

2012 Kieschnick Lecture
Peter C. Groff
"The Power of Partnership"
March 8, 2012

A lot of people ask me why I do what I do and how I came to believe what I believe? How I came to believe that partnerships between progressive pragmatic governments or policymakers and faith based organizations can change the direction of our nation?

The honest answer is because of historical events that I lived through but don't remember and I only know about because I read of them to satiate my interest in history, faith and policy and how they constantly converge at America's most critical moments - it's those events and 147 days, that put me on this stage tonight, that shape what I do and show me that there is no more powerful partnership than a progressive pragmatic government or policymaker and an engaged faith community.

It was those events and 147 days that show me that Robert Kennedy was right in June of 1966 when he told an auditorium of South African Students that "Few will have the greatness to bend history; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all these acts will be written the history of this generation."

The 147 days began on April 21, 1963. My birthday occurred during one of the most critical moments for the civil rights movement and one of those critical convergences between people of faith and progressive government officials.

Five days before I was born Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. released a Letter from Birmingham Jail. King, arrested on Good Friday for violating an anti-protest injunction, wrote the letter on scraps of paper torn from the Birmingham News and smuggled out of the jail by assistants. Rev. King uses the letter to challenge his clergy brethren, who called his work in Birmingham against legal segregation "unwise and untimely," to join him and fight against injustice.

On May 2nd, 11 days after I was born, over 1,000 children, organized by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, gathered at the Sixteenth Baptist Church, to march against Jim Crow laws in Birmingham. Over 700 were arrested during that non-violent demonstration.

On June 11th, 51 days after my birth the Governor of Alabama, literally stood by his inaugural commitment to support "segregation now, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever" by actually standing in the school house door. George Wallace blocked the entrance of the University of Alabama administration building to deny Vivian Hood and James Malone the chance to register until President Kennedy

federalized the Alabama National Guard, who told Wallace to step aside while 100 guardsman and faith leaders escorted Hood and Malone to the registrar.

That night Kennedy, in a nationally televised address, said the nation was “confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated.” He then promised to support and send to Congress a civil rights bill.

The very next day a gunshot rang out as the NAACP field Secretary for Mississippi exited his car in the driveway of his home. Medgar Evers, who had led the desegregation of the University of Mississippi the previous fall and was working with faith leaders on voter registration laws, had been assassinated.

June 19, 59 days after my birth President Kennedy did send a civil rights bill to Congress, House Resolution 7152, which guaranteed among other things, African Americans access to public accommodations, and allowed the government to file suit to desegregate schools. This bill would go on to become the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Two hundred fifty thousand people gathered 4 months and 7 days after my birth on August 28th at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial to hear the man who would be Time Magazine’s Man of the Year for 1963 outline a dream for a better America and the role everyone had in making the promise of America tangible for all Americans. The speech, which was originally entitled “Normalcy, Never Again,” is seen as Rev King’s most impactful.

Eighteen days later, a full 147 days into my life, on September 15, 1963 Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, four little girls whose names we didn’t know at 10:21am, but whose names are forever etched in our collective memory as of 10:23am that Sunday morning, were killed by a bomb planted by the Klu Klux Klan as the girls prepared to lead the 11:00 am service. Over 800 members of the clergy, of all races, attended the funeral. Dr. King reminded everyone that day “...they did not die in vain. God still has a way of wringing good out of evil. And history has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive.”

Understanding and studying those 147 days revealed three critical ideas to me; that anyone can indeed change and help write the history of their generation; that the partnership, whether by choice or indifference, of a progressive government or policymaker and an active “Isaiah driven” faith community is a powerful and impactful collaboration; and finally that a progressive government or policymakers can change the trajectory for the least among us.

Those 147 days shape my public service. I like to think of myself as a progressive

Democrat. I believe that government should provide opportunities to everyone – especially the least among us. I believe as President Barack Obama said last year at a speech at George Washington University that there is a “thread running through our history, a belief...that through government, we should do together what we cannot do as well for ourselves.”

