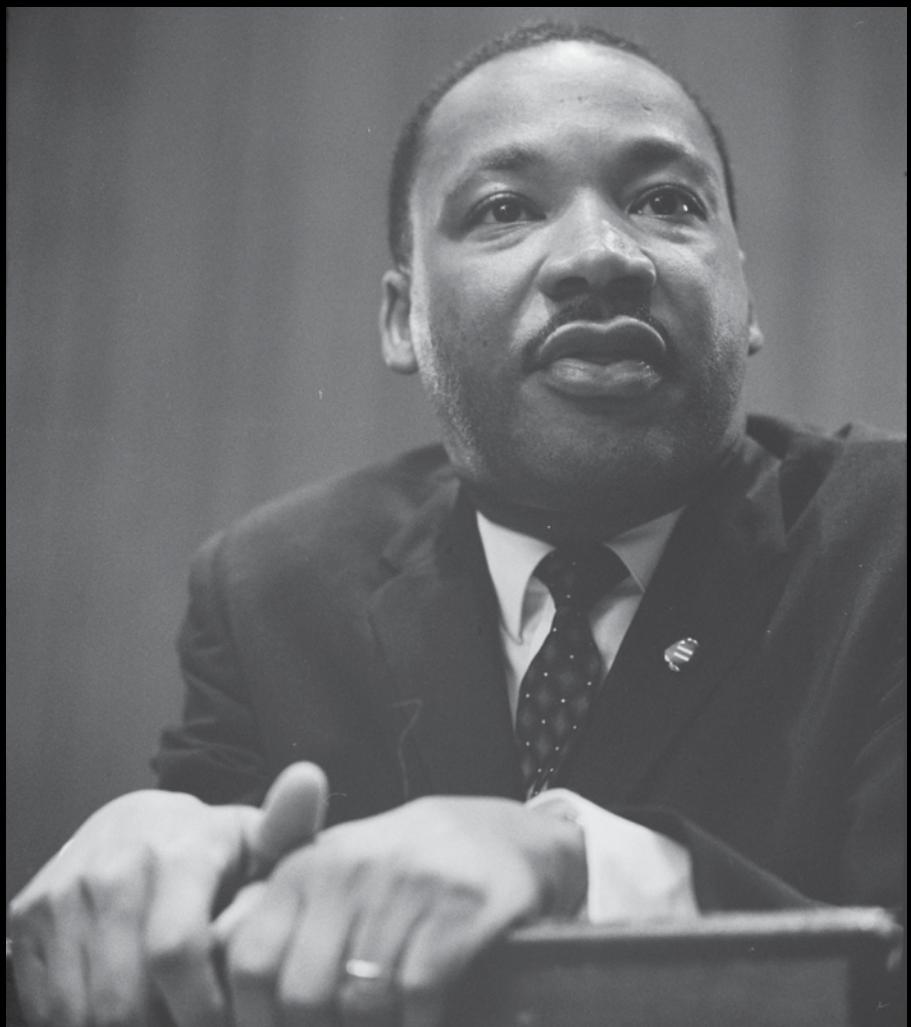


# The Beloved Community Today

**Voices of Justice and Hope Honor Martin Luther King Jr.**



**chalice press**

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# Introduction

Peering into the Lorraine Motel's room 306 is eerie. It resembles other hotel rooms of the late 1960s, with matching apricot-colored curtains and bedspreads, a television with rabbit-ear antennae, cups of coffee atop a dresser, and burnt-orange carpet. But visitors to the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis know they stand on sacred ground. Our stomachs turn knowing the next step takes us out to the balcony, that bloodstained balcony outside room 306 where 50 years ago one man's life ended - and the nation's struggle with racism began a new chapter in a still-unfolding story.

Visiting the National Civil Rights Museum is a *pilgrimage*. I was struck by the sadness in the place, knowing Martin Luther King Jr. was martyred there, but at the time I believed we had made remarkable progress. Today, with the Klan and neo-Nazis newly emboldened to publicly spew horrible words and profane ideas, with people of color persecuted by our legal system, failed by our education system, and excluded in perhaps more subtle ways than 50 years ago (but with the same conscious and unconscious racism), I know now I grossly overestimated that progress. We know there is still so much work to be done, so many injuries to be healed, so much change to be initiated and carried out, if we are to see the Beloved Community for which Dr. King and others have sacrificed their hearts, their blood, and their lives.

*If.* These days we find ourselves wondering if the human race will even make it that far.

I believe we will. I believe that because of the many Chalice Press authors working every day to bring down institutional racism, serving as a nation's collective conscience, including:

- **William J. Barber II**, the prophetic inspiration to millions calling out those in power for their injustice, greed, and racism;
- **Michael W. Waters**, an up-and-coming preacher, writer, and activist challenging those who emerged from race conflict with privilege, power, and no sense of justice;
- **Leah Gunning Francis**, digging into stories of clergy and emerging activist leaders who served on the front lines of the 2014 Ferguson protests following the police shooting of an unarmed teenager;

- **Nicole Massie Martin**, training women to be leaders in the church and the world to bring God's message to the masses;
- **Melvin Bray**, offering creative new stories that will bring us a new world when we dare to think in new ways;
- **Sandhya Rani Jha**, looking deeply into stories around racial identity and perception to provide new insight on how we view each other; and
- **Carolyn B. Helsel**, whose research and writing emboldens whites to plunge into conversations about racism and how they view the barriers between races.

Working with these visionaries in their ministries is so humbling. We at Chalice Press are grateful for their tireless efforts to continue writing the story Dr. King did not get to finish. May you find inspiration, courage, and hope in these pages.

Gratefully,

Brad Lyons

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brad Lyons".

President and Publisher  
Chalice Press  
Christian Board of Publication

# WELCOME

## PREACHING IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE



Moral March on Raleigh 2014 (Eric Preston photo)

Moral messages in the pulpit or the public square are designed not just to be spoken and heard, but to shape the prophetic consciousness of a Movement and of society. To paraphrase the Rev. Dr. James Forbes, longtime pastor of the historic Riverside Church in New York: *Prophets believe that what they proclaim on any day can be transformed into real action.*

Words can become flesh. The prophetic voice rises when government systems and sometimes even religious systems abdicate their responsibility to those whom scripture calls the *least of these*. When the forces of extremism become so overwhelming that they depress the hope of the people, the prophetic voice and mission is to connect words and actions in ways that build restorative hope, so a Movement for restorative justice can arise.

This book is an attempt to capture the practice of preaching in the public square, which is where prophetic inquiry must be at work.

Messages built from the perspective of authentic prophetic inquiry will insist that political decisions and public policies—which determine who will be the haves and the have-nots in the realms of wages; healthcare; public education; voting rights; workers’/ immigrants’/ LGBTQ/women’s rights; and criminal and environmental justice—are all deeply moral concerns. The authentic call of the Spirit will not allow pastors and preachers to be satisfied with words quarantined within the walls of the sanctuary. The moment when misery abounds necessitates messages that can move the masses to engage in deeply moral actions that question mean and hurtful public policies.

Prophetic messages wake people up, not just emotionally but also to the possibility of change and their particular roles in moving **Forward Together** in the push for that change.

When I was a student at Duke Divinity School, Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa once raised a question at Duke Chapel: *Who will join God?*? Progressive evangelical activist Rev. Jim Wallis has made the call for us to consider God’s politics. Duke Divinity School professor of homiletics, Dr. William Turner, has suggested that any claim of spirituality is terribly suspect unless that claim is followed by a clear quarrel with the world and its systems of injustice. And my father, a preacher and teacher like Dr. Turner and me, taught me the following principle articulated by British statesman and philosopher Francis Bacon:

*Knowledge is not a couch whereon to rest a searching and restless spirit; or a terrace for a wandering mind to walk up and down with a fair prospect; or a tower of state for a proud mind to raise itself upon; or a sort of commanding ground for strife and contention; or a shop for profit and sale; but a rich storehouse for the glory of the Creator, and the relief of man’s estate.*<sup>1</sup>

The role of prophetic moral activity is to awaken people to deep consciousness first, and then to engage them to use this new consciousness as a guidance system for framing a Movement that shifts the center of gravity of political discourse and action away from its accommodation to domination, and back to the deepest moral values of our faith. In essence, the role of prophetic social consciousness is to say to both political systems and to the people:

*“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin,*

*and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.”*

MATTHEW 23:23 ESV

The messages necessary for building Moral Movements must constantly refocus and critique issues around “the weightier matters,” or what matters most.

This book brings you messages spoken within a particular political context and climate—that of an extremist, regressive North Carolina legislation that disenfranchised and harmed multitudes of people in our state. However, the messages speak to universal needs, values, and hopes.

The proclamations recorded in this book employ our deepest prophetic moral framework to address the weightier matters before us all, in North Carolina and everywhere, as we must confront those who vow to act in our names but who act against the common good. Therefore the spirit of these messages is universal and useful to all of you who hope to enliven and strengthen your own efforts to achieve justice where you live.

There can be no Moral Movement or transformational politics without a decisive and deliberate attempt to use moral language and framing in a way that builds a new consciousness among the masses of people, which gives them the kind of critical analysis and charismatic hope to carry on and carry out the Movement.

Under the oppressive forces and pressures of extremism, people tend to *expire*, to give up. The role of prophetic moral messaging is to *inspire* people, to breathe life into the masses who hardly dare to hope for more. It is to give people permission to morally act up! Henry Thoreau in *Civil Disobedience* said: *The only thing I repent of is my good behavior in the face of injustice.* He did not write a book for mere academic purposes or give speeches for mere inspiration. His speeches were a form of his own repentance, as well as a call to action. In this spirit we offer the words you find here.

This book tracks our Forward Together Moral Movement in North Carolina during the key years of 2013 and 2014, as resistance to the hateful and regressive policies enacted by Tea Party extremists since 2010 gathered great force. This Movement did not spring up overnight after the 2010 election and redistricting to stack our state with right-wing leadership. Rather, it was built on the structural bones of long-lived North Carolina NAACP local chapters, and was forged on top of those with intentional alliances across many groups in our state and a vision

that we could assert a united moral vision of political and ethical fusion against all odds. So in addition to the Historic Thousands on Jones Street and Moral Monday speeches, we include those that bound us with two key constituencies: our allies who have championed Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) rights and labor rights. We hope you find our work of use for yours.

**William J. Barber, II**

Pastor, Greenleaf Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Goldsboro,

North Carolina

President, North Carolina Conference of the NAACP

Architect of the Forward Together Moral Movement

# INTRODUCTION

## TO THE FORWARD TOGETHER MORAL MOVEMENT AND MORAL MONDAY RALLIES



In the tradition of Dr. King (Sue Sturgis photo)

*The speeches and scenes in this book focus on North Carolina and our NC NAACP-led Forward Together Moral Movement, which unexpectedly has ignited the interest of people across the nation and beyond. We hope that our experience informs and encourages yours, as you work for the common good in times of globalization and growing inequality everywhere. To*

*understand the particular American Southern context from which our Movement arose, the following words may be of use. They are adapted and expanded from a narrative of 2013 Forward Together activities that was written by Rob Stephens and attorney Al McSurely.*

The forces that profit from racial division and deprivation do not rest. Since the mid-1960s, when the Southern freedom Movement was at its peak, shaking the very structures of Jim Crow, opponents of equal rights have been working on new tricks to divide and conquer the multiracial people's Movement against what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called the Evil Triplets in the United States: racism, poverty, and militarism. They have set up a national network with their own hidden funding and propaganda machines. They have directed billions of dollars to the George Wallace-John Birch base in the South, believing there are millions of whites who are open to racist appeals.

In November 2012, with the help of an unconstitutional racially gerrymandered scheme in North Carolina, these forces hand-picked extremist candidates, slipped them thousands of dollars for their campaigns, and overwhelmed candidates who represented the interests of poor and working people in North Carolina. In that 2012 election, despite the highest turnout in history for black, Latino, and progressive white voters, the extremists won a large majority of the seats in the North Carolina General Assembly.

We were not just in the fight *of* our lives. For many of us, it was a fight *for* our lives. We did not shrink from the challenge.

We took the struggle straight to our opponents' doors, armed with the best research to wage a well-organized nonviolent policy debate against their cruel policies. Tens of thousands of new friends joined the Forward Together Moral Movement, grasping its principles of grace, courage, and commitment. People all over the world are now looking to us for guidance in building a moral anti-racism, anti-poverty, pro-labor Movement to expose and reverse regressive policies wherever they ascend.

One way to understand the current cultural context is through the language of **Reconstruction**. We have talked with anti-racism forces across the nation in dozens of speeches, internet videos, and private conversations about a prophetic vision of a **Third Reconstruction** in our land. It's a vision based on our faith in the good people of all races, not just in North Carolina, but across the South. We sincerely believe that millions of Southerners are prepared to join the effort to repair the breaches caused by slavery and segregation within our Southern

human family. We have empirical evidence that tens of thousands of white sisters and brothers in North Carolina and beyond are prepared to join in this effort.

What are these three Reconstructions?

After most of our great-great-grandparents were liberated from slavery in 1865, there was a short period of the **First Reconstruction** in the South. A coalition of faith-based progressives and ordinary white tenant farmers and workers joined freed African Americans in a wildly hopeful effort known as the Fusion political movement in late 19th-century North Carolina. They succeeded in a hard-won push to build public schools, roads, and hospitals, and to move talented African American leaders into elected office and leadership positions of all kinds. A white backlash violently ended this period of political and social fusion, and white terrorists roamed freely in the South, enforcing a rigid apartheid system that lasted well past 1954.

The **Second Reconstruction** period began in 1954 with the NAACP's magnificent court victory over segregation in *Brown versus Board of Education*. In the next decade or so, Southern warriors in the NAACP and other organizations made great strides in dismantling the most blatant forms of segregation in schools, employment, and public life. Most people know this Second Reconstruction as the Civil Rights era of the 1960s. However, an insidious backlash developed in the mid-60s. Ironically, the vehicle for the backlash was the party of Lincoln. It now welcomed white extremists and politicians who appeared to have gained control over the once proud anti-slavery party.

We believe we are now in a period of the **Third Reconstruction**, our 21st-century wave of popular revolt against regressive extremism that has squelched economic human rights. The notion of individualism and social Darwinism and disinvestment in the common good has now reached a punitive extreme. People are suffering greatly in this era when jobs disappear to the lowest global bidder and the social safety net is seen as a crutch for the undeserving.

The Historic Thousands on Jones Street (HKonJ) movement, led by the NC NAACP in coalition with organizations across the state, took form in 2007. It was an annual protest gathering at our state legislative center to bring people together to stand against our then-Democratic leadership to demand the basic rights guaranteed by our state Constitution. Coalition members developed a 14-Point People's Agenda that articulated common goals.

