

# ACTING AGAINST RACISM



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**\*\*WITH ACTION STEPS FOR GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS\*\***

## CONVERSATION GUIDE

## PART ONE

# Think about racism, your role, and how you want to help bring about change

### Becoming less defensive about White privilege

One of the unspoken privileges of being White in America is the privilege to assume that racism is not a pressing topic. To many White people, it makes little sense to expend energy talking about something largely remote from their daily experience. Race is what other people have, and racism is what other people are responsible for. When one's life is shaped within the confines of neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and worship settings that are mostly or entirely White, Whiteness feels quintessentially American. It's normal. The standard. The default. Every other skin color is abnormal, other, diverse.

Because structural racism gets discussed so reluctantly within White enclaves, it's little wonder that racial illiteracy rears its head when a death like George Floyd's occurs and millions take to the streets. Suddenly White innocence gets exposed, and people race to catch up on what they have largely ignored. Hefty reading lists get shared. Antiracism titles go on back order. Uncomfortable conversations about White privilege tumble into the open as people try out new vocabularies and test their voice.

Racial credentialing enters the scene, too: *I have a couple of friends who are Black* . . . Shaming goes on a rampage. Guilt ratchets up. Defensiveness shifts into high gear.

I've noticed that few subjects spark defensive behaviors among White people quite like White privilege. Plenty of folks take umbrage at that label because it feels to them like an accusation of personal racism, a threat to their way of life, an indictment of their niceness. To them, the word *privilege* connotes visible perks or benefits usually associated with class or wealth.

What they don't see is a racialized society where privilege is essentially an exemption from the weighty psychic burdens that afflict Black people every day. If you're White, you don't have to deal with negative assumptions being made about you based on the color of your skin. If you're Black, you deal with it every day. As someone has put it: White privilege doesn't mean your life isn't hard. It just means the color of your skin isn't one of the things that makes it harder.

Here's what the Christian faith helps me know and reminds me to tell my most defensive-minded friends: look, you have some tools in the toolbox of your faith life that are exciting to put to work in our world of racial inequity. Start by letting go of the defensiveness. That's a must. It's a constrictive survival response that only separates you from God. I know we equate letting go of something, including cherished assumptions, with deprivation. But claw marks don't set you free. According to Jesus, relinquishment is a ticket to abundant life. Reexamining personal behaviors and perspectives isn't just a Lenten project. We no longer have the luxury of living racially unaware lives. Where you feel uncomfortable, disempower it. Let go of your brittleness. The Lord helps us know that we don't have to secure ourselves against insecurity.

So relax into the power of faith. Do some soul searching. Take what scares the hell out of you about yourself and pick it up, much like that cross Jesus mentions. Then, move your ego aside, much like that denying of self that Jesus commands. And live! Live with the mind of Christ, humbly open to changing all that needs to be changed about you and your world. 

## S T U D Y   Q U E S T I O N S

1. *What is your experience with White privilege?*
2. *What makes you the most uncomfortable about reflecting on White privilege?*
3. *How can the “tools in your toolbox of faith,” as described by Peter Marty in this article, help you process racism’s impact on your life and your response to it—whether you have benefited from privilege or been negatively impacted by racism?*

**Action:** *Find a partner to have an honest and ongoing discussion with about your thoughts on White privilege and racial discrimination. You may begin by sharing your background and how your experiences may have shaped your thoughts. Evaluate where you are today and what you’d like to change about your own perception. (If it helps, name one stereotype or feeling you have regarding a race other than your own; explore what the stereotype is based on and how it impacts you, your family, and others.)*

## James Baldwin reminds us not to be surprised by this

**E**ven as we mourn the incalculable loss of human life in the COVID-19 pandemic, we also mourn yet another onslaught of anti-Black violence that highlights a long-standing sickness in the American body politic. The killings of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, and George Floyd in Minnesota were tragic events on multiple levels. So was a White woman’s blatant attempt to intimidate Christian Cooper in New York City’s Central Park. These events have claimed national attention partly because of video evidence that shows the way some White people feel entitled to use violence and intimidation to control, and even kill, Black people.

Am I deeply saddened by all this? Yes. Am I surprised by any of it? Absolutely not.

The justified sadness caused by events like these can express itself in lament. Lament is a ruggedly honest declaration that something is deeply wrong and severely out of joint or that someone who is dearly loved is now significantly absent. In our family rooms, classrooms, cultural spaces, and private places, we must encourage personal and communal lament.

It takes many forms: guttural groans, copious tears, long stretches of silence, fits of rage, quiet questioning, bittersweet remembering, tension-riddled tossing and turning. We lament because people mat-

ter to us, because values such as dignity and the presumption of safety matter to us. We do it because there remains somewhere in us a faint hope that today’s pain will not completely swallow tomorrow’s possibilities. As an educator charged with cultivating the hearts and minds of emerging leaders, I lament the violence and death in these difficult times, and I encourage our students to lament.

I harbor a growing intolerance, however, for people acting surprised by tragic events like these. Why would anyone be surprised?

“Nostalgia is the enemy of history,” insist sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. “We frequently accept . . . tales that corrupt our understanding of the past and mislead us about the present.” I know enough US history—and I have had enough encounters with racism—to never again be surprised by any form of aggression against Black people.

We will slow the spread of the coronavirus by wearing masks. We will slow the spread of virulent racism by unmasking the presumption of ignorance. It’s due only to willful ignorance that

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some people are surprised by the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 or by aggressive policing of communities of color.

