
FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF US

A STUDY OF CROSS-RACIAL/CROSS-CULTURAL
MINISTRY FOR CLERGY II



RELIGION & RACE
The United Methodist Church

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INTRODUCTION

The mission of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. As licensed, commissioned, and ordained persons, we embrace the mission of our church and strive to fulfill it. However, before we can transform the world outside the church, transformation must first be realized in every congregation, clergy person, and lay person within our global, institutional church. Without authentic transformation within the church, we cannot expect to bring about any transformation in the world. Without genuine transformation ourselves, we cannot become reliable and effective agents of transformation.

The Apostle Paul writes, "So, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, *as agents of transformation* that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature." (Romans 12:1-2 CEB, *italics added*)

Transformation is not a one-time-and-done endeavor; rather, transformation is a continuing process of being created anew over and over again. The process of transformation begins at one point whether we realize it or not. And it must be a continuous process of learning, growing, and change, especially if it is to be effective and everlasting.

The General Commission on Religion and Race offers this series in hopes it will serve as a companion for clergy in their continuing transformation and renewing process. When pastors undergo transformation, the congregations they serve are likewise invited into the process of transformation. When these congregations undergo transformation, their surrounding communities are touched and changed by these transformation ripples. Whether or not a pastor and congregation are currently part of a cross-racial/cross-cultural (CRCC) ministry, CRCC ministries are in our DNA as the church of Jesus Christ. May the reflections and stories gathered in this collection be used for our transformation so we can in turn fulfill our mission.

SUGGESTIONS FOR USE

This series is designed for use by pastors in cross-racial/cross-cultural ministry and for those exploring the call to such ministry. This resource can be used with groups, such as a district or annual conference CRCC clergy cohort, or clergy peer groups. Individual clergypersons may also use it as a guide for individual learning and reflection. There are five sessions, each with theological reflections on cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry, vignettes about the writer's personal experiences in ministry, and questions to guide reflection and conversation.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource is designed for five sessions of 60 minutes each with reflection questions for group engagement or for individual self-reflection. Each session presents theological reflection with personal CRCC experience and reflection questions. This resource can be used as curriculum for clergy peer groups that meet regularly or for a clergy cohort group

formed just for the purpose of learning engagement through this resource.

For robust group conversations the group may choose to covenant to prepare for these sessions by reading and reflecting on the questions before each gathering.

HERE IS A SUGGESTED FLOW FOR EACH SESSION, ALONG WITH SOME TIPS (TOTAL TIME: 60 MINS)

GATHERING & PRAYER

10 MINS

- When everyone is ready to begin, the facilitator can pray or invite someone to begin with a prayer.

READING TOGETHER THE THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION & PERSONAL CR/CC EXPERIENCE

15 MINS

- Facilitator can pre-assign readers or participants can take turns reading sections around the circle.
- If the group covenanted to read and reflect prior to gathering, then this section can be shortened to five minutes with a brief recap by the facilitator or by participants. This allows more time for conversation.

CONVERSATION GUIDED BY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

30 MINS

- Facilitator will need to be mindful of the time and help the group stay on topic.
- Participants can take turns reading a question and beginning the conversation.
- Encourage everyone to share, and be on guard that no one monopolizes the conversation.

CLOSING PRAYER

5 MINS

- Facilitator can ask for a volunteer to close the session in prayer OR the group can close with a prayer circle where each person prays "one sentence" until everyone has had a chance. The last person closes the prayer saying, "We pray in Jesus' name. Amen."

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SESSIONS

- 1. ADAPT AS NECESSARY**

Feel free to adapt this resource to the needs of your group; for example, depending on the need or desire of the group, the engagement time can be shorter or longer.
- 2. CREATE SPACE FOR DEEP SHARING**

The size of the group should be no less than six (6) and no more than twelve (12) persons for deep and intimate sharing. Find a gathering space that is as quiet and comfortable as possible for the group to convene.
- 3. PREPARATION BEFORE SESSIONS**

To facilitate rich conversations, the facilitator should read and reflect on the questions beforehand.
- 4. PRAY IN PREPARATION**

The facilitator and participants are encouraged to prepare for these small-group gatherings with prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to be present in your midst.
- 5. INVITE PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE**

PRAY – ask God for wisdom on who and how to invite.

OPEN INVITATION – invite and encourage clergy to join in these sessions to learn and share their CRCC experience together in the district or conference.

COMMUNICATE – make the information and invitation available to all using as many avenues as possible, including written invitation, email, phone calls, and notices on the Annual Conference website and/or District newsletter. If more than 12 persons are interested in participating, consider creating two groups to allow all participants to be fully engaged.
- 6. BE FLEXIBLE AND USE CREATIVE MEANS OF GATHERING**

If the cohort is a conference-wide group covering large areas making it difficult to physically gather, then consider virtual meetings.
- 7. USE “RESPECTful COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES”**

R – Accept **RESPONSIBILITY** for what you say and feel without blaming others.

E – Listen with an **EMPATHETIC** heart.

S – Be **SENSITIVE** to differences in communication styles.

P – **PONDER** on what you hear and feel before you speak.

E – **EXAMINE** your own assumptions and perceptions.

C – Keep **CONFIDENTIALITY**.

T – **TRUST** ambiguity because we are not here to debate who is right or wrong.

(Adapted from “*The Bush Was Blazing But Not Consumed*” by Eric Law pg. 87)

HOW TO FACILITATE CLERGY SMALL GROUP SESSIONS

Here are a few things to be mindful of as facilitators:

- There is no right or wrong answer in the reflection sharing.
- The aim of each session is to reflect and engage in conversation, not to debate or argue.
- It is important to hear from everyone.
- Be patient. Allow participants time to pray and reflect before they answer, and respect the right to listen without speaking.
- Be flexible. There is no need to be rigid in following the material. Follow the leading of the Spirit while listening to people in the group.
- Trust in God. Be assured that group members are on a continuing journey toward understanding God's work in the community.

SESSION 1

THE MULTIETHNIC, MULTICULTURAL HUMANITY IN CHRIST

The Rev. Dr. Nora Colmenares, deacon
North Georgia Annual Conference

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Colossians 3:9-11 NRSV

Christianity's mission is grounded in the iconic "Great Commission," the charge Jesus gave his disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28). This divine assignment came after three years of Jesus' disciples witnessing him living and teaching a new paradigm between God and humanity. This new paradigm was modeled through the many transforming encounters experienced between Jesus and the outcasts of his time. Contrary to the expectations of his culture, Jesus defied social norms and crossed boundaries to engage, heal, and love society's "outsiders." The Jesus of the gospels healed and touched the untouchable; he sat at the table with a crook, violated the holy day, and broke protocol by praising the faith of a gentile.

In John 4, Jesus broke social and religious norms by approaching a woman from a culture he had been

raised to despise—the Samaritan culture. His request of her opened a conversation about faith that not only transformed this unnamed woman, but compelled her to become something unthinkable, namely a spokesperson for Jesus in a town that would have otherwise rejected him.

The disciples witnessed other transforming encounters: with a soldier of the occupying army, with a sick woman impure by religious standards, with many sick and maimed who would not have been otherwise recognized, touched or even seen.

At the end of his time on earth, Jesus gave his disciples an assignment that included the phrase "all nations." Although there is considerable discussion about what this phrase means, most theologians

agree that it means all people, all ethnic groups, all nations, without distinction. With this phrase, Matthew is returning to the blessing promised to Abraham and, through him, to all people on earth (Gen 12:3), which is now to be fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah and through his followers. This phrase refers to much more than just making disciples of people; it refers to the challenging task of stepping out into communities that were foreign to the disciples to connect with and include people who had previously been excluded.¹

The Great Commission made real to the disciples what Jesus had already shown them: that they were to take the gospel message to those from other ethnicities, races and cultures, and to the outcast of their society; that they were to do what was not accepted or comfortable for them to do, to cross cultural, racial and ethnic boundaries to share the gospel message.