Although thousands of people have been coming to our annual Historic Thousands on Jones Street People's Assemblies and other protests since 2005, it was not until April of 2013 that our prophetic

vision materialized every Monday. Total attendance at the Raleigh Moral Mondays exceeded thirty-five thousand. People of all races, classes, sexual identities, and political persuasions drove hundreds of miles from the mountains and the coast to Raleigh for 13 Moral Mondays during the 2013 Raleigh legislative session to bear moral witness against the cruel policies of the extremists. Nearly 950 persons were arrested: some in wheelchairs, some with cancer, some unemployed and seeking work, some overwhelmed with college debt, some police officers who understood flaws in our criminal justice system, and regular people who simply knew things were stacked against their hard-working habits as they still suffered from lack of health insurance and other hurdles such as the North Carolina legislative cuts in unemployment insurance. Thousands more came to show solidarity with the witnesses whose conscience drove them to civil disobedience. For both rally participants and those engaging for the first time in civil disobedience, this was a brand new and scary experience. But the moment demanded action, and the Forward Together Moral Movement was a catalyst with an open door for ordinary people to speak their minds.

Beyond all this action in Raleigh in 2013, at least thirty thousand more attended Moral Monday rallies from Sylva in the western North Carolina mountains to the Outer Banks on the state's eastern coast. Many people who attended these rallies returned to Raleigh for later weekly protests, comparing the events to a personal spiritual revival of solidarity and hope. Many thousands of others enthusiastically joined in from afar through Livestream, videos, YouTube, and news media.

The media caught the spirit and spread the word nationally and internationally about our self-described Moral Monday Movement in North Carolina. Our critics also helped the Movement go viral. One North Carolina legislator, desperate to minimize our power and message, called our growing weekly protests Moron Mondays. Opponents also resorted to 1950s McCarthy-era fear tactics and called us *outside agitators, leftists, and radicals*, because they could not debate the foundations of our claims, the breadth of our coalition, or the faces and pain of the people who kept telling their stories and driving even deeper our moral critique.

Through this Forward Together Moral Movement during our **Third Reconstruction**, the NC NAACP has added many new black, white, and Latino members to our local NAACP branches, strengthening our position as the largest State Conference in the South and the second largest in the nation. We convened 38 separate Moral Monday

Forward Together direct actions (13 in Raleigh; 25 around the state) in 2013, and also led a 26-county Spring 2013 tour.

Through all this organized action against regressive legislation in our state, we have reinvigorated and continued the historically venerable Long Walk to Justice in North Carolina. This work is challenging and demands persistence, strategic action on multiple fronts (the streets, courts, media, and voting booths). It is undergirded with a keen sense of hope and possibility.

We are faced by forces extremely hostile to our purposes. Warriors from the 1960s Movement tell us they underestimated the viciousness and the power of their opponents. The right-wing extremists view the emerging new Southern electorate as destructive to their way of life. Their fear about the fundamental change that is happening in the South causes them to view us with suspicion. Our work is dangerous and daunting. We find strength in the words of Paul:

*But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost,  
but among those who have faith and so are saved.*

HEBREWS 10:39 NRSV

By staying the course, we know:

*...if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as noonday. And the LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire with good things, and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.*

ISAIAH 58:10-12 ESV

My brothers and sisters, we must live into the moral standard for all—individuals and political systems as well—that was proclaimed by the prophet Micah:

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

MICAH 6:8 NRSV

We must also stand on the principles embodied by moral leaders like the Rev. J.W. Hood and the Rev. Samuel Ashley, who insisted in 1868 that the following words be inscribed in our North Carolina Constitution:

*Section 1. That we hold it to be self-evident that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, the enjoyment of the fruits of their own labor, and the pursuit of happiness.*

*Section. 2. That all political power is vested in and derived from the people; all government of right originates from the people, is founded upon their will only, and is instituted solely for the good of the whole.*

I am comforted in the knowledge that we are gathering a mighty force of people of faith. I am aware there are many different names and beliefs about the nature of the faith we each hold. But I know if we take risks of faith, if we reach across old man-made breaches in our human family, steady in our march toward justice, we may be called repairers of the breach. As we say when groups of protesters leave the North Carolina Legislative Building in buses going to jail:

*Thank you. We love you.*

*Forward Together. Not One Step Back!*



Rev. Barber surrounded on stage at Mass Moral March on Raleigh, lifting the message of "Higher Ground."  
(Eric Preston photo)

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## **It's Complicated: On Tubman, Race, and Progress in America**

After many years of struggle to achieve equal opportunity and accommodations for African Americans in this nation, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is famously quoted as saying, "What good is having the right to sit at a lunch counter if you can't afford to buy a hamburger?" Dr. King's statement powerfully and succinctly illuminates the complicated nature of race and progress in America. Quite often progress is followed by the immediate recognition that much more progress is needed to achieve equality among the races in America.

Hence the complicated nature of reactions to U.S. Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew's announcement that 19th-century abolitionist Harriet Tubman will replace President Andrew Jackson on the face of the American \$20 bill. In so doing, Tubman will become the first African American featured on American paper currency and the first woman featured on American currency in more than 100 years. This is undeniably a historic achievement.

On one hand, if there is any historic American personality deserving of this honor, it is Harriet Tubman. She was a model American at a time when many states regarded her as property instead of as a citizen. After escaping to freedom in the North, she courageously returned to the South hundreds of times to lead others born into slavery into freedom via The Underground Railroad. Tubman embodies all that should be celebrated and honored in America: bravery, ingenuity, intelligence, loyalty, and strength.

Furthermore, a retrospective view of President Andrew Jackson proves him unworthy of the honor that had been bestowed upon him by placing him on our currency. The legacy of America's seventh President is, at best, problematic. During his lifetime,

Jackson personally held hundreds of human beings in captivity and forced them to work as free labor. He built his wealth on the weary backs of the captives, who harvested cotton on his over 1,050-acre plantation. A runaway notice from Jackson himself offered a \$50 reward for the return of “a Mulatto Man Slave.” Repugnantly, the notice also offered the captors “ten dollars extra for every hundred lashes...to the amount of three hundred.”<sup>18</sup>

Jackson’s cruelty reflects the worst of our nation and is without honor. If anyone deserves to be removed from America currency, it is Jackson. Unfortunately, Jackson will not journey far. His image will still be captured on the back of the \$20 bill.

On the other hand, it proves exceedingly difficult to be completely celebratory of this swapping of images given the gross racial wealth disparity still present in our nation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 27.4 percent of Black people live in poverty, the highest percentage among all racial and ethnic groups in America.<sup>19</sup> In 2014, among Black people who were unemployed, 23.7 percent had attended college, 15.4 percent had bachelor’s degrees, and 4.5 percent had advanced degrees.<sup>20</sup> Disturbingly, by percentage points alone, there are more unemployed Blacks with advanced degrees than there are unemployed Asians overall. In America, a Black college graduate has the same job prospects as a white high school dropout or a white person with a prison record.<sup>21</sup> And while the median wealth of white families increased from \$138,600 to \$141,900 between 2010 and 2013, the median wealth of Black families decreased from \$16,600 in 2010 to \$11,000 in 2013.<sup>22</sup> When it comes to Black economic progress in America, our nation is headed in the wrong direction.

The economic disparity among the races in this nation is not accidental, but intentional, and multifaceted. It reeks of the smoke that belledowed from the ruins of Tulsa’s Black Wall Street and is stained red by the innocent blood that flowed down the street of the same. It looks like the redlining of communities and the construction of urban highways that destabilized the economies of the urban core in the mid-20th century. It sounds like names believed to be too ethnic that appear atop the resumes of qualified applicants who do not get called in for an interview.

It is J. Edgar Hoover's COINTELPRO. It is President Richard Nixon's War on Drugs. It is President Ronald Reagan's "Reaganomics." It is President William Jefferson Clinton's Crime Bill. It is the suffocating reality and presence of American racism and its economic manifestations. Just as King openly questioned the value of having access to a lunch counter but lacking the financial resources to order from the menu, there is a certain unintended cruelty in placing our nation's greatest Black abolitionist on currency at a time when many of her descendants are struggling to make ends meet.

Still, like many, when Tubman's \$20 bills are released, I will be in line at the bank with unyielding excitement. I will proudly display them and distribute them to my children. Yet as I pass public inner city schools that are still without adequate resources to properly teach our youth, as I pass the unemployment line, and as I witness another family in line at the grocery store wrestling with hard decisions in the checkout line, seeking to determine what items they must leave at the store because they cannot afford it all, I will question whether or not this is the freedom for which Harriet Tubman fought.

Then, if I have it on me, I will hand them a Tubman \$20 to assist with the grocery bill.

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## ***On Struggle and Strongholds***

I took a seat next to my friend, the imam, near the front of the mosque. A camera was trained on us as the Friday worshipers filled the space, some sitting on chairs, and some sitting on the floor below. The camera ensured that we would engage an even larger audience than the one gathered before us. Our dialogue would be streamed across the globe.

I first met this young, charismatic, highly intelligent imam in June of the past year. We gathered together to hold vigil for nine precious souls martyred two evenings before at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The weight of this massacre weighed heavily upon our shoulders.

Two months after our vigil, I visited Mother Emanuel. I was in Charleston to speak on a conference panel. While there, I requested to stop by the church so that I could pay my respects.

Outside, the church was adorned with flowers and stuffed animals. A large wall that had been erected was completely covered with condolences. Sunlight reflected brightly upon the white edifice, betraying the brutalities that had unfolded there.

I entered the lower level of the church, where Bible study was traditionally held. There, I looked upon the bullet holes that had pierced the walls. A man named Brother Nathaniel, a trustee at the church, became my guide. He pointed over to the circular tables erected near the side of the room. "That's where most of the killing took place," he said. He mentioned there were more bullet holes in the floor beneath the tables. I could not bring myself to look.

I did look upon the door to the Pastor's Study. It was behind that door that the late state senator and pastor's wife and one of his daughters took refuge. That door served as the only barrier between them and the horrors that unfolded on the other side.

Before departing, I left a copy of a tribute that I had written the night of the tragedy. The church secretary graciously received the tribute and stated that it would be shared with the congregation.

The space reminded me of another church that I had visited several times before while leading civil rights pilgrimages across the Deep South. Like the lower level of Mother Emanuel, the lower level of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, was the site of unspeakable horrors. Neither space is particularly extraordinary, save for the tragic events that unfolded there, which bespeaks the fact that these tragedies could have taken place anywhere.

Just as I had looked upon the space where a domestic terrorist with a bomb took the lives of four little girls on September 15, 1963, I was now looking upon the space where a young domestic terrorist armed with a handgun—yet driven by the same hate—took nine lives over half a century later. The tragedy in Charleston bore witness to the fact that the same struggle for racial equality and the same stronghold of racism was still before us, only separated by time and space.

It was for this reason that I had been invited to the mosque. My friend, the imam, was concerned for the Muslim community. Daily, words of hate and acts of hate were being levied against them. Presidential candidates were calling for Muslim Americans to wear identification eerily similar to Hitler's orders that Jews do the same in Germany. Other candidates were calling for special patrols in Muslim neighborhoods. Both were calls motivated by misappropriated fear.

Times were particularly challenging for Muslims in our North Texas community. Armed protests were being held outside their mosques. The Ku Klux Klan threatened to hold its own protest of a local mosque as well. Men in fatigues and masks carrying AR-15s followed closely behind female worshipers wearing hijabs as they made their way to their mosques. An anti-Muslim organization went so far as to publish the home addresses of prominent Muslim leaders on a website, an intimidation tactic directly from the days of the civil rights movement when addresses of activists were published in the local newspapers.

A young Muslim boy who proudly brought his homemade clock to school to show his teachers was arrested and accused of making a bomb. This incident in a Dallas suburb made international headlines. A Muslim man new to the country was gunned down outside his apartment while watching snow fall for the first time. A Muslim mechanic was shot and killed as his assailant hurled Islamic slurs. One night, while gathering together for a rally against gun violence, we received news that the windows in the home of a Muslim family had been broken with large rocks.

Humbly, the imam had previously quoted my words during his sermons delivered at the mosque, but I was physically present that night to offer words of encouragement myself. My words were intended to strengthen this community by reflecting upon the historic and present suffering of my own people and of how we have worked together to overcome. I offered that there were no monolithic approaches in the Black community to overcoming oppression, but I did offer one approach that has been most meaningful to me: the way of faith.

As I spoke, I shared that our community's faith had strengthened us for generations, enabling us to keep moving forward in the face of unspeakable horrors and of great odds placed against us. I shared that their community's faith would also see them through. Tens of thousands streamed our conversation and offered kind words for our time of sharing. The worshipers present were especially kind and gracious.

Yet I was drawn to the young children who were present and who later came to shake my hands and to extend their gratitude. Watching these Muslim children and my own children, who had accompanied me that night along with my wife, playing together later as the adults congregated in extended conversation, illuminated the importance of our present work in the world. Our work is necessary so that our youth will not face the same struggles and strongholds of generations past. This must be our singular mission and our greatest goal.

# The Power of Making Things Right

## *Restorative Justice Models*

*In a real sense all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*

*I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...This is the interrelated structure of reality.*

—REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

*What kind of society spends more on cages than classrooms?*

—REP. PETE LEE (COLORADO)

In 1995, Sharletta Evans's three-year-old son Casson Xavier Evans, nicknamed Biscuit, was killed in a drive-by shooting. The three shooters were teenagers. Evans had to endure three separate trials.

"As we look back on the photographs of Paul [one of the three youth sentenced for Casson's death] walking through the courthouse he has this smirk on his face like he could care less what he had done," said Evans. "And that smirk on his face is the image I've had of Paul Littlejohn for the last 21 years."

Evans's journey had already led her to become an advocate opposed to life sentences for teenagers, and because the state of Colorado had recently adopted a statewide victim-offender mediation program commonly known as Restorative Justice, she had met with another of the men who had killed her son before meeting Paul.

"Having that four-hour victim-offender dialogue," said Evans, "he changed that image I had of him."

When Evans met with Raymond, another of the men in prison for her son's murder, she had a blunt conversation with him that weaved between transparent anger and wondering what God's plan was in the midst of this. And towards the end of their meeting, she decided she was ready to physically connect: she asked him to extend his arms and turn his palms up; she took his hands and prayed:

"I prayed that they would cause no more harm, that they'd be hands of comfort, that they would bring help and serve people and that they would no longer be hands of destruction but hands that bring life."

Hearing his confession and extending forgiveness, both Evans and her son Calvin Hurd (who was six when his brother was killed) believed Raymond had experienced both transformation and remorse. And they experienced a different level of healing than they had found up to that point.<sup>14</sup>

### Why Restorative Justice Is Needed

The current justice system around the world (often referred to as retributive justice because it is set up around specific laws and consequences for violating those laws) is a few hundred years old at this point. It has been around long enough for most of us to take it for granted, and for some of us to miss the fact that its retribution is not equally dispersed or that its results are less than stellar.

Disparate sentencing based on race and class has become a common subject of discussion in some circles.<sup>15</sup> The higher likelihood of an innocent person ending up on death row

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<sup>14</sup> This story comes from both the article and the accompanying video by the *Denver Post*: Kevin Simpson, "Denver woman feels the power of restorative justice after son murdered," July 9, 2012, [www.denverpost.com](http://www.denverpost.com).