But I have seen first hand through my service at every level of government that progressive policies, passed by progressive governments and championed by progressive policymakers are limited in their impact because government can't do everything. I created a health disparities office in Colorado and opened up various parental choice options for Colorado's students. However, if people continued to eat poorly and had no one to show them how to prepare a healthy meal; or if stores, when they existed, wouldn't carry healthy options; or if parents kept their kids in poor performing schools having no one to explain the choices they had; those progressive policies were useless.

Sometimes I saw the potential impact of progressive policy ideas curtailed because of a lack of political will and courage on my side of the aisle and a lack of caring and concern on the other side of the aisle or because the parties retreated to their “politics comes first” corners and refused to find common ground.

So I've tempered my progressiveness with a pragmatic moderation by embracing the comment by President Bill Clinton who once said “individuals [and I would add community also] had to accept the responsibility to work and to contribute to the common civil order.”

That pragmatic progressiveness revealed to me that government needs help. It needs a partner. It needs someone or some entity to stand in the gaps created by government's incompleteness and human weakness to offer another opportunity for the least among us. That entity can't be co-opted, it must operate with a certain moral authority and be connected to the community it seeks to help. More often than not it is faith based, faith oriented and faith influenced entities that stand in that gap and pick up when progressive government or policymaker acts or their acts falls short or when those of small government beliefs cut opportunity.

Standing in the gap to assist government, whether in a collaborative partnership or a bridge the gap partnership, is a role Christians of every stature have played from the beginning of time according to the greatest history book of all.

In the bible the first part of the book of Nehemiah, tells the story of a cup-bearer to the King, who receives word that the wall of Jerusalem had fallen. Nehemiah, after receiving acquiescence from “the government” and resources, tours the city and sees the ruins. After his tour of the ruins Nehemiah said to the people, all types of people in chapter 2 verse 17 “You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.” The people “...replied at once, ‘Yes, let's

rebuild the wall!’ So they began the good work.”

But as people of faith we know that that “work” must be done to glorify the Lord, not ourselves.

In chapter 58 of Isaiah, we are told that if we truly worshiped God then the actions we engage in can’t be about us, like it was with those that were fasting in verse 3. To truly worship Him we need to serve his people. To serve his people by “free[ing] those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. Share your food with the hungry and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from the relatives who need your help.”

“Once you have done for the least amongst us, it says in Isaiah 58:12, your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of pathways to dwell in.”

The breaches and damaged pathways in our time and in our communities are very, very clear. Homelessness, poverty, unemployment and hunger are among the issues that have left the wall in our “Jerusalems” in ruins. People of faith and faith organizations must form partnerships with governments and policymakers and other people of faith to begin to rebuild those walls and begin the good work that is needed today.

I believe the largest breach, the one that lies in ruins in many of our communities and binds up our people, is the issue of education. It is also the one area where I have seen incredibly powerful partnerships that are making a real difference in the lives of many young people and our communities.

And it is a difference that is very much needed. I believe that the reformation of education and the delivery of a high quality education to every single young person – regardless of delivery mechanism – is the most critical issue facing this country and our future as a nation. Thomas Jefferson felt that the efficiency and integrity of our democracy should be placed in the hands of enlightened and educated people. Education is the great equalizer, it is the one thing that can constantly, consistently and permanently change the world and your life. Nelson Mandela once said that “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

But right now too many of our young people are not receiving the type of education that will allow them to not only compete in the growing global economy but to change the world especially for the least among us.

The rest of the world has seen how important education will be in a global economy and have changed their education systems to ensure their young people are prepared for the global marketplace.

The world is not sitting by and graciously waiting for us to get our educational act together and perform better; in fact the world is working very hard to pass us by.

In an emerging global economy where the currency of the world will be our young people's intellect and their analytical ability, the academic preparation of all of America's children is more important now than ever before.

