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“Won’t be weighted down:”
Richard R. Wright, Jr.’s contributions
to social work and social welfare

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African-American scholars, intellectuals, and social work practitioners made significant contributions to American thought and life during the Progressive Era. Unfortunately, their work is often overlooked by history. This paper explores the contributions of Richard R. Wright, Jr., an African-American, sociologist, social worker, and minister. His voice has rarely been heard beyond the walls of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; however, his contributions to sociology, social welfare, and the church serve as a model of integration for scholars, social workers, and ministers. Wright’s example is particularly valuable as policy makers and the public look to organized religion for solutions to social problems.

Key words: *Richard R. Wright, Jr., African American scholars, Progressive Era, Religion, Faith*

The Progressive Era was a time of significant upheaval and change in the U.S. There was great industrialization, immigration, and prosperity; however, many people were struggling to survive while corporate leaders amassed vast fortunes. In midst of the turmoil, new voices emerged challenging the inequities that came with industrialization and urbanization. Many African-Americans made key social and intellectual contributions during the Progressive Era; unfortunately, their work has been lost or overlooked. This paper will attempt to recover the voice of Richard R. Wright, Jr. an African American progressive scholar, social worker, and pastor.

Wright methodically engaged the social issues of his day. His actions were deeply rooted in his theological and sociological

training. Wright provided hope to the masses through his work with the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He helped thousands of Southern migrants to Philadelphia secure employment, develop businesses, invest in their community, and own homes. His scholarly work shed much light on a variety of sociological and economic issues as a researcher and academic. He worked to systematically dismantle the myths surrounding African Americans. At the close of his life in an interview with the *Detriot Free Press*, Wright said, "There will always be differences in people, but they won't be weighted down by myths," (Anderson, 1963). Richard R. Wright, Jr. left a legacy of empowerment and systematic engagement. His life provides a valuable example for sociologists, social workers, and ministers as we seek to find ways to engage contemporary social and political issues.

Shaping Influences

Richard R. Wright, Jr. is the product of his family, his education, and his faith. His passion for excellence, his love of education, and commitment to the betterment of his people can be traced to his parents. Wright's approach to social issues and the world is heavily influenced by his education and his thirst for justice and righteousness is tied to his faith.

Family

Richard R. Wright, Jr. was born April 16, 1878 to an extraordinary family in Cuthbert, Georgia. Richard was the first child of Richard R. Wright, Sr. and Lydia Howard Wright, who both attended Atlanta University and taught in Cuthbert (Fleming, 1950; Haynes, 1952; Wright, 1965).

Little is known about the Howards, Richard's mother's family, but what we do know sheds great light on his heritage. Lydia was the fifth daughter in the Howard family. Her father had earned his freedom from slavery and owned a successful livery and blacksmith business in Columbus, Georgia (Wright, 1965; Haynes, 1952). Her mother could read and write and taught many other freedmen these skills upon emancipation. The Howards valued education, and they secured the best possible training for their children. Lydia was very successful at Atlanta University; however, she did not graduate, marrying Richard R. Wright, Sr.

after her junior year (Haynes, 1952). The success of Lydia's parents made a profound impression on her son Richard R. Wright, Jr, who noted, "both . . . could read, write and figure well, had money in the bank and owned their own home and other property. Grandpa owned several horses, drays and carriages and had a prosperous business" (Wright, 1965). The Howard's success was no small feat for African Americans in the 19th Century. It clearly served as an inspiration and model, instilling a pride and a hope for his family and his people.

Richard Wright, Sr. was born into slavery some time in the 1850's. His mother is said to be a descendant of a Mandingo princess and his father, a Cherokee Indian, was killed while trying to defend himself. After his father's death, the whole family was sold to another family for \$300. Richard was small in size, but he had a keen mind. As a slave, his size made him slightly suspect, but according to Elizabeth Ross Haynes (1952), Richard was able to master a plow, and his love for learning never died. At the close of the civil war, Richard and his family followed Sherman's Army from north Georgia to southwest Georgia and settled in Cuthbert (Haynes, 1952; Wright, 1965).