<sup>15</sup> Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow* spurred a great deal of conversation on this subject when it was released in 2010, although the Supreme Court case *Kimbrough v. United States* in 2007 had already pointed out that across the country, people went to prison for longer terms for possession of the same amount of crack versus cocaine, which correlated to steeper sentencing of poor people and Black people in comparison to wealthier people and white people. Additionally, James Forman Jr.'s book *Locking Up Our Own* eloquently lays out the creative ways we can establish alternatives to a system that serves neither victim nor offender (nor society) well.

if they are Black was heartrendingly detailed in Bryan Stevenson's book *Just Mercy*. And the phrase "school-to-prison pipeline" (which some have renamed the cradle-to-prison pipeline) points to how some children are more likely to be suspended for disciplinary issues based on race, and suspension rates correlate to juvenile detention and to long prison records.<sup>16</sup>

One article on restorative justice notes, "Statistically speaking, high school dropouts are much more likely to become incarcerated than those who graduate. According to a 2006 study by the Alliance for Excellent Education, a national policy and advocacy organization, 75 percent of America's state prison inmates, 59 percent of federal inmates and 69 percent of jail inmates in America do not have high school diplomas. In California, youth recidivism—the rate at which youths return to prison—runs as high as 90 percent. Youth completing restorative justice programs, however, have a significantly lower recidivism rate, in the range of only 10 to 20 percent."<sup>17</sup>

The current retributive justice system certainly hurts people because it is unjustly implemented. It also misses an element that many ancient indigenous justice practices included: in focusing on laws broken, it does not connect the crime to the victim, and it does not truly and deeply honor the experience of the victim.

For years, this system has seemed inadequate to people on all sides. And so began to emerge an alternative.

### How Restorative Justice Emerged

Restorative justice has actually existed in various forms for thousands of years within various indigenous communities; in fact, according to the Canadian Department of Justice, "the continued overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples in correctional institutions in Canada has led to demands for

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<sup>16</sup> The *Christian Science Monitor* discussed this issue in the March 31, 2013 cover story by Stacy Teicher Khadaroo, "School Suspensions: Does racial bias feed the school-to-prison pipeline?"

<sup>17</sup> Eric K. Arnold, "Oakland leads way as restorative justice techniques enter education mainstream," Center for Public Integrity, July 11, 2012, [www.publicintegrity.org](http://www.publicintegrity.org).

more traditional approaches, such as sentencing circles, for Aboriginal offenders.”<sup>18</sup> So it is probably not surprising that the first major victim-offender mediation circle attributed to the burgeoning restorative justice movement occurred in Canada in 1974.

Since that time, it has moved from Canada around the world, including now having deep roots in both Chicago and Oakland, two cities known for their violence and with an urgent desire to change that reality. It is no longer solely the domain of prisons and jails and is found in schools and neighborhoods as well, with a dream of creating lasting solutions to violence by reducing recidivism and reducing the likelihood of acting out or of punishing in ways that don’t move a person towards a better way of being.

### **How Restorative Justice Works**

Teresa Frisbie, director of the Loyola University Chicago School of Law Dispute Resolution Program, tells the following story: Two youth in Des Moines, Iowa were caught spray painting swastikas on a synagogue. Members of the synagogue called for the judge to throw the book at the youth for their heinous crime. The attorney asked the rabbi if the members would be willing to sit down with the youth to try a restorative justice process, and to the rabbi’s surprise, after some serious debate and discussion, the members of the synagogue agreed.

The youth met Holocaust survivors who had gone into hiding after the tagging of the synagogue. They explained to the youth the horrors of the extermination camps and what that symbol had done to their families.

The synagogue members learned that one of the youth had been seriously bullied throughout childhood in part due to hearing loss and speech problems. The Aryan Nation, recognizing his vulnerability, recruited, embraced and mentored him with the goal of him becoming a leader in his hometown and recruiting other white supremacists. His only recruit was a young and willing girlfriend along for the ride.

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<sup>18</sup> “The Effects of Restorative Justice Programming: A Review of the Empirical.” Canada Department of Justice, [www.justice.gc.ca](http://www.justice.gc.ca).

Over the course of hours they began to recognize one another's humanity and one another's fear. In that way, "they were able to craft a solution whereby the young couple acknowledged what they had done and agreed to perform restitution by spending many hours cleaning the building and studying Jewish history, including the history of persecution." The agreement also included getting GEDs, Nazi tattoo removal and the temple getting the young man a hearing specialist.<sup>19</sup>

Restorative justice was the domain of prisons and juvenile detention facilities for many years, but it is now showing up in school districts and neighborhood groups and in family counseling as a means of restoring broken relationships when conflicts seem intractable. In schools, RJ is reducing detentions and suspensions, but it is also changing the culture of schoolyards and playgrounds, because inherent in the model is cultivating empathy when that seems hard to do, and claiming accountability when that also seems hard to do.

In a four-part series on the violence in Chicago, Cheryl Graves reflected that restorative justice is the only hope she sees for reducing violence, and that's from an expert location:

"Gun law debates in Congress are one thing," says Cheryl Graves, founder of the Community Justice for Youth (CJYI), "but that won't really impact what happens on the street here." Cheryl worked for years as a trial attorney, and "I loved my work; loved the performance aspect of trial law. But it was an endless cycle of repetitive cases, with no reduction in crime. The system just doesn't change" through court and prison justice, she insists. Launching CJYI "to save lives and keep kids out of the court system" and in school, service programs, and jobs, Cheryl and her team have trained over 5,000 people in restorative justice. They've trained people from Kenya (ahead of their 2013 presidential elections) to Chicago. "We'll train people in circle-work wherever they go—the

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<sup>19</sup> Teresa F. Frisbie: "Restorative Justice is expanding in Illinois, but more can still be done," *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin*, Monday, July 28, 2014.

barber shop, beauticians, the old grandma who lets kids sit on her front steps after school," she explains.<sup>20</sup>

Believing that "hurt people hurt people," Graves and her colleague Father Dave Kelly of Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation work at helping gang members and formerly incarcerated youth cultivate the accountability and respect that will help them eventually thrive and heal. That means being in RJ circles with members of opposing gangs and families who have been hurt by that person's crime. Real dialogue like that cannot happen in the court system which is built around accountability to laws rather than accountability to people.

Whether in prison or a school or a neighborhood meeting, RJ orients itself generally around three main questions:

- Who has been hurt?
- What are their needs?
- Whose obligations are these?

Establishing the process involves a lot of set up, so this isn't a model that people can just jump into, explains CamishaFatimah Gentry, a restorative justice consultant who worked for many years with Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth, considered to be one of the flagship programs in the nation for restorative justice in public schools. CamishaFatimah watched the program grow from 2 staff to 40 with a current goal of being present in every single public school in Oakland from high school down to elementary. "You start with buy in, then you implement the circles (where participants speak their lived experiences) really well, then you follow up," she says. The reason she is inspired by it is it invites all people to pay attention to why they react to situations in the way they do and to recognize that in each other as well, with a goal of being able to be better to one another and also be better human beings. "It is true with almost every person I've dealt with: how we respond to the world is rooted in how we were raised. We have to become aware of that in order to do the work necessary to heal."

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<sup>20</sup> Suzanne Skees, "'Gun Laws Won't Impact Us Here' in the Line of Fire, Say Peace Workers: Part 1 of 4," *Huffington Post*, September 28, 2013, [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com).

The community buy-in that CamishaFatimah mentions is not just important for promotional purposes; it matters because otherwise the community will not actually change, even if the whole school is engaged. During a panel on the 10th anniversary of restorative justice work in Chicago, Cheryl Graves made the following observation:

[Some years back] there was a lot of energy from systems people to move the restorative justice agenda in North Lawndale. There were also social service providers on board, but there weren't that many community people. And so that initiative had systems energy, but it didn't have community energy. Things began to happen, but they didn't really gel until maybe 4 or 5 years later when the community said, "You know what, this restorative justice stuff, there's something to it. We need it because too many of our kids are getting arrested, too many of our kids are getting expelled. They're getting arrested in schools." The community then had that foundation to build upon. And now we've got community people who've been trained in victim offender conferencing, who've been trained in peer jury, who've been trained in peace-making circles, who actually now even have an entity in North Lawndale, Sankofa, which is hearing something like 40 or 50 cases a month of North Lawndale kids. Instead of them going into the system, they've been diverted out.<sup>21</sup>

CamishaFatimah also notes that restorative justice serves all parties, including the part that most people balk at: forgiveness. "Forgiveness is a gift for the person receiving and giving. Letting go happens in that process; it softens the heart and also empowers the person to move forward. Softening the heart is actually part of empowerment."

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<sup>21</sup> Cheryl Graves, "AREA Dialogue: Towards a Restorative Justice City: Ten years and counting" ([areachicago.org](http://areachicago.org)).

## **The Greatest Challenge to Restorative Justice**

Obviously, skepticism is a major barrier to restorative justice making its way throughout the U.S. criminal justice system (although many guards, wardens, chaplains, probation officers and police are so aware of the failings of the existing system they can be very open to alternatives like RJ). Politicians' desire to be perceived as "tough on crime" creates another barrier, especially when paired with media coverage that inaccurately suggests crime is growing when in fact it is decreasing in all but a few major cities. But CamishaFatimah notes that the greatest challenge is with people going on the restorative justice journey themselves.

The ongoing challenge of restorative justice, she notes, is that people may believe themselves to be open and ready for the process but then in fact resist it. "People say they want to do the work. They begin to do the work. But oftentimes they do not follow through because of the level of awareness, reflection and character changes that have to remain present in our daily walk." She said that this is actually one of the biggest barriers to success and saturation of restorative justice in the field, an issue that practitioners of restorative justice actively bemoan when they gather.

"It's not easy, and you have to be willing to be uncomfortable, be aware that you'll get defensive or rationalize behavior and have to deal with that. It requires working with the uncomfortable parts of ourselves to become more comfortable with our authentic selves."

And that is actually the payoff, so hard to get to: finally getting to be our authentic selves.

## **What This Community Looks Like as a Result**

In reports from the Longmont (CO) Police Department's Restorative Justice Programs and the Longmont Community Justice Partnership, Master Police Officer Greg Ruprecht states that youth programs show exponential drops in recidivism (at this writing the rate is 10 percent, compared to 60-70 percent nationwide) and high participant satisfaction. Perhaps even more

poignant is the tens of thousands of dollars, per case, that is saved from diverting youth from incarceration. In a recent live interview Officer Ruprecht shared his initial doubts about Restorative Justice, coming from a background as a Veteran serving in the Army, he says he was very skeptical at first. And then he saw it in action. To the argument that it "has no teeth" he responded, "it actually has more teeth" and that having to face one's crime and do that truthfully is much harder than being locked away.<sup>22</sup>

One of the purposes of this book is to look at how communities are growing stronger through the various models people are using, rather than only paying attention to personal improvement. Obviously individuals who stay out of prison and become contributing members of society have a better quality of life, and people who are able to find peace with their loss and heal through both forgiveness and the experience of their assailant's remorse likewise have better lives. Communities where the retributive justice system has torn apart families will, over time, experience a strengthening of community as this model becomes more deeply entrenched. That said, it is too soon to see the flourishing of that in neighborhoods dealing with so many other traumas still, especially when it takes years to normalize a culture of restorative justice so that it permeates family and school and religious community and street life as well as prisons and jails.

But there is a community burgeoning in an unexpected place, according to CamishaFatimah: "With all the shifting and changing in the people we work with, it takes 7-10 years to make a significant shift. Teachers leave, people are homeless and moving because of gentrification. It's so hard to keep track of folks; we're constantly starting over. The thing is, though, when I started, there were one or two people in the whole city I could turn to for wisdom and advice. Now there's a huge network and system of people doing the work

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<sup>22</sup> Molly Rowan Leach, "Restorative Justice Is On the Rise," *Huffington Post*, July 23, 2013, [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com).

in and out of the city; there's a huge network of very diverse people doing this work in all kinds of places, supporting each other and resourcing each other because we have this shared vision. When we talk about building community, that's the strength and community for me."

Marge Piercy's famous poem "The Low Road" ends with the stanza,

*It goes on one at a time,  
it starts when you care  
to act, it starts when you do  
it again after they said no,  
it starts when you say We  
and know who you mean, and each  
day you mean one more*

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The restorative justice movement is building that community where each day they mean one more.

And restorative justice is simultaneously deeply personal. CamishaFatimah came to the work because of her passion for self-development. She believes in "the power of being heard, the power of forgiving, restoring myself back to my original self; the Arabic term is fitrah, the original way you came here before it was mediated through the place you were born and your family upbringing and society's influences. I am about returning to that.

"Being a product of our environment can hold us in harmful ways but also in beautiful ways," she clarifies. "Restorative justice gives us an avenue and philosophy to live ongoing in a state of shifting to our better selves, our original selves so we can peel the onion layers back and stand up for what we believe in a powerful way where we're not bullying or intimidating, where we're not causing more violence or harm but we're leading others who may not be as courageous to guide them back to their original selves. It's about how to be human, learning and relearning how to be, how to build."

Charletta Evans, who lost her three-year-old son in 1995 in Colorado, regained herself through the restorative justice process where she prayed over a man involved in her son's

murder. "What I got for myself was that I have a sense of more feeling who Charletta is, my identity of who I was before Casson passed. I feel more courage and more hopeful about the advocacy work I do. I told him I advocate for him to perhaps being one day released. He added value to that for me. I feel more solid in who I am. It kind of affirmed and confirmed for me what I'm doing. It gave me more boldness to speak on behalf of the lifers."<sup>23</sup>

And as she continues to heal and grow she better and better supports a community in dire need of the process of restorative justice, victims and offenders alike.

#### LEARN MORE

Restorative justice really is being used in schools and neighborhood groups as well as prisons. It can be a powerful way of practicing a different form of justice that honors everyone's humanity or capacity. And it can actually offer more possibility for healing to a victim of a crime than the current system of retributive justice as well as potentially correcting for the racial bias that saturates that system. A great entry point resource on why restorative justice models can be good for schools to adopt, check out the article by the Alliance for Excellent Education, "Five Things Parents Need to Know About School Discipline," written by Kristen Loschert, October 11, 2016, All4Ed.org.

The country of South Africa has an excellent online primer on restorative justice: [www.justice.gov.za](http://www.justice.gov.za), search "restorative justice booklet."

The United Nations has an entire e-book that touches on criminal justice and family circles and use with juvenile communities, [www.unodc.org](http://www.unodc.org), search "criminal justice ebook."

PBS showed a riveting film about people engaged in the work of interrupting violence in Chicago through restorative justice models. The film is called *the Interrupters* and is a great way to glimpse the process of restorative justice. *Interrupters*. kartemquin.com

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<sup>23</sup> Kevin Simpson, "Denver woman feels the power of restorative justice after son murdered," July 9, 2012.

To find a restorative practices trainer who works with schools or any number of books on creating restorative circles in any number of venues, visit Living Justice Press's website: [www.livingjusticepress.org](http://www.livingjusticepress.org)

If you would like to talk with people inclined to being skeptical about the restorative justice model, the article "How Restorative Justice Changed This Colorado Cop's Views on Prison" might be a great resource to share, [www.yesmagazine.org](http://www.yesmagazine.org).

To imagine a restorative justice circle in your community and what it would entail on a small scale, check out this resource from the Student Peace Alliance on peace circles and the restorative justice model, [www.studentpeacealliance.org](http://www.studentpeacealliance.org).

