Thirsty in Detroit: Water shutoffs and baptismal witness

Features
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AROUND THE FONT: At St. Peter’s Church, baptism is linked to the mission of helping people get water. Photo courtesy of Tommy Airey.

In the heart of the Great Lakes region, surrounded by 20 percent of the world’s fresh water, St. Peter’s Episcopal Church of Detroit swims with activity. The parish hall provides office space for nonprofit organizations barely staying afloat. Five mornings a week, the local Catholic Worker House staffs a basement soup kitchen that serves hundreds of people drowning in unemployment, homelessness, abuse, and mental illness. On Sundays parishioners stream into a sanctuary with a peculiar setup: the baptismal font is surrounded by some 500 gallons of bottled water.

From the site of these sacred waters, where parishioners worship a God of overflowing grace, a deep theological conviction flows. The people of St. Peter’s know that water is a gift that underlies all creation. It is the lifeblood of the region and the planet, circulating as river and rain, the very emblem of the commons. It holds together every living thing as one. In the liturgy, the water of the baptismal font beckons a diverse community of Detroiters to wade into freedom, immersed in the cleansing waters of conversion. But the bottled water around the font is also a

sobering reminder of the principalities and powers that are drying up the city and reshaping it in their own image.

Three years ago the governor of Michigan appointed an emergency manager over Detroit, temporarily stripping powers from elected leaders. This manager claimed the authority to renegotiate or cancel union contracts, hire and fire government employees, and sell, lease, and privatize local assets. He steered the city through a bankruptcy process, massively downsizing pension and health-care obligations.

In one of the most egregious expressions of structural adjustment, he mandated that the city's water department raise rates and embark on a shutoff campaign for all residents who were two months behind on their bills. An estimated 26,500 homes were disconnected last year. City records show that a third of all residential water accounts in Detroit—68,000 out of 200,000—are at least 60 days past due.

City and corporate leaders (and their suburban cheerleaders) have narrated Detroit's water crisis as a tutorial on how poor people ought to manage their household budgets, accusing them of "paying their cable bill but not the water bill." One former city council member proclaimed that residents who can't pay their bills ought to go down to the river with their buckets.

The reality on the ground, however, tells a different story. In 1972, the Environmental Protection Agency set a standard for affordability: no American ought to pay more than 2.5 percent of his or her income on water. At $75 per month, the average water and sewerage bill in Detroit is about twice the national average. In many cases, this cost far exceeds the EPA's mandate. In most of Detroit's neighborhoods, unpaid water bills are a result not of apathy or absentmindedness, but of abject poverty.

Two women (from a pool of dozens of water shutoff victims I've met over the past 18 months) exemplify the issues at stake. One is named Deborah. Every Thursday I deliver eight gallons of drinking water to Deborah on the east side of town. Her water was shut off because of an outstanding $4,000 water bill which included charges for the repair of old leaky pipes. Deborah is a college graduate who has lived in the same house for 60 years. Unable to find a job anywhere, she spends much of her time volunteering at the soup kitchen down the street.

Meanwhile, while canvassing with the grassroots organization We the People of Detroit in the northwest section of the city, I met an elderly woman hooked up to an

oxygen tank. She lived downtown in Section 8 housing for years until a billionaire bought the building and dramatically increased the rent. She and her daughter with special needs moved into another home, only to learn that they would not have access to water because the prior owner hadn't paid the bill.

These are just two of tens of thousands of Detroit residents who are, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity." Every Detroiter has the right to live in a city where decisions are made by elected officials and to have access to clean and affordable water. The fact that this right is denied to so many reveals deep strands of injustice.

The hard truth is that Detroit's water struggle is not only the result of fiscal austerity; it also reflects white supremacy. Eighty-three percent of Detroit residents are now black; more than 40 percent of them live below the poverty line. Over the past five years, every black-majority city in the state of Michigan has been taken over by a state-appointed emergency manager. Many of the state's white-majority municipalities, including Wayne County and the cities of Genesee and Jackson, have retained their democratic self-determination despite fiscal problems comparable to Detroit's.

Emergency management has proved detrimental to the residents of cities like Detroit and Flint. No-bid contracts and their jobs have been outsourced to suburbia, while health care and pension cuts have dug deep into the pockets of retired city workers. In 1999, when the governor appointed an emergency manager to run the Detroit Public Schools, there was a $93 million surplus and test scores were at the state's median. Today, the massive school district's deficit is approaching $1 billion and test scores are the worst in the state.