In 1866, the Wright family walked 200 miles from Cuthbert to Atlanta to enroll their children in the Storrs School, a school for freedmen established by northern missionaries. Richard excelled in school; however, he needed to work to help support his family, requiring him to withdraw. Richard left school to work for a wealthy family but maintained his passion for education and was able to reenroll and graduate, near the top of his class, from the Storrs School (Haynes, 1952; Wright, 1965).

Two stories highlight Richard Wright, Sr.'s foresight and ingenuity. The first and most famous occurred in 1866, shortly after he was enrolled in the Storrs School. General O. O. Howard, Head of the Freedman's Bureau, met with the students of the Storrs School at the close of a church service. He is said to have asked, "What message shall I take your friends up north?" After a period of silence, a young R. R. Wright answered, "Tell them we are a rising." Howard thought that was an appropriate message and should become the motto for the Freedman. John Greenleaf Whittier immortalized those words in his poem *Howard at Atlanta* (Haynes, 1952; Wright, 1965). The concept of an emerging people

with great gifts and talents was instilled in the Wright family from an early age channeling much of their energy into making this prophetic statement a reality.

The second critical experience for Richard, Sr. came also in those early days in Atlanta. One day, while he was working to help support the family, he gave his paycheck to his mother. His mother replied, "I am going to take this money and put it in the bank and live off the interest." This message stuck with Richard, Sr., so clearly, that when he was walking past the bank he told the banker, "I am going to have money in your bank" (Haynes, 1952). It is not clear if Richard, Sr. ever had money in that particular bank, but the concept of thrift was very much a part of his life; it was so influential that he eventually opened a bank with Richard, Jr. and his daughter Lillian making him one of the best known and most successful African American businessmen in the country (Davie, 1949; Haynes, 1952; Wright, 1965).

While his banking career established R. R. Wright, Sr. as a force in business, he had already played significant roles in organizing farmers into cooperatives, founding several educational institutions, including Georgia State Industrial College for Colored Youth, now Savannah State College and serving as a paymaster in the Spanish-American War, appointed to the rank of major by President McKinley. He also was active in Republican politics and advised several presidents on the conditions of African Americans (Haynes, 1952; Meier, 1969).

This powerful heritage of education, self-help, and cooperative development had a great impact on Major R. R. Wright's son, Richard R. Wright, Jr. He excelled in school and worked to help others by establishing means for them to help themselves. The tradition of self-help was passed to each generation of the Wright family. Grace Wright Kyle, R.R. Jr.'s daughter, said her father and grandfather taught her to, "give your first 10% to the church, save your second 10% and live on the rest and you will never be in need." It is this mind set that Richard, Jr. also facilitated for many of the Southern migrants he would work with through the church and social service agencies during his long career.

Education

Richard R. Wright, Jr.'s education helped shape him into the person he was to become. For many years he studied under his

father and looked to his father for direction. In 1892, Richard enrolled at Georgia State College, where his father was president. The university was mainly a technical school, but it also offered a classical course of education in Greek and Latin. However, while Richard was attending, the Georgia State Education Commission decided to disband the classical curriculum at the Georgia State University on the basis that a "white man's education" would be useless to African Americans (Wright, 1965). This controversy only strengthened the resolve of the faculty and students, creating an evening school with classical training taught by the faculty in their homes. The State commission eventually relented, allowing the college to reinstitute the classical course from which Richard graduated in 1898 (Wright, 1963, 1965; Fleming & Burckel, 1950).

Upon graduation from Georgia State, Richard entered the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. This was his first venture outside the South and his first real encounter with whites. Educationally, the University of Chicago also had the most impact on Wright, exposing him to the concepts of the Historical Critical Method of Biblical Studies that led him to a commitment to the Social Gospel that characterized his work for the rest of his life. Also, while at the University of Chicago, he had the opportunity to study in Germany for a year where he met many people and his race ceased to be a barrier. Wright earned a Bachelor of Divinity Degree, the equivalent of a Masters of Divinity, and a Masters in Biblical Languages from the university. He also completed most of the course work for a Ph.D. in New Testament. However, in many ways his academic experiences were not the most valuable lessons Richard learned while at Chicago (Fleming & Burckel, 1950; Wright, 1963, 1965; Banner-Hally, 1993).

