000,000 in loan resources and, like the Lutherans, attempted to form parish-based micro businesses, like child-care, baby-sitting, etc. They planned to form an economic development corporation and sponsor community organizing ventures under the aegis of Saul Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation. In addition they planned to combat institutional racism in the church, in part by pairing up parishes across racial and cultural lines.

The United Church of Christ’s initial response was to express shock over the Rodney King case verdict and to call for justice; and then to provide massive relief efforts—food, clothing, and medicine. A prayer vigil in the city was planned but cancelled out of fear among the suburban churches as the riot escalated. UCC members were asked to invest funds in inner-city banks to strengthen the banks’ ability to make loans. A national staff person was made available to aid six inner-city congregations develop community outreach programs.

The response of the Disciples of Christ denomination, after the obligatory statements, was to call a conference on urban ministry in an inner city-church. Generous financial support for relief work was given, and a team of church members from Kansas City spent four days in the riot-torn area distributing food and clothing.

Effusive statements emanated from Presbyterian judicatories followed by financial resources for relief work and a reaffirmation of commitment to fight racism and support urban children and youth programs, parenting classes, job

training, and investment in inner-city banks. Partnerships between inner city and suburban congregations were encouraged.

United Methodists coined the term “Shalom Zone” as their main response to the riots. The term was introduced at the quadrennial General Conference of the denomination, which opened in Louisville just days after the rioting began. Its purpose was to establish listening and resourcing stations in key neighborhoods of the inner city in the Los Angeles area for inter-ethnic dialogue, relief resources, community development, and systemic change of unjust structures. Substantial funds were committed for the Shalom Zones, which at this writing have not yet been established.

African American churches of all denominations were, of course, very much affected by the disturbances and figured prominently in the relief efforts; they also organized around long-range social justice issues. The riots stimulated an unprecedented alliance of black and white churches working close together—alliances which created lasting personal friendships across racial lines. First African Methodist Church led the way in creating a pervasive community of good will among all races and between government and citizens.

Because Korean merchants in the black community were so hard hit by the burning and looting, and had been accused of being insensitive to black customers, the Presbyterian Church of Korea committed more than \$100,000 to support reconciliation between blacks and Koreans through church-related programs. One of these provided several black clergy with an opportunity to visit Korea and experience its church life and culture.

Ecumenical bodies, including the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches, and others, sent representatives to Los Angeles in the wake of the riots and set up hearings with gang members to express solidarity with the aggrieved and support for dialogue and reconciliation.

The churches in the city responded to the crisis in some predictable ways and in some unprecedented ways. Providing relief for victims of cataclysms has historically been the church’s role. The church’s relation to the poor has been tied up with the church’s identity over the years. “A church that does not feel responsible to the poor,” said one observer, “loses some of its churchly character.”<sup>2</sup> The churches, however, appear now to have added another issue to their responsibilities to the poor: economic development. Some would consider this a transgression into the political realm and inappropriate for religious organizations, but churches are becoming more aware that economics is a fit subject of the church’s mission. After all, to be poor is largely an economic condition. Among the root causes of the riot, alongside a perception of injustice and materialistic greed, is the widespread lack of economic opportunity that has led to a growing disparity between the rich and the poor.

The psychological effect on the poor in America is devastating, since America

<sup>2</sup>Julio Santa Ana, *Good News to the Poor* (Geneva: WCC, 1977) 20-21.

is trumpeted as the land of equal opportunity. It leads the poor person to react in one of two ways: "Something is wrong with me"; or "Somebody is doing this to me deliberately." The systematic stripping of the poor's inability to compete begins at birth with an inadequate health care system, and continues with a poor educational system based on property taxes. This results in a lack of preparedness for good jobs and is accentuated by race and cultural discrimination. And the "redlining" of the inner cities by lending institutions and insurance companies exacerbates the condition. Accumulated rage is often the result, the inability to get a handle on one's life, not knowing who or what is specifically holding one back. Derek Walcott, a Nobel Prize winning poet, has called it "the locked jaw of a silent scream." And it took the Rodney King verdict to release the rage.

Economics, by definition, is "the art of managing a household." It comes from the same root as "ecumenical," and connotes "God's plan or system for the government of the world," and "a special divine dispensation suited to the needs of a nation or period."<sup>3</sup> Economics, then, should be a suitable, even a central concern of the Christian church. In the Bible, Jesus talks continually about money and the proper allocation of resources. We find examples both of socialism and capitalism all through the scriptures (for example, Luke 15:11ff. [parable of the prodigal son] and Luke 16:1ff. [parable of the unjust steward]). For Christians, economics should be shaped by an equitable way to create and share resources in community. The early Jews tried to correct economic imbalances through the Jubilee year, the fiftieth year, which called for hereditary properties to be restored to their original owners, for slaves to be emancipated, and for the rights of the poor to harvest the fields (Leviticus 25; Exod 21:2-11). It may not be farfetched to regard the riots as a negative expression of Jubilee!

What then has been characterized as a "race riot" was in fact a "poor riot." The Rodney King verdict did not anger blacks alone, but many persons aggrieved by powerlessness, poverty, and police brutality in the Los Angeles basin. According to Mike Davis, the author of *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles*, a mythology created in part by the media focused on historical black grievances as the cause of the riots, but in fact only 38% of those arrested were black; 51% were Latinos, and 13% were Anglos. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, he related that "Municipal Court data show that more Spanish-surnamed individuals were charged with arson than blacks. Meanwhile the large contingent of Anglos arrested (1,447) belies the idea that whites were merely passive bystanders or victims. The Crips, after all, did not loot Hollywood Boulevard."<sup>4</sup>

What the riots reveal, in addition to the anger and anguish of the poor and powerless, is that a new Los Angeles is forming. Journalist Richard Rodriguez strikes a hopeful note, contending that

the City famous as a collection of separate suburbs is no more. For people in

<sup>3</sup>"Economics" and "economy," in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1986) 720.

<sup>4</sup>*Los Angeles Times*, 28 March 1993.

suburbs realize now that they are not so far away from neighborhoods of poverty. Blacks are very much aware of Asians. Latinos are aware of blacks. Los Angeles is not dying; a new metropolitan idea is being born. Birth is traumatic. It is messy, it is slimy, it is painful beyond pain. There is blood. Birth begins with a scream. I tell you, Los Angeles is being born.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to conventional opinion, churches have qualities which make them uniquely suited to the support of economic development in urban communities. First, they are based in the community and are in large measure identified with the fortunes of the community. Second, they have connections outside the community through denominational and ecumenical links, allowing for the transmission of financial resources from outside. And third, they espouse a gospel that obligates them to release the captives of poverty and powerlessness. What they require is leadership, both lay and clergy, who can navigate around the roadblocks of selfish politics, corporate greed, despair, and anger that beset inner-city communities.

<sup>5</sup>*Los Angeles Times*, 11 April 1993.