Imagine With Me: Social entrepreneurship

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Transcript

Terri Hord Owens: Hello, Disciples. Welcome to another edition of Imagine With Me, an exciting opportunity that I have to meet with leaders and Disciples across our whole church to find out what we’re doing, to not only reimagine who we must be as a new church in this new world, but to help us actually be the church that we say we are. And today, I have with us two staff members from the National Benevolent Association, NBA, who are responsible for the SENT seminar and I'm going to allow them to introduce themselves. We have with us Darnell Fennell and Ashley Mayham. And so, Ashley and Darnell, thank you so much for making time for us to be together today to talk about the SENT seminar. If people are paying attention to social media, you guys have been talking about it a lot over recent weeks, and even months, and there's some exciting members of that cohort that you've been spotlighting. But Ashley, let's start with you. Tell us a little bit about your role with NBA and even maybe your ministry journey that brought you to this, and what you do relative to the SENT seminar.

Ashley Mayham: Absolutely. Thank you so much for having us. We're really excited for this opportunity to just lift up this conversation. My name is Ashley Mayham and I am the social entrepreneurship program coordinator at the National Benevolent Association, and I've served congregationally. I live in Houston, Texas, and I've also served in the wider church in the past few years my role with SENT seminar as coordinator. I have the joy of doing some of the logistical planning and connecting with those who are presenting. We have a various number of workshops and so we get to connect with our presenters and kind of help with the behind the scenes aspect of getting all the details lined up so that we can have a fluid and successful event. And it brings me a lot of joy. That's one of the things I do at the NBA.

THO: Amen. I'm always happy when what people do brings them joy. That's exciting to hear. Darnell Fennell, would you introduce yourself? So many of us may know you through your role at NBA, but talk a little bit about what you're doing with the SENT seminar and your path to this ministry at NBA.

Darnell Fennell: Again, thank you for allowing us to share with you this morning. Rev. Darnell Fennell. Served as the director of social entrepreneurship at NBA and I also reside in Houston, Texas. My path to this role in social entrepreneurship is rooted in my experience as a faith organizer in Texas, working with Faith in Action affiliates as well as being a new church planter, working toward creating pathways to justice in the Houston area, and also being able to support those on the margins by creating social
entrepreneur social enterprises to be able to address issues in the community. So I serve also as the pastor of Just Love, a new church started in 2016 here in Houston, Texas. And my role at seminar, of course, is to be able to lean forward, as one of our core values at NBA, to think about, what are the ways that we invite our larger church to imagine what the church can be when it takes seriously the cries of God's people? How we respond to those cries in ways that not only meet the immediate need but they work toward dismantling the systems that create these particular cries and needs of these people? So it's definitely been a great experience to be able to have this space to introduce our larger church to the importance of social enterprise in this moment in time.

THO: All right, Darnell, before we get into a few questions that I have for you, could you help us better understand what do you mean when you say social entrepreneurship? That may be a term that some are unfamiliar with.

DF: Yeah, so, social entrepreneurship in short, we define it as an entity or organization that exists in order to solve a social issue. So the birthing of that entity, the birthing of the organization, is rooted in there is an issue that they seek to respond to and they want to solve it. That's the short version. We often want to caveat that by saying we are faith-rooted social entrepreneurs, so our faith compels us to respond. Our faith moves us to take action.

And again, we're not just meeting the immediate need. We're also seeking to disrupt the systems that create this issue in general. So that's what we define social entrepreneurship as.

THO: Thank you. I'm sure that will be really helpful for others as they're thinking about the context in which SENT seminar's doing this work at NBA. So, tell us about the seminar. What is it? Why do you do it and who's involved?

DF: So, the seminar has been around for almost 10 years now and it began with my former predecessor Rev. (Ayanna) Watkins who led this program. And she began creating a space for people to gather. It was in person, where they would gather with people who were thinking about starting a social enterprise, or in the imagination stage, and wanted some coaching, wanting some education, on how to get started. And providing a space where they could be among other peers who are in the same space, and offering them education and workshops to be able to better equip them for that work. I came aboard about two years ago and I had one time to be able to experience an in-person experience. And, of course, in 2020, we have a pandemic and we were planning a great gathering in Philadelphia, and, like many people who had plans in 2020, we had to make pivots.

And we began to ask questions on how we can still bring this very important information to the church? And one of our goals is to be able to bring this conversation to a larger audience. So before, again, it was about 10 to 12 people we would bring in for about three days. And we thought, how can we give this conversation a larger platform and
be able to invite people who are regional ministers, lay leaders - people who have no understanding of this concept at all - into the conversation. So we went virtual last year. In doing so, we were able to provide the same workshops, but now allowing people to either be live in the moment or watch the recordings later, and providing platforms for them to be able to interact with the presenters.

