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Seeking Justice and Defending the Oppressed: The Protestant Church's Role in Racial Reconciliation

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This is the time for you and me.
African American. Whites. Latinos.
Gays. Asians. Jews. Native
Americans. Lesbians. Muslims.
All of us must finally bury
the elitism of race superiority
the elitism of sexual superiority
the elitism of economic superiority
the elitism of religious superiority.
-Sonia Sanchez

*It is essential to remember how cold the sun
how warm the snow...¹*

I peered into the living room and felt like everyone was looking at me. I gazed around and noticed coloring book pages of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s face that fluttered as guests walked past the mantle. Soft R&B music echoed in the background of the house. Four African-American women sat in a circle around the room, scattered on the floor and the couch. Two young children playfully scrambled about the house, to their mother's dismay. One of the women oohed and ahed at an infant as she bounced him up and down on her knee. Another woman noticed me standing awkwardly in the hallway, not joining in on their laughter. She warmly called for me to claim a spot on the floor. Immediate acceptance. The kids insisted on making me lemonade and staying by my side on the floor, as they recounted their summer day and talked about their brothers and

¹ All headings are excerpted from a poem by Sonia Sanchez titled "Poem for July 4, 1994: For President Vaclav Havel."

sisters. I felt included, but initially, I had stiffened, momentarily feeling like I didn't belong there. I realized that as far as I could remember, I had never stepped into a black family's home until that day.

We will never forget

the earth

the sea

the children

the people...

She hesitated to tell us anything about her life. Years of pain and heartache stained the pages of her story. To uncover those wounds again felt unproductive to her, she said, but she reluctantly peeled back the layers of her life and detailed the intricacies to us: the sexual abuse, the homelessness, the identity issues, and the sometimes racialized struggle. As she spoke, she carried herself with a bittersweet strength that had been cultivated over years of heartache. I immediately felt inadequate in my "struggling." I couldn't experience or even understand the weight of the injustices my beloved roommate had endured. I tearfully expressed to her how, upon hearing her story, I felt unworthy and incapable of grieving my bouts of seemingly insignificant struggle in life. Instead of agreeing, as she had every right to, my roommate reassured me, making space for my vulnerability and different life experience. "That's your struggle, and this is mine," she said. "Your story matters, too."

*No more intoxicating ideas of
racial superiority
as we walk toward abundance...*

Aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents gathered for a typical Sunday dinner after church. Sunlight and warmth peeked in the slightly open window in the kitchen, as faint oldies music played through the radio. Grandmother pulled turkey out of the oven and broccoli salad from the fridge—the sweet smell of “home-cooked” greeting me at the front door. I slipped off my shoes, stood around until all the food was ready, quieted for prayer, grabbed my plate, filled my plate, found my seat, ate, and made small talk. Clockwork. I looked at the perfect flowers and candles strewn about the dining room table atop a creamy white table cloth while listening to story after story—school, work, politics, work, church, work. My aunt shared a story about a recent beauty event she attended with her daughter. The sound of disappointment and discontent swelled in her voice: “None of it was for *normal* hair. We looked forever and couldn’t find anything for *us*.” She said she eventually realized the event was for women of color. Laughter. Smiles. Subjects change. I found myself staring at that perfectly creamy white table cloth, biting my tongue, afraid to object.

Introduction

*This is the time for the creative
Man. Woman. Who must decide
that She. He. Can live in peace...*

I come from a family who categorizes itself as Christian, white, and middle class. We've always lived in the same small southern town and attended the same small Southern Baptist church until 2017. We serve in various capacities at our current church and pray before every meal. My childhood church hosted two people of color during my entire tenure there, and other than those two, no other black person has ever set foot in my parents' home. While there are some people of color at our church now, most are African international students. Between the majority (white communities) and minority (communities of color) lies a divide of typically unspoken prejudice, even in my quaint town of Murray, Kentucky. Is that the fault of my family or my town at large? Not exactly, I'd say, but the city of Murray, Kentucky isn't home to many, if any, places where diversity is embraced. Even at Murray State University, the local college, there is an emphasis on diversity, but according to the university's annual fact book report, 79 percent of Murray State students are white (Murray State 4). From my experience, the college campus sees more ethnic diversity than Murray as a whole, but groups stay fairly segregated on campus. The Baptist Campus Ministry director often says they need to get more black students involved, because other than the occasional African international student, the ministry sees maybe a handful of African American students enter its doors each year, while hundreds of white students call the ministry home. And even if they are welcome in theory, they are exceptional. Everyone notices.

The city of Murray has a small population of nonwhites. According to 2010 United States census data, 86 percent of the 18,000 people who lived in Murray were white (2). Those who stay in Murray their whole lives may, like me, feel a sense that it's best to surround yourself with people who look like you. There is a comfort in sameness. It is not just ignorance; it is a preference for homogeneity. In grade school, I never assumed any of the privileges I had

(education or socioeconomic implications) were because of my skin, and still, the town I live in largely reflects that. There was just a small group of black kids in my high school graduating class—maybe five percent. Exclusive immersion in any one culture precipitates a fear of the “other,” no matter what race or creed the “other” belongs to. In a place like Murray, the danger in exclusivity is the creeping feeling of cultural supremacy, and therefore racial supremacy. There is a need for a cultural third space: a place where the differences are acknowledged and majority culture bends and eventually embraces and celebrates the notion that they are not the only culture present in America. And in Murray, that space doesn’t seem to exist, at least for me. To be silent about cultural supremacy is to believe the lie of post-racial America, to avoid acknowledging racial issues in America, and to delegitimize the stories of so many Americans.

The catalyst for my own evolution was being around people who are different from me—an experience I’d never had growing up in Murray. To satisfy a requirement of my undergraduate degree at Murray State, I completed a nonprofit internship during the summer of 2017. Out of that experience came personal epiphany after personal epiphany. I had the opportunity to spend three months living in an urban environment with eight women, three of whom were minorities. Our house was in a rough area of town: a drug dealer lived next door and most of our neighbors were of low-income and minority populations. My roommates and I interned at a nonprofit called Love Thy Neighborhood (LTN), which seeks to partner with other local nonprofits in the Louisville, Kentucky, area and provide them with free labor, while creating a space for vulnerability and growth for the people taking part in the LTN program and serving in the local church. Every few weeks, the LTN staff would invite their 48 interns for a time of worship known as Gathered. Each Gathered was different, with topics ranging from church community and loving neighbors to views on homosexuality in the

church. The most pivotal of those meetings for me was a panel about racial reconciliation.

