

# Just Act

2021

ISSUE

1

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A NEWSLETTER AND RESOURCE FOR THE CENTER FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

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# We Can Do Better

By Dr. Rodney Sadler

## “And bring the homeless poor into your house...” from Isaiah 58:7

A sea of Black faces.

Perhaps that is the best way to describe the masses of newly homeless in Charlotte and across the nation at this moment. While the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute has set the official statistics for Black homelessness in the Queen City at above 70%, anecdotally, those who have visited the camps that have been exploding across Uptown have reported well over 90% of the occupants to be of African American descent.

I write this not to quibble about statistics, but to note that we have a problem, and that this problem is expressing itself in racial terms. One of the things that has been become clear about the COVID-19 pandemic is that African Americans, Latinx, and Indigenous Americans have been much more susceptible to the disease than have white Americans. According to a CDC report on Hospitalization and Death by Race/Ethnicity from November 30, 2020,<sup>1</sup> African Americans have an infection rate that is 1.4 times that of whites, with a hospitalization rate that is almost four times as high and a death rate almost three times as high. The statistics are similar for Indigenous and Latinx communities. This pandemic has taken a significant toll on the health of minoritized communities.

“And bring the homeless poor into your house...”

But the impact has not been solely on health, for the pandemic has disproportionately impacted these communities economically, as well. They

have high percentages of people who are frontline workers in service industries. They have been less able to work from home, they are less likely to have private vehicles and more likely to rely on public transportation, they are less likely to have access to healthcare, and they make less money—all of which, together, puts them at increased risk during this pandemic.

This is even more true in a state like North Carolina, where we have denied people access to Medicaid expansion as part of the Affordable Care Act and many people getting the disease are forced to wait until their conditions are acute before they seek treatment in an emergency room. The healthcare risk has its own economic consequences, which are being seen now on the streets of our larger cities.

I have been amazed to see the way that tent communities have been popping up in cities across our nation—in downtowns, in public parks, under bridges, and even in wealthy neighborhoods. People are losing jobs, losing loved ones, losing homes, and losing hope as this pandemic wears on. And perhaps because minorities have always functioned as the canary in the coal mine, they are the harbinger of the economic woes impacting the larger society.

We as a society have got to do better! We are the wealthiest nation in the history of the world. Surely, we can do something to prevent people

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# The Reimagining America Project: Truth, Reconciliation, and Atonement Commission of Charlotte (RAP TRAC)



## Addressing the Issue of Race Itself

By Dr. Rodney Sadler

The Reimagining America Project: Truth, Reconciliation, and Atonement Commission of Charlotte (RAP TRAC) began as a partnership between the Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation and the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University. It is a project that acknowledges that we can no longer simply seek to resolve the symptoms of racism, like implicit bias in policing, or disparities in access to healthcare, or inequality in educational outcomes. Such attempts, while necessarily addressing presenting crises, inevitably allow an unjust system to remain intact. Body cams, educational reforms, healthcare policy adjustments, and financial reparations alone will not resolve systemic injustices predicated on the presumptions of the legitimacy of racial thought.

Our current belief system suggests that we as human communities exist in a hierarchy of being, with those who are of lighter skin at the top and those of darker skin at the bottom. Those at the top are ascribed undue privilege and access to wealth and power, while those at the bottom are

denied access to opportunity and the ability to thrive. In fact, the pernicious substance of racist thought makes us as a society both expect and accept disparities as though they are simply a result of nature. It is why mass incarceration, criminalization, ghettoization, and excessive unemployment in Black communities rarely inspire societal outrage. Because of the premise of Black inferiority, they are expected and, thus, accepted by society at large.

It is for this reason that RAP TRAC was formed. We are a coalition of community leaders who have come together to say that we finally have to address the ultimate source of inequality in America—the issue of race itself. As you read the articles by Rabbi Marc Gopin, Ph.D., and former Charlotte mayor Jennifer Roberts, you will see why this novel approach to the problem of disparity in America is necessary and has a chance to foster real systemic change. We hope you will join us in this work, for we need each and every person of good will to help us reimagine how we can finally become Beloved Community.

## Building a Beloved Community

By Jennifer Roberts

The murder of George Floyd this past spring was one more tragic example of the racial divide that continues to plague America. In Charlotte, I joined with many people of all races who felt that this might be the wake-up call that could lead to real, deep, pervasive change in our institutions.

The Reimagining America Project: Truth, Reconciliation, and Atonement Commission of Charlotte was launched with the leadership of several local faith leaders, former elected officials, and concerned citizens who wanted to do the hard work of confronting the ugly truth of our racist institutions and changing them. With administrative help from Union Presbyterian Seminary and the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University, the commission has met weekly since then.

The commission's vision is to make America a Beloved Community of shared values centered around the dignity of every human being, with an urgent need to change racist structures that are deeply entrenched in every aspect of American life. Hearings designed to actively listen and understand the stories of those who have been directly impacted by racism have only just begun, but already there is a sense that true transformation is possible.

I am hopeful that, through this process, more people will see that racism hurts all of us, and that more white allies will join in the heavy lifting of eradicating the idea of race from our society. If we can imagine that type of Beloved Community, I know that we can build it.

Join us.



## Peacebuilding through Truth-Telling

By Dr. Marc Gopin

The work of peacebuilding and repair of society has been a profound part of my life for many decades. It has been walking between enemies in war zones such as Syria, and through conflict zones such as Israel and Bosnia. It has been caring for victims and survivors.

I was deeply conscious from a very young age of the heroic figures of the Black community. I read their work and listened to them again and again in recordings, but I had no contact with them. As I became an activist and professor, and then Director of George Mason University's Center for World Religion, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution (CRDC), I went into interfaith settings in hot zones, particularly in the Middle East, with a focus on healing conflict. I felt safe believing others were doing the same work in the United States.

This country's inability to overcome white identity fears and the wounds of an enslaved society are a tragic, festering wound that I realized, late in life, was something I had failed to confront with my abilities and my labor. America needs a new way to form "a more perfect Union." It will require all of us to take an in-depth look at ourselves—our dreams, our achievements, our failures, and what stands in the way of fully pursuing our democratic ideals and character.

