

---

# JRL

**JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP**

**Volume 24**  
**No. 2**  
**Autumn 2025**

---

ISSN 1935-6943 (PRINT)

ISSN 1935-7060 (ONLINE)

**EDITORIAL BOARD**

**MANAGING EDITOR**

**Robert Martin**

**COPY EDITOR**

**Elaine Garrison**

**BOOK REVIEW EDITOR**

**Michael Wilson**

*Board of Pensions*

*Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

**PRODUCTION EDITOR**

**Scott Simmons**

*Lydia Way*

**MEMBERS**

**David Forney**

*First Presbyterian Church,  
Charlottesville, VA*

**Scott J. Hagley**

*Pittsburgh Theological Seminary*

**Lisa M. Hess**

*United Theological Seminary  
Dayton, OH*

**William M. Kondrath**

*VISIONS, Inc.*

**Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi**

*Illiff School of Theology*

**Jessica Vaughan Lower**

*San Marino Community Church,  
San Marino, CA*

**Susan Maros**

*Fuller Theological Seminary*

**Dwight Zscheile**

*Luther Seminary*

The *Journal of Religious Leadership* is published semi-annually by the Academy of Religious Leadership. Information regarding the academy and its journal can be found at [www.arl-jrl.org](http://www.arl-jrl.org). Please direct editorial correspondence and manuscript submissions to [editor@arl-jrl.org](mailto:editor@arl-jrl.org).

# JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

---

Volume 24, Number 2

Autumn 2025

## ARTICLES

- 
- PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS AND INTRODUCTION TO THE JRL** 8  
**AUTUMN 2025 ISSUE. LEADERSHIP AS JUSTICE: A VOYAGE**  
**THROUGH THE SIX SENSES**  
KRISTINA I. LIZARDY-HAJBI
- 
- IMPACT OF LEADERS' RACIAL-ETHNIC-CULTURAL IDENTITY** 25  
**DEVELOPMENT ON CAPACITY FOR JUST ACTION**  
PHIL ALLEN JR., SUSAN L. MAROS
- 
- UN-SUTURING REFLEXIVE WHITENESS: RECOGNIZING AND** 59  
**RESISTING WHITE+CHRISTIAN DOMINANCE IN RACIAL**  
**JUSTICE MOVEMENTS**  
REBECCA M. DAVID HENSLEY
- 
- REIMAGINING PASTORAL MINISTRY – THREE MODELS** 90  
**OF LEADERSHIP FROM ORDAINED WOMEN PASTORS IN**  
**SOUTH KOREA**  
EUNJIN JEON, BYUNG HO CHOI
- 
- FROM PERFORMANCE TO FORMATION: REIMAGINING** 116  
**SERVANT LEADERSHIP EDUCATION**  
KYLE J.A. SMALL, DAVID G. FORNEY

## Book Reviews

- PLAY LEADERSHIP FOR THE CARE OF SOULS* 143  
**BY: AARON PERRY**  
REVIEWED BY THOMAS W. Baran
- EVERYDAY CHRISTIAN TEACHING: A GUIDE TO PRACTICING FAITH IN THE CLASSROOM* 145  
**BY: DAVID I. SMITH**  
REVIEWED BY SARA STABE
- WHEN CHURCH STOPS WORKING: A FUTURE FOR YOUR CONGREGATION BEYOND MORE MONEY, PROGRAMS, INNOVATION* 148  
**BY: ANDREW ROOT AND BLAIR BERTRAND**  
REVIEWED BY JEFF MINGEE



*religions*



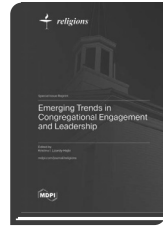
*Special Issue Reprint*

## **Emerging Trends in Congregational Engagement and Leadership**

[www.mdpi.com/books/reprint/11414](http://www.mdpi.com/books/reprint/11414)

Edited by  
Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi

ISBN 978-3-7258-5025-9 (Hardback)  
ISBN 978-3-7258-5026-6 (PDF)



This Special Issue focuses on emerging trends in congregational engagement and leadership related to a variety of topics, including COVID-19, climate change, Christian nationalism and political polarization, multiculturalism, church staffing, individualization, Afrofuturism and the Black Church, stewardship and economic practices, community organizing, gendered pastoral vocational paths, and clergy leadership development and lifelong learning. Together, these contributions highlight the study of congregational life and leadership as an interdisciplinary endeavor that draws upon sociological, anthropological, historical, ecclesial, theological, and other frameworks to better understand the dynamic nature of religious life.

**MDPI** Books  
Publishing Open Access Books & Series

Order Your Print Copy  
You can order print copies at  
[www.mdpi.com/books/reprint/11414](http://www.mdpi.com/books/reprint/11414)



# INTRODUCING THE LIMINALITY PRESS

## LIMINAL LEADERSHIP, LIMINAL THINKING, LIMINALITY AND RELIGION, THE ARTS, SOCIETY, SPACES AND TIMES

*Writers are invited to submit proposals for general readership, academics, or as part of the Essential Liminal Library series, as outlined in our submission guidelines found under the Submit Proposal tab*

<https://www.liminalitypress.com/services-3>

*Contact Lisa Withrow (lwithrow@me.com) or  
Timothy Carson (timothylcarson@yahoo.com),  
if you would like to discuss your work for the Press*



---

## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS AND INTRODUCTION TO THE JRL AUTUMN 2025 ISSUE

### LEADERSHIP AS JUSTICE: A VOYAGE THROUGH THE SIX SENSES KRISTINA I. LIZARDY-HAJBI

#### Abstract

*What does justice look, sound, smell, taste, and feel like for religious leaders and communities? Through a journey of the senses, this essay offers a framework for a just religious leadership that sees multiple perspectives, listens carefully to what lies beyond ourselves, tastes like joy, smells like change, feels like interconnectedness, and intuitively deeply the work of the Spirit.*

#### Introduction

We are living in tough times. We see it in the news, social media, and our neighborhoods. We hear about it from podcasts, the radio, and our friends and loved ones. To a lesser extent—and depending on how far removed we are from such blatant injustices—we smell and taste it in the air. We can almost reach out and touch these many injustices, but most of us only do so through our fingertips pressing on phone screens. We know, and live with the ongoing reality, that these are unjust days.

In the Call for Proposals for this year's Academy of Religious Leadership conference theme—Leadership as Justice—I posed an odd question: “What does justice look, sound, smell, taste, and feel like for leaders and communities?” This was not a flippant question but, rather, a wondering about the nature and tenor of a framework for understanding just leadership. It was also a movement to pull theory toward praxis and to make visible the material realities that are often experienced in the practice of such leadership. As

*Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi, Ph.D., is an associate professor of Leadership and Formation at Iliff School of Theology.*

a result, I began to give more tangible consideration to how our senses themselves might shape religious leadership as justice. So, with your permission to employ a bit of creativity, I offer a framing of just religious leadership with a brief voyage through the five—actually six—senses.

## Sight

And their eyes were opened.

—Matt. 9:30<sup>1</sup>

Jesus restored physical sight to several blind persons; but in Matthew 9, when he placed his hands on the eyes of two blind men who followed him into a house, the gospel writer tells us that “their eyes were opened.” In the Greek translation, this is just an idiom indicating that their sight had been restored. But, I wonder, what does it mean for us religious leaders to have our eyes opened?

Just religious leadership requires an ability to see from multiple perspectives, often beyond the dominant line of vision. Walter Brueggemann, in his classic book *The Prophetic Imagination*, distinguishes between royal consciousness and prophetic consciousness in the Hebrew biblical literature. Royal consciousness, developed and perfected in the time of Solomon’s rule, relied upon an economics of affluence, a politics of oppression, and a religion of immanence.<sup>2</sup> An economics of affluence was created not when everyone had all that they needed but, rather, when those with more were satiated enough that they did not need to be concerned with their own survival any longer. This is the point when a politics of oppression became necessary because the satiation of some required that others had less and thus labored for the satiation of the elite. What kept both affluence and oppression in place was a static faith in which God became domesticated to the will of those in power (i.e., the king).

---

<sup>1</sup> All biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th anniv. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2018), 30.

The new gods in Solomon's time became "order, symmetry, and coherence" in a land where "questions of order [took] priority over questions of justice."<sup>3</sup> The prophetic consciousness, on the other hand, saw multiple realities at play—both the satiation of the elite and the marginalization of the many, keeping in mind that the marginalized also included those who identified with the elite and felt that they had just enough not to cause trouble.<sup>4</sup> Where most people saw order and a management mentality, those with a prophetic consciousness also saw that there was exploitation and suffering under such order. Because multiple sights are necessary to the praxis of just leadership, this makes just leadership an inherently prophetic act.

More than seeing only multiple perspectives, however, just religious leaders look beyond the current view to envision freedom and care for the whole community. Brueggemann argues, "It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one."<sup>5</sup> In other words, just religious leaders see realities that are not yet reality. In her short book *When No Thing Works: A Zen and Indigenous Perspective on Resilience, Shared Purpose, and Leadership in the Time of Collapse*, Norma Kawelokū Wong encourages individuals and communities to see two different horizons: a near horizon—a future story that is attainable in our present lifetimes—and a far horizon—a "living story that descendants live in, in which they describe how ancestors imagined it and then made it true."<sup>6</sup> The near-horizon story, Wong says, is grounded in problem-solving and "hope-filled thinking" and focused on "doingness, and the rough calculation of how many units of doingness one may accomplish

---

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, 33.

<sup>4</sup> In the words of liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez: "It is important and even absolutely necessary that we see things as they really are, for otherwise we distort the Lord's summons to unity." *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) 261.

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Norma Kawelokū Wong, *When No Thing Works: A Zen and Indigenous Perspective on Resilience, Shared Purpose, and Leadership in the Time of Collapse* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic, 2024) 35.

between now and the descriptive picture of the near horizon.”<sup>7</sup>

The far horizon, however, is concerned with none of the immediacies of the present time, or even with the years to come in one’s own life.<sup>8</sup> The far horizon is a much bigger leap, “always beyond the apocalyptic time when everything completely fell apart and the skies were dark for so long no one knew lightness or blueness.”<sup>9</sup> Wong says that this imagining of a future story is much more difficult to create but is just as necessary because what cannot be created cannot be made reality. Thus, the practice of telling the far horizon story is where we need to focus more energy as just religious leaders. What are the stories within us, within our communities of faith and learning, that are “beyond the moment’s fierce fights” and are “the manifestations of the values, the ways, the spirit mechanisms of the world as we would have it be?”<sup>10</sup>

## Sound

I think I have heard many voices in many times and places, but it may be that I have heard only One.

—Vincent Harding<sup>11</sup>

In his powerful essay titled “I Hear Them...Calling,” Vincent Harding reflects on his life and the many voices that led him to various places, experiences, and vocations rooted in justice and peace, including his work with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and in the civil rights movement more broadly. It is a beautifully written piece, and I share the following excerpt with the request

---

<sup>7</sup> Wong, 36.

<sup>8</sup> I liken this view to the words in the prayer of Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador: “It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view. The Kin[g]dom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision.” Oscar Romero, “The Romero Prayer,” <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/romero-prayer>, accessed April 22, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Wong, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Wong, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Vincent Harding, “I Hear Them...Calling,” in *Callings!*, eds. James Y. Holloway and Will D. Campbell (New York: Paulist, 1974) 57-69. Included, with permission, in Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020) 39.

that individuals read the essay in its entirety at some point:

I hear all the varied sounds of my homeland, all its human sounds, all its animals, its spirit-filled rivers and lakes, its waterfalls, its mountains, its grass and trees playing with the wind. I hear them all.

I hear my people. I hear them calling from Virginia to San Francisco, I hear their songs and their cries and their defiant shouts and their long silences through all the horrors called slavery. I hear them lost in the wilderness, I hear them moving, seeking the North Star, determined to make their way to freedom.

I hear them in preaching and praying, holding one another through hunger and parting, through torture and sickness, through childbirth and dying, I hear them calling.

I hear my people marching, refusing to stop, refusing to be quiet, refusing to be satisfied, refusing to die.

I am a witness (teacher, preacher, ranter, raver, dissident, resistant, radical, revolutionary, silent carrier), witness to their truth and power, pressed forward by the force of their being, by the integrity of their struggle, by the silent roaring of their voices. No turning back.

It means I am now of them, deep calling unto deep. Their voice has entered so profoundly into me that I am flesh of their flesh, bone of their bone, song of their song, pain of their pain, hope of their hope.<sup>12</sup>

Just religious leadership calls us to hear—not simply for the sake of hearing, but to listen, to let the sounds ruminate within our bodies and our spirits. As Scott Cormode writes in his book *The Innovative Church*, “Leadership begins with listening...to God, to the people, to the tumbleweeds.”<sup>13</sup> Such leadership requires us to be

---

<sup>12</sup> *Harding*, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Scott Cormode, *The Innovative Church: How Leaders and Their Congregations Can Adapt in an Ever-Changing World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020) 41-45.

in community with one another so that we are in physical proximity to hear what is being shared. In my experience, many seminarians have strong and passionate convictions about what is just, what is right, what ought to be. These convictions are admirable, but they are often articulated from an individualistic frame of what the seminarians themselves have determined as justice. However, if justice is *only* one individual's version of what is wrong and how it ought to be righted, then it is not justice. Justice can only be so if it is articulated and experienced by a community. Justice without hearing the voices of "our people," as Harding describes—and sometimes those who are not "our people," or the "tumbleweeds" as Cormode describes them—is a cheap kind of justice.

Church pastors know this kind of listening because a core component of their ministry is to listen to the people in their congregations—to really have their ears to the ground to get a sense of where their people are spiritually, emotionally, materially, and otherwise—to preach, teach, care, and lead in ways that respond to what is being communicated. This is a skill that takes years to develop, requires patience, and delights in listening to the sounds of others more than simply the sound of one's own voice.

## Taste

O taste and see that the Lord is good;  
happy are those who take refuge in [the Lord].  
—Psalm 34:8

Just religious leadership often tastes bitter, or at least that's what many of us are conditioned to believe and practice. Yes, the pursuit of justice is serious business; it leads to conflict, loss of respect and privilege, loss of or damage to personal and communal goods, and individual and communal harm and even death. It can taste like pepper spray, tear gas, or more deadly chemical weapons.<sup>14</sup> But just leadership, when embodied within communities of faith and

---

<sup>14</sup> Rosemarie Freeney Harding describes "the desperation of slavery" as "the iron taste in their mouths." *Remnants: A Memoir of Spirit, Activism, and Mothering* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2015) 165.

learning, can also taste deliciously good. In his inaugural address last year, Stephen Cady, now president of Brite Divinity School, said: “Justice without joy is empty, and joy without justice is sin.”<sup>15</sup> Because justice is not a solitary action, but rather one that requires collaboration with trusted others, it should be inherently joyful. Therefore, just religious leaders cultivate joy in the work of justice.

But this joy doesn't taste trite or shallow; it is borne and sustained through a fully embodied commitment to justice. Rebecca Solnit, author of *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, says, “Joy doesn't betray but sustains activism. And when you face a politics that aspires to make you fearful, alienated, and isolated, joy is a fine initial act of insurrection.”<sup>16</sup> Such joy is a deep knowledge that the drama playing out on the main stage is ever-present, but Solnit says that “stories move in from the shadows to the limelight. And though the stage presents the drama of our powerlessness, the shadows offer the secret of our power.”<sup>17</sup> Just religious leadership in this time calls for a faith that works in and from the shadows to cultivate joy both in the midst of, and beyond, present injustices.

As religious leaders, we have rich and varied traditions that attest to how our ancestors of faith cultivated such joy. Protest and resistance songs and chants—many originating as hymns sung in faith communities—have been used the world over not only as verbalized calls for justice and peace, but also as anthems that arise from the lungs to breathe joy into those who allow the words to roll from their tongues in harmony with others across time and space. In his work *We Shall Not Be Moved / No Nos Moverán: Biography of a Song of Struggle*, David Spener traces the history of this Southern revival song through various movements and catalogs its translation into Spanish and its use in Latin America and Spain. Interestingly, these translations happened at different

---

<sup>15</sup> “The Inauguration of Rev. Stephen M. Cady II, Ph.D.,” Brite Divinity School, November 2, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkPIPXh-qE48&t=6633s>.

<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2016) 24.

<sup>17</sup> Solnit, 34.

historical moments and places in the world without knowledge of other translations. For example, during the 1960s, two leaders in El Teatro Campesino (The Farmworker's Theater) who were familiar with the repertoire of both the US labor and African American civil rights movements translated a number of those songs, including "We Shall Not Be Moved" and "We Shall Overcome/Nosotros Venceremos" into Spanish.<sup>18</sup> Singing these songs in Spanish not only was a show of solidarity across the different movements, but also "helped members of movements to keep up their spirits" and "spiritually sanctified most gatherings."<sup>19</sup>

Of course, song is only one way in which joy is cultivated by and through just religious leaders. Food itself, among other things, often brings joy and nourishes the soul. We can "taste and see" goodness as religious leaders when we break bread together. In connecting joy and food, J. Drew Lanham, in his sense-filled poem titled "Joy Is the Justice We Give Ourselves," ends his piece with these delicious words:

Joy is my seeking.  
 Your being,  
 It is mine for the taking.  
 Ours to share.  
 More than enough to go around,  
 when it seems nowhere to be found.  
 Have yourself a heapin' serving.  
 Have seconds. Or thirds.  
 'Cause  
 joy is the justice  
 we must give ourselves.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> David Spener, *We Shall Not Be Moved / No Nos Moverán: Biography of a Song of Struggle* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University, 2016) 83.

<sup>19</sup> Spener, 7, 13.

<sup>20</sup> J. Drew Lanham, "Joy Is the Justice We Give Ourselves," *Emergence Magazine*, August 31, 2022, <https://emergencemagazine.org/poem/joy-is-the-justice-we-give-ourselves/>.

## Smell

And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in [the Lord's] heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humans.'

—Gen. 8:21

The God of the Hebrew Bible experienced the senses. In this passage from Genesis, God smelled; and that act of smelling (something sweet) shifted God's heart toward greater compassion for humanity. This is the power of the sense of smell—to bring to life memories that have the potential to alter worlds. As such, I believe that just religious leadership smells like an ability to bring about change.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, smells reach the parts of our brains associated with memory and emotions—the hippocampus and the amygdala, respectively—much more quickly and directly than sights, sounds, and other sensory information because those other senses have to pass through another part of the brain first. As a result, “odor-evoked memories tend to be more emotional and more likely to extend back earlier in one's life.”<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, smells are strong elements that are less frequently relied upon in justice work; however, the Christian church's historical relationship to smell has been quite extensive. For example, an “odor of sanctity” that surrounded certain people has been used as evidence for the canonization of saints over the centuries, even as recently as 2002.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> A poignant use of smell and memory in the struggle for justice is found in the lyrics of the poem-turned-song “Strange Fruit,” recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939: “Scent of the magnolia sweet and fresh, then the sudden smell of burning flesh.” The poem-song was based upon the lynching of two young black men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana, on August 7, 1930. “Strange Fruit,” [http://www.protestsonglyrics.net/Racism\\_Discrimination\\_Songs/Strange-Fruit.phtml](http://www.protestsonglyrics.net/Racism_Discrimination_Songs/Strange-Fruit.phtml), accessed April 21, 2025.

<sup>22</sup> Molly McDonough, “The Connections Between Smell, Memory, and Health,” *Harvard Medicine*, Spring 2024, <https://magazine.hms.harvard.edu/articles/connections-between-smell-memory-and-health>, para. 8.

<sup>23</sup> John Last, “The Centuries-Long Quest For The Scent Of God,” *Noëma*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.noemamag.com/the-centuries-long-quest-for-the-scent-of-god/>, para. 5.

It is clear that smells evoke something deep within us, propelling us toward old resonances and new possibilities.

As just religious leaders living in late-stage modernity, however, we are fairly accustomed to the notion of change. In the last one hundred years, we have experienced some of the most rapid global changes in human history; and the changes seem to be accelerating, especially when it comes to technology and climate change as omnipresent forces.<sup>24</sup> I have written recently about change in my book *Unraveling Religious Leadership* and argued that religious leaders and communities need to rethink how colonial logics have taught us to shape change (i.e., by believing that we have more power to change than we actually do) and toward what ends we shape change (i.e., continual production and growth).<sup>25</sup> Over the past several months, I have also had the opportunity to be a witness to faith communities rethinking and reimagining change in ways that subvert these colonial logics.

The BTS Center is the legacy organization of Bangor Theological Seminary in Maine, which closed its doors as a theological school in 2013. The continuing mission of The BTS Center is to equip faith leaders and communities with “spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world...catalyz[ing] spiritual imagination, with enduring wisdom, for transformative faith leadership.”<sup>26</sup> I have been journeying with this organization as part of their research advisory committee, which supports the applied research work and evaluation of their initiatives. In a conversation with staff and other committee members about pre- and post-survey results for one of their congregational programs, we noticed that participants responded differently to one particular prompt: “Briefly describe how you understand the climate crisis—its causes and the best ways of addressing it.”

Before the program, participants spoke at a much more global level and with technical specificity about the need to reduce fossil

---

<sup>24</sup> Norma Kawelokū Wong calls this “collective acceleration,” 19.

<sup>25</sup> Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, *Unraveling Religious Leadership: Power, Authority, and Decoloniality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2024) chap. 5.

<sup>26</sup> The BTS Center, <https://thebtscenter.org/>, accessed April 21, 2025.

fuels and greenhouse gases to solve climate change. After the program, however, responses were more oriented toward a need to shift theological and cultural values and worldviews that undergird consumption, highlighting humanity's broken relationship with the planet and using spiritual resources to engage around smaller community-focused changes.<sup>27</sup> This shift is profound because it seems that the program radically altered participants' perspectives about the injustice taking place and, therefore, their responses to it. What they smelled/inhaled in that program—learnings from theologians, indigenous leaders, and leaders in the environmental movement, as well as discernings about their own sense of purpose and vocation as congregations—laid the groundwork for profound adaptive change, not technical solutions, as Ronald Heifetz and others might suggest.<sup>28</sup> Now, this is not the grand change that is ultimately needed, but I would argue that just religious leaders more often are cultivating this kind of change—deep, memory-recalling, emotionally sustaining, worldview-shifting change—than large-scale technical changes.

## Touch

Christ has no body but yours,  
 No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
 Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
 compassion on this world

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
 Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
 Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
 Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
 Christ has no body now but yours,  
 No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
 Yours are the eyes with which he looks

---

<sup>27</sup> Ben Yosua-Davis, "Claiming Your Call: Preliminary Research Findings for Discussion," The BTS Center, April 3, 2025.

<sup>28</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business, 2009).

compassion on this world.  
 Christ has no body now on earth but yours.  
 —Saint Teresa of Ávila<sup>29</sup>

Just religious leaders *feel*. They touch and are touched by the material world (in consensual and appropriate ways). In more academic terms, just religious leaders embody a theological anthropology of beingness with and within the world. Christianity has long suffered from a “persistent *somatophobia* or a fear of flesh,” according to M. Shawn Copeland.<sup>30</sup> In her timeless book *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, Copeland lays out a theology of black freedom and writes that “the black body is a site of divine revelation, ‘a basic human sacrament.’” She continues, “The body is the medium through which the person as essential freedom achieves and realizes selfhood through communion with other embodied selves.”<sup>31</sup>

Just religious leaders recognize the inherent di(g/vi)nity of all bodies, including those bodies that we do not often recognize: animal bodies, plant bodies, bodies of water, mountain bodies, desert bodies, and beyond. Moreover, quantum entanglement theory suggests that we are already touching and intertwining with other bodies on a subatomic level. While this theory contains many complexities, quantum entanglement at its simplest suggests that “particles of the same origin, which were once connected, always stay connected. Even if they separate and move far apart in time and space, they continue to share something beyond a mere bond—they shed their original quantum states and take on a new, united quantum state which they maintain forever.”<sup>32</sup> When just religious leaders touch and feel, we are shaped and impacted as

---

<sup>29</sup> Teresa of Ávila, “Christ Has No Body,” [https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/3637-Teresa\\_Of\\_Avila\\_Christ\\_Has\\_No\\_Body](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/3637-Teresa_Of_Avila_Christ_Has_No_Body), accessed April 21, 2025,

<sup>30</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010) 24.

<sup>31</sup> Copeland, 24.

<sup>32</sup> “What Is the Spooky Science of Quantum Entanglement?” NASA, <https://science.nasa.gov/what-is-the-spooky-science-of-quantum-entanglement/>, accessed April 22, 2025, para. 4.

part of a sacred exchange that remains within us long past any initial connection. Theologian Catherine Keller rightly describes this understanding of the universe as creating a tingling feeling in her own body. She remarks,

Each new insight into quantum entanglement has, I admit, caused my flesh to prickle in a way that the Eucharist rarely has. Not because God or anything else is getting proved, but because something about what we all, human and nonhuman, together are, what it is we are part of, is coming through just when we desperately, even politically, need it.<sup>33</sup>

It is in holding another's hand, offering a needed embrace, witnessing in solidarity with others during a rally, advocating for policy changes at a local council meeting, preparing meals together for an event, or tending to a community garden that we are made and remade on a quantum level. Religious leaders who seek to be just not only recognize this reality, they presence it in their words, affects, and movements toward a just and equitable world.

