

*LIBERATING*  
LEADERSHIP



*Reflections on the Struggle of our Time*

*Edited by*

LEROY BARBER

*Liberating*  
**Leadership**



Reflections on the Struggle of our Time

*Liberating Leadership: Reflections on the Struggle of our Time*

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## INTRODUCTION

I am in no way overstating the obvious when I say we are in some extremely difficult times, with outcomes that are leaving people and families completely devastated. COVID-19 has changed our entire world and continues to wreak havoc while turning what we knew as life on its head.

These times are challenging our personal relationships. If you didn't have a great relationship with your children before the crisis, the quarantine has certainly uncovered it. If your marriage was shallow before, the shelter in place exposed the cracks. For many, the quarantine has disrupted our lives and reoriented our priorities around what really matters.

Not only that, this pandemic is uncovering racial wounds, deep historic flaws in our education and health systems, and shameful memories from our nation's past. Witnessing the killing of Black people while in quarantine has led to a substantial historical reckoning, causing everyone from suburban moms to multi-national corporations to rethink our justice system and declare, "Black Lives Matter!" The monuments of White supremacy and anti-Blackness that have cast long shadows over our collective consciousness are literally being dismantled. We are in a moment.

The challenge of the moment is this: which leaders will we begin to listen to, to pull us through and create a new way forward? The desire to go back to whatever normal was is gone. Many are eager to see a new vision. Leadership will be key, and new liberating leadership is critical.

This book will give you a glimpse of new leadership. It is my belief that the reflections of leaders help move things forward. What are leaders thinking that can inform our context? What are they pushing against that brings new thought? Whose shoulders are they standing on as they reflect on our time? Leadership reflections shape our thought, and the thoughts of this diverse group of faith leaders and activists will hopefully push you forward in your context.

Our narratives come alive with leaders who don't try to control, but give space to create, struggle, fail, and open new lanes. The beauty of the words

to follow is that the new leadership reflections on these days are not dictatorial but reflective, authentic, and nurturing. They are challenging and hopeful.

Liberating leadership is no longer about one central person bringing in others to manage their ideas, but is collective and invitational. May the chapters to come spark the leadership within you and give you courage to lead for such a time as this.

Leroy Barber

Co-Founder

The Voices Project / The Voices School of Liberation and Transformation



## THE PRACTICE OF PRESENCE

Jonathan Brooks

*God's Spirit is on me;  
he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,  
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and  
recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set the burdened and battered free,  
to announce, "This is God's year to act!"  
Luke 4:18-19*

### *Disembodied and Disconnected*

We were well aware that 2020 was set to be an important year politically. We pushed communities of color to make sure they were counted in the census, even with the lack of trust in these kinds of demographic surveys. However, the emergence of COVID-19 and video proof of more murders of unarmed Black people just reminded us of why it was so important in the first place. As the saying goes, "When the White community gets a cold, communities of color get pneumonia." Early on in the coronavirus pandemic, it seemed as if demographic information was unimportant until local leaders fought for that information to be released to substantiate our claims that the impact of the virus was not equal. There were billboards with slogans that reminded people that coronavirus was no respecter of persons and that regardless of gender, race, class, or ethnicity we were all at the same risk of contracting the virus. For those of us who could never stand on the sidelines, who have always had to "lean in" in new ways and who have always had to push for change, our cry as leaders was that we finally had to work together and the answers could only be realized if everyone stepped up and brought their gifts.

At Canaan Community Church during our worship services, we do what's called the "soul-train giving line." Everyone turns to face the center aisle, and then we come dancing down the aisle joyously and we give whatever

we have to give. Before we get started, I say, “This is giving time, not just giving money time. Which means that every single person in this room has a gift. Whether that's a handshake, a hug, a word of encouragement, a smile, or a mean dance move, whatever you have to bring, you bring it.” Throughout the pandemic I have just said the same thing. If you can't give financially right now because you just lost your job or you're struggling, how are you giving to your community? Who are you calling? How are you being a resource? To whom are you giving an encouraging word? Since that was already the DNA of giving at Canaan, it has made mobilizing our congregation to be a continued asset during this time much easier. It has helped us to remember that we cannot turn inwardly on ourselves when our community needs one another the most. For truly community-minded ministries like Canaan, there is already a lot of church life that happens outside of the Sunday morning gathering. During the pandemic it has become even more unique because of the increase in need for our community and congregation.

In a typical week we may have our 5 Loaves Food cooperative, block club meetings, community-assisted policing strategies (CAPS) meetings, and resident association meetings that all happen at the church. Then there are small groups, visiting with families of the incarcerated to deliver boxes of food and other engaging activities. At the start of the pandemic with all of those things in flux and the uncertainty of how to proceed we decided to create as many opportunities as possible for people to connect virtually. We had multiple Zoom meetings where people could connect affinity-wise. We could still have all of our gatherings and meetings, plan and share resources, and do all the things we needed to do.

I think the hardest part has been that our food cooperative, which really feeds quite a few people in the neighborhood and mostly focuses on healthy food, has had to rework itself. It took us about two weeks to figure out how we were going to be able to do that. People couldn't be in there shopping since our church is not an official grocery store, so we flipped it into a distribution center. We gave people specific times to come, we packed bags with some of the fresh vegetables and fruits that we grew, as well as nonperishable items, and then had them pick them up.

Leadership in both our church and congregation has meant creativity. The digital divide in neighborhoods like Englewood is so real. When Chicago Public Schools fully transitioned to e-learning during the pandemic, it exposed how many families, although they are digitally literate, are unable to provide the necessary technology for their students to thrive. Not only did our community struggle, but also some of my members really struggled to digitally adapt.

For this reason, we made sure we reached out to every member of the congregation, every day for the first two weeks after moving to online gatherings. We had to reach out through every route we could think of, whether that was sending out snail mail letters, to emails, to calls and social media, and even drive-by visits where we knocked on doors and dropped off communication on the porch.

In addition to that, we also partnered with an organization in our city, Jahmal Cole's My Block My Hood My City. This organization was doing daily wellness checks for over 1500 seniors, and Canaan was given 125 seniors from that list that live in the Greater Englewood community. Every Canaan member who wanted to volunteer has been given five seniors to call, check in with, and connect back to resources when needed. My message to my congregation and community in this time has not changed. It has always been for us to seek total communal flourishing for the common good, and there is no greater time for this than now.

### *White-Collar Pandemic*

I was interviewed by Christianity Today and was recorded as saying, "To be honest with you, this is a White-collar pandemic. It's not a blue-collar pandemic. The folks who serve us all and make things run still have to go to work, which is the majority of my congregation and community."

This has meant that pastoral care has evolved because it has become imperative to remind the congregation and community that love during this time is not just about caring for yourself, it's about making a decision that will also help to save the lives of others. It is imperative that we take care of ourselves, because in taking care of ourselves we are actually saving the

lives of others.

During this time, I was an advisor to the mayor's equity rapid response team. In Chicago, racial demographics concerning Coronavirus showed that over 50% of the cases and deaths in our city were African Americans. That's 10 times higher than the national average. On a call about the disproportionate effects of Coronavirus on communities of color, we discussed the number of families living in high-density situations. I began to realize the number of people I knew living in multi-unit buildings with 40 other people. Furthermore, in their household alone there might be three generations of people living together. Pastoral care quickly went beyond counseling individuals to not be afraid and care for themselves, but that when you care for yourself you're also caring for your grandmother. You're also caring for the other senior members or people with underlying conditions in our community and congregation.

Of course, context matters and on the south side of Chicago where trauma, fear, and worry are almost everyday realities, the pandemic and racial unrest have just added to an already stressful existence. I've heard people outside of my community say, "I think the coronavirus numbers are not just high in the African American community because people have underlying conditions and all that, but because people don't take it seriously." My response to them is that it's not necessarily that people aren't taking it seriously but you have to understand that the reality of not making it home on any given night already exists here. So, beyond our distrust of American health care systems, there is also the reality that the virus is not the only life-threatening thing we have to be concerned about. Our neighbors have needed leaders in our church to walk with them and let them know it is okay to be afraid. Black people, especially Black women, have always had to appear superhumanly strong. In our community it has never been okay to admit we are afraid. We are living with extreme trauma, living with real fear, but we don't say it. So I'm counseling our neighbors to physically say, "This is hard. This is scary." And it's allowing people to open up and be honest about their real fears and concerns. I believe this is part of what it means in Luke 4:18 to set the oppressed free. The truth is the bondage we experience as Black people in America can lock us up in ways we aren't even aware.

## *Imagination vs. Memory*

Rev. Dr. Renee Jackson of St. Mark CME Church in Joliet once told me, “Be careful not to lead out of memory but to always lead out of imagination.” This admonition has become one of the most important mantras of my life as a leader. It has become imperative to me that if we are going to lead people down a road that leads to future hope, we must believe that things can and will change. We must activate our imagination so we can see the world that could be versus only the one that is. We must see new liberating systems in place of these antiquated racially biased ones we currently live under. The current climate in our country has helped me to believe that freedom is available and that it is imperative that we all live as such. After celebrating Juneteenth, which is the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States, I made a social media post stating, “Juneteenth has me reflecting hard on what freedom truly is. Were our ancestors finally ‘free’ when that ship landed in Galveston, TX? Or could they have already been free mentally, despite being bound physically? Do we really have to wait for whiteness to announce our freedom to us?”

I actually began to realize that where I want to lead is towards a path of liberation, a liberation that does not require someone or something from the outside to activate freedom internally. This means that as we fight we must make sure that we do not become the very systems we are trying to take down. That somewhere along the journey the oppressed do not become the oppressors, the hated do not become the haters, the forgotten do not become the forgetful, the angered do not become the angry and most importantly the righteous do not become the unrighteous. This is what it means to truly seek freedom. For the freedom we seek doesn’t just liberate the oppressed but also the oppressor. I want us to believe that freedom is truly available right now and that it requires that we desire freedom for all.

On the weekend after the murder of George Floyd, we saw cities all across America erupt into protest, riots, and looting. Chicago did not escape the heartache, frustration and destruction that followed this chain of events. As a pastor, artist, activist, and community developer I was affected by the

events profoundly. I found myself paralyzed by what I had seen transpire and how quickly it all unfolded. I wept bitterly as I watched the video of George Floyd being brutally and mercilessly killed as he begged for his life. The numbers of young Black leaders and others I saw hitting the streets in response demanding justice encouraged me. I am typically on the front lines of protests against injustice, especially those dealing with our law enforcement or incarceration systems. However, Coronavirus had changed the dynamic for me this time. I had a congregation I was encouraging to stay home, a 70-year-old mother I was concerned about as well as my own family and just could not risk bringing the virus home. As I watched the looting from home, I was disheartened. However, once the looting hit my neighborhood and I began to see businesses and buildings that our community had worked tirelessly to build over the last 20 years destroyed in 24 hours, I fell into a deep dejection. If I am honest, in that moment I began to question everything I believed in and everything I had been working for over the last two decades. I began to wonder if it really even mattered. Once again, I remembered... imagination, not memory, had to be the way forward.

That moment, with all of the difficulties that it presented, reaffirmed the need for long-term presence in my community. While we definitely had a setback, because our community has been connected relationally over the long-term we knew how to care for one another in this moment. The next day we organized block cleanup events, food distribution was happening, and neighbors were even setting up transportation to get seniors to pharmacies outside of our neighborhood to pick up their medicine. We immediately saw the depth of relationship as the community began the healing process.

In my book, *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods*, I try to describe what it looks like to actively be present in your community for a long period of time so that our place begins to narrate what it will mean for us to live in community. When times get difficult, our practice of presence doesn't change. We dig in our heels even more into being present with one another in order to meet collective needs. Even in a time where we are forced to be physically distant, we are present with and for one another. In a time when our society is recognizing the

severity of the virus of racism, we must still fight to be present with one another. We have tried being “separate but equal” and have seen that equity will never come with distance. Maybe we should try being “present and equitable” and see how that works out.

