



Relational Refugees: Alienation and Re-Incorporation in African American Churches and Communities

Edward P. Wimberly

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Children imitate behaviors and learn values from the adults who care for them. In the absence of relationships or healthy, clearly transmitted values, children flounder. They are, one could say, relational refugees. Those in ministerial leadership positions likewise need someone to imitate or learn from, a type of mentor. This mimesis or copying of behavior, ideas, attitudes, lives, examples, and ministries of significant others has a long legacy in the African-American community. Such mimesis entails trying on different dimensions of ministry until one finds one's unique approach to it. In the African-American context the core of mimesis is liberation. Most models of liberation have ignored or trivialized the significance of caring and supportive relationships to the liberation process. Yet ministry occurs in contexts where, increasingly, cross-generational, extended family, and church relationships are lacking.

Such nurturing relationships where mentoring occurs and where values are handed on are often marred when the debilitating messages of racism are internalized without being countered. Practical methods of ministry, Wimberly suggests, must attend to the ways these messages are learned, and work to counter them by ensuring that there are no relational refugees. Wimberly's case studies deal with a family whose son is dying of AIDS, violence, black male and female relationships, adolescent identity in society, aging and parenthood, drug addiction, and consumerism and the American dream.

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