In the 2012 election, Michigan residents voted to outlaw emergency management. However, the GOP-led state legislature overturned this mandate, arguing that it was a budgetary measure not subject to the popular vote.

That legislative decision has had severe ramifications, particularly for black-majority cities. Most famously, the residents of Flint were poisoned with lead-tainted water and initially ignored. Only after continuous strategizing and prodding by grassroots organizers did news of the Flint catastrophe go viral. In the aftermath of that ongoing crisis, most media and government organizations have pinned responsibility on Flint's emergency management schemes.

Yet media and government officials continue to project mixed opinions about the efficacy of emergency management in other cities. Many still claim that emergency management has been successful in Detroit.

“Not even close to the truth,” proclaimed Cecily McClellan recently as she clocked into her weekly shift at the We the People of Detroit water rights hotline at St. Peter’s. “We need to keep the main thing the main thing. And the main thing is emergency management. If you had people that could speak and vote for themselves, none of this would have happened.”

Despite Detroit’s widespread hardship, much is being reported about a Motor City comeback. The professional sports teams have state-of-the-art facilities. Construction on a new M-1 rail line is scheduled to deliver upwardly mobile newcomers to hip bars, coffeehouses, and restaurants in Midtown. Quicken Loans has moved its headquarters from the suburbs to downtown, promptly purchasing a dozen tall buildings as if it were playing a game of Monopoly. Loft apartments are springing up, and there’s a river walk with a view of Canada.

This salvation narrative, however, ignores several facts. The city is home to hundreds of thousands of low-income black residents who are native to the city, their parents and grandparents having fled the Jim Crow South for Henry Ford’s factories several generations earlier. Over the last half century, most of Detroit’s white middle-class residents migrated to the suburbs. At the same time, the city’s industry has been outsourced to states and countries that incentivize relocation by outlawing union organizing, lowering minimum wages, and eliminating worker-supported regulations. Many of Detroit’s elderly and disabled people live off of their Supplemental Security Income checks, which total $600 or $700 a month. Sixty percent of the city’s households with children under 18 live in poverty.

Officials from the United Nations visited the city in the fall of 2014 and rendered this verdict: “Low-income African Americans in Detroit are being asked to face impossible choices—to pay their rent or their water bill, to pay their medical expenses or their water bill. These are not choices we expect people to have to make in one of the richest, if not the richest, country in the world.” Maude Barlow, the executive director of Blue Planet Project, proclaimed, “I haven’t seen anything like this in any so-called First World country anywhere in the world.”

Despite these critiques, political and economic elites have chosen to prioritize development and finance over the basic needs of longtime residents. Federal funds could be used to help Detroiters keep the water running and stay in their homes. But instead, suburban companies are given contracts for a three-mile rail project (at $45 million per mile), blight removal (at $18,000 per home), and water shutoff (at $2 million per year). This kind of “urban redevelopment” is what Detroit author Adrienne Maree Brown calls “the opportunity available among the ruins of other people’s lives.”

The real Detroit is, and always has been, its neighborhoods, the familial and communal incubators of those who, two generations ago, put America on wheels and manufactured the arsenal of democracy. What ultimately happens to their children and grandchildren will measure whether Detroit is making a comeback or not.

These realities beckon Christians back to the waters of baptism. At the font, followers of Jesus hear the messianic commission of Psalm 2, “You are my beloved child,” alongside Isaiah’s prophetic blessing of the suffering servant, “with you I am well pleased.” Like Jesus, we are challenged with the conviction that royal personhood is bestowed upon all humanity, and we are commissioned to give our lives to service.

This baptismal vocation is inspiring a coalition of Detroiters to respond to the water crisis in unique ways. Maureen Taylor, the state chair of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, recently hosted a midwinter retreat for community organizers where she made this confession: she’d sent the governor a package of onions with a note telling him to slice one of them if he needed help crying for the victims of poisoned and shut-off water all over Michigan. “The people that we hired to protect the people we love,” she laments, “have let us down.”