**D**eep down, most adults and many young people in the United States know where the color and class lines are. These visible and invisible lines rope people into better or worse levels of economic, educational, personal, and communal well-being. While the landscapes and skylines of our communities have changed dramatically over the centuries, these color and class lines were laid down a long time ago by the architects of the American republic. Unfortunately, they have proven thus far to be indelible.

In 1963, as the United States was reeling from highly publicized episodes of racial violence, James Baldwin delivered his speech “A Talk to Teachers.” With probing words, the literary sage exploded the myth of ignorance and, along with it, that of American innocence. Baldwin remarked:

Black [people] were brought here as a source of cheap labor. They were indispensable to the economy. In order to justify that [Black people] were treated as though they were animals, the white republic had to brainwash itself into believing that they were, indeed, animals and deserved to be treated like animals. . . . What I am trying to suggest to you is that it was not an accident. . . . It was a deliberate policy hammered

into place in order to make money from black flesh. And now, in 1963, because we have never faced this fact, we are in intolerable trouble.

More than half a century later, we are still in trouble—but trouble need not last always.

Educational institutions—from colleges to elementary, middle, and secondary schools—are engaging in robust discussions about equity. While equity has many components, it certainly entails *intentional* individual and institutional efforts to counteract the disproportionate privilege and power that are unfairly afforded to some people while denied to others. Those of us who are teachers can create equitable places and practices by courageously dispelling ignorance—both the benign lack of knowledge that welcomes instruction and the malignant ignoring of knowledge that revels in nostalgia.

In these times of violence and death, our classrooms—whether in person or online—can be sites for sharing meaningful information and forming moral identity. According to Kelly Brown Douglas, a moral identity “is one that is relieved of pretensions to superiority. It lets go of any myths that suggest one people is more valuable than another. . . . A moral identity affirms the shared humanity of all human beings.”

Let’s create a world where everybody counts, irrespective of color, class, creed, or condition. Now *that* would be a most welcome surprise. CC

## S T U D Y   Q U E S T I O N S

1. *Brad Braxton asserts that we know where “the color and class lines are.” Do you agree with him? Why or why not? What questions do you have about this assertion?*
2. *Write about color and class lines in your community. Are there clearly drawn lines? Do you know and befriend people on all sides of that line, and does that make a meaningful difference?*
3. *What is your definition of equity? What do you believe should be done, if anything, to create a more equitable society?*

**Action:** *Reach out beyond your comfort zone this week and journal about what happens when you cross social, class, or racial lines. How did it make you feel? How did the person you reached out to respond? For example, did you feel clumsy, like you said or did the wrong thing? Consider exploring how you felt with your partner.*

## I believe racism is wrong. So what?

Last year Eddie Glaude Jr., who teaches religion and African-American studies at Princeton, gave a lecture at the college I serve as chaplain. Afterward I joined a group of students and faculty to discuss the issues he raised. Our conversation ranged about freely but mostly circled around mass incarceration, police violence against Black males, and the housing crisis in African-American communities.

Sitting across from me was an African-American student with short dreadlocks and a red T-shirt. I knew this young man, Denton, only by my professor husband's admiration of his work as a philosophy major. After listening for quite a while, he finally spoke up. "Well," Denton said with a little shake of his head, "I pretty much think that White people created these problems, and so White people need to fix them. That burden should not be on us."

His words were understated yet damning, and they silenced the room. As the chaplain, I struggled to come up with an appropriate response. I wanted Denton to know that I was on his side. I also wondered if I really was. I didn't want to express my guilt over being a part of the problem, as such confessional statements seem to be primarily about me and my need for redemption. And redemption requires an honest desire for change—change for which I was unprepared. I wanted to know what exactly needed to change, what I needed to give up.

I also didn't want to come across as a self-congratulating White antiracist—as the one who clearly understood Denton, unlike those ignorant White people who don't. So I just sat there, wondering what to do, what to say, and who to be.

This wasn't the first time I struggled to find an appropriate response to a person of color. My background left me woefully unprepared for such conversations. I grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods, schools, and churches. My family moved around Michigan every few years as my father was promoted to higher positions at his bank. As a teenager I moved to the affluent Detroit suburb Bloomfield Hills, which my parents chose for its high school. Our house, a two-story colonial in a cul-de-sac, was a relatively modest one for the neighborhood. One of the Detroit Pistons lived nearby, in a palatial estate protected by a brick wall and a black iron gate. I don't remember any other Black neighbors.

Something happens to us when we grow up without people

of color around. We are habituated to a White world in which people of color will always appear to be strange, different, and other. Stereotypes are fed because there is no one nearby to dispel them. Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, and Jackie Joyner-Kersey were my models of Black life and culture. So, I reasoned, all Black people have rhythm, can dance, and are athletic. When my track team's bus transported us to a predominantly Black school closer to the city, I instinctively assumed that I couldn't win against those athletes.

But as much as I admired and coveted these stereotypical Black traits, I also knew that I did not want to be Black. Being Black, according to the news, also meant being poor and dangerous. When my family ventured into the city, I carefully guarded my purse. When Black males went by I felt my body respond instinctively by going rigid and tense.

I know better now, but that does not always mean that I act better. Most times I don't act at all, impaired as I am by my ignorance, my uncertainty as to what would be helpful, and my deeply engrained habits. And the way society works—basically, in my favor—I don't have to do much. As philosopher Shannon Sullivan reveals in *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism*, in order to be counted as a good White person today I simply need to be against racism. I do not have to do so at my own expense, and certainly not at the peril of my own White people. There's no need for me to work toward the goal of ending racial injustice; it's enough for me to be recognized as antiracist.

