

DISCUSSION GUIDE | JANUARY 2016

# The Third Reconstruction

*Moral Mondays, Fusion Politics, and the  
Rise of a New Justice Movement*

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# Introduction

*The Third Reconstruction* tells the story of William Barber and the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina. The story he tells embeds the current movement in the larger story of racial and economic justice movements since the Civil War. He demonstrates his conviction that justice movements are born in response to local experiences of larger injustices and that such movements thrive only when those involved do the hard work of coalition building. Drawing on the prophetic traditions of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, while making room for other sources of truth, Barber challenges us to ground our justice work in moral dissent, even when there is no reasonable expectation of political success.

## Using This Guide

This discussion guide is for a single session of two hours, although you may eliminate one or two discussion topics for a shorter session. It includes an opening and closing, and five discussion topics, each introduced by a quotation. The quotations and discussion questions are also suitable for journaling. Reading and reflecting on the book is recommended as preparation for those who will attend General Assembly 2016 and hear Rev. Dr. Barber speak in person.

# Plans for Reflection and Discussion

## Goals

- Provide a framework for reflection and discussion of *The Third Reconstruction*
- Invite participants to explore their own experiences and commitments pertaining to justice work
- Invite participants to consider how Barber's insights apply in their own context

## Materials

- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Optional: Video of Sweet Honey in the Rock performing "[We Are the Ones](#)"
- Optional: [Excerpt](#) (6:34) from Rev. Dr. William Barber keynote, Marching in the Arc of Justice Conference, March 6, 2015
- Optional: Video of Sweet Honey in the Rock performing "[Ella's Song](#)"
- Optional: Computer with Internet connection, projector, and speakers

## Preparation

- Review the discussion guide and consider your own responses to the questions.
- Write these covenant points on newsprint and post:
  - We agree to speak from our own experiences and perspectives and to present our statements as our thoughts rather than as indisputable truths.
  - We agree to listen respectfully and intently to the experiences and perspectives of other people.
  - We agree to pay attention to the group process, making sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and to listen.
  - We agree to use this time as an opportunity for ethical, religious, and spiritual discernment, rather than as a time to debate politics or public policy.
- Optional: Set up video screening equipment, queue and test videos.

## Opening and Covenant (5 minutes)

If you wish, play just the audio from the “We Are the Ones” video as people enter the room. Then, light the chalice and share these words from civil rights leader and organizer Ella Baker. Ella Baker was an advisor for SNCC in the 1960s and a tireless advocate for youth:

*Oppressed people, whatever their level of formal education, have the ability to understand and interpret the world around them, to see the world for what it is, and move to transform it.*

Another option is to screen the video excerpt of Rev. Dr. Barber’s keynote at the Marching in the Arc of Justice Conference, adjusting allotted times for discussion activities as needed.

Post the covenant points you have written on newsprint. Propose them as guidelines. Ask if any points need to be clarified, added, or amended. Note changes on newsprint. When the covenant is complete, invite participants to voice or signal agreement.

## Introductions and First Impressions (10 minutes)

Invite participants to introduce themselves and, in a sentence or two, to share what stays with them after reading the book. Ask each person in turn to speak briefly uninterrupted.

Briefly outline the plan for your time together, explaining that you will divide your discussion into five (or fewer) segments, each beginning with a quotation from the book that lifts up one of its key insights.

## Go Back Home (20 minutes)

Read these quotations aloud:

From Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech:

*Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.*

From *The Third Reconstruction*:

*People would say, “We want to have a Moral Monday here. Will you come and be our speaker?” The first thing we had to make clear was that fusion organizing always takes the long view. There is no such thing as a Moral Monday. What’s more, a state-based,*

*state-government-focused fusion coalition needs indigenous leadership. I could lead in North Carolina because I was raised in North Carolina, went to school in North Carolina, pastored and organized my whole life in North Carolina, lived and breathed North Carolina. We'd spent years helping our own people realize that we couldn't wait for leadership from somewhere else to come and save us; we were the ones we had been waiting for. It was our time now. (p. 114)*

Lead a discussion using these questions:

- How does the idea that effective justice organizing must arise from local concerns connect with your own experiences? Have you ever been part of a local organization trying to make your community or state a better place for all?
- What are the advantages—both tactical and spiritual—of “going back home” in our justice-making efforts?

## **The Stone Which the Builders Rejected (20 minutes)**

Read this quotation from *The Third Reconstruction* aloud:

*Our coalition had learned how essential it is to a fusion movement for those most directly affected to speak for themselves. But no one was listening to poor people. Republicans and Democrats alike were struggling to prove that their program was the best way to lift the middle class. Justice organizations created a platform for people of color, women, labor, the environment, and LGBTQ folk. But no one was handing a microphone to poor people. The way to beat mystery money and the secret conspiracies of the governing elite was to trust that their evil deeds would come to the light as we lifted up the voices of the most vulnerable. As the psalmist had taught Israel to sing through the long days of exile, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner.” We did not know the extent of the gap our coalition would have to span, but we had stumbled upon the architectural insight which would ensure our moral arch’s stability. The people the builders had rejected were to be the capstone of our coalition. (pp. 88-89)*

Lead a discussion using these questions:

- Have you ever witnessed or experienced a time when the microphone was handed to poor or marginalized people that they might tell their own stories?
- Why is it that well-meaning people often try to speak for poor or marginalized people in the public square?
- What would change in the justice work of your congregation, group, or organization if a priority was placed on creating space for marginalized people to tell their own stories in

the halls of power and in the public square? What role can people with privilege and power play in ensuring that the marginalized have the opportunity to do this?