During Wright's time at Chicago, he developed several important relationships and experienced many social phenomena that would change the course of his ministry. During his early days at the university, Wright had heard about another student who had been considered a model by Richard's high school teacher. Eager to make a new friend, Wright went to introduce himself and talk about home. However, the young man denied being from Georgia or knowing his teacher or father. After checking with several sources, it was confirmed that he was in fact the boy from Georgia but he was "passing" as white. This young man was

one of the only people that ever made any kind of racial slurs to Wright while at the university. The running from one's roots made such an impression on Wright who, over 60 years later, recounted that story in his autobiography.

The university also offered many positive opportunities. It was during Wright's years at Chicago that he developed a relationship with George Edmund Haynes, the founder of the Urban League. He also came to work with Jane Addams and many of the people involved in the settlement movement. Wright's relationships with Haynes and Adams and his experience while pastoring in Chicago caused him to shift his academic focus from New Testament to Sociology.

The decision to study Sociology brought Wright to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where he was chosen to follow up W. E. B. DuBois's ([1899] 1996) study entitled the *Philadelphia Negro* (Wright, 1965, [1912] 1969; Fleming & Burckel, 1950). While a student at Penn and in the years to follow in Philadelphia, Wright made many of his most significant contributions to the field of social work and social welfare. His study *The Negro in Pennsylvania* debunks many of the myths that surrounded African Americans for years and clearly defines the "Negro Problem" as a lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of the majority culture (Wright, 1969). Wright's experiences at Penn also allowed him to see first hand the ignorance of the race question portrayed by the well-meaning White experts (Wright, 1965). These valuable experiences established Richard Wright, Jr. as an expert on social issues and provided the foundation from which he could engage and address the nation regarding the concept of uplift and the "Negro Problem."

Faith

As crucial as family and education were in shaping Richard R. Wright, Jr., his faith and religious convictions provided his core values and the vehicles for him to work for progress and social change. Wright was raised in his mother's denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church or AME. The AME church emerged out of the Free African Society founded in Philadelphia on April 12, 1787 by Richard Allen, Absalom Jones and several other Freedmen who were barred from prayer at St. George's

Methodist Church (Williams, 1972). From that point, the AME Church became the primary institution of self-help and leadership development in the African American community. The mission of the church demonstrates its commitment to uplift, which states, "God our Father, Christ our Redeemer, Man our Brother (Wright, 1963)." These are the values that were instilled in Richard from his childhood.

In his autobiography, *87 Years Behind the Black Curtain*, Wright (1965) recounts the story of his conversion, which was an arduous process. For years, Richard had struggled with the emotionalism of African American Christianity. His parents did not act in such a manner, but they had clear commitments in their faith. Each year during revival, young Richard would go to the "mourner's bench" and pray but never to the emotional conclusion that those around him were experiencing. The emotional response to revivals in his community were such that if a person were converted, he or she did not have to attend work the next day, and most people spent their time telling people about their experience. Since this was not consistent with his experience, Richard came to question his faith even though he believed in all the tenets of Christianity. However, during the revival of 1892, which Wright (1965) calls the "greatest revival in the history of Augusta, GA," Richard was converted. Unlike the other new converts, Richard went to school the day following the revival. The principal commended Richard on his commitment and lifted him as a true example of Christianity. Richard's father was also proud that his son's actions demonstrated his faith in a fuller manner than mere words, stressing the importance of living a life consistent with Christianity, not just talking Christian talk. This experience provided Richard with a clear example of ethical religion that he would take with him for life.

Richard's faith led him to the study of religion and a call into the ministry, where he would rise to the position of Bishop in the AME Church. He viewed the church as a vehicle to offer hope to his people and to develop leadership for future generations. Wright (1965) states, "I have devoted myself to the Christian ministry, as I was early convinced that building the spirit of people is the most important thing." In addition to traditional religious activities that built up people's spirits, Wright used his position

of pastor to organize other churches to improve their community and provide opportunities for education and uplift, including holding lecture series and exposing the community to the arts and letters (Banner-Hally, 1993).