My first chance to act on these antiracist principles arose when I was 16. My father needed to join a country club so he could entertain clients on the golf course. I remember the decision being difficult, because my parents were not country club types. They didn't believe in the extravagance and weren't going to build their social lives around their membership. They shopped around and were considering joining a club in nearby Birmingham, Michigan.

Then I learned that this club did not welcome African Americans as members, and I confronted my father about it. I don't remember the scene exactly, only the feeling that this was wrong. But he loves to tell the story, with a note of pride about

how his daughter threw such a fit over this racial injustice that my parents decided to join a different, less exclusive club instead, one a little farther from home. I adored this recognition from my father. And from this experience I learned that acting as an antiracist didn't have to cost anything more than a slightly longer trip to the country club.

After Glaude's lecture at our college, he paused to take a question from a White professor. The question soon turned into a speech, the point of which seemed to be to inform everyone what a good enlightened liberal she was. The speech was couched in a message for our students of color: they should share their experiences so others could learn from them. "I tell my students to teach me, to help me learn," she concluded passionately, as if expecting a round of applause.

Glaude paused for a moment. Then, slowly and more graciously than was warranted, he said, "You know, it's *tiring* trying to teach people all the time. There are books you can read." And the Black and Latino students in the room exploded in spontaneous, raucous applause.

**G**laude's comment led me to read James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*. I was immediately pulled in to the craft of Baldwin's prose—his detailed scenes, his layered structure, his profound honesty and self-awareness. I was thoroughly enjoying getting to know Baldwin's work—until I came to a scene that brought me to an abrupt stop.

In the title essay, Baldwin describes the rage, the blind fever that finally overcame him after he was repeatedly turned away from restaurants and diners because of the color of his skin. In one restaurant, a young White waitress with "great, astounded, frightened eyes" was sent to tell the hungry Baldwin that he would not be fed. Baldwin writes:

She did not ask me what I wanted, but repeated, as though she had learned it somewhere, "We don't serve Negroes here." She did not say it with the blunt, derisive hostility to which I had grown so accustomed, but, rather, with a note of apology in her voice, and fear. This made me colder and more murderous than ever. . . . Somehow, with the repetition of that phrase, which was already ringing in my head like a thousand bells of a nightmare, I realized that she would never come any closer and that I would have to strike from a distance. There was nothing on the table but an ordinary water-mug half full of water, and I picked this up and hurled it with all my strength at her.

Baldwin's raw, violent anger upended me. At first I did not

want to understand, because to understand the rage would make it acceptable—and it was too frightening for me to accept it. I fought with myself, tempted to close the book on Baldwin. How easy it would be to dismiss him as just another dangerous Black man.

I couldn't close the book, though, because I found myself in Baldwin's story. The White waitress could have been me. She followed the norms and rules set by White society; she did as her employers told her to do. She was sorry for what she knew was wrong, but not sorry enough to change or rebel. The dark stranger at her table may have frightened her, but she was more afraid of what she risked losing as a good White woman—her job, her reputation, her position of privilege.

She felt powerless, even though she wasn't. She had a voice, but she used it only to perpetuate her own domination. She had a body, but no muscle of hers moved to cross the line of segregation. She didn't act, she didn't speak up or out, because she knew that this angry Black man had more to fear from the restaurant full of White people and its White owners and the White police officers who would come when *she* called. It was safe for her to do nothing. So though she empathized with Baldwin's plight, she offered him nothing more than a tone of apology as she rejected him like everyone else.

Sitting at the desk in my home office, holding Baldwin's book open to this page, I stared blankly out the window overlooking the green of our neighbor's yard and felt the full effect of this confrontation. I felt unbalanced, uprooted from my position of safety and privilege. I didn't want Baldwin's rage and resentment to include me. But of course it did. And this, I believe, is when the first flicker of understanding lit within my mind. I had to feel the heat of this rage before I could even begin to appreciate the nightmare of the African-American experience.

Baldwin later came to terms with his anger, noting the destructive nature of hatred, which "never fails to destroy the man who hate[s]." But he also wrote that "there is not a Negro alive who does not have [this rage] in his blood." And I recalled hearing it, though in more restrained form, simmering in the voices of students like Denton who are frustrated and tired, angry and resentful that here, in 2016, White people still fail to understand.

Rage can consume and destroy, but it can also serve as a pure, refining fire, burning away all that blinds us to the reality of human suffering. I think of the story where Jesus enters the temple and, in a fit of rage, overturns the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sell doves. I wonder if those confronted by Jesus' rage listened. I wonder if we good White people will, too.

## S T U D Y Q U E S T I O N S

1. Teri McDowell Ott shares a story of a time Eddie Glaude Jr. gave a lecture at the college where she is chaplain. An African American student said the burden to fix racism should not be on African Americans. Do you agree with the student? Explain why or why not.

2. How do you view your role in “fixing” racism? How are you actively fulfilling that role? What are some questions you have or some things you’d like others to consider when seeking answers?

**Action:** Make a plan to step up how you participate in erasing racism. What will you do today? This week? This year?

## How do we know Black lives matter to God?

**A**nselm’s dictum that theology is “faith seeking understanding” perfectly describes my theological journey. Even before I knew the word *theology*, I struggled to understand the meaning of my faith in relationship to my Blackness. This struggle continues for me today, although perhaps in a more focused way. While I initially wondered about the propriety of faith in what I believed then to be a “White Jesus,” I now struggle with the efficacy of faith at all.

James Baldwin once said that there comes a time in the life of every Black person in America when they must face the “shock . . . that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance . . . has not pledged allegiance to you.” And now, as the mother of a six-foot-tall, loc-wearing, 27-year-old Black man—fearing for his life in this nation as much as I did when he was born, and realizing the gravity of sin in this country that is a mortal threat to all Black life—I find myself facing the shock that perhaps the “God of Jesus Christ,” in whom Black people have pledged faith, has not really pledged allegiance to us.