### **Intuition**

The universes which are amenable to the intellect  
can never satisfy the instincts of the heart.

—Evelyn Underhill<sup>34</sup>

All of the more tangible five senses are mediated in communion with what is known as the sixth sense, which many understand as intuition and/or the movement of the Spirit. While some might argue that this sense is separate from the five senses, I believe it is through the other senses that intuition becomes known. Without bodies, how would we even experience this sense?

---

<sup>33</sup> Catherine Keller, "Tingles of Matter, Tangles of Theology," in *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*, eds. Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein (New York: Fordham University, 2017) 130.

<sup>34</sup> Evelyn Underhill, "Introduction," *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 2nd ed. (London: John M. Watkins, 1922) 26.

Our religious traditions have much to offer regarding the wisdom of intuition and spirit, and for Christians, such wisdom is found mainly in the mystical tradition. St. Teresa of Ávila, referenced in the previous section, wrote of many experiences she had that were just beyond, but still experienced through, the other five senses. She says, “I used unexpectedly to experience a consciousness of the presence of God, or such a kind that I could not possibly doubt that [God] was within me or that I was wholly engulfed in [God]. The soul is suspended in such a way that it seems to be completely outside itself.”<sup>35</sup> In the book *When the Spirit Is Your Inheritance: Reflections on Borderlands Pentecostalism*, Jonathan Calvillo shares his family’s story about their physical, cognitive, and spiritual existence in the borderlands between Mexico and the United States. Calvillo asserts that the Pentecostal faith that his grandmother brought from Mexico to California and passed down to subsequent generations was one that resided at the borderlands, the in-between spaces. He also writes about the presence of supernatural testimonios (testimonies) within his faith community. He says that “while these particular stories were atypical, their circulation...revealed an expectation among some Borderlands Pentecostals that the border between the natural and the supernatural was permeable.”<sup>36</sup> Experiences like that of Teresa of Ávila and from Calvillo’s faith community highlight the role that this sixth sense of intuition and spirit plays in faith.

The work of justice also requires our use of intuition and spirit; therefore, just religious leaders cultivate our spiritual lives by stretching our intuitive muscles. Great religious leaders—people like Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Howard Thurman, Walter Wink, Winona LaDuke, and Thich Nhat Hanh, just to name some more contemporary figures—knew or still know the centrality of this sense and that they needed or need to give continual attention to its care and nurture. Otherwise, they—and we—might not have what is necessary for the work of

---

<sup>35</sup> Santa Teresa de Jesús, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, trans. by J.H. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1957) chap. xxiii.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Calvillo, *When the Spirit Is Your Inheritance: Reflections on Borderlands Pentecostalism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2024) 27.

justice. I liken this sixth sense to a form of groundedness, an inner knowing, borne from time spent in the presence of the sacred, that requires an attunement of all the other senses—sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch—to listening for that which can only be heard from and by the soul. Just religious leaders make friends with our “spidey sense”—the mystical unknown that communicates from the ether—lest we become attuned to voices and values that masquerade as justice but are not its kin. To make friends with the sixth sense—like any other burgeoning friendship—takes time, patience, and an openness to the Spirit.

The Academy of Religious Leadership also engaged in a bit of spidey-sensing this past year, as we stretched our capacities for intuition and spirit. We hosted a series of four conversations which we designated as “futuring ARL.” We gleaned wisdom from across the membership to identify our values as an organization and then discern how we might live more fully into those values. I am indebted to Lisa Hess and Robert Martin for their leadership and collaboration on this process, as well as to the participation of the steering committee and former and current members. For a traditionally scholarly guild to risk the deployment of all six senses—and our sixth sense in particular—was a grand experiment that challenged me, and maybe challenged others too; but what resulted from that work—and the work we will continue into the year ahead—was worth it.

## **Conclusion**

While just religious leadership is lived through the senses, we must never equate the use of our senses with ableist assumptions. We cannot deny those whose senses function differently, or not at all, their abilities to labor for justice or to live into the fullness of their leadership capacities. What I have attempted here is simply a beginning framework for how we might reconceive religious leadership through prioritizing the sense-filled ways by which we embody justice.

Our senses are our receptors; they take in all that is around us. I have also employed the use of simile to ignite our imaginations for the possibilities for just religious leadership by asserting that “justice

looks like / sounds like / tastes like” and so on. However we perceive justice and our leadership therein, my hope is that we might:

- *see* multiple perspectives, including that which is not yet reality;
- *hear* and listen carefully to what lies beyond ourselves;
- *taste* the joy that comes from justice pursued in community;
- *smell* our way toward change that alters worldviews and transforms power;
- *feel* our sense of interconnectedness and intertwining with all bodies; and
- *intuit/sense* deeply into Spirit so that we are sustained and grounded for the long haul.

### Sensing Our Way Forward

The contributors have incorporated the senses, in one form or another, into what they offer in this issue. **Susan Maros** and **Phil Allen**, in their contribution “Impact of Leaders’ Racial-Ethnic-Cultural Identity Development on Capacity for Just Action,” put forth a model that asks leaders to sense into/intuit their own racial-ethnic-cultural identity development and the development of those with whom they work. Maros and Allen contend that such reflection is necessary for leaders who seek to enact justice. **Rebecca David Hensley** spoke with and listened to community organizers in Texas to develop a just religious leadership that critically examines Whiteness in the article “Un-Suturing Reflexive Whiteness: Recognizing and Resisting White+Christian Dominance in Racial Justice Movements.” Hensley suggests several praxes and traits that White Christian leaders should embrace in the process of “un-suturing” from the White moral imaginary. **Eunjin Jeon** and **Byung Ho Choi**, in “Reimagining Pastoral Leadership: Practical Wisdom from Ordained Women Pastors in South Korea,” listened deeply through an embodied practice of “friendship-talk” to the experiences of female pastors in the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK) to learn how they lead within patriarchal church

structures. Jeon and Choi found that models centering koinonia-centered practice, motherhood as theological leadership, and radical interdependence challenge dominating paradigms and move the church toward just leadership. Finally, in “From Performance to Formation: Reimagining Servant Leadership Education,” **Kyle J.A. Small** and **David G. Forney** articulate a reframing of Servant Leadership from a surface-level, leader-centric engagement to a relational and communal praxis that is developmental in scope. Through five pedagogical “movements,” Small and Forney reorient Servant Leadership praxis as a curriculum of liberation. In distinct ways, each of the authors in this issue has asked the question: What does justice look, sound, smell, taste, and feel like for religious leaders within particular communities? Their nuanced, carefully articulated, and sensory-informed responses to this query hold wisdom for us all.

**Inviting your manuscript submission to the JRL**

Do you have an idea for an article to be published in the JRL?

Do you have a manuscript you would like to submit for consideration?

Contact Editor Robert Martin to talk about your idea or submit an essay by emailing [editor@arl-jrl.org](mailto:editor@arl-jrl.org).

**Book Reviews**

Book Review Editor Michael Wilson has a list of books to review (receive a free book!), or suggest your own, at [mwilson@lancasterseminary.edu](mailto:mwilson@lancasterseminary.edu). No unsolicited reviews accepted.

**Guidelines for articles and book reviews are found at the ARL/JRL website: <https://arl-jrl.org>**

---

**IMPACT OF LEADERS' RACIAL-ETHNIC-CULTURAL IDENTITY  
DEVELOPMENT ON CAPACITY FOR JUST ACTION**  
PHIL ALLEN JR., SUSAN L. MAROS<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**

*This essay explores a racial-ethnic-cultural identity development model based on the work of Janet Helms, William Cross, and Beverly Daniel Tatum, influenced by a framing offered by Khyati Joshi and Shanelle Henry. This model facilitates reflection on the following phases of development: implicit and explicit acceptance of societal norms, the experience of disorientation when faced with new awareness, processing implicit and explicit resistance, and the work of reorienting one's sense of identity leading to generative embodied presence in just action. This essay offers recommendations for personal development of the leadership educator as well as implications for their students and mentees in the classroom and in the community.*

**Introduction: Case of a Leadership Class**

Imagine yourself as the educator in the following scenario. Notice what assumptions arise for you. Consider how you would be inclined to respond. We will explore this scenario in light of this case throughout the essay, returning to consideration of the implications for you as the educator in the conclusion.

---

<sup>1</sup> Although we list our names alphabetically by surname, this essay is entirely co-authored.

*Phil Allen, Jr., PhD is an Affiliate Assistant Professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of Open Wounds (Fortress Press 2021) and The Prophetic Lens (Fortress Press 2022).*

*Susan L. Maros (PhD) is Affiliate Associate Professor of Christian Leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary. She is a past president of the Academy of Religious Leadership.*

A class on leadership and diversity is engaged in a small group discussion of “The Complexity of Identity,” a chapter from Beverly Daniel Tatum’s book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race*.<sup>2</sup> The aim of the discussion is for group members to explore their racial-ethnic-cultural identity and its impact on their present leadership. One group in particular is demonstrating complex interpersonal dynamics. Two of the group members, Aaliyah and Richard, are talking animatedly. Rosio, who’s body language suggests frustration or irritation, breaks in with an occasional comment. Meanwhile, Ha-joon looks confused and Miko and Lisa sit stiff and silent.

As soon as you call for a break in class, Richard comes to you. “Can we make an announcement to the class?” he asks.

The day before, the students received an email from the Board of Trustees announcing the cutting of the position of Chief of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and the departure of Dr. Roberta Johnson, the longtime faculty member who held that position. “We regret the need to decrease administrative positions in the current economic environment. We thank Dr. Johnson for her service and wish her well in all her future endeavors,” reads the email. You know that Dr. Johnson is the fourth person of color to leave positions of authority in the institution in the last five years.

“The Board of Trustees is bowing to White supremacist pressure!” exclaims Richard. “We can’t stand by; we have to do something!”

---

<sup>2</sup> Beverly Daniel Tatum. “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*”: *And Other Conversations About Race*, Twentieth Anniversary edition. (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

Aaliyah comes up behind Richard, glancing sideways at him. “The Black Student Union is organizing a vigil in front of the administration building tonight in response to Dr. Johnson’s departure. I’d like everyone in class to know about it and to participate.”

Rosio joins the conversation, asking, “And where were you guys when United for the Dream sponsored an Art Protest last month in response to the deportation of Pastor Luis?”

Given this is a course on leadership and diversity, supporting the efforts of the students to engage in acts of justice is a priority. Having noticed the dynamics in the group discussion just prior, and seeing the conflict in front of you, you see the potential of a teachable moment that relates to the chapter the students were all (supposed to be) discussing.

- How are the students’ various identities playing a part in how they perceive and respond to the concerns of the community?
- What do the students need, individually and collectively, at this moment to be able to engage justly—with one another and with this situation?
- And how is your own racial-ethnic-cultural identity development impacting how you respond to this situation?

### **Contexts, Frameworks, and Caveats**

Ideally, religious leaders value diverse peoples, cultures, and experiences; demonstrate the capacity to discern unjust behaviors and structures; and enact just action grounded in gospel-rooted faith convictions. In reality, even leaders with a deep desire to do all this frequently act in ways contrary to our best intentions. The authors posit that one reason for the discrepancy between intention and impact is the influence of the leader’s racial-ethnic-cultural

(REC) identity development.<sup>3</sup> To the extent a leader has not formed a healthy, holistic REC identity, we will enact and replicate unjust social norms, and thus perpetuate harm even when we intend to be a just leader. Conversely, when we as leaders have deeply processed our REC identity, including all of the problematic history that comes with that identity, and have come to a place of healthy and holistic acceptance of ourselves and our social group(s), we can encounter the world from a place of grounded self-awareness, thus increase the likelihood of engaging in just action in a generative manner.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, we explore the process of racial-ethnic-cultural identity development, considering how our REC identity affects our engagement with the world. Our conviction is that leaders who seek to engage in just action in the world need to be mindful of their identity development and the development of the people they work with. None of us can put off attempting to enact justice until we have fully formed our racial-ethnic-cultural identity; the need in the world is too great. However, we can and should engage in actions mindful of our formation and the impact that formation has on our capacity to lead justly. It is important to engage the process of development so that we are more likely to bring settled bodies, rather than unsettled bodies, to spaces of activism.<sup>5</sup>

The aim and purpose of this essay is to be a resource for reflection and self-awareness, particularly for the educator engaged in leader formation. We offer reflections on the process of identity development, including the similarities and differences between People of Color and White people in identity formation. The model presented draws from the work of Janet Helms, William Cross, and Beverly Daniel Tatum, and is significantly shaped by a

---

<sup>3</sup> We follow Beverly Daniel Tatum's lead in the use of the term "racial-ethnic-cultural identity." See Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 126.

<sup>4</sup> Scholars have noted that an individual's awareness of racial identity is predictive of that individual's racism with a lower level of awareness predictive of a higher level of expressed racism. See Derald Wing Sue, Mikal N. Rasheed, Janice Matthews Rasheed. *Multicultural Social Work Practice: A Competency-Based Approach to Diversity and Social Justice*. (John Wiley & Sons, 2015) 188.

<sup>5</sup> Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017) 237.

framing offered by Khyati Joshi and Shanelle Henry. We attempt to offer language for naming the experience of identity formation, the experience of injustice, and guidance on discerning appropriate action toward justice.

With these aims in mind, we begin with several points of caution. First, this REC identity development framework is descriptive, not prescriptive. The framework describes the kinds of processes and behaviors we and others have observed. Like all frameworks, it does not capture the nuances and complexities of all experiences, contexts, and situations.<sup>6</sup>

Second, we note a common tendency whenever people use frameworks describing development across time to make sense of their own experience: We tend to diagnose ourselves as being much further in development than we really are. We note that we tend to identify ourselves as being in a phase of formation that we value or aspire to, rather than identifying the phase that best describes our current attitudes and behaviors.

Additionally, presenting racial-ethnic-cultural identity development as a series of phases implies a linear progression in which a person “reaches” a static condition before moving onto another, presumably better, condition. We agree with Janet Helms’s framing of these phases as “mutually interactive dynamic processes by which a person’s behavior could be explained rather than static categories into which a person could be assigned.”<sup>7</sup> Beverly Daniel Tatum’s image of REC identity development as a spiral staircase is helpful: as we move through formation, we have a sense we have passed this way before, revisiting again the processing we have

---

<sup>6</sup> For example, this framework does not directly address the experience of people who are bi-cultural or multi-ethnic. These individuals experience racial-ethnic-cultural identity development and can, thus, benefit from this engagement, but the framework does not directly address their distinct concerns.

<sup>7</sup> Janet E. Helms, “An update of Helm’s White and people of color racial identity models.” In J. G. Ponterotto, J. M. Casas, L. A. Suzuki, & C. M. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of Multicultural Counseling*. (Sage Publications, Inc., 1995) 183. Other scholars have noted the cyclical or episodic nature of REC identity formation. See, for example, William E. Cross, “The Psychology of Nigrescence: Revising the Cross Model,” in *Handbook of Multicultural Counseling*, by J.G. Ponterotto et al. (SAGE Publications, Inc., 1995) 94-95

engaged in the past, but in a new context or a different situation.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, our experience is that people inhabit different aspects of the framework in different arenas of their lives and can move between adjoining phases of the framework depending on life circumstances.

Third, we want to acknowledge that naming realities can provoke a variety of emotions. We encourage readers to be conscious of mental and emotional reactions that arise as they read. We hope readers will be able to discern when what they are reading contrasts with the narratives, “the wordless stories” that their bodies might already hold.<sup>9</sup>

With those cautions in mind, two further caveats are necessary. First, we name the experience of racial-ethnic-cultural identity as experienced in the United States. Some of these concepts, particularly around ethnicity, difference, and history are applicable to other cultural contexts. We note, for example, that privilege and power dynamics exist in all human cultures. Nevertheless, the way this framework engages the construct of race is distinctive to the social environment and history of the United States.

Second, we use People of Color as an umbrella term for people who do not identify as White. We recognize that people who embrace a single racial designator (e.g., Black or Latino/a) are not a homogenous monolith, let alone all People of Color. Different racial-ethnic-cultural identity groups have distinct histories and experiences. Those distinctions matter and impact experience as participants in the social milieu of the United States. For the sake of brevity, however, we will keep to a binary set of identities: White and People of Color.

As authors, one of us identifies as White (Maros) and one as Black (Allen). When using the collective “we” in the following, Allen is speaking on behalf of People of Color, and Maros is speaking on behalf of White people. We recognize that our racialized experiences are part of a broader and more complex set of experiences and beliefs, such that neither of us represents our entire

---

<sup>8</sup> Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 161.

<sup>9</sup> Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 4.

group. Nevertheless, we engage this practice as a reflection of our personal connection to the dynamics explored here as a practice of intellectual and cultural humility.

### **Racial-Ethnic-Cultural Identity Framework**

The racial-ethnic-cultural identity development model presented in this essay has six phases of development, with two of these phases having an explicit expression and an implicit expression: pre-contact, acceptance (implicit or explicit), disorientation, resistance (implicit or explicit), redefinition, and embodiment. In each of the following sections, we define and describe the nature of the phase of development for White people and for People of Color. We then utilize the characters in the case study to offer some thoughts on how this stage is reflected in the actions and reactions of leaders attempting to enact justice. We note the effect on the people in the room in the case study as well as the educator leading the class.

#### *Pre-Contact Phase*

A person in the pre-contact phase of racial-ethnic-cultural identity is unaware of race, ethnicity, or culture as an identity marker. We assume that we are human and that our experience is the experience of people everywhere; what we see in our own context and culture is presumed to be universal. Further, in some parts of the world, “race” is not a salient construct in the way that it is in the United States. In many contexts, for example, a person’s identity is tied to their ethnicity, culture, language, or family rather than race.

It is hard to imagine, in a globalized world, that anyone is entirely unaware of racial-ethnic-cultural differences. Even in isolated contexts where the society is homogenous, access to media—television, movies, music, etc.—gives a window into a diverse world. Yet simple awareness of the existence of difference is not enough to prompt us to think about our racial-ethnic-cultural identity.

One population particularly pertinent to leadership educators is international students. People coming to the United States encounter a perspective on race and an expression of a race-based

society distinctive to this context and different from their home culture. International students from Nigeria, for example, comment they never thought of themselves as Black but as Igbo or Yoruba or another ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or familial identifier. For those individuals, the racial-ethnic-cultural identity assumptions made in the United States affect their experience of being in this country. Exposure to the racialized dynamics of US-American society provokes them to think about themselves in different terms.

### Application and Implications

You noticed Ha-joon's silence during the group discussion and interpreted his expression as one of confusion. Ha-joon is in his thirties and from South Korea. You know his wife and three children remain in Seoul while Ha-joon is studying in the United States. After addressing Richard's request, you find a moment to speak privately with Ha-joon. "I don't understand this conversation and the content doesn't make much sense to me," Ha-joon confesses. "I don't have a race, I'm Korean!"

The United States is the cultural context in which Ha-joon is studying, and that affects his experience. He is particularly vulnerable as an international student on a visa. He needs to learn to read this context and know how to engage in a way that fosters his physical and psychological safety. Additionally, the conversation can potentially help him think about his own culture and history with a reflection on the history of Christianity in Korea, the impact of Japanese occupation in the early 20th century, and the division of North and South Korea as possible areas of consideration.

As a seminary professor teaching people from multiple countries, being an expert on all these histories and circumstances is beyond your grasp, yet offering a context to reflect on personal and collective history is generative for the students' capacity to grow as ministers of the gospel as well as being sufficient for their adaptation to the US context and their wisdom and capacity to be safe in an unpredictable social milieu that threatens their existence.

### *Acceptance Phase*

A person in the acceptance phase of racial-ethnic-cultural identity development either implicitly or explicitly adopts their society's views on race and identity while viewing racial identity as having little personal salience for their lives.<sup>10</sup> This stage is "marked by a conscious belief in the democratic ideal: that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed in a free society and that those who fail must bear the responsibility for their failure."<sup>11</sup> White people and People of Color in this stage tend to believe racism is either not real or not a significant problem. Alternatively, there is a tendency to accept the idea that nothing can or will be done to change the reality and implications of racism on society. Thus, people in the acceptance stage might believe that efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion undermine an already just society or are futile in a helplessly unjust one. People in the acceptance phase are not able to see their behaviors and speech as reflecting and supporting unjust systems and social norms and, thus, will not be moved to engage in just action.

### Implicit Acceptance

People of Color in the implicit acceptance stage of racial-ethnic-cultural identity development unconsciously adopt and internalize stereotypes about our groups.<sup>12</sup> We adapt to or accommodate expectations to behave in ways acceptable to (White) society. People of Color might operate from a colorblind perspective, erasing race or ethnicity as a salient identifier, and having internalized their oppression, either go along with or excuse racist behaviors on the part of White people.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Cross, "The Psychology of Nigrescence," 98.

<sup>11</sup> Derald Wing Sue, Mikal N. Rasheed, Janice Matthews Rasheed. *Multicultural Social Work Practice: A Competency-Based Approach to Diversity and Social Justice*. (John Wiley & Sons, 2015) 189.

<sup>12</sup> For an explanation of the characteristics of internalized racism, see Derald Wing Sue and David Sue. *Counseling the Culturally Diverse: Theory and Practice*. (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2015) 364-366.

<sup>13</sup> Austin Channing Brown, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* (New York: Convergent Books, 2018), 68. For critique of a "color-blind" approach as a means of attempting to promote a nonracist society, see Janet E. Helms, *A Race is a Nice Thing to Have: A Guide to Being a White Person or Understanding the White Persons in Your Life*. (San Diego: Cognella Academic Publishing, 2020), 9-11.

We might focus on our ethnicity or nationality as opposed to a racial identifier as an attempt to deny ways in which we are racialized in the United States.<sup>14</sup> People of Color at this stage of development do not see or believe the existence of systemic injustice and so do not notice ways in which they daily experience the consequences of racism. The history of redlining, for example, is not known or, if encountered, is excused as people wanting to live around others like themselves. The impact of this practice on familial wealth acquisition is unrecognized.<sup>15</sup>

At this stage of development, People of Color accept a White European-centered history.<sup>16</sup> Some of us are embarrassed at the brief references to our ancestors in history texts. Many of these are seen only in the form of bare-chested natives, brief paragraphs about the history of slavery, or through references to “uncivilized” cultural practices such as cannibalism or child sacrifice. There is no sense of a familial or cultural history about which to be proud. As a result, we avoid and resist any reference to race and see media and social figures as causing problems by naming racialized experiences.

At the implicit acceptance stage, many White people do not see ourselves as racialized and do not consciously experience whiteness because of its apparent “transparency” and the way in which it has been “naturalized.”<sup>17</sup> As Derald Wing Sue and colleagues note, “Whiteness is transparent because of its everyday occurrence—its institutionalized, normative features in our culture—and because Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, average, and ideal.”<sup>18</sup> When talking about race, we focus on People of Color

---

<sup>14</sup> Sometimes this denial is a method of averting a sense of worthlessness. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 58-59. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000) 46. Freire calls the uncritical acceptance by the oppressed of their exploitation “fatalistic.”

<sup>15</sup> Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2005) 163.

<sup>16</sup> Cross, “The Psychology of Nigrescence,” 100-101.

<sup>17</sup> Ian Haney Lopez, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, 10th Anniversary Edition (New York University Press, 2006) 109.

<sup>18</sup> Sue, Rasheed, and Matthews Rasheed. *Multicultural Social Work Practice*, 184; Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 102.

because we do not see White as a racial category.<sup>19</sup>

As members of the historically dominant racial-ethnic-cultural group in the United States, White people might not see anything wrong with the current social structure and do not recognize how it has benefited us.<sup>20</sup> We tend to focus on individual hard work and relationships, unable to perceive the existence of systemic advantage or disadvantage. Typically, we unknowingly act in ways that perpetuate racist stereotypes at this stage of development. We unconsciously judge people's dress, behavior, and speech using White cultural criteria as the standard.<sup>21</sup> We often deflect discussions that are about race to make them about anything but race.<sup>22</sup>

### Explicit Acceptance

With explicit acceptance among People of Color, there is more intentionality. Explicit acceptance shows up as internalizing and perpetuating racist stereotypes.<sup>23</sup> We actively seek validation and approval from White people and conform to White social norms,<sup>24</sup> often referred to as "acting White." We believe in the inferiority of our own race and criticize members of our group who fail to adhere

---

<sup>19</sup> Helms, *A Race is a Nice Thing to Have*, 12-14.

<sup>20</sup> Helms, "An update of Helm's White and people of color racial identity models," 188.

<sup>21</sup> Amanda E. Lewis, "What Group?: Studying Whites and Whiteness in the Era of 'Color-blindness'" in *Sociological Theory* (22) (4) (December 2004) 623-626.

