Courageous Leadership in 'The Help'

The Help

Reviewed by
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"Everything I learned about courageous leadership I learned at the movies."

That is not quite true. I have learned from some inspiring saints of history and some admirable contemporary role models. I love gleaning courage from the stories of Scripture. And seeing friends and family face off difficult circumstances and life-threatening challenges helps put my challenges in perspective and to face them with the courage I see in others. But movies help too. Some of my favourite movies are ones that inspire courage in me.

The Help, a 2009 novel by Kathryn Stockett and 2011 movie, narrates the story of young white journalist, Eugenia ‘Skeeter’ Phelan (played by Emma Stone) and her relationship with black maids in early 1960s America. While the country is legislating equality at a macro level, Skeeter writes the stories of what it is like at a local grassroots level for black household workers. She tells the stories from the perspective of the maids (called 'the help'), revealing the racism and derogatory treatment they have to endure. They are dangerous stories. She starts writing about Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis) who was helping Skeeter with her ‘homemaker hints’ column, and outspoken Minny Jackson (Octavia Spencer) after she was fired for using her employer Hilly's toilet. Skeeter’s perspective is quite different to many of her white friends, especially Hilly and her proposal of legislating different bathrooms for black help because of their supposed different diseases. Skeeter adds a dozen other stories, including Constantine who brought her up as a child. All the maids, initially hesitant to disclose let alone make public their stories, realise the book allows their stories to be heard and understood. They hope their stories will help change their world buffeted by racial tension. Cleverly they disguise the stories and manipulate Hilly to declare they would not have been collected in her town of Jackson, Mississippi. The book is published and Hilly shares the royalties with the contributors.

There is power in collecting and sharing dangerous stories. We face a world that needs ongoing transformation by the gospel. The dangerous stories Jesus calls us to live, I am learning, is to join with Jesus in restoring the world from the situations that bring tears to our eyes and that break the heart of God. A critical skill of courageous leaders is to be able to share some of the dangerous stories they have been inspired by and that encapsulate their vision for community transformation.

I invite people at church to bring and share their stories of courage as we gather on Sundays and at other times, in order to encourage one another. And I invite you, after you read this, to reflect on your stories of courage and share them in the blog below and as we get together for dreaming and discernment a Baptist tribe of churches at the next Gathering.

Daren Cronshaw pastors AuburnLife and is BU’s researcher in our Mission Catalyst Team. Kim Hammond is National Director of Fuse USA and Director of Missional Imagination at Community Christian Church in Chicago. This article is adapted from their chapter “Movies every church planter should see” in the EBook What Every Church Planter Should Know (Vol 2), accessible at http://www.portablechurch.com/stories/ebooks/