

Is Now the Time to Bring Alive Centuries-old Jubilee Concept?

Image



Cincinnati group steps to edge of practicing radical Old Testament teaching on debt forgiveness

A group of leaders of diverse faith affiliations in Cincinnati has been gripped by a sense that the ongoing economic struggle of those on the margins has brought their city to an historic crossroads.

Believing that genuine hope for the future lies in a radically different approach, they're committing to step forward and do the hard work required.

kai·ros

A time when
conditions are right
for the
accomplishment of
a crucial action: the
opportune and
decisive moment.

A sense of sacred urgency surrounds the effort, as manifested in a term the group is using — “kairos”, a Greek word for time that is associated with a sense of crisis and possibility, as well as a sense of holy or God-given time.

A group of South African faith leaders used the term kairos in relation to their bold move to oppose apartheid in the 1980s.

The allegedly unprovoked killing of a black man by a white police officer in Cincinnati last week heightens the sense of urgency.

“It (the event last week) brings to the surface the big problems we’ve got in Cincinnati, that at bottom I think are probably economic, but they’re very complex,” says [Walter Brueggemann](#), an Old Testament scholar and Cincinnati resident.

“There is some growing awareness and some growing passion among thinking people in the city that we really need to do something.”

Jubilee: Where the Economy Serves the Neighbourhood

At the centre of the new endeavour in Cincinnati is a biblical concept called Jubilee.

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*Walter
Brueggemann*

Walter sums it up this way: “The (biblical) text that we’re working from is an utterance of Moses that says at the end of 49 years you’ve got to give people back their land and their economic viability that they have lost through the rough and tumble of the economy.”

Specifics of the traditional Jubilee concept included that slaves must be freed, land must be returned to its original inhabitants and debts forgiven.

“It is a very radical teaching that upsets conventional economics,” Walter says.

“It is an argument that the operation of the economy must be subordinated to the well-being of the neighbourhood,” he adds. “So the economy has to serve neighbourly relationships.”

This directly contrasts how people tend to act — as though the economy is autonomous and has to go by the rules, no matter what happens to the neighbourhood.

Drawn by a Commitment to a Just Economy

As someone grounded in Christian faith and believing that Christian faith is a call to economic political justice, Walter is committed to exploring the manifestation of the Jubilee concept as “one attempt to get at justice questions in a serious way.”

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“It’s all very hard, but I also think it’s very exciting to be walking up to the edge of it,” he says.

[Adam Clark](#), a theologian and faculty member of the Department of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati, is also saying yes to the practice of Jubilee.

Like Walter, it is his commitment to a just economy that draws him.

“We talk a lot about justice, but what does it look like specifically in terms of a new form of economic and political arrangement,” Adam says.

“This (endeavour) is really helping us figure out what that really means in some detail. It’s giving us a new vision of what a just economy looks like, perhaps even a new option that goes beyond the left-right options that we’re currently presented with in our political culture.

A First Time for Everything

Interestingly, the Jubilee concept appears to have been rarely, if ever, strictly applied, even in biblical times.

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Peter Block

But that’s another part of the draw for some, including [Peter Block](#), a Cincinnati resident, author and another frontrunner in this effort.

That said, some structures for debt forgiveness do exist and have been practised.

For example, the Jubilee 2000 and its successor groups, was a movement to forgive the debts of poor countries.

The practice of institutional and individual bankruptcy is another form: debts are re-negotiated or declared unpayable and the party is given a second chance.

“We have these structures; we’re just afraid of applying them to individuals on the margins — and to making it a collective effort,” says Peter, also pointing out he’s never heard of a church-sponsored debt forgiveness program.

Mobilizing a Movement

“We want to create conditions under which forgiving the debts of neighbours, welcoming them in from exile, and supporting their productive capacity becomes a common task and a common purpose,” a Cincinnati Jubilee document states.

“Our ultimate goal is to mobilize a movement in Cincinnati that says, ‘If we want people to join fully to community, we have to get rid of predatory debt and change people’s relationship with their own spending’.”

— *Peter Block*

“Our ultimate goal is to mobilize a movement in Cincinnati that says, ‘If we want people to join fully to community, we have to get rid of predatory debt and change people’s relationship with their own spending’,” Peter says.

Ideally, this will happen through a local coalition of the faith community, neighbourhood leadership, philanthropists, social entrepreneurs, government, corporations, and social service institutions.

Muslim, Jewish and Christian clergy are joining in to lead the Cincinnati effort, which launches this fall with a series of four monthly forums open to the public.

The forums will be shaped around understanding the Jubilee concept, as presented by the clergy.

“We’re approaching it in a biblical context, so it doesn’t become an argument,” Peter says. “It’s not a question of left-right politics, rich versus poor.”

With their understanding of Jubilee as a stimulus, people who come to the forums will have the opportunity to bring this concept forward 3,000 years into their present-day lives. In small groups, they will first be invited to confront their own relationship with money and debt.

Through this exercise, a clearer picture of the landscape of credit and debt in local neighbourhoods will also begin to take shape.

The followup will be to invent realistic forms of debt release that also gives people in vulnerable neighbourhoods more control over their economic lives.

The plan for a Phase 2 of the effort is to launch a recruitment and fundraising campaign to finance Jubilee debt release in vulnerable neighbourhoods. This money would be directed to both paying off or releasing debt and supporting residents in building their neighbourhood economy.

To read the Jubilee declaration document, click [here](#).

Watch for more stories as this Jubilee concept comes to life in Cincinnati.

Comments on this story may be made below, or by emailing [michelle\(at\)axiomnews.com](mailto:michelle(at)axiomnews.com).