Social Context

Family, education and faith all helped to shape R. R. Wright, Jr.; however, people are also formed by the times and the community in which they live and work. Wright was born and raised in the South and educated in the North where he remained for the majority of his life. Most of his social work took place in Philadelphia, from 1905 until 1932, when he moved to Ohio to become President of Wilberforce University¹ (Wright, 1963, 1965; Fleming & Burckel, 1950). During this time Philadelphia was considered a haven for many African-Americans. According to W. E. B. DuBois ([1899] 1996), "Philadelphia was the natural gateway between the North and the South."

Philadelphia was also considered a liberal and enlightened community because of its Quaker heritage. This meant that blacks were more freely accepted there, and economic and social opportunities were better than in many of the other northern cities. According to DuBois ([1899] 1996), this was generally true prior to the mid 1800's when the influx of Southern migrants began to overwhelm the people of the city. In fact, between 1830 and 1900, there were several instances of race riots in the city (DuBois, [1899] 1996). According to Roger Lane (1986), Philadelphia became two cities, one black, the other white. Nevertheless, by the turn of the century, Philadelphia had the largest black population of any Northern City (Franklin, 1979), totaling 40,374 (DuBois, [1899] 1996).

The Negro Problem

In the midst of this tumult, Richard R. Wright, Jr. came to Philadelphia to explore the "Negro Problem" in a follow up study of DuBois's seminal work. It is Wright's work on this issue that established him as a national authority. In many ways, Wright and DuBois differ on their approach to the problem. DuBois ([1899] 1996) tended to define the "Negro Problem" in terms of crime,

ignorance and laziness and is particularly critical of the Southern migrants; whereas Wright ([1912] 1969) seemed to see other issues such as poor living conditions and lack of access to economic opportunity and the attitude and ignorance of the White culture as the major factors of the "Negro Problem."

Wright's research addressed a number of the questions posed by DuBois. In terms of the Negro's ignorance, Wright ([1912] 1969) argued the Negro population was in fact more literate than other immigrant groups. In terms of crime, he shows that in 1908 there were nine Whites arrested for every Black arrested, and in 1905 less than 10% of the paupers in Pennsylvania were Black, the vast majority were White.

Wright also set out to show that there were structural factors involved in the plight of the African American migrants. In Philadelphia, despite its long tradition of educating Blacks, education for African Americans was poor and even if one could obtain a good education, there was no guarantee that one could secure adequate or appropriate employment. A full 60% of all black men were employed in domestic and low skilled work, the lowest paying of all fields, making it necessary for 90% of black women to work for their families to survive. This discouraged many migrants from pursuing an education as a means of uplift and increased the odds that children of working families would get into some kind of trouble due to the lack of parental supervision, possibly increasing criminal statistics (Wright, [1912] 1969).

Both Wright and DuBois acknowledged similar aspects of the "Negro Problem," but Wright focused more on the systemic issues that would produce the characteristics common to it. Both also indicate that the issues common to the "Negro Problem" such as crime, ignorance, inefficiency, etc. tended to be characteristic of the lower class rather than the race as a whole (Wright, [1912] 1969; DuBois, [1899] 1996). Thus, it was really a problem of poverty. The new arrivals from the South were poor and had little real opportunity for education and employment; however, as Wright points out, the great migration made it possible for the advancement of the already established Northern blacks by creating markets for their goods and services (Wright, [1912] 1969).

While the economic realities of the Great Migration contributed to the "Negro Problem," one cannot deny the role of

racism and paternalism on the part of Northern Whites. Wright comes across more fervently on this issue than DuBois, early acknowledging the role of racism in excluding Blacks from the main avenues of economic and social success. Wright ([1912] 1969) states, "the 'Negro problem'—that condition which is peculiar to Negroes, and common to them—is rather found in the attitude of the White race toward the Negro; an attitude of majority which seeks to shut out a minority from the enjoyment of the whole social and economic life."

Wright ([1912] 1969) felt that many Whites would use limited instances and activities to distort and judge the entire Negro race and justify their discrimination. The distorted views of the races only further exacerbated the problem, creating even deeper division. Wright seemed to believe that true mutual relationships between races would help address the problem, but he did not think that they were possible because most White/Black relationships were structured to benefit the Whites. This lack of relationships created an ignorance on the part of the community as a whole. Wright ([1912] 1969) notes, "It is not an exaggeration that the community as a whole is ignorant of the real life of Negroes." Wright dedicated the rest of his life to dispelling this ignorance and providing practical opportunities and programs to alleviate the "Negro Problem."