### **Jonathan “Pastah J” Brooks**



Jonathan Brooks is a lifelong resident of Chicago, IL and currently serves as Senior Pastor at Canaan Community Church in the West Englewood neighborhood and as an educator on many different levels. As a firm believer in investing in your local community, Jonathan has a deep desire to impress this virtue on the students and young people in his congregation, classroom and community. His ministry focuses on youth development, holistic health, college scholarships, art and music training as well as restorative justice practices and care for the incarcerated and their families.

Pastah J, as he is affectionately called, is a sought-after speaker, writer, artist and community activist. He has contributed to numerous blogs, articles and books and recently released the book *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods*.

Jonathan is married to Miche'al Newman-Brooks and has two beautiful daughters, Jasmine and Jade. They reside in West Englewood, steps away from the church campus.





## EVERYTHING IS AN EXPERIMENT

Sunia Gibbs

*“I cannot go in these,” he said to Saul, “because I am not used to them.”  
So he took them off. Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth  
stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd’s bag and,  
with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.*

*1 Samuel 17:39-40*

*“Everything is an experiment. I have the right to fail and try again. I will  
bring my whole self into the work. I will not assimilate.”*

*(The speech I give myself every single day.)*

Before I am anything, I am an artist. I write songs and I paint abstract art. Whatever comes in through my senses comes out as a feeling in a lyric or brush stroke. The beginning of every creative work is inspiration and curiosity. The middle is all about bravery. And the end is pure commitment. Usually an image or word will grab my attention and begin bouncing around in my mind, body, and heart, looking for a connection and a way to be expressed. Those initial moments of output are exhilarating and liberating. But following very quickly is perfectionistic fear. What if the next color I add ruins this whole painting? What if this song is the wrong tempo, vibe, or message? What if *I* am wrong? I have literally stood in front of my work repeating to myself, “Be brave, be brave, be brave,” then rationally reminding myself that gesso and the delete button cover every error. In my particular process, each attempt actually adds to the beauty. It’s the layers and textures of a work’s history that leads to the moment I can step back and say, “It is good.” And then I am released.

This is the process I have learned to bring into how I lead as a pastor and organizer.

I should note this is not what I learned in Bible school, internships, or from other church leaders and their books. I thought I was leading for a very long

time when, in fact, I was actually copying and people-pleasing. In the industry of church, when those in charge are flattered through mimicry and being catered to, they offer microphones, stage time – and even jobs. I learned very early to assimilate and perform in exchange for platforms, privileges, and pay. Leadership was a title and an audience.

I abandoned the upwardly mobile ministry career ladder in part because it was boring and stifling. It required very little imagination or risk. As I trusted in each predictable rung, I came to recognize there were built-in limitations for me as an artist and as an Asian-American female. In a field dominated by White men, I found myself mostly overlooked and undervalued. While frustrating, there were some benefits. Being ignored meant I was relatively free from the scrutiny and weight of achieving “success” as defined by whiteness. I escape the scripts and the pressure many of my counterparts’ experience.

Presently, as I lead a faith community and organize coalitions of POC leaders, I am leaning on my creative strengths. The traditional, linear, and systematic approaches to ministry have not been adequate to address the complexities and nuances of the world we live in.

I remember when I stepped into my current role and, for a moment, felt the pressure to become the White-male-CEO-business-model-type pastor leader. It was like David trying on Saul’s armor and sword to go fight Goliath; it didn’t fit. For me, the courage to lead requires trust in the Divinely-placed intersections I embody, pushing myself to not fall back into old patterns or ways of thinking, but to constantly be liberated from the systems of oppression I was born into. Because I believe the good news is contextual, it also means paying attention, listening, and taking note of what is happening around me, particularly around marginalized people. Jesus did, after all, come to bring good news to the poor. It is being brave with whatever power and privilege I hold in order to participate in the liberating work of Jesus in my neighborhood. This space of facilitating and guiding is the non-stop work of the Spirit internally and externally in my life, dismantling with the awareness that reconstruction will follow. I am interested in the overlapping and emerging ideas found in the convergence of Pentecostal and liberation theology.

The majority of those currently in my gathered faith community are White, disenfranchised, post-evangelicals. When my partner and I co-founded The Groves, we had intellectuals and artists in mind as we had experienced isolation and exclusion among White evangelicals based on our own questions, curiosity, and creative expressions. We centered ourselves in downtown Portland near the university and focused our energy on playing music around the city.

Two significant events happened that forced shifts around who and how we gather. First, one of two Black men in our congregation was tragically shot and killed by police. Second, our family adopted a Black presenting bi-racial child. The distance I once had from communities of color was removed, and I was confronted with my own place and privilege. Cops weren't killing Black men over there in that *other* city, it was happening in my own neighborhood and in my church. I was abruptly pulled into a conversation I previously had the privilege of ignoring. My blind eyes were being opened. Now, how was I as an Asian female to lead and pastor in this moment? How does a Korean adoptee and a man of English/Welsh descent raise a strong Black man in a very White city?

As I came to increasingly identify as a Korean-American, I intentionally began learning and leading with other persons of color, gathering and drawing others into the work of being anti-racist<sup>1</sup> communities and organizations. The questions, mentoring, and growth have led me to begin to center our work for and with marginalized persons.

As an outsider who learned to assimilate in order to fit in, I have a particular draw toward those who have been excluded, and deep admiration for those who have refused to compromise their identity in order to show up. I want to lead with them.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the Continuum on Becoming an Anti-Racist Multicultural Organization ([https://www.aesa.us/conferences/2013\\_ac\\_presentations/Continuum\\_AntiRacist.pdf](https://www.aesa.us/conferences/2013_ac_presentations/Continuum_AntiRacist.pdf))

I am currently moving my congregation and organization toward being an anti-racist, multi-ethnic faith community. This requires full participation and shared power. Everything is an experiment, none of us have ever done this before. We are developing literacy and language, exploring partnerships and ways of structuring, trying and failing and trying again, making mistakes and trusting all will contribute to the beauty of who we are becoming. We have long discussions and work through misunderstandings and miscommunication. Some people have decided to walk away. Others have joined in. I paint and write and sing about it. I fall short and we get closer every day.

I hope the work we are doing is liberation. I hope it's Jesus in Luke 4. I hope as leaders we are doing and being Ephesians 4. I hope it is deeply personal and thoroughly, significantly structural.

The invitation to lead did not come with a clear path or destination, but a promise of presence and a hope to see Kin-dom realities in unexpected places. Faith and trust are key. If I forget the character of God, if I doubt God's goodness and lose hope, the barrenness of the wilderness will tempt me to go back to Egypt or wander, focused on something I've created. If I forget the words, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, I'll lose sight of how and why I'm in this work. If I am not attentive, empowered, and guided by God's Spirit, I will lack the strength to persevere.

For those who follow from a distance and see my work as an artist, musician, or communicator, I hope there is increased freedom to lead beyond the creative sphere. I hope that we imagine our creative selves leading faith communities and organizations, sitting on neighborhood, city, and school boards, contributing not only our work but our way of being and thinking.

As I hack my way through these unprecedented times, sheltering in place during a global pandemic, protesting in the streets with masks and hand sanitizer, I'm hopeful. For the first time I feel like I was made for this moment - that who I am and what I offer is precisely what we need right now.

## **Sunia Gibbs**



Sunia Gibbs is an artist and faith leader in pursuit of creative innovation that promotes connectivity and belonging. As an abstract painter and musician, she creates from conversations and experiences anchored to people and place.

A founding pastor with The Groves at Sunnyside UMC in Portland, Oregon, she is currently reimagining and developing old church facilities as creative arts and inclusive neighborhood spaces.





## NOW IS THE TIME

Nicholle Ortiz

A few weeks ago, my husband, Forrest, and I were watching the local news when we saw a nearby street crowded with people marching in protest for Black Lives. It was the first time I saw a march cross into residential neighborhoods. Forrest leapt from the couch and said, “Let’s go!” For a moment I hesitated but then grabbed a piece of cardboard and red paint and wrote **BLACK LIVES MATTER** in bold letters, taped a ruler to the back, and was ready to head out the door. Before this day we had avoided protests. With my health conditions, the idea of entering a large crowd of people seemed extremely unsafe.

I have a disease called Connective Tissue Disorder. While that’s usually an umbrella term for diseases such as Rheumatoid Arthritis and Lupus, doctors are still unsure what type I have. It’s a condition that attacks white blood cells and prevents them from protecting one’s immune system from recovering from illnesses. Because of this, there is a high likelihood that if I contracted COVID-19, it would be fatal.

Even so, following the death of George Floyd, my entire being beckoned me to be physically part of the movement. It was a moment in history I couldn’t fathom missing. So despite the danger it posed, when the protestors moved into our neighborhood, down our street, something inside of us exclaimed, “Go!” With our sign in tow and our masks safely secured, we waited for a small clearing in the march to jump in. Portland, Oregon is known as being one of the Whitest cities in America, but as I looked around I saw a racially diverse group marching alongside each other. I couldn’t imagine what I would feel uniting in a protest, but in the way my body had ached at the idea of not being a part of this moment, my body also ached once I joined it. Perhaps it was the children on the sidelines, standing outside their homes with handmade signs that read **BLACK LIVES MATTER**, maybe it was the thousands of people risking their own wellbeing to march for justice for my people, or maybe it was simply the mask restricting my breathing as we briskly

marched... but when I watched as a White man a few rows in front of us shouted with all of his might, "SAY HIS NAME!" and the crowd erupted with a communal cry, "GEORGE FLOYD!" I felt like my breath had been taken away and an inaudible howl came up from within me. I couldn't breathe, as a crowd of thousands roared his name, "GEORGE FLOYD! GEORGE FLOYD!" Tears welled up in my eyes as I thought of the comparisons between my own loss of breath and the way Officer Chauvin robbed George Floyd of his right to breathe. It was as if I could feel a new Jesus walking beside us, and the combination of joy, rage, and sorrow was almost too much to bear, yet we kept walking. We kept walking.

For some reason I always imagined the days after Jesus' death to be quiet. Contemplative. Like he was killed, then forgotten by everyone except those close to him. I imagined moments of the disciples sitting around the same table where they took the last supper, now minus their Lord, and weeping; unsure how to move forward. These days, I wonder if that wasn't entirely the case. Perhaps there was chaos. Maybe there were marches? Protests? Looting? Riots? Maybe there was noise, and a wailing from the communities he reached. Crowds of people gathered shouting his name. "Jesus! Jesus!" From the waiters at the wedding in Cana, to the blind man who could now see, to the woman at the well; I wonder what kind of noise they made when the news of Jesus' crucifixion reached them? After George Floyd's murder, we heard an outcry all around the world that could not be ignored.

I had been a part of churches before that were comfortable with speaking of lament. The year before becoming a pastor, my previous church held a vigil after the death of Jason Washington (a Black man killed by Portland police on a college campus after breaking up a fight), but they were not ready to speak of justice. Justice required action, and action required a choice and a commitment. I remember sitting in the sanctuary together as a church crying and sending thoughts and prayers to the loved ones of Jason Washington and the families of other Black and Brown bodies that had been lost that year, but after our prayers we turned silent. No one seemed to know what the next steps were. We didn't take a stance, and we moved on as if nothing changed.

Today, my husband Forrest and I co-pastor a predominately White congregation of members that all average around 70 years old. When we

became pastors in July 2019, I was 25 and Forrest was 30. While Forrest is White, I am Black and Puerto Rican with dreadlocks, so it's safe to say that from our ages to my ethnicity and style, we didn't really match the demographics of our church. Now as a pastor, I see the complacency and hesitation among many churches to act in times of injustice, and I refuse to allow passive silence within our own congregation. Forrest and I know we cannot solely speak of lament without a real call for justice. The truth of lament is not simply thoughts and prayers for those who are hurting. Truthfully, lament is a recognition of that harm and a realization of the disconnect of our world from the kingdom of God. Lament is the hope that we can move closer to a true shalom. In the days since the murder of George Floyd, we have chosen to lean into a raw tangible lament among our congregation. This has meant calling out the problem.