Living in the buckle of the Bible Belt, one would think I had heard every Christian term, but racial reconciliation had never graced the lips of my pastor when I was growing up. Messages from the pulpit were heavy on personal salvation and “the lost,” but never on acknowledging or standing up for the oppressed. The LTN panel on racial reconciliation included a collection of people from the church I attended in Louisville, Sojourn Community Church. A white pastor, two black pastors, and one white woman who attended the church told their personal stories and charged the audience with action and empathy. My mind opened to the possibility that I’d been living in apathetic and innocent ignorance for years. The oppression, the systemic injustices, the implicit racism, the inequalities in racial minorities represented in churches—all of it was new. I had never heard about or considered any of these issues before, yet they rang true for me. The panelists shared their burden for racial equality from a place of brokenness, because they deeply felt the church’s responsibility to “get this right.” One of the panelists said that if anyone gets this right, it should be the church. The foundation of Christianity is one of hope for unification and reconciliation among all people through God. Another panelist reflected on the “on earth as it is in heaven” sentiment expressed in the Lord’s Prayer. She said heaven is the definition of diversity, and this compels churches to see and promote the heaven-like picture of racial equality on earth as they soon will in heaven. I was shocked by ardent Christ-followers who were passionate about social justice and its place inside their church. Their message was inward. It echoed the “take the plank out of your own eye” messages I’d heard before, but it transcended to a new level of social responsibility.

As if the black and white movie of my life was now screening in color, I left Louisville and came back to complete my final year of undergraduate studies

at Murray State, with disbelief of my and my community's unawareness in tow. Why had I been so unaware for all of my young adult life? And what can and should my Southern Baptist church do in response? While recognizing that this discussion isn't popular in my hometown, I know that it's the most significant conversation I've ever been a part of. Now I look around the room and gauge if everyone looks like me or not. I see the pictures of the organizations I'm involved in and wonder why we all look the same. Six months ago, I never cared to consider any racially-based inequalities or hardships faced by the people of color around me; therefore, I sought to explain what has led me from ignorance to awareness for those who may be journeying along this path for the first time, specifically in "the church." The road to my understanding of white privilege is one marked by feeling generational guilt, uncovering misconceptions, and learning to honor the pain of people of color; but as a result of that understanding, there is a certain enlightenment and call for action—an action that the church at large and Sojourn specifically has the tools to enact. And while all sects of Christianity are built on principles of love and forgiveness, for me, the call to action in my own life was for the white evangelical church, which is where I grew up and long to see change.

Methodology

It is essential that we finally understand...

As the women of the Truth's Table podcast say in their episode Multiethnic Churches: Part I, one of the steps toward illuminating simple ignorance about racial divides is to reject your homogenous bubble and find out who you are when you're around people who are different from you. Whether I realized it at first or not, this was my exact experience in the summer of 2017. I ventured outside the lines of white culture in Murray, and as a result, I saw glimpses of minority

culture and how a majority culture church embraces its brothers and sisters of color in Louisville. Many of these revelations happened for me in the context of personal relationships. I sought to understand the ways in which Sojourn cultivated this space for racial healing and inclusion and how these practices could translate to the larger body of the church. Critical Race Theory (CRT) was particularly useful in analyzing the ways in which personal storytelling influenced my view of racial inequality and how storytelling can be used as a tool in the church to precipitate awareness and changes to church leadership and worship services to be more inclusive.

Critical Race Theory is a theoretical framework with five tenets that address the intersection of law and race: the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest convergence, critique of legal liberalism, and counter-storytelling—the last of which is most relevant for my research. In Kevin Hylton’s article about the meaning of CRT in research, he concludes, “CRT’s major premise is that society is fundamentally racially stratified and unequal, where power processes systematically disenfranchise racially oppressed people” (1). CRT is the acknowledgement that all is not well, and in fact, all is not well because of the system. This starting point allows the mind to see past an individual and instead consider the structural forces at play. It sets the groundwork, and it is instructive: “It uncovers the ongoing dynamics of racialized power and its embeddedness in practices and values which have been shorn of any explicit, formal manifestations of racism” (Crenshaw et al. xxix). According to CRT scholars, the permanence of racism is a part of the American life, which cultivates structural injustices. Whiteness is a claim to property, policy, curriculum, media, and everyday social interactions. There are situations in which whiteness allows privilege, whether that is in educational, workplace, or legal scenarios. Whiteness and the agency associated with it allows for most gains in society to be aligned with white agendas. Scholars argue that the legal system is

also tainted with white agendas and injustices. And finally, according to CRT scholars such as Daniel G. Solórzano, Tara J. Yosso, and Richard Delgado, opening a space to allow the bravery of offering an opinion or personal story that challenges commonly-held majority views, also known as counter-storytelling, is a pivotal part of racial understanding. It is not to construct walls and assign labels that divide and define us, but rather to embrace who we are and how that interacts with the identities of others.

As the church finds itself needing the tools necessary to work toward racial justice in its own congregations, CRT is a viable framework for understanding racial inequalities, especially through counter-storytelling. It attempts to “cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (Delgado and Stefaniec 2). Counter-storytelling opens the avenue of racial awareness, because it isn’t just telling stories—it is telling stories that are counter to misconceptions about people of color. This method reverses the narratives of misconception, even though dominant methods of research can find it to be too personal and unscientific. Counter-storytelling humanizes issues of racial prejudice by giving a face and a voice to often coldly politicized injustices. By telling these stories and thoughts on the presence of racial inequality in America, the intent is to welcome every person at the table. At this table, though, people of color have had to fight for their place for far too long. Instead of assuming a majority culture cannot and will not seek to understand the implications of living as a minority in American culture, we must cultivate listening ears, encourage counter stories to strip away their false preconceived notions, and hope for open minds from every party involved. The stories of people of color are necessary, but so are the stories of white people feeling uncomfortable around minorities.