Self-Help

Clearly that the degree of legitimacy given to the characteristics that defined the "Negro Problem" would shape one's response to the problem itself. Even African American scholars such as H. T. Kealing (1903) and W. E. B. DuBois ([1899] 1996) gave intellectual credence to some of the stereotypes that defined the race and the "problem." While both Kealing's and DuBois' intentions were geared toward understanding and solving the "Negro Problem," their use of common assumptions may have reinforced the stereotypes and posed a threat to the psychological well being of the Southern migrants.

There is no doubt of DuBois' commitment to helping Blacks improve their stance in society through self-help; however, his belief that the characteristics of the "Negro Problem" were common

to the lower class would influence his approach to uplift. DuBois felt that the best path to improving the plight of Blacks was to develop the "Talented Tenth" (DuBois, 1903). DuBois' (1903) writes, "The Talented Tenth raises and pulls all that are worth saving up to their vantage ground." DuBois was truly committed to improving the race through the liberal and classical education of the elite.

In contrast, Booker T. Washington (1903) downplayed the importance of a classical liberal education and emphasized a grass-roots, bottom up approach to uplift and self-help. His success in providing high quality technical training to as many Blacks as possible truly had a great impact on the community. His concept of moving people from being worked to work was critical to the spirit of uplift in the people (Washington, 1903). However, when these artisans moved north they were often met by barriers to plying their trade or finding adequate work. Many of these barriers were erected by fear and prejudice on the part of the majority culture.

Much of R. R. Wright Jr.'s contributions to social work and social welfare were born while trying to tear down the barriers of race and build a level field of free and equal competition for African Americans. Wright ([1912] 1969) believed that education and free and equal economic competition were the primary means to self-help and uplift. It is an ideal that was instilled in him from an early age by his parents and grandparents.

In his 1909 work, *Self-help in Negro Education*, Wright outlines the contributions of African Americans in achieving their own uplift. He shows how the education of Blacks cost Whites little or nothing. Wright (1909) quoted George W. Cable, an ex-confederate soldier, who said, "The Negro, so far from being the educational pauper he is commonly reputed to be, comes, in these states, nearer to paying entirely for his children's schooling, such as it is, than any similarly poor man in any other part of the enlightened world." In many ways, self-help was the only real option for Blacks during this period. In fact, Wright's commitment to self-help was so strong that in his work *The Negro in Pennsylvania* he criticized Pennsylvania's colonial practice of supporting Freedmen as a means of making Blacks dependent on their former masters.

Wright was keenly aware of the dangers of dependence and the messages that Blacks were receiving from both the majority White culture and even some elements from within the African American community. Philosophically, Wright fell between Du-Bois and Washington, actively advocating and creating opportunities for employment for all African Americans as well as encouraging and creating opportunities for the educational uplift of his people. Wright (1913) states, "It has been chiefly the school which is gradually raising the Negro from unskilled to skilled labor, and making even his unskilled service more productive, by enlarging his desires for consumption, increasing his foresight and in general strengthening his character." Uplift, for Wright, could occur through manual labor and or classical liberal education, but it was primarily a product of Negro self-help. His passionate defense of self-help would prove to be both a point of great impact and a point of contention.

Contributions to Social Work and Social Welfare

Eighth Street Settlement House

One of Wright's early adventures in social work came while living and working at the Eighth Street Settlement House in Philadelphia. His work there was a part of his fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania. Some of his early duties included teaching evening classes to many of the boys who worked in a variety of jobs and did not attend school. In addition, he had some recreational duties with the boys. Wright began to investigate the conditions in the immediate area and resolved that there was a need to facilitate home ownership among African Americans in the community. Thus, Wright proposed that the Settlement House start a bank. Originally the idea was not well received by W. W. Frazier, the benefactor of the settlement. However, he suggested that Wright explore the possibilities of purchasing all the houses in the settlement neighborhood and he commissioned him to conduct a study on the feasibility of developing a homeownership program for blacks in the community (Wright, 1965).