<sup>22</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 71.

<sup>23</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1-2. Fanon speaks generally about colonized People of Color, and particularly about African Americans, who internalize the narratives about their inferiority. The practice of code-switching (our term, not his) is one example of living and being for the dominant other. In other words, a "repositioning," even in the use of language to acquiesce to the "civilized" or the dominant culture. Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, "Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans," in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 69, No. 5 (1995): 797-798. Steele and Aronson connects "internalized anxiety" to the stereotype threat that People of Color and women experience after constant preoccupation with the narratives of inferiority. This anxiety and preoccupation often leads to modeling the very stereotypes they hoped to avoid.

<sup>24</sup> Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 163.

to White norms.<sup>25</sup> We might accept a US-based racial hierarchy and discount or criticize people of other racial groups.

At this stage of identity formation, People of Color avoid committees, social groups, and organizations that focus on race. Such groups are viewed as divisive and the source of social unrest. Any attempt to name or address race-based injustice is viewed as making trouble. Instead of seeing unjust social systems, we blame the individuals and fault their behavior as the source of their difficulties.<sup>26</sup>

White folks at the stage of explicit acceptance often operate from the belief that People of Color are inferior because of biological traits or inherent cultural traits. We might use biblical content to justify these negative racial views such as the “curse of Cain.”<sup>27</sup> We operate from stereotypes, including “positive” stereotypes about racial ethnic groups: Asians are all good at math, Black people make great athletes, and so forth.<sup>28</sup>

At this stage, we hold explicit White nationalist and White supremacist beliefs, although we might not like or use those terms. If we are politically conservative, we may be attracted to Christian faith traditions and congregations that emphasize the United States as specially blessed by God. If we are more progressive in our political leanings, we often participate in faith groups that affirm we are “good” White people.<sup>29</sup> Either way, we do not perceive how we perpetuate unjust systems and cultural practices. When confronted with how our behaviors or language affect other people, we may feel offended; we interpret having our behaviors called racist as a

---

<sup>25</sup> For more on anti-black attitudes from Black people, see Cross, “The Psychology of Nigrescence,” 99.

<sup>26</sup> Cross, “The Psychology of Nigrescence,” 102.

<sup>27</sup> Cain Hope Felder, “Race, Racism, and the Biblical Narratives,” in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation 30th Anniversary Expanded Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021) 129-132.

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of the impact of “positive” stereotype assumptions, see Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 251-252.

<sup>29</sup> Tatum refers to the implicit racism of progressive Whites as “aversive racism,” an adaptation developed by the cultural assumptions of values of fairness and justice while simultaneously “breathing the smog” of bias and prejudice. Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 201.

personal attack on our character.<sup>30</sup>

It is possible for people, particularly White people, to stay in the acceptance phase for an entire lifetime. Moving on in racial-ethnic-cultural identity development requires some catalyst to provoke the questioning of one's assumptions. This catalyst could come in the form of an event such as the murder of (yet another) Black person or the brutality of anti-Asian violence, or it might be the encounter with new experiences or powerful new information about the history of our own and other people groups. This event or set of circumstances provokes us to question, to be curious, and open to new learning.<sup>31</sup> We move from the comfort (or comfort with the familiar discomfort) of acceptance into the challenging space of disorientation.

### Application and Implications

During the group discussion, Miko had remained mostly silent. Miko is a woman in her mid-forties of Japanese background from Hawaii. She has a master's in business administration and has worked in an accountancy firm for years; she is now in seminary exploring the possibility of a career change. Miko is an excellent writer and a careful thinker. You can tell she is struggling with the course content. When asked to reflect on their personal experiences, Miko is apt to focus on her professional accomplishments. She mentioned in passing that two great-uncles who owned a nursery business in Southern California were interred in the Manzanar internment camp during World War II while her grandfather, living in Hawaii, joined the Navy and served in the European Theatre. She expressed that this was family history and irrelevant to her lived experience today. "We've moved beyond this time. I'm American, not Japanese. I want to be known by my accomplishments, not marginalized by my racial or cultural identity!" she writes in a class reflection. She also mentions being spat at in a grocery store

---

<sup>30</sup> DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 110-111.

<sup>31</sup> For more on the potential impact of a catalytic event on moving individuals and communities toward acting for justice, see Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation 2.0: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020) 34-45.

during the COVID-19 lockdown, but dismisses the experience as insignificant.

Miko may have found her sense of security and identity in her professional accomplishments, all of which significantly included conforming to cultural and business norms shaped by whiteness. Miko appears to find her security and identity in her accomplishments, avoiding grappling with the traumas experienced by her family. The possible disorientation provoked as she experienced anti-Asian American and Pacific Islander hatred during COVID was rationalized away.

The challenge for the educator leading Miko is to provide context that allows her to reflect, knowing this will trigger disorientation. Without framing and support, this experience could easily be interpreted as an effort to force her to accept a marginalized identity. Offering Miko, and others like her, a vision for a healthy REC identity and a framework for walking through the process of formation can encourage her to perceive identity formation as a spiritual process initiated by God. Miko cannot yet perceive her racial-ethnic-cultural identity as a gift from God to the world. Still, such a vision might help her open to the possibility of disorientation as a generative part of the identity formation process.

### *Disorientation Phase*

In the disorientation phase, new events or information challenge past assumptions and beliefs. The experience can be akin to a tectonic shift in one's worldview. The event (or series of events) can evoke feelings of dismay, confusion, frustration, and anger as we experience cognitive dissonance between what we have previously believed and what we are now experiencing.<sup>32</sup> In disorientation, we often begin to encounter non-innocent history about ourselves and our people.<sup>33</sup>

In the disorientation phase, People of Color conditioned to believe White-normative narratives often struggle to acknowledge

---

<sup>32</sup> Cross, "The Psychology of Nigrescence," 105; Helms, *A Race is a Nice Thing to Have*, 42.

<sup>33</sup> Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010) 34.

and/or articulate experiences of discrimination.<sup>34</sup> We see it, but we lack the language to describe the experience or name what is unfair or unjust in what we are seeing. We might have a sense of mistrust of authority figures and other sources of information that shaped previous perspectives. This struggle can lead to significant tensions within our families and community as we realize significant persons in our lives have accepted and even advocate for White-normative narratives and might have even participated in perpetuating these narratives.<sup>35</sup>

Realizing one's marginalized status is in itself disorienting. For some People of Color, our lifelong efforts to assimilate into White cultural norms are now seen as futile. The sense of responsibility to do something about what is seen can be daunting and overwhelming. We are not familiar with models in our community for positive action and have few internal or interpersonal resources to address what we now see. The task of beginning to confront internalized racism is central to the process of starting to develop a healthy racial-ethnic-cultural identity.<sup>36</sup>

In the disorientation phase, White people are exposed to different people, new ideas, or experiences. This exposure challenges the cultural mythology about our country and our identity that had previously formed the basis of our sense of self. Much of the exploration at this stage is conceptual and intellectual; understanding "White privilege; sociopolitical aspects of race; and issues of bias, prejudice, and discrimination tends to be more of an intellectual exercise."<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Plácida V. Gallegos and Bernardo M. Ferdman, writing specifically about Latinos, see the task of being able to recognize discrimination when it is present as an important developmental challenge. See Plácida V. Gallegos and Bernardo M. Ferdman, "Latina and Latino Ethnoracial Identity Orientations: A Dynamic and Developmental Perspective" in *New Perspectives on Racial Identity Development: Integrating Emerging Frameworks*, 2nd ed., edited by Charmaine Wijeyesinghe and Bailey W. Jackson. (New York: New York University Press, 2011) 64-65.

<sup>35</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *How to be An AntiRacist* (New York: One World, 2019) 7.

<sup>36</sup> Helms, "An update of Helms' White and people of color racial identity models," 189.

<sup>37</sup> Sue, Rasheed, and Matthews Rasheed. *Multicultural Social Work Practice*, 193.

At the same time, in this phase, White people experience “dissonance and conflict, resulting in feelings of guilt, depression, helplessness, or anxiety.”<sup>38</sup> Because, as White people, we have never had to develop the resilience to engage in the complex dynamics inherent in conversations about race, we shut down our emotions and shut down conversations about race.<sup>39</sup> We might seek validation and emotional support from People of Color.<sup>40</sup> This is the season in which we are inclined to claim that one Black friend or Latino friend or Asian friend, and seek their assurance that we are “not racist,” meaning “not a bad person.”

The volatility of this stage is such that many White people retreat from further engagement and, thus, from further development of a healthy White identity. Janet Helms notes, from a psychological perspective, how people utilize the schemata available to them to make sense of present experience. If those models are inadequate, we will retreat into earlier coping strategies until we find a schema that allows us to function or survive in a racialized situation.<sup>41</sup> Many of us fall back into implicit acceptance or double down on explicit acceptance instead of grappling with the challenging nature of seeking equity and inclusion.<sup>42</sup> The impact of disorientation can be that White people move into explicit acceptance, adopting overtly White supremacist views.<sup>43</sup>

People in the disorientation phase might desire to engage in just action but feel overwhelmed, having neither the knowledge nor the resilience to respond to unjust systems and behaviors. Invitations to engage with just action must be carefully scaffolded to provide an “onramp” for both People of Color and White people

---

<sup>38</sup> Sue, Rasheed, and Matthews Rasheed. *Multicultural Social Work Practice*, 192.

<sup>39</sup> DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 116-117.

<sup>40</sup> DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 133-134.

<sup>41</sup> Helms, “An update of Helm’s White and people of color racial identity models,” 187.

<sup>42</sup> Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 178.

<sup>43</sup> Janet Helms identifies this as “reintegration”: the idealization of White people and White culture, and the denigration of People of Color and their cultures. Helms, *A Race is a Nice Thing to Have*, 48.

to join in just actions.<sup>44</sup> In the process of formation, we begin to connect the dots between previously disregarded incidents and new information. We take more seriously the implications of what we see. We might shift back and forth between acceptance and disorientation for a time. At some point, perhaps moved by a sense of commitment to justice, a sense of God's invitation to engage in actions of justice, or because we find a supportive community to join within these actions, we move into resistance.

### Application and Implications

Lisa, a White woman from Kansas, is in her early twenties. She was a communications major in her undergrad and currently works with an after-school tutoring program near the seminary. This course is her first experience in engaging with questions of race and justice in a sustained way. Lisa is curious, open to learning, and overwhelmed by the new information she is receiving. The deconstruction of her assumptions is profoundly unsettling to her.

In the midst of the class discussion, Lisa is silent and appears to be unresponsive. Her body language—crossed arms and legs, slight turn of her body away from the group—suggests she is deeply uncomfortable with the conversation. Lisa's response is representative of many White people who find themselves in a group that is discussing an issue around race. Typically, their understanding of racial injustice is cognitive rather than embodied like many People of Color.<sup>45</sup> They struggle to know how to engage in the conversation or to deal with the strong emotions present. This uncertainty often feels threatening. The fear of saying the wrong thing or appearing insensitive triggers the nervous system and puts Lisa, and others like her, in fight, flight, or freeze response.

As a facilitator of the classroom discussion, it is important

---

<sup>44</sup> Thanks to educator and activist Shelly Tochluk for the image of an “onramp” as a metaphor for the process of guiding people, particularly White people, to be able to constructively “merge” into the activism freeway. See also Shelly Tochluk, *Witnessing Whiteness: The Need to Talk about Race and How to Do It*, 3rd edition (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2022).

<sup>45</sup> Beverly Daniel Tatum. “Talking about Race, Learning about Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom.” *Harvard Educational Review* (62) (1) (1992) 7.

not to read Lisa's response as being uncaring or resistant, or to assume Lisa has nothing to offer. The experience of disorientation makes engagement difficult for Lisa. Allowing her to be silent and supporting her ability to remain present is key to Lisa taking steps toward developing further capacity to engage in conversations, to process experience, and to take small steps toward participating in just action. Normalizing the experience for Lisa can go a long way to helping her accept the experience of disorientation as a natural part of development rather than a sign that something is fundamentally wrong or bad, either with her or the discussion.

### *Resistance Phase*

In the resistance phase of racial-ethnic-cultural identity development, we still feel disoriented but now we're starting to wrestle generatively with the disorientation. We might start to question policies and practices in our family, church, or community. We begin to notice norms and, instead of accepting them as being the way things are or accepting the narratives we have received, we start to break the silence that served as a survival practice and ask questions of our leaders and communities.<sup>46</sup> In the resistance phase, we begin to see that racism is not something that is "out there" or rooted in a stereotyped community in another location, but that racism is present in our own community, family, and in us. There is a beginning of an ideological shift as we grapple with how our actions have been complicit with unjust systems and structures.<sup>47</sup> Here, we begin to engage in behaviors aimed at just action. Similar to the acceptance phase, the resistance phase has an explicit expression and an implicit expression.

### Implicit Resistance

An expression of implicit resistance in People of Color is to express affiliation with particular racial-ethnic-cultural groups and participate in cultural practices of dress, music, food, holidays, and other expressions of culture. We often turn away from dominant culture media outlets to focus on consuming media created for and

---

<sup>46</sup> Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 197.

<sup>47</sup> Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 202.

by People of Color. We feel compelled to learn cultural history and family history, seeking to explore previously hidden or disregarded narratives.<sup>48</sup>

In the implicit resistance phase, we see an emerging passion and conviction to be a part of the process of progress instead of being apathetic or disengaged. Our growing awareness of the systemic nature of racism and its structural manifestations provokes us to see how systems and structures work.<sup>49</sup> We begin to experience a natural preference for learning from those who look like us and who share similar cultural experiences and history as we do.<sup>50</sup> We begin to see and name racism, even within ourselves and our community.

Implicit resistance among White people can be expressed in a growing recognition of the reality of racism and a willingness to grapple with the implications for our families and communities.<sup>51</sup> We can still feel immobilized in the face of the magnitude of the problem but we are unwilling to remain passive. As a result, we begin to engage with media created for and by People of Color. We start reading books that offer a different perspective on the history we were taught in elementary school and high school, which reflected an “education built on a [W]hite worldview.”<sup>52</sup> We begin to process our non-innocent history, no longer avoiding narratives that contradict the heroic ideals we previously embraced. We begin to understand white privilege and to see it in action, including in our own actions and beliefs.<sup>53</sup>

Some White people in implicit resistance want to move slowly toward social change. We see that change is difficult and that people are uncomfortable. We feel the weight of the ideological shift in us and other people like us. We want People of Color to

---

<sup>48</sup> Phil Allen Jr., *Open Wounds: A Story of Racial Tragedy, Trauma, and Redemption* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021).

<sup>49</sup> Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist*, 219-221.

<sup>50</sup> Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 144.

<sup>51</sup> Helms refers to this process as “immersion/emersion.” See Helms, *A Race is a Nice Thing to Have*, 62-65.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, *I'm Still Here*, 43.

<sup>53</sup> Frances E. Kendall, *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012) 199.

be gracious and patient with us, giving us time to process.<sup>54</sup> We are often deeply anxious about getting anti-racism work “right” and struggle with the effort to be right and act perfectly.<sup>55</sup> That very impulse toward perfection hinders us from engaging in just action and learning from our mistakes. We have a hard time hearing feedback, particularly from People of Color, where our intentions and actions are at odds with one another.

### Explicit Resistance

Explicit resistance for both People of Color and White people often involves overt confrontation with race-based injustice. We learn how White privilege and inequality are perpetuated, and begin to take overt action. A hallmark of this phase for many is a critical judgmental stance to begin dismantling whiteness.<sup>56</sup> We might confront White people in our families, in our communities, and in our institutions when we see whiteness in action. We initiate conversations to address behaviors that contribute to oppressive systems. We challenge the structures and systems, the policies and procedures that are borne of White privilege and that support and continue White privilege. For people in this phase, racism is a major issue: addressing racism is a priority and a significant driving force.<sup>57</sup>

An expression of explicit resistance finds People of Color unapologetically embracing our racial-ethnic-cultural identity and community.<sup>58</sup> We actively resist the narratives of White supremacy and perhaps even demonize whiteness or White people because of their historical and persistent practices and our deep mistrust

---

<sup>54</sup> For a historical example, see Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” in Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Essential Martin Luther King, Jr.: “I Have a Dream” and other Great Writings* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013) 76.

<sup>55</sup> Thema Bryant and Arrington, *The Antiracist Handbook: Practical Tools to Shift Your Mindset and Uproot Racism in Your Life and Community* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2022) 141.

<sup>56</sup> Lopez, *White By Law*, 136-137.

<sup>57</sup> Khyati Y. Joshi and Shanelle Henry. “Social/Racial Identity Development Model.” Presented at Institute for Teaching Diversity and Social Justice, Los Angeles, CA, August 7, 2024.

<sup>58</sup> Brown, *I’m Still Here*, 119-125. See also Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2007) 117-126.

of them.<sup>59</sup> We are suspicious of People of Color who not only prioritize relationships with White people who have not shown themselves by their actions to be allies, but who also exhibit traits and attitudes formed by proximity to White culture and power.<sup>60</sup>

In explicit resistance, we actively call out racism, pointing out and objecting to racist policies, practices, statements, and behaviors.<sup>61</sup> This is an expression of resistance that is bold to confront and challenge people in authority. There is a sense of urgency. We feel a sense of “no more waiting,” no more patience. In explicit resistance, we prioritize racial justice and demand the same of other people.<sup>62</sup> While this active approach can be viewed as aggressive and, indeed, can express deep anger, explicit resistance can be fueled by love, as love and a demand for justice are not mutually exclusive.<sup>63</sup>

White people in the phase of explicit resistance often feel the need to take immediate and drastic action. It is at this stage that self-identified “allies” can unwittingly enact whiteness as we attempt to engage in just action. Unprocessed White privilege results in talking over People of Color, for example. We can take up all the psychological space, not noticing that we are contracting our intentions with our actions. We have not yet processed our White identity sufficiently to see that our impulses toward taking charge and our compulsion to “fix” the issues we see are rooted in whiteness. Because of either consciously or unconsciously avoiding the conversation around race and racism, we might be ignorant of

---

<sup>59</sup> Cross, “The Psychology of Nigrescence,” 112.

<sup>60</sup> Daniel G. Solórzano and Lindsey Pérez Huber, *Racial Microaggressions: Using Critical Race Theory to Respond to Everyday Racism* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2020) 80-82.

<sup>61</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 67. Freire writes, “Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.”

<sup>62</sup> Joshi and Henry, “Social/Racial Identity Development Model.”

<sup>63</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” in *Essential Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 24.

the long history of people engaged in just action.<sup>64</sup> A lot of well-intentioned White people get to this phase and end up being deeply disruptive to the very process of justice we seek to promote.<sup>65</sup>

For some White folks in the explicit resistance phase, being White is seen as “bad.” As a result, we often appropriate elements of other cultures, adopting different patterns of dressing, speaking, and behaving.<sup>66</sup> Some White people begin to associate with People of Color, finding community and connection with people of other racial-ethnic-cultural groups. The difference between resistance and the later, more integrated stage of embodiment, is that, in this stage, there is a deep sense of criticism and judgment of the White identity rather than the later stage of a healthy and holistic sense of White identity.

Also in this phase, White people begin to experience social consequences for being explicitly resistant. We might experience ostracism from and by other White people for our active anti-racist actions. If we do not have a community to sustain our efforts, we will likely burn out and give up, moving to implicit resistance or even back through disorientation to (unhappy) acceptance.

Khathi Joshi and Shanelle Henry observe that people—both White people and People of Color—might feel uncomfortable with the conflict inherent in the resistance phase and want to avoid going through this part of development.<sup>67</sup> Resistance to resistance, however, keeps individuals cycling back and forth between disorientation and uncomfortable acceptance. It is not possible to get from acceptance to redefinition and embodiment without passing through disorientation and resistance.

Many people never develop a healthy and generative sense of racial-ethnic-cultural identity because disorientation and resistance

---

<sup>64</sup> Julie M. Hughes, Rebecca S. Bigler, and Sheri R. Levy, “Consequences of Learning About Historical Racism Among European American and African American Children,” in *Child Development*, (78) (6) (Nov/Dec 2007) 1690.

<sup>65</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to be White?: Developing White Racial Literacy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016) 194.

<sup>66</sup> Note this behavior is different from appreciation. Appreciation honors difference; appropriation adopts cultural elements without proper attention to honoring the sources.

<sup>67</sup> Joshi and Henry. “Social/Racial Identity Development Model.”

are too difficult for them to process.<sup>68</sup> Instead, we retreat into an uncomfortable state of implicit acceptance or double down on a full-throated explicit acceptance. Either of these is made “comfortable” by conforming to the views of like-minded people in our racial-ethnic-cultural group.

Resistance is a normal phase of development. The invitation to People of Color and to White people is to continued growth. As we reflect on how we have enacted these types of actions in our efforts to foster justice, we can cultivate personal and cultural humility, leading to a deeper understanding and more effective ways to move toward justice.<sup>69</sup> We can continue to acknowledge how the values and norms of whiteness have shaped us. We continue to develop self-awareness as a part of growing into a healthy racial-ethnic-cultural identity, moving toward redefinition.

### Application and Implications

Richard and Aaliyah collectively demonstrate how implicit and explicit resistance can be expressed (although an argument can be made that both demonstrate explicit resistance). With both there is the sense of urgency and evidence of passion. Richard—a white man seeking ordination in a mainline, predominantly White denomination—sees himself as an ally and tries to rally the class to take action immediately despite not having a clear plan of action. Aaliyah—a Black woman in her late twenties from Chicago, a student representative on the school council, and an active member of the Black Student Union—expresses agitation and frustration at Richard’s usurpation of initiative and failure to engage with an event she has already been a part of organizing. For those in the resistance phase, like Richard and Aaliyah, the immediacy of addressing the problem of some form of injustice is what will resonate most.

---

<sup>68</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *Atlantic*, June 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631>. Coates writes about white supremacist ideology in the United States, “[W]hite supremacy is not merely the work of hotheaded demagogues, or a matter of false consciousness, but a force so fundamental to America that it is *difficult to imagine the country without it* [emphasis added].

<sup>69</sup> David A. Hurley, Sarah R. Kostelecky, and Lori Townsend, *Cultural Humility* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2022) 5-6.

In this particular scenario, Richard and Aaliyah show the most explicit resistance traits. They are vocal, passionate, and ready to move into action to confront the issue at hand. Sometimes passion and urgency cloud the clarity of action. It can be difficult to agree on what should be done, what degree of forcefulness should be applied, and even which causes are of utmost importance. On the other hand, in this phase, any perceived injustice will receive the opposition or corrective action it deserves.

A challenge for the educator in this situation is personal as well as collective. It is common for the emotion of a person in active resistance to be disturbing to people, particularly those who are in acceptance or disorientation. As educators, attending to our own development includes knowing our own triggers. A sign that we ourselves need more processing of our REC identity is if we experience the impulse to criticize, shut down, or condemn people who are expressing explicit resistance.

### *Redefinition*

During the redefinition stage, there is significant personal exploration and self-discovery. While the emphasis in the disorientation phase was on becoming aware, in the redefinition stage, there is a move toward integrating new information and experience into a coherent sense of self. At this stage, the impulse toward immediate and drastic action reduces as we consider the need for sustainable collective initiatives and life-giving personal rhythms. These elements of this phase are critical for two reasons: 1) activists might burn out as they have not taken seriously their mental and physical well-being, and 2) intense activism can become an unhealthy way of avoiding their own personal problems and pain.<sup>70</sup> Redefinition then functions to not only redefine self, but also to explore what a holistic approach to activism should look and feel like.

---

<sup>70</sup> Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 243.

Crucial to the work of redefinition is the ability to be comfortable with being uncomfortable.<sup>71</sup> While in the resistance phase, we find ourselves constantly seeking to do the work “right,” in the redefinition phase, we recognize this is an unattainable goal. Our resilience in the face of discomfort grows as we are increasingly able to hold space for discomfort—our own and that of others.<sup>72</sup> Along with this, we deepen our capacity for personal and cultural humility. We stop trying to perfectly avoid causing offense, recognizing, instead, the need to cultivate the capacity to note harm and to seek repair.<sup>73</sup>

In terms of racial-ethnic-cultural identity development, individuals in the redefinition phase of development begin to find ways of embracing their identity independent from racial stereotypes. People of Color and White people will continue to ask questions, seeking insights and sense-making within our community rather than accepting narratives that the dominant culture has imposed.<sup>74</sup>

For People of Color at the phase of redefinition, dialogue with other People of Color—both within one’s own group and between groups—becomes a source of wisdom, insight, and healing.<sup>75</sup> A person in this phase has an increased capacity (and, potentially, desire) to support other People of Color in their own journey of racial-ethnic-cultural identity. We have a capacity to be patient with People of Color who are expressing the attitudes and behaviors of earlier stages without feeling an internal pressure either to correct or to join in. In this process, agreement or affirmation from White people is of little interest. We turn to our own story and the narratives of our community for validation, recognizing that whiteness will

---

<sup>71</sup> Joshi and Henry. “Social/Racial Identity Development Model.”