As Gloria E. Anzaldúa put it in her defining work about counter-storytelling called *This Bridge We Call Home*, “Not only must we build a bridge

toward reconciliation, but we must walk across it.” She writes, “to bridge is an act of will, an act of love, an attempt toward compassion and reconciliation, and a promise to be present with the pain of others without losing themselves to it” (4). Racial reconciliation is a work of embracing color, not negating it. Anzaldúa adds, “It’s about honoring people’s otherness in ways that allow us to be changed by embracing that otherness rather than punishing others for having a different view, belief system, skin color, or spiritual practice” (4). The antidote to othering, or ostracizing one group of people based on their differences, lies in the medicine of building a bridge where every nationality, race, religion, and class feels comfortable to share their story without fear of doubt. One story is not more important than the other; rather, all are valid simply because they exist.

To analyze the ways people in the church can be forces for racial justice, I focused on the counter-storytelling aspect of CRT. By conducting semi-structured interviews in September and October 2017, I learned about the experiences of five prominent people at Sojourn Midtown Community Church, whose voices are important to both me and their church community. I chose these five participants because I realized their interest in racial reconciliation as I grew to know them personally and chose to conduct my study through purposive sampling of individuals. I recruited them via email and was greeted with great willingness and with hearts committed to exposing darkness. Through their stories, I discovered the ways in which systemic and societal injustices and scripture fuel their cry for racial reconciliation. As I spoke with pastors, worship leaders, and others who are forces for racial equality within the church and the community,² I heard stories of great struggle, resilience, and hope. They shared experiences and philosophies that I believe many people in Murray and other places like it would be surprised to hear and need to hear. This counter-storytelling invites the possibility of

² Interviews were conducted with Level One IRB clearance from Murray State University.

shedding light on ignorance. From these stories, we see that race relations are a kind of romance, a falling in and out of love, a falling in and out of succeeding, a trial and error. They show us that the “almost but not yet,” attitude toward overcoming racial injustice contributes to the struggle. There is failure. These representatives’ voices are weary from doing good, but they are not finished doing good just yet. My childhood church in Murray lacked the energy I felt at Sojourn—an energy which demanded actions in the community: seeking justice and defending the oppressed.

Tools for Racial Reconciliation

*“this is the time for the creative
Man. Woman. Who must decide
that She. He. Can live in peace...”*

If racial understanding is a continuum with several phases to be completed in succession, then we must realize the existence of racism, eradicate explicit racism, eradicate implicit racism, and create a space for healing. Often a lack of awareness about implicit forms of racism plagues relationships between people of color and white people in America and prohibits the next step of racial reconciliation. Hart Blanton and James Jaccard pinpoint three forms of implicit racism among white people: lack of awareness of how actions affect people and social institutions (279), lack of consciousness of their own racist leanings (279), and rationalization to preserve one’s self-image (281). Unknowingly, implicit racism contributes to privileged people perceiving steps toward racial equality as inequality; privileged people have always enjoyed the favor of the system and

have never experienced otherwise. A system steeped in implicit racism poisons the minds of privileged people and corrupts the institutions they form.

While the journey of reconciliation is one that I believe everyone must embark on individually, in some respects, the national culture is waking to the injustices of racial inequality, and churches have chosen to respond or not. For the Kentucky Council of Churches (KCC), they have taken a stance on embracing racial reconciliation. On their website, the KCC has posted a “prayer for unity,” which includes the lines:

Renew in us the resolve to dedicate our energy
to the work of building a just society for all people
of every race, language, and way of life.

This is inspiring for the church at large to look at societal issues, but historically, the authors of “Studying Race and Religion” write, “Evangelical religion... leads to greater division in racial attitudes, more resistance to political solutions for racial inequality, and greater division in how to solve America’s racial problems between blacks than is found among other Americans” (352). In my experience, white Conservative Christians tend to shy away from issues of national social injustice, and instead they put emphasis on personal salvation. Scholars at Rice University in Houston, Texas, propose this problem is sometimes referred to as anti-structuralism, or “an inability to perceive, unwillingness to accept, or negative reaction to macro social structure influences” (“Equal in Christ” 400). Instead of facing or even considering these problems, Christians often turn the other cheek for the sake of avoiding political sides, becoming blind to the very illnesses that plague their country and their congregations. In *Race and Resistance*, Reverend Paul Scott charges white congregations to address societal issues:

What if the pastor would stand up every Sunday morning and preach against the white supremacist system with the same energy (and volume) that he preaches about what black folks are doing wrong? What if he challenged the congregation to go out and fight for freedom after each service? How long would it be before changes happened in that neighborhood—or that city? (186)

All Christians come to this conversation carrying the rhetoric and cultural tools that illuminate how they see reality (“Equal in Christ” 399), and for white people, those tools may or may not recognize racism. Anti-structuralism builds rationale for racial inequality, and thus halts the work of racial reconciliation and ignores the issues which never see the pulpit.

Studies of race and religion after the Civil Rights movement showed a U-shaped relationship between religious involvement and prejudice: the most prejudiced people were those somewhat involved in religion, while the least prejudiced were either deeply religiously committed or not religiously affiliated at all (“Studying Race and Religion” 351). Homogeneous communities have the power to deeply influence their respective ideology. The authors of this study found, “There are thus strong feedback loops between religion and ethnicity, which buttress and reproduce each other. Failing to take this as a starting point is inviting under-theorization and misunderstanding of race, ethnicity, and religion” (352). Religion is an important characteristic of a culture; therefore, church is a source of ethnic preservation. The evangelical religious tradition has specific traits that are characteristic of their populations. For example, white evangelical church services are typically shorter and more knowledge-based, and ethnic churches can be longer and more expressive. By the relationship between them, “Religion is racialized, and race is spiritualized” (“Studying Race and Religion”

349). Religion and race are deeply interwoven, which substantiates the need for racial reconciliation in the church.

In thousands of years of Christianity, the rhetoric used inside the church has impacted the beliefs of churchgoers. According to Bosco Bae, the central tenet of Protestant Christianity is the belief that God is relational and therefore desires a personal, individual, transcendent relationship between Christ and each believer. Bae points out that Christians value relationship with one another in a way that mirrors a transcendent relationship with God. Christianity also emphasizes sin and salvation as a consequence of free will and personal choice (1009). Under the umbrella of free will theology in Christianity, ideas about salvation and choices in life being dependent on the individual can be manipulated into placing blame on the individual and avoiding systemic issues of injustice. And historically, evangelicals have sometimes added to the problem of racial divides. In the mid-1800s, evangelical churches had a choice: abolition or pro-slavery. In their book examining the relationship between racism and the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), Jarvis J. Williams and Kevin M. Jones recount the ways in which the SBC has been plagued with prejudice, even from the convention's conception. They show that the driving factor in the birth of the SBC was influenced by racial issues. White delegates from the South broke from the American Baptist Home Missionary Society to defend slavery. They gathered in May of 1845 to form their own mission society called the Southern Baptist Convention. They ironically joined in singing "Blest Be the Tie That Binds" (10).