Wright's study turned up many available houses but all at inflated prices. In his autobiography, Wright writes that this was due to the fact that he had mentioned that Mr. Frazier was interested

in purchasing the houses, offering a very valuable lesson for the young Wright. After much persistence, Wright was able to convince Mr. Frazier to help start a building and loan. Mr. Frazier remained doubtful as to its prospects, but he promised to match each dollar Wright could raise to start the institution. After much work, the early meeting yielded only \$50.00, to Wright's disappointment. Frazier, however, was so impressed that even fifty dollars was raised that he matched it and offered additional support. Four years later, the Eighth Ward Settlement Building and Loan appeared alive and well as it advertised in the 1910 Philadelphia Colored Directory (Wright, 1910, 1965). The Building and Loan allowed Wright to facilitate progressive uplift, while encouraging self-help.

Armstrong Association

Wright's work at the University of Pennsylvania and the settlement house provided some recognition and opened opportunities for networking. In 1907, Wright met with John T. Emlen, a prosperous White man and former teacher at Hampton Institute, to discuss ways of helping the recent migrants. The result was the formation of the Armstrong Association, named after General S. T. Armstrong, founder of Hampton Institute (Sabbath, 1994, p. 84). The purpose of the Armstrong Association was two fold: educational and economic (Armstrong Association, undated).

Wright was employed as the first field secretary, working directly with the recent migrants. As field secretary, Wright also wrote the constitution of the organization and secured work for many of Philadelphia's new citizens. In addition, Wright organized the Colored Mechanics Association to help the migrants obtain work that they were skilled and trained for. Wright also provided a key relational link to George Edmund Haynes, the founder of the National Urban League, whom he had known at the University of Chicago (Wright, 1965). This relationship would prove fruitful for both the Urban League and the Armstrong Association, as they became the first regional affiliate.

However, after only two years with the Armstrong Association, Wright's commitment to self-help over social service created a division with Dr. Grammer, President of the Armstrong Association. Wright writes, "As the time passed, Dr. Grammer, our

president, and I did not agree on many fundamentals. He lived in the South and apparently thought he knew all about 'Negroes.' His idea of helping them was limited to giving them charity" (Wright, 1965). This caused a rift that could not be repaired. Nevertheless, Wright was elected as Editor of the *Christian Recorder*, the primary literary organ of the AME Church.

Unfortunately Wright's name has almost disappeared from the work of the Armstrong Association. Both he and the Association lost the files of those early years (Wright, 1959; Carter, 1959). Other than an unpublished history of the Association, which credits Wright for starting the economic work of the organization, stating, "Dr. R.R. Wright, Jr., contributed the format for the expansion of economic opportunity" (Armstrong Association, undated) and Wright's own reflections, little is known or documented of the early years.

Research and Writing

From 1909 to 1928, Wright's focus shifted from a direct practice of social welfare to shaping opinions as the editor of the *Christian Recorder*. Robert Gregg (1993) points out in *Sparks From the Anvil of Oppression* that as editor of the *Christian Recorder*, Wright was one of the primary advocates of the Southern migrants. Wright's research was being published in many scholarly journals and periodicals, in addition to the *Christian Recorder*, during this time. His research provides a vivid picture of Black life during the progressive era. Wright ([1912] 1969) writes, "Only after one has obtained knowledge of the history, is he fully competent to deal with present problems, and then he is less certain than ever that any of the ordinary problems of life are particularly Negro problems." He was able to demonstrate that African Americans had made great contributions to our nation and were capable of making similar contributions if the barriers of race were removed allowing free and equal competition.

While Wright was a prolific writer, he also applied his research in practical contexts. During the time Wright served as editor of the *Christian Recorder*, he remained active in banking through his association with the Eighth Ward Building and Loan and by founding Citizen's and Southern Bank with his Father Major R. R. Wright (Wright, 1965). Citizen's and Southern became one of the

premier Black owned banks in the nation and offered true opportunities for African American self-help (Haynes, 1952; Meier, 1969). Wright's contributions to banking were truly significant. According to M. R. Davie (1949), "The Negro bank is more than a financial institution; it is a symbol of the Negro's aspirations to enter commercial life of the nation and a mark of his faith in his own ability and competence." These economic ventures were instruments of self-help and hope.