In the Pentecost story, we see the emerging church that is diverse and united in its nature. This unity is not based on ethnicity, phenotype, language, culture, or socioeconomic class. It is not based on personal preferences or affinity. Instead, it is founded in the peace acquired by Jesus Christ, who formed a new humanity reconciled on the cross (Eph 2:11-22).²

The early disciples did not readily embrace this directive. Violent persecution pushed them out and into uneasy encounters that forced them to start to understand the wide range of God's vision. From baptizing a gentile on the side of the road, to receiving hospitality from a Roman soldier, to agreeing that circumcision need not be a universal requirement, the early disciples took slow and painful steps to

grasp what the mandate of making disciples of all nations entailed.

The new paradigm took hold against all odds. The Book of Acts describes the congregation in the city of Antioch, with an ethnic and racial diversity that included Syrians, Romans, Greeks, Arabs, Persians, Armenians, Parthians, Cappadocians, and Jews.³ These groups crossed boundaries of race, cultural and ethnicity to be part of one church; its leaders were a Jew, two gentiles, a gentile educated in Rome, and a Jew from Tarsus. They were from Asian Minor, Africa, the Mediterranean and the Middle East (Acts 13).

The congregation in Corinth also gathered a diverse congregation. It had both Jews and gentiles (Acts 18), as well as slaves and free (1 Cor 7). Imagine how revolutionary this was: Jesus' followers were no longer separated by the norms of their cultures, ethnicities, or status; rather, they came together—against all odds—as “one body and one Spirit” (1 Cor 12).

The early church continued evolving in living out this new paradigm that was part of God's vision from the beginning: that all nations would know God (Isaiah 66:18; Revelations 15:4); that the ministry of the church is to be cross-racial and cross-cultural; and that Jesus' followers are mandated to cross boundaries of culture, ethnicity, language, status and class to share the Gospel message.⁴

As we continue to reflect theologically on the meaning of cross-racial/cross-cultural ministry, the verses from Colossians 3:9-11 articulate how crossing boundaries of race, culture and class are a fundamental part of what living in Christ means:

1 Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), VIII: 596-597.

2 David E. Stevens, *God's New Humanity* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2012), 136.

3 David E. Stevens, *God's New Humanity*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 133, quoting Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, University Press, 1996), 156-158.

4 These notes were adapted from my Doctor of Ministry Thesis: *From Sameness to Multicultural. Lessons from the Journey*. Drew University, 2016. They were also published on “There Heresy of Sameness in a Landscape of Difference,” *Insights. The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary*,” Fall 2017.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. 11In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

The writer uses the images of the new self and the old self to describe what life in Christ is. The old self and its practices are to be rejected, while the new self and its practices are to be adopted. This passage is often interpreted through the lens of individualism, and the behaviors listed in previous verses are often understood as what each disciple must do and must not do in his or her new life in Christ. However, to reduce the understanding of the old and new self to an individualistic nature renders the affirmation in verse 11 nonsensical. A more accurate understanding is that the relational affirmations of verse 11 are a reality of the new self, which is the collective new humanity—the church—for whom Christ is all and in all. Just as the old self is the entirety of humanity alienated from God and within itself, the new self is the entirety of humanity reconciled to God within itself. Through the redemptive work in the cross, believers of all races, cultures, classes and ethnicities are identified as the new self, and the new humanity, which is the church (Eph 2, Eph 4, Col 3).

This new humanity is not simply an abstract aspiration or just a good idea; neither does it mean to ignore or negate differences. This new humanity is the new identity in which differences enrich the whole and in which social markers do not exclude anyone.⁵

It is easy to simply interpret these groups merely as boundaries to cross. However, verse 11 also describes a new humanity in Christ that is radical; it is a new humanity that unites unequal groups that

had been separated by their national, ethnic, cultural, ceremonial, social and class identities, but that now are one in Christ.

The new humanity in Christ includes as equal those from different ethnicities; those who before were considered ceremonially unclean are equal to those who are clean; those of lower social class and status are equal to those of higher class and status. This is what the cross does, a new understanding that requires all who follow Christ to cross races, cultures, ethnicities and class and build communities where all are equals.

It is easy to understand cross-ethnic cross-cultural ministry as merely the personal efforts of church leaders to effectively engage with those who are different from themselves. These verses, however, describe an even more meaningful and revolutionary paradigm: the divine design of a community of believers where differences of race, culture, social class, ethnicity, etc. are put aside to belong together with those who are excluded, who do not belong, who are not good enough, educated enough, or clean enough, but who are now included in the body of Christ.

For decades, The United Methodist Church has attempted to address its lack of diversity by increasing the number of underrepresented races and ethnicities in places of leadership, as well as through legislation, funding, specialized agencies, and even through making cross-ethnic cross-cultural appointments, often without addressing the systems that exclude some.

The fact is racialization is embedded within the normal, everyday operations of the denomination, and denominational leaders, pastors, and even church members have failed to understand that their actions contribute to racial division and inequality even if they

5 "Christ Is All and In All—Colossians 3:1-11," Esther Parajuli, Political Theology Network, <https://politicaltheology.com/christ-is-all-and-in-all-colossians-3:1-11/>.

do not intend them to do so.⁶ Consequently, solutions proposed and implemented merely addressed these issues on the surface while exclusionary systems remained unchanged.

I am a Hispanic Latina clergywoman who has served at conference and churchwide levels. I have been involved in cross-racial cross-cultural ministry and in developing ministries and leaders that cross boundaries of race, culture and ethnicity. I have witnessed how the denomination has continued to exclude many, through outdated credentialing systems, through gatekeepers who ignore cultural differences and the value they bring to our church, through systems that insulate the church from the rapid changes taking place in surrounding communities, through open biases that excludes those who are not part of the majority, those who speak with a non-majority accent, those from other cultures who use different thought processes and who express themselves in different ways. These

biases box in certain leaders to certain roles, to certain kinds of churches, limit the funds to certain groups, and even expect less from those who are not part of the majority culture.

The proof is in the evidence. After decades of various initiatives, The United Methodist Church membership in the United States is still almost 90 percent white.⁷ While the non-white population is increasing rapidly, the white population, currently about 76%⁸, is in continuous decline.⁹

What is required are deep changes, systemic changes, and changes in personal behaviors. Cross-racial/cross-cultural ministry is not a seminary class, nor it is merely a model or a good idea. Cross-racial/cross-cultural ministry is the paradigm of Christ's church, that must guide its systems, that must impregnate the training of its leaders—clergy and lay, that must shape its resources, its budgets, its initiatives, and all of the life of the church.

6 Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith*, Oxford University Press, 2001, 9.

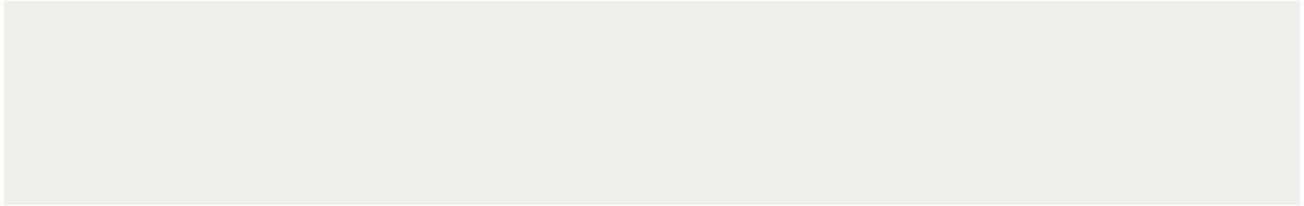
7 "2017 Annual Conference Lay Membership by Ethnicity," General Commission of Finance and Administration, <https://www.gcf.org/media/1611/2017annualconferencelaymembershipbyethnicityandgender.pdf>.