The CRDC team—including Maddie Anderson, CRDC Communications Assistant, and my wife, Christel, CRDC Director of Development—wanted to take a deep national dive into healing across lines of color in the United States, in particular with the help of interfaith peacebuilding. The Reimagining America Project: Truth, Reconciliation, and Atonement Commission of Charlotte (RAP TRAC) is a central effort of the CRDC and a source of deep pride. RAP TRAC's mission is to call to account for the history of racialized oppression in Charlotte and then to foster—through testimony, witnessing, and atonement—measurable changes to end systemic racism permanently.

We hope to continue to collaborate with Dr. Rodney Sadler and the Seminary's Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation for a very long time to come. Our hopes for the future of the nation are at the center of why we have all dedicated ourselves to deepening our relations and our best practices.



## CSJR Welcomes New Ambassadors

By Erin Mills

The Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation formally welcomes its 2020/21 CSJR Student Ambassadors, Dana Purdom and Amy Simes. Both students have shown extraordinary commitment to the Center since its inception and are dedicated to the critical social justice work we are called to as disciples of Christ.

Dana and Amy will lead and coordinate the Seminarians for Social Justice, organize quarterly student-led panel discussions, assist Center staff with events throughout the year, and serve as student liaisons. Interested students are encouraged to reach out to Dana and Amy with ideas, questions, and concerns. We would love to hear from you!



### Dana Purdom

Dana Purdom, a native of Los Angeles, California, who currently resides in Charlotte, is a Union Presbyterian Seminary student pursuing her M.Div. and M.A.C.E. degrees with a concentration in Social Justice.

Dana is a spiritual entrepreneur and womanist scholar who, through her ministry BREAK[ing]FAST with Minister Dana, helps women seeking to embrace God's higher purpose for their lives identify the "interruptions" preventing them from thriving using radical self-love as a transformative tool.

Dana was recently recognized by "God is Calling: Sojourner Truth Still Speaking" as part of 2020 National African American Clergy Women's Awareness Month. She guest-preaches

throughout Charlotte and in other states, develops and facilitates women's Bible studies, and more. She sits on the Advisory Council for the Katie Geneva Cannon Center for Womanist Leadership and has been a guest panelist and co-moderator for several webinars during the 2020 racial injustice uprisings.

Dana is a proud mother of three young men and a pup named Hiccup. She is a womanist scholar doing the work her soul must have!



### Amy Simes

Amy is a fourth-year M.Div. student who lives in Raleigh. She comes from a long line of Presbyterians and has been a deacon, a ruling elder, and a clerk of session at her local church. She currently works as a senior program manager with the North Carolina Division of Water Infrastructure in the Department of Environmental Quality. She has worked with the department for almost 30 years, with 22 of those years in water and sewer funding.

She is a Certified Public Manager and has a degree in mechanical engineering from North Carolina State University. Her passion for social justice began almost 20 years ago, when her eyes were opened at an event called Word and World in Greensboro, North Carolina, which combined aspects of the sanctuary, the streets, and the seminary.

### cover story *Continued from page 1*

from being forced to subsist outdoors in the cold of winter in the midst of a pandemic. It is immoral to do otherwise. Frankly, it works in all of our interests to make sure our sisters and brothers are not left to languish in clusters of poverty on our streets, for the increased potential for outbreaks puts us all at risk. We need to find a way to provide people in need with access to warm, safe, socially distanced living situations.

"And bring the homeless poor into your house..."

And in this moment, I hope that we are ever cognizant of the racial dynamics of poverty. There is something very wrong in our system that has allowed for disproportionately high rates of poverty among those deemed "racial" minorities. You can tell a lot about a society by how it treats its most vulnerable citizens (Matt. 25:31-46). It is not happenstance, but a consequence of years of policy decisions and structural systems, that has dehumanized Black and Brown peoples and relegated them to the social margins. Limited access to opportunity predicated on racial identity has consequences that are evident on our streets. I hope during this time of national crisis that we don't miss this truth.

Third Isaiah reminds us that we are called to care for those who are homeless ourselves...taking them into our homes. The prophet reminds us that "their" suffering is "our" responsibility. We have a role to play in alleviating their suffering and producing more just outcomes for them. It is time to see Black and Brown suffering not as "their" problem, but as "our" collective concern. The problem is something our prior racialized thinking caused and something we have the power to resolve—if we can only marshal the collective will to do so.

As we begin this new year in the midst of a crisis that has disproportionately impacted those in Black and Brown bodies, let us commit ourselves to solving the problem not just of homelessness, but also of the racial injustices that have contributed to the "sea of Black faces" flooding tent communities in our cities.

1. [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html)

## JustAct

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## Rev. Jimmie R. Hawkins

By Rev. Dr. Tim Moore

Tim Moore discusses with Jimmie Hawkins his affiliation with CSJR and the challenges of the church in today's world.

**Tell us a little about yourself. Where are you from? What role do you play in the church? What do you do?**

I was born in Henderson, North Carolina, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. I am married to Sheinita Hawkins, and we have two teenage children, Kaela and James. I am the director of the Presbyterian Office of Public Witness (OPW) in Washington, D.C. This office has existed for more than 70 years as the public policy advocacy agency for the church. We have a staff of four who focus on domestic issues (Christian Brooks) and international issues (Catherine Gordon), as well as an office manager.

**How long have you been in your role? How do you hope your work at the general church level might impact both the broader church's understanding of justice and its connection to faith and the local church's practical work of faithful living?**

This is the end of my fourth year as director. We work to ensure that OPW helps shape the broader church's understanding of justice by helping reinterpret the church's understanding of the relationship between faith and politics. Many react negatively to discussion of social justice, and to the term itself, deeming it political in nature. We define advocacy as a spiritual discipline and one of the elements involved in fulfilling our Christian call. As disciples of Christ, we are to have a focus on justice:

- Are people treated fairly?
- Are the poor being provided with the resources they need to climb out of poverty?
- Is the church engaged not only in providing help and charity, but also in working to change the operations of the systems of government so that there is equal distribution of opportunity?

The presence of racial bias is evident in the institutional structures of the nation, and, when it is apparent, it should be challenged.

**How are you connected to the Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation?**

I am a board member of the Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation. I am an alumnus of Union Presbyterian Seminary (formerly the Presbyterian School of Christian Education). I attend board meetings and participate in events and programs.