<sup>72</sup> Sue and colleagues note that, for Janet Helms, “a successful resolution of this stage requires an emotional catharsis or release that forces the person to relive or reexperience previous emotions that were denied or distorted.” Sue, Rash-  
eed, and Matthews Rasheed. *Multicultural Social Work Practice*, 194.

<sup>73</sup> Hurley, Kostelecky, and Townsend, *Cultural Humility*, 12.

<sup>74</sup> For a more detailed explication of this process for Black people, see Cross, “The Psychology of Nigrescence,” 106-112.

<sup>75</sup> Bryant and Arrington, *The Antiracism Handbook*, 202.

never validate the experience of non-White people. Our sense of validation comes from within and from our community.<sup>76</sup>

The role of community for People of Color at this redefinition stage is vital. It is important to realize that there are people who have experienced what we've experienced and have matured and grown. We begin to internalize a new, mature self, and we're doing it together. During times when we're feeling weak or unsure, we have community to lean upon instead of sliding back into an earlier phase of formation. The process of naming experience, discovering language for what we have experienced, is a crucial part of the process for People of Color and one that takes place in community.<sup>77</sup> In the community, we find help to redefine our experience and name it with clarity. It is important to our formation to name our experiences.

In the redefinition phase, White people continue to engage with knowledge acquisition but the emphasis now is on making personal sense of this content, integrating it into our sense of self, and our sense of our group.<sup>78</sup> We are in the process of reconstructing our White identity, revisiting and reshaping the traditional definition of White people to incorporate a more nuanced understanding of culture and privilege.<sup>79</sup> Knowing our non-innocent history is no longer so deeply distressing. In redefinition, we do the work of embracing our non-innocent history and integrating this new understanding into our view of ourselves and our groups.

White people at this stage see we have a self-interest in anti-racism, recognizing that combating racism isn't just a moral

---

<sup>76</sup> Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 145.

<sup>77</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 30th anniversary ed., 15. Language is important because it "make[s] social inequality visible." Donald Macedo, who wrote the Introduction to this edition, reflects on how Freire's work in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* gave him language "to critically understand the tensions, contradictions, fears, doubts, hopes, and "deferred" dreams that are part and parcel of living a...colonized cultural experience" (8).

<sup>78</sup> See Helms, *A Race is a Good Thing to Have*, 62-65.

<sup>79</sup> Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 182-184. See also Jamie Utt and Shelly Tochluk. "White Teacher, Know Thyself: Improving Anti-Racist Praxis through Racial Identity Development." *Urban Education* (55)(1) (2020) 134-136.

obligation but also the best interest of a just society. Our efforts are no longer about “helping” People of Color, but about the collective liberation of all.<sup>80</sup> As Frances Kendall notes,

We all exist in institutionalized systems of the supremacy of whiteness. These systems were built and are maintained to benefit those of us who are white. Thus it is essential that we know ourselves and how being white affects our lives; know our histories and how they affect our present-day behavior; identify ways in which we collude with the systems of the supremacy of whiteness; and change our behavior, remembering that we do it for ourselves, not to look good to others.<sup>81</sup>

For those of us who identify as followers of Jesus, we understand that White Christian responsibility to combat racism and advance equality and justice is gospel-rooted work.<sup>82</sup> As our self-definition shifts, we grow able to address bias and privilege making connections between personal biases and the larger systems of racism and discrimination. We grow to recognize how we are recipients of benefit, how we can behave in ways that perpetuate these systems, and how we can behave in ways that disrupt systems of racism and discrimination.<sup>83</sup>

Along with our siblings of Color, White people too need community. Support from others is very important for sustaining our ongoing process of redefining our understanding of whiteness and the development of a healthy White identity. White affinity groups support the process of our White identity development; we

---

<sup>80</sup> Lilla Watson’s famous quote reflects this shift: “If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” “Attributing Words” November 3, 2008. Accessed June 12, 2025. <https://unnecessaryevils.blogspot.com/2008/11/attributing-words.html>

<sup>81</sup> Kendall, *Understanding White Privilege*, 114.

<sup>82</sup> Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel. *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

<sup>83</sup> Bryant and Arrington, *The Antiracism Handbook*, 41. See also Sonya Horsford on *racial realism* in “When Race Enters the Room: Improving Leadership and Learning Through Racial Literacy,” in *Theory Into Practice*, (53) (2) (2014) 123-130.

no longer look to our siblings of Color to support our formation but see our relationships as interdependence and mutuality.<sup>84</sup> Webs of relationship and intercommunity connection are vital at this stage as White people in redefinition have turned away from acceptance of normative White views, and therefore are likely to experience a great deal of relational and social rejection.<sup>85</sup>

The work of racial-ethnic-cultural identity development is not a linear process; development is more of a spiral as we loop back again to earlier stages as different events take place in our lives and in our communities. As we grow, we come to be more comfortable and confident, not being discouraged by the lifelong nature of the developmental process as we move toward embodiment.

### Application and Implications

Rosio is a second-generation US-American Latina from an El Salvadorian family. She works at United for the Dream, a non-profit working with immigrants. Rosio responds with some asperity to Richard and Aalyiah, noting their activism does not include attention to other pressing concerns or her efforts toward just action. This kind of intra-group tension is not uncommon when dealing with race-based justice activities: there are a broad set of situations and concerns, and people have limited emotional resources to respond. A typical challenge is to pit one group of Color against another,<sup>86</sup> seeing justice as a zero-sum game. Rosio expresses some of this in her response in the classroom, possibly reflecting some element of resistance. At the same time, she also has a track record that suggests aspects of redefinition are a part of her experience. She can speak with clarity about her family's experience, expressing pride in her heritage as well as embracing her sense of hybrid identity as El Salvadorian and US-American. She is actively engaged in work that is motivated both by her faith and her sense of responsibility to her community. You see Rosio fluctuate between frustrated response (such as in the conversation in class), personal action unfazed by what other people do (such

<sup>84</sup> Utt and Tochluk. "White Teacher, Know Thyself," 142-143.

<sup>85</sup> Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 293.

<sup>86</sup> Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 254.

as her participating in organizing the Art Protest), and a sober awareness of her decreased personal safety in a contentious social environment making self-care and self-awareness particularly important for her capacity to sustain engagement in the work. Your role as an educator with someone like Rosio in the classroom might be more about collaboration and co-learning than about mentoring or guiding.

### *Embodiment*

The final stage in this identity development model is embodiment. Though it is not the end of a person's development and maturity, the work as described holistically in the previous phases has become visible, almost instinctive, in the sense that in our regulated bodies—attitudes, thinking, reactions, and responses—we can observe these concepts in action.<sup>87</sup> A person is able to navigate each phase beyond precontact with dexterity, free of anxiety because we have lived through and have bodily experience now integrated with conceptual understanding. Our bodies and minds hold the memories of each phase and how we worked through each one. In this phase, both People of Color and White people are able to challenge internalized oppression or superiority while acknowledging the impact of systemic racism. We have a realistic sense of self, despite overlapping and sometimes conflicting identities,<sup>88</sup> having become aware of, integrating, and embracing our non-innocent history as part of our personal and collective story. We work actively to dismantle racism and other forms of oppression, advocating for equality and inclusion. We do this work resisting a scarcity mentality that would prioritize one form of oppression over another and set different marginalized groups against each other.

Tatum offers an example of embodiment, writing, “When a group of Black teens are sitting together in the cafeteria, collectively

---

<sup>87</sup> Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 237. Menakem claims “social activism that is body centered” is needed. He continues, “Bringing a settled body to any situation encourages the bodies around you to settle as well.”

<sup>88</sup> Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2017) 11.

embodying an oppositional stance...We need to understand in racially mixed settings racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism.”<sup>89</sup> Notice she does not suggest this is necessarily a conscious decision by the students, but may be an instinctive response as part of a developmental process as they create safety in their context. Any of the students very well might have experienced disorientation at some point indicating, because of racism or White supremacy, it is not as safe a space as they thought it would be. Others might have simply gravitated toward one another having discerned the lack of safety early on or the attraction of community in shared culture. Either way, Tatum describes it as “embodying an oppositional stance.” The concepts of resistance, maturity, and community are no longer abstract and forced, but concrete and instinctive.

In this phase, we cultivate a non-defensive attitude about having privileged identities. We grow in a capacity to acknowledge ways in which we experience privilege (e.g., able-bodied, neuro-normative, male) while not shying away from naming marginalized identities (e.g., female, indigenous, LGBTQ+). We embody a sense of security, neither ashamed of our privileged identities nor our marginalized identities.<sup>90</sup>

In the embodiment phase, we are to uplift and support others, both People of Color and White people, in their growth and development.<sup>91</sup> We engage in healthy, productive dialogue and education to help individuals to understand and dismantle their prejudices and biases. We are able to discern when a conversation is worthwhile and when we will walk away.

The goal in this phase moves away from simply reacting to specific instances of injustice and toward fostering a more just and equitable society.<sup>92</sup> Events are now seen as a part of the process

---

<sup>89</sup> Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 61.

<sup>90</sup> Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 97-99.

<sup>91</sup> Joshi and Henry. “Social/Racial Identity Development Model.”

<sup>92</sup> For a survey of literature around non-profit work focusing on creating a just society, see Judith Y. Weisinger, Ramon Borges-Méndez, and Carl Milofsky. “Diversity in the Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector.” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 45(1\_suppl) (2015) 3S-27S.

but not an end in themselves. There is an easing of anger and an emerging generativity. We mature, acquire wisdom, and learn how to self-regulate through the process of redefinition.

We recognize that learning about racism is a lifelong process. We accept that we stand in a long line of people who have stood for justice and that there will be more generations to follow us. We are less focused on complete change than we are on generative, healthy, life-sustaining rhythms in our personal and collective lives.<sup>93</sup>

We trust the words of Dr. King are true: The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

People who are engaged with actions intended to foster justice might resonate deeply with the description of this stage and yet not be firmly grounded in embodiment. It is legitimate and meaningful to recognize the resonance with this stage and acknowledge the gaps between intention and action. Resonance can be seen as an invitation by God to develop toward the capacity to fully embody a healthy racial-ethnic-cultural identity that fully acknowledges our own distinctives and honors and respects the distinctiveness of others, able to work effectively with diverse people toward common goals of just action in the world.

### Application and Implications

In the case study presented, perhaps no one, including you as the educator, is in the embodiment phase of formation. How all of the individuals respond and how you, as an educator, engage with these responses will be impacted and complicated by where each of you is in the process of developing a healthy, generative racial-ethnic-cultural identity. The moment of conflict about a class announcement might not be the moment for a conversation about the vision for such development, but it is the context in which

---

<sup>93</sup> For one reflection on the need for self-care while engaged in just action on the part of educators, see Asia Eaton and Leah Warner, "Social justice burn-out: Engaging in self-care while doing diversity work" in *Navigating Difficult Moments in Teaching Diversity and Social Justice*, edited by Mary E. Kite, Kim A. Case and Wendy R. Williams, (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2021) 31-43.

this development is taking place and affecting the class' collective capacity to engage in just action.

## **Conclusion**

The work of a just leader begins with the often arduous and frightening, yet liberating, inner work of self-reflection and development. Racial-ethnic-cultural identity development concept as presented in this essay offers the opportunity for leadership educators to locate ourselves in our own formation and become aware of the factors that contribute to our identity and how we relate to others. This awareness is not focused exclusively on the leader's development, but provides a framework for the community (in the instance of the case study, students) to locate themselves in their identity development as well. In other words, there is an individual and a collective benefit for participating in racial-ethnic-cultural identity development.

The case study illustrates the range of responses from students that indicate the varied stages of the racial-ethnic-cultural development that can exist in one group. It is the leader's own

personal development according to this model that better prepares them for effective leadership in this real-life scenario. Diversity is an asset to be embraced and benefited from, opposed to a threat or liability to overcome after one has availed themselves of this development.

Racial-ethnic-cultural identity development is a lifelong undertaking. It is less a linear process and more of a circular path where one might revisit previous phases depending upon new information or experiences that cause us to seem to move backward. However, revisiting previous phases is not a setback, but rather an opportunity for further learning and development based on new information and experiences. Because of the potential for continued growth, new information and experiences become catalysts for growth. Embracing one's identity, including the non-innocent history associated with that identity, is a part of the process of becoming just leaders.

We began with the assumption that our efforts toward fostering just action can be complicated and even hindered by our racial-ethnic-cultural identity development. As an educator in the classroom—the focus of the case presented—our own formation impacts our ability to lead the classroom process in a generative manner. For example, an academic still deeply rooted in cultural or disciplinary tradition, tacitly accepting the inherent norms of that tradition, will likely find teaching a class on leadership and diversity to be unappealing and stressful. We are unable to lead students to attend to the speck in their developmental eye when we have not begun to address the log in our own. Institutions of higher education are full of academics who want to view themselves as “rational” and “objective” and who can utilize the resources of their cultural capital and disciplinary competencies to avoid conversations about race and act—whether deliberately or not—in ways that hinder just action.

Disorientation, too, deeply obstructs even the most genuine desire for being a just leader. The academy has such a focus on expertise that the experience of confusion and uncertainty is doubly

problematic leading an individual to feeling both personally and professionally vulnerable. An educator in the resistance phase might be much less troubled by engaging students in learning yet can also be disruptive because of the inherent expectation that other people will value what the professor values. This is complicated in the classroom by the disparity of power between professor and student, leading to charges of faculty attempting to “brainwash” students or pressure them to accept a different worldview.

As we noted earlier in the essay, we cannot wait until we have formed a healthy and holistic racial-ethnic-cultural identity before taking action. Indeed, it is in the midst of action that our identity is challenged and offered opportunity for continued formation. If, as educators, we profess to value being just leaders and want our work to contribute to forming just leaders, then we need to have a concurrent commitment toward ongoing personal development in our REC identities just as much as we see the need for lifelong

development in other areas. Embedded in the presentation above are a number of different actions and activities, some distinctive to particular phases of development. These include expanding our historical knowledge of our group and other groups, reading or listening to the voices of People of Color (e.g., prioritizing scholars of color when attending conference presentations), and finding a collaborative community in which to pursue this formation. Seeing that formation takes place in and through our work makes the process of racial-ethnic-cultural identity development less of a separate task and more of an important thread to which we attend in our lives as a whole.

As authors, we offer this benediction and blessing: May God give you the grace to acknowledge and accept who you are and where you are in this moment in time in the process of racial-ethnic-cultural identity development. And may God give you the grace to receive comfort and hope and encouragement that the Spirit is at work in you and in your community. As we are on this journey of racial-ethnic-cultural formation, we are on a formational journey in so many ways. As people of faith, we look forward to the time when all things will be renewed, when all peoples, ethnicities, cultures, and languages will stand before God, fully reflecting God's nature and character in all of who we are. Even as we face difficult truths about where we are in the present moment, may we be encouraged that the one who began a good work in us, and in our communities, will carry on that work to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

---

## UN-SUTURING REFLEXIVE WHITENESS: RECOGNIZING AND RESISTING WHITE+CHRISTIAN DOMINANCE IN RACIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

REBECCA M. DAVID HENSLEY

### Abstract

*Based on research examining the lived experiences of sixteen racially diverse community organizers working on incarceration and immigration reform/abolition in the state of Texas, this article employs qualitative ethnography, Critical Whiteness Studies, and liberative theologies as frameworks for building a theo-ethical, praxis-centered approach for White Christian leaders to engage more ethically in racial justice work from a critical whiteness perspective. Participant interviews<sup>1</sup> sought to understand better how White Christians engage in and are impacted by organizing in multirace and multifaith movements for racial justice, asking whether such movements have the potential to un-suture White Christians from the White moral imaginary.*

### Introduction

In contrast with overtly racist iterations of White Christian Nationalism, many White Christians believe their faith compels them to engage in racial justice work actively: to lead change in creating a more just, equitable, and liberative society for all. The

---

<sup>1</sup> To protect the privacy of study participants, pseudonyms were used throughout the interview recording, transcribing, and data analysis for this project. Any direct quotes from study participants cited in this article are referenced with pseudonyms.

*Rebecca M. David Hensley, Ph.D., has served as an adjunct faculty member at Iliff School of Theology and is an ordained deacon in The United Methodist Church.*

problem is, when attempting to lead in such efforts, they (we)<sup>2</sup> inescapably show up White and Christian, with all the privileges and culturally dominant aspects and interactions these identities entail: from blatant acts of “caucacity,”<sup>3</sup> to more systemic refusals to follow the leadership of directly impacted persons. Justice-seeking White Christians frequently engage in these kinds of acts without conscious thought or realization, like a reflex that hails to whiteness.

Critical whiteness scholar George Yancy argues that the condition of whiteness is a social construct that can be deconstructed, and from which Whites (through great and sustained effort) can enter a process of “un-suturing.”<sup>4</sup>

Yancy introduces this concept of “sutured” and “un-sutured” into Critical Whiteness Studies “as a way of rethinking and reimagining whiteness and what is socio-ontologically at stake at the level of white embodied existence and possible white transgression.”<sup>5</sup> Simply stated: to preserve whiteness is to remain sutured to it, and to transgress whiteness is to become un-sutured from it.

Like Yancy’s appeal to all White people to commit to this process of un-suturing from whiteness, womanist scholar Kelly Brown Douglas has stated that the work for White Christian leaders is to “help White Christians become free of a White moral

---

<sup>2</sup> As one who identifies as both White and Christian, I use the inclusive term “we” throughout this article as a way of engaging critical whiteness theory within the text itself. To use impersonal identifiers would imply a sense of separation between the author and the subject, thus invoking a function of whiteness that separates oneself from the necessity for critical self-reflection.

<sup>3</sup> First used in a *Vice* music review in 2012 and later popularized in social media by actor-comedian The Kid Mero (Joel Armogasto Martinez), *caucacity* is a blend of the words “Caucasian” and “audacity” used to mock arrogant behavior that White people stereotypically enact upon BIPOC individuals and communities.

<sup>4</sup> George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America, Second Edition*, Second Edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017). Other CWS scholars, such as C.W. Mills, David Roediger, E. Bonilla-Silva, and Thandeka, also argue that whiteness is a socially constructed condition that is possible to deconstruct through an understanding of how it operates on personal and social levels, combined with a sustained commitment to dismantling it.

<sup>5</sup> Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, xxi.

imaginary.”<sup>6</sup> Based in findings from study participants, I contend that many justice-seeking White Christians are so sutured to whiteness that we overlook the ways we continue to hail to, and then perform, dominant identities within our daily lives. Critical to the conversation on religious leadership, White Christians often do this while engaging in the very work of decentering whiteness and striving toward racial justice. For justice-seeking White Christians, the primary task is first to recognize and understand the specific ways we are enacting White+Christian dominance before we can begin to un-suture ourselves (and our faith communities) from it.

### **What Is Reflexive Whiteness?**

The findings in this article are based on interviews with sixteen community organizers of various racial identities who work on issues of incarceration and immigration reform and/or abolition in the state of Texas. Exploring how White Christians engage in and are impacted by organizing in multirace and multifaith movements for racial justice, participants were asked to share stories and examples of what it’s like to work on racial justice issues with White people, and with White Christians in particular. From their experiences, I noticed a pattern emerging around the ways well-intentioned, justice-seeking Whites often perform acts of White+Christian privilege and dominance within the movements and among the people with whom we are striving to build racial solidarity. This pattern is what I refer to as *reflexive whiteness*.

Womanist scholar and psychologist Chanequa Walker-Barnes has described whiteness as a moral injury stemming from the generational distortion of the “entire cognitive structure of

---

<sup>6</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, “Re-Imagining,” lecture in *Reparations: Remembering, Repairing, and Re-Imagining* Zoom webinar educational series hosted by the General Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church, June 24, 2021.

White Americans.”<sup>7</sup> My research shows that one peculiar way this distortion plays out is through an unwillingness on the part of Whites to perceive or acknowledge the privileges and power whiteness affords on personal, generational, and structural levels, while concurrently enacting personal privilege/power in quotidian interactions. Critical whiteness scholar Charles Mills describes this type of unwillingness as “white ignorance,” or “white epistemic authority,” which he defines as

...an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made. Part of what it means to be constructed as ‘white’...part of what it requires to achieve Whiteness, successfully to become a white person...is a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities.<sup>8</sup>

White ignorance, then, plays a significant role in the concept of reflexive whiteness as reflexive whiteness involves an element of this localized and globalized cognitive dysfunction/distortion operating among people who cognitively desire to be/come allies in the struggle for racial justice. Because the lack of self-transparency required to achieve whiteness is inherently present within every individual and community (including churches) that identify as White, justice-seeking White Christians, like all our White siblings,

---

<sup>7</sup> Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision for Racial Reconciliation / Chanequa Walker-Barnes.*, Prophetic Christianity (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019) 127, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/du/detail.action?docID=5910240>. Prophetic Christianity (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019)

<sup>8</sup> Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract/Charles W. Mills.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 18. In his 2007 essay, “White Ignorance,” (*Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, eds. Albany: SUNY Press), Mills provides a deeper analysis of the components of what he terms “white ignorance.”

are caught in this web of “psychologically and socially functional” realities that are at once distortions of reality intertwined with our earnest desire to live out a call to engage in the just and reconciling work of Christ.

By and large, justice-seeking White Christians are at least somewhat educated on the concept of White privilege. Many engage in church book studies on subjects related to race and anti-racism. Recall the masses of White people who rushed to read and discuss Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* in the wake of the 2020 police murder of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter racial justice uprising, propelling the then two-year-old publication to the top of several best-seller lists.<sup>9</sup> While I believe these kinds of studies significantly affect White Christians’ understanding of whiteness and structural racial injustice, the paradox arises when these same, seemingly educated, White Christians continually perform acts of racial dominance while remaining committed to and engaged in the work of racial justice.

This cyclical-paradoxical movement between one’s desire to work toward racial equity, solidarity, and justice, and the performance of White privilege/power in quotidian interactions is what I define as reflexive whiteness. Here, *reflexive* refers to an action being performed without thought or conscious control—or from a critical theory perspective, without the process and perspective that Paulo Freire referred to as *conscientização* (conscientization). In his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire describes this concept as “the revolutionary leaders[’]...own conviction of the necessity for struggle (an indispensable dimension of revolutionary wisdom)...[which] is reached...by means of totality of reflection and action. Only the leaders’ own involvement in reality, within an

---

<sup>9</sup> Barbara VanDenburgh, “Anti-Racist Book Dethrones ‘Hunger Games’ Prequel on Best-Seller List amid Mass Protests,” USA TODAY, accessed May 21, 2025, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/books/2020/06/10/anti-racist-books-dominate-best-seller-list-white-fragility-how-to-be-an-antiracist-ta-nehisi-coates/5331188002/>.

historical situation, led them to criticize this situation and to wish to change it.”<sup>10</sup>

Because Freire is describing the internal and communal work of oppressed peoples when he invokes this term, it is important to distinguish my use of it about White people. When discussing racial injustice, Whites undeniably take on the role of oppressor and therefore would not qualify for the exact usage Freire describes. However, I use conscientization here in concert with Walker-Barnes’s theory of whiteness as moral injury (the distortion of the “entire cognitive structure of White Americans”<sup>11</sup>) and about Yancy’s assertion of the potentiality for Whites to un-suture from whiteness through a sustained process of deep interrogation and resistance to the personal and social benefits of the condition of whiteness. Without such process and perspective, Whites remain in a state of nonconscious<sup>12</sup> “white ignorance...producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, without a lifelong commitment to the process of conscientization, we remain sutured to whiteness, regardless of even the most earnest desires to be/come strong allies or our involvement in racial justice work.

As a theory, reflexive whiteness can be compared with Robin DiAngelo’s work on *White Fragility*. However, a key distinction is that DiAngelo defines White fragility as a defensive response to a specific racial trigger,<sup>14</sup> whereas reflexive whiteness refers to the fluidity of whiteness so basic and primal to White Americans’

---

<sup>10</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New rev. 20th-Anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 1997) 49.

<sup>11</sup> Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People*, 127.

<sup>12</sup> I use the term nonconscious to signal that for Whites, society is structured such that we have a choice in whether we raise our consciousness of how whiteness operates within and through us. In contrast to “unconscious” thoughts that might be inaccessible, or “subconscious” thoughts that might be brought to awareness, nonconscious signals the choice to remain in a state of White ignorance.

<sup>13</sup> Mills, *The Racial Contract/Charles W. Mills.*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54, 3, <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/view/249>.

distorted cognitive structure that we don't even recognize the movement itself as whiteness operating on autopilot within us and emanating through us. Celeste, a Latine female organizer who focuses on workers' rights for undocumented immigrants, shared the following story, illustrating the distinction between White fragility and reflexive whiteness:

There is this one dude...who's White and has no idea how much privilege he has. And he just feels like he's always suffering. So he tells people all the time about how the injustices that he has are the same or equal to the injustices that undocumented people suffer. And I don't know how many times I've had to tell this man that there is no way that it's the same.<sup>15</sup>

This man's behavior was not a singular response to a specific racial trigger. Rather, as Celeste asserted in her statement, "I don't know how many times I've had to tell this man," it is a repeated (presumably nonconscious) pattern that denies his own White privilege even as he continues to be engaged in the work of racial justice, while simultaneously asserting racial dominance by centering himself/whiteness.

