



## REWIRING

*Bishop Jennifer Brooke-Davidson*

In the house that is the Diocese of Virginia, we know that we have a solid foundation, and we know that as long as we remain firmly tied to the rock that is God in Christ Jesus, we're on firm footing. If we remain grounded in Christ, anything that is amiss can be fixed, updated, removed, or renovated.

We can take our time with some things, budgeting time and money as we go. Other things that turn up in our house inspection require immediate action, like it or not, because they pose a clear threat to the safety and soundness of structure. Everything may look just fine, but some hidden issues can be lethal. One of those issues is wiring.

When I was young, we lived in a small house with a laundry "room" in the back of the detached garage. The dryer would shock my mother when she turned it on, so she called an electrician to fix it. He went into the garage, poked around a bit, and came out ashen-faced. "Lady," he said, "lock the door to that garage and never, ever go in there again." Then he ran for his life.

Power is a necessary thing. It makes things run. Not enough, and the systems don't work. Too much, and things blow out. Sent in the wrong direction, or uncontained, it is lethal. It can start fires; it can shock; it can even kill. And the challenging thing, in old houses, is that the kind of wiring that was the latest technology for our ancestors -- cloth-covered wire, aluminum wire, unprotected outlets in kitchens and bathrooms -- the old ways of understanding and directing power are now known to be deadly dangerous. So we pull the old wiring, and we re-wire. We don't just say: Well, the lights come on, and so far nobody I know has been harmed here; no need to change. People who have lived with obsolete wiring have been electrocuted. Houses wired that way have burned to the ground.

And our house has a particular wiring problem: the long legacy of racism and slavery. It's an issue that goes far beyond any conscious desire of white people to discriminate against people of color (which I fervently hope is not true of anyone

in the Church -- and when our work is done, anyone else). It's not enough to believe that we are not prejudiced against individuals. Our call is much broader than that, because the habits and systems and images and cultural disconnects that went into constructing systemic racism are wired into every aspect of our common life, whether we are consciously aware of it or not. The bad wiring is a spiritual issue, not a political issue, because we are called and commanded by God to love our neighbors, ALL our neighbors, as ourselves. We can't do that -- I'm speaking here to other white people -- unless and until we come to a deep understanding of what life is like, still, today, for our Black siblings and other people of color.

To understand where we are now, we first have to unravel our views of history to include the perspectives and experiences of all the people who were part of it. To choose not to look, to choose not to see the whole picture, is to refuse both to see the present and to see ourselves. Once we see, we are able -- rather, compelled -- to change the present, and the future.

I have learned so much as I have immersed myself in the complex web of life that is Virginia. Since the public murders last year of George Floyd and Brionna Taylor (among uncounted others), I have spent many hours reading, participating in conversations like my bishops' Sacred Ground group, and working alongside and learning from Black colleagues who were gracious and generous in schooling me on much that I had somehow managed not to see. It is frustrating, and sometimes embarrassing, to face my own ignorance and blindness, but it is also life-giving and soul-healing. I still have a long way to go, taking in so much injustice, so much trauma, so much despair, so much resilience, so much courage, and so much hope. It's just so much -- and it's the tip of an iceberg others have lived with for centuries.

I have come to understand how inadequate, and how misleading, much of my (fine and expensive) education was. The history that white people have received was written by white people, and it is woefully, sinfully incomplete. This is not necessarily always a result of intentional bias in the writers; it is sometimes a function of historiography going back to Thucydides in the fifth century BC. (On this subject, I commend to you *The Ever-Changing Past* by James Banner). We who are part of the dominant culture have a lot to learn from Black (and other) chroniclers of the ideas and events that have made us all who we are, for better or worse.

In Virginia, this has particular and powerful import. The concept of race -- that people coming from different continents with different appearances are somehow fundamentally different, with some groups inherently superior or inferior -- that notion was first codified in Virginia. Human enslavement was not invented here, but racially based, lifelong, hereditary enslavement was wired into the social, legal, and economic fabric here in a new and devastating way. (For the documented details, see *In the Matter of Color* by Leo Higginbotham.) Virginia was not alone in this evil, but we were front and center. The most casual and callous observer knows that the impact of racist slavery on Black life did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation of the 1860s, or the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The horrors of Jim Crow, lynching, peonage, segregation, redlining, and mass incarceration have left us, especially our Black citizens, with deep, unhealed scars.

The reality is that all of these things were wired not just into the body politic, but into the Church in Virginia. Bishops, clergy, and congregations held enslaved persons. By our own diocesan count, 82% of Episcopal clergy in Virginia were slaveholders at the beginning of the Civil War<sup>[i]</sup>. Many congregations held “glebes,” land that was worked by enslaved labor. It’s a fair assumption that all the churches built before the Civil War were built, entirely or in large part, by enslaved labor. Long after the war, congregations remained segregated. Our histories are not fully known or understood, and the effects of the behaviors of our spiritual (and sometimes literal) ancestors on our collective soul remain to be surfaced and healed. These are the bare, oversimplified surface facts.