## Made for the Call

If you're reading this book, it's because you are one of the brave women who has accepted the fact that God can use you (or one of the brave male supporters of such an amazing woman). You have agreed to serve the Lord in ways that you can't even fathom at this moment. You've said "yes" to a process that is unfamiliar, yet you're ready and willing to navigate this unfamiliar territory. You have agreed to a lifestyle that may seem hard to imagine. You've reached a major milestone in your life of which you should feel proud! You have accepted God's call.

Those who are called by God have said yes to . . . God knows what! Only God knows the details and purpose for which each one of us is called. We've agreed to a future that looks fuzzy to us but is crystal clear to God. With all of these ambiguities and doubts, it's amazing that you and so many women like you still have the strength and grace to say "yes!" Don't worry: you are not alone. You were made for this call!

To be called by God is to be set apart for the work of ministry in a unique way. It means that you have been appointed and anointed for a work in God's kingdom that will draw on your past experiences along with future training in leadership,

teaching, preaching, and a host of other gifts, talents, and abilities. While everyday there are many people who accept God's calling, many others still wrestle with and deny the calling on their lives. Unfortunately, many of those happen to be women.

The reality for many of us women is that we know deep inside that God is calling us to lead ministries in the church, but we allow internal and external obstacles to keep us from embracing that call. Why? Some women have not seen many examples of women in ministry and cannot quite believe that this calling is for them. They may attribute masculine qualities to ministry and feel that they are not strong enough, tall enough, or don't have a voice loud enough to lead. Other women feel that who they are as mothers or young women prevents them from being fully used by God. They see people working at the church day and night and suppose that mothers couldn't possibly fill those shoes. They see married couples collaborating in leadership and assume that singles could never manage that kind of pressure or they see singles leading with a freedom they don't feel as a married person or parent.

Other women struggle with the pressures to measure up to televised, photoshopped images of women in society. No matter how old or young, whether single or married, we women constantly face insecurities, and we fear that we are not pretty enough, smart enough, thin enough, or tall enough to be accepted by others.

Once we do manage to wrap our heads around those external stressors, then we confront our internal struggles as well. We ask: Can God really use me, knowing where I have been and what I've been through? Considering all of my issues and weaknesses, does God really want me to lead? More fundamentally, does the Bible really endorse the notion of women in ministry? Sometimes we have our doubts. Even the most progressive women wrestle with what to make of scriptures that suggest women should remain quiet in the church or only minister to other women, not exercising authority over a man.<sup>1</sup> And then we wrestle with

self-esteem and acceptance issues. In effect, saying “yes” to God also means saying “yes” to ourselves. It means accepting that who we are is good enough for God.

In effect, saying “yes” to God also means saying “yes” to ourselves.

These concerns may be valid. But they leave out the most important thing: that God is the One who initiates the call. Do we believe that God knows

what God is doing in calling us? Do you believe? If God is the One behind the small whisper in your heart, then surely God believes that you can do what you are called to do. This means that (especially with some training) the ideas that come into your mind as you read scripture are good enough to be put into a sermon; that the advice that you give and the listening skills you have can be formalized in a counseling session; that the programs that you’ve developed, the discernment you exercise in talking to people, and the prayers you’ve prayed for those in need are all valid gifts that God can use in ministry leadership. Yes, God can and will use you! Yes, you were made for this calling.

Consider Sharon’s<sup>2</sup> story. Sharon was always leading someone, ever since she was a child. She can recall lining her dolls up one by one and teaching them with authority at just four years old. As she grew up, Sharon always felt drawn to the church. On some Sundays, she was the only one in her household who walked down to the local church where she sat in the back and enjoyed the worship experience. She developed relationships there and eventually became involved as a junior usher. By the time she went off to college, she had served in most of the ministries in the church and enjoyed talking about God to her family and friends, most of whom assumed that she was being brainwashed by the church.

Sharon went off to college knowing that she was different. As much as she tried to fit in, she was always recognized as the “church girl” and the go-to for prayer and an encouraging word.

When a professor suggested that she consider seminary or a vocation in ministry, she balked, believing that she could never be qualified to serve in such an important field. Growing up, she had only seen one woman in ministry and had never felt a connection to her. Instead, she decided to follow her accounting degree all the way to a reputable firm where she was able to do church ministry on the side and make a living for herself.

After ten years of working in the accounting field, Sharon could fight her call no longer. Both internally and externally, she knew that God was calling her to serve in ministry leadership. On the inside, she could no longer fight the fact that her heart and mind were connected to God and to the church, even when she was at work. On the outside, she was tired of wrestling with the people who assumed that she was a nun or a minister because they caught a glimpse of her true passion. So one Saturday afternoon during her devotional time, she finally said “yes” to God and to her call. She agreed to the fact that God wanted to use her to serve more fully and lead more intentionally in the context of God’s kingdom. Beyond that, however, she had no idea what exactly she was called to do or how to start the process.

So, what exactly does it mean for you to be called by God? Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do you sense an internal wrestling that pushes you to serve God in ways that go beyond where you are and what you are doing now?
2. Do you read scriptures thinking about how they apply to your life and the lives of others?
3. Do your friends, family, or faith community leaders affirm the work of God in your life as a minister or leader?
4. Would you serve in a capacity that requires you to share the gospel, teach the scriptures, offer spiritual guidance, and serve the people, even if you didn’t get paid?

5. Do you often find yourself excelling in leadership positions at work, church, or school?

If you answered positively to the questions above, God may be calling you to serve in ministry leadership.

### *Biblical Observations*

Fortunately for us, the Bible is full of examples of God calling the least likely and using them with great purpose and power. Whether you are tall or short, soft-spoken or loud, a homebody or party animal, there are scriptures that remind us that God can still find you and call you wherever you are.

#### *Hagar<sup>3</sup>*

Hagar was an Egyptian slave girl. She was sold to Sarai's family and was destined to fulfill someone else's dreams. She was overlooked, unappreciated, and underestimated. No one cared who she was. She was to be known by what she could do and her function was simple: to serve her mistress Sarai and do whatever she was asked. It was a challenging existence and just when she thought that her life would be forever abased, she was asked to do something unbelievable: she was asked to bear a child for her mistress.

Having no say in the matter, Hagar did as she was told and conceived a child with her master, Abram. She finally began to experience another side of life. Instead of being at the bottom, Hagar began to rise to the top. The one who was trained always to think less of herself finally began to think more. The Bible tells us that when she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. This "puffed up" sense of self eventually led to punishment and abuse from the family she knew so well. Feeling trapped and threatened, Hagar did the only thing she could to protect herself and the child growing within her: she ran away.

She ran with no clear direction or purpose. All she knew was that she needed to get away. Once she got into the desert, reality probably hit her hard. She had no food, she had no resources,

and she didn't know anyone who could help her to deliver her child. Feeling lost and alone, Hagar sat down at a spring, most likely preparing to die. But it was there at the spring on the side of the road that God met her. In the midst of her despair, God called her. God called her by name, gave her directions, and assured her with the promise that everything would be all right. In essence, God affirmed that Hagar, the servant of Sarai, was made for a future and an impact that would be greater than anything she could imagine. This divine encounter would make Hagar the first person in the Old Testament to give God a name: El Roi, meaning "the God who sees."

### *Life Application*

Hagar may not stand out on the top ten list of leaders in the Bible, but she was one of the first women

The call of God meets us in spite of where we've been, what we've done, and who we used to be.

who experienced what it meant to be called by God. As women accepting God's calling, we can identify with Hagar's wrestling with position, power, and even her obedience to do what may not have made sense at the time. Hagar embodies the feeling of isolation that can come with leadership, the feeling of despair that can come when we feel like our options are few, the desire to protect our children and those who have been entrusted to us, and even the sense of oppression that can come from being viewed by what we do and not by who we are. Her story is important to all women because through her, God reminds us that we are destined for so much more than we can see or imagine.

One of the first things Hagar's story teaches us is the fact that *God knows where we've been*. Sometimes, we struggle to accept God's calling because of the women we used to be. We can be paralyzed by the past and halted by our wounds, believing that these things disqualify us from serving God and God's people. We wonder whether God made an error and called us

by accident, mistaking us for a better and more holy version of ourselves. But Hagar reminds us that God knows everything about us and still chooses to call us by name. The call of God meets us in spite of where we've been, what we've done, and who we used to be. As women redeemed by God, we are reminded of God's all-sufficient grace that equips us for everything that lies ahead.

Hagar's story also teaches us that *God knows where we're going*. The angel told Hagar to return to her mistress, Sarai, because God was preparing to bless her in unimaginable ways. He said, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count" (Genesis 16:10 NIV). God not only knew where Hagar had been, but God also knew exactly where she needed to go. While it may not seem logical or desirable to return, God did not send her back empty-handed. Instead, God sent Hagar back equipped with a promise and a vision for life that extended beyond anything she could imagine.

It is so good to know that God calls us from where we've been to places and spaces much bigger than ourselves. While the future may look uncertain and the details may not be completely clear, we carry the assurance of knowing that God knows the trajectory of the call. God knows the people we need to see, the places we need to go, and the tools we need to get there. The best part is that what God has in store for those who heed the call is always greater than what we can imagine.

God knows where we've been, God knows where we're going, and Hagar's story also reminds us that *God knows what we need*. This truth from Hagar's story is essential to every woman's call. Hagar needed something important from God; she needed to see and know the One who called her. God met her deepest needs, allowing her to find new purpose and meaning for her life and for her child. Having accepted the words of the angel, Hagar returned to raise her son in the knowledge of who God called him to be: the one who was called would nurture the call of another. By God's grace, your calling can be the spark that

encourages someone else to accept their calling and live out their fullest potential in life.

Lastly, I believe that the story of Hagar also teaches us that in every calling, *God seeks to reveal more of God's self to us*. At the conclusion of this divine encounter, Hagar named God and declared, "I have now seen the One who sees me" (Genesis 16:13 NIV). Her calling positioned her to know God in a way that she had never known before.

You may not know it, but God has special treasures for those who bravely embrace the truth of God's calling. By saying "yes" to God, you are positioned to have a relationship with the Lord that exceeds what you have experienced in the past. Embracing God's call may not make you a millionaire or lead you to the center stage of life. However, scriptures remind us that those who are called to lead God's people are invited into a sacred relationship with God. They are given unique gifts and covered with an anointing that allows them to do whatever God calls them to do. From this, we understand that *God has so much in store for those who are called!*

As you consider your calling, take a few moments to respond to the following questions:

1. How do you know that God has called you?
2. What obstacles or questions come to your mind that you believe could disqualify you from embracing the call?
3. What principles from the story of Hagar resonate most with you?
4. What is God calling you to do in response to what you have read?

## Summary

While every call is different, there are similarities that draw all of us together. No matter who you are or where you've been, our scriptures affirm that God can use you. If you are called

or are wrestling with a call to serve in ministry leadership, you should know that you are not alone. God sends us community to affirm and clarify the specifics of the calling so that we will know the best fit for our gifts. You are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, both men and women, who boldly declare that your calling is not just about you, it is also about what God wants to do *through* you. You have accepted the calling to perform a unique work in the kingdom of God. You are anointed to serve people who will respond to God's voice through you. My sister, God has opened a door of opportunity and for now all you have to do is say "yes!" You were made for this!

*Lord, thank you for loving me enough to call me into greater service for You. Although I'm not certain of where the call will lead me, I am confident that as you were with Hagar, so you will be with me. Open my eyes to see you more clearly, my ears to hear your voice, and my arms to embrace all that you have in store for my life. Amen.*

## Better Stories

When we revisit the sacred myths of our various traditions, we can yet hear whispers of a deep virtue and even critique that belies the unfailing pro-us-and-our-way-of-life messages we most often take from them. We find persons responding to a call to move beyond personal comfort into a place that brings greater comfort to others. We see ordinary people questing for possibilities that won't exist unless that specific character brings them into being. And if we're astute, we realize such mythic heroism is still possible today. Though handed down for millennia, our faith stories are now ours to tell and live, and we can choose to tell them in new and living ways.

### **Man of the Century**

Reimagining our sacred myths is exactly what Martin Luther King Jr. was doing when, in response to a deeply religious white America that was by and large convinced that its treatment of Negroes honored their Christian faith stories, began to speak of a beloved community. King adopted the language from early twentieth-century philosopher/theologian Josiah Royce, who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation. The words *beloved community* do not appear in Christian sacred text, but King began to see it as the tangible communal and *political* end to what the stories of Christian scripture, particularly the stories of Jesus, intimated about living nonviolently.

The King Center website documents:

As early as 1956, Dr. King spoke of The Beloved Community as the end goal of nonviolent boycotts. As he said in a speech at a victory rally following the

announcement of a favorable U.S. Supreme Court Decision desegregating the seats on Montgomery's busses, "the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men."<sup>7</sup>

King's use of images like "beloved community" captured onlookers' imaginations and catapulted him onto a world stage. Who in their right minds wouldn't want to belong to the world about which King dreamed? I know when I heard it I wanted to. You mean to tell me that there is a way to be in the world that people of goodwill in all their glorious differences—the fifty-two-year-old Caucasian banker, the twenty-five-year-old indigenous entrepreneur, the seventeen-year-old transgender Asian American homeschooler, the thirty-three-year-old Latino immigrant soldier and I—could connect with each other and together rewrite the stories of oppression in the world? Sign me up!

King would later express, "[Beloved community is] the aftermath of nonviolence. . . so that when the battle's over, a new relationship comes into being between the [formerly] oppressed and the [former] oppressor."<sup>8</sup> "I do not think of political power as an end. Neither do I think of economic power as an end. They are ingredients in the objective that we seek.... That objective is a truly brotherly society, the creation of the beloved community."<sup>9</sup>

King began to tell a better story. In beloved community, the story of Adam and Eve is not a story of exclusion and bias, but rather of the radical inclusion of all God's good creation.<sup>10</sup> In beloved community, the story of Noah and his ark is not the story of God's destruction of sinners, but rather of God's saving grace to all creation.<sup>11</sup> In beloved community, the story of David and Goliath is not about God facilitating the triumph of a favorite few over all others, but instead about the historically marginalized and undervalued finding honor in society as well.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," speech given December 3, 1956, in Montgomery, Alabama, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>.

<sup>8</sup> Palm Sunday Sermon on Mohandas K. Gandhi, March 22, 1959.

<sup>9</sup> July 13, 1966 article in *The Christian Century* magazine.

<sup>10</sup> Check out my take on the Adam and Eve Saga—<http://findourselves.blogspot.com/search/label/Adam%20and%20Eve>.

<sup>11</sup> Hear my take on the Noah Saga—<http://findourselves.blogspot.com/search/label/Noah>.

**"Discrediting old myths without finding new ones to replace them erodes the basis for common action that once bound those who believed into a public body, capable of acting together."**

**~William H. McNeill, historian**

King was undoubtedly ahead of his time, and America despised him for it—first by killing him, then by trying to dismiss his genius, then going further by attempting to domesticate or misappropriate his legacy.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See chapter 8.

Vast numbers of people are waking up to the damage our lesser stories have done to the world and are seeking a script that makes beloved community possible. But you can't wake up to something nearly sixty years after the fact and expect nothing to have changed. Conditions on the ground and in our psyches aren't the same as they were in 1956. There are things we know now that we couldn't know then about our individual and collective selves—the systems and structures of empire in which we intra- and inter-relate, the histories of movements to transform those systems and the lengths to which supremacy will go to maintain itself within whatever iteration of the system comes into being. Beloved community can still be our chosen image of political justice, and sacred myths like David and Goliath can still inspire social change,<sup>13</sup> but our understanding of those metaphors and myths must expand.