Some argue that in the conversation about what Christians believe about racial superiority, having a misconception of Jesus and his race is a factor. In 1941, Warner Sallman painted *Head of Christ*, which became the most recognizable face of Christ in the world (Blum 208). In Sallman's depiction, Jesus had white skin, blue eyes, a beard, and flowing brown hair. He felt approachable and familiar to white Christians. By 1944, almost 14 million Sallman prints had

been sold, and Christian publishers were using the image on calendars, stickers, buttons, and Bibles. By the 1990s, it had been printed more than 500 million times. Despite this image, scholars agree Jesus was Jewish and was brown, not white. There is a tendency to white wash the reading of Jesus, whether to create a certain image of Christ or to identify with a certain people group. And even for me as I grew up, I held the view of Jesus portrayed by Sallman; Jesus looked like me, and He was *my* savior. But breaking down the view of white washed Jesus reveals the beauty of multi-ethnic Christians through the ages. Christianity isn't for white people; it is for all people. And in the same way, racial reconciliation isn't just for Christians, it is for all people.

Despite years of misunderstanding entrenched in the minds of churchgoers, there is hope for the evangelical church. The Bible offers stepping stones to reconciliation both horizontally, with each other, and vertically, with God. Themes of love, forgiveness, justice, and mercy bind together the foundational beliefs of Christianity. Racial reconciliation is not trendy, it is necessary—a demand of the gospel. Being a believer in Christ should require a constant struggle for the liberation of the oppressed (Boyd 187). From the divine framework of Christianity, all are welcome at the table of God. In Genesis, God created man in His own image, and therefore any person who subscribes to the narrative found in Genesis can look at people all over the world and see that no matter color or creed, every human is worthy of the same respect and love. The narrative of ethnic inequality can also be traced to the Old Testament. God chose the descendants of Abraham to be His people, and He promised that through Abraham's offspring, they would be blessed (*New International Version* Gen. 22:18). Through years of slavery, hardship, and oppression, they eventually reached the Promised Land. White Christians often liken themselves to the Israelites, God's chosen yet oppressed people, but those white American Christians have a historical experience closer to that of the oppressor. According

to the Bible, God makes a way for the unchosen to be brought back to Him; therefore, God is not only a redeemer of the oppressed, He is a redeemer of the oppressors (Gungor, et al.) and creates a unity among all people.

According to Romans 10:13, through Jesus, God makes a way for all those who call on the name of the Lord to be saved. Paul states that the blessing of the Lord came to all people through Christ: “He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit” (*New International Version* Gal. 3:14). Through the life and death and perfect sacrifice of Jesus, all were made one in the eyes of God. According to Galatians 3:28, there is no Jew or Gentile, man or woman. Jesus talked with the foreign prostitutes, ate with the sinners, and healed the sick and downtrodden. Jesus was a political revolutionary. He didn’t bow to the structures of the time; instead, he flipped the literal and metaphorical tables that were stained with unrighteousness. He wasn’t concerned with the superiority of race; in fact, he ate with those who were downcast minorities and praised Samaritans who stopped to help those who were untouchable. The teachings of Jesus to love each other regardless of background or skin color are often silenced in the church by the deafening cry of the unwillingness to stand up for societal injustices.

The ideas found in Micah 6:8 of acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with the Lord are lived realities at Sojourn Midtown, a church that advocates for racial reconciliation in an area of Louisville known as Shelby Park. The church is a seventeen-year-strong source of life and love in their neighborhood. Every Sunday, they offer four worship services, and they engage with the community through Vacation Bible School, health clinics, block parties, and other community-centered initiatives. The leadership of the church makes conscious decisions to encourage and celebrate diversity. These threads bind together every decision made at Sojourn. My interviewees, Jamaal Williams,

Rachel Hamm, Lauren Ritter, Jesse Eubanks, and Jonny Barahona, are passionate about racial reconciliation. Their cultural and racial backgrounds bring a unique viewpoint to the church. In the course of our conversations, three main tools for reconciliation surfaced: cultivating meaningful relationships, intentionally hiring people of color for church leadership positions, and creating an inclusive worship environment.

Relationships

This is the time for you and me.

African American. Whites. Latinos.

Gays. Asians. Jews. Native

Americans. Lesbians. Muslims...

My experiences with counter-storytelling and hearing about the ways in which my worldview was ill-informed only happened in spaces where others felt accepted and able to share their stories in a safe space. These life-changing spaces happen in the context of relationships. Jamaal Williams, one of the LTN racial reconciliation panelists, is a graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. From 2009-2016, he served as the head pastor of Forest Baptist Church in Louisville, a traditionally African American church. He has been the lead pastor of Sojourn Midtown since January 1, 2016, where he contributes to the work of growing Sojourn as a multi-ethnic church as a black pastor. Pastor Jamaal expressed, “I feel like my call then and now is to see the beauty of diversity without division and color without contempt and to see the imagination and creativity of God come alive in local churches.” He shared the following story about his childhood at the LTN racial reconciliation panel over the summer:

I grew up in Chicago. Chicago is a very segregated city. The first time I experienced racial trauma happened when I was around six, walking with my auntie in the inner city, actually more of a well-to-do neighborhood. We were going on a walk to a garage sale, and a truck pulls up alongside of us, and they just start yelling racial slurs at us, which is when I was introduced to the word 'nigger.' I just remember and still kind of carry that trauma of that moment of seeing a truck with three white males just yelling profusely at us, and I just remember feeling unsafe and sliding close to my aunt. That was the moment that I realized that something was really different in 'us' as opposed to 'them'.

At the panel, within the comfort of personal relationships, he voiced pain in his life. As a pastor, Jamaal has a platform. He speaks almost every Sunday with the Midtown congregation, but at this LTN event, he stepped into a vulnerable, intimate space, and spoke about his past. There was comfort in the room—a freedom to tell stories without the fear of rejection or invalidation. This attitude of valuing relationships was continued all the way through my time at LTN.

