

---

## INTRODUCTION

REGINALD BLOUNT AND VIRGINIA A. LEE

Every July for the past twenty-four years, hundreds of persons who are concerned about justice and the plight of children have journeyed to Haley Farm in Clinton, Tennessee, to attend the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry (Proctor Institute). On this 157-acre farm, once owned by Alex Haley, the CDF "welcomes home" participants who gather to connect and network, teach and learn, lament and celebrate, eat with and talk to each other, hear about and listen to children and youth, hear great music and great preachers, and spend time with icons of the civil rights movement and young activists, and in doing so, they prepare themselves to mobilize for justice with children and youth. The Proctor Institute is a part of the work of the CDF, which was founded in 1973 by Marian Wright Edelman, the current president emerita of CDF. As stated on their website, the mission of CDF is to be a voice for and with children:

The Children's Defense Fund Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

CDF provides a strong, effective and independent voice for *all* the children of America who cannot vote, lobby or speak for themselves. [CDF pays] particular attention to the needs of poor children, children of color and those with disabilities. CDF educates the nation about the needs of children and encourages preventive investments before they get sick, drop out of school, get into trouble or suffer family breakdown.

The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit child advocacy organization that has worked relentlessly for more than 40 years to ensure a level playing field for all children. [They have championed] policies and programs that lift children out of poverty; protect them from abuse and neglect; and ensure their access to health care, quality education and a moral and

spiritual foundation . . . CDF advocates nationwide on behalf of children to ensure children are always a priority.<sup>1</sup>

The twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians is an important reminder for child advocates. There we read about the imagery of the church being the body of Christ, which is composed of a variety of persons with different gifts called to a multitude of ministries.

During my (Virginia) years in ministry, I have had many well-meaning persons say to me, “Our children are the church of the future.” And my response was always, “No, they are the church of today! They are a part of the body of Christ, and we need their gifts and abilities and voices now! Because not only do we have much to teach them, but they have much to teach us!”

In a congregation I (Reggie) recently pastored, I remember a youth named Shawn. The community we served was in a “food desert”; there was no fresh produce within a five-mile radius. So one summer, our congregation offered a weekly free farmer’s market to the community, providing those who came with free fresh fruits and vegetables.

One week, as we were setting up, twelve-year-old Shawn showed up and asked if he could help. We allowed Shawn to assist, and he worked very hard setting up the produce and clearing out boxes. After we completed the setup and prepared to receive the community, Shawn asked if he could also receive some of the produce for his grandmother. He told us she was unable to come herself because she was unable to walk. We allowed him to choose items, and he was overjoyed! For the next several weeks, Shawn was there to assist in the setup, and then he took a bag of produce home for his grandmother.

Soon Shawn began showing up to Sunday school and worship service, and he brought his younger sisters with him. Several persons in the congregation became concerned about the children’s circumstances and home life and wanted to make sure the children’s parents or guardians knew they were coming to the church. One of our members took the children home after service one day and met the grandmother, whom we discovered was the children’s guardian. The children’s mother had tragically passed away, and their father was not in the picture. We also discovered that the grandmother was living with multiple sclerosis, and she was unable to walk because of it. It became apparent that Shawn was assuming a lot of responsibility to assist his grandmother and care for his sisters.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Our Mission,” Children’s Defense Fund, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://www.childrensdefense.org/about/who-we-are/our-mission/>.

Shawn and his sisters began coming to church regularly, and the congregation began to nurture these children. Shawn was a talented drummer and began playing for the worship service. He and his sisters became active in the various ministries for the children and youth of the church. The Women's Ministry of the congregation took responsibility to help the family financially, including making sure the children's basic needs were met. The following summer, the Women's Ministry partnered with another congregation that was hosting a summer camp, and they made it possible for Shawn and his sisters to attend. The "body of Christ" provided Shawn and his sisters a place to belong, to be active members, to try out and share gifts and talents, to be cared for, and to be nurtured and mentored.

Each year, through our work with the Garrett-Evanston CDF Freedom Schools Program (see chapter 7), we have seen that while school systems may define some children by achievement gaps, we identify our scholars by their many gifts and abilities. Our churches and religious institutions as well as our communities and schools need the voices, gifts, and contributions of our children and youth.

Our children have so much to offer. But do we listen to them? We need to understand that child advocacy is not only about speaking for children but also about creating the space and time to hear them.

In the *2016 Children's Sabbath Manual* created by CDF, they ask the following questions:

Have we created opportunities for children and young people to share their stories as well? How fully do we include children as valued participants in our congregations—not just the "church of tomorrow" but vital parts of the church right now?