The competition for America's students comes not only from Milwaukee, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New York and Miami but also from Taiwan, Shanghai, Finland and Canada.

We must prepare this global generation to compete and succeed in a global economy.

The PISA rankings, which is the Programme for International Student Assessment for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), ranks American students 31st in math, 23rd in science, 17th in reading and 15th in overall global academic performance. Those numbers are nowhere near good enough and should be concerning and eye-opening.

And so should the fact that America ranks 13th in the world in college graduation when we know that 90% of the fastest growing jobs in the world require a post secondary degree.

If those numbers are not sobering enough, the statistics for our students of color are chilling and scary.

Barely half of African American and Latino students graduate from high school compared to 76% of whites – meaning that a student of color drops out of high school once every 26 seconds.

Eighty six percent of African American and 89% of Latino students in middle school and high school read below grade level.

The achievement gap in 8th grade math according to the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), shows there is a 31 point gap between white students and African American students and a 23 point gap between Latino students and white students – every 10 points represents a years worth of schooling. So African American students are 3 three years behind and Latino students are just over 2 years behind.

In 8th grade reading the same report says there is a 25 point difference between African American students and whites and a 22 point difference between Latino's and whites.

I could continue to share chilling statistics but you all get the point. The walls of that part of our Jerusalem are in ruins and as the modern day Nehemiah's seek to rebuild those walls there is opposition to that work, fiercely defending the status quo claiming it's the right thing to do. They sound like those fasters in the book of Isaiah; but just like those fasters their actions benefit themselves and their station.

So we need modern day Isaiah's – faith based and faith influenced organizations to do the good work at this critical moment in our history to partner with government and policymakers and other faith groups to close the achievement gap and help better prepare all of our students.

Over the last 3 years, working for the Obama Administration and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, I traveled at least 150,000 miles and as I crisscrossed this country I saw countless examples of strong educational partnerships between faith organizations and government entities. These partnerships have reinforced my belief that a government and faith collaboration is the most powerful partnership of all. That travel showed me the characteristics of a strong partnership and the strongest areas of potential partnerships.

The common characteristics I saw in the strongest partnerships were:

1. Resources and Facilities – resources doesn't always mean cash. During the creation of the First Lady's "Let's Move" project, the White House Office of Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships reached out to faith leaders to engage them around the best way to reach the hardest to reach communities and about using their resources (the good cooks in the church and ability to gather people around an idea) and facilities to get communities to engage in eating and preparing healthier meals. The outreach resulted in a number of local "Let's Move" events and programs;
2. Talent – Faith organizations are rich with capable people or have access to expert and experienced people who can help kids in a variety of ways. Kids Hope, based in Zeeland, MI partners local churches with schools to create mentor relationships. Even though the mentors and mentees meet only one hour a week for the entire school year, the district has seen increases in achievement of those students;
3. Targeted – Partnerships are most effective when faith entities target government entities and specific policymakers and the program takes advantage of their own resources and talents. At Primm Tabernacle AME church in Pomona, CA the church has created a program called the Masters Academy that assists church and area students in preparation for their college entrance exams. Primm has the space for the program and has a large number of higher education facilities in the area so lots of college employees attending Primm or their members have access to nearby college employees to assist with the academy;