<sup>13</sup> Check out Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> *Faith Forward*, ed. Dave Csinos and Melvin Bray (Kelowna, British Columbia: Wood Lake, 2013).

As I've noted in previous writing,<sup>14</sup> mythologist Joseph Campbell (the scholar whose ideas inspired the modern myth *Star Wars*) suggests that if our metaphors and myths are to continue to fulfill their vital functions as time passes, they must continually evolve. Metaphors and myths that haven't progressed simply do not address the realities of contemporary life. It's like looking at a very old map of where you currently live. The map may not have on it your home or half the places you go on a regular basis. The map isn't wrong per se, but it is not very useful in helping you orient yourself. Even if you were to recognize a landmark or two as you looked at the map, you'd have to constantly explain to yourself where that landmark is in relation to other places you know. "A mythological image that has to be explained to the brain is not working."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *The Hero's Journey: The World of Joseph Campbell*, 1987, David Kennard and Janelle Balnicke, directors..

<sup>16</sup> After modernity or after colonization. A way of being in the world different from, yet informed by, what came before it.

What is necessary to make a mythological image such as beloved community or Adam and Eve or Noah and the ark work for our post-modern/post-colonial<sup>16</sup> brains are not a mere updating of the imagery employed, which we often find in "contemporary churches," but also an acknowledgment, if only tacit, of what we know better since the image was first employed. All too often we try to use old images to justify or idealize "the way things were," ignoring that the "good ol' days" weren't so good for everyone.

Take, for example, the traditional imagery of the subservience of women to men. Whereas gender equity still may have been up for debate among civil rights leaders in the 1960s, we now know there's no room for inequality in beloved community. Failure to acknowledge this truth undermines one's credibility. To speak of "traditional family values" as those taught by the Bible in ancient times minimizes the damage done in the name of those values and flies in the face of all the progress that's been made since.

A look back into the biblical narrative will reveal stories wherein traditional values were subverted in favor of a beloved community that enfranchised everyone regardless of gender. The mythological image itself then becomes more recognizable to our post-colonial brains, and we have reason to be interested in what else the story may have to say. It's not that the world has no use for faith stories that challenge our predispositions; it simply has no use for faith stories that set us back.

Beloved community is a beautiful hope and an important corrective on the telos of our faith stories. But like many mythological images before it, beloved community (and all the tangible, affirmative tactics and vision associated with it) can also be co-opted, corrupted, or rendered useless over time. What is needed is not just better language that speaks of a more worthy end, but a better way to preserve and create new meaning on our journey toward that end.

Nature's way of doing this is called composting. As a part of the life cycle, the organic remnants of that which is no longer alive and vital is broken down into its constituent parts and used as nutrient for the next generative organism emerging. This is the way life continues: That Which Is gives its life to make way for That Which Is Becoming. The only organics that don't regenerate into nourishment for what is coming next are those that become petrified and serve only as windows into the past, rather than vital contributors to the present.

There are some stories, myths that do the same (e.g., the stoning of adulterous women in the Bible or speaking of communities of

"The Bible cannot go unchallenged in so far as the role it has played in legitimating the dehumanization of people of African [and other] ancestry in general and the sexual exploitation of women of African [and other] ancestry in particular. It cannot be understood as some universal, transcendent, timeless force to which world readers in the name of being pious and faithful followers must meekly submit. It must be understood as a politically and socially drenched text invested in ordering relations between people, legitimating some viewpoints, and delegitimizing other viewpoints."

~Renita Weems, womanist scholar

faith as if they were conquering armies). Joseph Campbell would often refer to these as “petrifacts.”

What if we discern other ways to tell faith stories—even those we’ve begun to tell through a beloved community lens—so that the specific interpretations, forms, and metaphors used don’t become calcified in our imaginations? Wouldn’t the world be better if each of us took the time to find better ways of holding our faith stories in it?

### **Psycho-Degradable Stories**

A masterful storyteller and friend Russell Rathbun once set out with me to see if we could identify the elements of stories that are life-giving to our imaginations for a time, yet easily “psycho-degrade” when they are no longer useful. We called them “stories that compost.”

We concluded that stories that COMPOST:

**Confess far more than they proscribe.** Have you ever noticed how much religion is about what will happen, should happen or is happening with people other than ourselves? It seems to me that proscriptions about others are far more likely to fester into petrifacts than our confessions about ourselves, because when we speak about ourselves we never want to leave the story at its low point. We are always anxious to tell the rest.

**Put Opposing forces in dynamic with each other.** There is a tendency in the telling of religious stories to reduce them to, “There was mess. God came. Whomever lived happily ever after. The end.” We know, however, that’s not the way life is. There’s a lot of doubt and loss and uncertainty with which we have to reckon—God or not. So why not tell stories full of the dialectical tension of life? Why make an idol out of our particular understanding of God—especially when theists know that an encounter with the true and living God seldom resolves tension; more often than not God’s interference heightens it.

**Have the Meekness to admit other interpretations—even in the midst of telling the story.** I’ve found that the best way to start to get at this is to begin to pepper one’s storytelling with phrases like “maybe,” “perhaps,” “on the other hand,” “as best I understand,” “as far as I can tell,” “one way of looking at it might be,” “the way the story has been handed down to us.” By moving

away from absolute proclamations, we make room for others to have something to say too.

**Pose questions more than answers.** Conceptually, faith (humble confidence) is more analogous to questions than to answers. Questions create relationship because they draw people into conversation, setting them on a journey together. Questions drive us toward people we may have never otherwise engaged. If we let them, questions move us away from antagonism to care for one another.

**Nurture Others-interestedness.** Have you ever wondered why the virtues lauded by most faith traditions are so very communal? Either they seek the good of others or foster an environment that can't wait to be shared. Even Christian imagery like "Fruit of the Spirit" calls to mind the fact that trees share their fruit; otherwise, the fruit spoils. This is what makes a faith story a story of faith: humble confidence in the mystery that though virtue costs our all, instead of diminishing us, fills our lives with an overflowing richness.

**Choose Susceptibility to harm.** Someone obviously thought they could improve on the Jesus story (the biblical narrative leading up to it and the narrative flowing from it) by recasting it as the grand and glorious triumph of good over evil. "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword. His truth is marching on!"<sup>17</sup> Whereas I get the need to rally the weary, there is nothing about the Jesus story that is this triumphal. It is a story fraught with vulnerability that subverts the triumphant; and that's where its power lies.

<sup>17</sup> Julia Howe, "Battle Hymn of the Republic," 1861.

**Treat Tradition as a living word—a bell that is ringing, not a bell that has rung.** A tradition cannot be alive and not change. So then, by their nature, COMPOSTable stories are filled with grace and resurrection—unafraid to converse (not engage in parallel monologuing) with that which heretofore had not been encountered.

Once we identified the types of stories that sustain life, we then wanted to discover if others also found it helpful to recount their sacred myths in this way. We took groups through a reading of a common scripture narrative with these six simple instructions:

1. Read the passage for what it says and doesn't say.
2. How have you traditionally heard this story told?
3. List three things you love about the passage as you are now reading it.
4. List three things that have bugged you about the story itself or the way the story is typically recounted.
5. Articulate three questions that come to mind when you think of this story.
6. Now, select one thing from each of the three preceding categories, and use them to reimagine the story keeping in mind the seven attributes of stories that COMPOST.

For the purpose of this book, which is to show how *reimagining our faith stories reshapes our way of being in the world*, I will add a seventh step: "What intuitions arise from our telling of the story that point us toward beloved community?" In each chapter I'll name what I smell. It's perfectly okay if you smell something totally different. The goal isn't unanimity; but rather, to tell stories that celebrate our current best intuitions until we develop better ones.

When told this way, our reimagined faith stories bear within themselves the seeds of their own deconstruction—that is to say they aren't told as if they are the one true and eternal interpretation. The credibility of usefulness within a specific context is sufficient, particularly if we are ready to admit that, even taking the most favorable view, we are simply doing the best we can with what we know at the moment. The essential part is that, instead of mistaking our interpretive intuitions for the virtues they help us imperfectly make sense of, we should insist the intuitions derived from our storytelling always affirm the virtues that gave rise to them (love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, meekness, self-control, courage, and so on). And when the imperfections of our intuitions become more pronounced than the beauty of the virtue they're supposed to teach us, let's give ourselves and others, especially our children, permission to reimagine anew.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Faith Forward*, ed. Dave Csinos and Melvin Bray (CopperHouse, 2013).

## **SPIRITUAL PRACTICES FOR RACE TALK**

As you continue long-term in the process of working against racial discrimination, I encourage you to consider practicing several spiritual practices. As a Christian, I grew up learning about traditional forms of spiritual practices, such as prayer and fasting. Some of the practices I discuss below may not sound as familiar to you from Christian history, but they can be found within the Christian tradition. These are the spiritual practices I want you to consider as you end your study of this book and respond to some of the concerns we have raised together: practices of caring for yourself through self-compassion, tending to cries

for justice through bearing witness, strengthening community through hospitality and dialogue, and incorporating a vision of reconciliation in the regular forms of worship and preaching.

### ***Self-Compassion***

Self-compassion focuses on the second half of Jesus' commandment to *love your neighbor as yourself*, insisting that we cannot love our neighbor if we do not love ourselves. Self-care is often emphasized in seminary training, since pastors often spend many hours of the week caring for others—sometimes to the neglect of their own health. I tend to think of self-care as including making sure I get enough sleep and eat well, exercise from time to time, and make sure I spend time engaging in hobbies that renew my energy. But self-compassion is a little more intentional.

The spiritual practice of self-compassion is something that I borrow from reading the work of Dr. Kristin Neff.<sup>1</sup> Neff is a psychologist at the University of Texas who has written on self-compassion both for the scholarly community and broader public. Neff's understanding of self-compassion includes three things: mindfulness of one's suffering, a sense of common humanity, and an expression of loving kindness.

The first aspect of self-compassion, mindfulness of one's suffering, is simply a way of talking about how we need to acknowledge our difficult feelings. Neff emphasizes the importance of being mindful of our own suffering, because we have a tendency to ignore or deny these feelings. By giving ourselves a moment to focus our attention on these feelings, much like you have been doing in earlier exercises in this book, you are becoming mindful of your suffering, even if you do not particularly experience your feelings as "suffering." That's okay. The important thing is you are paying attention to them, whatever your feelings are in the moment. From having led many groups talking about race and

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<sup>1</sup> For a full list of her scholarship and books for the broader public, see Kristin Neff's website: [self-compassion.org](http://self-compassion.org)

racism, I can tell you a lot of feelings come up for me, and it is important to take a minute and tell myself: "I see you. I see what you're going through."

The second element of self-compassion is a sense of shared humanity, which means you allow yourself to acknowledge you are not the only one going through this experience in this moment. Suffering can leave us feeling very isolated. Believing we are the only ones going through a situation can prevent us from accepting our experience and building relationships with others. After participating in diversity workshops, I notice my tendency to want to be alone, to avoid being around other people. Not realizing the suffering we experience together in our shared humanity can prevent us from building connections with those around us.

The third part of self-compassion is loving kindness, the ability to offer yourself understanding and a nonjudgmental attitude. For many white people talking about racism, it is hard to avoid judging ourselves when we recognize racist thoughts or beliefs. We can judge ourselves and try to shut down our awareness of what is going on inside us. Acknowledging that others are also going through this assures us we are on a journey others are traveling also. That our complicity in racism gives us pain is a sign that our suffering is part of the process of growth. Knowing we have not "arrived" can allow us to be patient with ourselves, to encourage ourselves along this long journey. We can accept our feelings and failings and remind ourselves that God still loves us.

What does this look like in practice? When leading a workshop during a conference held at Montreat in North Carolina, I led the participants through a guided imagery prayer to help them cultivate self-compassion. You can use the following script to guide yourself or a group of others in a time of practicing self-compassion.

The prayer began by asking persons to sit comfortably and close their eyes, taking in deep breaths. (I encourage you to practice

this as you read along.) After several moments of deep breaths, I invite each of them: "Imagine the healing balm of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, being poured down upon your head, dripping down from the top of your scalp to your shoulders, down your arms, to your hips and down both legs. This healing balm of Christ, the Holy Spirit, is a word of grace being poured over you. In this moment, allow yourself to acknowledge that what you are going through right now is hard. This is difficult. What you are experiencing right now is a kind of suffering. Name to yourself the feelings that you are carrying in this moment.

"At the same time, there are others who are also going through this same thing. Others perhaps in this room are also suffering in the same way that you are. There are others around the world who share in this suffering to varying degrees. Feel yourself connected to them. And as you continue to take deep breaths, feeling yourself connected to all others who are suffering, imagine now the loving arms of your Savior Jesus Christ being opened to you, with the scars in his hands still visible. Imagine these loving arms wrapping around you, embraced by the love of a Savior who continues to be with you as you suffer, who sees what you are going through right now. Imagine those arms extending to surround persons suffering across your community, nation, and world. See Jesus' arms covering all who experience the kinds of suffering we have been discussing.

"And as you imagine these loving arms wrapped around you and the whole world, let yourself exhale with gratitude for the love God has shown to you. With every breath, let out an audible or inaudible, 'Thank you.' [I take an audible deep breath] 'Thank you.' [deep breath] 'Thank you.' You express your gratitude to God, to your loving Savior Jesus Christ, saying, 'Thank you.' You give thanks for the healing balm of the Holy Spirit, flowing down over you: 'Thank you.' You give thanks for the stories that have been shared with you, the individuals who have opened their hearts by sharing their experiences with you: 'Thank you.' You give thanks for the challenge of these kinds of conversations,

the way they push us to think in new ways and to expand our network of concern, and call us to love our neighbor anew: 'Thank you.' We are thankful for the ways that our emotions respond to these stories and conversations, thankful that we can feel deeply: 'Thank you.' We give thanks for all of those who are working for racial justice, working to rebuild communities that remain divided; for these workers we say, 'Thank you.' We thank you, O God, for the ways that you work through us and in us, continuing to redeem us and calling us to share good news with the world. For all of this, we say, 'Thank you. Thank you.' [deep breath] 'Thank you.'"

At the end of the exercise, I invite the participants to remain in silence as they depart, carrying with them the thoughts and gratitude that they expressed through the guided prayer. I find this exercise helps many people attend to their emotions, to connect with God during a challenging time, and return to the world renewed with the confidence that God continues to work through them. This exercise helps me as well. I can feel my own anxiety lessen, my awareness of God's presence heighten, and my capacity to love myself and my neighbor deepen. Imagining Christ physically embracing us during the exercise helps us experience that love from God in a bodily way, beyond what we feel from simple verbal acknowledgment. We need to imagine ourselves physically embraced for our brains to send the message that we are indeed loved and cared for.

### ***Bearing Witness***

One of the other spiritual practices important for continuing the work of disarming racism is the practice of bearing witness. As with caring for the self, bearing witness also comes from the New Testament, specifically when Jesus instructs his disciples to go and be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Self-compassion and bearing witness are as old as the commandments of Jesus.