Of particular importance on this Children's Sabbath weekend but also throughout the year, how do we attend to the prophetic voices of children and young people? How do we let their visions guide us? Do we even know what their visions are for our church, our communities, our world? Are we partnering with them to realize those visions?<sup>2</sup>

While I (Virginia) had known about the Proctor Institute for the past twenty years and had always wanted to attend, I had never been able to do so until 2014. When

---

2 *2016 Children's Sabbath Manual*, Children's Defense Fund, 2016.

one steps foot on Haley Farm,<sup>3</sup> one realizes that this is no ordinary place; in fact, many participants describe it as sacred ground. As you will read in the following chapters, many participants describe the experience as a family reunion of persons who have never met. In 2014, after I left the Proctor Institute’s “Orientation Session for First-Time Participants,” I told everyone I saw, “These are my people!” I had never been in a place with so many persons who were so passionately committed to the well-being of children and youth. I knew then that I had indeed found my home.

I (Virginia) have been a supporter of CDF for a long time, primarily through my ministry as a United Methodist minister and through the work of the denomination’s United Methodist Women. I have helped facilitate Children’s Sabbath worship services in all my ministry settings (church and seminary) in three different states. I (Reggie) have been an admirer of the work of CDF since attending as a seminarian a CDF conference that was held in Seattle, Washington, in 1995. But it has been through our (Virginia and Reggie) connection with the Dale Andrews Freedom Seminary at the Proctor Institute that we have been able to fully integrate disparate parts of our vocation and ministry. We found the place where seminary, sanctuary, streets, and soil come together (see chapter 5). It is the place where a new model of theological education is being nurtured. It is a beloved community where persons are radically welcomed and profoundly challenged.

When we gather at the 2019 Proctor Institute of Child Advocacy in July, we will be participating in the twenty-fifth gathering. It seems a fitting time to introduce persons to this work of child advocacy and to provide resources to new and seasoned advocates.

The purpose of this book is to assist in mobilizing persons who advocate for justice for children and youth by introducing the history and work of the CDF Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry and the Dale Andrews Freedom Seminary and to call attention to alternative approaches to theological education.

This book is divided into three sections. Part 1 is an introduction to child advocacy and to some of the history of the CDF and the Proctor Institute. The focus of part 2 is education, specifically theological education and the CDF’s Freedom Schools. Part 3 provides examples of theology in praxis or on how the gospel is embodied in liberative practice.

In part 1, all four authors have an extensive history with and commitment to the work of CDF and the Proctor Institute. In chapter 1, Marian Wright Edelman—founder

---

3 “CDF Haley Farm,” Children’s Defense Fund, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://www.childrensdefense.org/activism/haley-farm/>.

of CDF, tireless advocate for children, and role model for many—shares her family legacy. It is a legacy of service where one has a responsibility to care for one's neighbor, and everyone is a neighbor! It is also a legacy where all children are made to feel valued and important. It is the foundation upon which the CDF is founded. In chapter 2, Shannon Daley-Harris explains the connections between the CDF and the religious community and the history and purpose of the Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry. In chapter 3, Eileen W. Lindner, longtime child advocate and consummate storyteller, delineates nine doctrines for a theology of child advocacy. In chapter 4, Lorena M. Parrish shares her journey in ministry, in which the Proctor Institute played a primary role.

In part 2, three educators provide the history and alternatives to our current view of religious and theological education. In chapter 5, Ched Meyers provides a vision of alternative spaces for theological education that connect seminary, sanctuary, street, and soil. In chapter 6, Reginald Blount provides a history of religious education that takes us from Sabbath schools to Freedom Schools, while Virginia A. Lee provides a history of the Freedom Schools movement and what we might learn from them in chapter 7.

Part 3 brings together three educators/activists who embody the work of the Proctor Institute and the implications of our work. In chapter 8, Gregory C. Ellison II provides an understanding of what it means to be unseen and how one might learn to see invisible persons. In chapter 9, Patrick Reyes shares practical theological acts that create the conditions for the next generation—for children—to thrive. In chapter 10, Janet Wolf asks what it would mean for the church to be willing to engage with communities of struggle not with programs or solutions but with a willingness to listen long enough to really hear.

These chapters are a part of the ongoing conversation of the CDF Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry and the Dale Andrews Freedom Seminary at the CDF Proctor Institute. We invite you to join the conversation and the movement as we continue to mobilize for justice for all our children.<sup>4</sup>

---

4 "Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute," Children's Defense Fund, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://www.childrensdefense.org/programs/faith-based/samuel-dewitt-proctor-institute/>.