Rachel Hamm, Music Administrator at Sojourn Midtown, saw the consequence of the absence of building relationships where people of every color feel welcome a few years ago at Sojourn:

When I made the decision to become a member, I was meeting and becoming friends with a handful of people of color in the congregation. One of them was a guy named David who had moved to Louisville to go to Southern Seminary. He had lived in Houston and in New Orleans, both of which have large areas of the city that are predominantly black. At the time, Southern was not nearly as vocal about issues of race as they have been in the last three or four years. Basically it was like crickets. He was

really feeling the burden of ‘Nobody at Southern understands my experience, but also they don’t care about it. They don’t care to learn.’

With experience in building friendships across racial and cultural lines and being a diversity trainer in college, Rachel said she had the tools to know how to care for David. Rachel first joined Sojourn in 2010 and took the position of Sojourn Music Administrator in 2016. She often plays violin and guitar and sings with the worship band. She is white and is from Indiana, where she grew up around mostly white people in her neighborhood. Her fine arts grade school was a great source of diversity for her, and she conveyed that going to a college of almost entirely white students was a shock to her system, but while there, she had the opportunity to become a diversity trainer. As a diversity trainer, she learned how to listen and talk about racism, which set her up to handle many situations she has found herself in at Sojourn. Despite her efforts, David eventually left the church. From her perspective, there was a whole other part of his story that people didn’t know, as if he spoke a different language. He couldn’t fully be himself or fully participate, because his entire story was not welcomed or understood. Rachel admitted:

It’s hard, but even though he loves the church, he still feels like he can’t share all of his life with us. He was an unnecessary casualty of our fears to expand our culture and include more people. I don’t even know if I would say it was sin or idolatry, but it definitely was like there were fears. There were a lot of people in the membership and potentially in the leadership who were either unaware of what our narrow culture was doing, that it was keeping people out, or they were afraid or they didn’t have the capacity or skills to expand it.

Rachel explained the church body was completely unaware of the racial divides in their own congregation. When she tried to explain to other people how significant David's leaving was, no one considered it a big deal. They thought if one person needed to leave the church, they shouldn't be too concerned.

Even when the congregation began to see racial reconciliation as an important issue, they were ill-equipped to start necessary conversations. Rachel proposed, "You're going to want to start talking about it, but you don't even have the vocabulary. You're like a two year old learning how to talk for the first time. So understand that you're going to say idiotic things. Be prepared." After a ground-shaking sermon about racial reconciliation, the leadership at Sojourn realized the need for a space to discuss their feelings about the topic. "[The pastor] preached Ephesians 2, and it was like this is the gospel: reconciliation between enemies," Rachel remembered. The pastors understood people had a lot to say, and they wanted them to be heard. In the weeks after the sermon, small groups met at the church with one pastor and one member of color to lead each group. In early 2015, Rachel's husband Casey, a member of Sojourn, wrote a survey and sent it to every non-white person at Sojourn, which was about 30 members at the time. He compiled the answers and shared it with church leadership, and they realized that most people did not know how to build relationships with people of color. That realization gave birth to things like diversity trainings for Community Group leaders. Loving your neighbor, found in several instances in the New Testament, is often quoted in churches, but when Sojourn first felt the implications of racial reconciliation, it was as if the tangible steps toward loving their neighbors, and specifically Christians of color, were missing. Loving your neighbor includes a willingness to understand the experiences that have shaped who people are, which as Lauren Ritter, another interview participant, says, is a fruit of the Gospel. She was also a member of the

LTN racial reconciliation panel, and seeks racial reconciliation through the wisdom in God's word:

Isaiah says if we are not about the freedom of oppressed people, then we are not about the Lord. If you start reading scripture, Jesus acted socially. He was a social activist—Jesus Christ himself. If we're walking in the steps of Christ, then we must stick up for the oppressed. We must speak where words can be spoken, and if we have power and a position, we must use that for God's glory. Plus, we are to love our neighbor like ourselves. There is no way you can be silent and watch a brother or sister's pain and tell me that you are being obedient to the greatest commandment in scripture.

Especially among white Christians, there must be honest conversation, Lauren emphasized, with the goal of carrying brother and sisters of color's burdens.

Lauren grew up in Oldham County, Kentucky. Her first racialized memory happened when she was in kindergarten. Her best friend was African American, and one of Lauren's family members commented, "Isn't that so cute that she has a little black friend?" That experience has stuck with Lauren her whole life. Lauren comes from a white family of pastors and leaders, but she expressed that she felt a disconnect between her childhood church's teaching and racial reconciliation. She became a member of Sojourn in 2007 and has served the church by discipling women, leading community groups, and helping out with Sojourn Music whenever she can. Through the ways she cares about people in her church and community, she shoulders their burdens daily. In Galatians 6:2, the Apostle Paul encourages this sentiment: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Carrying burdens does not mean Christians should ever require people of color, or anyone for that matter, to give proof of their pain.

Lauren declared that demanding validation of wrong is a direct refusal of the Bible's instruction to carry burdens. She said, "The carrying is an effort to understand and to step towards healing: "Reconciliation says you go to your brother and say, 'How can I make this better? Please teach me.'" Diversity in churches offers these opportunities for reconciliation, honest conversation, and meaningful relationships.

One hindrance to building meaningful relationships is a sense of what might be called colorblindness, which is often pushed by the white evangelical church as God's view of humans. Pastors sometimes say that God is colorblind, so Christians should be also. This line of thought negates any racialized experiences of people of color. It is a way of saying, "I don't see your pain, and I don't care to, because I just see you as a human." Pastor Jamaal argued that "colorblindness as a gift from God" is unhelpful rhetoric and one of the worst lies that the church has believed. God created us to be "color blessed" instead. Jamaal claimed, "We should see color as a blessing, as a unique expression of God and His creativity, His beauty, His majesty, and His awe." He said colorblindness is not a luxury people of color have:

I can't be colorblind. It's impossible for me not to see color. I see color every time I walk into a grocery store that's owned by a person that's not black and the suspicious looks I get. I'm weekly reminded by when I look around and I see somebody following me acting like they're fixing something even though the section looks great. I don't have the privilege of being colorblind the handful of times I've been wrongfully pulled over by police and harassed because I'm driving suspiciously, or when I have a nice vehicle in an area of town that's maybe not nice. [Colorblindness is] a privilege. That's white privilege.