The Sunday following Memorial Day, I preached of the weariness I felt as a Black American. A weariness that many White people could not know because of privileges they receive in a society bent toward whiteness. I shared about my sister Tessa, her husband, and their baby boy. Right now, everyone who meets my nephew can see how beautiful and precious he is. Even so, it is only a matter of time before he is seen not as a cute baby boy but as a Black boy, as a potential threat. It's only a matter of time before my nephew could be Trayvon Martin or Tamir Rice and a police officer could claim "I feared for my life" before taking his. Every day I pray for my nephew. Every day I pray that he will grow to be older than those boys, I pray that he will live to be older than George Floyd. I know that Tessa prays for him in ways mothers of White children never have to pray for their children.

We began with teaching our faith community to recognize the problem. Once they acknowledged that racism is alive and well in our country, then we have challenged them to recognize the part they play in that problem. Through sermons and conversations, Forrest and I have used our own experiences to help move our congregation forward to own the ways they have contributed to racism and benefited from it. Now we are entering a stage of equipping our congregation with the tools to be actively anti-racist and allies to their Black and Brown siblings.

Our church's mission statement is: To Express Christ's Love to All God's

Children. Fortunately, when our church doors closed in the wake of COVID-19, our congregation rose to the occasion to care for one another and prepare for the long haul. They actively sought to live into the church's mission statement. To stay connected, we began teaching an aging congregation how to connect via social media and video conferences, and for those without technology we started a call tree among the congregation. We gathered funds along with other Methodist churches to buy grocery gift cards for families in need.

Still, we continue to teach our community that expressing Christ's love to all God's children does not stop with phone calls and gift cards. To Express Christ's love, our church is on a journey to acceptance of the harm that they have inflicted and gain privileges from as White Americans. To express Christ's love requires one to mourn with those who mourn but then to call for justice and act for justice.

In all sincerity this has been challenging work for me, but my wonderful husband/co-pastor/best friend has stepped in to educate our White community, living into his responsibility as a White person to guide White folks through this exhaustive work. Overall, these messages have been received well. There has been admittance of implicit bias and irrational fears of Black and Brown people, and honest realizations of ignorance surrounding race.

Still I find myself dwelling on the voices of those who don't understand and don't want to move forward. Weeks after George Floyd's death, I received a letter addressed to me from one of our parishioners. This letter implied that the cause which we are fighting for and educating our community for doesn't really exist because of an incident of racial violence this individual endured in their youth. I was floored by the implications of this letter, the challenging nature, and its harsh tones. Most of all, I was astonished that this person had held in this trauma for over 70 years, even admitting in the letter the only person they ever told was their father. I can't imagine the pain that they must have felt all these years silently carrying that horrific event with them. Still, I am disappointed that the cause for which they shared it now was not to heal but to perpetuate a certain prejudiced agenda.

Letters like this are what I feared when accepting a pastoral position at an

aging White church. In moments like this, I ask God, “Do I have to be their pastor, too?” Part of me wants to hold them and help them process this, and the other part of me wants to dismiss their experience and cut off communication. Sometimes I don’t think I’m strong enough or loving enough to engage ignorance in the way Jesus did. When the Pharisees would try to push Jesus into a corner, he always knew how to turn the entire conversation around. He knew how to get to the root of what they were saying and push back in a way that put the burden back on them to decide how to move forward. I truly love this parishioner. They are kind and sweet and a gentle soul. Though it does not escape me that as we continue to challenge our congregation to engage these uncomfortable topics, the reality is, no matter how much I love them, not all will come with us.

The challenge is, that even as some fall away, we cannot lose sight of our mission. Because when we ask our church who they want to be, they say: more loving peacemakers, more courageous justice people, and a more open church for all God’s children. At our church we are creating a new culture. A culture that will not ignore racism. A culture that will not ignore a virus that threatens our vulnerable populations. I have watched my whole life as churches have spoken of the love of Christ but their actions showed they would crucify their own Christ if he came back again today because of their own biases. This is work that cannot continue to wait. Our churches are losing my generation and the generations after me because of a lack of integrity to call out unjust behavior.

I think we need more pastors at protests, and more pastors calling out racism in the pulpit. When I think back on the protest I marched in, the deafening sounds of the crowds calling for justice, my throat closing up with tears, in the back of my mind it was almost as if I could hear a response to a question I asked after watching the execution of George Floyd.

“How long, Lord? How long until the suffering ends?” I asked.

And in that moment, it was as if I heard my Lord respond, “This long, child. Now is the time.”

## Nicholle Ortiz



Nicholle Ortiz is co-pastor at Tabor Heights United Methodist Church. She is originally from Tacoma, Washington but now calls Portland her home. Nicholle graduated from Warner Pacific University where she began to actualize her dreams of community development, ministry, and artistic expression.

Nicholle is a connector, an includer, a performer, an artist, a spouse, an advocate, and a friend. Nicholle wears many hats but all in the name of justice, inclusion, and love. She chooses to enter spaces that are uncomfortable because she believes in sharing her voice so that other people may feel inspired to share theirs. Nicholle is a Black, Puerto Rican, Plus-Sized Woman who enjoys wearing funky glasses, laughing loudly, talking about recycling and telling jokes that don't make sense.



## WEAVING COMMUNITY IN TROUBLED TIMES

Bethaney Wilkinson

*"Diversity is about all of us, and about us having to figure out how to walk through this world together." - Jacqueline Woodson*

The first person I feel most responsible to lead in this moment is myself. How am I doing really? I don't say this to be selfish or narcissistic. I've simply learned over time that I'm only effective in my leadership "out there" if I'm present to leading myself, right here. Right now. Leadership in this moment has challenged me to slow down. The waves of grief and heartbreak are persistent and strong. Even this morning, as I finally let myself enter the story of Elijah McClain—another young Black man whose life was snatched from him by racism and state violence—I had to slow down and listen to the laments of my heart: "How long, O Lord? What do we do now? Justice isn't even possible in this. He should still be here..."

A few moments after reflecting on Elijah's story, I received a news notification. It was an alert announcing the indictment of the three White men who lynched Ahmaud Arbery. My heart swelled with gratitude because for once, it was as if the court system was also saying, "Yes, Ahmaud's Black life mattered!" But then, sadness returned as I considered that justice isn't even possible. Ahmaud should still be here...

It comes in waves. The hope and the heartbreak. The action and the rest. Leadership, in this season, starts with me being present to the waves as they come. Why? Because I want my action to be guided by something more than my feelings. I want it to be purposeful, authentic, and sustainable. I want my actions to be of lasting service to a community that is bigger than myself.

In my work with The Diversity Gap project, I'm exploring the gap between our good intentions for diversity and the impact of those intentions, specifically at the organizational level. Here's where I've landed so far: we

don't have a diversity problem. We have a racism and White supremacy problem.

After pausing and checking in to make sure I'm leading myself well, my attention has turned to equipping my community of social entrepreneurs to not only think about "diversity," but to become practitioners of anti-racism and justice.

The lack of diversity in our organizations, churches, and teams becomes more evident in these crisis moments. If we want to solve our organizational diversity problems, then we must become anti-racist. And the journey of anti-racism is one we cannot navigate on our own.

One of the great blessings in my life is that I live in inter-generational, multi-racial community. On any given day, I'm not only interacting with peers, but I'm also interacting with people in their sixties, teenagers, and babies. What I have so appreciated about this living situation is that I've had a front row seat to conversations about race, politics, health, and the church that are not only focused on this present moment. I get the benefit of talking to my parents who grew up on the tail end of Jim Crow. I get the benefit of talking to teenagers who have strong opinions about the trajectory of our nation. I also get to interact with the tiniest of humans, dreaming and praying and asking God what kind of world he wants baby Black boys to grow up in.

These conversations, while particular to this moment, are tied to a past and a future. Even though we don't know where our world is headed, I am immersed in a community of family, friends and peers who are holding big questions with me. I do not pretend to be a single superhero or an expert or a lone champion for justice. I am, at best, a puzzle piece in this grand story. It's my proximity to others that is making my engagement and leadership possible.

So, when I step back and think about who I'm most concerned about in this season, it's not the White folks who are trying to figure out racism. It's not even the activists, from a variety of racial backgrounds, who are top of mind for me. I am most concerned about the people who feel desperately alone right now.

I am concerned for the young Black man who grew up with all White friends, but is experiencing a tearing in those relationships as he realizes that whiteness (and political alignment with protecting whiteness) means more to his White friends than his Black dignity.

I am concerned for the men and women in interracial marriages, and leading multiracial families, who are having painful, confusing conversations as they wrestle with what it means to love each other. As they question if sustained love is even possible.

I am concerned for the adoptee who is a person of color within an all-White family. Their family means well, but cannot empathize with the fear, the isolation and disorienting nature of being a darker skinned body in the United States.

I'm concerned for the White ally who is desperately trying to shift perspectives in her family or on her team, only to be met with gaslighting and pushback.

I'm concerned for the Black woman who is waking up to how she's been carrying racial trauma in her body and feels at a loss for healing herself.

Crisis moments in normal seasons of life (i.e. not during a pandemic and a racial uprising) can already be so isolating. I am concerned for those who need others to journey with in this season. I want them to know: "Hey, you are not alone."

As leaders, and as followers of Jesus, our work in this season is to be weavers of community. Yes, we are to call for justice. Yes, we are to protest and advocate for change. Yes, we are called to educate and teach. AND, we are called to one another. We are called to hold space for our humanity and the humanity of those around us. Not because we are trying to change people, but because the only way to get out of this mess is to move forward together.

I understand that this message might feel too soft. I understand that the urgency of our time can make the work of weaving community feel too slow,

too messy, and too non-linear. And yet, I am also convinced that operating purely from a place of urgency, and complying with the busyness it creates, is yet another manifestation of White supremacy culture. What if our true invitation is to slow down, to be present to the real relationships in our lives and neighborhoods, and to build the kinds of communities who can move towards anti-racist love together?

This is not quick work. It requires self-awareness, ongoing analysis of power imbalances, confession of painful truths, reflections on challenging histories, and more. It requires loss and change. It requires that Black people, indigenous people, multiracial people, and other people of color (BIPOC) do our own work cross-culturally to build solidarity. It requires that White people imagine and embody new ways of existing in relationships. This is not quick work. I use the metaphor of weaving with intention. It's ebb and flow, in and out, up and down—work.

### **Where do we go from here?**

I am fortunate in my work with The Diversity Gap project to be connected to all sorts of people. White people who are waking up to their complicity in racial injustice and striving to learn as much as they can in hopes of living differently. Black people who are tapping into our collective, ancestral resilience, sharing our stories, pursuing all kinds of self-liberation and healing ourselves and communities. Asians and Asian-American people who are translating their experiences of anti-Asian racism in light of the 2020 pandemic into solidarity and action with Black lives. Even this list only scratches the surface of the rich racial and ethnic diversity present and available in today's world.

I said earlier: we don't have a diversity problem; we have a racism and White supremacy problem. I am convinced we are at a pivotal moment in history where we've been shaken up just enough that the roots of racism and White supremacy might actually have a chance to get pulled out of the ground and dropped into the compost bin. I'm reminded of the verse in Hebrews that states, "I will shake everything that can be shaken so that the things that can't be shaken will remain." We're experiencing a shaking. Our job is to open our hands, let the ways of the past fall apart, and to make room in our hearts,

in our homes, and in our leadership for the new ways to come.

We do not move forward alone. As a Black woman, I carry the legacy of my ancestors with me. I also carry my hopes for the generation to come. We are not alone.

As you move forward in whatever sphere of influence you have, link arms with others. Learn together. March together. Cry together. Create new cultures and new kinds of communities, teams, churches, and organizations *together*. Share power, meaning some of you have to give it up and others have to pick it up. We are called to companionship. We belong to each other. May we pursue liberation from this rooted and connected place.

### **Bethaney Wilkinson**



Bethaney Wilkinson has spent more than a decade exploring the intersections of community, racial justice, and social change—as a writer, leader and social entrepreneur.

In 2013, Bethaney co-founded Atlanta Harvest, a high-production economic development farm on a mission to create jobs and strengthen neighborhood economies. In 2015, Bethaney also founded G.Race Dialogues, a faith and community-based initiative designed to support people pursuing racial reconciliation.

After leaving the world of urban agriculture behind, in 2017, Bethaney joined the team at Plywood People, a non-profit in Atlanta leading a community of startups doing good. On the Plywood People team, Bethaney designs and leads creative events, builds organizational partnerships and spearheads DEI (diversity, equity, & inclusion) initiatives. She also leads a project called The Diversity Gap, an initiative exploring equity-centered institutional change.