To bear witness means several things. First, it means you are aware of the experiences of others, and you have close enough

relationships to witness the things persons of color experience that whites do not. To witness something, you have to actually be there. And to be there, you have to be around people experiencing it. This means you need to consciously cultivate relationships with people different from yourself. If you live in a predominantly white neighborhood, it means intentionally making friends with the people on your block who do not look like everyone else. Get to know someone from a different country or background. Spend time with the families who have biracial children or transracial adoptees. Listen and learn from their experiences.

So the first thing about bearing witness requires proximity, being close enough to people who have experiences that are different from your own because of the color of their skin. This does *not* mean go and tell someone, "You can be my black friend!" But it does mean opening your eyes to the people of color you already come across in your life and finding ways to build relationships with them.

The second thing bearing witness means is you are *bearing* something. To learn about people's experiences involving racism or xenophobia, you are actually bearing their experiences with them. This doesn't mean you know exactly what they felt like when things happened, but it means in that moment you are recognizing the pain these experiences caused them, and you are not dismissing their experiences. To bear witness means to sincerely bear what they are telling you, not to suggest how their experiences could be reinterpreted. You are receiving them as they are told. You are honoring their sharing of these experiences with you.

And bearing also means you are feeling the impact on *you*. Pay attention to what feelings are being brought up in you. Intentionally bearing something means that we will feel its weight, and that can make us feel difficult feelings of our own. But to bear what has been shared, without becoming defensive or taking it personally, is to honor a moment of vulnerability and sharing.

Third, bearing witness means that you do not keep these incidents to yourself. When you see a black friend being pulled over by the police for no apparent reason, you serve as a real witness to this event, and you protest the action you see as unjust. You witness by telling others that racism is still a problem we need to be addressing across our society. You witness by trying to make a difference in your sphere of influence. Witness to the experiences of others, and share what you have witnessed with other groups of white people to say that racism is real, and by ignoring it we contribute to it.

What exactly are we witnessing to, besides painful experiences of discrimination against persons of color? There are other things we witness: we witness that society has changed, and yet still needs to transform. We witness the grace and power of God moving through groups of people who have been oppressed for generations. We witness the movement of God's Spirit calling on new leaders and generations of persons to take a stand on behalf of the most vulnerable. We witness the stirring of Christ's passion within us, calling us to become involved in some way. To all of these things, we are witnesses. To bear witness as a spiritual practice means to keep in mind these things while pursuing a life of justice. Taking time to give thanks to God for the many ways we can bear witness even now encourages us as we continue in our work.

### ***Hospitality***

Another spiritual practice we can engage in is hospitality. Hospitality can refer to a number of different actions—from the more concrete act of hosting someone in your home for a meal, to the more abstract act of welcoming another person into your heart. I think there is a rich spectrum of ways we can be hospitable toward one another.

In the sense of opening your heart to someone else, you are already doing that by reading this book. You are listening to the stories of others, people who may be different from yourself,

and you are attending to their experiences. Such attention is a form of care. Even if it is only through reading this book, you are practicing a form of hospitality.

Being hospitable to someone else may also mean intentionally joining in conversations with persons you know to be on the other side of an issue. For instance, if you vote Republican, you may be practicing hospitality by having coffee with a friend who votes Democrat. Allowing space for the other person to share his or her thoughts, is another form of hospitality.

Talking about race is complicated. As mentioned before, race intersects a number of other ways individuals experience their identity. Persons who are both racialized the same can have very different experiences based on their economic status and other factors. Persons from the same family can have widely different experiences of race based on personal attributes. Sometimes, two siblings coming together to talk can be a sign of mutual hospitality if past conversations have been difficult. Conversations across differences of any kind can take place only because of a certain degree of hospitality.

Hosting dinners with persons from different groups may be an excellent way to intentionally build community in your city. Churches can connect across racial lines and build bridges through shared meals. Individuals can offer hospitality to others, opening their homes to make way for deeper communion. A group I have been part of in Austin called the Red Bench hosts monthly dinner gatherings for persons to come together and talk about difficult topics.

Churches have known for a long time that eating together is a powerful thing. The Lord's Supper, the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples, we commemorate in worship every time we share the Eucharist. Church potlucks may be as old as the first-century Christian communities. Sharing a meal is not something new to Christians, but making an intentional effort to share a meal with persons from a different community or perspective may

be something out of the ordinary. Christians need to be able to build upon this familiar tradition of meal-sharing hospitality to build relationships with people who may be unfamiliar to them. Your church may already do something like this. Look into ways your church may already be hosting gatherings of people from diverse backgrounds under its roof or sponsoring such gatherings in other parts of your city or area.

### ***Spiritual Practices of Worship and Preaching***

This next set of practices may seem rather obvious: preaching and worship. You may be thinking, “Of course these are spiritual practices; why even talk about them?” I focus our attention on worship and preaching because these are the shared practices that the church engages in together on a weekly basis. This is where, together, you make up the body of Christ. And in worship we learn to listen for God’s voice, to confess our sins before God, and to commit ourselves to living lives responsive to the grace that God has shown us. But what, exactly, does that have to do with the conversations about race and racism that we’ve been having?

That’s a good question. You would not be alone in asking it. I was leading an afternoon workshop for a group of church leaders, both lay and clergy, who were sitting in a circle talking about the topic of diversity. Many people hear the word *diversity* and instantly interpret it as meaning “race.” So I began by listing the many ways diversity is present in congregations: age, sexual orientation, gender, race, worship style, background, nationality, politics. I then asked the participants what they thought a preacher should say about diversity. If they were to look at this list and think of what they would want to hear a preacher preach about regarding any of them, what would that be? One person spoke up: “They shouldn’t say anything. That’s not what I came for. Sunday morning, I come to hear a sermon preached from the Bible, and none of those issues you’ve listed are in the Bible.” *Are issues of diversity present in the Bible? Specifically, what does the Bible say about race?*

In some ways, it is anachronistic to suggest that biblical texts address race. Skin color as a category used to distinguish groups became systematized during the era of colonial expansion and the slave trade, at least a millennia after the latest writings in the Bible were penned. If white preachers relied only on the biblical text for guidance on what to preach about, they would never preach about race or racism, unless they chose to preach on the “slaves obey your masters” text, which most preachers typically avoid these days. The same could be said of other important issues that may not be named specifically in the Bible, and yet are topics preachers need to address in sermons. Additionally, avoiding preaching on race seems wrong when so much of the history of racism is connected to Christian practices of preaching.

Through much of the history of Christianity on the North American continent, Christians have largely been the source and proponents of racist ideology. When white Christians from Spain colonized the Americas, a racist understanding of humanity justified their treatment of indigenous people. When white Christians began baptizing enslaved Africans, they insisted that freedom in Christ did not make them free on earth. The history of the black church denominations in this country is one of segregation, through which white churches relegated black Christians to the balconies or did not allow them in at all. The Bible that we say is the word of God is the same Bible used by preachers to tell slaves to obey their masters. It is important that Christians respond to race *because of this history*. It is part of our heritage and we must address it. Worship and preaching provide us a great opportunity to engage these historical and lasting legacies.

Because racism is not just part of our history, but continues on today in the marches of white nationalists and more prevalent instances of discrimination and segregation, preachers and worship leaders need to name this sin in worship. Naming the problem of segregation and discrimination in our prayers of confession and prayers of the people can help remind us of our

need to be mindful of the continuing struggle. Having in our church leadership persons that represent different groups of people also sends a message to all present that we are all made in God's image, so any of us can lift our voices in service to the praise of God. There are a lot of great resources for worship that recognize the diversity of God's beautiful creation, drawing from non-white authors of hymns, praise songs and prayers.

For preaching, there are a number of scriptural themes and texts that support and generate sermons on this topic. From the earliest dysfunctional family in the Bible, with Cain killing his brother Abel, we see the trajectory of humanity at war with itself. Noah's "curse of Ham," in which he curses his son Ham, was used to justify slavery.<sup>2</sup> A preacher can draw from these texts ways to inform the congregation of the history of racism and the harmful ways Christianity has fueled it.

A story about the leading figure of the Abrahamic traditions—how Abraham took his slave Hagar to have a child, and then abandoned her at the command of his wife Sarah—is, too, a story about slavery.<sup>3</sup> Biblical scholars have made connections between this text and the ways enslaved African women were forced to be concubines to their white masters and were also left to die, their children never recognized as part of the master's family.

The Exodus narrative of God bringing the Israelites out of slavery is a story that connects with many persons of African descent whose ancestors escaped slavery in the United States.<sup>4</sup> The Psalms and the voices of the prophets call out for justice on behalf of the oppressed; these too call our attention to the oppressed who are among us today. These are just of a few of the many passages just in the Old Testament that can foster rich discussions and sermons that address the history and ongoing legacy of racism

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2 Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

3 Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993).

4 Eddie S. Glaude Jr. *Exodus! Religion, Race and Nation in Early Nineteenth Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

and remind us that our brothers and sisters continue to suffer. The New Testament is also a rich resource for such preaching, and early Christian literature shows African theologians reflecting on difference from the beginning of the church's history.<sup>5</sup>

The framework for preaching on race I teach to my students includes the three processes of recognizing racism, recognizing ourselves within the story, and recognizing gratitude for the grace of God. Recognizing racism involves opening our eyes to the ways the scripture text informs our understanding of the subtle ways sin continues to operate in and around us, particularly through insidious and slippery expressions of racism. Recognizing ourselves within the story means that the preacher needs to help white Christians understand how racism impacts them, how they are connected to their brothers and sisters who continue to experience racism, and how their own spiritual growth is stunted through the system of racism. Recognizing ourselves includes understanding the difficult emotions that may be brought up for us as white people unaccustomed to talking about our whiteness. Finally, recognizing gratitude for the grace of God means looking within the text for the signs of God's grace that remind us God is already at work in us, continuing to work for our redemption. Gratitude is the third of these three processes because it is gratitude for God's grace that motivates us to live and act differently, not the shame of our sin. I encourage my students as they preach on difficult issues such as racism to look for a way to end with gratitude, some sign of the promises of God.

I helped to plan a church conference in North Carolina. The conference title was "DisGRace," and the focus was on finding God's grace amidst the disgrace of racism. Over the course of the event, we wanted to have three services of worship, and our planning team decided to pattern our worship on the three days of Triduum: Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. Prior to the event, a liturgical artist wrote lists of names on

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<sup>5</sup> Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

long hanging banners that surrounded the sanctuary where we worshiped. The names were some of the many people of color whose lives have been lost because of hate and fear. Some of the names I recognized; many, I did not. At the end of the Good Friday service, members of the worshiping body brought down each banner and draped them onto the front table. It was a powerful statement, seeing the names of the dead laid out on the communion table, the place where we commemorate the sacrifice of Christ. We left the sanctuary in silence.

On the last day of the conference, we held a worship service that was themed with the message of Easter Sunday. As participants walked into the sanctuary, there in front—hanging high and brightly lit—were the names of the people; the banners that had been laid on the table, now lifted up. The message proclaimed that in our dying, we die with Christ. And as Christ lives and is raised from the dead, we too shall rise. This worship experience inspired me with hope that we can together mourn the injustice in our society, and we can pray for God's strength as we work. All those who have died as a result of injustice will not remain dead, but will rise with Christ, held forever by the love of the God who created each one by name. We *can* address these painful realities in our worship and preaching, and we must, to remind us all of the God who has called us together, to be one body.

#### ***Questions for Reflection and Discussion:***

After reading, listening to the stories of others, and attending to your own emotions, what feelings do you have? My hope is that you feel a deep sense of gratitude for the people in your life who have shared their own stories with you. I hope you are feeling grateful for what they have contributed to your own understanding. I hope you feel gratitude toward the God who loves you even though your mistakes and sins are completely known. I hope you feel grateful for the love that calls you to new acts of love.

I also hope you feel an urgency that this is a subject we need to continue to talk about, because the repercussions of centuries of slavery and later

forms of discrimination do not simply evaporate or age out. The legacy of racism is born anew and comes in new forms. I hope you are left feeling a sense of urgency to stay alert for the ways it re-emerges in your own context.

My hope is that, when you feel difficult feelings surrounding this topic, you will be able to notice what is going on inside of you and allow yourself those feelings without denying them or pushing them away.

I also hope you will share this book with people you know. Invite them to read it with you as you re-read it. Suggest that your small group at church or leadership team read it together. Or, find other books that talk about this subject in other ways. The goal is to stay aware and to continue to look for ways to engage with long-term efforts at racial justice.

If you are journaling while reading this book, I invite you to write down things you hope to do in the next year that keep you in this conversation. Is there a conference or an event you can attend? Is there an organization in your area you can join that's working on issues of justice with and for persons of color? Can you meet with the white people in your networks to talk about race? Can you put into practice some of the spiritual exercises talked about in this chapter? Can you work with people in your church to incorporate some of these ideas in worship? Take time to notice any experiences of gratitude you find along the way, and give thanks to God for the opportunities for new relationships.

## #staywoke

*“Arise, shine; for your light has come...”*

Isaiah 60:1a (NRSV)

In 1966, Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered a speech during a Universalist Unitarian General Assembly meeting titled “Don’t Sleep Through the Revolution.” Dr. King’s speech was a clarion call for the church to remain awake to the social injustices of the day, and join the Civil Rights Movement’s efforts to eradicate unjust racial and economic systems in the United States and around the globe. King gave this speech one year after “Bloody Sunday” occurred in Selma, Alabama, where peaceful protestors campaigning for voting rights for African Americans were met with violent opposition from police and civilians. The images from “Bloody Sunday,” coupled with Dr. King’s invitation, compelled hundreds of clergy from around the country to go to Selma and join the struggle for voting rights.

A contingent of clergy from St. Louis responded to the call. Cardinal Joseph Ritter, Archbishop of St. Louis, secured a chartered plane through the Archdiocese of St. Louis and led an interfaith group of 48 people to Selma. Sister Antona Ebo, a Franciscan Sister of Mary, was invited to join the group. She was the only African American woman on this trip, and in her recent visit to Ferguson, she compared some of the rhetoric related to the young activists in Ferguson to the accusations about Selma protestors in 1965, and draws on her faith tradition to frame what it means to do right in this instance. In a recent interview she said, “When the young blacks in Ferguson speak, they are rabble-rousers, and that’s what we were called when we went

to Selma. We were called rabble-rousers and dupes of the communists because (FBI director) J. Edgar Hoover was working so hard to prove that Martin Luther King was not a Christian but a communist. People who had put their trust in J. Edgar Hoover rather than J.C..—if only they would have put their trust in J.C., they would have been on the right side of this thing. It's the same kind of stuff that's happening now.”<sup>1</sup>

What is happening now is people are waking up to the realities of the racial disparities in the United States and their impact on black communities. For instance, the Mother 2 Mother events gained so much traction in St. Louis because so many white mothers were saying they had no idea so many black mothers' sons encountered such discrimination in schools, neighborhoods, and with the police. At each gathering, a white mother would inevitably ask, “So what can we do about this?” and earnestly desire concrete answers. There is not simply one answer, because this is a complex problem that requires a multifaceted solution. The conversation would often turn toward asking, “What circumstances are within your immediate control?” In other words, what kinds of actions can you take today to bring about racial justice in our country? Each time, white mothers were challenged to reflect on their own interactions with African Americans, and how often their children had meaningful interaction with them, such as going over to their homes and vice-versa. White mothers were also asked to think about the message sent to their children if they do not have any meaningful interactions with African Americans.