In light of that reality, I find myself reflecting not primarily upon how my theological mind has changed but upon how my journey to understand my faith continues. This journey is marked by two books, my first, *The Black Christ*, and my most recent, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*.

The origins of *The Black Christ* began in my childhood. When I was six, I heard the whispers of the adults around me talking about how awful it was that a church was bombed and four little

girls were killed. I can remember hearing someone say that “the White man” who did it would probably never be caught, and if he were caught nothing was likely to happen to him. I now know they were talking about the 1963 Birmingham church bombing.

Around that same time in my childhood, I remember seeing pictures on the news of White policemen with dogs attacking Black people, and what struck me most were images of dogs attacking Black children. I didn’t know what I was watching, but those images were seared into my mind. I also remember eavesdropping as my parents talked about a man in Mississippi, Medgar Evers, who was killed in his driveway in front of his family. My parents discussed what a shame it was, but I also heard them say that nothing would probably happen to the perpetrator (if he was even caught).

I have no doubt that these whispered conversations and violent images are what prompted me around that time to ask my father why White people didn’t like us. I don’t recall his answer, but I remember thinking that if I could figure out the reason, then maybe we could do something about it and then White people would stop treating us so badly. I was certain that we must have done something to warrant such treatment.

After some time had passed, I picked up the conversation

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with my father. As we were leaving our home one afternoon, I stopped on the porch and said, “Daddy, I figured out the answer to my question” (as if he and I had been having this continuous conversation).

He asked, “The answer to what question?”

I responded, “To what we did that made White people not like us and treat us so badly.”

“Oh, what did you figure out?”

“We didn’t do anything. They just treat us like this because they want to. It could be anybody; it just happens to be us.”

I didn’t realize then that it wasn’t just us, or that it was more than simply a question of whether White people liked us. What was important for me at the time was the discovery that there was nothing wrong with Black people; rather, there was something wrong with White people. This was my first understanding of White racism—the notion of a problem with White people, the enforcers of the color line.

It was also around that time that I first became aware of the realities of racialized economic injustice. When I was about seven years old, I remember riding with my parents through the inner city of my hometown, Dayton, Ohio. It was a rainy evening. I looked out the window of the car and noticed a little girl and boy crossing the street. They were about my age and Black like me. I presumed them to be sister and brother. They were a bit disheveled and not properly dressed for the cold rainy weather. From my perspective they looked poor and hungry. Tears filled my eyes as I imagined for them a life of struggle. In the midst of my tears I made a silent vow to one day come back and rescue those two children from the blight of Dayton’s inner city.

Initially, I fantasized that I would grow up while they remained young. I would become a teacher and somehow change their life options. As I got older, the thought of those children never left me. They created within me a deep sense of accountability to the poor and marginalized people of our society, especially those who looked like me. I was determined to find a vocation that makes a just difference in the lives of Black people, particularly those who were trapped in life-negating conditions.

My sense of vocation didn’t come only from the memory of those children. I was also motivated by my love for Jesus. I grew up in St. Margaret’s, the only Black Episcopal church in Dayton. Nearly every Sunday I would awaken my parents and ask them to take me to church, even if they weren’t planning to go that day. Most weeks I attended both the 8 a.m. and 11 a.m. services, plus Sunday school in between.

One of the reasons I liked going to church, especially as a young child, was that I loved hearing stories about Jesus. One of the most compelling yet saddest stories I heard was about his birth. I simply could not understand how people allowed a baby

to be born in a cold barn and laid in a manger. I cried every time we sang, “Away in a manger, no crib for a bed / The little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head.” Those words reminded me of the girl and boy I’d seen that rainy evening. Somehow, I instinctively knew that there was a connection between Jesus’ manger birth and those children’s inner-city life. As time went on, I would try to figure out this connection—but not before a period of profound doubt.

I entered college with a deep pride in my Blackness, along with an intense understanding of what W. E. B. Du Bois meant when he wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk* that “the problem of the Twentieth Century [in America] is the problem of the color line.” My experiences of growing up in Dayton—a city with a history of segregation and race riots—and of being called the *N*-word schooled me in the violence of White racism. These experiences also made me very wary of White people.

As this wariness grew, I became increasingly impatient with the color line that circumscribed and threatened Black life. Moreover, I recognized that as long as the color line existed, far too many Black children would be born into social conditions that fostered death—not life. My accountability to those two children I’d seen crossing the street became a passionate commitment to dismantle the White racist color line. Ironically, as that commitment grew, my belief in Jesus waned.

By my junior year of college, my childhood love for Jesus was slowly being replaced by a deep skepticism. I wanted to know if the Jesus I’d loved unconditionally as a child loved me back unconditionally. I wondered if my Blackness made a difference. After all, the Jesus of my Sunday school lessons was always pictured as White. This fact alone made me skeptical of his love for me—and it led me to question the propriety of my love for him.

How could a White Jesus ever care about me, not to speak of caring for poor Black children? And how could I, a Black person, ever have faith in a White Jesus? I didn’t want to abandon the church—or Jesus—but I needed answers to these questions. I was experiencing an agonizing crisis of faith. And then my college chaplain, David Woodyard, introduced me to James Cone’s book *A Black Theology of Liberation*.