**What are your hopes for the Center and its work for advancing justice and reconciliation?**

It is my hope that the Center can engage with local congregations and offer resources to enable local Presbyterians and others to commit and recommit themselves to the work of social justice. Further, it is my hope that it will

*“The greatest challenge to the church is a situation wherein many people, especially youth, do not see the church as a relevant part of their lives. They define it as an institution only concerned with what happens within its four walls.”*

— Rev. Jimmie R. Hawkins

Rev. Jimmie Hawkins speaks at a rally on Capitol Hill.

be a national and global resource in the training of people of faith who see justice advocacy as important to their service to God.

**What do you see as the greatest challenges for the church, for our nation, and for the world with regard to living faithfully, justly, and in unity?**

The greatest challenge to the church is a situation wherein many people, especially youth, do not see the church as a relevant part of their lives. They define it as an institution only concerned with what happens within its four walls. This is a serious indictment that needs to be challenged, as the church must extend its ministries beyond those typically put forth.

A social justice framework in partnership with non-profits and other agencies can help diminish negative images of the church. Social justice ministries are a great evangelistic tool, because people gravitate to congregations that are engaged in the community, helping keep young people in the church involved.

The greatest challenges for the nation are internal. We have devolved into a country that has turned on itself. Racial divisions are as prevalent as they have ever been, with hate speech and violence being displayed. There is great mistrust of our institutions (e.g., press, government, and political leaders). We have ample terms for what separates us, with little focus on our commonalities. We also have a shortage of leadership that promotes the well-being of citizens and immigrants. We are turning on ourselves.

One of the greatest challenges to the global community is climate change. It has an especially devastating impact upon impoverished communities that do not have access to proper farming equipment or knowledge to grow food in regions where drought, famine, and other ecological disasters are occurring.

**What is one practical bit of advice you would give to someone on a local level about how they might become involved in both immediate and long-term justice work?**

I would advise anyone on the local level to first become informed on what the issues of vital importance are in their local community, and then nationally and globally. They can then make a choice concerning which issues to focus on and which are of high priority. Utilize the community resources that are available, as non-profits can offer advice and resources.

Access the resources of the PC(USA), as the OPW offers advocacy training and racial justice, environmental, and other resources online and through the office. There are other offices that provide vital information on the church's ministries and are available to congregations and members seeking to engage on a greater level.





# Bodies

by Rev. Leslie Oliver (Isai Efuru)

piled on  
piled on  
shackled  
piled on  
piled on  
bones  
piled on  
piled on  
flesh  
piled on  
tears  
piled on  
fields  
piled on  
pain.

bodies  
carted and bruised  
vomit drips from weary mouths  
upon diseased torsos and cracked hymens  
of girl ghosts left to haunt those  
who were just left to rot  
underneath the feet of slave shoremen  
bodies  
wearing tar like Max Factor  
to make sure the lies don't show through the truth

bodies  
on the block like turkeys on sale last week  
cheap like oatmeal in the box  
soul shredded like cheese on your grits  
while you eat and laugh about  
how long it took that Nigger to die this time

bodies  
running in dark fields  
eyes scratched with leather whips  
clutching at their rags to keep from freezing and  
dying as slave  
bodies  
sore from leeches in the river water  
skin cracked and burning to be free  
bodies  
on the cross  
while you say Amen and eat your pie  
and steal my legacy

bodies  
slapped while praying  
bodies  
sprayed while staying  
bodies  
beat while singing  
bodies  
shot while wishing

bodies  
fighting a war for your lies  
bodies  
coping with substances  
due to the absence of your why  
bodies

bodies...  
...plagued  
inside your cages  
while you write prescriptions  
of persecution and call it law

bodies  
from the soul of first civilization  
begin  
to remember  
the bodies  
that bore  
our best  
and built  
our brevity

bodies  
from the bowel  
of our press  
begin  
to realize  
the bodies  
that braved  
our beatings  
and survived

bodies  
from the bench  
of our becoming  
begin  
to speak  
to the bodies  
that are waiting  
to answer  
you

bodies  
are building  
bodies  
are birthing  
bodies  
are bold  
bodies  
are being

created  
to stand  
to see  
to say

to you

that

YOU  
could never  
destroy  
the essence of  
what

our bodies  
really are

for all of  
those bodies  
that were shed  
were the railroad  
that carried  
the weight  
of our majesty  
and traveled through time  
to deliver  
the message  
that our  
bodies  
behold  
POWER  
and that within  
our souls

there IS  
a knowing  
that will KEEP US...

there is a trusting  
that has fed us...

there is a love  
that knows us...

there is a FORCE  
that rises through us...  
and there will be a time

where  
bodies  
will  
take our bodies  
BACK



# On Giving Birth to Hope

By Janice M. Kominski, Sept. 28, 2020

updated for COVID-19 statistics Nov. 3, 2020

This labor will be long and unpredictable  
This Hope we've been carrying so long  
Dreaming, wondering,  
Can no longer stay tucked away in our womb.  
She needs to come into this world that  
desperately needs her.

It is time.

The contractions come in ever more  
breathtaking waves  
Squeezing so tightly  
Bringing pain  
Distraction  
An inability to focus on anything else  
Hardly able to take another step  
As the intensity of the tightening—  
The sensation of closing in—  
Gains momentum and becomes stronger.

We brace ourselves as a wave comes:

Insecurity  
Fear  
Anger  
Lies  
Lashing out  
Projecting pain  
Grasping for Control  
Poisoning systems  
Recruiting accomplices

This scarcity mindset  
Sets events into motion of  
Retribution after retribution  
That can only lead  
To the end of a barrel of a gun.

Those in positions of power  
who seek to control the business of birth  
Believe it is theirs to dictate  
how a birth should unfold.  
Or, whether it should happen at all.  
They examine efficiencies  
Calculate costs  
Stack statistics  
Look over liabilities  
Promote predictability  
and deny divergence  
to protect their assets.

It's the supremacy of the status quo  
over the humanity of change.

We cannot let fear  
artificially  
stall this labor.  
The birth of Hope must continue.  
It is already overdue.

Another wave begins,  
building upon the momentum of the first:

A microscopic invader  
unpleasantness ignored  
reality kept at sea  
deceptive downplay  
silent spread  
unchecked obstinance  
mounting suffering  
contagion of lies  
quarantine of truth  
politicization of prevention  
loss of connection  
loss of income  
loss of employment  
loss of homes  
loss of humanity  
loss of life itself.