With degrees in Education, Community Building/Social Change, and Theology, Bethaney is passionate about amplifying solutions to challenges facing diverse communities.





## FROM THE WILDERNESS

Daniel Hughes

*Forget everything you thought you knew  
who you were  
what you wanted  
I am here now....and it's all over*

I wrote those words toward the beginning of the COVID quarantine. At the time, I wasn't sure what the future held, but I sensed that we were transitioning from the world we knew and into a new one. This epic shift has thrown the US into a wilderness experience—uncertainty and vulnerability. I have lived most of my life in uncertain and vulnerable spaces, and believe that leaders who can speak from the wilderness can lead people to co-create the new world that we need.

For the first time in my life, I am leading from a more authentic place. As a Black man, I was taught to work harder than anyone else (especially White people) in order to prove that I could measure up to the expectations of White Western ideals and values. I was a great performer. I was fully assimilated! Born in a small city with about 35% African Americans, I then moved to a rural community about 20 minutes from the city with around 99.9% Caucasian Americans. I had friends and family in both communities, but I was too Black to be White and too White to be Black. I lived in a liminal space – occupying both Black urban and White rural places. This was the wilderness, and in 2017, I decided to leave the plantation of assimilation – White middle-class life, and traverse the wilderness of the unknown toward the promise land of anti-racism. I am no longer performing for whiteness or assimilation.

In the West, we are maladjusted to uncertainty and vulnerability. But like it or not, we must become acclimated to the wilderness moment. We have examples of folks through history, but especially in scripture, who succeeded and failed the testing in the wilderness. Many Jews died while traveling from

Egypt toward the Promised Land because they couldn't handle the challenges of the wilderness. However, the next generation of leaders saw the challenge and believed that with God's strength they could be victorious. John the Immerser, Jesus' cousin, left the path of being an ordained priest like his father, and became a wilderness preacher – eating food, wearing clothes, and preaching a message that seemed crazy. Jesus is the best example of passing the wilderness test. His soul was tempted and tested while he spent over 40 days fasting in a desolate and dangerous place. Once passing the test, he was empowered to carry out the purpose of his life, which was to announce Good News to the poor, proclaim freedom for the imprisoned, sight for the blind, and healing for those who were crushed. My message is: let's endure the moment of our testing without giving up. Let's look to our ancestors and fellow humans who made it through their moment trusting that God was with them. Let's stand together and fight together until the most oppressed among us finally get to rest.

You aren't leading if folks aren't following. That is what we say as community organizers. I led our first Juneteenth celebration this year with a protest march and rally. I took a group of many first-time marchers through the neighborhood and shut down a busy intersection. We were met with smiles and cheers from neighbors as we said, "Black Lives Matter" and, "This is what democracy looks like." We were also met by the police in our district, including the captain. Our group was uncomfortable in the beginning, but by the time we knelt in the street for 8 minutes and 46 seconds (the amount of time an officer kept his knee pressed on George Floyd's neck, killing him), they had gained a confident power that their voices and bodies needed to be heard and seen.

I truly believe that you cannot lead someone to a place that you have never been without some type of divine direction. Also, you cannot give something away that you do not have. I don't know who came up with that axiom, but it is true. Leaders can intentionally or unintentionally lead folks astray by asking them to sacrifice things they (the leader) are unwilling or unable to sacrifice. I am working with a statewide community organizing coalition to mobilize the faith community for action and liberation. This organization is led by some of the smartest and most courageous millennials that I have seen.

I seek to lead like Jesus did – finding a few people who I can teach to do what I do, so that we can usher in a new reality. In this moment, I am proclaiming the need for all people to answer one question: what do you want, really? The answer will determine where we go and how we lead. This is a perfect time to shift our focus from energy-sucking and unproductive activities to reorganizing money and people for the world we need. I am looking for people who want to fight for the dignity and humanity of all people. I am fighting for anti-racist and inclusive policies, institutions, and systems. I am concerned for poor, Black, and Brown people who live in a society that was built on controlling or annihilating their bodies for refusing to submit or assimilate to internalized racist oppression/superiority. I am concerned that the next generation of leaders will not stick with the fight and will lose faith. I am concerned about building and protecting Black wealth for the future of all people.

As a leader, I cannot want something more than the people. This is a moment when people can notice, acknowledge, and accept what is being disrupted in what they believe, feel, and think, and lead from the discomfort and distress of uncertainty. The uncertainty that I grew up in shaped and prepared me for this wilderness moment, and I know how to take care of myself so that I can look out for the needs of those that I am leading. As you look at society, pay attention to what is happening in your body, heart, and head. If you have an ear to hear and an eye to see, you can begin constructing who you want to be and where you want to go.

A side note: When I left the plantation, I didn't know what I wanted but I knew what I didn't want. You might not know what you want, but if you know what you don't want, you can partner with folks who agree on going in a different direction until you discover what you really want.

One new humanity:

*E pluribus unum; out of many comes one*  
*One love, I hate, I cry, I hope, I fear, I faith*  
*one virus*  
*one Day*  
*One People*

Honestly, I don't know where I am taking my followers because I have never been there before. I have no desire to reform the past systems or make America great again. I want to create a different world with new social contracts and an equitable, inclusive, and anti-racist economy. I want people to experience the new heaven and new earth that the prophet Isaiah spoke about in chapter 65, and John saw in Revelations 21.

I imagine that this may be what Abraham felt when God asked him to leave his country, his people and his father's household to the land yet to be revealed. I imagine that Moses felt like this when he was questioning his capacity and credibility to lead the people out of Egypt saying, "*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*" And God said, "*I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain*" (Exodus 3:11-12 NIV). The most challenging part of the text is that no one will know that Moses was sent by God until he succeeds in the mission and the people are worshipping God on the mountain. What the what!!?? That's all we get from God (do it and then you will know that I was with you). This feels like those moments.

Some individuals were born for this moment and others have been being prepared. Either way, this is a generational shifting moment and leaders have the opportunity to walk humbly with God while loving mercy, and doing justice. I don't want to fool myself or mislead anyone in this moment because I don't have a plan. I am seeking the direction of God, and investing in a few people, and asking them to invest in a few people who want a new heaven and new earth. I want all people to take good care of their souls – beliefs, emotions, and thoughts. We need you ready to face whatever challenges that arise in the wilderness with authenticity and intentionality. You will need the elements of your soul to work together so that you lead others courageously and sacrificially. My goal is to make sure faith remains in the hearts of people because we have many more battles to fight before we win the war. If you find yourself in distress, in debt, or discontent, I will leave you with another of my poems:

*Everybody wants freedom  
freedom ain't free  
Everybody wants freedom  
But freedom ain't free  
er'body wants freedom  
but freedom ain't free*

*So, who's gonna pay?  
I'll pick up the check this time*

If I pick up the check for you, will you pick up the next one for the next generation?

## **Daniel Hughes**



Daniel Hughes is a speaker, poet, leadership coach, community organizer, and serves as the Pastor for Incline Missional Community (IMC). IMC is a diverse, loving, productive, and missional faith community transforming the lives of people who are seeking another chance at a life. Hughes loves to connect with the marginalized and use this gift in a partnership with the Hamilton County Office of Reentry. He is working to reduce gun violence and deaths, mass incarceration, and recidivism in the county. He also works with inter faith organizations to create new ways for people to belong in community.

Hughes received his B.A. from Bluffton University and his M.A. from Bowling Green State University. He believes as followers of Jesus, we have been given the ministry of reconciliation so that all people can have the opportunity to know the love of God. Pastor Hughes is currently partnering with different ministries and people from urban, suburban, and rural communities to develop a culture of discipleship--a culture of people who no longer live for their own selfish motives, but offer their time, talent, and resources to restore community. He finds joy in helping others identify their passion and purpose, and connect them to the resources that will make them the most loving and productive people in the community.





## SAVING CHURCH FOLKS

Michelle Lang-Raymond

In the past 12 months, I've had significant conversations about racism. I want to reflect on three of them but before I write, there's a few things you should know...

When I was in my early twenties, I received a revelation that I would be a bridge IN the church. In the 90's when so many people were outreach-focused, I kept getting distinctive revelations (in prayer and in prophetic exhortations) that I was called to be a bridge that would help people understand the gospel, and bring many to salvation in the Church. I was always perplexed by that idea since, as I believed then, everybody in the church already understood the gospel and was already "saved" and therefore a bridge to salvation IN the church was a meaningless call to action. I had a lot to learn about the vastness of both the Church and salvation. I didn't know what I didn't know.

I'm as Black as I know how to be. Raised in the deep south of Mississippi. Then re-raised by the faster-paced streets and playgrounds of the Northeast (New Jersey to be exact), before flying off to an Army base in Germany where, despite the push for everybody to be "just American," we found Americans like us - Black. Then transported to the Pacific Northwest's version of the inner-city when school-busing was still a thing and gentrification was on the horizon but not quite yet a reality. And in every space I lived, we found us. The Black us. The people, the food, the language, the traditions and everything else us. No matter where or how I was given room to grow up, it was with Blackness at the heart and center. Black people are my sweet spot and Black culture is my security blanket.

I assumed my steadfast and mutual love of the Church (as it is originally intended), and for Black culture and Black People, that my life's work would be to any system or institution that supported, upheld or celebrated those two

things mutually. And yet it is in this simultaneous shut down of society and uprising of racial discontent that I find myself invited and quite confusedly drawn to White people's church. I don't find it to be a badge of honor, nor some sign that I have "made it." Quite frankly, it's annoying. It wasn't until my god-daughter once seared my conscience just seconds before I was to take the stage in front of an audience filled predominantly with White men that I received a new revelation. Not so rhetorically she asked, "Why do you keep coming to talk to these White folks? Why do you keep helping them?" It was in that moment that the understanding of my call was revealed.

***When I go to the White church and "help them," I am not going for them. I am not going for myself, as I have no need of their affirmation or acceptance. I am going for every Black person who is tired of explaining, carrying, smiling and codeswitching. I'm going for every Black person who refuses or simply can't grin and bear to do this lifting any longer. I go for the Black people who need a break. I go for the Black people who have a hard time restraining their anger long enough to have a conversation that might move the needle of their White coworkers' complicity in racist structures and systems. I'm not there as the one Black friend of White people. I am there as the play-cousin of my extended Black family who still has some measure of patience, grace, or whatever to take it just a little longer. I go to show the other Black people that you deserve to be here and to be heard and that you don't have to play small to justify your presence or your opinion when your very existence IS your right to be here!***

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1.

Recently I was asked to come speak at a large White church. They were launching a series called "Elephants in the Church" and wanted me to come talk about Racism and the Church. I was told that I was the only Black speaker to ever keynote on a Sunday morning. Initially, I was humbled at being the first, but then I realized it was 2020 and I became a little miffed that I was being asked to speak on race as if that's the only subject on which a Black speaker could lend expertise. I trust that wasn't the message they were trying to send, but that's what NOT diversifying until there's a crisis looks like. But I digress. In being asked to come speak about racism, I

wrestled not with how truthful to be but with how direct. I've seen other preachers speak with ill-measured amounts of truth and directness only to have what I consider paradigm-shifting gems wasted on people who just couldn't get past the delivery.

Guest preachers often have to toe the line between being likeable enough to warrant the invitation (and maybe an invitation back) while yet being challenging enough to actually cause some change and movement in the hearts and minds of the people. While likeability is not the goal, sometimes telling the truth assures you *won't* be liked and therefore not heard and if the goal is to be heard, then... you get the idea.