Like a reflex in the body, reflexive whiteness connotes nonconscious movement—specifically, the movement from renunciation of one's White privilege/power to the enactment of White privilege/power over others, and vice versa. On a physiological level, we might think of reflexive whiteness like a nerve impulse, sending a signal to some part of our body that responds without first passing through the brain (i.e., a knee-jerk or gag reflex). On a psychological level, reflexive whiteness describes thoughts, words, or actions generated and performed without critically conscious thought. *Reflexive* in this sense is not to be confused with the concept of *reflexivity*—a critical examination of one's thoughts, feelings, and motives—which is an essential tenet of critical whiteness theory. As critical whiteness scholar David R. Roediger asserts, "Any easy white assumption that excellent intentions, fashion, rhymes,

---

<sup>15</sup> Celeste, video interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, March 23, 2022.

and even politics obviate the need for self-reflection will produce troubling results.”<sup>16</sup> Citing Robyn Wiegman’s work, he adds, “the embodied, visible nature of whiteness...make[s] whiteness persist even after its personal renunciation.”<sup>17</sup>

One of the goals of interrogating whiteness on a personal level should be to break this cycle of reflexive whiteness by engaging critical reflexivity as an ongoing practice and acknowledging personal, structural, and generational privilege through an understanding of one’s personal, familial, and communal history as it relates to social and legal structures. Critical reflexivity is therefore a crucial component of the un-suturing process.

Yancy argues that this process of un-suturing the “ingrained history of white supremacy” cannot be achieved “solely through a single act of intention...[but] will require constant *striving*; it will require practice, a reiterative opening and wounding, habits of uncovering the stench of white mendacity.”<sup>18</sup> White Christians who truly desire to be/come allies in the struggle for racial justice must learn to welcome the discomfort of this reiterative opening and wounding, and reckon with the generational stench festering beneath our sutures to White+Christian dominance.

### Resisting Reflexive Whiteness

With the problem of reflexive whiteness now identified, the remainder of this essay will focus on Yancy’s concept of un-suturing. How can those of us who identify as White and Christian lead ourselves and our White congregations out of the continual loop of reflexive whiteness and into more ethical leadership practices for racial justice? This process, or “opening and wounding,” is often painful, as it can invoke feelings of White guilt, shame, and even fear of (and sometimes actual) rejection from one’s White community and known identity. But Yancy identifies a *critical first step: we must tarry with it for a while*. He explained, “the process of tarrying [with

---

<sup>16</sup> David R. Roediger, “Critical Studies of Whiteness, USA: Origins and Arguments,” *Theoria (Pietermaritzburg)* 48, no. 98 (2001): 90, <https://doi.org/10.3167/004058101782485511>.

<sup>17</sup> Roediger, “Critical Studies of Whiteness, USA,” 90.

<sup>18</sup> Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, Second Edition, 257.

our White racial dominance] encourages forms of courageous listening, humility, and the capacity to be touched, to be shaken by those black bodies and bodies of color that have achieved and honed degrees of epistemic complexity regarding white racism...<sup>19</sup> This process of “tarrying” helps White Christians learn to recognize and acknowledge the ways we impose White+Christian dominance on the very people and spaces where we seek to build solidarity.

To fully understand the perspectives of study participants, it is important to be clear on what is meant by the term “organizing” throughout this essay, as organizing is often associated with partisan political campaigns focused on elections. Here, organizing—or, more specifically, grassroots organizing—refers to an Ella Baker-style of empowering leaders to grow and carry the movement forward. In her detailed biography of the iconic civil rights leader, historian Barbara Ransby describes Baker’s organizing model as combining

the black Baptist missionary values of charity, humility, and service with the economic theories of Marxists and socialists of various stripes who advocated for a redistribution of society’s wealth and a transfer of power from capitalist elites to the poor and working classes. Added to the mix was Baker’s popular democratic pedagogy, which emphasized the importance of tapping oppressed communities for knowledge, strength, and leadership in constructing models for social change.<sup>20</sup>

Considering the question of whether these types of organizing spaces have the potential to un-suture whiteness on personal and social levels, data from study participants provided a roadmap for White Christians to engage in more ethical leadership practices when involved in racial justice movements. These are categorized below as solidarity-building practices, leadership praxes for White churches/groups, and desired personal traits for White Christian leaders.

---

<sup>19</sup> George Yancy, “Tarrying Together,” *Educational Philosophy & Theory* 47, no. 1 (2015): 26, 99963769, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2013.861197>.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement a Radical Democratic Vision / Barbara Ransby*, Gender & American Culture (University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 74, <http://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?BLTC;S17061>.

### *Solidarity-Building Practices*

#### Practice 1 & 2: White Caucusing and Checking White Privilege

The organizers who participated in this study provided critical insight not only into the behavioral patterns of reflexive whiteness, but also into ways White Christians can begin the process of un-suturing from White+Christian dominance. One such practice discussed by several organizers was “White caucusing.” This process involves White people gathering before entering multirace spaces to share in deeper and quicker ways, and working to identify the “sin” (as one organizer described it) within ourselves and one another as it relates to our historical and personal sutures to whiteness. White caucusing is one crucial way White Christians can tarry with the dominant nature of whiteness and its impacts on ourselves, our faith communities, and (most importantly) communities of color. It is categorized as a solidarity-building practice because it helps White Christians build the strength needed to engage in another critical solidarity-building practice: checking White privilege. Simply stated, checking White privilege is acknowledging and addressing incidents of reflexive whiteness when they occur within multirace spaces. Paul, a White male organizer, described the importance of this practice as follows:

I’m sure that [I] am doing things that need to be checked or need to be addressed—like simple things showing up, that I don’t even know it’s happening. So it’s really important to make sure that [practice] lives in all the folks who are at the table as much as it can...making sure that other folks, other White folks, are there to check folks. Or folks who are not White feeling the relationship and the comfort in building those relationships to a point where [they] are willing to say, “Hey, that hurt.”<sup>21</sup>

It is important to note that for White Christians to fully engage this solidarity-building practice, we must approach it as checking White+*Christian* privilege to address the presence of these dually

---

<sup>21</sup> Paul, interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, March 21, 2022, Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, Texas.

dominant identities we carry into the space. Together, White caucusing and checking White privilege (for ourselves and others) are two solidarity-building practices organizers named that enable justice-seeking White Christians to consciously monitor the ways we embody and perform whiteness within multirace and multifaith spaces; which is to say, these two practices are effective avenues for White Christians to identify and interrupt reflexive whiteness.

### Practice 3: Deep Listening and Relationship-Building

While many kinds of organizing spaces do not require deep or long-term relational commitments from participants, the practice of deep listening and relationship-building is imperative for justice-seeking White Christians to embark on a faithful and honest journey of un-suturing. Lupita, a Latine female, described this practice as follows: “It’s where we uplift each other. Because it’s not only the work, it’s also caring about each other. Like, how are you feeling about this? Because after you start doing this work together...you care for each other. So the first [thing] is, ‘How are you doing?’ Then, ‘This is what we can do.’”<sup>22</sup>

Octavia, an Indigenous female/nonbinary organizer, discussed the importance of having people who are “emotionally grounded” in the room because when conflict arises, people who are “rooted” can step into leadership and say, “Thank you. Let’s create some space around this before anyone responds.”<sup>23</sup> This is the kind of exchange that can transform a moment of reflexive whiteness into a moment of shared learning and solidarity-building. Over time, continual engagement in these kinds of exchanges can lead entire groups of White Christians toward sustained awareness of their reflexes toward White+Christian dominance. Liz, a White female, described how she had witnessed her White congregation move into deeper relationships and understanding of the issues that disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities through their work in multirace and multifaith organizing:

---

<sup>22</sup> Lupita, video interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, July 19, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Octavia, video interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, July 1, 2022.

I have seen our group listen deeper and their compassion shows, which I think is very important. I don't think you can do the work without compassion. So I have seen them evolve and change for the better, with greater understanding. Again, we will never know what it's like to be a different [race]. I only know White. But I can have a greater understanding and love. And I think when you approach people from a love basis, then that's the beginning of a good relationship.<sup>24</sup>

As these examples show, relationships are key to the kind of organizing work that leads to solidarity and transformational change, as well as the potentiality of un-suturing from White+Christian dominance.

#### Practice 4: Following the Leadership of Directly Impacted Persons

By far, the most exhausting iteration of reflexive whiteness for study participants was justice-seeking White Christians exerting their dominance by simply ignoring or refusing to follow the leadership of BIPOC organizers. Ella, a Black female organizer, shared that White Christians often push back or resist her expertise. When she shares information about an issue, she's often questioned: "Where did you get it [that piece of information]?"<sup>25</sup> White Christians exerted these behaviors in both overt and subtle ways; therefore, learning to recognize and resist this behavior is critical to un-suturing reflexive whiteness and the multifaceted harm it causes.

Peter, a Latine male, shared a story of how White Christians can center directly affected persons on a concrete, organizational level. He described how his organization uses synchronous Spanish interpretation devices, allowing Spanish speakers to share their experiences in their native language without having to pause for interpretation, which centered the non-Spanish speakers in the room. Peter shares:

---

<sup>24</sup> Liz, interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, March 16, 2022, Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, Texas.

<sup>25</sup> Ella, interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, March 15, 2022, Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, Texas.

I remember seeing, whenever a member of the community would say something in Spanish and then the people would have to pay close attention to what they were saying in English... And I remember saying to myself, this is the first time I've seen where English speakers have to hold their [interpretation device] close and like, *listen*. I've never been in a space where it was reversed. And I remember thinking to myself, I like this. I like that we're intentional. Because I think for them [the Spanish speakers] too—when was the last time a White Christian, or a White person, had to hold something to their ear to understand what's being said? That just doesn't happen... It was beautiful. And as a Spanish speaker, I feel like they felt empowered. And that they felt like this space is actually listening to me speak, and they're all intentionally looking at me and holding their earpieces... I can't think of an organization before or after that does that... It was a beautiful thing.<sup>26</sup>

Justice-seeking White Christians must learn to raise our consciousness regarding the many ways White+Christian dominance emerges in multirace and multifaith organizing spaces. What are the unspoken ethnic, cultural, and religious differences that are so often overlooked, thereby reiterating White+Christian normativity? How can we make simple, or even more complex, adjustments that communicate our willingness to hear the voices and follow the leadership of directly impacted people?

### *Leadership Praxes for White Churches/Christian Groups*

#### Praxis 1: Setting Agendas and Expectations

Three organizers discussed the importance of setting agendas and expectations in multirace and multifaith gatherings, specifically as it relates to managing group power dynamics within the room. Peter discussed the importance of community guidelines, “set[ting]

---

<sup>26</sup> Peter, interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, May 16, 2022, Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, Texas.

the stage for growth and for the work that we can do together,”<sup>27</sup> while William, a Black male, stated these are not spaces to build personal agendas: “This agenda is for the people.” William noted that his organization encourages people to identify and utilize their personal power in ways that benefit the movement. However, he emphasized that if someone attempts to use their capital for personal gain, “then we will immediately correct it.”<sup>28</sup> When White churches, small groups, or individuals get involved in multirace and multifaith organizing spaces, setting agendas and expectations is an essential praxis for creating an environment of “power with,” as opposed to allowing the historic forces of White+Christian dominance to exercise “power over.”<sup>29</sup>

## Praxis 2: Financial Support of Multirace and Non-White Organizations

Ella acknowledged the history of White congregations giving money to Black congregations “with expectations, really heavy strings [attached].” But she shared that her congregation has been involved in justice work “...and wealthy congregations, after looking and seeing this work for years...have come to us and just given...Usually that’s the first step...a conversation, a ‘getting to know you.’ But then there’s...financial support...then collaboration on specific events and, ‘How can we help?’”<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Peter, interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, May 16, 2022, Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, Texas.

<sup>28</sup> William, interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, March 17, 2022, Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, Texas.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Parker Follett, *Creative Experience* (Longmans, Green and Company, 1924) 189–90. Originally credited to social worker turned organizational management theorist Mary Parker Follett, who believed that “genuine power is power-with,” and that “the validity of the ‘will of the people’ depends on the distinction between power-over and power-with,” the concepts of “power over” and “power with” are often used in community organizing to distinguish between unhealthy/oppressive forms of power (domination) and capacity- or power-building with directly impacted individuals and communities for the purpose of attaining justice goals.

<sup>30</sup> Ella, interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, March 15, 2022, Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, Texas.

Several organizers named resources in the form of financial support for the following: hiring more organizers so the workload can be shared among more people, connecting with broader coalitions and parent organizations (costs of attending trainings as well as parent organizations sending subject experts to train and engage with local organizers), focusing on the mental and emotional health of organizers, and channeling more resources to support young and BIPOC organizers in general. Resources were mentioned several times as a benefit of working with White Christians, as “White Christians are often wealthy,” or “more well off than someone else who doesn’t have those identities.” Learning to engage in financial and other forms of material support for organizations *without* any strings attached is a positive step for White Christians in un-suturing from the control aspect of whiteness.

### Praxis 3: Supporting the Work of BIPOC Organizers

Several responses sought to address the problem of racialized exhaustion that is prevalent among BIPOC organizers and the need for stronger support systems to address this. These support systems included:

- organizations having organizers on staff who are members of and understand the communities they are working with (representation in race and faith identities, as well as other marginalized identities such as members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community);
- the need for White people to understand that not every space is for White people; working as an organization on ancestral trauma; acknowledging and embracing the credibility of Black women<sup>31</sup>;
- intentionally having the “ugly” conversations that need to happen so people develop the skill of not taking everything personally;

---

<sup>31</sup> I would also add embracing the credibility of Indigenous, Latine, and any other racialized minority women.

- giving organizers downtime to process primary and secondary trauma; not forcing organizers to work with problematic (racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.) people;
- and supporting organizers in their decision to remove problematic people from the space.

For justice-seeking White Christians, these recommendations might be the most critical for us to consider in how we move forward with our own processes of un-suturing whiteness and how we engage an ethic of authentic solidarity in multirace spaces. This requires the self-awareness (or conscientization) to understand that even with the best of intentions, our presence and our enactment of reflexive whiteness often causes repeated and compounding trauma for BIPOC organizers. Therefore, understanding how reflexive whiteness operates is a key step in interrupting processes of racialized trauma within racial justice organizing spaces.

#### Praxis 4: Leverage in Organizing

Eight of the sixteen study participants named leverage in organizing as part of the value or rationale for organizing with White Christians. Examples included leveraging White allies to get into meetings with elected officials, be taken seriously at government and NGO meetings, or to gain critical mass in support of organizing goals. Celeste named the necessary but regrettable need for White allies: “There are times that we need an ally, so there are many times where I’ve used my White friends to be that person that stands in front, or to even get us a meeting sometimes with elected officials so that we could try to get some ordinance passed... Unfortunately, that’s how it works, especially when we do lobbying.”<sup>32</sup>

Shawn, a Black male organizer, shared the following regarding the impact of having White Christians involved in organizing: “You tend to have more leverage and be taken more seriously when you’re attached to a structure. And the majority of the decision

---

<sup>32</sup> Celeste, video interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, March 23, 2022.

makers [in Texas] are attached to White religious structures.”<sup>33</sup> Octavia echoed this sentiment when she discussed distribution of power in the US: “We had a Black president before we had a non-Christian president. So when you think about where power is held, it is held within the Christian Church.”<sup>34</sup>

*Desired Personal Traits for White Christian Leaders*

Trait 1: Self-Awareness/Willingness to Engage in Lifelong Learning

Seven participants discussed attributes such as: spending many years learning; having knowledge of BIPOC communities’ experiences and suffering as well as knowledge of facts and figures related to the issues; trying to learn while being respectful and humble; understanding of power dynamics; being honest about one’s own whiteness and recognizing the shortcomings thereof; being intentional about self-education as well as educating others; a willingness to be educated or corrected if whiteness exerts itself; and studying, listening, and learning from each other and from BIPOC leaders. Trisha, a Black female, summarized many of these characteristics in describing a relationship with a friend and fellow organizer:

They’re very intentional about not only educating themselves...but educating others. And it works when you come out of ignorance, and you educate yourself. It makes a difference...They’re just very intentional about learning and reading; they’re a voracious reader on all these subjects and that’s really benefited them. They’re very intentional about the way that they do the work, the way that they do outreach, the way that they organize. And they’re always asking those questions—What would be best? What should we do here? Or what do you think about this?—instead of just darting

---

<sup>33</sup> Shawn, interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, March 21, 2022, Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, Texas.

<sup>34</sup> Octavia, video interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, July 1, 2022.

off and doing something with no context and input from people who are experiencing whatever that is.<sup>35</sup>

Ella described how this aspect of self-awareness presents itself in one of her White organizer colleagues: “They seek to grow and recognize their own shortcomings, their own whiteness, their own challenges, and the language of all that. So that’s really helpful when we come to the table together to plan things and organize together because there’s an intentionality of making room for me and my leaders that are people of color.”<sup>36</sup> Self-awareness around whiteness, along with the willingness to engage in lifelong learning, are primary examples of Yancy’s assertion that un-suturing whiteness “is a continuous process of disarticulation.”<sup>37</sup> Stated another way: un-suturing whiteness is an intentional, lifelong endeavor. Another key aspect to this process, intrinsic to multirace organizing, is intentionally removing oneself from “White only” space and building solidarity and relationships with BIPOC persons, which several participants named as a positive trait in working with White organizers.

### Trait 2: Spirit/Posture of Humility

Altogether, eight organizers provided examples of White Christians who displayed a spirit of curiosity or openness to learning. Responses included White Christians “having a hunger to know more about what was going on in the community around them, and then a hunger to find ways to engage that community”; being open to trainings and the “I do, we do, you do” organizing process<sup>38</sup>; asking clarifying, and “the right” questions; wanting to know more about the situation; relying on the wisdom of BIPOC

---

<sup>35</sup> Trisha, interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, May 17, 2022, Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, Texas.

<sup>36</sup> Ella, interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, March 15, 2022, Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, Texas.

<sup>37</sup> Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, Second Edition, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Ella elaborated on this process as follows: “In our organizing model, the ‘I do’ is if I’m coaching you and bringing you on, you’re a key leader. We’ll talk about it and you’ll watch me do it as an organizer. Then we’ll do it together. And then you’ll just do it on your own.” Interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, March 15, 2022, Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, Texas.

organizers to teach/lead; being ready to take action; seeking to enhance or be a part of an existing BIPOC-led movement, rather than trying to start something new without understanding the context; and organizers witnessing a congregation moving from apathy to action.

While these traits mostly relate to personal qualities, Celeste shared the story of a congregation that moved from a lack of understanding about the challenges undocumented persons face to a posture of humility with her organization:

The church where our office is [located] has recently started [providing sanctuary]. It has taken years, because when we first moved there, that was the first thing I asked them. And they didn't want to do it. And actually they were very happy that the police department would come around the church a lot... For a few years we were telling them that we can't allow police officers in our offices so that's why we always kept our doors locked. And they were constantly leaving our doors unlocked, so we were always having to go through that. But now they understand, and I feel like we're in a different place together.<sup>39</sup>

This congregation's evolution from ignorance to openness about learning the unjust realities that many undocumented persons face led them down a path of trusting Celeste and the work of her organization, which then led to a deeper (and safer) partnership between the individuals and organizations.

### **Practicing Liberating Leadership**

In many ways, these practices, praxes, and traits can be summed up in what scholar-practitioners Dori Grinenko Baker, Stephen Lewis, and Matthew Wesley Williams describe as “liberating leadership” in their book *Another Way: Living and Leading Change on Purpose*: “Liberating leadership seeks to dismantle [or we might say, un-suture] the dominant forms of living and leading that reinforce

---

<sup>39</sup> Celeste, video interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, March 23, 2022.

the oppressive norms of empire. It helps to create alternative ways of being that open new, expansive possibilities for communities to flourish.”<sup>40</sup> They contrast the difference between a “Warrior-Hero” form of leadership, where one “rescues” and “fixes” what’s broken; to a “Warrior-Healer” model that helps “living systems – people, communities, ecologies – reconnect to their wholeness.”<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most harmful aspect of whiteness is that it breaks the connection humanity has to the imago Dei and replaces it with the White gaze. A term coined by Toni Morrison in a 1998 interview with a White journalist, “White gaze” describes the normalization of whiteness by White society to the point of creating the perception that non-White “lives have no meaning and no depth without [it].”<sup>42</sup> This concept is akin to W.E.B. Du Bois’s theory of “double-consciousness,” whereby BIPOC individuals and communities experience an internal conflict between their lived experience and inherent worth, and their existence as it is perceived from a White person’s/society’s perspective.<sup>43</sup> When certain forms of settler colonial Christianity became sutured to White dominance, then White Christianity itself became responsible for invoking the White gaze through a lens of religious superiority, thus creating God in our own (distorted) image. As Indigenous leaders and scholars have been warning White people since our ancestors first made contact with these lands, that model is unsustainable for human relations, as well as earth relations. A healing model of leadership beckons White Christian leaders to take seriously Kelly Brown Douglas’s instruction to “help White Christians become free of a White moral imaginary.”<sup>44</sup>

Williams describes liberating leadership as a “relational and collective process that builds the capacity of a community to

---

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Lewis et al., *Another Way: Living and Leading Change on Purpose*, 1st ed. (Chalice Press, 2020) 129.

<sup>41</sup> Lewis et al., *Another Way*, 129.

<sup>42</sup> “Toni Morrison,” Charlie Rose, accessed August 11, 2025, <https://charlirose.com/episodes/17664?autoplay=true>.

<sup>43</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, with Brent Hayes Edwards, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> Douglas, “Re-Imagining.”

envision and enact a future distinct from its past.”<sup>45</sup> This involves freeing the very concept of leadership from “its conventional use and practice,” wherein leadership is often thought of on individual, or warrior-hero levels. These “deeply ingrained leadership reflexes often stymie the emancipatory efforts of communities seeking alternatives to systems of domination and oppression.”<sup>46</sup>

Williams employs a critical relational dynamic from the civil rights movement as a comparison between the warrior-hero model and the liberating leadership model. Lamenting that the “mythic” nature that developed around Martin Luther King’s leadership style largely produced “dominant contemporary expressions of the warrior-hero model,” Williams turns to Ella Baker as an exemplar of a “collective, distributed leadership model that called for meaning-making to be the work of a whole community.”<sup>47</sup> He shares Baker’s “thinly-veiled” critique of King’s leadership style:

I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed people to depend so heavily on a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the limelight... Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time and they don’t do the work of actually organizing people.<sup>48</sup>

While White Christian leaders would be wise not to compare ourselves to Dr. King, it is worth noting that the reflexes of White+Christian dominance so historically ingrained into our cultural milieu, and our very being, cause us (especially those of us who desire to be leaders in the work of racial justice) to fall into White Savior modalities that often mimic a warrior-hero leadership style. Recalling the research findings discussed above, particularly those centered on solidarity-building, following the leadership of

---

<sup>45</sup> Lewis et al., *Another Way*, 132.

<sup>46</sup> Lewis et al., *Another Way*, 133.

<sup>47</sup> Lewis et al., *Another Way*, 134.

<sup>48</sup> Lewis et al., *Another Way*, 134.

and supporting the work of BIPOC organizers, self-awareness, willingness to learn, and humility, listen to how Williams describes the importance of process in liberating leadership models:

Attention to process – *how* we listen, *how* we engage in dialogue, *how* we organize time, *how* we receive and integrate feedback, *how* we convene and connect people, *how* we manage organizations, *how* we build leadership in others, *how* we design organizational experience, *how* we motivate and mobilize collective action, *how* we tend our inner lives – all this reveals key markers of liberating leadership.<sup>49</sup>

Regardless of one's feelings about "warrior" language, liberating leaders in racial justice movements have long been, and will continue to be, engaged in a moral and spiritual battle with the historical structures of White+Christian dominance—or to use biblical terminology, the "powers and principalities"—that reside deep within our cultural milieu and (for White people) deep within ourselves. Womanist scholar M. Shawn Copeland writes, "Solidarity is a wrenching task: to stand up for justice in the midst of injustice and domination; to take up simplicity in the midst of affluence and comfort; to embrace integrity in the midst of collusion and co-optation; to contest the gravitational pull of domination."<sup>50</sup> If we seek to be healers amid this "gravitational pull of domination," *how* we show up is as important as showing up at all. For justice-seeking White Christian leaders, the *how* of un-suturing from White+Christian dominance translates to constant striving toward the healing of systemic woundedness, grounded and sustained in a theo-ethic of communal solidarity.

---

<sup>49</sup> Lewis et al., *Another Way*, 140.