The Parish Church

In 1928, R. R. Wright, Jr. returned to the parish ministry as the pastor of Ward AME Church in Philadelphia. From his pastoral position, Wright continued to influence social work and social welfare in the city of Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin (9/1/28) notes that Wright was going to have a nurse and a social worker on staff at Ward AME. This was consistent with his belief in the Social Gospel. Wright (1965) writes, "For me there was little else for the church to do than to make practical its belief in God and brotherhood, and to help build a Christian society on earth."

This concept was consistent throughout Wright's ministry. In the *Outline of the Teachings of Jesus*, originally published in 1903, Wright writes, "The Christian ought to strive to make the state the true representative of the Kingdom of God upon earth." We can see this in his early pastorate at Chicago's Trinity AME Church and in his writing and social work (Wright, 1965). There is little surprise that the same elements would be representative of his later pastorates. In practical ways, Wright used his churches as meeting places for clergy and social activists and staging grounds for education and change in the community.

Wright (1907) saw the church as the primary influence in the African American community due to its size and organization, and as a pastor he used this to impact his people. Wright used his church to expose people to literature and the arts, holding lectures and having readings (Wright, 1965; Banner-Hally, 1993). For him, it was a place to teach children about their African culture and heritage. Many of the social and educational activities emerged out of Wright's concern for the migrants who were succumbing to the saloons and ballparks of the big city (Wright, 1907).

In 1932, Wright was elected President of Wilberforce University, signaling the end of his career in the local church. Wilberforce University was the first university in the U.S. specifically for African Americans. Founded in 1856 as a joint venture between Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, its purpose was to educate "Colored People." In 1862, the Methodist Episcopal Church sold the university to the Cincinnati Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church for \$10,000, making it the only institution of higher education wholly owned and controlled by African Americans in the nation (Talbert, 1906). The move from the pastorate to Wilberforce greatly increased Wright's influence on the church and his people.

An Officer of the Church

As President of Wilberforce, Wright put the College on the path to accreditation and provided opportunities to develop many young African American leaders (Wright, 1965). A few years later, Wright was elected Bishop in the AME Church, a position he held until his death in 1967.

While his official Church duties would take Wright around the country and around the world, he kept a focus on creating change in the community and organizing the church for action. His position allowed him to serve as President of the National Fraternal Council of Negro Churches, whose purpose was to "foster unity and to bring about racial and economic justice; through progressive measures of non-partisan political legislation and social reform" (Walls, 1974).

In his 1948 Episcopal Address to the 33rd General Conference of the AME Church, Wright urged the denomination to form a formal social service branch so they could address social concerns ecumenically. In that same address, he proposed a men's service league that would reach out to men, render community service, and promote social service on a national, connectional basis.

Wright's legacy as bishop impacted social welfare beyond the programmatic and organizational areas. Once he was asked to speak at a church in Georgia. The church was located in the black section of town, and city services ended where the neighborhood began. After considering his options, Wright accepted the invitation under the condition that a bathroom with running water be

constructed at the parsonage. The church had been turned down by many other dignitaries, so they agreed to build the bathroom. Wright's acceptance had an agenda: he thought if they built the bathroom and ran the water lines, the entire neighborhood would have access to public water (Conversation with Grace Wright Kyle, 1996). Richard Wright was a methodical planner and visionary leader intent on creating opportunities to improve the plight of all people and tearing down the "Black Curtain."

Contributions to Social Welfare

Eugene Kinckle Jones (1928), Executive Director of the National Urban League, in his article, "Social Work Among Negroes", writes, "While the Black social worker has to do all the work of a typical social worker, they also have the responsibility of bringing the whole Negro group as a separate social entity up to a higher level of social status." Richard R. Wright, Jr. epitomized this quality. He not only was able to design programs, inform the masses and inspire hope, he was also able to develop leaders and improve not only the plight of African Americans, but all humanity.