And the abuse of white privilege, the specific advantages of being the majority race in America, has the power to cripple racial reconciliation.

But hope is not lost. In fact, the SBC is making strides toward racial reconciliation. The authors of *Removing the Stain of Racism in the Southern Baptist Convention* claim that, over time, racial healing has taken place: Pastor Fred Luter served two terms as the first African American president of the convention, twenty-three Baptist state conventions elected minority presidents, and many churches have entered the conversation about justice for African American men dying at the hands of white police officers in recent years (44). None of this change happens without recognizing the need to create a church environment where all races and backgrounds are valued, welcome, and represented. Rachel explains, “Relationships are the number one way this is going to happen—when people feel connected to each other. Build connections with people who have different life experiences than you.” If Christians are to love God the way they love each other, relationships built on trust and vulnerability must be the standard.

Leadership

*All of us must finally bury
the elitism of race superiority
the elitism of sexual superiority
the elitism of economic superiority
the elitism of religious superiority...*

Although they embrace racial reconciliation in a way that is inspiring, it wasn't always this way at Sojourn. As Rachel said, people of color left because

they didn't feel welcome, but when the church started to make the shift toward inclusivity, some white members of the church left as well. The monumental racism and white privilege sermon, a turning point in the church's mission, happened just three years ago. When Sojourn Midtown moved locations from Germantown, a predominantly white area, to the very diverse Shelby Park, Rachel recalled that leaders of the church began thinking about reaching the neighborhood with the gospel and reflecting their neighborhood by their attendance at church. If the neighborhood was diverse, they wanted to see that diversity represented on Sunday mornings. They realized they would have to change several things, and one of those was hiring a pastor of color. Rachel asserted, "You have to put your money where your mouth is. You have to make hiring decisions. The people who are in power are going to have to step aside sometimes. The beautiful thing is in the church, none of us have the ultimate authority." But those hiring decisions required pastors to relinquish some of their control and submit to Pastor Jamaal's leadership. He is respected at Sojourn, though he said this is not always the case:

One of the challenges with multiethnic ministries in general is that they want a person of color without giving them power and authority. One of the things I'm most encouraged by is at Sojourn, from the time that they pursued me to be the lead pastor, is that I'm the lead pastor. I, in essence, along with the other elders, have the responsibility of hiring and staffing as well as finances and overseeing the vision of the church and being the primary voice that is shaping people through the preaching of the word. A lot of multiethnic churches want people of color without giving power as well as without accepting and embracing people as they are in their culture. As a church, we have to constantly put down our preferences and pick up our crosses.

Looking back, Jesse Eubanks remembered that the past three years have been long and challenging, but he said their church now is almost unrecognizable in comparison to where they started. Jesse is from Louisville, Kentucky, and comes from a white middle class family. He took classes in high school about the Holocaust and African American history, which opened his eyes to racial injustices. Through experiences living in areas of the country such as Oakland, California, where racial divides are clear, Eubanks came to the conclusion that these injustices are why God speaks so often about the poor and oppressed in scripture. Today, he is the Founder and Executive Director of LTN and the host of the LTN Podcast. Creativity, justice, and empathy season all his actions, which I especially saw when he was my boss over the summer. He has been with Sojourn since its conception, and he has watched the church grow into its role in racial reconciliation.

About a year and a half ago, people of color made up only one or two percent of Sojourn Midtown's congregation, but through a transformation in the leadership of the church, Jesse said racial reconciliation is slowly starting to take shape.

Over time, the Lord caught the hearts of the leadership at Sojourn, and the truth is that it's always top-down in a church. If the pastor is convicted about something, the congregation will become convicted, but if the pastor is not convicted and does not care, the congregation is very slow to come along. It's nearly impossible. I think it just took time for the leadership of Sojourn to really begin to understand the weight and realities.

Now, that population of people of color at Sojourn has grown from one to two percent to around 20 percent. All the interviewees claimed this is largely because

of Pastor Jamaal's presence and leadership and the elders' entrusting him to truly lead. Lauren stated that white Christians had to take a seat and allow the black leadership to flourish. There was a respect and an understanding that people of color in positions of leadership were to be taken seriously, not because some prominent white evangelical imprints his stamp of approval on them, but because they are competent and able to preach wisely and lead well (Williams and Jones 20). Pastor Jamaal expressed he always tries to be himself, even while adjusting from preaching at a black church to preaching at a majority white church. The leadership encourages him to be himself, not assimilate to white culture.

As a result of white Christians stepping aside for the sake of empowering people of color, other people of color began to identify with the leadership and see themselves in those roles. Jesse acknowledged:

Definitively, there is a glass ceiling that exists in every congregation when you look up on stage and don't see someone that looks like you or comes from a background that you understand. There's a subconscious ceiling there that says, 'I could be the best leader I know how to be and follow the Lord as faithfully as possible, but I'll never get above this point in the church. If you see that there's a deacon that kind of looks like you, you think you could be a deacon. But if there are no pastors, no worship leaders, no stage presence or leadership presence, you don't see yourself in those roles.

That stage presence for people of color has grown over the past few years. Since he came on staff as Director of Worship in December 2015, Jonny Barahona has noticed a huge growth in Latinos at Sojourn, in part because they identified with his presence on stage and felt more comfortable. Inviting people of color to leadership positions reframes perceptions of race on all sides. Their race is not

what defines them, nor is it the most important thing about them, but their presence has a way of making other people of color feel welcome. If churches create a space for people like Pastor Jamaal and Jonny to be respected and to flourish, the congregation will grow to be more accepting, and over time, the hope is that this mood will permeate the surrounding community.