So, the seminar seeks to provide foundational tools, inspiration for those who are discerning and thinking about the world of social enterprise. And we're grateful that last year Rev. Terri Hord Owens was a part of that opening session. And we think about how she invited us to consider, as people of faith, that the work of justice and the work of being active and seeking justice for those who are on the margins is the work of the church. So we're grateful that our general minister is also in concert with the work that we're doing, as far as, that from a value/faith, standpoint.

THO: Amen. It was a real honor and a real joy to participate in that conference last year as you as you went virtual, so thanks for the invitation. I'm really glad I could participate. I think it's such a valuable experience and I'm looking forward to seeing how this year's event comes together.

So, Ashley, talk a little bit about how the SENT seminar can provide tools for reimagining a new church in a new world, as we say, and Darnell has told us that social entrepreneurship people have an issue or need that they see and they see in a more expansive way how they can address it. So, how does the seminar help equip people for actually living into what that new imagination is giving them?

AM: Yeah, well, the definition is helpful that Darnell provided, and a similar term that we will often use is that this is faith-rooted social impact, because, as you have named and we have named, we really believe that this is the work of the church. These are faithful and faith-filled responses to the cries of God's people. And so I want to name and acknowledge on the front hand the fact that, in some ways, this work has been done. It's not new in the sense that, you know, largely among marginalized groups who are living and are attuned to the needs that are in their communities, they are responding and that, instead, it is sometimes the dominant culture that really failed to respond to these needs or to invest effort in dismantling those systems, as we said, that are oppressive and that perpetuate this inequity. And so what is new is the invitation to everyone to recognize the importance and for the church to participate collectively. And so if we're understanding God's kingdom to bring about wholeness and justice and liberation, and that is the work that we are called to, that social entrepreneurship is that journey of participation.

And so the tools that the SENT seminar provides, we want to be able to do the work of the church well. And so we have workshops on community organizing and leading change in communities - what that looks like practically - and how we can be educated and equipped as leaders to speak and guide our communities and contexts in responding. We have a workshop on digital marketing, knowing that, you know, this is the world that we live in, and we want to do this work well. We have a workshop on the
theory of change and, you know, being able not just to cast vision but to have a measurable understanding of what that change looks like and what steps we can take to see that.

But we’re also talking about not just doing the work well, the work of the church, but doing this in sustainable ways. And so we have workshops that are on grant research and grant writing, and on fundraising and developing social capital where we’re cultivating relationships that are collaborative and with shared vision, and that can increase our impact as well as a workshop on developing a business plan.

And so, as we’ve said, we're using this term social entrepreneurship, but we're really talking about how do we participate in the work of the church well, and how do we do that sustainably. And we're really excited for the ways that the SENT seminar can equip people to do that.

THO: Thank you, Ashley. And we’ve also talked as part of what we call these four reimaginings. Being a covenant church, one of the things we talk about is that we've got to sort of reshape our narrative that we’re living into as church. Darnell, how does the seminar help its participants just sort of reshape that narrative that we live into as church?

DF: Yes, so SENT seminar is reshaping the narrative in a way that is inviting the church to reflect on its theological roots, going back to even the Hebrew scriptures, where we see a Moses who is called because God has heard the cries of God's people. So even as we imagine a new narrative, we must commune with the narrative of old. There are there are clues; there are hints that remind us that this has always been among us, and sometimes we find ourselves prioritizing the wrong things. But this is a way to invite us to reimagine who we can be, and maybe even put ourselves back in alignment to who we always have been theologically.

So one way we think about this is that we are a movement toward wholeness in a fragmented world. I once was asked the question of how does that look when we reach wholeness? And I would suggest, one of the ways that looks is that we must take seriously that in a fragmented world, a lot of our fragmenters are due to systems - social systems, from sexism, racism, classism, and all the other many isms. And if we are to take seriously the work of wholeness, the church must be willing to change the narrative that our spiritual work, our faith work, is called to be actively engaging these systems in a way that seeks toward dismantling them, that seeks speaking truth to power that we may live out our faith in more bold ways, beyond, sometimes, the comforts of our sanctuaries - that the movement toward hope, this movement, has life. And it's not a monument, as I believe Bishop Flunders said last year, that my monuments stay still, but movements are active and engaged.

So we're changing the narrative by equipping people to be able to be active and engaged in their local context, for God is always speaking to us in context. So,
no matter where we are - an affluent neighborhood or a neighborhood that may be on the margins - God is calling us for us to be able to lean in and ask the questions, how are we to respond.