The question I hear -- a question I might have asked when I was younger -- is: Why bring up the past, when it is so terrible and depressing for all concerned? Haven’t things changed? Hasn’t our wiring already been upgraded?

There’s a simple answer: It is still hurting people. The wiring can’t be right if there are still shocks and fires. Jesus commands us to love one another. It is not loving to gloss over, to ignore, or to minimize the pain of our neighbors. The pain is real, and it is deep, and if we are not fixing the things that cause it, then we are accountable for it. People living today are not to blame for the past, but we are not exempted from changing ideas and habits and systems that hurt others just because they are inherited. The biblical “good Samaritan” inherited all kinds of negative attitudes about Jews, but was a neighbor to one who was robbed and

beaten and left to suffer alone. That is the neighbor our Lord and Savior explicitly, pointedly, calls us to be.

It's not as if we don't think history matters in Virginia. We carefully preserve old buildings, old silver, old traditions. We can't simultaneously be proud of history, and in the same breath argue that history doesn't matter. If we tell the story at all, we must tell the whole story. To tell only the parts that seem pleasant for some people is to deny the reality, even the existence, of Black people. To ignore the reality of the past is to deny the reality of the present.

Of equal or greater importance is that we come to see clearly the current experience of Black people here in the Diocese and beyond. It can be difficult for white people to know how to take the steps to do this without causing more pain and frustration for Black colleagues and friends; we can't just march up to people and demand that they recount their pain for our benefit. My own first steps were to engage in Sacred Ground, and to read like a maniac. There's a growing mountain of good writing about life as a Black person in America. Come along with me in exploring those gifts, and in expanding our exposure to broader culture through arts, culinary experiences, cinema, and other media, not to mention service in the community. It helps to find another white person who is ahead on the path of learning. I have also found great joy in finding a way to work alongside people who look different from me, sometimes being given the gift of seeing through their eyes. "Beginner's mind" -- that is, assuming that we have a LOT to learn -- will serve us well. Then we can see where the Spirit leads.

The generational inequity, injustice, and trauma of a large proportion of our population requires that the whole community engage the whole truth. There is no other way to repair the damage.

To learn is the first part. To act is the second, and crucial, part. When Jesus said "love your neighbor as yourself" he didn't mean that we should think loving thoughts. He meant, take care of your neighbor the way you take care of yourself. We do that by pulling out the bad wiring: the barriers, the barely conscious assumptions, the thoughtless comments, the tolerance of obvious inequity and imbalance and oppression and disenfranchisement and violence. We replace that with Christ-like wiring: justice, safety, mercy, kindness, respect, dignity, agency. Start anywhere. There's more than enough to do. If you are stumped, here are a few ideas, courtesy of the kindness of a colleague:

## **106 Things White People Can Do For Racial Justice; Dear White People: Here Are Ten Actions You Can Take to Promote Racial Justice in the Workplace.**

A note: I am well aware that this divide, the legacy of Black enslavement, is not the only one we face. I believe that divides are all problematic, but they are different in character, so I intentionally did not speak generically. I'm also aware that this is a bit long, and at the same time it barely scratches the surface. It's a crucial, central topic, and there are others to address. I apologize for these shortcomings. I am also aware that others have waited on the sidelines while I address our white communicants. For today, what I want to say is: I see you, better and better every day, and I want to do everything I can so that all of us see you, so that the necessary work falls on the right shoulders -- so that we can announce and reveal the Kingdom together, true siblings in Christ.

Our house is a fine house. It is built on Christ, the solid rock. It's quirky. It's roomy. It holds treasures. And it has wiring that needs fixing. Let's not lock the door or run away; let's fix the wiring. Here's the thing: The Church in Virginia then was part of the creation of the foul history of racist slavery. We are the Church in Virginia now. We have a sacred responsibility, and a holy opportunity, to take the lead in setting things right. We must never lag behind others in this work; we must never lose our zeal for justice, for kindness, for the cure of souls, and for the revealing of God's dream to a hurting world. May God, who has called us to be his people, give us the courage, the strength, and the grace to always, always, always love our neighbors as ourselves.

Peace,  
Bishop Jennifer Brooke-Davidson

<sup>[1]</sup> *Meet Me in Galilee: Beginning the Journey From Repentance to Reconciliation: The History of Racism and Race in the Diocese of Virginia*, p. 27. The Diocesan Committee on Race and Reconciliation, 2012. [Read it in its entirety.](#) Also of great value in understanding later eras is *Episcopalians and Race: Civil War to Civil Rights*, by Gardiner Shattuck, Jr., 2000.

FOR CHRIST. FOR THIS TIME. FOR ALL TIME.