When I opened the book, I could not believe what I was reading. Cone pronounces, “Jesus is the Black Christ!” He further explains, “The definition of Christ as Black means that he represents the complete opposite of the values of White culture . . . [and] leads the warfare against the White assault on Blackness.” When I read these words, my questions were answered. I could be Black with a love for Jesus without contradiction, because in fact Jesus was Black like me. And most significantly, as Cone made clear, because Jesus “was born in a stable and cradled in a manger (the equivalent of a beer case in a ghetto alley),” he was one with all those Black children

who were trapped behind the life-draining color line of inner-city realities.

Essentially, Cone's declaration of Jesus' Blackness opened me to a whole new appreciation of my faith, the faith of my grandmother. My love for Jesus was renewed. My angst turned to excitement. This discovery marked the beginning of my purposeful theological journey. I wanted to learn as much as I could about my Black faith and the Black Christ that was at its center. Writing *The Black Christ* was the first step of that journey.

**D**uring this part of my journey, it was Jesus' manger birth that held the most meaning for me. That he was born in the starkness of a manger allowed me to see his connection to that Black girl and boy who had made such an imprint upon my childhood imagination. His manger birth convinced me that he understood the struggles, if not the hopes and dreams, of Black children who were trapped in manger-like conditions of living.

Jesus' manger birth continues to have theological significance for me as an indicator of his intrinsic bond with those on the outside, that is, on the wrong side of the color line. Nevertheless, as my youthful images of Black children crossing the street were steadily overtaken with images of Black children dying in the street, it was Jesus' crucifixion death that came to the forefront of my faith.

Some 50 years after asking my father why White people treated Black people so badly, I found myself asking that question again. And once again, images of Black children in the street were haunting me. They were the faces of Trayvon, Jordan, Renisha, Jonathan, Tamir, Sandra, Michael, and so many more. These were young Black men and women being murdered at the hands of White people, for no apparent reason other than being Black. Worse yet, the White people who killed them were getting away with it. My father's words, "nothing will happen to the White man who did it," were echoing in my mind. History was repeating itself, and I wanted to know why.

Why were our Black children's lives as much at risk—if not more so—as they'd ever been in our nation's history? After all, the nation had just elected its first Black president, which signaled to some the advent of a postracial society. What was going on? I had to know, for now more was at stake for me than the relief that Black people did nothing to deserve such treatment. Our children's lives were at stake. My son's life was at stake. I needed answers.

Those answers began with the recognition that the problem was about more than White racism and whether or not White people liked Black people. It was about the lethal and insidious reality of White supremacy that is endemic to the very fabric of this nation. White supremacy is the system of structural, cultural,

and ideological realities that protect and privilege Whiteness. Whiteness, therefore, is not a benign social-racial construct. It is both the foundation and the capital of White supremacy.

Recognizing this further complicated my understanding of the color line in America. The problem of the color line is not a matter of White people being overtly racist. Rather, it is about White people benefiting from White supremacist realities—whether or not they acknowledge these benefits. And the more they benefit from White supremacy, the more Black life is socially, economically, and physically endangered. What therefore became clear to me in this part of my theological journey was that White supremacy is the original sin to which this nation is still held captive.

Ironically, this recognition only caused my appreciation for the faith of my grandmother to grow. I felt indebted to a faith that was forged in the midst of one of the most perverse and inhumane realities of Black life: slavery. This was a faith, as Howard Thurman says, that "has had to fight against the disillusionment, despair, and the vicissitudes of American history." This was a faith in the Jesus who, in being crucified, revealed his utter solidarity with Black people as they struggled to survive the crucifying cross of White supremacy. That Jesus was crucified affirmed his absolute identification with the Trayvons, the Jordans, the Renishas, and all the other Black men and women whose lives were lost to White supremacist violence. It was in their faces that I could see Jesus.

Thus, as my youthful images of Black children crossing the street became overtaken with images of Black children dying in the street, Jesus' crucifixion death came to the forefront of my faith. At the end of that part of my journey, marked by the publication of *Stand Your Ground*, I was able to echo the words of Trayvon Martin's father: "My heart was broken, but my faith was not shattered."

**B**ut now here I am, five years after *Stand Your Ground*, calling out more names of Black lives lost, seeking to understand not just the what but perhaps the why of Black faith.

*I am Trayvon. Say her name. Hands up, don't shoot. I can't breathe. Black lives matter.* These mantras filled my mind recently as I ran 2.23 miles to honor and demand justice for Ahmaud Arbery, who was gunned down by two White men while jogging in a Georgia suburb. By the time I completed the run, I was breathless, but not because my legs were tired or my lungs were winded. I was breathless because my heart was heavy and my spirit was troubled. Ahmaud had become the latest in a long list of young Black lives lost to the hate of White racist violence. Then there was Breonna Taylor. Then George Floyd.

In response to President John Kennedy's assassination, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "While the question of 'Who killed President Kennedy?' is important, the question, 'What killed him?' is more

important.” Inasmuch as what is killing Black people in this country is about the systemic, structural, and cultural realities of White supremacy, I have become increasingly aware that it is also about much more than that. It is about the collective soul of America.

The soul—that which connects human beings to our aspirational selves, animating and propelling us to do better, pushing us toward the fullest potential of what it means to be *good*—reflects the essence of our humanity. The soul of who we are as divinely made creatures, therefore, is not defined by the mercurial and compromising protestations of human beings, nor is it accountable to the politics and biases of human history. Rather, it is inextricably bound to the transcendent arc of the universe that bends toward justice—that perfect goodness which is the loving justice of God. Our soul connects us to the beloved community, which God promises for all of us, a community where all persons are treated as the sacred creations that they are.

The bodies of Black people in the streets raise the question: What has alienated America from its very soul, thereby normalizing violence against Black lives and preventing all people from reaching for their best selves? The answer: Whiteness itself.