<sup>50</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, "Toward a Critical Christian Feminist Theology of Solidarity," Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H Kaminski, eds., *Women and Theology* (Orbis Books, 1995, 29–30).

## A Theo-ethic of Communal Solidarity

In her defining text, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, Latine scholar Ada María Isasi-Díaz describes solidarity as

...being with others. The goal is not to be like the poor and oppressed (an impossibility), but rather to be in solidarity with them...Solidarity has to do with understanding the interconnections that exist between oppression and privilege, between the rich and the poor, the oppressed and the oppressors. It also refers to the cohesiveness that needs to exist among communities of struggle.<sup>51</sup>

Isasi-Díaz's words ring true for the organizers who participated in this study. White organizers as well as Black, Latine, and Indigenous organizers agreed that racial justice work demands solidarity among differing racially-identified groups—if for no other reason than the goal of racial justice is so formidable, as Estela, a Latine female, aptly proclaimed: “We need everybody.”<sup>52</sup>

In addition to needing everyone, the commitment to solidarity is, according to Isasi-Díaz, “not a light or easy matter. It involves all aspects of one's life and demands a lifelong permanency.”<sup>53</sup> Like Copeland's assertion that “solidarity is a wrenching task,” and Yancy's description of the painful and sustained process of un-suturing from whiteness, Isasi-Díaz reminds White Christians that seeking solidarity is not a seasonal or one-time event. Painful as this unremitting process can be at times, the practices and praxes discussed above put flesh on the “reiterative opening and wounding” Yancy deems necessary for the full exposure and healing of the “stench of White mendacity.”<sup>54</sup>

That said, it is crucial for Whites to recognize and respect that any amount of difficulty or pain we might experience from the

---

<sup>51</sup> Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century / Ada María Isasi-Díaz*. (Orbis Books, 1996) 88–89.

<sup>52</sup> Estela, interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, April 19, 2022, Rio Grande Valley, Texas.

<sup>53</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 100.

<sup>54</sup> Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 257.

un-suturing process pales in comparison to the lived experiences of racial trauma experienced by those who are the direct targets of White+Christian dominance. Study participants who identified as Black, Latine, Indigenous, and mixed-race shared their deepest fears as organizers, which involved everything from social isolation to detention and deportation to “racism kill[ing] me.” Their witness is a reminder that the very act of *being* any racialized identity other than White in the United States is a trauma-inducing reality. The actualized traumas of racial targeting, combined with the enduring physiological processes induced by white supremacy, are unquestionably more acute than the moral injury Whites experience over un-suturing from our historical and social conditioning into whiteness. With these stark differences in racialized realities in mind, how do we move toward a theo-ethic of communal solidarity?

*Reparations: A Path Toward Communal Solidarity*

While only one study participant explicitly identified the need for reparations to be part of the work in organizing for racial justice, Walker-Barnes makes the argument that the biblical and theological concept of repentance (turning away from sin and changing direction) “requires recognition and accountability” for racial reconciliation to become a reality.<sup>55</sup> Recognition and accountability are the cornerstones of a reparations paradigm. For Christians, such a paradigm is inherent to our baptismal vows:

Repentance from White supremacy means that whiteness itself must be transformed. No one is innocent here. Even a refusal to engage the powers is an abdication of responsibility. For Christians, it is an explicit betrayal of our baptismal covenant, which regardless of denomination includes a statement of our commitment to repent from and resist evil in all its forms. Resisting White supremacy means that White Christians must become more Christian than White. It means that White people broadly must undergo a

---

<sup>55</sup> Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People*, 188–89.

process of rehumanization. That is, they must recover the fullness of their humanity—the *imago Dei*—that was lost through cooperating with the powers.<sup>56</sup>

In her chapter entitled “Reconciliation Begins with a Curse,” Walker-Barnes compares the relationship between whiteness and blackness to an abusive (and then transformed) relationship through a critical analysis of Celie and Albert’s relationship in *The Color Purple*. Invoking the famous line from Celie—“Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble...Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail”—Walker-Barnes opens a conversation on the commitment and depth of repair necessary for racial reconciliation to become reality. She names four movements of “1) confrontational truth-telling, 2) liberation and healing for the oppressed; 3) repentance and conversion for the oppressor; and 4) building beloved community” as necessary to the “developmental process” of reconciliation.<sup>57</sup> Asserting that the first step of confrontational truth-telling contains an inherently spiritual dimension in dealing with the “powers and principalities” of evil, Walker-Barnes writes:

...racism is not neutral; it chooses sides, the side of White supremacy, the side of evil. The primary goal of truth-telling in racial reconciliation is not to build bridges; it is to reveal the powers and principalities so that we can tear them down. To diminish this in any way is not truth-telling; it is catering to the very White supremacist system that we claim to be trying to eradicate. It is being complicit with evil. The truth that

---

<sup>56</sup> Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People*, 193. It is worth noting that one point of contention between Isasi-Díaz and Walker-Barnes is that Walker-Barnes emphasizes the need for a repentance-first ethic of reconciliation, whereas Isasi-Díaz promotes an ethic of “forgive even when there is no repentance, praying that our forgiveness may bring forth repentance” (Isasi-Díaz, 59). As one who embodies an oppressor identity, writing primarily to an audience of my peers, I find the repentance-first ethic a more appropriate approach for justice-seeking White Christians to embrace, while also not diminishing the agency of scholars or communities of color who embrace a “repentance before/without forgiveness” ethic.

<sup>57</sup> Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People*, 163.

must be told—and retold over and over again—is this: Racism is alive and well. It did not happen by accident or as an act of omission, but it is an intentional way of structuring society so that White people have material, economic, social, and political power and advantages over nonwhite peoples...We cannot root it out unless we reveal how deeply it is embedded into our systems, relationships, and lives...

Like Walker-Barnes, Kelly Brown Douglas emphasizes a spiritual dimension to the work of reparations, claiming that “faith is about partnering with God to mend an unjust earth,” wherein faith communities are accountable to “mov[ing] us toward a more just future.”<sup>58</sup> Invoking the eucharistic concept of “anamnesic truth-telling,” Douglas asserts anamnesis refers to Jesus’s words, “Do this in memory of me” (Luke 22:19), establishing a “memorial sacrifice” that, like baptism, calls all Christians to accountability and repentance. Thus, the process of reparations becomes one in which “Christians enter into the sacrifice...being accountable to the past in the very present.”<sup>59</sup> Calling on Christians to consider a reparations paradigm not limited to compensations for past harms alone, but inclusive of a mandate to confront the ways Christian theology has been used to “legitimate white supremacist realities” which have “become a part of the collective theological consciousness,” Douglas echoes Walker-Barnes in her critique of choosing whiteness over “our common humanity as equal children of God,” identifying the moral and existential quandary all White Christians must contend with: “one cannot be at once White and Christian.”<sup>60</sup>

This existential questioning of White Christian identity reiterates Yancy’s point that the un-suturing process is “a site of openness, loss, and great discomfort. It is a site of suffering, a form

---

<sup>58</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, “A Christian Call for Reparations,” *Sojourners*, June 5, 2020, <https://sojo.net/magazine/july-2020/christian-call-case-slavery-reparations-kelly-brown-douglas>.

<sup>59</sup> Douglas, “A Christian Call for Reparations.”

<sup>60</sup> Douglas, “A Christian Call for Reparations.”

of suffering that is necessary for white people.”<sup>61</sup> But as Douglas asserts, anamnestic truth-telling requires Christians to “enter into the sacrifice.” In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, gender studies scholar Katherine McKittrick provides an interdisciplinary analysis of Black women’s studies and human geographies, describing racism and sexism as spatial acts of domination that have become normalized in White/patriarchal schemas.<sup>62</sup>

In Chapter 3, she introduces Robbie McCauley’s play, *Sally’s Rape*, where a White female and Black female portray various roles, culminating in the rape of Sally on the auction block as her White counterpart plays the part of the auctioneer. The audience is encouraged to become fully enmeshed in this final scene as they *become* the crowd of auction bidders. Through this embodied re-enactment of the dehumanization of the Black female, audience members are forced to confront the reality that participating in the dehumanization of another dehumanizes the oppressor too. But as McKittrick points out, perhaps the most striking element of the play is ironically found within the playwright’s stage directions for this scene: “It should be a moment of communion.”<sup>63</sup>

From a Christian theological perspective, solidarity-building might best be understood through recurrent (lifelong) participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion; an anamnestic act that forces us to acknowledge our role in the violence of injustice while simultaneously calling us to repent and create a more just future. M. Shawn Copeland makes the connection between Communion (Eucharist) and reparations work undeniably clear:

A broken body and a broken bread is a powerful mediating symbol of Eucharist...Eucharist is at the heart of Christian community, but it is an empty gesture, a mere routine or pro forma act, if we have not confessed our sins; repented of our participation and/

---

<sup>61</sup> Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, Second Edition, 13.

<sup>62</sup> Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006) 15.

<sup>63</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 87.

or collusion in the marginalization of others; if we have not pledged firm purpose of amendment; if we have not moved to healing and creative Christian praxis.<sup>64</sup>

Stated another way, womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas poses this piercing question in reference to communal sacrifice: “What does it mean when community becomes Communion, and our [Black] bodies are broken for others to consume, making *us* the ultimate sacrifice?”<sup>65</sup> The sustained process of un-suturing whiteness means that White Christians must continually pursue paths of amending and healing the historical harm White Christianity has caused to Black, Latine, and Indigenous communities through eurochristian invasion, settler colonialism, and the transatlantic slave trade while simultaneously amending and healing the perpetuation of harmful theologies that uphold current systems of domination. In so doing, we must be continually working to raise our consciousness of our own involvement in such systems and theologies, interrupting our tendencies toward reflexive whiteness, so that we do not continue to place our BIPOC siblings on the sacrificial altar. Furthermore, as the Indigenous organizers interviewed for this project pointed out, the amending and healing process must also consider the harm done to our relations with the earth.

*Ecofeminist + Indigenous Perspectives: Communion and Refusal*

In her text, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, Latin American ecofeminist Ivone Gebara centers a theology of interdependence, wherein she sharply critiques anthropocentric epistemologies, calling upon all religions to help develop “the sensibilities we need in order to love the earth and the human community in light of the indissoluble communion among all beings.”<sup>66</sup> Offering an ethic of “communion with, rather than conquest of, the earth and space,” her concern for cosmic

---

<sup>64</sup> Hinsdale and Kaminski, *Women and Theology*, 30.

<sup>65</sup> Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Society of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion Biennial Meeting, April 5-7, 2024, Denver, CO.

<sup>66</sup> Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* / Ivone Gebara ; Translated by David Molineaux. (Fortress Press, 1999) 212.

connection runs throughout her project, as “space” is both a spiritual and physical reality.<sup>67</sup> This connection came into sharp focus when Tanni, an Indigenous-Latine-White female organizer, shared her concerns about the (then) newly constructed SpaceX facility on Boca Chica beach, where, for generations, native peoples have fished for sustenance and enjoyed the pristine waters of the protected beachfront for recreational purposes. She also shared concerns about the potential environmental impacts on endangered wildlife in the area.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, the land surrounding the SpaceX complex, which the Federal Aviation Administration frequently blocks as a safety precaution for rocket tests, is sacred ceremonial land for the Carrizo Comecrudo Tribe of Texas.<sup>69</sup>

After my interview with Tanni, I decided to pay a visit to Boca Chica, as well as the SpaceX compound. Approaching the beach on that April day, it was hard to miss a sign that read: “Sea Turtle Nesting Season, April-September,” and wonder how that sacred species was being impacted by the massive construction site no more than a hundred meters from the shoreline. As I stood with my feet in the waters of my homeland,<sup>70</sup> the peaceful sounds of nature intermittently disrupted by the loud *BOOM!* of exhaust being released from the launchpad tower behind me, it was gut-wrenchingly clear that the pristine nature of this federally protected land has now been forever changed by what Gebara terms our “species evil” of the “excessive desire to take possession of life and make it our own.”<sup>71</sup> In that moment, with Tanni’s words echoing in my mind and the crystal-clear waters lapping at my ankles, a prayer of communal solidarity emerged from my core in a holy lament of righteous anger: “F\*CK YOU, Elon Musk!”

---

<sup>67</sup> Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 52.

<sup>68</sup> Tanni, interview by Rebecca M. David Hensley, April 22, 2022, Rio Grande Valley, Texas.

<sup>69</sup> “Environmentalists and Native American Tribe Rebuke SpaceX Ahead of Historic Rocket Launch,” accessed June 12, 2024, <https://www.courthousenews.com/environmentalists-and-native-american-tribe-rebuke-spacex-ahead-of-historic-rocket-launch/>.

<sup>70</sup> Boca Chica beach is in Cameron County, Texas, where I was born.

<sup>71</sup> Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 168.

If White Christians are to take the sacrament of Holy Communion seriously—and not treat it as “a mere routine or pro forma act”—a healthy dose of righteous anger and refusal to cooperate in the destruction of human and earth relations might need to precede our attempts at co-creating a more just future.

Kahnawà:ke scholar Audra Simpson describes a “politics of refusal” whereby Kahnawà:ke people refuse to take part in various forms of colonial domination through denying the legitimacy of such authorities: “Refusal...interrupts the smooth operation of power, denying presumed authority and remaking ignored narratives. Historically, it is empirical; strategically, it is oppositional; psychically, it is enjoyable.”<sup>72</sup> Hints of an Indigenous ethic of refusal appeared in Indigenous organizers’ perspectives around abolishing borders, as well as an example Tanni shared of the Carrizo Comecrudo border wall resistance camps—a space that was open for nonmembers to sit in solidarity with the Tribe’s refusal to allow a wall to be built on their sacred burial grounds. From a theo-ethical perspective, for White Christians who sincerely desire to build relationships of solidarity with our Indigenous siblings, authentic and “Holy” Communion might look more like sitting in the dirt of the Carrizo Comecrudo sacred lands and breaking bread with encampment dwellers than approaching an altar in a sanctuary and receiving breadcrumbs from church authorities in their (our) neatly pressed and cleaned clergy vestments. From a theoretical perspective, Gebara’s ethic of interdependence provides a critical point of solidarity between Christian theology and Indigenous spirituality, imploring all of humanity to recognize the sacred value of the relatedness of all things, in stark contrast to the eurochristian worldview of domination and dominion over the earth.

## Conclusion

Like all White people, all justice-seeking White Christians are sutured to whiteness, embodying and performing acts of White+Christian dominance even as we seek to be/come allies in

---

<sup>72</sup> Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (Duke University Press, 2014) 106.

the struggle for racial justice. The specific way we do this is through a pattern of behavior defined here as reflexive whiteness: the cyclical-paradoxical movement between one's desire to work toward racial equity, solidarity, and justice and the enactment of White privilege/power over others in quotidian interactions. I do mean all White people. Individuals have choices in how they identify, particularly if they are bi- or multiracial. But for those who identify as White—regardless of interracial familial ties, raising bi-racial children, etc.—we cannot escape that we are the embodiment (and beneficiaries) of whiteness as a social construct.

Even so, as conversations with community organizers revealed, when White Christians enter multirace and multifaith organizing spaces with the qualities of self-awareness, a willingness to learn, and a spirit of humility—and then begin to engage in solidarity-building practices including, but not limited to, those discussed above—it is possible to learn how to recognize and resist the gravitational pull of domination. In these spaces, we can learn to monitor and disrupt the cycle of reflexive whiteness within ourselves, our White Christian siblings, and our White Christian faith communities. And with sustained effort, grounded in communal theo-ethics, we can enter the lifelong process of un-suturing whiteness.

### **Inviting your manuscript submission to the JRL**

Do you have an idea for an article to be published in the JRL?

Do you have a manuscript you would like to submit for consideration?

Contact Editor Robert Martin to talk about your idea or submit an essay by emailing [editor@arl-jrl.org](mailto:editor@arl-jrl.org).

### **Book Reviews**

Book Review Editor Michael Wilson has a list of books to review (receive a free book!), or suggest your own, at [mwilson@lanasterseminary.edu](mailto:mwilson@lanasterseminary.edu). No unsolicited reviews accepted.

**Guidelines for articles and book reviews are found at the ARL/JRL website: <https://arl-jrl.org>**

---

## REIMAGINING PASTORAL MINISTRY – THREE MODELS OF LEADERSHIP FROM ORDAINED WOMEN PASTORS IN SOUTH KOREA

EUNJIN JEON, BYUNG HO CHOI

### Abstract

*Marking the seventieth anniversary of women's ordination in South Korea in 2025, this article explores how Korean women pastors are reimagining pastoral leadership amid persistent gender inequality and patriarchal church structures. Drawing on feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial theological frameworks, and based on qualitative "friendship-talk" interviews with ordained women pastors in the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK), the study identifies three models of alternative leadership: koinonia-centered practice, motherhood as theological leadership, and radical interdependence. These practices challenge dominant paradigms and offer a liberative vision for the church—one grounded in relationality, justice, and the embodied witness of women leading from the margins.*

### Introduction

As of 2025, women have been ordained in South Korea for seventy years. The history of women's ordination in Korean Protestant churches is relatively recent, and its development has been contested and hard-won. Historically, the Korean Methodist Church was the first to approve the ordination of women in 1955; this was followed by the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of

*Eunjin Jeon is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Denver/ILIFF School of Theology, studying religion with a focus on Religion and Human Experience.*

*Byung Ho Choi is a Ph.D. candidate at Princeton Theological Seminary in the department of History and Ecumenics, specializing in World Christianity and History of Religions.*

Korea in 1974 and the Presbyterian Church of Korea in 1994.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the struggle for full recognition of women's ministerial leadership is ongoing across denominational lines. The Korea Baptist Convention did not approve women's ordination until 2013. Meanwhile, the largest and most conservative Presbyterian denomination has still not officially granted ordination to women. However, a shift occurred in 2024 when its 109th General Assembly approved women's rights to preach and take the *Kangdosah* exam (pre-ordination licensure for preaching ministry), reflecting a slow but significant movement toward broader inclusion.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the growing number of ordained women, significant disparities persist between female and male pastors in terms of opportunity, authority, and recognition. Senior pastor roles in established churches remain overwhelmingly male-dominated in South Korea.<sup>3</sup> Many women are confined to assistant roles or ministry positions in education, care, or administration—fields traditionally associated with feminine labor and often undervalued within church hierarchies.<sup>4</sup> These structural dynamics reveal how South Korean church leadership continues to reflect and reinforce patriarchal norms, limiting the full vocational expression and leadership potential of ordained women.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kukmin Ilbo, November 12, 2024, <https://www.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=1731313236>.

<sup>2</sup> Kyungjin Yoo, "Women Pastors Account for 15.4%—the Highest in the Nation: The Fruit of Half a Century of Women's Ordination," Kukmin Ilbo, November 12, 2024, <https://www.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=1731313236>.

<sup>3</sup> Various churches and denominations use different terms to refer to the highest pastoral position, including "senior pastor," "head pastor," and others. For the sake of clarity and consistency, this paper uses "senior pastor" to refer to the highest pastoral office within a church.

<sup>4</sup> We do not seek to diminish the value of diverse roles within education, pastoral care, or administration; rather, our critique is directed toward the male-dominated structures of leadership, particularly in senior pastor positions.

<sup>6</sup> "Current Status of Women Ministers in the Korean Church," Numbers: Christian Statistics, no. 276 (February 25, 2025), [http://www.mhdata.or.kr/bbs/board.php?bo\\_table=gugnae&wr\\_id=150](http://www.mhdata.or.kr/bbs/board.php?bo_table=gugnae&wr_id=150).

<sup>7</sup> "Current Status of Women Ministers in the Korean Church," Numbers: Christian Statistics, no. 276 (February 25, 2025), [http://www.mhdata.or.kr/bbs/board.php?bo\\_table=gugnae&wr\\_id=150](http://www.mhdata.or.kr/bbs/board.php?bo_table=gugnae&wr_id=150).

Statistical evidence underscores the depth of gender inequality in Korean church leadership. Among 584 male and female clergy, 80 percent reported that gender discrimination exists within the Korean church. Strikingly, 94% of women pastors agreed with this statement, and 39% confessed they had at times regretted entering ministry—a stark indicator of the structural and emotional toll of exclusion.<sup>6</sup> In a separate study focused specifically on women in pastoral ministry, 90% of respondents—both male and female—agreed that it is extremely difficult for a woman pastor to be appointed as the senior minister of an established congregation.<sup>7</sup> These findings underscore the urgent need for ecclesial and cultural transformation to advance gender equity as a matter of justice and faithful leadership.

In the context of South Korea, existing literature on pastoral leadership reveals a significant gap. Most studies focus on male-dominated leadership models, often situated within historical contexts such as the Japanese colonial period, the revivalist era, and the era of democratization and social movements. These works predominantly center on senior male pastors, thereby reinforcing androcentric narratives on pastoral leadership. In contrast, the leadership experiences of women pastors in South Korea remain underexplored and underrepresented in both academic and ecclesial discourse.

Amid persistent gender inequality and marginalization, this paper poses a critical question: In what ways do Korean women pastors construct alternative practices of leadership that embody justice and challenge the oppressive structures of the church? We argue that Korean women pastors tend to reimagine leadership not as a hierarchical position of authority, but as a praxis grounded in justice, relationality, and embodied presence. Marking the seventieth anniversary of women's ordination in Korea as a moment of celebration and a call to action, this study highlights three leadership models through which ordained women are redefining leadership in resistance to hierarchical, male-dominated theological paradigms: koinonia-centered practice, motherhood as theological leadership, and radical interdependence.

Building on theoretical frameworks from decolonial and feminist theologies that foreground women's agency, leadership, and dignity, this paper seeks to recenter the voices of ordained Korean women. Drawing on qualitative "friendship-talk" interviews with ordained Korean women within the first ten years of ministry, particularly in Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK),<sup>5</sup> as well as analysis of relevant newspaper articles, this paper explores how these pastors navigate male-dominated ecclesial contexts, affirm their vocational calling, and embody a pastoral leadership rooted in agency, resistance, and transformative witness.

### **Dominant Typologies of Pastoral Leadership in South Korea**

Research on pastoral leadership in South Korea has primarily centered on male experiences, particularly those of senior pastors, while neglecting the voices and practices of women in ministry. Much of this scholarship situates pastoral leadership within significant historical and political contexts—such as the Japanese colonial era, the periods of revivalism, and the democratization movement—illustrating how pastoral roles have evolved alongside national developments. Within this trajectory, two dominant leadership typologies have emerged: one emphasizing sacrificial pastoral leadership and the other focused on paternal authority-centered pastoral leadership. These frameworks continue to shape the structure and culture of Korean churches today, particularly in ways that maintain patriarchal and hierarchical norms with harsh labor for pastoral leadership.

#### *Sacrificial Pastoral Leadership*

The sacrificial image of pastoral leadership has played a formative role in shaping the theological and vocational understanding of ministry in Korean Protestantism. This typology emerged in contexts of national crisis and political oppression, particularly during the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), and continues to influence contemporary conceptions of pastoral vocation as one rooted in suffering, resistance, and moral integrity.

---

<sup>5</sup> Hereafter, the Presbyterian Church of Korea will be referred to by its commonly used abbreviation, "PCK."

As Gil-Soo Kang outlines in his historical-anthropological analysis, six dominant images have characterized Korean church leadership, among which the figure of the Martyr-Pastor stands out prominently.<sup>6</sup> This image took shape during a time when Korean Christians were coerced into participating in *Sinsachambae*—a ritual act of bowing at Shinto shrines to express loyalty to the Japanese emperor. While colonial authorities framed the ritual as a patriotic gesture, Korean Protestants perceived it as idolatry and a direct violation of the First Commandment. In response, many pastors refused to comply, interpreting their resistance as a theological and moral stance. In effect, they chose potential death over spiritual compromise. The image of the martyr thus became closely intertwined with the crucifixion of Christ, elevating sacrifice as a theological virtue central to pastoral identity.

This model of sacrificial leadership persisted through the Korean War (1950–1953), when North Korean forces targeted pastors and churches. The image of the pastor as spiritual shepherd and political dissenter was reinforced, further solidifying a pastoral ideal rooted in suffering, resistance, and national devotion. In this light, the pastoral vocation came to be seen as inherently prophetic—marked by suffering not only for the faith, but also for the moral and spiritual future of the Korean nation.

Closely related is the figure of the Patriot-Pastor, whose leadership extended beyond ecclesial boundaries into broader sociopolitical movements for national independence. During key events such as the 105-Person Incident and the March First Independence Movement of 1919, Christian clergy played active roles in organizing protests, preaching liberation, and embodying a theology of resistance. In these contexts, pastoral leadership functioned as a form of theological-political praxis, reinforcing the role of religious leaders as moral authorities within church and society.

Together, the Martyr and Patriot images formed a distinctly Korean typology of sacrificial leadership—one that fused theological

---

<sup>6</sup> Gill-Soo Kang, *Church Leadership within the South Korean Context* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, March 2002), 25.

conviction with national identity, and spiritual devotion and obedience with ethical action. This model continues to influence contemporary understandings of what it means to be a pastor in Korea: one which endures suffering and exemplifies humility and absolute obedience in doing God's work. Within the Korean church, the ideal of pastoral sacrifice is still often valorized through the metaphor of Christ's humility and obedience "to the point of death- even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8).

