

# Repairing the Damage

## Damon Lynch III on A Life's Ministry



*Taking care of others is what the Rev. Damon Lynch III has done all of his life. This has meant working tirelessly for racial and social justice in Cincinnati, Ohio, and elsewhere. Senior pastor of the city's New Prospect Baptist Church, Lynch was instrumental in the founding of the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) and the Cincinnati Black United Front. His work has been recognized with the Southern Christian*

*Leadership Conference Rosa Parks Award, the Sentinels Police Association President's Award, the NAACP Theodore M. Berry Award for Civil Rights, and the Martin Luther King Jr. Award. His current focus is on community economic development. As a faculty member of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University, he has conducted seminars throughout the United States on the asset-based approach to problem solving and development.*

*I met Lynch at his church for an interview. When I showed him the questions I had prepared, he said rather than answer questions, he would like to just talk. And talk he did. For an hour and 15 minutes, he spoke openly and eloquently, sharing the story of his life and his ministry. He spoke about what his people had lost and what he hoped for them to gain. The way he sees forward is surprising. An edited selection of his words follows. -Barbara Lyghtel Rohrer, editor*

### Early Years

Matthew, my best friend growing up, and I recently reconnected. We grew up in Avondale—it was a mixed black and Jewish community. When he told his mother that he had seen me again after so many years, she said, oh, yes, Damon always protected you. I was shocked. I knew that is what I did. I just didn't think anyone else knew that. I was always looking out for everyone—standing up to the bullies. It is just something in me.

I grew up in a civil rights household, but I have to say it is my faith that guided my actions all these years. My father was a preacher and the first time I preached was in his church. Then I took my preaching to the streets—to Over-the-Rhine (the neighborhood just north of downtown Cincinnati, long economically depressed and now enjoying a renaissance). I gathered a few preachers together to work with me. We didn't go out during the day. During the day, when someone needed help, there was always a place they could go, a

social service agency. But at five o'clock, all those agencies close. So we were out on the street at night. If someone needed help at 1 a.m., I wanted us to be there, to tell them they were loved. At first, the people on the street thought we were undercover cops. It took us a while to convince them otherwise. We were only there to tell them of God's love.

I grew to love the people of Over-the-Rhine. By then I was pastor of New Prospect Baptist Church and intensely involved in the community, helping as needed, and I know I was doing good work. Then crack cocaine was introduced into the neighborhood. That was in the early '90s and that was something we could not fight. It just grabbed a hold of people and destroyed their lives. I didn't know what to do, how to fight this scourge. So I turned to Scripture. I am always turning to Scripture.

In Mark 9, there is a story of the disciples who were unable to heal a man's son. The man brought his son to Jesus, who did heal him. The disciples later asked why they were unable to heal the boy. Jesus said that kind of sickness could not be healed except through prayer and fasting.\* I went to my congregation and I said, we are going to do a three-week fast—no food, only water. Now understand, Baptists don't fast. When we gather together, we have food. *There's always food.* My congregation fasted for 21 days. It broke the back of crack addiction in our community. We still fast every year.

In 1980, 12,000 people lived in Over-the-Rhine. Yes, they were poor, but they were a true community and I was part of it. By 2010, the population was half that. The community, the people I cared about, were leaving or gone. I was fearful that Over-the-Rhine would become a parking lot for downtown. But development happened instead. That pushed out the laundromats, the small businesses that serve the poor community, and the bars. Then social services were pushed out. That broke apart the community.

### Beginning in 2000

In the summer of 2000, restaurants throughout downtown Cincinnati closed during the Cincinnati Jazz Festival (which draws large numbers of African Americans). My wife and I went to the jazz festival that year, and we stopped at a restaurant

\* King James Bible

to eat. We pulled on the door. It was locked. We tried the other door. That was locked too. Then we noticed the sign. The restaurant was closed. We went to another restaurant. The same thing. Later we found out that 14 restaurants were closed that day, leaving most of the patrons of the festival without a place to eat downtown.

In the fall of that year, Roger Owensby and Jeffery Irons, both unarmed black men, were killed by Cincinnati police. That's when we started the Cincinnati Black United Front. We packed city council chambers. We called for a boycott of downtown businesses to protest the closing of the restaurants during the jazz festival. We brought a class-action lawsuit to pressure the city to make changes in police operations.

Timothy Thomas, another unarmed black man, was shot in an alley by a Cincinnati police officer in 2001. That led to riots in the streets. My father, Damon Lynch Jr., and other local civil rights leaders of the previous generation came to the Black United Front and asked us to take this on. They said we have been fighting racial injustice for 50 years and we are tired.

We continued with the boycotting and protesting. Bill Cosby, despite whatever issues he may have, was the first to honor the boycott and cancelled his appearance in Cincinnati. Whoopi Goldberg followed, and it went from there. Conventions pulled out. A music festival was cancelled. We called for the boycott of Taste of Cincinnati. Even the jazz festival moved to Detroit for one year. Eventually the city came around. We were hurting it economically. What do we need to do for you to stop, asked city leaders.

The Cincinnati Collaborative Agreement grew out of those efforts.