While in reflection, it occurred to me that this was an opportunity to educate people who often run from these conversations. It would be one time that I could try and get past the mechanisms they often use to mute out or minimize "other voices". *And so truthful and direct would be my course.* For 45 minutes, their leader said they have to listen to me and so after about 30 minutes of biblical, historical, and experiential set-up, I started the last part of my sermon by saying:

*"I thought long and hard about what part of my message was going to make you mad. I thought about the part that was going to make you mad and want to leave or pull out your phone and start typing that angry email to your Pastor. I thought long and hard about it and I've come to the conclusion that it's this part. I understand for many of you, the phrases 'White Supremacy' and 'White Privilege' are triggering. I understand that, but I can't let your dislike for those phrases stop me from telling you the truth.*

*"For now, let's wrestle with this phrase as I think it is a better way to explain the other two: 'The Centering of Whiteness.' That means whiteness is considered right and everything else is considered right or wrong based on its proximity to whiteness. How I talk. How I wear my hair. How I engage the world. All of those things are considered and judged to be right or wrong based on how closely they resemble what White people do. Our entire society is structured on what most White people consider to be normal. It's a very shallow example, but when I go shop for makeup, the color that companies call "nude" is based on what White people look like nude. My hair products*

*are in an “alternative” section of the store. And my music and movies are considered a sub-category (not mainstream) genre until White folks discover, like, and sanction it to be so. The norm of our society is based on whiteness. What’s normal and natural for you is considered right, and all the rest of us are required to get as close to that as we can. THAT is what a White supremacist society is. It assumes whiteness is the center and everything else is considered, rated, and regulated based on that. You don’t have to be a card-carrying, tiki-torch-waving racist to understand and admit that you live in and have been the beneficiary of a White supremacist society.”*

At the end of that service, a man dressed in his finest Harley Davidson leather came up to me and admitted he *was* ready to be mad and write an email to the Pastor because discussions on race were anti-Christian. He paused, choked back his emotions, and continued to say that his heart was convicted for the first time ever because he could finally understand that he was indeed living in a racist (White-centered) society and it took me talking about makeup to help him see it.

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2.

Unbeknownst to me, in the midst of a national shut-down, my calling would be summoned to appear in the most unpredictable and non-orchestrated of ways.

On Tuesday, May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020, after wrapping up a day full of Zoom meetings and other duties for my job, I laid on the couch and like many began to mindlessly scroll social media. It was Tuesday, May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020, an interesting... angering... depressing... vexing time to be Black in America! Because, while by now the Black Lives Movements was not new, we were once again experiencing a mind-blowing number of new episodes of unarmed Black people being chastised, chased, assaulted, and even killed not just by police but by a seemingly never-ending tribe of Beckys, Karens, Chads and Bubbas (if you didn’t know – those are names Black folks call White folks who can’t seem to let said Black folks have a life without threatening to call the cops). But I digress. Back to this latest episode of distressing and traumatic occurrences. Even calling it “episodes” feels weird

because it makes it feel like this is not real – like it’s a television show; a terrible television show that we can’t turn off. But this is real life, and it was just a Tuesday. As I scrolled through the minutiae of media, my heart broke all over again reading posts about the killing of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia while my mind teemed with disbelief and anger at the Amy Cooper video from Central Park. In the midst of that scrolling, I saw a post on Facebook from one of my White friends. It said something like, “*I stand in solidarity with my Black brothers and sisters.*” And I immediately, almost repulsively, thought, “*That’s not enough. That is not enough this time.*” Before I knew it, I typed, “*I wanna have a chat with White folks, but I dunno.*” and hit send. With no thought of what would come next, it was posted and I went to bed.

The next morning, my Facebook inbox was full of messages from people wanting to participate in what had now become known as the “Chat w/ White Folks” so I was on the hook to go through with it. Problem was, I didn’t really know what “it” was. I had no objective. No intended outcome. No plan of action at all. All the things you’re supposed to know before you call people together; I didn’t have any of that. All I had was anger, disgruntlement, and the momentary thought that Facebook posts about White people standing in solidarity with the Black folks’ problems was not enough.

At some point in the day, it occurred to me: *Black people being policed (by cops and citizens) and killed was not a problem that Black folks created and should therefore feel grateful for any help we can get from Whites. These injustices were part of the system of supremacy set up in America to benefit and make White people comfortable. Black people don’t need help understanding that. White people do. And what is also clear is that they, as a community, need to take the responsibility to fix it.*

My objective became to say to those who belong to the “White community” that this was a pivotal moment for them to own the history that brought us all here. I wanted them to identify with the horrible behavior that had brought us all to this point and to be, as a community, embarrassed, maybe even ashamed to the point of being provoked to do something different. But before any of us could have a conversation about “solidarity” or about what should be done as a nation, there needed to be a come-to-Jesus moment about

how we got here. Not a reckoning with each individual in each unjust case, but an acknowledgement that historically there has been nearly irreparable harm done to people groups of color BY the people group called White folks. And I wanted every single one of my passive Facebook-posting White friends to hear me say it.

I was raised in the 80's when the Black community had to bear the burden of the individual. If one Black person used drugs, got pregnant, or dropped out of school, then the entire Black community had to identify with that failure and assume the communal responsibility to fix it – to fix ourselves. And that became my personal objective of the Chat with White Folks. I wanted White folks to know what that burden felt like, and I wanted to say to them, “Take responsibility for this problem and do all you can to fix it.”

As I secured those objectives in my mind, one real truth struck me with the precision of David's slingshot. Something I had learned over all my years of work but had never paid attention to until now. The White community that I wanted to speak to didn't exist. There is no such thing as “the White community.” White folks don't see themselves that way. They see and approach life as individuals who belong only to the human race, and not at all to a race of people who share a common hue, condition, or concern. So my expectation that suddenly some communal sense of knowing and atoning would happen to them would be nearly impossible.

Despite understanding that truth, the live Chat with White Folks happened. Approximately 100 people joined the conversation. 1,500 people watched (and commented) live and to date nearly 70,000 have viewed it since. I don't know if the people on the call participated as individuals or as a collective. I hope the latter. And I hope the significant numbers of White people participating in protests all around the world says that a communal awakening that is not dependent on the idea that they are standing in “solidarity with Black people” is indeed happening.

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3.

After the Chat with White Folks, I hosted a Chat with Teens about Racism. One of the things the teens kept saying in the conversation was that we just

needed to start the whole thing (America) over. That sentiment made me reminiscent of the biblical call to “repent;” to start over and do differently.

In a number of recent conversations, I as a Christian have owned that it was Christians who sanctioned slavery in America. As you might imagine, that’s a tough reality to balance as a Black woman. That the ancestors of my faith were so destructive and dismissive toward the ancestors of my race. But it’s true, and the Church needs to acknowledge that.

When the kids kept saying “we need to start over,” I heard it as a call to repentance. We can apologize, politicize, and create new ways to engage, but none of the things we do will matter as much as if we just start with repentance. We are in a place right now where the Christian mandate to repent is staring us in the face. Nothing that we do will matter if it doesn’t come from an internal conviction; a repentance. Many would like to ask for or be asked for forgiveness, but asking for forgiveness is not the same as repentance. In this moment, asking for forgiveness is essentially an act of feeling guilty. It is to ask another person to extend to you grace, but it is not to commit yourself to change. Repentance is to own your failure and to commit to do the work that change requires. As the Body of Christ, we are in that place. A place where we must not only ask for forgiveness for the sins we’ve committed against humanity but also repent, start over, and do better.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul talks about a “more excellent way” to live. It’s a way rooted in love. He presents us with this beautiful list of all the things that happen in a love-filled society and then he ends his commentary with a rather abrupt charge to grow up. In essence, he’s saying we don’t get the blessings of living in a love-filled land without its citizens making the hard choices to trade in childish behaviors (and mindsets) for the more excellent way. And perhaps that’s what starting over looks like right now.

These ideas of accountability, responsibility, honesty, maturity, forgiveness, and repentance are all gospel ideas that my younger self would have never imagined needed to be re-preached in and to the Church, and certainly not in relation to the subject of racism. And yet, I just didn’t know what I didn’t know. It’s the work that God has called me, a Black woman born and raised

in the Mississippi south, to do with White folks in the liberal Northwest. How can that be? God only knows.

### **Michelle Lang-Raymond**



Michelle Lang-Raymond is the Campus Pastor at Warner Pacific University and also the Founder & Managing Director of the Acts On Stage Theater Company. She is an ordained and licensed minister, and has been an urban community developer, a racial reconciliation facilitator and as an arts activist for nearly 30 years. Most notably, she is the writer/producer of “the Art of Tough Talks” – a multimedia project that utilizes the arts to foster conversation on often polarizing topics. She received her BA in Psychology & Leadership from Seattle Pacific University, studied theater at the Arena Stage in Washington, DC and received her Masters in Religion from Warner Pacific University. Michelle is newly married to Jay and though she is originally born and raised in Mississippi, she considers herself a city girl from the south who relocated into the Kingdom. Find out more at [www.ActsOnStage.com](http://www.ActsOnStage.com).



## SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Trixie Ling

In a time of living in a parallel crisis with a global pandemic and systemic racism, I have realized that we are more connected than ever with our shared history, humanity, and liberation. Our suffering, freedom, and well-being are linked together in both distancing and solidarity. Sunia Gibbs, a dear friend and a fierce anti-racist activist, pastor, artist, and musician, often says that “distance is a privilege” when we talk about racism. By acknowledging that we cannot distance ourselves since we are interconnected, we have to keep each other accountable for our commitments and actions. We need to close the distance by showing up, sharing the pain, standing together, and speaking out against anti-Blackness, anti-Indigenous racism, and anti-Asian racism in Canada.

As a Taiwanese Canadian, the distance was narrowed for me when I encountered my first traumatic racist incident in Vancouver during COVID-19. I was walking home, and a White man came toward me and made some sexual and racial comments before spitting on my face. This moment changed everything for me, like a lightning bolt that shocked my heart, mind, body, and spirit. I felt mixed emotions of rage, pain, and grief in knowing that I am one of many persons of colour who have experienced the individual and collective impact of historical, systemic, and structural racism. In this heavy time of emotional labour, it is important to hold spaces and support one another to work through our feelings. Ji-Youn Kim, an anti-oppressive coach, counsellor and facilitator, reminds us to “process our feelings so that we don’t take action that is stemmed in guilt and shame – because that makes it about us, and not the actual work.” We need to process our feelings to take care of ourselves and each other, so we can do the work of dismantling White supremacy.

In the past, I have seen how silence is used as a weapon to incite fear, apathy, and ignorance of the covert and overt racism that exists in our everyday lives

and systems. My rage grew after the racist incident and stoked the fire within me to break the silence, speak truth to power, and stand up for what is right, true and just. I took comfort in expressing my anger as I was reassured by the words of the writer, speaker, and activist Austin Channing Brown, who said that “anger can be creative and imaginative, seeing a better world that doesn’t yet exist. It can fuel a righteous movement toward justice and freedom.” This anger has given me the courage to speak with vulnerability, strength, and determination to go beyond the victim narrative and take back the power by sharing my story publicly and talking to the media to raise awareness and the call to action against systemic racism.

As Asian Canadians, we have been silent for too long, conforming to the model minority myth by not speaking out against the injustice and violence of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigenous racism in our communities. Erna Kim Hackett, a writer, speaker and practitioner of racial justice and liberating theology, calls us “to slash the model minority myth to bits with our refusal to stay silent, our unflinching resistance to White supremacy, our commitment to creating a contextualized theology, and our refusal to be used as pawns in White hierarchies.” We have the privilege of being close to whiteness in keeping our heads down, working hard to rise above our own racial oppression, and benefiting from systems that deem Asians as non-threatening people of colour. However, we have seen the rise of anti-Asian racism during COVID-19 and the grim reminders of our conditional belonging and acceptance in the country.

In order to break the silence, we have to use the most powerful tool we have - our voices. The stories we tell have to challenge our minds, touch our hearts, make us ask the hard questions, and lean into the discomfort and heartache in the process of healing and paving the way for co-liberation. Many friends and strangers have reached out over the weeks after I spoke up publicly, and in turn they have shared their own heartbreaking stories and fears of racism. I saw the ripple effect of speaking out and encouraging others to share and amplify the powerful voices of women of colour, especially Black and Indigenous women who are leading the work of racial equity, inclusion, and decolonization. By listening to the personal and communal experiences of racism, recognizing the underpinning of White supremacy, and standing in solidarity against systemic oppression, we are committing to keep each other

accountable in putting our learning into action.