Yet it is crucial to interrogate this narrative through a theological and ethical lens by asking: Whose sacrifice is being demanded, and for whose benefit? When sacrifice becomes a requirement imposed upon pastors—rather than a voluntary expression of vocation—it risks losing its theological meaning and instead leads to burnout, exhaustion, and even exploitation.

### *Paternal Authority-Centered Pastoral Leadership*

Alongside the sacrificial model, another dominant form of pastoral leadership in South Korea is characterized by paternal authority. This paternal model of church authority cannot be fully understood apart from Korea's enduring Confucian cultural legacy, which privileges male authority in familial and institutional settings. The pastor as "spiritual father" figure mirrors the Confucian ideal of the male household head—authoritative, morally upright, and responsible for the well-being of the group.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the church operates as an extension of the traditional family, where obedience and filial piety are not only encouraged but sacralized. Such cultural entanglements make it difficult to disentangle theological conviction from patriarchal tradition.

Rooted historically in evangelical and revivalist movements of the early twentieth century, this leadership style emerged prominently during the 1907 Great Pyongyang Revival. Figures such as Kil Sön-Ju, who was one of the first Korean ordained Presbyterian ministers and even so far to be deemed as the "father of

---

<sup>7</sup> Sang Nim Ahn, "Feminist Theology in the Korean Church," in *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), 128.

the Korean church,”<sup>8</sup> played pivotal roles in shaping this tradition, emphasizing prayer, Bible study, moral renewal, and fervent evangelism. These movements found renewed strength through global evangelical influences, notably Billy Graham’s 1973 crusade in Seoul, which reaffirmed Korea’s role as a hub of evangelical Protestantism.<sup>9</sup> The core theology promoted personal salvation, communal repentance, and scriptural authority, appealing deeply to a society seeking stability, hope, and moral order in the aftermath of war and national division: all driven by a male spiritual authority.

From this revivalist tradition evolved the figure of the Charismatic-Pastor, particularly prominent during South Korea’s post-war economic boom. As congregations grew into megachurches, pastoral leadership increasingly took on a centralized, authoritarian character, defined by spiritual charisma and institutional control. In this context, male pastors often functioned as paternal figures, which went hand in hand with the Korean family hierarchies that emphasized patriarchal authority. Moreover, they embodied spiritual and moral authority and reinforced hierarchical structures within both the church and broader society. This paternalistic approach to pastoral leadership effectively supported rapid church growth and institutional consolidation, providing absolute power to male senior pastors yet simultaneously entrenching deep-seated gender inequalities.

Today, many large Protestant churches in Korea continue to embody this hierarchical and male-centered structure. Senior pastoral roles remain implicitly—and often explicitly—reserved for men, reflecting enduring assumptions about gender roles and spiritual authority. In the case of South Korea, known to have “one of the highest concentrations of megachurches in the world,”<sup>10</sup> the

---

<sup>8</sup> Myunghyuk Kim, “How Gil Seonju—Once a Shaman—Became “the Father of the Korean Church,”” *Christian Today*, June 14, 2023, <https://www.christiantoday.co.kr/news/355005>.

<sup>9</sup> Helen J. Kim, *Race for Revival: How Cold War South Korea Shaped the American Evangelical Empire* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Jungyeon Yi and Chad M. Bauman, “East and South Asia,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Megachurches*, ed. Afe Adogame, Chad M. Bauman, Damaris Parsitau, and Jeaney Yip (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2024), 109.

top ten largest megachurches are all led by male senior pastors.<sup>11</sup> And despite a growing number of ordained women, significant barriers persist in mainline denominations, such as the PCK, limiting women's access to senior leadership roles.<sup>12</sup>

While paternal pastoral authority has offered stability and spiritual direction during periods of national trauma and modernization, it also raises critical theological questions: Does this model reflect the servant leadership of Christ, or does it mask authoritarian control behind the language of care and responsibility? Moreover, how has the image of God, as mediated through overwhelmingly male authority figures, shaped Korean congregants' understanding of divine authority, gender, and discipleship? Where do women pastors fit in the future of Korean Christianity?

### **Korean Women Pastoral Leadership: Between Sacrifice and Paternal Authority**

The dominant models of sacrificial and paternal authority-centered pastoral leadership continue to significantly shape women's pastoral leadership in Korean Protestantism. In the sacrificial pastoral leadership model, the narrative of sacrifice is often intensified for women pastors. For instance, discourses opposing women's ordination frequently frame their exclusion as a virtuous, selfless devotion to the church, family, or husband. Such arguments diminish women's vocational agency, reframing their sacrifice as a gendered expectation rather than a Spirit-led commitment. Consequently, the theological concept of sacrifice risks being appropriated by patriarchal systems to reinforce existing ecclesial and gender hierarchies.

---

<sup>11</sup> The current ten largest megachurches in terms of the number of registered congregants consist of churches within the Pentecostal, Presbyterian, and Methodist denominations. These churches are in Seoul, Incheon, and Gyeonggi Province.

<sup>12</sup> "Current Status of Women Ministers in the Korean Church," Numbers: Christian Statistics, no. 276 (February 25, 2025), [http://www.mhdata.or.kr/bbs/board.php?bo\\_table=gugnae&wr\\_id=150](http://www.mhdata.or.kr/bbs/board.php?bo_table=gugnae&wr_id=150).

Critical discernment is therefore essential in evaluating these sacrificial narratives: whether they genuinely reflect prophetic resistance aimed at serving God and the community or merely function as mechanisms to sustain unequal power structures. Without thoughtful consideration of whether women's sacrifices stem from authentic vocational discernment or internalized oppression, the language of sacrifice risks becoming a theological justification for injustice rather than liberation.

Parallel to this sacrificial dimension, paternal authority-centered pastoral leadership remains prevalent. Many large Protestant churches in Korea embody hierarchical, male-centric structures that implicitly or explicitly reserve senior pastoral roles for men, perpetuating entrenched gender roles and spiritual authority assumptions. Despite increasing numbers of ordained women, substantial barriers persist, particularly in mainline denominations such as the PCK, significantly limiting women's access to leadership positions.

This model of pastoral leadership is sustained by overlapping cultural ideologies that marginalize women's roles and restrict inclusive ministry forms. Neo-Confucian values emphasizing hierarchy and filial piety reinforce traditional male authority. Militaristic legacies from Korea's colonial and wartime history further bolster authoritarian, chain-of-command structures within ecclesial contexts. Patriarchal norms remain embedded, justified through theological rationales resistant to gender equality, even as Korean society at large increasingly embraces egalitarian principles.

Recently, increased emphasis on affective dimensions of leadership, particularly emotional intelligence, has offered partial counters to hierarchical masculinity in Korean churches. Women's leadership that exhibits emotional intelligence—such as self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation—can foster community cohesion.<sup>13</sup> However, defining women's leadership primarily through emotional labor also risks reinforcing essentialist

---

<sup>13</sup> Eun-kyung Nam, "A Study on Leadership Styles of Female Senior Pastors in the Korea Evangelical Holiness Church," *Hwalcheon* 839, no. 10 (October 2023): 81.

gender stereotypes. Without structural transformation, such frameworks risk reinforcing gender binaries rather than dismantling them.

In the same vein, theologian Park Bo-Kyung advocates a fundamental shift toward gender-inclusive leadership, emphasizing that genuine gender justice must be structurally enacted—through inclusive hiring practices, equitable leadership training, governance models, and ecclesial reforms.<sup>14</sup> Inclusion, Park argues, must transcend token representation, challenging churches to confront the theological underpinnings of gender exclusion and reconstruct power dynamics foundationally.<sup>15</sup>

However, women's leadership practices remain underexplored in the South Korean context, and there is limited theological and theoretical understanding of Korean women's pastoral leadership. To address this gap, we utilize frameworks from postcolonial and decolonial feminist theology. The continued academic and ecclesial silencing of Korean women's pastoral leadership—especially within English-language scholarship—constitutes a profound epistemic injustice. This silence represents more than mere neglect; it is indicative of a theological imagination still profoundly influenced by colonial and patriarchal epistemologies.

In response to this injustice, feminist and postcolonial/decolonial theological frameworks provide essential resources for critically engaging these entrenched power dynamics. Scholars such as Choi Hee An and Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi have emerged as critical voices, proposing innovative frameworks for ecclesial leadership grounded in postcolonial feminist theology, building on Kwok Pui Lan, Chung Hyun Kyung, and Boyung Lee. By examining intersections of gender, culture, and authority within Korean Christianity, such perspectives challenge traditional leadership models and advocate for pastoral leadership rooted in mutuality, community, and justice. We believe the future of Korean

---

<sup>14</sup> Bokyung Park, "A Missional Approach to Developing Gender-Inclusive Leadership," *The Korea Society of Mission Studies* 41 (2016): 149.

<sup>15</sup> Bokyung Park, "A Missional Approach to Developing Gender-Inclusive Leadership," *The Korea Society of Mission Studies* 41 (2016): 149.

pastoral leadership depends on embracing these critical frameworks as pathways toward deeper theological reflection and more faithful, inclusive, and liberative ministry practices.

### **Postcolonial/Decolonial Pastoral Leadership**

Postcolonial feminist theologies focus on how colonial legacies continue to shape theological discourse, critiquing the long-standing impact of colonialism. In contrast, decolonial feminist theologies seek to dismantle the enduring structures that perpetuate colonial power. Postcolonial feminist theologies emerged in the aftermath of formal colonial rule, drawing on postcolonial theory to analyze the cultural, social, and psychological effects of colonialism. As Choi Hee An elaborates, the term “postcolonial” encompasses discourses on colonialism, neocolonialism, anticolonialism, and postcolonialism, examining both the liberative and hierarchical/imperial dimensions of these frameworks.<sup>16</sup>

Choi aligns with Kwok Pui Lan, who argues that “postcolonial” is not merely a temporal marker or a political transition of power but also a critical reading strategy and discursive practice.<sup>17</sup> This approach seeks to unmask colonial epistemological frameworks, deconstruct Eurocentric logics, and challenge stereotypical cultural representations. Consequently, postcolonial feminist theologians critically engage with biblical interpretations, ecclesiastical structures, Christian ethics, doctrines, and rituals, working to expose and dismantle the colonial legacies that affect women’s daily lives and sustain colonial mentality within postcolonial feminist theology.

Particularly, Choi offers a searing critique of dominant leadership models in the church, naming them as products of colonial power and patriarchal control in the context of the United States. Choi proposes an alternative: *a postcolonial model of leadership centered on*

---

<sup>16</sup> Hee An Choi, *A Postcolonial Leadership: Asian Immigrant Christian Leadership and Its Challenges* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Pui Lan Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 2.

*hybridity, authenticity, and communal relationality*.<sup>18</sup> These are not theoretical ideals, but survival strategies forged by Asian immigrant women navigating the layered oppressions of racism, gender bias, and ecclesial exclusion. Choi challenges the hegemonic conflation of leadership with charisma and control, instead advancing a model that is adaptive, relational, and deeply contextual.

What makes Choi's intervention especially vital is her rejection of static or essentialist notions of authenticity. Choi redefines authenticity not as cultural purity or theological orthodoxy, but as a processual identity formation: "who I/we were in the past, who I/we are in the present, and who I/we want to become."<sup>19</sup> This reframing opens space for theological innovation and ecclesial practice rooted in movement, negotiation, and communal discernment. For Choi, women's narratives of marginality and resistance are not peripheral—they are the theological ground from which postcolonial leadership must emerge.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, a decolonial practical theologian, emphasizes the need for material, symbolic, and theological transformation in religious leadership.<sup>21</sup> She argues that truly liberative leadership must dismantle clericalism and decenter traditional notions of ordained authority, instead uplifting embodied wisdom and collective spiritual agency.<sup>22</sup> Her work contributes to the decolonial relanguaging of leadership, expanding how communities imagine leadership roles, practices, and qualifications.<sup>23</sup> Echoing feminist and womanist theologians, she insists that leadership is not defined by institutional titles but

---

<sup>18</sup> Hee An Choi, *A Postcolonial Leadership: Asian Immigrant Christian Leadership and Its Challenges* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 200-216.

<sup>19</sup> Hee An Choi, 200.

<sup>20</sup> Hee An Choi, 190.

<sup>21</sup> While Choi Hee An draws on postcolonial theory to develop her model of pastoral leadership, Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi engages decolonial theology. In her book *Unraveling Religious Leadership: Power, Authority, and Decoloniality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024), she briefly outlines the theoretical frameworks of decoloniality (pp. 38-39).

<sup>22</sup> Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, *Unraveling Religious Leadership: Power, Authority, and Decoloniality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024), 42-43.

<sup>23</sup> Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, *Unraveling Religious Leadership: Power, Authority, and Decoloniality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024) 49.

by the ability to disrupt unjust systems and reimagine power from the ground up.

Together, these thinkers converge on a powerful assertion: leadership must be decolonized, feminized, and communalized. It must emerge not as an accommodation to existing structures but as a disruption of them. The urgency of this reimagination is undeniable. Faced with a legitimacy crisis—declining membership, youth disaffiliation, moral failures—Korean Christianity finds itself at a crossroads. Traditional male-centered leadership models have not simply become obsolete; they now represent one of the primary obstacles to ecclesial renewal.

What is needed is not incremental reform, but theological reconfiguration. Korean women's leadership cannot be co-opted into patriarchal systems that were never designed to include them. Instead, their leadership must unsettle the very foundations of those systems. This means valuing emotional intelligence not as compensation for the absence of institutional power, but as a theological practice in itself. It emphasizes embracing hybridity not as fragmentation but as theological creativity. Furthermore, this entails recognizing that the wisdom required to lead the Korean church forward already exists—embodied in the women it has long ignored.

Korean women's pastoral leadership is not an optional addition to the future of the church—it is the future. It calls for ecclesial communities willing to be transformed by the very bodies, voices, and theologies they have historically silenced. Drawing on feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial thought, this vision moves beyond inclusion toward the radical redefinition of leadership itself: who exercises it, how it functions, and what it ultimately serves.

The task ahead is not merely to elevate women into existing leadership roles but to *remake those roles altogether*. The vitality of the Korean church depends on its willingness to be led from the margins—where truth is less distorted by power, where leadership is forged through suffering and resilience, and where the Spirit is already at work calling the church into liberation.

## Methodology

Our study employs qualitative, feminist, and decolonial research methodology to explore the lived experiences and leadership practices of ordained Korean women pastors within the PCK. Drawing from postcolonial and decolonial feminist frameworks, the research seeks to center voices that have historically been marginalized in both academic and ecclesial discourses. Specifically, we engage the theological insights of scholars such as Choi Hee An and Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, whose work critically examines how coloniality, patriarchy, and ecclesial authority intersect to shape Korean women's roles in the church. These scholars not only diagnose the systemic injustices embedded in church leadership structures but also offer constructive visions for relational, justice-oriented, and community-anchored pastoral models.

To operationalize these frameworks methodologically, we developed a research strategy rooted in *friendship-as-method*, a feminist and relational approach to qualitative interviewing. As articulated by Emma Heron and other feminist researchers, friendship-as-method acknowledges that relationships grounded in trust, mutuality, and shared experience are not methodological weaknesses but vital sources of epistemological strength. Heron writes that the “unlocking potential” of close friendships facilitates deeper engagement with lived experience, allowing for the emergence of thick, embodied, and affect-laden knowledge that more distanced methods may obscure.<sup>24</sup> This approach requires the researcher to navigate a dual identity—as both friend and investigator—by practicing reflexivity, ethical sensitivity, and critical attentiveness throughout the research process.

Hence, we conducted what we like to frame as *friendship-talk interviews* with ten ordained women pastors currently affiliated

---

<sup>24</sup> Heron, Emma. 2019. “Friendship as Method: Reflections on a New Approach to Understanding Student Experiences in Higher Education.” *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 44 (3): 393–407. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2018.1541977.

with and serving in the PCK.<sup>25</sup> These women were not random participants, but rather colleagues, friends, and co-travelers—sisters, in many ways—with whom we share academic, ecclesial, and vocational formation. All participants were graduates of the same seminary (Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary) in South Korea. They currently serve in urban congregations ranging from mid-sized (300-400 members) to megachurches. Our selection criteria ensured that participants: (1) had held ordination within the PCK for a minimum of seven years; (2) currently serve as associate pastors or in comparably senior pastoral roles; and (3) work in urban ministry contexts. These criteria were chosen to foreground women with sustained experience in leadership positions and to highlight the specific challenges of metropolitan ministry within male-dominated church structures.

Interviews were conducted between January and April 2023 via the Zoom platform and lasted sixty to ninety minutes each. Each session began with an informal check-in, framed relationally as a conversation between friends, followed by more focused dialogue around their experiences as ordained women pastors. The friendship-talk format intentionally resisted rigid structuring; instead, it created a space where participants could bring forth what mattered most to them—whether stories of resistance, burnout, calling, joy, marginalization, or resilience. Participants often wove theological reflection into their stories organically, offering rich insight into how their personal and professional identities are entangled in their practice of leadership. Embodied expressions—laughter, tears, long silences, and moments of spiritual resonance—became integral parts of the interview data. And in protecting the identities of our interviewees, we will be using pseudonyms.<sup>26</sup>

To navigate these complexities, we engaged in ongoing

---

<sup>25</sup> The focus of this research centers on informal, conversational exchanges, what we frame as friendship-talk. This approach highlights the relational dynamic of friendship-talk as a methodological and interpretive lens in not only providing a safe space to talk, but to organically draw out honest reflections about the interviewee's experiences, thoughts, and emotions.

<sup>26</sup> We will be using pseudonyms for all our interviewees, except for Pastor Suhee Jeon, as her current ministry at Annyeong Church has become public through her interviews with media outlets.

pastoral and methodological reflexivity. This included maintaining a research journal to document our emotional reactions, ethical dilemmas, and evolving interpretations. We drew on principles of compassionate listening, attentiveness to power dynamics, and critical self-awareness to mitigate the risks of over-identification. Our dual roles as researchers and friends demanded a constant negotiation between care and critique, presence and analysis.

While this methodological approach generated rich and layered data, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is limited to the PCK and does not account for the experiences of women in other Korean denominations, such as the Methodist or Baptist churches, or even among other branches of Presbyterianism. Second, all participants serve in urban contexts, and their experiences might differ significantly from those of pastors serving in rural congregations or diaspora communities. Third, as this research focused on participants with a relatively high level of ecclesial recognition (associate or senior pastors), it does not capture the experiences of those who might have left ministry or occupy more marginal roles within church institutions.

Despite these limitations, this research offers several critical contributions. First, it amplifies the voices of Korean women pastors, positioning them not as exceptions or anomalies but as theological agents whose lived experiences challenge dominant models of church leadership. Their narratives reveal the structural violence embedded in patriarchal ecclesial systems and the creative, faithful resistance they embody in their ministries. Second, the study demonstrates how feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial theological frameworks can be fruitfully integrated with qualitative methods to produce theological knowledge that is both analytically rigorous and ethically grounded. Third, by embracing friendship as a method, this research contributes to ongoing conversations about the ethics and politics of knowledge production—particularly in contexts where community, solidarity, and relational accountability are central to both theological and research praxis.

Consequently, this study calls for a reimagining of pastoral leadership in Korea and beyond—one that is not confined by colonial, patriarchal, or hierarchical logics but is instead shaped

by shared wisdom, embodied experience, and relational care. The sisterhood talk among these pastors serves as a form of practical theology, pointing toward alternative futures where ecclesial leadership is more just, inclusive, and collaborative.

## Reimagining Pastoral Leadership

### *Koinonia-Centered Practice: Reimagining the Church Through the Table*

One of the most compelling models of alternative leadership and communal ministry emerging from the work of Korean women pastors is what we construct as the Koinonia-Centered Practice. Rooted in the biblical concept of *koinonia*, a Greek term often translated as fellowship, communion, or participation, this model emphasizes mutual care, shared life, and relational ministry.<sup>27</sup> It rejects the vertical, often patriarchal hierarchies that dominate many ecclesial institutions, and instead, cultivates an incarnational ecclesiology built on community, hospitality, and embodied spiritual practice. Moreover, it centers on the lived practice of Christ's servitude and that embraces all, including sinners (Phil. 2:5-8; Mark 2:17).

A powerful embodiment of this Koinonia-Centered Practice is found in the ministry of Pastor Suhee Jeon, the founding pastor of Annyeong Church, which in Korean translates as Hello Church. Pastor Jeon's journey into pastoral leadership was marked not by institutional welcome but by exclusion and systemic bias. According to Pastor Jeon, "women have no space to stand... many women work full-time as ministry staff before receiving ordination, but once they're ordained, they are often reduced to part-time roles."<sup>28</sup> The discrimination Pastor Jeon faced was not merely an isolated moment but part of a broader, systemic pattern. In her interview,

<sup>27</sup> Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989)

<sup>28</sup> Jang Chang Il, "Interdenominational Women Unite to Pursue a Vision of a Church Without Gender Discrimination," *Kukmin Daily*, October 3, 2022, <https://www.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=0924266201>.

she adds, “discrimination is daily life in the church.”<sup>29</sup> This blunt expression of gender discrimination and marginalization reveals how ordination, rather than granting authority, can paradoxically become a limitation for women in traditional ecclesial systems and reflects the lived reality for many ordained women in the Korean church.

Rather than abandoning her calling, Pastor Jeon responded with prophetic creativity. Despite encountering many that voiced concerns, especially the financial difficulties of starting a new church, Pastor Jeon planted her own congregation, Anyeong Church, a spiritual community specifically designed to welcome those excluded by institutional Christianity.<sup>30</sup> *Annyeong* (in Korean 안녕, meaning “hello” and “peace”) resonates deeply within Korean linguistic and cultural traditions. In Korean daily life, greetings such as “Annyeong” and “Have you eaten?” function not merely as inquiries but as expressions of care. Food and fellowship are intimately tied to emotional well-being and social belonging. Pastor Jeon intentionally drew on these cultural norms to articulate a new vision for her church.

At the heart of Anyeong Church is the monthly worship gathering called the Holy Table Service (Georukhan Siktak Yebae). This unusual form of worship takes inspiration from the communal meals of the early church and the Christian tradition of the agape feast.<sup>31</sup> In both structure and spirit, it resembles the Dinner Church movement in North America, pioneered by congregations such as Saint Lydia’s in Brooklyn,

---

<sup>29</sup> Jang Chang Il, “Interdenominational Women Unite to Pursue a Vision of a Church Without Gender Discrimination,” *Kukmin Daily*, October 3, 2022, <https://www.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=0924266201>.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Park, “Pastor, Why Do You Stay in Ministry?” *News&Joy*, May 1, 2024, <https://www.newsjoy.or.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=306278>.

<sup>31</sup> Park Yun Seo, “Are You Well? A Glimpse into a Table Worship Service That Asks Through a Shared Meal,” *Kukmin Daily*, July 28, 2024, <https://www.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=0020355194>.

New York.<sup>32</sup> However, Holy Table Service is not a replication; it is a contextual reinterpretation rooted in Korean cultural practices, feminist theological vision, and postcolonial critique.

Pastor Jeon explained, “I wanted to build a church centered on worship. I wanted to lower the church’s threshold so that people outside could naturally participate in worship, and that’s how the table was set.”<sup>33</sup> The service is not bound by strict liturgical formalism or pulpit-centered preaching. Instead, the gathering unfolds as a communal meal interwoven with hymn-singing, storytelling, testimony, prayer, and reflection. Conversations meander between theological reflection and everyday struggle. The meal continues throughout, without interruption or hierarchy. Emotional vulnerability is not hidden but welcomed—tears, laughter, confessions, and silence all have space at the table.<sup>34</sup>

This kind of table fellowship and service is not merely cultural adaptation; it is a theological act of resistance. In creating *koinonia* through food, story, and presence, Pastor Jeon challenges the patriarchal, clerical, and institutional frameworks that often marginalize women and other vulnerable groups. Drawing from postcolonial feminist theologians such as Kwok Pui-lan, this model of church can be seen as what Kwok calls a “counter-space,” a theological and social site formed at the margins where alternative visions of community and spiritual authority can emerge.<sup>35</sup> The Holy Table Service resists commodified ministry, performative religiosity, and ecclesial gatekeeping. It is radically participatory. Leadership is not wielded over others but cultivated among them.

---

<sup>32</sup> St. Lydia’s is a church in Brooklyn, New York, that holds its services in the form of a dinner party, centering worship around a meal that is prepared and shared in community. For more information, see <https://www.stlydias.org/dinner-church>.

<sup>33</sup> Park Yun Seo, “‘Are You Well?’ A Glimpse into a Table Worship Service That Asks Through a Shared Meal,” *Kukmin Daily*, July 28, 2024, <https://www.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=0020355194>.