By necessity, black people understand both the Euro-centric worldview and the African-centric worldview. We grew up in the white world—I learned the same European history as my white classmates. In our homes and churches, we learned an African-centric worldview. You might say that we are *bi-focal*. White people don't seem to have that ability. For example, a black person watching the tape of Rodney King being beaten will ask why the police won't stop beating him. But a white person will look at that tape and wonder why he keeps trying to get up. It never enters into their heads to ask why the police don't stop. The same happened with Timothy Thomas. The question white people ask is why was he

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running. The question black people ask is why was he shot.

White people don't realize that for black people the experience of America has been different from theirs. People get upset with a football player for not standing during the national anthem, but they don't see that for many black people America has not been good to them.

There is something that slavery has done to the African American spirit. It's done something inside of us that says we aren't good enough—it's unconscious—because that is what we were told for hundreds of years. We wake up and wonder deep down if we are okay.

### **The Present**

In 2015, when the city manager asked Cincinnati police chief Jeffrey Blackburn to deliver a plan to stop the uptick in crime, he turned to a group of us for help. We put together a plan and called a news conference at (New Prospect) church. All the local TV stations were here. They were expecting to hear a crime-fighting plan. We announced that we were calling for a \$50 million economic development plan. People were shocked. You are supposed to be introducing a plan to fight crime, they said. It is, we said. The

only way to fight crime is through economic development.

3CDC (the main economical engine for development in downtown Cincinnati) was given \$50 million for The Banks (Cincinnati's riverfront development) and to boost development in downtown and Over-the-Rhine. We want the same. Jobs and prosperity are the keys to diverting people from a life of crime. The police alone cannot stem the tide of violence with arrests, convictions, and incarceration. If we're going to make an impact, we must take a holistic approach to the problem.

It is not enough to simply develop an area. For example, \$15 million were poured into the renovating of Cincinnati's Findlay Market in Over-the-Rhine. But none of those funds flowed into the poor neighborhoods surrounding Findlay. None of the laborers who did the work came from the community. None of the residents have stalls in the market. That is what traditional economic development does. It re-vitalizes a given area but without taking into consideration the surrounding community.

Now we are working on establishing a group similar to 3CDC, but with a specific focus on leveraging new developments as a means to

prevent violent crime, particularly within the city's African-American communities adversely affected by crime. We want to utilize the strategies of community economic development to create vibrant, resilient, and sustainable local economies in those deteriorating neighborhoods. That's where the local people become the shop owners and homeowners. That's what brings them out of poverty and that's what prevents crime.

If you drive up Cincinnati's Reading Road from downtown through the neighborhood of Avondale, into North Avondale, then Roselawn, every gas station and corner grocery but one is owned by someone from the Middle East. I have nothing against these owners, but those neighborhoods are all black. Why aren't black people owners of the gas stations and the stores? Likewise, Koreans own the African American hair care product industry in the United States. Why? Why don't African Americans own this industry?

Changing this dynamic is what I am trying to do with my current work of community economic development.

### **The Future**

We African Americans have a history of following the Jewish community. As Jews moved to neighborhoods farther and farther away from downtown, we followed them. That is what happened when we all lived in Avondale. The Jewish people welcomed us into their synagogues and into their shops. I think because of their own heritage—they too had been slaves—they understood us. They left Avondale for Roselawn and we followed again. But for some reason, in the end, it doesn't seem to work. We can't seem to live together. The Jewish people have moved out one more time. They have left Roselawn. Every synagogue in Roselawn is now a church.

I don't want to follow them anymore. I want to stay here in Roselawn. We moved our church here because we were growing and we needed more space. There wasn't space to grow in Over-the-Rhine. This property became available in 2011 and we moved here in 2014. This is a 26-acre campus. It was formerly the Jewish Community Center. We have 22 chickens laying eggs in the back. We have 500,000 honeybees. We have community gardens. Our congregation has grown by 600 members.

I told (author, consultant and active citizen) Peter Block that if we are going to live in

segregated neighborhoods, which seem to be what we are always creating, then I want to make them work. That is why my work with community economic development is so important to me. We didn't get the 50 million dollars we asked for, but we did get three million, which we are putting to use in Roselawn and our neighbor Bond Hill.

Most scholars agree that the first Africans were brought to this country as slaves in 1619. So from that time until 1865, African Americans were fighting to be free. Then from 1865 to 1964, they fought for equality. More injustice followed with red lining (legally enforced housing segregation) and the war on drugs, the latter of which has exploded our prison population in the U.S. from 300,000 in 1980 to over two million today. The majority of these prisoners are black men.

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In Genesis 15, God explains how the children of Abraham will be enslaved, made to be strangers in a land not their own, and oppressed for 400 years. 2019 will mark the 400th year since Africans were first enslaved and made to be a stranger in this land. Does that mean that in 2019 we will see true emancipation? I don't think so. But I do see hope. We see it in growing talks of the biblical understanding of Jubilee with its call for the cancellation of debts. We see it in the talk of reparation, though that is not a term that I use as much as repairing the damage.

I am 57 years old. I have lived more years now than I have yet to live. I want to make the most of the time I have left to make things as right as I can. When Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson, I was there. When Hurricane Katrina struck, we loaded up to two semis of supplies and went to Biloxi, Mississippi. When a tornado ripped through Birmingham, Alabama, we were there. When there was flooding in Cincinnati earlier this year, we were in the neighborhoods cleaning. When I'm not free to travel, my heart goes where there's a need. It is with those now at Standing Rock. I always want to go where help is needed. 🌱