Over 230,000 men, women and children dead;  
felled on the battlefield  
of pride, politics and power.

We are overwhelmed.

Reeling  
Gasping for breath  
All we feel we have left are  
Groans too deep for words.

The doubts come  
as we try to stand  
sputtering  
after being blindsided by another wave.

How much longer can we go on?

Thank God  
for the midwives of hope  
who watch the laborers for signs  
hearing with the heart  
evaluating with their eyes  
disregarding the instruments of measurement  
that were built by the system.  
The midwives practice presence  
compassionate care  
laying on hands  
applying comfort  
whispering encouragement  
in art,  
in prophetic word,  
in applying their gifts to seek justice  
and embody peace.

The midwives wipe our tears and our brow  
with the cool cloth  
of empathy.  
They have seen many births  
and help us to recognize this truth:

what feels like death  
can be the beginning of new life.

As our labors progress and we move  
closer and closer  
to transition,  
the increasing pain and intensity  
make us wonder  
if we will be ripped apart.

There's no telling how long this will last.  
Every labor is different.

Especially in the uncertainty,  
we grieve.

Even as we labor to  
give birth to new life,  
our bodies remember  
our dreams that died  
before they could reach daylight.

Our arms still ache with emptiness  
for those we've lost,  
for our babes whose lives were cut short  
for justice miscarried  
again and again.

We struggle forward  
but the past  
still lives within us  
inhabiting our muscles  
our guts  
our breath.

We grieve our kin  
who birthed before us  
but are unable to accompany us now.

Another wave,  
one that started  
in the bellies of ships  
hundreds of years ago  
moves toward its crescendo:

dehumanization  
occupation  
domination  
colonization  
reservation  
indoctrination  
misogynation  
homogenization  
marginalization  
mass incarceration



We can't breathe.

We are, indeed, being torn apart.

How long, O, Lord?

How long must we bear the pain in our souls  
and have this sorrow in our hearts all day long?  
Bearing these burdens in bodies.  
Burying bodies.

In the face of all these overwhelming contractions  
our bodies can no longer be still:

Protest is compounded grief walked out.

We walk to move the labor along  
we walk so Hope will descend,  
apply pressure  
and dilate  
to bring forth something new.

Our society cannot be sustained  
if we allow Hope to be stillborn;

Hope is the lifeblood of democracy.

So, we reach down,  
to our inmost being,  
that vestige of primordial Love  
knit within our every fiber  
purlled into every double helix

We reach back  
through generations of ancestors  
who dared to demonstrate Love  
to bring forth hope  
into the void.

Love.  
Love that drives out fear.  
Love that lifts heads.  
Love that is about reconciliation—not punishment.  
Love that holds broken bodies with compassion.  
Love that remembers  
    Re-members  
So our bodies may function.  
Repairing holes  
becoming whole  
wholly other  
the other is holy  
because there is no "other"—  
it's all us.

Re-membling love,  
We recenter.  
We begin to see the opening that may come  
with each contraction  
during this agonizing transition.

We sense the opening  
discard the distractions  
and focus our attention  
our intentions  
on what we need to  
bring into the light,  
bring light to,  
Dar Luz.

And, from a center of Love,  
the opening reaches its fullness in:

Joy  
Peace  
Patience  
Kindness  
Generosity  
Faithfulness  
Gentleness  
Responsiveness instead of reaction

Which, really, are all Love  
in action.

Now that we are open  
We can trust our bodies  
and tune out the  
shoulds  
coulds  
and even the  
have to.  
Now is the time for  
need to.

Need to listen  
to our bodies  
to our hearts  
to each other.

Need to hold  
hold hands  
hold space  
hold tight.

Need to fill  
fill empty arms  
fill empty hearts  
fill empty tanks.

Need to return  
return regard  
return to connection  
return home  
to the human family.

Not alone.  
Together.

Will you be a midwife of hope?  
Why not you?  
Why not now?

It's time to push  
and we'll need every ounce:

of tenacity  
of creativity  
of compassion  
of beauty  
of poetry  
of art  
of will

What will you bring to the birthing room  
to move the delivery along?

It's time to push.  
Every sinew of our bodies  
is pulsing  
screaming  
with the urgency of  
now, now, now!

And  
at the end of the pushing  
just when we will think we've got  
nothing left,  
the midwives will apply  
just the right mix  
of encouragement and pressure  
until  
the crowning glorious  
Hope will burst forth  
with a lusty cry

Drenched in sweat,  
radiating heat  
we will tenderly cradle Hope to our breast

Our chests will heave great sobs  
and we will laugh:  
catharsis in blood, water, and spirit.

We shall sing out to any who will hear:  
She is here! She is here! She is here!  
After such a long wait,  
she is finally *here* in our arms  
a mix of softness and strength  
staring back at us in wonder,  
herself awed that we persevered  
to bring her forth:

Hope  
for the lives of us all.

# Honoring My Womanist Ethics During a Pandemic

by Dana Purdom

*“Womanist... appreciates women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter), and women’s strength... committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female... not a separatist, except periodically, for health... loves music... loves dance... loves the moon... Loves the Spirit... loves love and food and roundness... loves struggle... loves the Folk... Loves herself. Regardless.”*

—Alice Walker

As a womanist scholar, to the very core of my being, I uphold and embody the very tenets of what and who a womanist is. Or so I thought. Finding my womanist self, every day, through the simple act of breathing as my resistance, has been my plight while living during the time of the coronavirus.

When the world shut down in March 2020, many were faced with *seeing*, for the first time, the harsh realities of living while Black and what happens to those who fight for justice on behalf of Black people: the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Summer Taylor, and countless other male, female, transgender, differently abled, unhoused people.

It was this “Holy Disruption,” as I so poignantly heard the pandemic described by Rev. Ken Fuquay, Senior Pastor for M2M Charlotte, that thrust me into a world of social justice activism like never before. It was this “Holy Disruption” that opened doors and rooms and hush harbors for me that I never imagined myself being invited into. It was this “Holy Disruption” that revealed the open heaven I was living under that had been waiting for me to *see* it.

The extreme conditions of this “Holy Disruption” gave me sight to see the invisible! I am reminded of a song that says, “Rain only matters to those who have seed in the ground.” I had been unknowingly sowing seed in the ground for two years prior to the pandemic, not realizing that the shutdown would be my setup for great things to now be birthed—things that were gestating, that I had conceptualized in my mind but had no idea how to manifest.