The goal is not to just be able to say, “I have black friends,” but to genuinely seek to be in relationship with people who are racially different in an attempt to move beyond stereotypes and build authentic community. In her book *The Journey Is Home*, Nelle Morton talks about the process of “hearing to speech” when we acknowledge people by giving them our full attention, and being willing to hear them speak their truth, in their way, and on their terms.<sup>2</sup> Hearing people to speech doesn’t only value the process of speaking, but the content of the message. We must first see people as valued human beings who are deserving of being heard, then making space for their voices to be heard, and be willing to contend with the truths that emerge.

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<sup>1</sup><http://stlouisreview.com/article/2014-10-15/sister-antona-ebo> accessed December 2, 2014.

<sup>2</sup>Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 202.

As the young activists have shown, they created space to hear each other to speech, even when others did not want to hear them. Their resolve and determination called forth the best out of the clergy and faith communities that supported them. During the prayer vigil after the two police officers were shot near the Ferguson police station, Osagyefo Sekou, a clergy activist who is a St. Louis native, offered one of the prayers that evening. His task was to pray for the young activists, and brought their plight into the center of the gathering.

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Loving God, we say, “Thank you for these young people who have come to the streets and who have reminded us of the rich tradition of which made this very gathering possible, for those young people who have been mocked and betrayed by every level of government, who have often been betrayed by the homes of which they have come from, but these young who demanded that the world place on its lips three simple words that are pregnant with the possibilities of American democracy, these young people who remind us that ‘black life matters.’”

And so, God, for them, we say, “Thank you.” For 200 some odd days, they have been demonized, and they have been mocked, and they have been called names. But, nevertheless, they stand up, and, when they stand up, the best of who we are stands up with them. And so, God, now, we pray that a hedge of protection might be around them and that their hearts might be filled with a deep, abiding love that hate will never have the last word, but that they might know that they are not—that they are loved and that they are cared for and that there are people around them who believe in them, O God.

For we have seen you in their faces, O God. We have seen you when they scream and they yell and they are angry. We have seen the very face of God in them. We have seen that God has tattoos on God’s face and that God sags God’s pants and that God loves us so much that God is willing to stand in front of tanks and tear gas and bear witness to a truth that they will not bow down. And so, for them, we pray, and we say, “Thank you, thank you, thank you for these young people who have made us all a little more courageous, who have made us all a little more angry, and who have made us all a little more considerate that we must do our work with a deep, abiding love.”

And, God, for those who languish in jails, we pray for them For those who have been hurt in anger, we pray for them—and, God, that they might know. So right now, we call you to account for your word. We say over them that they may be persecuted, but they are not forsaken—that they are fearfully and wonderfully made in the very workmanship of God.

That they might know that they are loved, O God; for, Lord, we know their prayer and their actions might be the salvation of this nation. All of this, we ask in your name. Amen.

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The racial disparities that the Ferguson events have laid bare are part of a complex system of injustice that requires a multifaceted approach to correct it. The stories in this book point to some of the “signposts,” as Diana Butler Bass calls them, that, if nurtured, can lead us along a pathway toward racial justice.<sup>3</sup> Although Bass is primarily talking about practices that congregations do to form them to join God’s work in the world, the clergy who have engaged in the movement for racial justice have actually *joined* God’s work in the world and created a new set of signposts that point us in the direction of racial justice.

Clergy practices of prayer created an awakening to the presence of God in unlikely places. The “altars” were moved out of the sanctuaries and onto the streets, where they challenged people to see, hear, and feel the presence of God in the midst of the protests. The chanting, marching, and locking arms often symbolized a resolute strength and power that challenged us to consider why black lives mattered to God, and why they should matter to us all. The struggle for human dignity is a deeply theological issue, for to be human is to be created in the image of God, and whenever one’s humanity is distorted or discounted, it is an affront to God. Clergy were right to call the struggle to be treated as fully human as the work of God, and they affirmed this truth each time they showed up at protests in their robes, stoles, and collars.

Clergy practices of risk-taking were present each time they risked their personal safety, emotional well-being, or financial stability. To lay one’s collar on the altar of justice is to take a tremendous risk, because it is not the popular or easy road to travel. Clergy bodies in the streets stood in solidarity with the aims of the movement, but they

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<sup>3</sup>Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (New York: Harper One, 2006), 11.

often served as buffers between the police and other protestors. Some were tear-gassed and others shot with rubber bullets, yet those safety risks were secondary to their commitment to the fight for racial justice. The emotional risk of losing friends and acquaintances because they (the ministers) were no longer seen as “respectable” standing alongside the protestors did not cause them to waiver. And the financial risk of angering congregants who expressed their anger by threatening to withhold donations and recommend they be fired were part of some of the clergy’s lived experiences.

Clergy practices of creating safe sanctuary took on new meaning and opportunity. Many denominations have “safe sanctuary”-type policies that congregations are expected to adhere to in order to ensure the safety and well-being of children and youth. While those policies are needed and important, the clergy in this movement expanded our collective imagination about the ways in which our sanctuaries can become safe havens for the movement for racial justice. They opened their doors for meetings and consultations. They offered their kitchens for meal prep and service. They provided cots and cups of water for wayfaring travelers. Their sanctuaries were safe for all people—regardless of age, race, ability, or sexual orientation. Few had to worry about being made to feel unwelcome because they didn’t fit a prescribed image of a “respectable” person. These sanctuaries were havens of physical and emotional safety.

The clergy’s practice of “letting go” enabled them to step aside so there could be room for young leaders to step up front. Many clergy are accustomed to taking charge and leading the way for others to follow. In this movement, leadership took on a different form that made room for “the first to be last” and “the last to be first.” Often the clergy would follow the lead of the young people by listening to them, offering advice when warranted, and giving them space to find their own voices. They supported, affirmed, and prayed for the young activists. They apologized for the way many faith communities have not been havens or refuges for them in the past. They let go of being in charge and acquiesced to what they understood God to be doing in their midst through others.

These practices of prayer, risk-taking, creating safe sanctuary, and letting go were emblematic of the clergy engagement in this movement for racial justice. These “street signposts” are the kinds of activities that could be regularly witnessed for any who cared to see. They point us toward the embodiment of being God’s love in the world, and challenge us to consider making them part of our own faith practice.

The “street signposts” also challenge us to consider the opportunities for faith communities in the wake of Ferguson—to join the quest for racial justice around the country. As previously mentioned, Ferguson is merely one example of the racial injustice that is present in cities and towns around the United States, not an anomaly. This is a moral injustice, and faith communities are still being called upon to frame it as such. Now that we have been awakened to these injustices, there are at least three things we must do to #staywoke in order to be able to demand systemic changes that promote the fair and equitable treatment of black people. We must awaken to the awareness of our own privilege, build relationships in our own communities, and connect this awareness and the corresponding action in order to effect change for a more racially just world.

Awakening to white privilege, or benefits bestowed upon white people that non-white people do not receive, is crucial to the cause for racial justice. Cultural critic and educator Tim Wise makes the case for why people must be awakened to white privilege. He writes, “Being a member of the majority, the dominant group, allows one to ignore how race shapes one’s life. For those of us called white, whiteness simply is. Whiteness becomes, for us, the unspoken, interrogated norm, taken for granted, much as water can be taken for granted by a fish.”<sup>4</sup> The realities of white privilege can be as difficult to see as the air we breathe. Our cultural and social norms are shaped by it, yet mostly those who do not readily benefit from it see its prevalence in our society.

It is unlikely for a white person to be racially profiled. Even though “whiteness” is a race, it is rarely characterized as such, while “blackness” is readily deemed a race and too often evokes suspicion and distrust. African Americans have long been subject to unwarranted traffic stops. “Driving while black” is a reason that many have come to give for the disproportionate number of black people who are stopped by police. According to the Missouri Attorney General’s 2013 report, black drivers were 66 percent more likely to be stopped by the police than other drivers.<sup>5</sup> This is merely one example out of many of the ways black people are assumed to be suspicious simply because they are black.

It is no wonder the #usemeinstead social media campaign emerged in January 2015 after the discovery of a Florida police department’s

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<sup>4</sup>Tim Wise, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (Berkeley, Calif.: Soft Skull Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>5</sup>[http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/new-stats-but-same-trend-on-missouri-traffic-stops/article\\_77bec173-fbf3-563e-bd73-16538701d5bd.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/new-stats-but-same-trend-on-missouri-traffic-stops/article_77bec173-fbf3-563e-bd73-16538701d5bd.html) accessed January 15, 2015.

use of black men's mugshots for target practice.<sup>6</sup> A group of Lutheran clergy decided to submit photos of themselves to the police department for target practice use, and the movement spread to include clergy of many denominations. These mostly white clergy challenged the police department to use their pictures, in clergy garb, for target practice instead of black men. If shooting the pictures of black men was an acceptable practice, they believed using their pictures should be acceptable as well. And if not, why not?

"Whiteness" also allows most white people to not immediately be deemed out of place, or not belonging in the everyday places they visit. A few years ago our family lived in Webster Groves, Missouri, which is a relatively affluent suburb of St. Louis. It is chock full of beautiful homes, tree-lined streets, and quaint shops and restaurants. One sunny day, my husband and I decided to put our kids in their wagon and walk to the local ice cream parlor. On the way back home, we walked past a restaurant whose outdoor seating was full of patrons. All of the sudden we heard, "Well, that's a *strange* sight!" *Strange*? There are three primary modes of transportation in this town: cars, bikes, and wagons. What is *strange* about a father pulling his kids in a wagon in Webster Groves? I see it all the time. Surely this was about more than a father pulling his kids in a wagon. Although my example cannot be compared to the instances of racial profiling that have led to the emotional and physical torture of the victim, it does point to the more subtle ways that racial bias can emerge in an ordinary situation.

Recognizing white privilege is a step toward using it as a resource to bring about a more just and equitable world. Julie Taylor, a Unitarian Universalist community minister and active participant in the protest movement, reflects on her own understanding of white privilege, and how faith communities should be places of its deconstruction.

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What are you doing to dismantle that systemic racism where you are? Where that means, as white people, we have to give up the comfort and the privilege that we have. And so, where's the work around knowing that we have privilege and being willing to give it up? No matter what our race, we are all embedded in white supremacy and white privilege in this country because

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/01/25/florida-police-used-mugshots-of-black-men-for-target-practice-clergy-responded-usemeinstead/> accessed January 29, 2015.

it is the air that we breathe. And so, noticing that is the first piece, and acknowledging that is the truth is the first step—and understanding it may not be personally about you. For example, when white people say “Well, I had it hard growing up, so I don’t have white privilege. I had to work for everything I had.” That conversation, I’m tired of having, but it’s the one that has to keep happening, I think, for white people to get it.

I did not have it easy coming up. We were a missionary family. Of the money my parents raised for the mission board, they were allowed to keep \$485 a month. That’s what we lived on from 1970 until 1980. We didn’t grow up with much of anything, but I still have white privilege.

I think congregations may need to be a place—if we can get enough leaders, whether it’s clergy leaders or lay leaders—that can start figuring out for themselves how to unpack those pieces of how white privilege works in our society. Congregations and faith communities are meant for and typically work as such great places of healing. Maybe we need to start changing the language. Instead of “dismantling the systems” of racism and white privilege, maybe we’ve got to talk about “healing the systems.” Maybe that’s what it is for people of faith who keep struggling with this idea... See how we can heal it, because it is not healthy, the way we live. The healing must happen on a deeper level. The systems are a by-product of the illness of racism and classism, not the cause of it. Sometimes healing requires taking apart, uprooting, dislodging, dismantling the unhealthy elements. So the more I think about it, the more I want to be clear that I think racism and classism are the pieces that must be healed, and those are individual and internal, before any healing of a structure can take place. If we dismantle the systems without doing the work of healing, we will create new dysfunctional and oppressive structures.

I wish I had an answer about how to make this happen. For me, I have to start my healing with awareness and willingness to live in discomfort due to my complicity in white supremacy and privilege. Now that I’m “woke” to this, I can’t keep it to myself. I am compelled to point to it, preach about it, talk to people about it, talk to white people. Essentially, be a race traitor. And since I am a parent, I need to embody and model this so my

children will internalize it. I would love to think I can change the world, but it may be that I really only have the ability to change my house. Otherwise I need to be a follower in this Movement.

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In St. Louis, organizations such as Metropolitan Congregations United (MCU), an interdenominational organization of religious congregations, work with local faith communities to help improve the quality of life on a local, regional, and state level. David Gerth, the Executive Director of MCU, describes the focus of their work and how it has evolved over the past few years.

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We're ecumenical and interfaith based in the city and the county. We've been around for almost 25 years now, and the reason that we were founded was because congregations in neighborhoods that were changing recognized that they wanted to have an impact on what was happening in their neighborhoods. And this was still at a point where congregations were more and more commuter, but there was still a sense of connection to the neighborhood. And, over these 20 plus years, we've grown as we've recognized that fighting social justice issues at the neighborhood level leads you to look at what's going on in the ward or in the city and, ultimately, in the region, the state, and the nation.

And so we have gone through evolutions where we have spent a lot more time on regional and state issues than on neighborhood issues, and there's always been a tension for us about that. And it's been an acute tension for the last couple of years because, when you work on broad issues, sometimes people have a hard time figuring out, well, "What's in it for me?" This issue is very, very powerful from an organizing perspective because many of us see this as down the street, on my corner level of an issue that has regional and state and federal implications.

So the issues that we work on emerge from what is most important to our member congregations and, to some extent, to the partner organizations that we ally ourselves with. Sometimes, we're influenced by those ally relationships, too, but it's basically what's important to our folks. And what's historically been important to our folks is equity—economic equity has always been right at the center, along with racial equity and how that

plays out in what people call the social determinants of health.

Our national network, Gamaliel, had always had this clear focus on economic and racial equity. Also, it had a couple of internal crisis points over the years. Maybe about 10 years ago we had a major kind of moment of reflection about how our own internal racism was impacting our work. And so there was some very sophisticated strategic planning done that changed the way we organized the body, the way we govern and so forth. And, about two years ago, people started saying that, in this phase of this current strategic plan, it was time to come back and actually really focus on race and racism.

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A second point for faith communities considering joining the movement for racial justice is to build relationships in their own communities, especially with young people. David Gerth reflects on the way some of the clergy relationships formed with the young activists.

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The first night on the street, Alexis and Brittany, after they stopped chanting, they were sitting in the street, and then they were just like any ordinary twenty-somethings. They were thanking everybody and hugging people and saying, “We were just standing behind you.” We’re like, “You’re the ones that were doing the work.” But it meant something to them that we were there and we could start to see—and that just escalated. The more we did together and the more that we were backing them up, the more that there was an opportunity for us not to be the ones with all the answers but to be in actual relationship, at least to get closer to where we’re actually having a relationship rather than figuring either that the old people are clueless or the young people are clueless, which is kind of how I think we all approached it at the beginning.