**THO:** Yeah, I think that is so powerful. One of the things that we talk about also is spiritual practice, and how we practice our faith, and being the church that we say we are. In essence, right, we don't need new scripture; we don't need new bullet points; we don't need a new identity; we just need to be and live into our faith in a way that's relevant for the times in which we find ourselves. I think that is so important to keep saying - that this work is part of the work of the church. This is, if we are doing what Jesus asked us to do, this is the kind of work that we need to be engaged in, that that asks the question. Ashley, how does the seminar help Christians practice their faith? And maybe along with that, what's the difference between, say a congregation that wants to have a food pantry one day a week and maybe a ministry that would be categorized as social entrepreneurship? How do we practice our faith? But what are the differences there and how might a church better understand those differences?

**AM:** Yeah, well, when we look at the life and ministry of Jesus, which was very much rooted in feeding and healing and tending to very incarnational, tangible needs, and we take seriously as our faith and in our faith, Jesus is urging to love others in the same way, social entrepreneurship becomes that expression of faith today. And so the SENT seminar, the opportunity there for the those who attend, is that they get to hear some practical examples of what that looks like from a congregational setting and beyond outside of congregational ministry. So for example, our opening speaker on Saturday, September 18th, is Rev. Rudy Rasmus, who is the minister at St. John's United Methodist here in Houston. He'll share a little bit about their congregation's journey of attuning to the needs of their communities and going from smaller services or ministries that take place within the congregation, and then moving outward and creating sustainable enterprises that are consistently trying to disrupt those systems that are aggressive and that are perpetuating that kind of need in marginalization. And we'll also have some workshops on churches that are pivoting for social impact, and what that discernment process looks like. We'll have a couple of the NBA Incubate partners. So, these are social enterprises that have been around and they'll be sharing about their experience of having served in congregational settings and then that compelling call of God to respond to really specific needs that go beyond congregational ministry and really invest in sustainable and impactful change.

And so we're excited to, you know, share what that journey looks like, what that discernment process looks like, and what the process of taking steps towards creating something new that goes beyond congregational ministry.

And so honestly, another element of this is to connect to and support those who feel called by God to do this important work, and to highlight that there are avenues of support and accompaniment within the general church, in the National Benevolent Association, so that we can affirm that this work is holy and that we can equip those who are called to do and lead in the work of the church, that we can affirm that.
THO: Amen. I hear you say affirming and equipping, and it makes me think about how we all work together in covenant with one another. How would you see the SENT seminar in particular being a part of this covenantal life that we live together as whole church?

AM: Yes, so we see this covenantal relationship most evident in the ways in which we are able to equip individuals. That said, earlier to be able to be the movement that we articulate, that we are striving to be, so we want to continue to support those who are actively engaging in being the movement toward wholeness, of course, as I said earlier, that can be explained in a variety of ways, but one way that we cannot ignore is that it is a movement for wholeness that is reconciling, making better those fragments that are caused by systemic issues. So, as we support entrepreneurs in their idea phase, and even those who are already on the ground doing the work, in doing so we are helping them to live into a movement toward wholeness in a fragmented world.

THO: Amen, amen, and we're so grateful for the work of the National Benevolent Association and Rev. Darnell, Rev. Ashley for your work with the SENT seminar as you seek to affirm God's call and God's imagination being lived out in these social enterprises, whether it starts with an individual idea or a congregation who wants to expand their impact so that they're addressing systems.

Walter Brueggemann says that the prophet shouldn't just agitate; the prophet must create; the prophet must have a vision of what the world can look like. And so we lift up to the whole church the SENT seminar, and ask that you be prayerful as the seminar happens, that all the resources come together, that the people who are participating will get what they need. So, thank you so much today for being with us.

Disciples, if you're interested in learning more about the SENT seminar, you can always go to the NBA website, nbacares.org. There's more information there. Each year they take applications for participants, but you might find that your own ministry might be able to provide resources, and I'm sure that Rev. Darnell, Rev. Ashley would be happy to talk with you about how you can covenant with NBA in assisting and equipping and affirming of the vision that God has given to these social entrepreneurs.

Well, another exciting time here with Imagine With Me. Be sure to pay attention to your social media and be sure to go to disciples.org sign up for various newsletters that will keep you in the loop about what's happening across the whole church.

Always so grateful to talk with leaders in our church so that we can hear the exciting ideas and visions that God is giving, and the ways in which God is continuing to equip our church to be the church we say we are.

Thank you so much for your time today, Disciples, and remember God loves you and so do I. God bless.