Worship

*nourish your lives with a
spirituality that allows us to respect
each other's birth...*

In 2015, LifeWay Research conducted a survey of 1,000 church-attending Christians. Their results show that one-third of respondents regularly attend a church where they are a minority. Of those, one in five responded their ethnic identity hindered their involvement in the congregation. Twenty-two percent of those who have not been a minority in their church settings conceded that being a minority would make them feel uncomfortable in a worship service. To ease that discomfort, Jamaal reassured that they make every effort to be a church where anyone would feel welcome: “Whoever is on stage, they get to be their authentic self in the way that God has uniquely made them.” When he first became a part of Sojourn, he pointed out that there would be maybe one minority in the worship band, but now it’s becoming equally diverse: African American, Native American, Latino, white—all are represented. Rachel proposed, “If we want our neighbors to be welcomed in our church services because we want them to know Christ, surely we can lay down our preferences around music style, preaching style, dress... Not content of preaching, but delivery style.” When Jonny came on

staff, Rachel recalled the leadership at the church giving him the freedom to make risky decisions and to choose new songs. It was new territory. Now the music at Sojourn ranges from blues to rock to gospel and contemporary Christian, and they've sung songs in Spanish and Haitian Creole. But the point of church leadership, Lauren says, is not to make a moral issue out of preference. Preferences had to be laid down for the sake of reaching people in their neighborhood to had never experienced church or had only experienced church in a certain way.

The most enlightening thing I learned about worship is that for Jonny, understanding the ways in which dominant and subdominant cultures approach worship is crucial. Jonny is second generation Latino. He was born in New York and grew up in Palm Beach, Florida, a very diverse area. By the time he was 13, he was very involved in his church. He earned his undergraduate degree at Palm Beach Atlantic University and then went to seminary in Louisville. He said it wasn't until he moved to Kentucky for seminary that he realized racial tension in America as a problem. Every Sunday, he sings and plays piano at Sojourn Midtown. As he plans their worship services, he thinks critically about the way that worship and theology intersects with minority and majority culture. He shared, "If I want those two very different life experiences to meet each other on Sunday and to both get something from the service, I have to understand how vastly different they are." People of color or oppressed people, Jonny affirmed, live in a society where the world does not favor them. They feel the disadvantage Monday through Saturday; they are treated as sojourners. The struggles, the disenfranchisement, and the lament build tension throughout the week, and on Sunday, they get to enjoy worshipping with one another. The tension of the world is released through crazy celebration or drawn out longing and repetition. Songs, sermons, and services are typically longer, because Jonny said that time of respite and catharsis is needed. On the other hand, in white culture, church is receiving

information, changing your patterns of thought, then going back out into the world. Services are typically short. He remarked, “Keep it at an hour. More than an hour hurts.” White culture also has the history of luxury and very theologically dense hymns to receive information.

Johnny’s depictions confirmed my experiences growing up in a small white church. We sang many dense hymns, and more emphasis was placed on learning than responding to a holy god. His perspective gave words to what I’d been feeling while attending worship services at Sojourn: something was different. I realized one of the differences was the type of worship environment. Growing up in a white Southern Baptist church, I never saw any other sides to worship, and noticing these differences cultivated a new appreciation for diversity around me, especially in the context of the church. As I wanted to reject the models of worship I’d grown up with that felt sterile and disingenuous in comparison to the celebration and lament Jonny spoke of, he offered encouragement: “I say that both of those are legitimate. I’m not saying that you shouldn’t be remembering information, and I’m not saying that we need to suppress our spontaneity or raw emotions. When you’re creating worship, you’re supposed to bring both of those together.”

So at Sojourn every week, Jonny thoughtfully keeps both of those expressions present. To illustrate, he described a few of the songs he chose for a recent service: “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” and “When I Think about the Lord.” “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” is a standard Christian hymn first penned in the 18th Century. It is riddled with dense theological phrases like, “Here I raise my Ebenezer; / hither by thy help I’ve come” and “Clothed then in the blood washed linen; / how I’ll sing Thy wondrous grace!” (Robinson). But in the second song, the lyrics are contemporary, reflective, and less dense: “When I think about the Lord / How He saved me, how he raised me” and “When I think about the Lord / How He picked me up, turned me around / How He set my feet

on solid ground / That make me wanna shout / Hallelujah! Thank you, Jesus!” (Christ for the Nations). Jonny said “When I Think about the Lord” is a song that releases tension. The song speaks about what God did, and the natural response is worship. Although the songs are very different, Jonny believes it is necessary to have both present.

He noted one of the reasons he carefully crafts the services to be as inclusive of all racial backgrounds as possible is to create a space where people of different cultures can learn from each other. By worshiping with both groups, each is exposed to the other’s experiences. He thinks people of color can benefit from identifying the structures within theology of worship, but majority culture needs to learn from the experiences of minority culture at the same time:

The culture of oppression, the culture of sojourning in a foreign land is not something that is exclusive to people of color. Oppression is a part of the Christian experience. It’s a Christian thing to deal with sin. It’s a Christian thing to deal with oppression whether you’re white or black.

Some Christians believe that the world is not their home; instead, their home is with God in heaven. Jonny said white people can learn how to respond to that sojourning by participating in worshipping with people of color and giving voice to how they have suffered. Secondly, inclusive worship at Sojourn is a chance to mourn with those who mourn: “It’s an opportunity for privileged people to step into the suffering and the oppression of their minority brothers and sisters, and vice versa.” Church has the potential to be the most integrated, not segregated, hour of the week, and music has the power to speak to all groups, while bringing them together.

Conclusion

*It'll get better
if we the people work, organize, resist,
come together for peace, racial, social
and sexual justice
it'll get better
it'll get better.*

In “Gaining by Losing,” JD Greear spoke with Bill Hybels, who built the foundations of Willow Creek Church on the homogeneity principle: target one specific group of people, in this case, middle and upper class white people in Chicago. In 2015, the church welcomed a congregation of over 25,000 attendees each week. In an interview with Hybels, Greear asked him if looking back, he would be willing to reach fewer people of the same demographic and instead pursue cultural diversity, asserting that greater diversity outweighs the importance of overall salvations. Hybels responded, “The corporate witness of racially diverse churches in America would be more powerful, and result in a greater total number of conversions, than a numbers surge in any one congregation” (qtd. in Greear 161). Racial reconciliation is powerful. Not only does it attempt to heal racial and generational wounds, but it reconciles people to each other.

I have hope for communities like Murray and for churches in those areas to become advocates for the marginalized. To be silent about social issues is to be silent about the gospel that so many of these churches hold dear. My hope is not based on the idealism of justice, but based on the evidence, specifically at Sojourn. Making racism part of the conversation is like ripping off a Band-Aid; it's painful and necessary, but coupled with racial reconciliation, hopefully healing will begin, albeit slowly and with difficulty. For those who may

unknowingly contribute to implicit racism in America, facing prejudice is a matter of facing what might be considered heart issues. Christians must see the problems in their own hearts and use that revelation to transform the social climate, all while proclaiming the power God has to redeem racial strife. Confession and forgiveness are basic tenets of the Bible, and they must be applied to social issues of sin, not just personal sins.