I entered the “Holy Disruption” equipped beyond measure for what lay ahead of me: preaching opportunities in multiple cities, hosting bible studies with participants from around the world, being a guest panelist across sacred and secular web-bands, being invited to sit on an advisory council, a fellowship opportunity, being an anti-racism resource moderator and pastoral care advisor, curating and founding BREAK[ing]Fast Ministries, and more.

I dove into the “Holy Disruption” like Michael Phelps at the Olympics. You see, I am a competitively trained swimmer. I am not afraid of the water, the deep end, or having to hold my breath for long periods of time. So, if there was one thing I knew how to do during this “Holy Disruption,” it was to swim. And I did so like my life depended on it.

Any and every social justice-related webinar presented, I was there! Any courses offered, I was there! Any recommended books and resources shared, I ordered, read, and studied! Time had stopped for the world. We no longer had anywhere to report to—physically, anyway—and, thus, a gateway was created for me to deep-dive into this “Holy Disruption”—you know, the kind of dive that is so deep it requires machinery because it can’t be performed in a human’s own capacity. Only I wasn’t fully tapped into the machinery available to me in the person of Jesus Christ.

I was praying and holding others in prayer. I was supporting as many organizations as I possibly could that were doing great justice work. I was asking the hard questions and offering safe spaces to have difficult conversations for those who needed it. When people donated financially to me, I forwarded those funds to others I felt were in more desperate need than myself.

I did all of this for nine months straight without taking a single breath of air for myself. Occasionally, I took a walk here and there, or soaked in a warm bath once in a while. I was like the Energizer bunny: unstoppable! But somehow I had become separated from my buoy of God’s grace.

I was not relying on my machinery of God’s mercy. I began operating under the guise of my own conscientization, and that which the world continuously fed me through its 24-hour-a-day visualizations and news reporting.

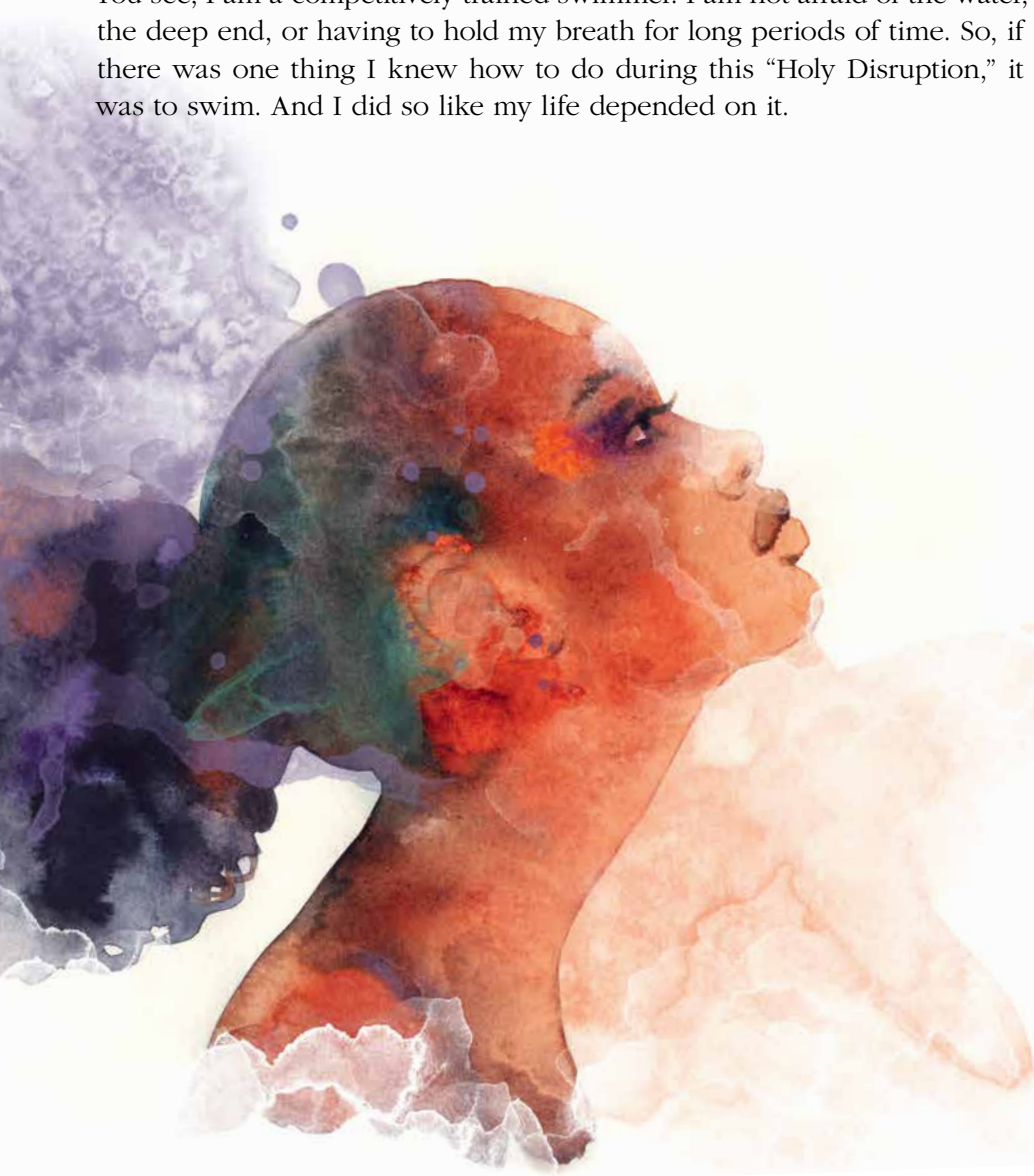
November 18 marked a day in which my body [again] tried to warn me to slow down. That was the day I was diagnosed with shingles. Shingles is a viral infection characterized by a painful rash with blisters, brought on by low immunity and stress. I was one of the 10% to 20% for whom it appears on the face, around my left eye. Every nerve ending from the left side of my neck, scalp, temple, eye, and hair hurt like nothing I had ever experienced before. And to top it off, as a result of having shingles, my blood pressure was now higher than normal. Willingly or not, I was forced to shut down. The pain was too excruciating to do anything.