8 "Quick Facts," Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219>.

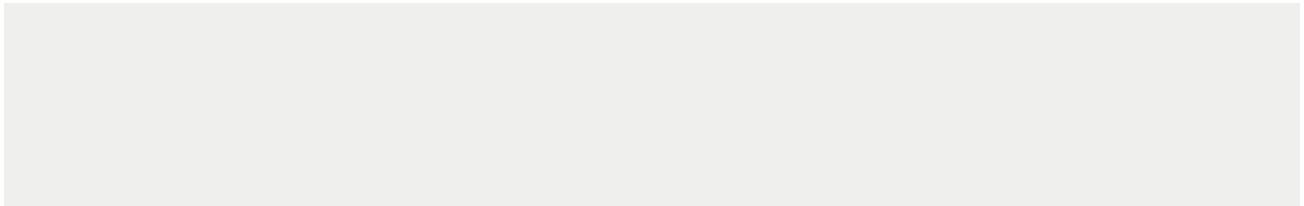
9 "Children of color projected to be majority of U.S. youth this year," PBS News Hour, August 9, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/children-of-color-projected-to-be-majority-of-u-s-youth-this-year?fbclid=IwARofX-ok8YCAurUapn8sLx3YB-klbp3Uarvv6twKCPQg1MryBm5L3mkb7-Y>.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

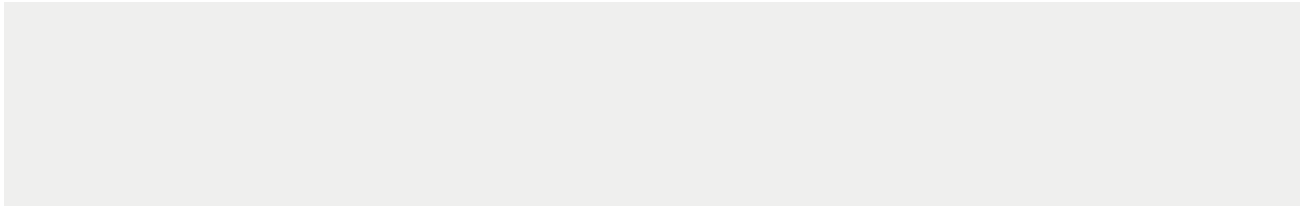
1. What compels you to be in CRCC ministry?



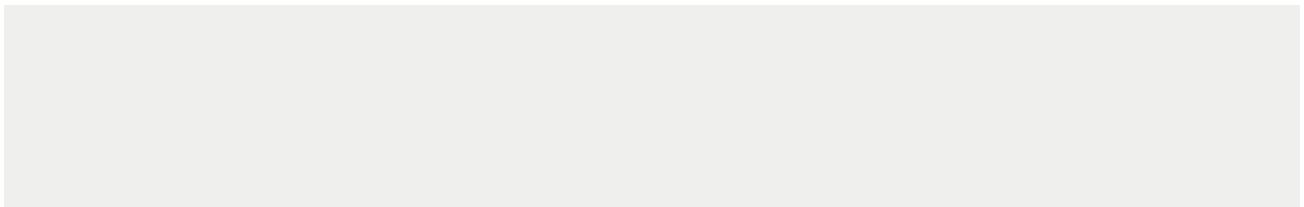
2. What is your vision for CRCC ministry?



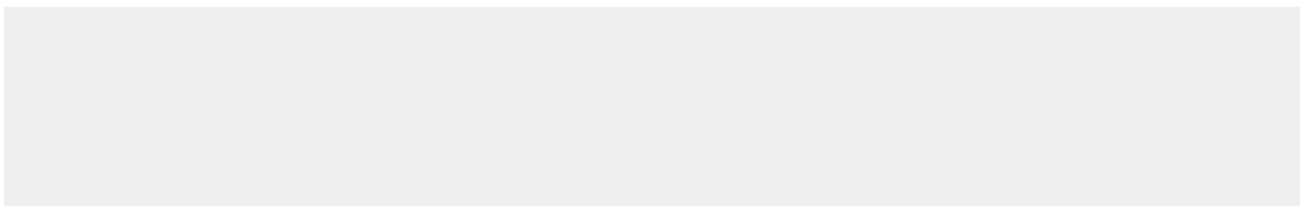
3. How does the Great Commission and the Pentecost story inform your CRCC ministry?



4. In what ways can/does your CRCC ministry promote participation with living in Christ as the new humanity? What does it look like?



5. What are the groups in your community that are at the margins? What groups are not represented in your local church?



SESSION 2

“EVERYTHING OLD HAS PASSED AWAY . . .”

The Rev. Dr. Clarence R. Brown Jr.
St. Luke’s United Methodist Church, Yorktown, Va.

“... everything old has passed away...”

2 Corinthians 5:17b NRSV

These words from the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5 encompass and enliven the hopes of Christians around the world. We indeed might shed our mortal miscalculations and inhabit the body of Christ as fully connected and reconciled persons who seek to invite the world to be transformed. It is to our sorrow that those words written millennia ago have not found fruitful maturation. There is still a need for some of the old to pass away.

To begin, I am a product of the African-American church. That institution that has been mother to the motherless, father to the fatherless, and a joyfully autonomous institution that has held the hopes and aspirations of generations untold. It has also been a place of healing, affirmation, and restoration of the *imago dei* for persons of color. It was that church that helped me hear God’s call and affirmed for me that I was gifted by God to engage in the work of ministry.

As I began my journey, I came to one of many critical decisions, this in terms of choice of seminary. At that juncture it was a simple choice, since I believed that

I would only be serving African-American United Methodist churches. Hence the clear choice was Gammon Theological Seminary, the only African-American UMC seminary, the seminary of my mentors, the place to prepare myself to serve my community.

I am ever a debtor to Gammon/ITC, for it was there that I came into the fullness of understanding myself as an African American. Religion was taught from a decidedly Afrocentric perspective, which infused the student with a confidence that allowed her/him to function in the larger church with excellence and without apology. There was one nagging theological question for me in that era of liberation theology: where was the doctrine of reconciliation? When do we all get to heaven? It was through the foreword to James Cone’s *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), written by Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire, that I came to terms with the thought that until the kingdom of God came into view, until justice rolled down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream, there could be no reconciliation here. While I understood and embraced the prophetic

urgency that Cone, Gayraud Wilmore, Cain Hope Felder, C. Eric Lincoln, Albert Raboteau, Robert Michael Franklin, William McClain, and several other influencers of that time brought, there was an inner longing for the work I believed was God's ultimate intention in creation—the work of reconciliation.