We cannot hide behind the lens of multiculturalism and diversity in Canada as we clearly see the societal structures that dehumanize and oppress the dignity, humanity, and livelihood of racialized people. As the historical and present struggles of Blacks, Indigenous, Asians and other people of colour are intertwined within White supremacy, we must fight together for justice and freedom for all. This means that we have to build bridges of understanding to listen, learn, and support each other in doing this work in solidarity as a marathon instead of a sprint.

My own journey of being an anti-racist leader and follower has been a winding road that consists of *resisting, relearning, reimagining, and reclaiming*. In my experience, resistance starts with rejecting the status quo and dominant White narrative, educating ourselves, and creating spaces and opportunities for difficult, uncomfortable, and honest conversations about racism with friends and families. By decentering whiteness, supporting the voices of people of colour, and protecting the bodies of Black and Indigenous leaders in protests, we are participating in daily acts of resistance. When we open our eyes, hearts, and minds, we see the incredible strength of ongoing resistance led by Black and Indigenous women and matriarchs on the front lines to protect their lands, cultures, languages, homes, and families. It is inspiring and convicting to witness and join women-led movements like Black Lives Matter in the US and Canada.

Along with resisting, I have been doing the work of listening, deconstructing, and relearning the history, culture, traditional systems and protocols that have been erased. As Canada is built on colonialism and enslavement, ideas of superiority became beliefs, and racist beliefs became policies that upheld White supremacy and oppression. As a settler, I have benefitted from living in the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, known as Vancouver, British Columbia. “Unceded” means the lands that we live on are still occupied by Indigenous sovereignty and were never forfeited through sale, war or treaty with the government of Canada. Colonization has resulted in dispossession of land, dignity, and well-being of Indigenous people by creating dehumanizing systems of dependency and domination. It

is our responsibility to educate all of us who are living on stolen lands to follow Indigenous leaders, Elders, land defenders, and water protectors to fight against pipelines and fracking and bring people back to the land to heal and restore. I am learning to decolonize how I think, work, live, and relate to Indigenous people and the land.

I am listening to Black leaders in my community speak about Black history and hearing their call to support structures that offer non-violent alternatives to address safety and security. We need to acknowledge how Black people experience systemic racism and oppression across institutions including criminal justice, health care, education, housing, and employment. According to Dr. Yvonne Brown, an educator, researcher, and writer, we “need to blackwash the whitewash history” to learn about slavery and policing. By understanding the historical context, we see presently that Black people face higher levels of police brutality, violence, and incarceration. This calls for us to support the current movement to defund police and reinvest funding toward mental health, social supports, housing, education, and labour. By acknowledging our complicity, accepting responsibility, and holding accountability to take actions, our humility increases the humanity we share with each other.

As we work to disrupt and dismantle systems and structures of racism, we need to reimagine what kind of society we want to build, who are leading, and how to strive for justice, equity and freedom for all. It starts with asking hard questions and holding spaces for new possibilities and realities. Who has power and privilege? How do we rebuild relationships between racialized and marginalized communities? How do we practice intersectionality with people who face multiple forms of structural discrimination including gender, race, ability, economic status, and immigration status? How are Black and Indigenous people leading the advancement of co-liberation? What is our hope for an anti-racist and anti-colonial future for our younger generation? As we use our imagination and voices to create just systemic changes, we can rebuild a society that moves collectively toward healing of the land and renewed relationships.

In this process of reimagining how the world is changing, I am slowly reclaiming my own cultural identity, unique immigrant story, and a

decolonized theology by aligning my anti-racist beliefs and actions to how I live, work, play, and find joy and hope these days. Ijeoma Oluo, an activist and writer, reminds us that “the beauty of anti-racism is that you don’t have to pretend to be free of racism to be an anti-racist. Anti-racism is the commitment to fight racism wherever you find it, including in yourself. And it’s the only way forward.” It means that we have to do internal and external work every day to educate ourselves, speak the truth, and take concrete actions toward change. According to Oluo, we must learn how to be better allies in the service of Black liberation, which means limiting our responses to what is practical and tangible help. This includes donating to groups that are doing anti-racist work, calling your local representative to demand policy changes, protecting Black people at protests, and amplifying the voices and work of Black communities.

Part of reclaiming my story is understanding how I have assimilated into White culture and I lose my Taiwanese heritage, culture, and history in the process of adapting and integrating into the Canadian culture. I am seeking mentorship and connecting with more Asian leaders and rooting myself in the diasporic Asian community to widen and colour my cultural lens. By embracing my Taiwanese Canadian identity, I am learning to live in the tensions that arise from holding Eastern and Western values and beliefs. We can be better bridge builders between different cultures when we support people to share their unique stories and reclaim complex identities. By confronting our own bias, stereotypes, and privileges, we can truly see the dignity, value, and humanity of each person in their story.

As an immigrant in Canada, I am passionate about co-creating with immigrant and refugee women in using their voices and stories to contribute and flourish in their community. I founded Flavours of Hope, a non-profit social enterprise in Vancouver that supports refugee newcomer women in earning a livable income and building social connections in the community through cooking and sharing culinary traditions and stories. We envision a society where refugee newcomer women flourish and experience belonging in the community through cooking, storytelling, and entrepreneurship. In a time of pandemic uncertainty with increasing divisions and racism, food has the healing power to break down barriers, build bridges between cultures, and bring people together around a table. During COVID-19, I pivoted our

cultural food events and started a virtual ‘Food & Race Conversation Series’ that explores the intersections of food, identity, and ancestral connections to shed light on how we are interconnected through generations. By creating more inclusive spaces and opportunities to develop cross-cultural relationships, we can build more empathy, compassion, and understanding with each other. I am committed to learning, engaging, and sharing with immigrants and refugees about the history of Canada and its systems and structures of oppression, and how we can work together to build a diverse, just, and liberated society rooted in trust, relationship, and belonging.

In my journey of decolonizing Christian faith, I am learning how to reclaim theology from systemic oppression and White supremacy and what it means to follow God’s collective call for us “to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly” (Micah 6:8). Brandi Miller, who hosts a podcast called ‘Reclaiming My Theology,’ challenges us to examine our ideas, beliefs, and systems that oppress and shape our hearts, minds, and faith experiences. According to Miller, White supremacy shows up when we elevate values of individualism, paternalism, and perfectionism in the church. Individualism in our faith becomes a resistance to our collective responsibility to confess and repent from our actions that cause harm and suffering. We need to make reparations for systems that perpetuate patriarchy, and develop a theology that makes us all more liberated.

As people of faith, we have to hold collective accountability to hear the cries and protests for justice, take what we have learned to dismantle systemic racism, and commit to the work of decolonization in the church, out in the streets, and into the land. Our actions must go beyond performative behaviours and create lasting transformative changes as we reclaim theology from oppressive ideologies. Let us lead with a posture of humility and embody the words of 1 John 3:18: “let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” My hope is that we can rise up, speak truth to power, and join the growing Black-led and Indigenous-led movements for co-liberation and justice for all. Our future depends on what we do today to reimagine and rebuild a world where we are, collectively, anti-racist.

## **Trixie Ling**



Trixie Ling is a Taiwanese Canadian who is passionate about creating intercultural spaces and opportunities to learn together, break down barriers, and build bridges between cultures through food, stories, and friendships.

As a social entrepreneur, she founded Flavours of Hope, a non-profit social enterprise in Vancouver that envisions a society where refugee newcomer women flourish and experience belonging in the community through cooking, storytelling, and entrepreneurship.

She is learning, growing, and joining others in advancing anti-racist work and speaking out for justice, equity, and co-liberation. She finds much joy in gathering around a table and eating with newcomers, neighbours, and friends. Instagram: [@flavoursofhope](#) Website: [www.flavoursofhope.com](http://www.flavoursofhope.com)





## ARE THESE MY PEOPLE?

Erin Rose

2020 has been quite the year, my friends. At the time of this writing we're just about halfway through and I need y'all to join your faith with mine to believe God for the strength to make it through! I don't know about y'all but I need some help! From losing Kobe & Gianna to the world shutting down "due to COVID-19" and the public deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, we have been through a very traumatic season. We'll look back on this time and wonder how in the world we made it through. While we were mourning the loss of tens of thousands of lives from coronavirus, and perhaps many of us lost someone we knew and loved, we were forced into mourning Ahmaud, Breonna, and George. While we were trying to wrap our minds around a new normal, we were confronted once again with how severely acute American racism is, and it sent us reeling.

In those heavy weeks, our souls already exhausted from sheltering in place, and Zoom work, Zoom school, and Zoom church, and the overwork of those considered essential employees, I heard over and over again: "I'm just tired." The hearts of the people God had given me to lead were broken. They were angry. Tired of trying to explain why their life matters, tired of rehearsing old traumas to White audiences who are reluctant to believe that racism is "still a thing." For a moment, we were bordering on hopeless. I didn't know how to lead a group of people out of hopelessness when I'd pitched a tent there myself. The weekend following Ahmaud Arbery's death, I prepared a word for our church. I'd mostly scrapped the sermon on rest that I'd previously prepared, but the process of coming up with something new that spoke directly to the moment was surprisingly challenging.

I've been a teaching pastor at a multicultural (but still mostly White) church for the better part of five years. Our local church has mourned and lamented publicly the unjust deaths of Trayvon Martin, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and Sandra Bland, just to name a few. Each time, I felt confident

that I could create space for the people of God to bring their cares to God and to share their burdens with each other. But this time was different. Maybe the pressure of being a single Black woman in full-time ministry combined with the frustrations of being a Black leader at a majority White church developed a heightened sense of discomfort in me. Maybe just being alive and Black and a woman in America during a pandemic was weighing on me especially heavy that week. Whatever the reason, I just didn't have the words. I wanted to hide. I wanted to cancel online church. How could I pastor when I so desperately needed to be pastored? How could I shepherd anyone when I felt like a forgotten sheep myself? Sunday came, and I did what pastors have done throughout time – I fed the sheep. I gave them what's real – I'm tired just like y'all are, I'm fed up, just like y'all are, I'm ready to throw in the towel, just like y'all are. I also reminded them, just as God had reminded me, that God *promises* justice. And just as God promised and delivered the Son, and just as God promised and delivered the Holy Spirit, God promises and will deliver justice. I have to keep believing that and I have to keep preaching it. Just like the psalmist – I would completely give up and walk out on everything if I didn't believe that I'm going to see the goodness/justice/mercy of the Lord in the land of the living.

One of the very first lines of Austin Channing Brown's seminal work *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* is, "White people are exhausting." And chile, if that thing didn't preach!? I've been *exhausted*. And not just with White people, OH NO. I'm exhausted with church<sup>2</sup> people. And them's the people that will wear you all the way completely out. If you had one iota of grace left, one mite left of patience, one beautifully sunny day in a week full of rainclouds, a member of the body of Christ will rise up within themselves and talk about "the blessing of slavery." A well-beloved pastor, whose books I have on my bookshelf said that, out loud, in all seriousness. And of course, it was the shot heard 'round the world. People everywhere were talking about it. One friend who hasn't been to church since the Clinton Administration sent me a screenshot from The Shade Room and was like, "This your people?" And honestly? I don't know, bro. *Are these my people?*

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<sup>2</sup> Just to let y'all know, for the rest of my 2000 words I'm going to talk about my deep and abiding love for the Church of God. I realize that makes many uncomfortable because for real, ain't no hurt like church hurt. The Church has failed many of us, and it must be better.

But for real, in my heart the answer is yes. Those are my people. Before you roll your eyes out of your head and stop reading, please know that I'm not in the sunken place! I promise. So many times, I've felt firsthand, secondhand, and thirdhand embarrassment at things that the Church has said, done, stood behind, endorsed, championed. I've seen the bride of Christ sell herself off in order to be seated in the halls of power, claiming she wanted to win America back to Christ, but in reality, she was drunk off the control, the influence, and she wanted more. I've seen the leaders of the Church have public, embarrassing failures more times than I can count. The Church has acted in such a way that the world has every excuse to demean, belittle, and dismiss it. I've seen the Church turn a blind eye to the practical needs of the poor and the marginalized in favor of setting their sights on Jesus and eternity. I've seen the Church be so focused on doing the right thing and thinking the right way that the Lordship of Jesus is an afterthought, playing second to the authority of wokeness. I've seen the Church exalt the name of Jesus and the principality of White supremacy at the same time. It's gross.