For the first time during the pandemic, I began to worry. I worried about not showing up in the world the way I had been for the past nine months, actively fighting against racism, showing and proving to the world that Black lives not only matter, but that Black lives *are* matter. And what would happen to all of the justice work I had put in? What would happen to BREAK[ing]Fast Ministries? What would happen to my social media following now that I was unable to create and post daily content?

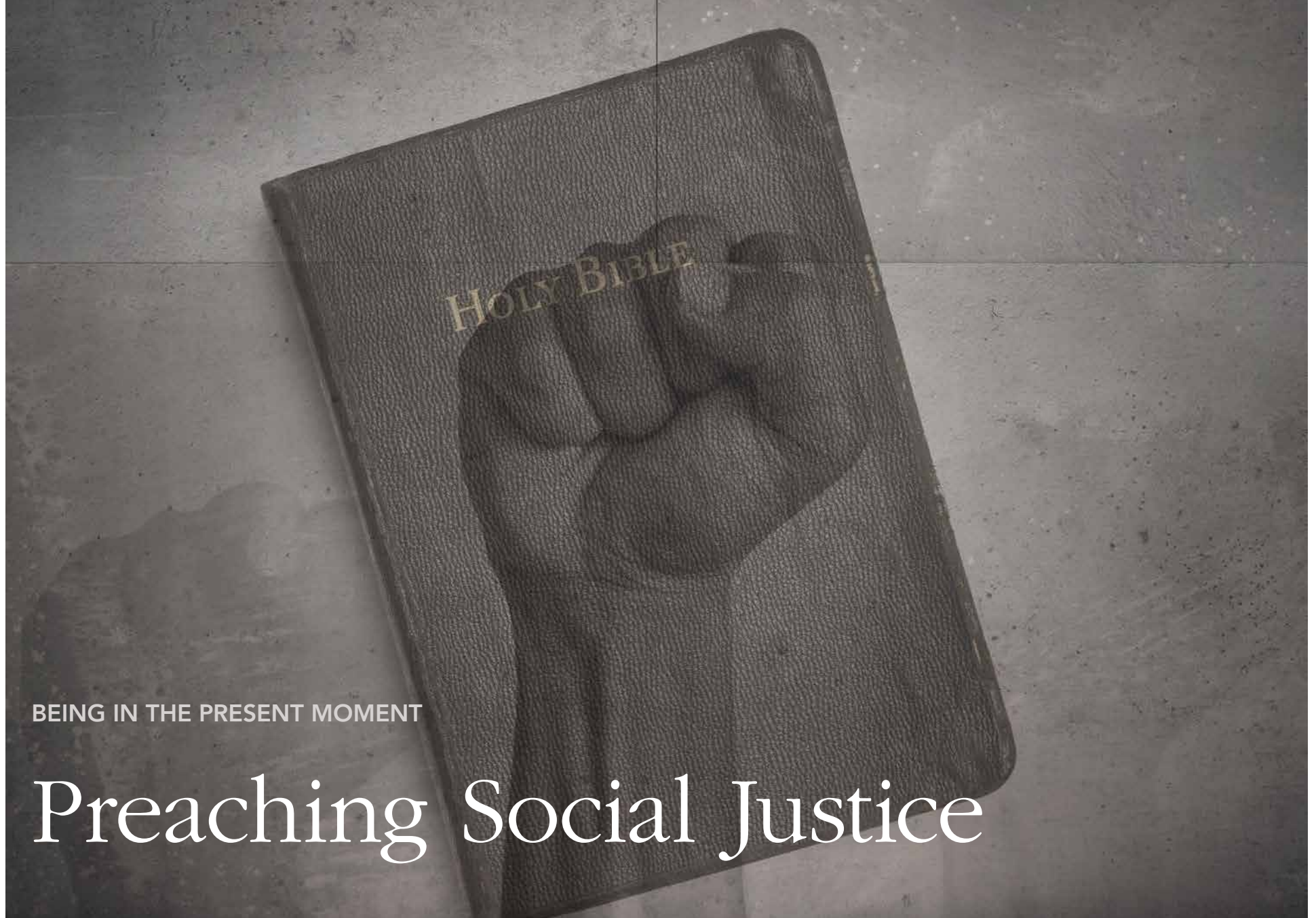
I thought my justice work was upholding my womanist principles. I believed I was embodying womanism. I was praying for the healing but not doing what my body needed and required to be healed. I had forced my mind to desert my body, welcoming external validation and the pressure that came with it. The desire that was driving me to over-produce during the past nine months, I now began to understand as FOMO—fear of missing out—a capitalist structure founded by white supremacist ideologies. The very principles I was fighting against.

It took me getting shingles, experiencing electric jolts of pain in my head and face, to come to the realization that I had not only neglected my physical self, but I had also neglected my espoused womanist ethics—*“...committed to survival and wholeness of entire people... not a separatist, except periodically, for health... Loves herself. Regardless.”* This time of living with shingles, during a pandemic, has shown me that I have not honored the womanist in me by performing opposite of what my words say—that it is not enough just to be Black and a woman, but that with that divinity comes a level of responsibility expected of me by my ancestors.

By the time this article is published, I will have completed my anti-viral treatment, and my experience of having shingles will be a memory—one I will never forget. With that in mind, I am going to love myself, regardless, in the hope that she forgives me kindly. As I am reminded by Alice Walker and my ancestor Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon, “If the present looks like the past, what does the future look like?” Then surely, there is more “work my soul must have.”







BEING IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

# Preaching Social Justice

By Dr. Marvin McMickle

In Karl Barth's short but insightful book *The Preaching of the Gospel*, he refers to a quote from Paul Tillich, who stated, "Preaching must always be done with an awareness of the present moment."

Barth writes on this theme, saying:<sup>1</sup>

*"What demands does the contemporary situation make on the preacher and his (or her) congregation? Together they are sharing a historical experience; the words of the preacher must be relevant to the immediate preoccupations of his (or her) hearers."*<sup>2</sup>

This is the essence of preaching on social justice. Preaching must be done with an awareness of the present moment that the preacher and the congregation are navigating together. Preaching must be relevant to the immediate preoccupations of one's hearers. It is not enough that a preacher selects a biblical text from one of the prophets of the Old Testament and immediately concludes that the mere act of selecting means they are engaging in prophetic preaching or preaching on social issues.