Acknowledging prejudicial tendencies is hard. As Jesse expressed, “You have to accept that you have made a mistake and that you have looked at things wrong, the world is worse than you thought, and your heart is probably worse than you thought. That requires grieving.” He added, “The luxury of the option of participation” has affected white people for far too long. There is a comfort in being the majority culture and a sense that the majority culture gets to choose to be a part of the conversation, while people of color are inherently a part of the racial justice conversation. To echo Sonia Sanchez’ poem, “It’ll get better,” and churches have the opportunity to make things better. No longer should we bite our tongues in silence and look down, as I have done. We must fix our eyes on the hope of a day when stepping foot in a family of a different racial identity is commonplace, stories of pain are shared with respect, and those with privilege become aware of injustice. With awareness comes the responsibility of embracing all people and furthering racial reconciliation across all ethnic lines.

Appendix A

Poem for July 4, 1994

For President Vaclav Havel

Sonia Sanchez

1.

It is essential that Summer be grafted to
bones marrow earth clouds blood the
eyes of our ancestors.

It is essential to smell the beginning
words where Washington, Madison, Hamilton,
Adams, Jefferson assembled amid cries of:

“The people lack of information”

“We grow more and more skeptical”

“This Constitution is a triple-headed monster”

“Blacks are property”

It is essential to remember how cold the sun
how warm the snow snapping
around the ragged feet of soldiers and slaves.

It is essential to string the sky
with the saliva of Slavs and
Germans and Anglos and French
and Italians and Scandinavians,
and Spaniards and Mexicans and Poles

and Africans and Native Americans.

It is essential that we always repeat:

we the people,

we the people,

we the people.

2.

“Let us go into the fields” one
brother told the other brother. And
the sound of exact death
raising tombs across the centuries.
Across the oceans. Across the land.

3.

It is essential that we finally understand:
this is the time for the creative
human being
the human being who decides
to walk upright in a human
fashion in order to save this
earth from extinction.

This is the time for the creative
Man. Woman. Who must decide

that She. He. Can live in peace.
Racial and sexual justice on
this earth.

This is the time for you and me.
African American. Whites. Latinos.
Gays. Asians. Jews. Native
Americans. Lesbians. Muslims.
All of us must finally bury
the elitism of race superiority
the elitism of sexual superiority
the elitism of economic superiority
the elitism of religious superiority.

So we welcome you on the celebration
of 218 years Philadelphia. America.

So we salute you and say:
Come, come, come, move out into this world
nourish your lives with a
spirituality that allows us to respect
each other's birth.
come, come, come, nourish the world where
every 3 days 120,000 children die
of starvation of the effects of starvation;
come, come, come, nourish the world
where we will no longer hear the
screams and cries of women, girls,

and children in Bosnia, El Salvador,

Rwanda . . . AhAhAhAh AHAHAHHHHH

Ma-ma. Dada. Mamacita. Baba.

Mama. Papa. Momma. Poppi.

The soldiers are marching in the streets
near the hospital but the nurses say
we are safe and the soldiers are
laughing marching firing calling
out to us i don't want to die i
am only 9 yrs old, i am only 10 yrs old
i am only 11 yrs old and i cannot
get out of bed because they have cut
off one of my legs and i hear the soldiers
coming toward our rooms and i hear
the screams and the children are
running out of the room i can't get out
of the bed i don't want to die Don't
let me die Rwanda. America. United
Nations. Don't let me die

And if we nourish ourselves, our communities
our countries and say

no more hiroshima
no more auschwitz
no more wounded knee
no more middle passage
no more slavery

no more Bosnia
no more Rwanda

No more intoxicating ideas of
racial superiority
as we walk toward abundance
we will never forget

the earth
the sea
the children
the people

For *we the people* will always be arriving
a ceremony of thunder
waking up the earth
opening our eyes to human
monuments.

And it'll get better
it'll get better
if *we the people* work, organize, resist,
come together for peace, racial, social
and sexual justice
it'll get better
it'll get better.

Appendix B

A list of possible questions for interviews:

- What has been your personal journey with race and culture, specifically in the church?
- What is the history of Sojourn? How was it started and what principles was it founded on?
- Geographically, Sojourn Midtown sits in a predominantly black neighborhood. How has this affected the congregation?
- What is your personal experience with racism in the Church as a whole?
- How does the worship style at Sojourn reflect an attitude of racial justice and overall justice?
- What about Sojourn eradicates the existing conceptions of the way a Southern church carries itself?
- How has the church bent itself toward an ignorance about implicit racism?
- How has the church fostered a sense of being “good” while perpetuating forms of racism?
- Do white evangelicals read themselves into the Bible as the oppressed people? How does this lead to implicit racism?
- “The luxury of the option of participation is great, right?” How do Christians participate?
- How can we NOT paint Christianity as a religion only for white people?
- So when did the Church start believing that to love is to shield and cover rather than expose and confront? (Truth’s Table podcast)
- It feels like some Christians understand the Bible and some understand the world... What do Christians do with that?

- Churches sometimes interpret free will as the reason why bad things happen to people, and that in turn leads to people saying that inequality is a result of the choices individuals have made. So, is racism a product of faulty theology?
 - God is “colorblind”?
- To what extent are implicit forms of racism held unconsciously? Are they the causes or the effects of ignorance?
- Are we to the point where we can push for racial reconciliation, or are we still fighting to simply eradicate racist thought? Are we as progressive as we think we are?
- Thoughts on this: “The idealization of what the world SHOULD be and the practice of religion in accordance with that romance negates and dismisses past racial inequalities - effectively creating an absence of history. The social and historical residue shrouded in present discourses of multiculturalism and colorblindness further cultivates and reproduces implicit forms of racism that permeate throughout the fabric of the U.S. moral and human economy.”
- What’s next? Is the church the way-paver for equality?
- Are we unwilling to be obedient to the things that are clear in the Bible?
- How does it affect the structure of the church?
- How does leadership lead the charge on diversity based on who’s a part of it?

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