My earliest appointments were to the community that formed me: the first as an associate pastor of a large-membership, urban, African-American Church; the second as pastor of a four-point charge consisting of small-membership, rural to semi-rural African-American churches; and the third as founding campus minister of the Wesley Foundation at Norfolk State University. My next appointment would take me beyond that nurturing community. I did not know at that time what a life-altering decision I would be making. While it was a certain matter of spiritual discernment, in retrospect it was a calculated risk made with an eye toward career arc and longevity. I had discerned that my time as a campus minister was at an end, and the local church pastorate beckoned as the place where my gifts might have been of greatest use. In our conference there were very few discernably African-American churches approximately 50 out of a universe of over 1,000. To serve in the larger church beyond my community would bring greater opportunities. So, I trepidatiously walked into the office of the district superintendent for the ritual of the annual interview, and asked him if I was considered able to transcend the ethnic barrier. The Rev. W. Dabney Walters, whom I shall always appreciate for his willingness to risk, affirmed the belief that I had the requisite gifts and grace to pastor cross-culturally, and recommended to the bishop and cabinet that I be appointed to St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Chesapeake, Va. Thus, began a nearly 30 year journey of CRCC ministry. I had no idea at that point how radically my life would be changed by that decision.

While I have been blessed not to experience some of the horrors that fellow CRCC colleagues have endured, the work of prayerfully shaping

communities of reconciled people then and now has been exceedingly difficult in some places, particularly where the blissful naiveté of participants of privilege precluded significant recognition of exclusion and harm. This first barrier must be, can, and in some places has been pierced. Significant relationships have formed, a hospitable community created, Kingdom work in the community engaged.

The mission we prayerfully discerned together at that first CRCC appointment? "St. Paul's is an intentional Christian faith community that builds bridges between generations and communities." The charge to us around the former was the intentional formation of community with the young people at the high school down the block from the church. The initiation into the narrative of privilege was not pronounced among them, and they helped teach us what community meant.

The latter charge was to say that in a community that was almost 50/50 (white people and black people) in ethnic composition, there was a need to invite our neighbors of color to join us in community service and transformation. That engagement began slowly, but we gradually grew toward becoming a community of love and encouragement.

Did that mean it all went swimmingly? Of course not, but there were several teaching/learning, tearful confession/forgiveness, harm/healing opportunities on the way to that particular expression of the beloved community. I believe that is the work of reconciliation: first to engage and understand, then to create something new. The difficulty I think we encounter is a culture of persons who value safety, familiarity, and comfort over the gospel, and are not willing to do the hard work of "...regarding everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8, NRSV). Our concerted effort to engage the community in new ways, and to invite all who would come to join in a different sort of community, culminated in a call from our bishop to serve in the ministry of superintending.

There my world changed significantly, and I learned more about the church and not all good.

As I engaged the ministry of supervision, I began to notice little things. During charge conferences, I discovered that some churches were not paying 100 percent of their apportionments. I noticed some churches paid 100 percent of every item except the Black College Fund and African University. At one meeting, I pointed out this omission and, reaching into my pocket, I personally gave the pastor the balance of the Black College Fund payment. I did this specifically to offer a lesson in racial justice and inclusion. Happily, that lesson led to a greater appreciation of things connectional and a wholehearted support, particularly, for African University.

At another junction, I engaged a local church in a visioning process and reviewed with them the demographics of the area surrounding them, that population being over 70 percent persons of color. I inquired as to whether CRCC clergy leadership might not be able to help them connect to the larger community in more significant ways. Upon their agreement, I spent time working first with their staff-parish committee, subsequently with the church council, and finally through a series of town hall meetings with the entire congregation. Through these, consensus was built to support the appointment of an African American pastor. Scarcely a month into that appointment discontent began to rise first questions

as to whether that pastor should be paid the same as the previous pastor, and then a series of other thinly veiled e-mails, unsigned and unattributed letters which made for a toxic environment. That church has since closed its doors.

Concurrent to the service in a new community was the charge of leadership of the Conference Committee on Religion and Race. Thanks to their untiring commitment to anti-racism efforts, we have learned how to conduct, and equip others to create, conversations in safe spaces to help all of our churches face their implicit biases, and further to recognize and affirm the value of CRCC ministry and the potential to make all of our communities of faith truly places of welcome and hospitality.

Our work then, has been the pursuit of a reconciled community, informed by Paul as he asks his community to be ministers of reconciliation the healing of broken relationships, first with God and then with neighbor. It is noteworthy that in 2 Corinthians 5 he expresses the thought that we should not regard anyone from a human point of view but reminds them that they (and we) once regarded Christ from a human point of view, thus revealing the need to transform the human tendency to cast all in our own image and attempting to take the place that only God can inhabit to the end that we might all become ambassadors for Christ and ministers of reconciliation.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What insights for CRCC ministry have you gleaned from Dr. Brown's reflection?

2. Dr. Brown expresses the work of reconciliation as "first to engage and understand, then to create something new."

- In what ways are you engaging and understanding the community which you are sent to serve?

- In what ways is your congregation engaging and understanding the "other", including their own pastor in the CRCC appointment context?

- What does it mean to create something new? What does it look like?

3. What is needed for your congregation to be a "reconciled community" that heals the broken relationship with God and neighbor? What is your role as the pastor?

SESSION 3

FROM FEAR TO FAITH

The Rev. Moonyoung Lee
Hawaii District Superintendent, California-Pacific Conference

"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Isaiah 41:10 NIV

The children of God lived in a bubble of isolation—disconnected from their neighbors in the Mesopotamian region—mostly surrounding themselves with those from the same cultural, ethnic, and religious background. I can only imagine the devastation experienced by the Judeans when their nation fell to the pagan powers, and especially after they were taken as captives to Babylon. On a daily basis, the children of God faced painful reminders of their failures, regrets, and shortcomings. It must have been very difficult to admit defeat and to recognize that this pagan nation, once deemed by Israelites as sub-par to their own culture, turned out to be far superior and more sophisticated in terms of military prowess, technological advancement, and lifestyle.

However, as our God's mercy is renewed on a daily basis, our Lord offers words of assurance through the prophet Isaiah. To a nation of people steeped in hopelessness and helplessness in a foreign land, God's abiding presence in the here and now is

promised. Although this probably wasn't the message they were hoping to receive at that precise moment, I believe in due time they were able to draw comfort, strength and renewal through this exhortation.

In exile, the Judeans' disquietude increased as they now lived in a polytheistic society that challenged Yahweh's supremacy and placement in the world. Throughout the years of Babylonian captivity, the Jewish community had to face and undergo a paradigm shift in their theological understanding to recognize that their God wasn't just a tribal Lord over a small nation, but the true and sole sovereign over all creation. As the assurance of God's faithfulness to the exiled community was promised, the daughters and sons of Israel had a choice to make, either to live in fear and misery or to live fully and faithfully in exile as they patiently awaited the time of restoration.

I believe these ancient words found in the book of Isaiah ring true even today. The children of God in every

generation are called to cast away fear. However, as we already know, that's much easier said than done. Fear is real, and at times it can have tremendous power over us, affecting one's mind, body and spirit. Therefore, spiritual discipline is required to banish fear, as the antidote for fear is faith. Faith in Christ will enable us to respond to fear unafraid by placing our complete trust in the promise that God is with us.

More importantly, this God is no ordinary being, but God Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, and the One to whom all nations bow down. Our God is not only with us, but offers us strength and help in times of trouble, and steadfastly journeys with us in life. So, the question becomes, is God more powerful, wiser, more faithful and everlasting than fear? To me, our God revealed in Christ is God of possibilities, God who is able, and God whose words never fall to the ground without them being fulfilled. Hence, tremendous relief, freedom, and confidence come from knowing who God really is and what it means to have this powerful divine being with us at all times.