So why, pray tell, are these *still* my people? Because God won't let me have it any other way. On some real stuff, I actually *love* the Church. I actively, passionately love the Church. This is the kind of love that comes straight from the heart of God. The kind of love that 1 Corinthians 13 talks about – this thing has endured, persevered, hoped, and trusted – despite any effort on my part to have the opposite be true. Because when you think about it, the Church is probably the most mysteriously beautiful miracle ever. I'm going to explain why, but I'll just give you the elevator version because I could go on forever about this.

Let's start with the obvious. Church isn't about whether you're Presbyterian or Methodist, or Pentecostal, or Apostolic. It doesn't matter if you gather in a sanctuary or in your living room. It's not about the music or the preaching. The Church is, point blank period, the glorious inheritance of God. It's not a place, it's not an activity, it's not even something that was created by accident when God decided to save people from themselves and the power of sin, hell, and the grave. It's more than a group of like-minded folks. It's more than people who love each other and love God and love others. It's one of God's most beautiful and intentional creations. God's special possession

(1 Pet 2:9). The Church is the blood-bought, Holy-Spirit-fueled, treasured possession of God. When God said, “I need something special for myself!”, God created the Church. What’s more, the existence and life of the Church is not just important on an earthly plane – it matters in the heavenlies. There is a spiritual war being waged and the Church is the representation of the victory of God. The Church is living, active proof that the wisdom of God is greater than the wisdom of every other being that ever existed. Ephesians 3:10-11 says this: “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities *in the heavenly realms*,<sup>11</sup> according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The Church is a testimony to beings in the spiritual realm and the natural realm that the power of God cannot be beaten, cannot be thwarted. I mean, God made a new humanity out of a million different kinds of humanity. He took *enemies* and made them *siblings*. Only the power of God can do that. And this new family screams into the darkness that our God is God.

Enter COVID-19. I saw the Church show off like never before. We extended ourselves in generosity, compassion, and faithfulness. Allow me to share a few examples. One woman from my church organized a community-wide childcare volunteer initiative. Households headed up by essential workers were able to sign their children up to be cared for during the day, and everyone who was willing was able to donate snacks, recreational resources, and their time to the effort. Many worshipping communities cared for their most vulnerable members by going on grocery shopping trips, mowing the lawn, and paying down utility bills. The Church did this and testified to the heavenly realms that the master plan of God was *actually working*. It’s easy to get distracted with the news cycle reporting that Christians are largely defying stay-at-home orders and claiming persecution. What I saw was completely the opposite: folks sheltered in place for months, faithfully attended Zoom meetings even though they’re a complete drag, and puttered around in their gardens until their local governments said it was okay for them to do otherwise. When it came to empowering the Church to be the Church, leading during COVID-19 was almost ...*easy*. This is where I could so clearly see the power of God at work in the hearts of the people of God. There was a divine spark that set the Church in motion - we got going! And we weren’t distracted by what people thought we should do or thought we

shouldn't do – we just worked to and for God's glory. Folks have literally been falling all over themselves to “outdo one another in showing honor (Rom 12:10).” It wasn't because they wanted to flaunt what they have or because they felt guilty or pressured by their peers into performing a false charity; I think they had a genuine desire to care for everyone, and were modeling the Macedonian church by giving far above what they were able. During this health crisis, I've seen what I can only imagine is the Church that Christ died to create.

There's a Church that is displayed on social media and in the general media that is foolish and self-seeking. But that's a facade. A distraction. The Church that I love is what's represented in my local body and in yours. People doing the work of God that grows out from a love of Jesus Christ. It's the moments of connection and compassion, of presence in sorrow, of hope in lament. It's the people that got out of their beds every morning and went to work as an essential worker in the fields of sanitation, medicine, food service, transportation, emergency services or retail because they believed they were working as unto the Lord. It's the folks who sheltered in place because they honored the charge to protect and love their loved ones both near and far. It's the ones who faithfully prayed for the sick in public and in private because they still believe God to be a healer. It's the ones who marched beside protesters who'd had *enough* and made visible their belief that God's will must be done on earth as it is in heaven. It's those who have repented and made restitution when confronted with their complicity in the racial violence against Black and Brown people. It's the ninety-nine-year-old church mother who pressed her way to the church building as soon as it reopened because she so deeply missed the assembly of the saints.

This is the Church in America in 2020. The enemy wants to divide us, turn us in on ourselves so that we would destroy this most beautiful piece of God's handiwork. We are in a spiritual war, and our enemy is a spiritual one. It seeks to blind us to the truth of who we are. And we are the righteousness of God. We are proof that God wins. We are proof that love wins. We are proof that darkness cannot and will not overcome light. We are proof that the blood of Jesus still works – it still purifies, qualifies, and justifies. We are proof that no scheme of the enemy will have lasting effect on us. Not even racism and White supremacy. We are the ones that have been set aside for eternity with God to

God's very own delight!

That's why I still believe in the Church. I've seen the awesome power of God at work on the local level, and I believe I will continue to see the Lord make the global, catholic Church exactly what she's supposed to be – a holy temple raised up together. I'm choosing not to be distracted by what I see, but just like my foremothers and forefathers before me, I'm going to cling to faith. My faith believes that the Church will repent for its complicity in the proliferation of White supremacy ideologies. My faith believes that the Church will cast down every idol we've erected. My faith believes that the Church will set Jesus in His rightful place – on the throne. My faith believes that the Church will look more and more as God designed her to be with each passing year. Things look a mess right now. Absolutely. But hear this and take heart: the Lord our God is most assuredly the “God who builds.” Our God is also the “One who dismantles.” There are some things in our hearts, in our lives, and our theologies that **MUST** be dismantled before God and God's people get to rebuilding something new. The walls of Jericho had to come down, too.

I can't wait to build something new. In fact, the building's already begun. And I'm so glad I get to do it with God's people, *my* people. Even when we act a fool, which is often, I'm reminded of the impregnable love of God that surrounds us, that changes us, that makes us the inheritance and righteousness of God.

## **Erin Rose**



Erin Rose lives and works in vibrant Richmond, Virginia, where she serves as Worship & Teaching Pastor at East End Fellowship. She is a graduate of the University of Virginia, and is currently enrolled as a graduate student at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Erin is a member of Urban Doxology, a ministry that is writing the soundtrack of reconciliation for the church. Her greatest joy lies in leading God's people in authentic worship, and teaching them the truth found in God's Word. She also enjoys eating delicious food, spending time with loved ones, and indulging in the occasional Netflix binge.



## THOUGHTS ON LEADERSHIP

Allen Buck

Whether participating in intentional friendships with local tribes, putting safety masks in bags, protesting, talking on the phone, making videos, Zooming, praying, or being a father and husband, I have a deep desire to do my part. It is my privilege to serve, and occasionally this means leading. As a true believer in what the Spirit is up to with us, I am grateful for my vocation. Leading today is humbling and often I am ill-equipped, but I do try. Feeling called, obligated, grateful, and engaged moves me to speak up and act up. The many contexts for leading are so very different, yet I've noticed a few things remain the same for my leadership roles.

I'm Cherokee. I'm a United Methodist Pastor. Right now, I work in community development helping our congregation, Great Spirit United Methodist Church, to become a Native American hub and spiritual family. I work with people of many nations, races, ethnicities, and orientations. In all those places, with all those diverse people, at some point, I find myself sharing an "Old Way." This "Old Way" is integral to what you'd hear and see me about today. In a way, it is in everything I try to do, reflecting the best of what the Spirit is doing with me. How I'm leading consistently includes saying and trying to live out of an orienting and generative principle – WE ARE ALL CONNECTED.

I'm a novice to this way, but feel very affirmed in the growing practice and implications of being about it. It isn't mine but, when invited, I'll always offer it or try to point to it. I'm not sure who is reading this right now, but it is my privilege to share it with you. In all the uncertainty of this pandemic, the real inequities in our shared systems, the joys, the despair, and the consumptive economies destroying the planet, I remain confident in *this* way. I feel it at my core. We are in it, together. We are all connected.

I'm immediately curious about people and systems I encounter on life's

adventure. Would they agree with me? Do they share a similar view, some understanding that we are all connected? If one agrees, then so what? What difference does that make in how one acts, thinks, and feels? What might it mean for our relationship with all of creation? And for those who disagree, how do they act differently? If there is truth in this way, then what does that say about all the things that divide us? Of the very real systems and institutions we've built or will build, upon what foundations are they grounded?

This connected orientation is older than written languages and humanity's sacred texts. You don't necessarily even need them to awaken to it – the principle is accessible through firsthand experiences. You don't have to create it, or possess a particular degree to access it. This isn't dependent upon or generated by us. We are not the center, but rather, we are in it. For instance, personal experiences in nature are often a first “doorway” to awakening to connectedness or interconnectedness. Sometimes this is described as oneness. Have you had experiences like that before? Go outside for a while. Find a dark place where you can see the stars. Listen. See. Smell. We are a grain of sand within a cosmic oneness. Like most mystical experiences, putting this into words is impossible. And so, I'm glad words aren't necessary to experience it. They fall so short. But my leadership right now is always pointing to it, with and without words. And, I'm not alone, which has been some comfort too. Through art, song, ceremonies, meals, rituals, and traditions, we express and embody this old way.

We do have our words about it too... So many words, often passed on from generation to generation. This “way” is in the traditional stories of our elders, informing how we relate to and interact with the rest of creation. From this way come our values and morals. So, for instance, we respect all creation, the four-leggeds, the stars, the waters, the winged ones, the other, and so on. They are us. We are as intimate as can be. And we face the consequences of every choice together at some level.

We see similar “understandings” expressed in many fields – science, psychology, ecology, and most religions (old and new). This way was familiar to Jesus or the authors of the gospels. We read of Jesus' praying “all be one” (John 17). The good news Jesus shared was that there is a Kin-dom,

the family of the One, available to all, even now. We are all related. Read the Hebrew stories of the beginnings in Genesis; you'll see it there too. Study Buddhism, and you'll see it. Hinduism, yes, there as well.

So this is how I'm leading right now, representing an old way which, for me, grounds everything else. We are all connected. I'm finding that there is an alignment with what I believe, say, and do that helps bring Spiritual partnerships to life. It has integrity and is one space where new spiritual families become alive, birthed, awakened, and created. I get to be a part of it! This way is full of potential. As a leader, I'm still saying and doing what I have been saying and doing – trying to share this experience with individuals and groups. It is amazing what develops. I think it could help us along life's journey, individually, and communally. From within this foundation, something blossoms, and following that Spirit becomes there, in connection with others.

Leadership for me right now also means constantly asking questions, of individuals and institutions, like, "What do you value? What do you believe? So what? So that? What are you going to do about it? What could you all do together? How can I help? Who is missing?" For those who agree we are connected, I have questions. For those who don't, I have questions. For myself, I have questions.

"Silence is Complicity" read the sign I held while protesting on a corner in NE Portland. I wanted the "No Justice, No Peace" one we'd made at home, but one of our children grabbed it first. My sign just didn't fit me. Generally, I agree with the notion and encourage people to speak up, but I want to qualify that in many ways. Again, it is my privilege to wear many leadership hats, and to be invited to speak more than my share in many unique contexts. Does that make me less complicit? If we're all connected, does my silence make me complicit? What about those who for a myriad of reasons haven't found ways to voice what they want to express, those who are silenced by circumstance, neglect, or force? Are they connected? Equal?

Silence may make one more complicit in certain spaces, but our speaking doesn't untangle the many ways we are all connected to each other, including our complicity in systems of injustice, by which, some more than

others, benefit. In all sorts of systems, we each have more or less power. For that matter, in the United States, we must recognize that even when we're breaking silence by speaking, shouting, writing, singing, protesting, preaching, exhorting the most prophetic, truthful, courageous, and righteous verbiage, we are all still complicit in systems, most of which were founded in White supremacy and inequality. We are in it - religion, education, finance, real estate, food, prisons, war, and pollution. Talking doesn't get us off the hook.