Whiteness *is* an inherently oppositional and violent construct. Not only does it stand in opposition to all those who are not White, but most insidiously, it opposes the very humanity of a people. Whiteness is soul-crushing, as it prevents those who refuse to name and let go of its privileges from living into who they are—sacred beings created in the image of a loving and just God. White America is alienated from its very soul, that is, its humanity. This fact has dire consequences for Black lives—and for Black faith.

In fighting against the White supremacist realities of his time, King noted that “the law can’t make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me. . . . So while the law may not change the hearts of men, it does change the habits of men. And when you change the habits of men, pretty soon the attitudes and the hearts will be changed.” But as the “Make America great again” politics of this nation has recently revealed, changing laws is not enough—because a heartless and soulless people will defy just laws and create inhumane ones.

In this regard, Whiteness has a profound spiritual impact upon this nation. It renders it without the moral leadership to lead it back to its better angels, that is, to be reconciled with its soul. And as long as the soul of this nation is compromised by Whiteness, then Black lives will be at risk. This means that the realities of prison, poverty, policing, and “greatness” politics will continue to obscure the compassionate, loving, and healing justice that is the grace of a crucified Christ.

It is with this recognition that I have come full circle on my theological journey. More than 25 years after *The Black Christ*, I am in the midst of another crisis of faith as I seek to discern God’s presence and power during an unrelenting war on Black lives.

But now, I am pushed not by my questions alone but mostly by my son’s questions to me: “How do we really know that God cares when Black people are still getting killed? How long do we have to wait for the justice of God?” he asks. “I get it, that Christ is Black, but that doesn’t seem to be helping us right now.” These are the questions that I now seek to answer. Left to be determined is how those answers will change my theological mind. CC

## S T U D Y Q U E S T I O N S

1. *Can you identify with Kelly Brown Douglas’s struggle to understand God in light of her Blackness? If so, what specifically do you identify with? If not, what questions would you have for her that might help you better understand her position?*

2. *What moments in history have made you take notice of the role of race in America?*

3. *How would you answer the question Douglas poses: “What has alienated America from its very soul, thereby normalizing violence against Black lives and preventing all people from reaching for their best selves?”*

**Action:** *What can you personally do to help heal America’s soul?*

## PART TWO

## More steps to alleviate racism

## Why are so many White Americans standing up for racial justice?

The weeks since the killing of George Floyd have seen some of the most sustained protests in US history, with swelling outrage at racial injustice and a growing acknowledgment of the reality of systemic racism in policing and throughout society. We in the church may celebrate the promise of justice so rapidly pooling and beginning to roll down. Yet, as a pastor of a majority White church, I also wonder what it means that this has happened at this particular time—when so many of our church buildings are closed.

Americans' support for the Black Lives Matter movement increased almost as much in late May and early June as it had in the previous two years, according to a June 10 *New York Times* poll. A *Washington Post* poll the day before found that 74 percent of Americans support the protests. These numbers are reflected in daily headlines of mainstream acceptance, everywhere from NASCAR to the NFL to the block letters leading down the road to the White House. As many have noted, at worst this is performative ally-ship seeking to keep pace with inevitable change. At best it is a long anticipated and worked-for generational moment to enact substantive reform. In any case, it is a markedly accelerated public shift that represents a great deal of social-political power.

Such progress is owed primarily to the expertise and long, hard work of Black activists, organizers, and leaders—as well as to the legacies and loved ones of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and the countless others whose names we say. Some have argued that the power of the moment is also tied to the conditions of COVID-19 quarantine, which Black Lives Matter cofounder Opal Tometi describes as “a period that has been deeply personal to millions of Americans and residents of the United States, and that has them more tender or sensitive to what is going on.” This period of heightened awareness has afforded many people—especially late-arriving White allies—more time to listen, learn, and act. That’s because of altered schedules and closed buildings at schools and offices—and churches.

It makes me wonder if the acceleration of the movement

among White people in this moment is in part *because* so many historically White churches have closed their buildings. This has left them unable to respond in ways they traditionally have—ways that historically have served to moderate tension.

When faced with unrest over racial injustice, White churches have often turned to conventional modes of response that prove incomplete on their own. Education is one impulse, taking the form of our book clubs, reading groups, and self-studies. Dialogue is another: in cities where churches still hold convening power we might pull together a panel of experts, or engage city leaders, or—as my congregation has done at various points in its history—host a conversation with a partner church that is majority Black.

The most common institutional response is prayer. We pull out the candles, complete with their wax drippings from the last community prayer service. “Under normal circumstances,” a clergy colleague said recently, “without quarantine, we’d all be at one of our churches for a vigil.”

These traditional responses in part reflect traditional virtues of majority White institutional life—including a focus on civility. Historian William Chafe discusses this sort of civility in his study of the civil rights movement in my city of Greensboro, North Carolina. He calls it “the cornerstone of the white progressive mystique . . . encompassing abhorrence of personal conflict, courtesy toward new ideas, and a generosity toward those less fortunate than oneself.” According to Chafe, such civility was ultimately the primary obstacle to civil rights progress in Greensboro and similar cities in the 1960s. Among its primary adherents were White Christians.

In response to racial injustice, White churches have often prioritized civility, neutralizing the more radical and costly message of justice. With an exclusive emphasis on education, for instance, we end up approaching racial injustice as though the primary problem is personal ignorance that can be

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*The author is Alan Sherouse, senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Greensboro, North Carolina.*

solved through learning, rather than systemic injustice that must be solved through reform. By emphasizing dialogue, churches can implicitly advance the notion that our chief aim is friendship and reconciliation, rather than wholesale change. And by lighting a candle and praying with our words, it is easy to stop short of Frederick Douglass's charge to pray with our feet and our bodies, too.