Engaging in a cross-racial/cross-cultural ministry is not for the faint of heart, for we enter a territory filled with many ambiguities. The fear of the unknown waits to unleash its power at the entrance of said context of ministry, often intimidating many to stay within their comfort zone. However, more than ever, the world is in need of good news, and the gospel needs to be shared, not just with our kin, but to the ends of the earth. So, when the Spirit leads us into an unfamiliar territory of CRCC ministry, may we not shrink back in fear, but boldly move forward and onward trusting in God's presence in our lives and ministry. Moreover, may we remember that God's grace not only accompanies us, but goes ahead to prepare the way. The path for CRCC ministry has already been paved—as Christ once said the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few—and Christ needs clergy willing to serve daughters and sons of God in bold faith by crossing over racial, ethnic, and cultural boundaries. Fear not, my colleagues, God is with us and our

ministry! May you bear witness to the above scripture in and through your ministry in CRCC settings.

This year is my 11th year as a United Methodist clergy, and to be absolutely honest, I didn't think I would stay in a local church ministry this long. There were many moments when I did actually entertain the idea of quitting, but through God's grace and grace alone, I am still here.

My current appointment, Wilshire United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, borders both Koreatown and Hancock Park, an affluent neighborhood of the city. It is truly a multicultural congregation with members from Korea, Africa, the Philippines, the West Indies, and South America. Wilshire was a church of one charter with five different ministries worshiping together under one roof on a weekly basis. It is important to note that with its close location to the largest Koreatown in the United States, Wilshire UMC's Korean congregation grew rapidly since its inception about 40 years ago. However, as one ministry rapidly expanded, four other congregations within the church struggled to grow. As one can imagine, the relationship between the five congregations at times became tense and embroiled in conflict, and the church as a whole could no longer move forward in ministry. Then in 2015, the bishop and the cabinet made a radical decision to reduce the number of ministries at Wilshire to only two: English language and Korean language. Furthermore, instead of having multiple pastors appointed to oversee respective language ministries, only two clergy were to be appointed to serve the entire church together as a team. As you might expect, the four congregations that were being merged to become the new English ministry were not pleased with this directive. But eventually, they came around to accept it.

However, they had one request: since the senior pastor doubtlessly would be Korean, they hoped for a non-Korean associate. As is written in Proverbs 16:9, in their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord orders their steps. And God had a different plan for Wilshire. Once I was named as the incoming associate pastor, the fear of the unknown ran rampant

within the new English ministry. Many believed that this Korean associate had a hidden agenda and was secretly being sent to close down the ministry to pave the way for Wilshire UMC to be a Korean-only church. Moreover, due to this false assumption, many did not want me as their pastor. And I echoed their sentiment, as I, too, did not want to be appointed to Wilshire and did not think I would be a good match. In addition, I was extremely happy with the church I was serving at that time, and did not want the burden to oversee and lead a merged congregation, much less a congregation that did not want me.

When the appointment to Wilshire became official, I prayed, asking God for wisdom and discernment. Why send me to this particular church when there are others who are better equipped than myself? I asked for God's will to be revealed.

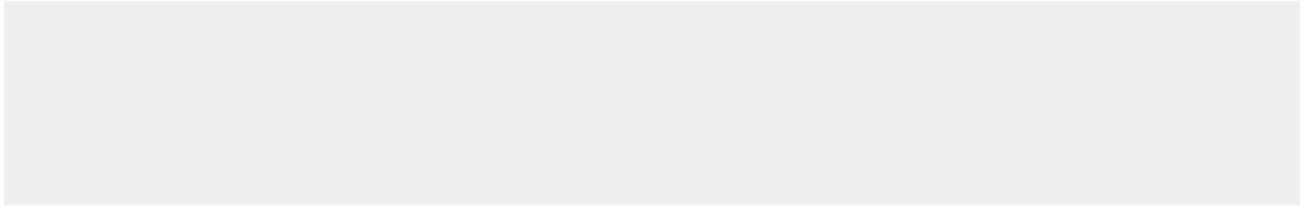
Then God spoke to me and quelled my fears of the unknown. The Lord assured me that the very fear felt by the congregation and myself was a human fear. Furthermore, I was informed through the Spirit that God's grace already had gone before me to Wilshire to prepare the soil for fruitfulness. It would be my task

to locate that grace within the congregation by not focusing solely on the seen, but to fix my eyes on the unseen. When July 1 came, I had a choice to make, either to be consumed with learned human fear or to surrender the situation to the Lord. Even though the feelings of inadequacy, personal preference, and fear of the unknown did not dissipate as I began my ministry at Wilshire, I made a conscientious decision to focus on locating God's grace that I knew had gone ahead to prepare a way forward for me and the congregation.

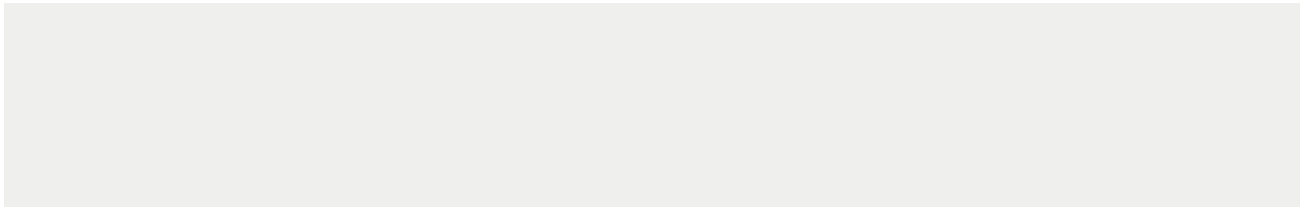
In the end, it is with great pleasure that I share with you that God failed neither me nor the congregation. While it took a lot of hard work, our labor in the Lord was not vain. God was with us through the merger and restructuring, and we were able to bear witness to the power and beauty of unity found in Christ anew, allowing Wilshire to usher in a brand-new era. Our testament is this: God is greater than our fears. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, fear not, be not dismayed for your God is with you always, offering strength, help, and refuge.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

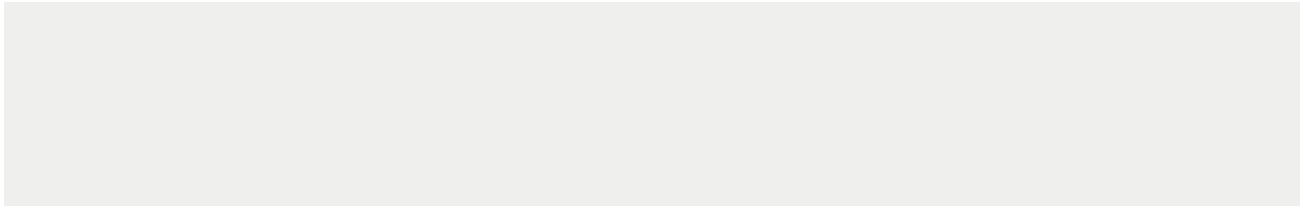
1. In what ways have you encountered fear in your life and in your ministry?



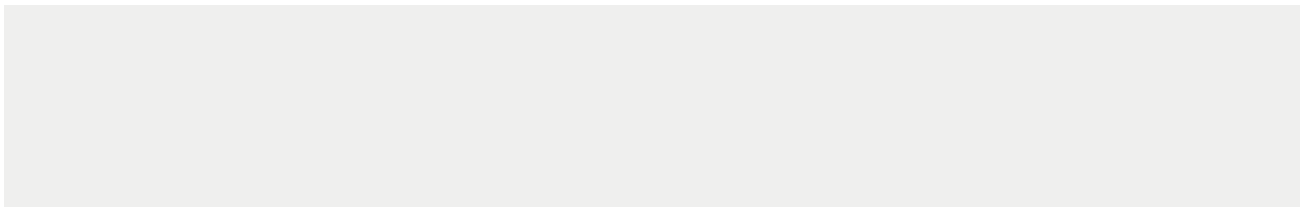
2. What is the source of the fear you identified?