As I noted in my book *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?*, I have heard more than a few sermons that followed the reading of a text from a prophetic book. But the content of those sermons was often more pathetic than prophetic because the sermon never managed to leave the eighth or sixth century BCE and say something substantive about the time and place in which the listeners were living.<sup>3</sup>

Preaching on social justice issues is necessarily a matter of speaking into a specific moment in time to a specific audience about matters that are confronting their lives in the present moment. That message cannot be rooted in the personal opinions of the preacher or the popular topics on one's favorite news channel or social media platform. Preaching on social issues means framing the topic within the context of God's will as revealed in God's word. It is important to remember those prophets who began their oracles with, "This is what the Lord says."

When I look around our country, I see many places where social justice preaching is needed. There are deep divisions even among those of us who trust in the same God and read from the same Bible. There are ideas and ideologies that have become dividing walls among friends and within families. We have movements like Black Lives Matter and Me Too. We have groups like the Proud Boys and the white militia groups that planned to kidnap, try, and publicly execute the Governor of Michigan because she imposed stay-at-home orders to protect people from COVID-19.

As I write this article, the current President of the United States has not conceded the election he lost by more than seven million votes. A large majority of the Republican Party does not view Joe Biden as the legitimate President-elect. There is speculation as of December 2020 that, on the day Biden is being sworn into office, there may be another event held on behalf of those who believe that Donald Trump is still the President. We will have to wait and see if that occurs.

Are we still the UNITED States of America? This is part of the context in which social justice preaching must be directed. Are we going to speak about the hard-won right to vote for all citizens, or remain silent in the face of voter suppression? Are we going to honor the effort of the millions of people who stood in line for hours to cast their votes, or allow conspiracy theories of voter fraud to subvert our democracy?

In the age of COVID-19, are we going to practice social distancing and wear a mask when we are around other people, both to protect them and to protect ourselves? Are we willing to sacrifice some small portion of our personal liberty to safeguard the common good of our community and our country? Will we think as much about the overcrowded hospitals and exhausted and overworked doctors and nurses who are battling to save the lives of those infected by the virus as we do about our "right" to gather in large numbers in indoor spaces that become breeding grounds for transmission?

This is what social justice preaching should sound like going into 2021. But this kind of preaching is not easy. It requires what Socrates referred to as *parrhesia*, or "bold speech," that is not altered by any fear of personal consequences.<sup>4</sup> I have invited students and other preachers to think about being witnesses in the spirit of Acts 1: 6–8. A witness *sees something*, *says something* about what they have seen, and, based on the word *marturia*, is prepared to *suffer something* for the sake of the truth they have spoken.<sup>5</sup>

That is what it means to preach social justice in this present moment. Who will be a witness for my Lord?

1. Karl Barth, *The Preaching of the Gospel*, Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1963, p. 54.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 54

3. Marvin A. McMickle, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?*, Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 206, p. 10.

4. Cornel West, *Black Prophetic Fire*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2014, p. 112.

5. Marvin A. McMickle, *Be My Witness*, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2016, pp. 62–67.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

# Join the Conversation

In addition to seminars and conferences, The Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation hosts a number of ongoing programs that promote dialogue and offer insight into the issues of our day. All are welcome to participate.



## DANGEROUS DIALOGUES

Dangerous Dialogues are conversations the Church needs to have but isn't having. They push us beyond our normal comfort level to look at crucial issues through a theological lens. The current virtual format is usually Zoom, and all participants are encouraged to engage in the discussion. An event link will be provided, and no registration is required.

FEBRUARY 18, 2021 / 7-9 PM

**Between Reparations Atonement:  
Overcoming African American Disparities  
(Black History Month)**

MARCH 18, 2021 / 7-9 PM

**Humanity, Equality, and the Lives of  
Palestinians**

APRIL 29, 2021 / 7-9 PM

**Race and Environmental Justice  
(Earth Day)**

MAY 20, 2021 / 7-9 PM

**A Jewish Response to Justice  
in Israel-Palestine**



## JUST TALK/TALK JUST

Following the murder of George Floyd, a new sense of resolve arose in cities around our nation and world to address racial disparity and systemic racialized oppression. The Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation (CSJR), the Katie Geneva Cannon Center for Womanist Leadership (KGCCWL), and Union Presbyterian Seminary partnered to look at these issues through a unique lens and examine what our response should be as Christians who are called to participate in larger calls for justice.

Just Talk/Talk Just events are webinars with panel discussions. Virtual audiences will be able to ask questions. Registration is required.

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FEBRUARY 9, 2021 / 7-9 PM

**Afrofuturism and Black History**

MARCH 16, 2021 / 7-9 PM

**Womanist Theology, Activism,  
Movement-Making, and  
Breonna Taylor**

APRIL 20, 2021 / 7-9 PM

**Existential Martyrdom and Black  
Suffering**

MAY 11, 2021 / 7-9 PM

**Changes in America Since COVID-19  
and George Floyd Uprisings**

Find event links and registration at [www.upsem.edu/csjr/](http://www.upsem.edu/csjr/). To be including on our mailing list, email Erin Mills at [Erin.Mills@upsem.edu](mailto:Erin.Mills@upsem.edu)

# GIVING

A Spiritual Act  
from the  
Heart

Planned gifts offer flexible and tax-friendly ways to invest in the Seminary's future. We want to share planned giving information with you. To request a brochure or to update your contact information, please contact Bernie Howell at [bhowell@upsem.edu](mailto:bhowell@upsem.edu)

You may also visit our Planned Giving website for more information: [pg.upsem.edu](http://pg.upsem.edu)





# Where to Start When the World Pulls Apart

By Emily Nyce, July 22, 2020

In these days of  
unknown,  
make soul  
your knowing.

What does it mean?

Beach walks,  
if you can.  
If not, have someone bring you.  
Drawing pictures for someone,  
and mailing them anyway.  
Listening to your body.  
Your bones host your life.  
May you never forget.  
Studying colors.  
And then don't report on them to anyone but  
you—except maybe to redecorate.  
Protest on the streets,  
in song at home, and through  
old fashioned gardening

Watch water  
Taste water  
Bathe carefully in water.  
Request a vulnerable conversation  
with warm chocolate chip cookies.  
Protect children  
and their innocence.  
Befriend your enemy  
deep inside.  
Remember, you are your parents' child,  
and do what you need to do with that.  
Imagine another's life  
Someone who lives with a limit you don't have  
Honor your own.