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Being a caring and considerate presence can help build trust and form community. Derrick Robinson, pastor of Kingdom Dominion Church, immediately connected with young people in the early days of the movement, and discusses how he cultivated those relationships to help build community.

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When we were at the Ferguson police station the day after Mike was killed, I went over to share with the young people, to kind of encourage and just let them know we're here to support, that we're all in this together. I had on my collar that day and the trust was not there. It was like, we don't want to listen to you. We don't want you to be around us. We don't want you to even speak to us. All you all want to come and force your Jesus on us. We've had that Jesus.

So I said, "Let me show you. Let me show you how Jesus can be. Let me show you how Jesus was among the people. Let me show you how Jesus walked from judgment hall to judgment hall. Let me show you how Jesus exemplified being a leader in front of the people."

That's what really thrust me into getting involved, and that was really my view as it relates to being a pastor in the community. I think you've got to be able to be among the people. After that, I felt compelled. I felt young people wanting to fight. I felt young people wanting to have a voice. I felt young people wanting to make a stand. I felt my role would be more of an assistant to them, more of a mentor to them, and, even some, I'm more of a father to them. There are many sons that I've come out of this movement with, many who call me "Dad." It was one of the things that I knew the assignment that God told me to go to...was to the boys on the street, boys who don't listen to our typical church "riddles." I felt that I needed to tap into them, and that's what I felt my assignment was—to be more of a mentor to them.

One of my closest mentees hated me in the beginning. He was like, "I don't talk to no preachers." He said, "I don't deal with preachers." And I went back to him the next couple of hours, and I talked to him. I started sharing things with him, just about the community and just about life in general, just building conversation.

And as I built conversation I think that's how I was able to eventually make the change—but also by becoming "proven" by the young people. When they...tested you, and they found you

consistent or they found that your word became who you are, they found that something you've done for them, not financially but just being there for them. They found you consistent, and that's what builds trust in the community, and that's how I was able to build trust in the community.

We started to take some out to eat. We would take some to a place called Blank Space in St. Louis where they would do poetry, listen to music. Just kind of sit there, let them mellow out. I wanted to make them feel comfortable. So we'd just take them to the mall, kind of walk around with them.

And I think that's what the church's focus has to be. How can we make a community impact? How can we change the lives of the young people that stay three miles from our church, or around the corner? Everybody in that two miles should know who the pastors are. I think it's very crucial because when people know that it's just not a building there, but things are actually happening within the community, the church will begin to emerge in the community as a leader. And I think, also, the church has to make sure that we get back to our number one focus. That's changing lives. If we don't change lives, then we don't need to exist.

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Dietra Baker, pastor of Liberation Christian Church (DOC) presses the importance of fostering relationships within one's own communities.

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I think a lot of us, at heart, we want to do something. We're always talking about something, but something about this movement forced us to be the hands and feet for the Christians and Jesus, forces to be incarnate in ways that we were struggling to get to. And I think that the incarnation will help us move back into areas really of long-term work where we're gifted differently and need to continue to move the work forward together.

[This movement] also changed our relationships with each other in generally a good way. The clergy in the city have never been as close as they are now. I'm glad that I had a little bit of a part of that. We have some relationships that we didn't have before,

which we should have. I mean, it's pretty central to our faith, but we didn't have them, and we could tell when we tried to start doing stuff together that we didn't know each other and that we didn't have relationships with each other. We didn't know each other as deeply as we needed to to be able to do what God was calling us to do.

The most heartbreak thing early on and even in these crisis points during the indictment decision time—it was really obviously the churches that were in Ferguson, a lot of them weren't connected to the community. I didn't hop up and say to Liberation, "Let's go build community with people in Ferguson." I said to Liberation, "We need to be on deck here in our neighborhood." It's a signpost to the rest of us. How deep are your relationships with people in the neighborhood?

If something goes off in the neighborhood, is somebody going to come to Liberation and say, "I know that church. I know that pastor. I know those people. They care."? And we're the church that says we're going to liberate lives and liberate communities, so we need to walk the walk. So that was a wakeup call, that we didn't really have the deep kind of relationships with the community—besides trying to save people or evangelize people. We didn't have the respect or the trust or the honor because, when you do right in the community, there's an honor there. There's a respect there. There's a knowing there. There's a trust there. We'll come to you, and we'll partner with you, and we'll be with you in certain situations.

And so there was a period where we really had to say [to the young people], "Hey, we messed up. We haven't built the kind of relationships that we should have been building with you, and let's build them and keep moving forward." And then, my call to liberators and to other clergy is, "Make sure you don't miss this lesson. Go build in your community. Make sure the neighbors in your community know you."

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A final reflection on the ways in which faith communities can join the quest for racial justice is to remain awake, and connect these learnings to the systemic issues and utilize them to effect change. Christopher

Potter, an Episcopal Service Corp intern from Massachusetts, reflects on the kind of tension he experienced that could only be resolved by getting engaged in the movement for racial justice.

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The kingdom of God is not a white kingdom,...nor is it a colorblind kingdom. I believe that God's vision for us, as individuals, is for us to reach our fullest potential and be able to grow into our full selves and not be misshapen by evil or oppression. And so, for us, as ministers—clergy and laypeople, we're all ministers—we have to actively break down systems that prevent people from reaching their full humanity in all aspects for...if a black person is being oppressed, they're not able to fully express all aspects of their identity. People should be able to grow into whatever identity they have. That's when we'll really start seeing the kingdom exist on earth.

The thing that struck me about the first action, the prayer on the sidewalk, was the raw emotion of the black teens who were there. It had already been like a month or two, and they were, like, chanting until they were hoarse like it had happened yesterday. And that created a lot of tension for me because when people are striving for dignity and safety, you can't really stay neutral. If you don't do anything to help, you're essentially against them. So a lot of tension like that could only be resolved by supporting them in some way in having their rights...met: to do nothing was not an option.

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Martin Geiger, another Episcopal Service Corp intern from Illinois, connects his learnings to his broader sense of calling and vocation that is rooted in the church and gives expression through tangible acts of love, justice, and mercy.

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So I think one of the things that's really central to the work of the church is reconciliation and, specifically, like, the drawing and healing of communities that have been fractured by power and the ways it's misused. One of the things that became really clear to me through being in Ferguson and living here and hearing these stories is that police violence is really real, and it's a key

weapon that gets used on behalf of power to keep itself in power, to close communities off.

So I grew up and went to school in university towns where that was not necessarily as obvious, but I think it was very much present. I was just kind of shielded from it because I was one of the people being protected by that [police] violence. So stepping into the street and realizing, like, “Oh, this is like we’ve given this particular group of people this incredible power of violence and we justified it through the state,” just felt so immediately wrong, like such a huge barrier to real reconciliation in the community happening. I don’t see how the church can do its work without making an effort to change a system of violence. I mean, I think that’s what Christ’s atonement is all about, certainly,...that resistance to systems of violence.

One of the things that I’ve been working out while I’ve been here is what feels, at the moment, at least, like a call to the priesthood. So I’ve been starting to think through that process. And one of the things that being present in Ferguson and seeing how a lot of local clergy were involved in the work there made clear to me was that work in the church as a priest could be an act of resistance, that it wasn’t—that I didn’t have—that it wasn’t just like signing onto this nice like country club and helping people, which I think it’s really easy to fall into a vision of the church where the church exists primarily to uphold the status quo.

And the church has fallen into that a lot, especially perhaps the Episcopal Church. But I think watching priests and clergy from all sorts of traditions get involved and get into the streets and really, explicitly use their privilege, as members of the clergy, to protect others, like, I think has been really powerful and really inspiring and helped me really reshape what I think, like, ordination is capable of doing for people, so I’m in. The fact that it was so explicit that protestors would say, “Okay, we want clergy here because that restrains the police,” like, I was realizing, “Oh, wait, like, there’s really good things you can do with the privilege of wearing the collar.”

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Rebecca Ragland, pastor of The Episcopal Church of the Holy Communion, makes explicit the role of the church in staying awake, and the ways our connections extend beyond the local faith community and into the wider world to connect with others on the same road toward justice.

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We, as the church, we all are committed to the common cause of justice and so we are seeing where each person's "giftings" are and their capacities and so we're naming those and making sure they're brought forth and aware of each other's incapacities and weaknesses and the deep need that we all have for each other.

For example, "Momma Cat" had a dinner for us at Christmastime. All the protestors were there. Momma Cat is a woman who is unbelievable. She has been at the protests faithfully since the day after Mike Brown died. She is a 4.0 culinary school person. She's just graduating this month and so she can cook like nobody's business and make cakes that are just gorgeous. She would go home and cook meals for the protestors and come out and feed them, faithfully feed them. And not just feed them macaroni and cheese out of a box. I mean seriously feed them. She is a beautiful person. And she has been so faithful and so committed and she identifies the needs of who can do what. There's just really this sense of "who does what" in this community.

I know maybe 40 or 50 people who I really genuinely care about and want to see on a regular basis. I didn't know any of them in August, and now, I know all these people and I'm in community with them. And there was this sense of, like, "Wow, that's church growth." So how to kind of capture that sense of common working together, identifying each other's giftedness and the power of persecution to grow community is something I had never seen before.

What I've learned from this experience and I'm continuing to learn is that clergy have to heed the call to stay awake. It's so easy in this vocation to be so busy that you get into the drone of beating your wings and getting the honey, or however you want to think about the metaphor of work of being a pastor, that you can forget to stay awake to the wider issues that you're truly called to. And staying awake is also critically important for us

in our communities because we need to open our eyes and see the systems and keep aware, so that we can raise up leadership.

I am just more and more deeply aware of how I've been asleep—asleep to how the decisions and apathy in this moment are going to critically affect next year and the decade ahead because we're not raising up leaders in our church who are going to run for election and so we're just going to get fed who our leaders are going to be. We don't have to do that, and we aren't awake to the legislation. We're not awake to all of these ways in which decisions are made. And I realize there's a separation of church and state, but we are embodiments of the culture around us. And if we are asleep, we aren't able to participate and embody the change that we want to see. I think that's a critical thing both for pastors and for people in the church.

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Karen Anderson, pastor of Ward Chapel AME Church, reflects on the ways in which she implored her congregation to remain awake and connect with what is happening in the community.

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I think this was also a time when sermons changed a bit. I think that I've always preached with a view towards liberation and history, but I think they changed a bit because I felt a greater need to talk about the oneness of the community and the fact that this was an issue that affected all of us, whether we were directly involved or not, and trying to show the connection to the community that we have because I think, sometimes, when we don't live in a situation and it does not affect us, we become desensitized to the violence around us. I think I felt a push to make us aware of the violence around us; and to talk about it and to preach about it, but to preach about it from the standpoint of restoration, to speak about it from the standpoint of liberation, to speak about it from the standpoint of "Ubuntu," the African proverb that says "I am because we are." We're in this thing together and...we have to have a voice;...the church can't be silent anymore.

I think...another connection was I also talked again about the history of our church and that the history of the church was born from protests—that it was a protest against the inability

to worship freely, and that, if it had not been for the courage of people to protest, the AME Church would not exist and so we're called to speak against things that hold us in oppression. And I felt a need to do that, too, because the congregation began to realize that I was involved, and they were concerned for my safety. And so I had to speak to them about why I was there.

I told them I was there because I felt called to be there and that I felt that that's a part of the gospel I believe, that I have to be present, that it's not enough for me to sit in the church and talk about what needs to happen, that I have to take an active role in what is happening.

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"Taking an active role in what is happening" was a primary theme from all of the clergy who engaged in this movement. The vision of a future filled with hope is clearly demonstrated by the clergy, but young activists first brought it to light. They are the people who held the line, claimed the streets as their own, and demanded to be treated as full human beings. These young activists are the ones whose righteous indignation often inspired the clergy to support these efforts, and awakened the spirit of possibility that challenged our prescribed notions of community and drew the circle wide to model a community that is emblematic of God's love and grace.

As faith communities, the ball is in our court. Will we wake up and #staywoke, or will we fall prey to sleeping through this revolution? Do we join this modeling of community whose base is wide enough to genuinely welcome all people regardless of race, social class, gender, age, differing abilities, sexuality, and religion? ? Or do we hold onto prescribed notions that box us into a corner and only allow us to play ball with people with whom we feel most comfortable? Are we willing to risk being uncomfortable in order to excavate the roots of prejudice in our hearts and minds so that we can truly build beloved community? Do we take seriously the need to clean off and refocus the lenses through which we see black people so all people can be seen as full human beings who are created in the image of God?

The fight for racial justice emerges out of the fight for human dignity. If there is any group of people who should be compelled to join this fight, it is the people who call themselves "children of God." Staying awake to the injustices that have been revealed through the Ferguson-related events is a critical task for communities of faith. Our

connectedness to our brothers and sisters is rooted in our connectedness to God, for we are all God's children. And, in the words of the Civil Rights freedom fighter Ella Baker:

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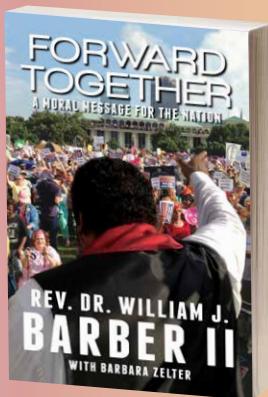
Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a white mother's son—we who believe in freedom cannot rest until this happens.

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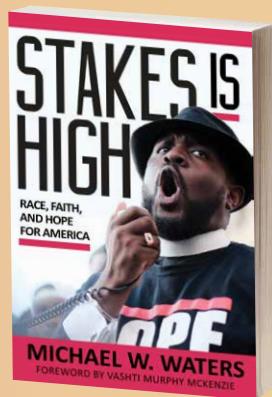
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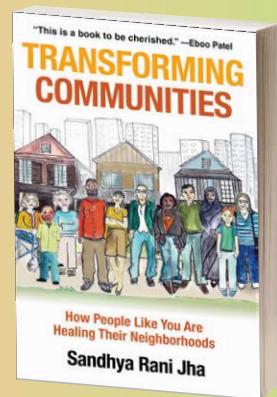
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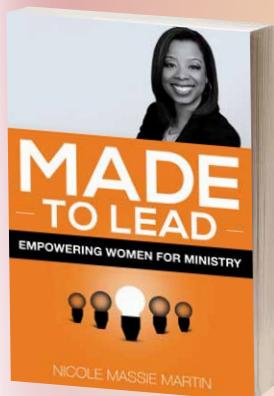
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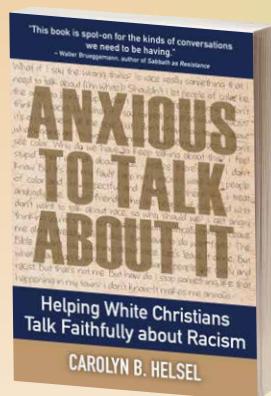
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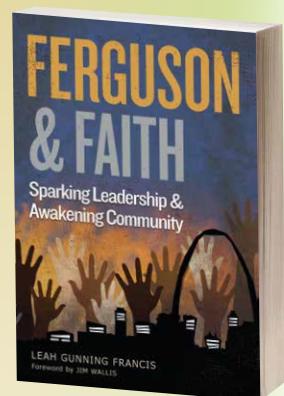
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