3. How have you been responding to fear?



4. What are some practical and spiritual ways for us to overcome fear through faith individually and as a community?



SESSION 4

NEVER FORGET WHO I AM, AND WHOSE I AM

The Rev. Dr. Victor Gomez
Harrisonburg District Superintendent, Virginia Annual Conference

*“So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”*

Genesis 1:27 NRSV

I will always remember January 5, 1993. I was at the International Airport in Mexico City with a one-way ticket to Richmond, Va. That was 27 years ago and I still remember it as if it was yesterday. During that time, airports allowed anyone to go all the way to the gate to say their farewells or to welcome their loved ones. Airport security was very limited with only x-ray machines being used. Nowadays, they have machines that can scan our entire bodies and sensors that can identify possible threats. But back then you would see family members and friends gathering at the gate, as we all had much easier access. You did not need a boarding pass, or a clearance from the Transportation Security Administration, but just passed the x-ray machine with limited security.

At the gate, many of my friends and family members gathered to offer their farewells as I was leaving to begin my undergraduate studies at a college in Winchester, Va. My plan at that time was to finish my

four-year-degree and return to Mexico, but little did I know that God had different plans for me. I remember that as the time for my departure approached, family and friends lined up to say their good-byes, one by one, so that I could begin my journey. Needless to say, it was an emotional time and I was nervous about the unknown the new adventure would bring into my life. I spoke with each person in the line; some tears were shed, as well as laughter shared, and of course I received many words of advice and encouragement.

As I went down the line, I noticed that my mother had placed herself last. I made my way to her, and, with both hands, she gently but firmly held my face and pulled me down to her height, so that I had no choice but to make eye contact with her. I will never forget that moment. My mother of course offered words of love and words of wisdom as tears rolled down from her eyes and mine. I could see how much she would miss me.

As I was about to board the plane, the last thing she said to me was: "Never forget who you are, and never forget whose you are." I reflected on her words the entire trip. My mother's words have been a constant factor in my life for the last 27 years. The two sentiments she shared resonate each day in my mind: never forget who I am, and especially whose I am.

First, I want to offer my reflection on never forgetting whose I am. Those few words constantly remind me that I belong to God, that I am a child of God, and, most importantly, that I am created in God's image. Genesis 2:7 says, "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (NRSV). As God breathed into God's new creation the breath of life, we find the *ruach* (breath) of God, which is the breath of God. God is breathing into us God's breath as we are created in the image of God.

Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (NRSV). Once again, we confirm that we are all created in the image of God. When my mother told me to remember whose I am, she was reminding me that I am created in the image of God, my Creator. She was also telling me that no matter what people made me believe in my new life, no matter how people made me feel regarding my image and my race and my accent, God loves me the way I am as the *ruach* of God; the breath of God is within me. I am a creation of God!

She was also telling me with those few words that we are all created in the image of God. She was telling me to always remember. Remember that even those who would try to hurt you, they are also created in the image of God. Remember that even those who would mock you because of your accent or the way you look, they are also created in the image of God. Remember that even those who would discriminate against you because of the color of your skin, they are also created in the image of God.

It is in the *ruach* of God that we are all created in the image of God. But the *ruach* of God also manifests God's love and the free will God bestowed upon us. My mother's words are also reminding me that I love all, not just because as a Christian I ought to do so, but with the free will God has given me. It is when I love in that free will that I truly and fully experience and manifest the *ruach* of God, the image of God in my life.

The other part of my mother's words—"remember who you are"—has shaped my understanding not only in my daily endeavors, but also of cross-racial/cross-cultural ministry in The United Methodist Church. While I was attending seminary, I immediately became aware that I was living in a cross-cultural setting due to my background. I worked for a local United Methodist church, and I must say that I was blinded and even naïve, as I had the impression the UMC was exempt from racial discrimination. My first experience was not only painful, but as I sobbed in the presence of those who made me feel discriminated against, it taught me a very important lesson. In retrospect, I wish they had not seen the manifestation of my feelings. They showed no compassion and their eyes expressed a level of mockery. The lesson I learned, that first time, was that the pain and tears of discrimination was being caused by the church.

I left that church and drove back home. While I was driving, I thought about the words of my mother: "remember who you are." This time those words resonated as a reminder that I should be proud of my heritage and not be ashamed for who I was, and especially, that I was created by God in God's image. At that particular time, those words helped me to remember that I was not alone. I turned to God in prayer. First of all, I prayed for those who tried to make me feel ashamed. I prayed that I could forgive them, that even if they did not seek forgiveness, I could have peace in my heart and mind. I also prayed that I could truly love them. I prayed for guidance and discernment, as I was facing a strong feeling of isolation, as I did not have a supportive community. In

remembering the words of my mother, I was able to remember who I was. I left that church with my head held high, knowing I am created in God's image and that God loves us all.

The words of my mother led me to Mark 12:31, which says: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (NRSV). I reflected on this verse in the Bible and I also read it in Spanish. The word in Spanish for neighbor is *prójimo*. This single word means more than neighbor. It means all human beings. It also means "the other"; in other words, *prójimo* is the one who looks different than me. The one who thinks different than me. The one who acts different than me. The one who may not live close to me. The one who does not agree with me.

There is another word in Spanish that sounds similar but is very different: *próximo*. *Próximo* is the one who is next to me. It is the one near to me. In other words, it is the one within my affinity group. The one who thinks and shares the same beliefs as me. The one who lives close to me. The one who is like me. The second commandment that Jesus gives us is to love our *prójimo*. "*Ama a tu prójimo, como a tí mismo.*" *Prójimo* is the one who often may be difficult to love, simply because he/she looks or acts different than us. When we love our *próximo* we are loving the one who is easy to love, simply because he or she thinks and looks like us. But the command is to love our *prójimo*—not just our *próximo*.

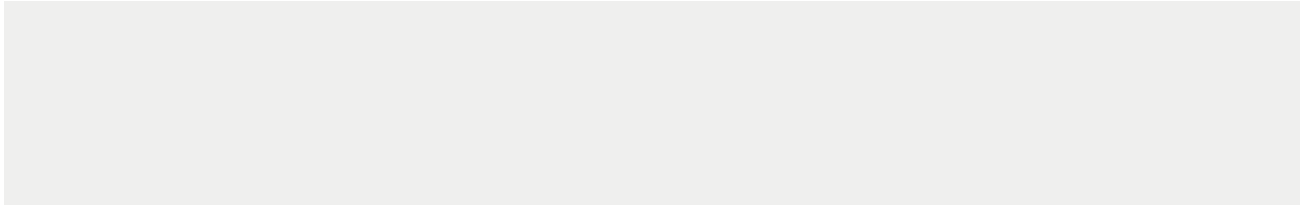
After the experience with that church, and as time passed by, I continued to reflect and discern, using the words of my mother. Her words and the

many experiences I had are constant reminders of the importance to being in cross-racial/cultural ministries. During my pastoral career, I have primarily served cross-racial/cultural appointments. At the same time, I have recognized that those distinctions should not exist in the church. I am always seeking to have a diverse community in the different settings I serve, including the church. I am often told, as I seek a diverse church, that this is a race issue and not a gospel issue. I believe that we must proclaim the good news of the gospel. We must go back to our roots and remember who we are, and, most importantly, remember whose we are. God's love is for everyone!