So, I get it, and agree we do need to speak up, but does everyone need to speak up all the time? Leadership doesn't just mean you get to do all the talking. Identified "leaders" more often need to be listening, hearing, seeing, sensing - not looking to insert our voices. As a United Methodist Minister, I was taught to always be ready to pray, to preach, to teach... We Methodists talk a lot and we expect our leaders to talk a lot. It is a double-edged sword, though. I recognize my privilege in often being invited to speak. And, often, I do not keep silent, but I've noticed something - when I am speaking, it is much harder to listen and hear. Where are the other people and the rest of creation speaking? What do our interconnected partners have to say? The hypocrisy in taking up space writing these words when we really need to hear from those who we don't see, those we don't hear, aren't lost on me. We do well to balance our speaking with the often-deeper need for listening. From there, founded in our interconnectedness and interdependence, we may discern when and how to speak and act

My gaze is on the ones without voice. Those finding it, demanding it, which our current realities are focusing and amplifying. Our ancestors, the generations coming next, the ones being excluded, forgotten, expended, kept out, and killed. I look at them, again mindful of our relatedness. It has been a month now since George Floyd's murder. Racial tensions are rightfully high. I wonder how police might hear "I can't breathe" if their work too was grounded in these old ways. Why couldn't they hear him? And would we hear him? Do we hear? Do we hear them? If we are all connected, then the systems we have in place are exposed and accountable for what they are actually doing - dividing, oppressing, and hurting. There won't be peace without equity and justice. How could there be? The time is now.

Look to the Spirit. She calls us to be a family. In the drums, in the songs, in the wind, in the words, in the stars, in our hearts and minds, She is doing what she does, calling us together. My relatives, I see you. You are not alone.

### **Rev. Dr. Allen Buck**



Rev. Dr. Allen Buck is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and Ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church. Currently, Allen is appointed to help develop an urban Native American hub and spiritual family at Great Spirit United Methodist Church (Portland, OR). Allen has been practicing contextual community development for over 20 years, primarily within the United Methodist Church. This work has included starting, staffing, coaching, and growing, numerous groups, gatherings, cohorts, congregations, events, and retreats.

After receiving an MDiv from Emory University, Allen completed his doctoral work at Drew University in community development. He advocates for equality, the environment, Native American rights, family, interfaith dialogue, and public service. Allen's passion is sharing an incarnational, relational, decolonized, spiritual, way of sharing the journey. He enjoys helping create community through relational small groups, prayer, shared values, and sacrificial service.

Allen cares deeply about social justice, especially the rights and protection of indigenous people's spaces, places, traditions, families, cultures, rights, and wisdom. Allen is passionate about the environment, civil/equal rights, leadership development, education, healing intergenerational trauma, housing, criminal justice reform, and poverty. He hopes to help decolonize the church by embodying a vision of beloved community.





## **CRITICAL BIPOC LEADERSHIP IN A PLAGUED SOCIETY**

Mayra Macedo-Nolan

A White female friend was just fired from her role as assistant pastor of a White evangelical church in my area. She and her Southeast Asian spouse and their joint intersectional identity, the questions they were asking about the role of the church in this moment of national reckoning regarding the church's complicity and participation of creating a society and systems that oppresses the image of God in marginalized people, were a threat to their comfort of the church's White leadership. But they were not the kind of threat that caused the church leaders to be cautious about the manner in which they handled the young woman's exhortation to the elders to engage in learning about systemic racism or how they responded to her reflections on social media. They were the kind of threat you simply get rid of. In 2020, when it seems the Church in America is waking up to the reality of White supremacy's malforming impact on the foundations of this nation, and the creation of governmental and societal systems, there remain a large number of churches that believe that silencing the prophets will save them and the spiritually destitute little bubbles they have created.

The truth is, churches like these will die soon. And the role of the prophet is to continue to announce God's vision of shalom and righteousness on earth as it is in heaven. It is a vision that is leagues beyond the shallow unity preached from pulpits over the last half century. A bankrupt vision that has created empty hug-it-out, colorblind theologies and ideologies that produced Christians who purposefully ignore the magnificent and intentional creativity of our God in forming our physical identities and sovereign geographical and historical placement on this earth, and trade it for a superficial homogeneity that brings with it a counterfeit community and a false peace. It is a vision that invites us in to the challenging journey of undoing. Undoing our sinful surrender to individualism and greed, calling us into a generosity and sacrifice for the greater good of humanity. Undoing our entitlement and privilege and calling us into service to one another and

a practical, selfless love of neighbor. This vision of unity is one we have not yet imagined. It is a reality beyond our ability to comprehend, much less attain outside the marvelous power of the Holy Spirit. Only by Her power can we shed our sinful human desires and move towards the unity that Jesus prayed we would experience.

As BIPOC, we have known the Church in America has been living on the fumes of this shallow unity for far too long. In her book, *I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision for Reconciliation*, Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes describes the exclusion of Women of Color from conversations about racial reconciliation and justice. Because of this exclusion, the solutions have lacked the perspective of the critical voices of those of us who make churches work. They have lacked accountability that is born of the challenges that Women of Color face daily just to survive. Challenges that forge creativity and perseverance, and call sloth, mediocrity and complacency on the table. We do not have time to waste and very few cares left to dispense. I contend that had the table of racial reconciliation and justice been hospitable to Women of Color, our present reality would be different. We would have made decisions differently and made different decisions. I cannot say with certainty that White supremacy would be completely dismantled, but we would not have arrived in 2020, half a century after the lynching of Dr. Martin Luther King, and after innumerable deaths of heroic freedom fighters, to a day where it seems not much has changed. Some proverbial asses would have been kicked along the line. We would certainly have made more progress. I have zero doubt of this.

Because this is in fact where we are, BIWOC must exercise discernment in how we spend our time and energy in the present and coming days. I have personally spent the last two decades in conservative Christian spaces making a case for the pursuit of the unity Jesus pleaded for on our behalf in John 17. I have expended generous amounts of emotional labor, recounting my story and those of my community in hopes that hearts of stone would be turned to flesh, only to have mine crushed by dismissal, denial, or worse, silencing and retribution. I have studied scripture, taken my lived experience, research, and traditional and non-traditional scholarship to develop thoughtful theologies from which I teach and lead, only to have my work marginalized, labeled “interesting,” or fully rejected and deemed

divisive by fellow clergy and church members alike. As BIWOC, our intersectional perspectives as Women of God, who see through the eyes of God, who love with the maternal heart of God, who care with the hands of God, are a gift to the Church and to this world. The rejection of these gifts by the Church does not diminish their beauty, dignity and value. As stewards of these sacred offerings, we must protect and judiciously apportion them with the greatest care.

Who are these God-ordained jewels for? Are they for the flourishing of the Church, even the Church which continues to reject them? Are they for our faithful White sistren and brethren, the servants of the God of Justice who rely on them for wisdom and encouragement on the road towards racial righteousness? Are they for the established and emerging BIPOC leaders who continue to be called into predominantly White-led Christian spaces to serve the Church? This is the most critical question to be asking of ourselves in this moment. The answer will aid us in being faithful to the work we have been prepared to administer.

In recent years, I have made it a practice to periodically intentionally question the work that I believe God has for me at a particular point in time. It began a few years ago when some of my colleagues were questioning theirs. It was inauguration weekend 2017. Our country had just elected the current president. For the majority of marginalized people in the U.S., this was a tragedy we did not believe would come to pass. A small group of BIWOC had gathered for a weekend with the intention to strategize our work around supporting other BIWOC working in Christian ministries. Most of us had traveled across states via car or plane for this intimate gathering. When we arrived, we took a look at one another and collectively took a deep breath. Not the type of breath you take to center yourself and find inner peace – but the deep breath you take as you realize you are about to walk alone through a dark forest in the middle of the night. After much honest conversation we realized we were at a crossroads and not certain that we all wanted to, or were even fit to, engage in the work we originally had in mind. In the end we decided to pause our work and figure out how we were gonna get our lives together. We agreed to reconvene at a later date. Some of us knew exactly what we were going to do. Others of us had no idea.

I was in the latter frame of mind, and deeply challenged by the certainty of some of my friends. This led me to a time of deep reflection. I admit it was a confusing time. However, it was a place I needed to go and I emerged from it a more thoughtful, purposeful leader, and this practice has proven worthwhile each time I have undertaken it.

I moved forward with confidence that the work in front of me was for me. As I did that, I was able to be present for the young Black woman on our staff who had to convince White leaders of the impropriety and racist nature of a White volunteer putting his hand in her hair, all while feeling violated and disbelieved. And I was able to be present to advocate for and bring correction when a millennial Latina was asked to chair an important committee, only to later have her motives questioned when she applied ethics of accountability and integrity into her work, shedding negative light on past and current White leadership. It is important to examine the place, time, and focus of the work that is for you. And it is crucial to ask this now. Some may be asking the question for the first time. Regardless, the implications for self and community are ones of life or death. Absent of God's divine appointment, we may perish.

Similar to the critical contributions BIWOC have to offer towards the decolonizing, liberative work needed to reshape society, our communities desperately need our nurture and care. A recent Gallup Poll conducted for workplaces impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic identified the greatest needs of workplace communities as trust, stability, and hope. BIWOC are these without thinking, as they are inherent in how we practice community, navigate households, and raise children in a patriarchal, White supremacist society. Our communities share similar needs and we are beautifully equipped to lead within them. The traits and values often overlooked in predominately White-male led spaces – expressiveness, empathy, balance, self and community care – are invaluable for our communities in this time. For Latinas, the passionate expressionism we learned, that is often used to define our “Latina-ness,” brings a sense of unquestionable authenticity to communities of color in the midst of a national atmosphere of mistrust. As BIWOC from collectivist cultures, our very presence signals to our communities that none of us walks or fights alone. We carry the pain of Black mothers who have lost their children to police violence as if it were

our very own. Our gifts are fitting and essential for the healing and progress of our communities.

Self-awareness, coupled with appreciation of our unique and cultural gifts is critical for discerning the work that is for us. The regular practice of discerning my work allows me to be confident that in this moment my prime energy must be directed to supporting, encouraging, amplifying voices, opening doors for, carrying bags for, and generally making and keeping space for BIPOC. Secondly, my time is available to White accomplices who have been willing to walk with me, and be led by me, lovingly (or at times harshly), towards encouragement and exhortation of their responsibility to fight with us. The particular spaces that I am burdened for most are those where BIWOC, BIPOC Millennial and Gen Z-ers dwell. They are the present and the future. While Boomer and Gen X BIWOC have been in the struggle for most of our lives, largely without substantial power to shape the masses, oftentimes our voices have diminished over time as we have contorted ourselves to fit in the tiny boxes built for us by the patriarchy. Millennial BIPOC generally reject the White supremacist patriarchal systems and structures and reserve allegiance to Brown Jesus alone. Neither will settle for mediocrity. Neither will forfeit accountability. Both are grossly underestimated and worth every ounce of my time.

In this historic time of forced deceleration and focus induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, BIPOC leaders must not constrict. Rather, the aggrandizement of our prophetic leadership is what our communities and this nation desperately need to survive and flourish. Our boldness sustains our comrades and inspires emerging leaders. Our innovation and leadership, often dismissed or perceived as threatening to the dominant culture, is required to reshape malformed spaces and create new ones. As the collective head of eager White Christians spin and they find that they can no longer sit idly by while their friends are harmed by systems that exclude, oppress, and sanction their demise, we must press forward, declare our truth, magnify one another's voices and lead the Church into the Promised Land.

## Mayra Macedo-Nolan



Mayra grew up in East Los Angeles, and currently lives in Pasadena, CA. She serves on the pastoral staff of Lake Avenue Church, a large congregation that has been at the same location for over 120 years. She has spent the past 18 years leading in her local community and casting vision for Kingdom-neighbor-loving. Her love for the local and global church fuels her speaking and teaching focus on issues related to leadership, race/ethnicity, gender, faith, justice, and the Church. Mayra spends lots of time mentoring and learning from younger leaders in her church and community. She serves on various local and national boards and is Chair of the Board of Directors of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA). She is married to Chris and they have four children ranging in age from 7 to 29. Besides Jesus, Mayra loves her community, the challenging and sacred call of pursuing justice....and....shoes.

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