With such traditional modes of response, historically White churches—like many other established institutions—have repeatedly had a moderating influence on movements toward justice, as noted so pointedly by Martin Luther King Jr. in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in which he famously addresses “the white moderate.” King’s letter is specifically addressed to White pastors of downtown churches in Birmingham, who had issued him “A Call for Unity” urging “peace.” King points out that they spoke of peace but really sought order—the absence of tension rather than the presence of justice. “More light, less heat,” such pastors might say in the vernacular of moderation today, forgetting that the light will scorch us if we allow ourselves to stand close enough.

In recent weeks, lacking access to buildings and the well-established responses they host, historically White churches have been less able to keep a distance. We’ve been less sheltered, less apt to respond in traditional ways, and in turn have had less power to moderate the tension and thereby neutralize the moment. As a deliberately decentralized and diffuse movement, Black Lives Matter is not assigning essential roles to religious institutions. Majority White churches can only play a useful role when they’re willing to leave the safety of conventional response.

In some cases, this has happened. Instead of merely dialogue, churches have embraced a clear, singular message of change. Instead of panel discussions, there are lists of clearly articulated expectations and demands. Instead of softened calls for unity, there are bold calls for justice. Instead of vigils, people are attending protests.

Of course, White Christians could have been doing so all along. “It’s great that you’re here, White clergy,” one pastor and organizer said from the stage at one of Greensboro’s massive protests, “but stop asking what you can do. Look around. You see what to do.”

If we can see what to do in this moment, it’s partly because the walls of our buildings aren’t obscuring our view. The protests in many cities started the weekend of Pentecost, recalling how the Spirit falls on the people in the streets of the city. In John’s version of the Spirit’s coming, the disciples are waiting in the Upper Room, holding vigil behind locked doors. But in Acts, the doors are open. The room is empty. The disciples have poured out into the city to find that this is where people are speaking new languages, dreaming new dreams, and standing up to proclaim the world as it can yet be.

Who knows what would have happened if they’d stayed inside? My hunch is it all would have happened without them.

And who knows what might have happened if we’d been able to be in our church buildings in these weeks of momentous change? All we know is that we weren’t. It’s happened while our church buildings are closed. What’s left is to determine what will happen when they open again. 

## STUDY QUESTIONS

*1. How has your community or congregation addressed racial discrimination and racism in the past? What impact do you think these efforts had?*

*2. Have you observed a difference in how you and your community have responded to the racist acts of 2020 as compared to previous years? If so, what do you think caused the difference? Do you agree with Alan Sherouse’s article?*

**Action:** *Make a list of things you can do to act against racial discrimination this week and in the future. Consider sharing your list in the CHRISTIAN CENTURY Facebook reading group: [christiancentury.org/fb-group](https://www.facebook.com/christiancentury.org/fb-group). We are keeping an ongoing list so readers can learn from each other’s ideas.*

## Wearing down structural evil with the ministry of erosion

The COVID-19 pandemic has grandly clarified the inequalities that lock American families and workers in ongoing economic jeopardy. The pandemic is not creating new economic vulnerabilities as much as it is exposing the generations-long political abandonment of tax-paying, voting people whose hard work keeps padding the pockets of politicians and the economic elite. As the pandemic's impact grows by the hour and communities grapple with their responses, we are seeing that the coronavirus does not affect all equally. This is confirmed by the appalling death rates in Latinx and Black communities, from Louisiana to New York.

My community of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Pleasantville, New Jersey, sees social justice work as the center of its reason for being. Treating the needs of people as sacred claims our bodies, imaginations, and souls. But we are having to find a way to do this in the midst of another mandate, less transcendent, to remain at a distance from those whose needs we hold sacred. The issues we care about—the concerns that draft us into the fight for equity and justice—mandate that churches leverage our technological ingenuity and digital will to advance our humanity during this disruptive and dizzyingly uncertain period.

We have to find ways to continue what I call our “ministry of erosion,” that is, our work to wear down structural evil and organized sin. When we unceasingly and relentlessly show up for one another, we wear down the forces of destruction and corruption. This does not change—whether we are indoors or outdoors, whether we stand in the streets or we find creative ways to engage this fight from our homes. Crisis establishes a platform for patriots of human flourishing and freedom to demonstrate a stamina greater than the performances of evil. The ministry of erosion is a sacred practice of consistent presence—even digital presence—and socially conscious solidarity.

Black churches have historically served as sites of refuge and communities of mobilization during crises. While there is no monolithic Black church, social justice remains a cardinal tradition of Black Christian life. From the brush harbors beyond the gaze of enslavers to the Baptist women's movement of the early 20th century, Black churches seized US crises as platforms to shape public discourse on justice and to mobilize people to open the political window on the possible. American democracy owes a compelling debt to Black churches—to laypeople and clergy—for, at a minimum, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. As Black women crowded streets and Black students flooded jails, they were taking sacramental action. They were practicing the ministry of ero-

sion: a stubborn resilience to show up and embody love in the face of grotesque, generations-deep, racist opposition.

But how do we show up now, when we can't show up physically? This moment of social distancing and trauma applies pressure to the storied activist feature of Black religious life in the United States. When Mount Zion closed our in-person functions and began to focus instead on cultivating community digitally, we wanted to keep all aspects of our work alive: weekly worship, community learning, and public policy advocacy.

Our decision to stop meeting was unsettling and trying. It was, perhaps, one of the hardest decisions we have ever made. We knew that many of our senior citizens already live in isolation, and public worship is the only time they go somewhere and feel alive. Likewise, our social justice work depends on congregants making weekly offerings. Our dependence on one another is mutual.