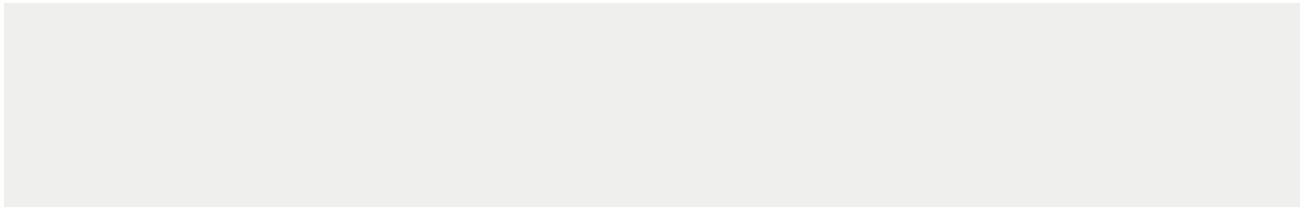
I believe that an inclusive church is a church where both *prójimo* and *próximo* love one another. It is a church where God's love is being shared to all, including those who are or think different than each of us. It is a church where love of *prójimo* is what we ought to practice each day. It is a church where we embrace one another in God's love. I believe that an inclusive church is a church that truly loves our *prójimo*, and, when we love our *prójimo*, then we can wholly experience God's love in us and through us as we find in Mark 12:30. There we love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength. It is where we truly experience being what God intends for each one of us. It is where we fully experience God's image. I will continue to reflect on and discern the words of my mother at that airport 27 years ago. "Victor, never forget who you are, and never forget whose you are."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

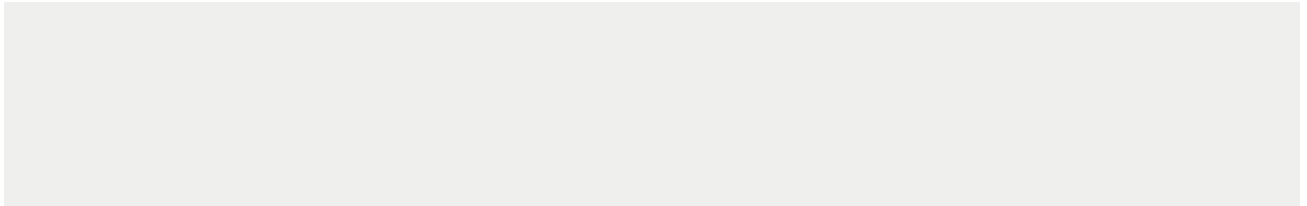
1. What was/is your first instinctive reaction as you encounter a cross-racial/cross-cultural appointment?



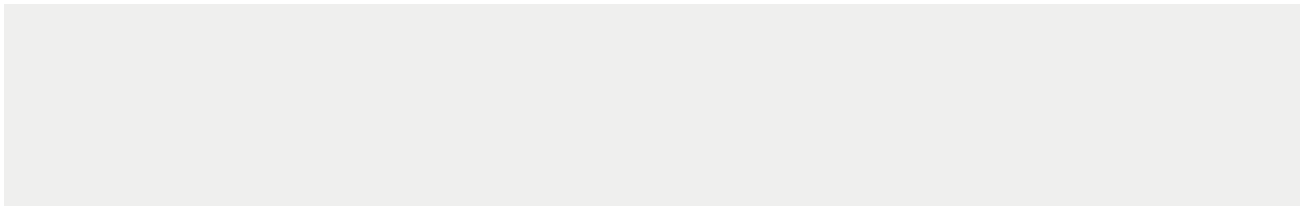
2. What is your understanding of diversity in the church?



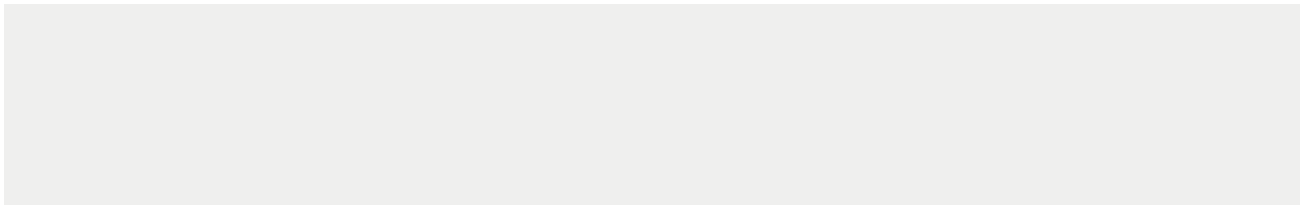
3. Who do you identify as your *próximo*?



4. Who do you identify as your *prójimo*?



5. Within the context of a cross-racial/ cross-cultural ministry, what comes to your mind when you hear these words: never forget who you are, and never forget whose you are?



SESSION 5

TARGETED AGITATORS

The Rev. Brian A. Tillman
Associate Pastor, Ben Hill UMC, Atlanta, Ga.
Chairperson, North Georgia Conference Commission on Religion and Race

"The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—the vision he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel."

Amos 1:1

Amos was a prophet from the southern kingdom, Judah. He was a shepherd with no known connection to other priests or prophets. His calling was one that would see him sent north to proclaim God's words to the northern kingdom of the tribes of Israel. He had to leave all he had known, family, friends, work, and his supportive environment, for a new place with people who lived and believed differently than he did.

Amos was not called to be prophetic in places of comfort but to do so in a place where his only shelter would be found in God. He's an outsider. Some might have said he was an "outside agitator." They'd say that as a sort of rebuke and as a way of dismissing his words. Nevertheless, Amos is sent by God to this place as his mouthpiece.

Welcome to the world of cross-racial/cross-cultural (CRCC) ministry! To this point, I've served 7 years in a CRCC appointment as an associate pastor, in two

very different church locations, and with four white senior pastors. Both locations were large churches in suburban areas with multiple pastors on staff where I served as its first black pastor. Like Amos, as long as I was talking about Damascus, Gaza, Edom, Tyre, Ammon, Moab, and Judah, all was well. But prophets have a knack for walking closer and closer until they are eventually stepping on your toes. Amos doesn't just step on toes; he moved to forever shrink their shoe sizes.

CRCC appointments are very complex. In my experience, it would be easy to pump the chest because of the esteem that comes with being appointed to a large wealthy church. You could enjoy the dinners, extravagant outings, numerous gifts, and rubbing shoulders with important people with immeasurable influence. It would be easy to fall victim to their power and then to become bought and bossed by them. But when that temptation comes, it's

important to remember that we aren't sent to please them. We are sent to please God.

Pleasing God comes with a task that can feel impossible. How do you love and embrace while also decrying the racist ills of the congregation? How do you provide pastoral care on Saturday night but then identify and decry white privilege on Sunday? How do you best raise the issue of racism in the congregation without the congregation walking out on you?

This is a calling that must be taken seriously and one that is better lived into when there is supportive spiritual leadership from the bishop, cabinet, and church leaders. Without appropriate spiritual leadership, the pastor risks isolation, negative reputation, questioned calling, and depression. Many pastors appointed cross-rationally do not have supportive spiritual leadership and must go in alone. Fortunately for me, this has only been my experience half of the time.

In both places where I served cross-rationally, I was eventually counted as a sort of outside agitator who should have been happy to have been allowed in the company of such important people. I attempted in my early time in cross-racial ministry to be relatively quiet on race issues. But my first year serving cross-rationally was when Trayvon Martin was brutally murdered. I noticed on Sunday morning that no one said anything about him or his murder. It was not mentioned in the sermon or in prayers.

As social media took off and my friends and family began to show support for Trayvon and his family, I joined in. Then I was thrust into the fray and my church became furious. One senior pastor I worked under said, "Why would you speak to an issue that doesn't impact our community? You chose the hottest topic in America!" I was floored and angered that he didn't believe that white terrorism towards black people impacted our community or me. I had a son a few years younger than Trayvon and we lived in a majority white area. That could have been my son. I was floored that a big church pastor still didn't have

the guts to stand up for what was right. He chose, instead, to keep quiet to anything controversial. The rationale was that we just need to preach Jesus. But, didn't Jesus walk into the Temple, tie a whip, turnover tables, and boot people from the Temple for propping up injustice?