## Moral Dissent (20 minutes)

Read this quotation from *The Third Reconstruction*:

*The New Testament Letter to the Hebrews offered an apt summary statement for the posture required by the faith I was learning: "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved." In a movement based upon moral dissent, defeat does not cause us to doubt our purpose or question the ends toward which we strive. We do not belong to those who shrink back, for we know the tragic truth of history. When oppressed people shrink back, they will always be forgotten and destroyed. Faith-rooted moral dissent requires that we always look forward toward the vision of what we know we were made to be. But defeat can and must invite us to question our means. While realism cannot determine the goals of our faith, it must shape our strategy in movements of moral dissent. (p. 24)*

Lead a discussion using these questions:

- On what moral basis do you ground your justice-making work? Do you draw on scripture, tradition, principles, or some other source to ground your actions?
- When have you been part of a justice effort or event that was unsuccessful or that ended in defeat? What lessons did you take from that defeat? Do Barber's insights change your understanding in any way?
- How do you think we should balance what is politically attainable at a particular moment with what is morally right? Has Barber's call for taking the long view no matter what changed your thinking about that balance?

## Forming Coalitions (20 minutes)

Read aloud this quotation from *The Third Reconstruction*:

*Holistic community development, rooted in the power of the Spirit, depended on its own kind of fusion coalition. Yes, we needed dedicated church folk with faith that not only motivated them but also gave them a distinct, prophetic vision for their work in the community. But we also needed community partners. We needed to come together with banks and businesspeople, with other people of faith and people of no particular faith. When we went to share with others the vision we'd received from the Spirit, we found that the Spirit was*

*already moving them. The church didn't have a monopoly on God's dream. No, the Spirit was stirring all over the community. (p. 38)*

Lead a discussion using these questions:

- Where is the Spirit stirring in your community or state? Have you personally felt a longing for justice that has moved you to action?
- Barber calls for a fusion coalition that includes groups and organizations who are unlikely partners. Has your congregation ever formed a coalition with an unlikely partner? Have you personally? What was that like? What did you learn from that experience?
- What hesitations do you have about working with people who may not agree with you on every point? How did Barber work through his own hesitations?
- With whom does your congregation, group, or organization partner? How might you expand that list to include others you with whom have not previously worked?

## Learning from History (20 minutes)

Read this quotation from *The Third Reconstruction*:

*In both the First and Second Reconstructions, it took the extremists more than a decade to mount an effective reaction. But in the face of this new electorate in the South [revealed by the 2008 election of Barack Obama], the extremists reacted immediately. In North Carolina we witnessed firsthand the development of an extreme effort that America's governing elites are now trying to effect in every state of the Union. But from the start we also recognized this opposition as a confirmation of something much more important; we are participating in the embryonic stages of a Third Reconstruction.*

*As I've traveled to share North Carolina's story, I've seen how a reconstruction framework can help America see our struggles in a new light. Everywhere we've gone...I heard a longing for a moral movement that plows deep into our souls and recognizes that the attacks we face today are not a sign of our weakness, but rather the manifestation of a worrisome fear among the governing elites that their days are numbered and the hour is late. (p. 121)*

Lead a discussion using these questions:

- What did you learn in school or from your own study about post-Civil War reconstruction? About the Civil Rights movement? What surprised, unsettled, or uplifted you in Barber's framing those two movements as the First Reconstruction and the Second Reconstruction?

- Today's movements for justice and equality include Black Lives Matter, transgender rights, and economic justice. How does framing those movements as part of a nascent Third Reconstruction unify them and help their members work together?
- What do the lessons of history tell you about the strong push back in the public square that we see today?

## Closing (5 minutes)

Offer these words from "Ella's Song," by Sweet Honey in the Rock, a song dedicated to Ella Baker and drawn from her words, or offer a recorded version of "Ella's Song."

*We who believe in freedom cannot rest*

*We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*

*Until the killing of Black men, Black mothers' sons*

*Is as important as the killing of White men, White mothers' sons*

*We who believe in freedom cannot rest.*

Invite participants to close by sharing a word or phrase that expresses their thoughts or feelings after the discussion. Extinguish the chalice.

## Find Out More

View [Rev. Dr. Barber's keynote address and other presentations](#) from the Marching in the Arc of Justice Conference, Birmingham, AL, March 6, 2015.

View an [excerpt \(6:34\) of Rev. Dr. Barber's address](#).