This is not a to-do list.  
This is a remembering.

In our memory lies our freedom:  
"Do this in remembrance of Me."

## New Contributors to This Issue

**Dr. Marc Gopin** is the director of the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution and James H. Laue Professor at the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University. Gopin has developed peacebuilding projects both domestically and internationally. He explores how religion and culture are often central to conflicts' origins and integral to sustainable solutions.

**Janice Kominski**, a current student at the Seminary, has been influenced by living in metropolitan Washington, D.C.; Durham, North Carolina; Buenos Aires; Los Angeles, California; and St. Croix. She studied linguistics and Spanish at Duke University, later earning her M.S. in counseling from Johns Hopkins University. After work in education, she returned to school to pursue an M.Div. and M.A.C.E. at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Charlotte and became a candidate for ministry in the PC(USA). Kominski explores how language reflects the intersection of culture, theology, and experience with the power to open hearts and minds to receive new ideas. She currently lives in Asheville with her husband and three children.

**Dr. Marvin McMickle** recently retired as president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School in Rochester, New York. Before joining Colgate Rochester, he was pastor of Antioch Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio. He is the author of 15 books and dozens of articles that regularly appear in professional journals and magazines. His writings also appear in *Feasting on the Word* and *Preaching God's Transforming Justice*, two recent preaching commentaries. He is a member of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Board of Preachers at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, and has also served as a visiting professor of preaching at Yale University Divinity School.

**Emily Nyce** has always called Richmond, Virginia, home, even when she spent several lovely years in Harrisonburg, Virginia. A graduate of Eastern Mennonite University and Union Presbyterian Seminary, she is currently contracting with UPSem as the founder and director of its newly developing center, Yaupon

Place: Northside Center for ReCreation. Nyce enjoys exploring the intersections of community and ecology, food, spirituality, storytelling, poetry, justice, and peacebuilding.

**Rev. Leslie Oliver** ("Pastor Isai"), a current student at the Seminary, is a native of Newark, New Jersey, and pastor of Sanctuary Outreach Ministries, a multi-dimensional outreach experience. She is a visual artist, author, accomplished psalmist, and motivational speaker committed to the gospel and social justice. While currently serving as a lead theomusicologist for North Carolina Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for a Moral Revival, she also serves as lead ethnomusicologist for the Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation. A proud womanist preacher, Pastor Isai lives in Charlotte, North Carolina.

**Dana Purdom**, a current student at the Seminary, is a native of Los Angeles, California, and has resided in Charlotte, North Carolina, for the past 16 years. By trade, she is a licensed cosmetologist. She serves her seminary, Union Presbyterian Seminary, and her church home, C.N. Jenkins Memorial Presbyterian Church, in a variety of capacities. She was recognized in "God is Calling: Sojourner Truth Still Speaking" during National African American Clergy Women's Awareness Month, is a fellow of the Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation, and has recently been confirmed by the Committee on Ministry and Committee on Preparation for Ministry of the Charlotte Presbytery to serve, in the first position ever of its kind, as student interim pastor of The Avenue Presbyterian Church. Purdom is a womanist scholar who champions social and racial justice.

**Jennifer Roberts** is a native of Charlotte and its former mayor. Earlier in her professional career, she was a diplomat through the United States Department of State. She was also a consular officer in the Dominican Republic and a political officer in Mexico. Throughout her personal and professional life, Roberts has been an advocate for social, educational, economic, racial, and environmental justice.

# CENTER FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

The Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation operates from the Seminary's Charlotte campus and is directed by Associate Professor of Bible Dr. Rodney S. Sadler Jr.

Grounded in a ministry that is mandated in scripture, its two main goals are to remind people in the Seminary of the significance of social justice work as part of ministry and to bring the activist community into the Seminary.

Visit us at  
[www.upsem.edu/csjr](http://www.upsem.edu/csjr)



Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation

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UNION PRESBYTERIAN SEMINARY'S CENTER FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION (CSJR) AND THE LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE PRESENT:

## Called to Justice: Seeking Change within the Classroom, Congregation, and Community

TWO-DAY VIRTUAL EVENT: February 24–25, 2021

### WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 24

#### 9 AM / OPENING KEYNOTE

*A Dialogue Discussing Social Justice in the Church*

**Dr. Brian Blount** *President and Professor of New Testament in the Walter W. Moore and Charles E.S. Kraemer Presidential Chairs, Union Presbyterian Seminary*

**Dr. Rodney Sadler** *Associate Professor of Bible and Director, Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation, Union Presbyterian Seminary*

#### 11 AM / WORKSHOP

*Be My Witness: A Study of Acts 1:6–8*

**Dr. Marvin McMickle** *Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program and Professor of African American Religious Studies, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School*

#### 3 PM / WORKSHOP

*Teaching Social Justice in Comfortable Congregations*

**Dr. Rebecca Davis** *Associate Professor of Christian Education, Union Presbyterian Seminary*

### THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25

#### 11 AM / WORKSHOP

*Cultivating Anti-Racism Practice in the Congregation*

**Rev. Jason Williams and Nikkeia Lee** *Little Tree: A Multi-Racial Consulting Cooperative based in North Carolina*

#### 3 PM / WORKSHOP

*Church in These Streets: Pandemic, Protest, and Public Theological Witness*

**Dr. Brandon McCormack** *Associate Professor, Director of Undergraduate Studies, University of Louisville Department of Pan-African Studies and Department of Comparative Humanities*

#### 7 PM / CLOSING KEYNOTE

*Building on a Firm Foundation (based on Matthew 16:13–20)*

**Dr. Marvin McMickle** *Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program and Professor of African American Religious Studies, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School*

### REGISTRATION OPTIONS

**Keynote Sessions Only** *Free option includes the opening and closing keynotes*

**Group Registration** *1 church/organization; 2–3 participants; all workshops and keynotes included*

**All-Access Individual Registration** *Includes 2 free keynotes and 4 workshops*

**Individual Workshop Registration:** *Includes 2 free keynotes and workshop registration, based on availability.*

For more information or to register:  
[na.eventscloud.com/ehome/601375](http://na.eventscloud.com/ehome/601375)

*Workshop space is limited.*