A few months after Trayvon Martin's murder, Jordan Davis was murdered in Florida, but he actually lived just a few miles from my church in Georgia and his funeral took place at a church about 1 mile from mine. I slipped a newspaper clipping of the circumstances of the shooting under the senior pastor's office door with a note that said something like this: "Jordan Davis lived not too far from here. Does this impact our community now?" I assure you this didn't work out too well.

It is my experience that black pastors serving in cross-racial appointments are too often expected to be silent to racism, to ignore injustice broadly and locally, and to serve as an absolver of white guilt. In many instances a cross-racial appointment can be used as a way to avoid looking racist while still maintaining racist structures, policies, and practices. Any time someone calls those things what they are, the church points to their black pastor. This cannot be what is intended by appointing pastors cross-rationally.

How should cross-racial appointments be used? I recall several years ago when a pastor named The Rev. Dr. Freddie Haynes III preached the Martin Luther King Day Service at Ebenezer in Atlanta. In his dynamic breath-taking style, he reminded the congregation and audience of how Dr. King was called an outside agitator when he went to different towns to organize against racism. Being called an agitator was counted as derogatory. Who could forget George Wallace telling the nation that Alabama was satisfied with their life as it was, and that the only friction they had was from outside "agitators" like Dr. King?

Dr. Haynes then reminded the listeners of what an agitator is. An agitator is something that is found in washing machines and used to friction the dirt and

grime away from things. In the years prior to washing machines, people used washboards, and washboards had ridges and grooves used to agitate the dirt away. This is what the civil rights movement did. Everywhere they went, they agitated the stain of racism in institutions, organization, laws, policies, practices, and in hearts. They agitated school segregation. They agitated red lining and unfair housing practices. They agitated glass ceilings. They agitated unjust practices in transportation, banking, and voting. They agitated until some of the dirt was loosed and the systems began to change.

This is how I see cross-racial appointments when they are most effective. I would call them targeted agitation. Targeted agitation is when a stain is identified and then consistently rubbed until the dirt is loose and able to be washed away, and then the object that once carried the stain of racism is still there but better, cleaner, and able to be used. It's not careless agitation. In fact, it is agitation more like what would be used to clean a precious garment. This is work that is not suited for the washing machine which agitates wildly and broadly. The church is much too delicate for that. We need agitators who love Jesus and who love the church. Because if you love God and

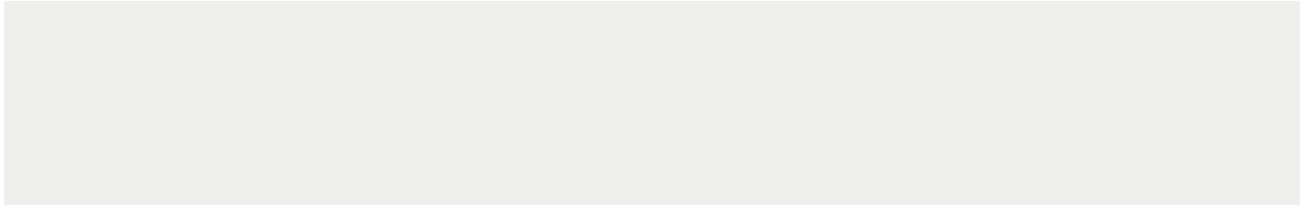
God's church, your efforts will not be aimed to hurt. Instead, your efforts are aimed to heal. This requires calculated decisions rooted in love, grace, and mercy while calling for justice and righteousness.

Aiming to heal does not mean that there won't be pain. Healing the wounds of racism cannot come without pain. Much like a doctor who performs surgery, there must be an incision, but it's one that is measured and is only as large as is necessary to remove what does not belong and to bring about healing.

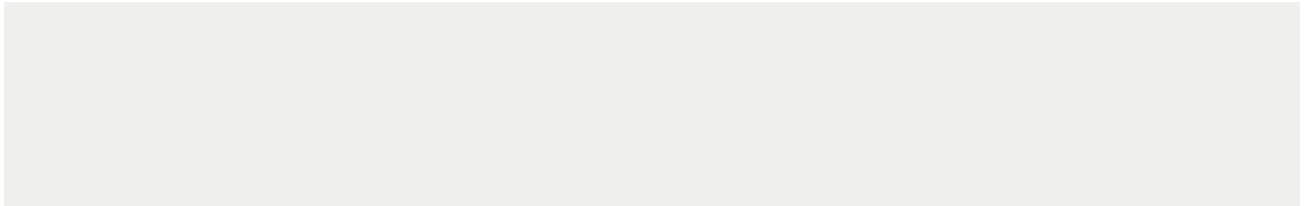
The United Methodist Church has always had targeted agitators who did the very careful, skilled, and spiritual work that showed us the ills we allowed. It was targeted agitation that resulted in women being able to live their calling as pastors. It was targeted agitation that resulted in the removal of the Central Jurisdiction. It was targeted agitation that resulted in the creation of the General Commission on Religion and Race. It will be targeted agitation that will result in a more radically inclusive church and one that will move forward in love, grace, and mercy without compromising justice and righteousness. We need targeted agitators. Are you one?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

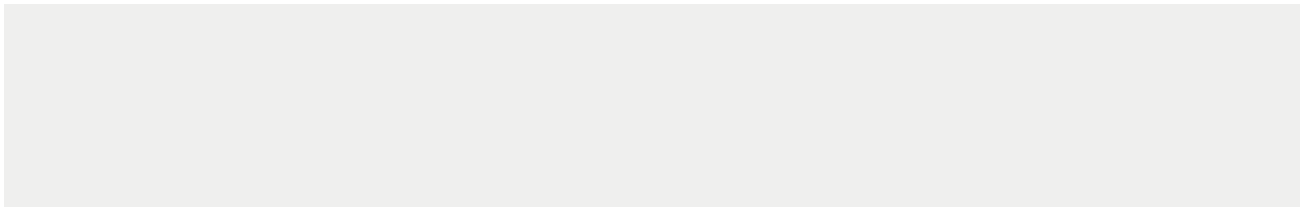
1. Have you been called by God to be an agitator? If so, how have you been developing your skills?



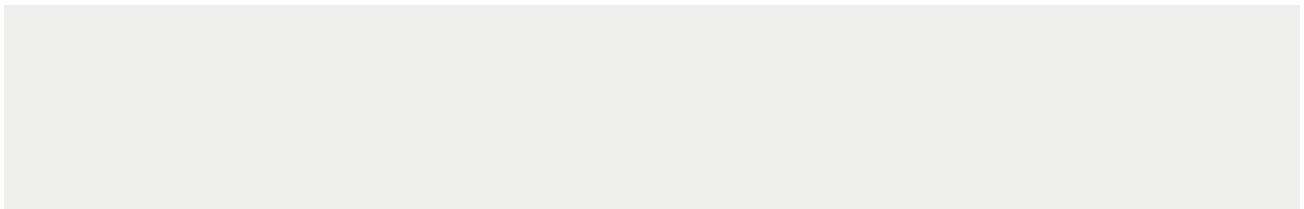
2. Identify practices and issues in your ministry context as well as in the larger community context that needs targeted agitation for transformation.



3. What would it look like for you to be a targeted agitator to bring healing in your community context?



4. Who can support/partner with you in this holy work of being a targeted agitator?



5. How do you hold love, grace, and mercy for the church, while also holding it accountable to justice and righteousness?