Taylor is a key player in a growing cadre of “angelic troublemakers”—attorneys, pastors, nuns, retirees, teachers, single moms, urban farmers, and community organizers who have been radicalized in the seminaries, sanctuaries, or streets. Grassroots organizations like the People’s Water Board and Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management meet weekly, formally and informally, in bars and church basements all over the city. This coalition of organizations engages in teach-ins, rallies, protests, social media hashtag blitzes (such as #DetroitFlintH20), door-to-door canvassing, people’s potlucks, weeklong fasts, water deliveries, public protests,

and an extensive mapping project on the water crisis.

A prophetic choir called the Flowtown Revue shows up at public events, performing songs like “Stop Turning Water Off” (which mimics the classic “Stop! In the Name of Love”). A People’s Water Tribunal requested Michigan governor Rick Snyder and Detroit mayor Mike Duggan to appear and invited victims of water poisoning and shutoff from both Flint and Detroit to testify. Snyder and Duggan declined. Multiple times, activists have been hauled out of city council meetings and water department hearings.

This brand of subversive activity reflects the ethos of the first disciples who were baptized into the way of Jesus. They testified to being “buried with him by baptism into death” (Rom. 6:4), in what James Perkinson describes as a radical moment of conversion that “at once ‘drowns’ everything connected with empire.” Those early Christians met in underground churches, little clusters of light flickering under the dark imperial shadow. They called these meetings ekklesia, the Greek word for “town hall meetings.” They pledged allegiance to the reign of God, not the empire of Caesar.

For those believers, as well as for us, baptism inaugurates a transformation of identity that inevitably flows into one’s vocation. This vocation involves experimenting together, strategizing, and discerning how to work out the politics of Jesus across every aspect of life. It means risking everything in the commitment to justice.

However, the churches’ involvement in Detroit’s water crisis has mostly been limited to bottled water deliveries and cash assistance. We the People of Detroit’s Monica Lewis-Patrick laments that churches and faith-based organizations seldom go beyond “philanthropic ‘do good in the hood’ projects.” Charity is important, but what is truly needed in the face of systemic injustice are policy changes.

In fact, what we do on Sunday morning is deeply embedded in a political reality. *Sacramento* was originally a sacred oath of loyalty and allegiance, prominently referring to the oath of military induction sworn to Caesar. *Leitourgia*, meaning “public work,” was also borrowed from the larger political context. This etymology reminds us that our liturgy and sacraments are inseparable from how we live our lives in the public sphere.

Some leaders, like Bill Wylie-Kellermann of St. Peter's, are working for policy changes through a broadening sense of church. Twenty-five years ago, influenced by William Stringfellow and the Berrigan brothers, Wylie-Kellermann coined the phrase "liturgical direct action" in *Seasons of Faith and Conscience*. Liturgical direct action describes a brand of Christian witness that moves outside the church building to expose and resist the powers that be. "By its simple public character a measure of light is directed upon an otherwise hidden and inconspicuous evil. By it an aspect of the historical crisis is expressly identified," he wrote. "A kairos moment of decision for the community of faith is named and commended and acted upon."

This "virtual liturgical renewal movement in the streets" believes that every act of worship is inherently political, that liturgy and sacrament are most faithfully expressed when energetically engaging the world. Detroit is a space of competing liturgies. Two examples from just outside the walls of St. Peter's are the annual beer-soaked St. Patrick's Day parade and the billboard for the MGM Grand Casino beckoning "Do What You Like . . . Get What You Love." Liturgical direct action counters such counterfeit liturgies for the sake of those who suffer the most.

Wylie-Kellermann leads the Homrich 9, who two years ago held a vigil in the middle of the street to block the trucks of the suburban wrecking company contracted by the city to conduct shutoffs. In a press release, the nine activists proclaimed, "We act in solidarity with all the organizations in the city which are calling for an end to shutoffs and the restoration of services, a revival and implementation of the Water Affordability program, a halt to privatization, and a recognition of water as a human right." After being arrested and charged with misdemeanors, they demanded a jury trial to draw attention to the injustice surrounding the shutoffs.

The abundance of water is perhaps the most precious theological symbol soaking Christian faith. The book of Revelation promises: "To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life" (Rev. 21:6b).

Unfortunately, the absence of water remains a painful reality for many Detroiters. For a small coalition of Christians in this city, "You gave me something to drink" remains the litmus test for all who claim to know the height and depth of the love of God in Christ. Flowing out of the sanctuary and into the streets, the bottled waters of baptism continue to beckon disciples to work creatively and courageously for the rehydration of Detroit.