Our church offers a lot to our community, and none of the needs we work to meet have gone away, even as these ministries have closed their doors. Our joblessness clinic helps people find work; our family enrichment courses help people make the most of their SNAP benefits and shorten their probations; our food pantry and farmers' market help people find resources in a food desert.

Without opportunities to connect and be strengthened by their communities, some of the people I serve in New Jersey whisper to me their fear that isolation will adversely impact their struggle with depression. They are helping to “flatten the curve,” but at what personal cost?

We were determined to find new ways forward, knowing that lives depend on it. As we worked to migrate our operation as a church to digital engagement, a senior citizen in our community glowingly remarked, via text message, that our use of Zoom for Sunday school and Bible study and of YouTube and Facebook for worship helped to ward off the emotional weight of isolation she felt.

Leveraging video conferencing, unprompted phone calls, and social media, we use relational organizing practices to conduct wellness checks for our members, assess their varied needs, bolster community education, and put pressure on elected officials. Charity and justice remain central.

The reimagination of congregational care exposed people's

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*The author is Willie Dwayne Francois III, pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Pleasantville, New Jersey, and president of the Black Church Center for Justice and Equality.*

need to know they are still seen when out of sight, still supported during a unique period of grieving the loss of mobility and freedom. One 81-year-old widow, Meredith, found solace after one of our lay leaders shared the church's plan to provide valet services to refill prescriptions and restock refrigerators.

**E**ach week, Mount Zion harnesses the vitality of online strategies for doing social justice while practicing social distancing. From the safety of our homes, we can engage in specific measures to defend democracy. Each week, I record numerous videos for the congregation highlighting remote voter registration opportunities and the urgency of the 2020 Census. Outvote, a grassroots voter mobilization project and app, helps structure and expand our church's capacity to build political power with dispossessed communities—and to remember Black bodies bloodied in pursuit of the right to cast a ballot.

In the most crucial election year of our lives, the pandemic amplifies the dire need for the political strength and audacity to address wage inequality, food insecurity, limited access to early childhood education, and health-care inaccessibility—some of this country's structural sins.

In mid-April, Mount Zion circulated an email in support of New Jersey prison reform, demanding that Governor Philip Murphy devise and execute a plan to de-densify state prisons

during the outbreak. As millions of parents assumed new roles as coeducators, Mount Zion, through the Black Church Center for Justice and Equality, hosted an online town hall for educators, faith leaders, parents, and policy experts to help congregations strategize innovative forms of support.

Mount Zion members also participated in a digital action, initiated by the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, demanding that Murphy sign a bill mandating the systematic reporting of COVID-19 demographic data related to race, gender, age, and ethnicity, a bill the state legislature passed unanimously. Our members sent emails to the governor's office and posted support for the bill on social media platforms. This work is crucial for highlighting the virus's disproportionate effect on people of color and the systemic racism that lies behind this.

As a millennial pastor leading his first congregation, I find in the resilience, work, and love of this church the grace I need during these days of social distancing. Only a mass exhibition of abundant humanity—the practice of radical mutuality, love beyond the limits of our prejudices, prudent social distancing, and authentic vulnerability—furnishes the resources to combat the social nihilism, political defeatism, and moral panic besieging our lives right now.

The sheer force of love drives back the specters of social misery. By pulling back the layers that divide us, we ratify a politics of love, even during this time of physical isolation. 

## STUDY QUESTIONS

*1. Do you agree that the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified racial inequalities? What new revelations have you had about racial inequality as a result of the pandemic?*

*2. Willie Dwayne Francois says his church has had to find new ways to work to wear down structural evil during the pandemic. How has your congregation participated in similar ministry work? In what ways would you like it to?*

*3. How do you think your church addresses what Martin Luther King Jr. called “the most segregated hour of Christian America” (Sunday morning worship)? Do you have integrated services? Do you partner with churches where the majority of the congregation is of a different race than the majority of your own? Why or why not?*

**Action:** Share what you are doing in our Facebook group; we can all benefit from new ideas for wearing down racism. [christiancentury.org/fb-group](https://christiancentury.org/fb-group)

# Selected *CC* reviews of antiracism resources

## **When We Imagine Grace: Black Men and Subject Making**

by Simone C. Drake

[christiancentury.org/drake-review](http://christiancentury.org/drake-review)

## **How To Be an Antiracist**

by Ibram X. Kendi

[christiancentury.org/kendi-review](http://christiancentury.org/kendi-review)

## **Renewal: Liberal Protestants and the American City After World War II**

by Mark Wild

[christiancentury.org/wild-review](http://christiancentury.org/wild-review)

## **White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism**

by Robin Diangelo

[christiancentury.org/diangelo-review](http://christiancentury.org/diangelo-review)

## **Such a Fun Age**

by Kiley Reid

[christiancentury.org/reid-review](http://christiancentury.org/reid-review)

## **So You Want to Talk About Race**

by Ijeoma Oluo

## **How to Be Less Stupid About Race**

by Crystal M. Fleming

[christiancentury.org/oluo-fleming-review](http://christiancentury.org/oluo-fleming-review)

## **FOR CHILDREN**

### **Something Happened in Our Town**

by Marianne Celano, Marietta Collins, and Ann Hazzard; illustrated by Jennifer Zivoin

### **Not My Idea: A Book About Whiteness**

by Anastasia Higginbotham

### **New Kid**

by Jerry Craft

[christiancentury.org/higginbotham-review](http://christiancentury.org/higginbotham-review)

Please share any titles that you have found particularly helpful in our discussion group:

[christiancentury.org/fb-group](http://christiancentury.org/fb-group)