4. Long-Term Commitment – Government entities and young people need to be able to count on support for a long and consistent period of time. The great example of this is the Kalamazoo Promise, which is a promise to all Kalamazoo students that they will receive a four year college scholarship that covers tuition and mandatory fees that can be used up to 10 years from when they graduate from high school. The Promise also partners with lots of non-profits including the Northside Ministerial Alliance which works to inform and connect with students;
5. Connection – Faith organizations that are deeply rooted in the community they worship and work in, bring a great deal of comfort, stability and gravitas to both government entities and students because relationships, especially long time relationships, matter. In Orlando, FL churches adopted nearby schools, working with principals and teachers to create a list of the school's needs. That list was placed in the Sunday bulletin and parishioners committed to fulfilling the needs on the list. The program worked because churches knew the schools and the schools and the district knew the churches;
6. The final characteristic is “An Isaiah” Vision and Purpose – For as many programs as I have seen work, unfortunately, I've seen too many fail because the entity was doing the work for the wrong reasons. Beyond the fact that young people can tell when you're not genuine, too often faith entities are looking for a quick payday or a steady stream of cash and have entered education partnerships for the wrong reason. At the end of the day all the partnerships must be about increasing the academic strengths of our kids to assist in preparing them for the global marketplace.

Along with the characteristics of a strong partnership I saw the most powerful partnerships in the education area occurring in three specific areas. The examples I witnessed showed me the power of partnership between faith leaders and organizations and government entities and policymakers and the tremendous impact that partnership can have in remaking American education and closing the achievement gap:

1. Out of School Time – There is a lot of attention that is paid to strengthening schools and classrooms, but the fact of the matter is kids are only in school 13% of the time. We need to extend the learning time of our children, especially our most struggling students, and expand their learning experiences and environments – so we need 87% solutions. Not programs that just roll out basketballs or “houses” kids until Mommy or Daddy can pick them up, but high quality out of school programs. Faith leaders can create or partner with others including schools and districts to create high quality out of school programs that drive achievement, that are aligned with students' school work, that are innovative and expand the learning experience and

environments. A great example of an out of school program is Project Spirit. Project Spirit is an after school program in St. Paul, MN created and funded by the Minnesota council of churches that assists young people from various schools with their school work after school and then engages them in an African American history program that is academically based and extends the learning time;

2. **School Creation.** School creation is an area that you all know very well, for you have created schools. Two years ago my friend Vernard Gant talked about the issues facing faith based private schools. They remain real options and much needed options for many young people across this country. Many states are considering and have created vouchers to give parents the option to attend private faith based schools, giving operators in those states a chance to create new partnerships. But another possible partnership exists around the creation of charter schools or the conversion of private schools to charters. In New York City, pastors, faith leaders and churches have created or are home to over 10 charter schools throughout the city. The schools can be like Dr. Gant said, faith-friendly, faith-led and publically funded. In those charter schools you can shape the culture and provide a values-based education.
3. **College Innovation.** Simply put colleges need to do and must do more. This is one area where I think more innovative thinking can create some tremendous partnerships and really benefit students. Some states allow colleges to authorize or even open and operate charter schools. More colleges, especially colleges with a faith influence, need to explore these options. Colleges can enter into partnerships with public and private schools and guarantee graduates admissions into their schools, which will boost college attendance, retention and graduation. Colleges should partner with states and faith based organizations to create summer programs to handle the remedial needs of students and create programs to close the K-12 achievement gap. Colleges can partner with faith influenced charter schools and faith based private schools to train school leaders and teachers in a variety of ways in an executive leadership program housed in their schools or departments of education. Colleges need to partner with faith based organizations and schools and districts to create college tours, college readiness and prep program – similar to one I created at the University of Denver that worked with local churches and Denver High Schools to bring area youths to DU for a summer college prep program. Colleges also need to create mentorship and tutoring opportunities in the communities in which they are located.

It is one of moments. One of those moments when we need all the faithful, all the churches and faith organizations to create partnerships to repair the walls of our community and repair the breaches and restore the pathways for our young people to dwell in.

Clearly our government needs to do more. But our churches need to do more, our colleges need to do more and our organizations need to do more. Those entities are living, breathing organizations, they are us. They are as effective, as powerful and as impactful as we are active.

We all need to do more, we need to work harder to change events, even in the smallest ways, so that we can help write the history for this generation and change the trajectory for the next generation. We can't wait for someone else to do the good work, the good work must be done by us in a way to glorify God – it is in your hands.