Through his research and writing, R. R. Wright, Jr. provided insightful analysis and wise counsel for all to heed.² In his endeavors to encourage home ownership, he developed banks and building and loans that were a major factor in providing housing to the Southern migrant and make the Philadelphia housing market more equitable (Emlen, 1913). Through the Armstrong Association, he helped develop a national model of social service and economic development among Southern migrants. And through the church, he developed leaders and "kept hope in the hearts of our people," creating national networks that would work for justice. George Edmund Haynes (1928) wrote, regarding the church, "No one institution has probably contributed as much to Negro development . . . the church and especially the segregated Negro church, has been a powerful ally of Negro progress." During the Progressive Era and beyond, Wright contributed much to the development of the church in general and the segregated Negro church in particular. His work with the church provides a model for social workers, scholars, and ministers as the federal

government increasingly looks to religious organizations to take on increased responsibility for the provision of social welfare services in our communities:

First, Wright possessed a clear theological concept of the church. Wright states, "The object [of the church] seems to be to serve men, rather than to get members, and though the church proper has only 250 members its social influence has been seen in the lives of thousands of citizens who have been helped to respectability and goodness" (Wright, 1907, p.91). His theological understanding provided a purpose for his work in religious organizations. It drove him to his study of sociology, and it shaped his actions as a pastor, scholar, social worker, and administrator. Wright felt the model church would provide linkages to employment, housing, education, and economic development (Wright, 1907). Practically, he used his congregations for such purposes and his position as bishop to encourage denominational investment in social service activities (Wright, 1948).

Second, Wright understood the capacity of congregations. Developing a clear understanding of the strengths and limitations of congregations is vital, as policy is sculpted with religious organizations in mind. Wright (1965) knew the church was a place that could foster hope and identity in people. He understood religious congregations were valuable social institutions uniting people for action (Wright, 1907). However, he was aware of the challenges of mobilizing the church for social activities—particularly when people believed the church to be solely responsible for spiritual activities (Wright, 1965). The danger was the church would see its activities as a means of increasing membership rather than improving life for all people (Wright, 1907). His insight into the capacity of the church was the result of years of research and practice.

Third, Wright's actions were deeply rooted in sound social scientific scholarship. Wright was a scholar of the church and of the social conditions the church encountered. The programs he developed were significantly shaped by his theological understanding of the nature and mission of the church and supported by empirical sociological evidence uncovered in his research on the plight of Southern migrants. Wright's model points to the fact that sound social intervention through congregations and religiously related organizations must be rooted in social scientific

and theological research and scholarship. This is a valuable lesson for religious leaders, policy makers, social workers, and program planners.

"There will always be differences in people, but they won't be weighted down by myths," R. R. Wright, Jr. stated in the *Detroit Free Press*. Wright demonstrated that the characteristics of the "Negro Problem" were myths, he created structures to ensure the destruction of the myths, and he inspired hope for many weighted down and oppressed by these myths. Wright's work in the church is particularly valuable in a time when religious institutions are seen as key providers of social services. His life can serve as a valuable model as we seek to answer many complicated questions. Wright is a social welfare pioneer and his voice must be heard, not just in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, but also in the corridors of academia and the halls of power and most importantly in the hearts of people everywhere.

Notes

1. Wilberforce University was founded in 1856 with the purpose of educating "Colored people." It was the first university to be solely owned and operated by African Americans, making it an important institution in the life and history of African Americans. It is also important to note Wilberforce has always used the name "university." In the early days, there was some debate over the use of the name university, considering school, academy, or college; however, the early founders decided the name "University" was the only adequate name for the institution. Therefore it has never been considered a college (Talbert, 1906, p. 265).
2. Two critical publications of R. R. Wright, Jr.'s appear to have been lost: *Social Work in the Church: A handbook written for the Allen Christian Endeavor League, as a guide for local social work and Social Service* (1922) these publications are listed in a number of sources but I have not been able to locate either in six years of searching, including at the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection at Temple University, that houses R. R. Wright, Jr.'s remaining papers. Wright's eldest daughter, Ruth Hayre, Ph.D., told me her father burned many of his papers and letters when he found out she had discovered them. The loss of these important publications points to a great tragedy in this nation—the loss of valuable African-American historical resources.

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