<sup>34</sup> Park Yun Seo, “A ‘Delicious Worship’ Filled with Food, Hospitality, and Fellowship,” *Kukmin Daily*, July 29, 2024, <https://www.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=1722152397>.

<sup>35</sup> Kwok Pui-lan. *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

There is no fixed boundary between clergy and laity, no binary of speaker and listener. Everyone is both host and guest, both learner and teacher. In this way, Holy Table Service becomes not just a setting for worship, but a theological method, an invitation into God's hospitality through embodied practice.

The Koinonia-Centered Practice, as embodied by Pastor Jeon and Annyeong Church, offers not only a vision of healing for those marginalized by ecclesial structures but also a profound critique of dominant paradigms. Grounded in cultural memory, shared meals, and feminist theological imagination, this praxis challenges conventional understandings of church—not as a building or bureaucracy, but as a living table that is open, nourishing, and infused with God's presence.

Within this framework, the Holy Table Service does not simply redistribute power; it redefines it. The absence of rigid hierarchies, the embrace of vulnerability, and the cultivation of mutual presence confront deeply rooted assumptions about authority, leadership, and legitimacy in Korean church culture. Rather than presenting leadership as a status to be attained, Pastor Jeon reimagines it as a relationship to be nurtured. For those shaped by patriarchal ecclesial systems, this alternative model can be both disorienting and transformative. Yet her ministry offers more than critique—it points toward a possible future for the church, one marked by radical inclusion, embodied grace, and collective healing.

### *Motherhood as Theological Leadership: Embodied Authority and Spiritual Intimacy*

Motherhood as Theological Leadership reclaims women's leadership by centering relational intimacy, embodied care, and affective presence—not as gendered traits, but as theological strengths. Rather than feminizing patriarchal authority, it reimagines spiritual leadership through maternal gestures of love, vulnerability, and wisdom. As Pastor Park's ministry shows, this leadership is not rooted in biology but in liberative, incarnational presence. In contexts like Korean ministry, where leadership is often shaped by patriarchal, clerical, and militarized norms, this model reconfigures both pastoral identity and divine representation.

Consider the ministry of Pastor Park, a single, ordained Korean pastor whose leadership subverts traditional models of the “spiritual father”—a distant, authoritative figure shaped by Confucian hierarchies, colonial legacies, and militarized structures. Though not a biological mother, Pastor Park embraces a maternal paradigm grounded in trust, emotional presence, and relational openness. “There’s no wall between me and them,” she shares; congregants approach her “like they’re coming to their mom.” Her authority does not command obedience but arises from relational safety and healing presence.

Crucially, her leadership is not reducible to emotional labor. Instead, it embodies what feminist and postcolonial theologians identify as an epistemology of embodiment—a way of knowing and leading through lived experience, affective resonance, and relational responsiveness. Her authority is not a lesser supplement to patriarchal power but a theological claim in itself: that God can be mediated through maternal gestures of care, vulnerability, and attentiveness. This model resonates with a broader tradition of feminist theological reflection. Chung Hyun Kyung suggests a new image of God as Mother, highlighting a compassionate one who deeply feels the suffering of humanity and weeps with them,<sup>36</sup> while Kwok Pui-lan critiques the ways patriarchal ideologies have shaped both church structures and divine imagery.<sup>37</sup> In line with this tradition, Pastor Park’s ministry serves as a living theology that reclaims the maternal as a powerful symbol of divine care and communal transformation.

By identifying her pastoral identity with maternal imagery, Pastor Park expands the theological imagination of her community. For her, motherhood signifies not a private domestic role, but a public spiritual vocation—marked by presence, resilience, and restorative care. This model contests the dominant association of pastoral leadership with performance, control, and charisma,

---

<sup>36</sup> Hyun Kyung Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 64.

<sup>37</sup> Pui-lan Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 75.

offering instead a vision of leadership grounded in attentiveness, emotional intimacy, and the flourishing of others.

Within the Korean Protestant context—where leadership is often measured by church growth, public influence, and masculine charisma—Pastor Park’s maternal posture is particularly subversive. It challenges normative assumptions about who is qualified to lead and what leadership should entail. Moreover, it disrupts binary associations that confine motherhood to biological or domestic roles. Rather than essentializing femininity, Pastor Park frames maternal leadership as a theological practice—a dynamic orientation that invites connection, vulnerability, and shared spiritual labor.

Her social location is significant. As a single woman pastor in a context where such a position remains relatively rare, Pastor Park’s embrace of maternal imagery is both a theological and political act. It allows her to claim spiritual authority outside normative frameworks of marriage, motherhood, and gender conformity. In doing so, she redefines motherhood not as a biological status but as a prophetic and pastoral vocation that speaks from the margins of institutional power.

This marginal positioning is not a limitation but a site of creative theological insight. Postcolonial feminist theologians speak of border-crossing wisdom—knowledge born from liminal, contested, and hybrid spaces. Pastor Park exemplifies this. Her leadership does not emanate from the institutional center but from its edges. And it is precisely from these spaces that new ecclesial models can be imagined—models grounded not in control or hierarchy, but in tenderness, trust, and relational being.

### *Radical Interdependence as Playing Tug-of-War Game*

A final model of women’s leadership takes the form of Playing Tug-of-War—a metaphor for the radical interdependence and solidarity-based sisterhood embodied by Korean women in ministry. This image isn’t about adversarial competition but about collective resistance, mutual support, and shared strength under pressure. Liberation here means not persuading others with our opinions, but transforming reality through listening, allowing ourselves to be

influenced, and changing together.<sup>38</sup> In tug-of-war, no one claims victory alone: the rope moves only when we pull in unison—matching rhythm, anchoring each other, trusting every weight, and holding on even when we slip. Leadership, then, is not individual prowess but synchronized struggle and coordinated resilience.

This image speaks to the deep longing among many Korean women pastors—not for individual success within patriarchal structures, but for shared purpose, endurance, and spiritual accompaniment. In a context that often isolates and fragments women’s ministerial paths, tug-of-war offers a metaphor for sustaining leadership through embodied solidarity, rather than hierarchical visibility or institutional recognition.

Pastor Shin articulated this tension with painful clarity. “Solidarity is necessary, but in the Korean church, even among women, it’s hard to find solidarity,” she reflected. Her words reveal the complex barriers to collective action within marginalized communities—competition, internalized patriarchy, and fear of judgment often fracture potential alliances. For many, the term “feminist” is still seen as politically subversive or theologically deviant. Pastor Shin noted that some women avoid attending women’s gatherings to avoid being labeled, reinforcing the isolation many feel despite a shared desire for community.

This fear of being judged is grounded in the historical suspicion of feminism within Korean Protestantism, particularly in its evangelical and conservative expressions. Feminist theology is frequently portrayed as disruptive or unorthodox, leading many women leaders to remain silent about gender justice lest they jeopardize their already precarious roles. Consequently, women are simultaneously encouraged to lead and cautioned against “rocking the boat,” creating a double bind of expectation and constraint.

Pastor Lee, another pastor, described gender consciousness as something not inherently present, but cultivated through lived experience. “It comes from being pushed aside, from feeling like

---

<sup>38</sup> Boyung Lee, *Transforming Congregations through Community: Faith Formation from the Seminary to the Church* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2013), 135.

your gender disqualifies you from authority,” she shared. This awareness, often forged in struggle, becomes a theological resource. For some women, pain becomes pedagogy; exclusion becomes a source of pastoral empathy. Their theological depth is not abstract, but formed in the crucible of lived marginalization.

Yet despite these challenges, women continue to practice what Pastor Lee calls “loose solidarity.” This form of connection is not institutionalized or publicly visible. It emerges instead through small but meaningful gestures: a text message of encouragement, a prayer before worship, a moment of quiet affirmation in a stairwell. These moments may seem inconsequential, but they function as lifelines. They are the soft pulls on the rope—small reminders that someone else is holding on regardless of gender, sexuality, and age.

From a postcolonial feminist theological lens, this leadership model embodies *radical interdependence*. It resists colonial-patriarchal ideals of dominance and individual achievement, instead centering mutual empowerment, relational care, and shared burden-bearing. Like a tug-of-war, leadership here is not about solitary strength but collective resilience. Korean women pastors often find strength in grassroots spaces—over meals, prayers, and quiet conversations—where trust, vulnerability, and accompaniment form a sacred, though often invisible, spiritual infrastructure.

This model of radical interdependence reflects a distinctly theological vision. As articulated in 1 Corinthians 12:26, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one is honored, all rejoice together.” This is not merely emotional idealism but a reimagining of the body of Christ as a network of co-suffering and co-flourishing. It calls for a departure from hierarchical models toward relational and mutual leadership. Creating conditions for this kind of solidarity-based leadership requires more than structural change; it demands cultural transformation. Churches must cultivate ecosystems that value emotional labor, affirm informal networks of care, and recognize leadership as a shared vocation. Formal initiatives—mentoring programs, theological education with gender analysis, public celebration

of women's contributions—are essential. Yet equally important are shifts in the affective and cultural atmosphere of the church.

In this vision, even the act of “holding the line” is sacred. As one pastor shared, “Sometimes, I don't have the energy to pull. But I know someone else is holding on, and that keeps me from letting go.” This quiet perseverance is a form of resistance. It is not about winning but about remaining connected. To reimagine women's leadership in the Korean church, we must pull together—imperfectly, persistently, and with grace. The rope may slip. Hands may blister. But when women lead in radical interdependence, they embody a church grounded in compassion, not competition—a church sustained not by domination but by *hesed*, steadfast love.

### **Conclusion: Reclaiming Leadership, Reimagining the Church**

Korean women pastors are not merely participating in existing ecclesial structures but fundamentally reshaping the contours of pastoral leadership. Their ministries do not replicate dominant paradigms of power but instead offer alternative models rooted in *communal belonging*, *maternal care*, and *radical interdependence*. These women are not leading despite their marginalization; they are leading *from* it, transforming sites of exclusion into spaces of resistance, healing, and theological imagination.

Here, reclaiming leadership means rejecting the binaries that separate strength from care, authority from vulnerability, and theology from lived experience. Reimagining the church means creating spaces where tables replace pulpits, where maternal intimacy is honored as divine reflection, and where holding the rope for another becomes a sacred act of ministry. In these counter-spaces, formed not at the center but at the margins, a different kind of church becomes visible: one that is participatory, liberative, and infused with *hesed*, steadfast love.

In light of the seventieth anniversary of women's ordination, and as the Korean church continues to reimagine pastoral leadership and the contributions of women as spiritual leaders, a crucial question emerges: What must still be addressed to bring about lasting change? The task ahead is not only to remember the past but to courageously envision the future. This future must

include a conscious and sustained commitment to dismantling the structural, theological, and cultural barriers that continue to marginalize women in ministry.

To do so, denominational bodies and local congregations must actively design and implement leadership development curriculum that foreground gender justice and theological inclusivity. Theological seminaries and church-based training programs should integrate postcolonial feminist thought and elevate the lived experiences and pastoral wisdom of women clergy, not as add-ons, but as central sources of ecclesial knowledge. Education must go beyond theory, cultivating spiritual and practical habits that challenge patriarchal assumptions and model relational, collaborative leadership styles. Equally important is the praxis of intentional inclusion. Churches and denominational committees must proactively seek, appoint, and support women in senior leadership roles, including preaching, governance, and theological education. This requires not only opening doors but also redesigning the architecture of decision-making spaces so that they are no longer shaped by exclusion. Visibility matters. Representation shapes imagination. When women lead visibly, younger generations can envision new possibilities for ministry beyond traditional gender roles.

The road ahead demands more than passive acknowledgment; it calls for intentionality, courage, and communal transformation. The church must nurture a culture that affirms women's callings, names their contributions, and celebrates their leadership as essential to the life and mission of the church. This is not merely an issue of justice, but a matter of theological faithfulness to the gospel that calls all people, regardless of gender, to proclaim, shepherd, and lead in love. As Korean Christianity faces pressing challenges in the twenty-first century: declining membership, generational disaffiliation, and moral fatigue. It cannot afford to ignore the Holy Spirit's movement through those it has historically silenced. Women pastors are not waiting to be included; they are already leading with wisdom, resilience, and grace. The question is whether the church will have the vision and humility to follow.

---

**FROM PERFORMANCE TO FORMATION: REIMAGINING SERVANT LEADERSHIP EDUCATION**  
 KYLE J.A. SMALL, DAVID G. FORNEY

**Abstract**

*In this article, we reimagine Servant Leadership education by confronting the ways it is often co-opted to promote compliance and surface-level virtue. Drawing on Robert Greenleaf's lesser-known writings and informed by critical pedagogical theory, we propose shifting Servant Leadership from a leader-centered model to one rooted in communal formation and institutional healing. We highlight key pedagogical practices, emphasize culturally expansive frameworks, and explore Servant Leadership as a relational and developmental process grounded in trust, discernment, and power. Rather than codifying a particular version of SL, we invite educators to teach it as a living practice, a way of forming people and communities, grounded in shared responsibility and transformation.*

**Introduction: From Deconstruction to Pedagogical Reform**

In our earlier article,<sup>1</sup> we explored how Servant Leadership (SL) can often obscure hierarchical control rather than advance social responsibility, institutional integrity, or collective transformation. Framed as moral performance—“be like Jesus,” “put others first,” “lead through humility”—SL is widely embraced in leadership

---

<sup>1</sup> Forney, David, and Kyle Small. “The Ghost of Servant Leadership: Power, Performance, and the Illusion of Virtue” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 24, no. 1 (2025): 7-28.

*David G. Forney serves as Pastor at First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, Virginia*

*Kyle J.A. Small serves as Dean of Graduate Studies at Calvin University, Grand Rapids, Michigan*

education as a benevolent corrective to authoritarianism. Yet our analysis uncovered a troubling paradox: behind the public transcript of service lies a hidden curriculum of compliance, privilege preservation, and institutional image management.

For all its professed virtue, SL can function like the portrait in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that is radiant on the surface but decaying within. In Wilde's novel, Dorian Gray remains outwardly youthful and unblemished, while a hidden portrait—locked away in an attic—absorbs the marks of his moral corruption and vanity. The more he indulges in a life of self-serving pleasure, the more grotesque the portrait becomes, revealing the cost of maintaining an untainted image at the expense of integrity.<sup>2</sup> Leadership educators must be willing to climb into the attic and confront the darker realities of institutional formation that remain hidden even as the surface gleams with character rhetoric and virtue signaling.

This second article turns toward the necessary work of reconstruction. If SL education can become performative, or even corrosive, what would it mean to teach SL in a way that heals rather than hides, empowers rather than coerces? How might we recover and reframe Robert Greenleaf's original vision, not as a leader-centered ethic of moral modeling, but as a pedagogical project oriented toward meaningful organizational change?

We begin by recognizing that SL is not just a theory of leadership; it is also a curricular system. It transmits assumptions about authority, goodness, obedience, and purpose. And, like any curriculum, it can be examined, reshaped, and reimaged. While Greenleaf never developed a comprehensive pedagogy, his lesser-known essays—*Servant Leadership in Education*, *Trustees as Servants*, and *The Institution as Servant*—offer essential clues for a more formative and socially engaged educational approach.<sup>3</sup> Across

---

<sup>2</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, edited by Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> These essays are in Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, anniversary ed., ed. Larry C. Spears (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002).

these works, Greenleaf invites us to see institutions as not only useful but capable of becoming transformational: “Education that does not serve to foster the maturing of the person is subversive. It discourages, dilutes, and corrupts.”<sup>4</sup> He challenges trustees and educators to act not as moral overseers but as “culture-shapers” who must regularly ask, “What is the institution becoming because of our presence?”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps most notably, he conceives of vision as a shared act of discernment, a process of “building a consensus of group purpose through the clarification of values and goals.”<sup>6</sup> He undoes any notions that vision-casting is heroic or charismatic, even under the guise of servanthood.

To avoid reinforcing the Dorian Gray effect, namely, the separation of image from integrity, we are invited to confront the pedagogical systems through which SL is taught and internalized. This article proposes a reorientation of SL education grounded in Greenleaf’s original institutional concerns and informed by critical pedagogical theory. We argue that leadership education should form wise, free, and socially responsible people, not merely reinforce compliant and “humble” leaders. Our approach seeks to reclaim SL as a curriculum of liberation: one that values process over performance, formation over behavior management, and collective insight over unilateral vision.

To that end, we propose five pedagogical movements that emphasize: (1) relational accompaniment (in exchange for virtue performance), (2) systemic critique (in exchange for private character), (3) communal empowerment (in exchange for moral individualism), (4) courage through discernment (in exchange for control through niceness), and (5) institutional healing (in exchange for image maintenance). Throughout, we return to Wilde’s metaphor, urging leadership educators to examine the portrait in the attic, again, not to discard SL but to save it from its ghost and return it to an embodied practice.

---

<sup>4</sup> Greenleaf, “The Servant as Leader,” 27.

<sup>5</sup> Greenleaf, “Servant Responsibility in a Bureaucratic Society,” 304.

<sup>6</sup> Greenleaf, “The Servant as Leader,” 34.

## The Problem of Transmission: How SL Is Taught and Internalized

The contemporary teaching of SL in religious institutions mirrors broader trends in leadership education: it is predominantly prescriptive rather than descriptive. SL syllabi often prioritize idealized portrayals of leadership over a critical examination of how the theory has been historically developed, practiced, or evaluated. Typical pedagogical approaches center on moral aspiration while neglecting the social scientific realities that inform the leadership experience.

Religious leadership courses frequently elevate Jesus as the archetypal servant leader. For example, in many evangelical and Protestant institutions, Blanchard and Hodges's *Lead Like Jesus* serves as a primary text.<sup>7</sup> In ecumenical contexts, the writings of Henri Nouwen are often employed.<sup>8</sup> And in previous decades, Laurie Beth Jones's *Jesus, CEO* emerged as a widely adopted Christianized model of leadership.<sup>9</sup> These resources, while spiritually evocative, tend to abstract SL into a series of ideal virtues rather than critically engaging with the theological or organizational complexities of power, identity, or responsibility.

This Jesus-as-model framework is further reinforced by the blending of SL with transformational leadership discourse. In religious education, transformational leadership is often framed as a second lens that emphasizes inspiration, connection, and personal charisma. Yet this conflation produces an image of Jesus that accentuates victorious leadership traits while marginalizing his suffering, rejection, and death. What emerges is a sanitized portrait of Christ-as-leader that strips away the disruptive, cruciform nature of his ministry. It also reaffirms a leadership ideal focused on public influence and emotional intelligence rather than prophetic resistance or systemic critique. In doing so, it privileges individual

---

<sup>7</sup> Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *Lead Like Jesus: Lessons from the Greatest Leadership Role Model of All Time* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus, CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership* (New York: Hyperion, 1996).

personality over communal discernment and reinforces an individualized model of leadership that can obscure the collective, relational, and justice-oriented dimensions of Jesus's ministry.

In response to these tensions, some religious institutions have distanced themselves from Greenleaf altogether, labeling his work a "secular model." In doing so, they either retrofit Greenleaf's ideas with explicit biblical exegesis (e.g., Irving & Strauss, *Leadership in Christian Perspective*, 2019) or replace his writings entirely with works like *Lead Like Jesus Revisited* by Blanchard and Hodge.<sup>10</sup> Others, notably Jacquelyn Grant, have sharply critiqued the language of servanthood, arguing that it has historically functioned to justify the subordination of Black women and reinforce systems of racial, gendered, and economic oppression rather than liberation or shared responsibility.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Original Image of Dorian Gray: Greenleaf's Deeper Assumptions**

It is important to remember that Greenleaf's conception of SL was not primarily theological. While he acknowledged the influence of Judeo-Christian thought, his foundational inspiration came from literature, specifically Hermann Hesse's *The Journey to the East*, originally published in 1932. Greenleaf often repeated, "If I had not read the story of Leo, I might never have written anything on this subject."<sup>12</sup> His reflections emerged not from Christology but from narrative intuition. This origin story is not incidental; it reveals Greenleaf's concern with formation, mystery, and moral awakening rather than moral certitude.

Yet over time, SL in religious settings has become increasingly codified. Rather than inviting discernment, it is taught through lists

---

<sup>10</sup> Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *Lead Like Jesus Revisited: Lessons from the Greatest Leadership Role Model of All Time* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, "The Sin of Servanthood and the Deliverance of Discipleship," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, "Servant: Retrospect and Prospect," in *The Power of Servant-Leadership*, ed. Larry C. Spears (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1998), 22, 58.

of traits, maxims, and behaviors. Larry Spears's ten characteristics of Servant Leadership are helpful to the teaching of SL, yet risk detaching the practice from Greenleaf's institutional and existential critique.<sup>13</sup> When SL becomes a set of bullet points, it loses its disruptive edge. Greenleaf himself warned against usefulness without responsibility.

Greenleaf's lesser-known essays, especially "Servant: Retrospect and Prospect" and "Education and Maturity," paint a far more complex picture. They serve as institutional laments, diagnosing malaise in business, higher education, health care, and religion. He observed how each sector developed problematic mindsets; universities administered an anti-leadership vaccine; churches became bureaucracies for managing the status quo. When Greenleaf challenged executives with these critiques, he often received the same reply: "We don't want to talk about it." Like toddlers covering their eyes, institutions avoided the hard work of self-examination. SL was his response, not to praise virtue but to provoke transformation.

In these writings, Greenleaf insists that only a "spirit-led transformation" can reverse the cultural paralysis he witnessed. He warns of "courting disaster" through truncated vision, limited mental models, and organizational inaction.<sup>14</sup> His urgency remains prophetic today.

Greenleaf's framework for mature leadership reaches beyond simply critiquing organizations; it presents a psychological and ethical vision of leadership as a process of inner growth. True maturity, in his view, involves the capacity to endure experiences that humble or diminish the ego without falling apart, and to navigate moments of success or praise without losing one's sense of perspective. He names four formative tensions:

- The consequences of responsibility under pressure ("heat of action"),

---

<sup>13</sup> Larry C. Spears, "Character and Servant Leadership: Ten Characteristics of Effective, Caring Leaders," *The Journal of Virtues & Leadership* 1, no. 1 (2010): 25–30.

<sup>14</sup> Greenleaf, "Servant: Retrospect and Prospect," 25.

- The tension between institutional conformity and personal authenticity,
- The complexities of significance (status, property, and success),
- The call for growth through the expression of one's unique self.

These are not abstract issues. They are crucibles of formation. To lead is to suffer; to serve is to bear the costs, both personal and communal, of meaningful change. Greenleaf contrasts this with what he calls the misleading indicators of success: wealth, status, institutional peace, and busyness. These may accompany maturity but are not signs of it. True maturity is marked by discernment, integrity, and the ability to hold contradiction. For Greenleaf, character, not charisma, matters. Greenleaf offers nine “valid tests” of SL, none of which can be reduced to technique:

- A simultaneous contentment and discontent with the present,
- A sustained sense of purpose,
- A willingness to be truly seen,
- A shift in what one finds meaningful,
- An impatience with wasted time,
- An integrative vision of work and life,
- An appreciative stance toward others,
- And an intuitive sense of wholeness, even when it is not comfortable.

These tests indicate that SL cannot be measured by achievement or charisma but by resilience in ambiguity. SL becomes hollow when divorced from these crucibles of growth. Servanthood, in this frame, is not a virtue to perform but a vocation to endure.

Greenleaf believed the modern quest for safety and comfort was strangling leadership. Jacquelyn Grant's critique sharpens this point. When SL is stripped of struggle and context, it becomes not a radical call to transformation but a quiet tool of control. To teach SL today, we would benefit in returning not just to Greenleaf's

writings but to the spiritual and institutional anguish that shaped them. Only by ascending into the attic—into the hidden fears, risks, and truths of leadership—can we retrieve a model worth teaching.

### **Greenleaf's Pedagogical Hints: A Recovery of Neglected Resources**

Although Greenleaf never constructed a formal pedagogy, his essays are laced with educational insight. Spread across his writing on trusteeship, institutional responsibility, and moral maturity, Greenleaf outlines a vision of SL that is fundamentally pedagogical. Leadership is not simply a matter of guiding others or modeling virtue; it is a way of forming people, cultures, and institutions toward greater wholeness, responsibility, and service. These insights are offered not as a cohesive instructional design but as what we might call pedagogical hints: suggestions, provocations, and moral cues that invite educators to do their *own* reflective work.

Greenleaf's restraint from codifying a teaching method is not a flaw but an intentional expression of SL itself. By refusing to formalize his educational philosophy, Greenleaf models trust in the discernment of others. He writes suggestively, not prescriptively. Just as the servant leader listens before acting and leads by empowering others, Greenleaf—the teacher and writer—steps back to create space for moral agency. His writings are less a curriculum to be adopted than an invitation to formation. The absence of a rigid pedagogical model reflects the very ethic he sought to promote, namely, trust, humility, and dialogue in service of shared transformation.

To recover a more formative, liberative, and institutionally grounded pedagogy of SL, we return to three of Greenleaf's lesser-known yet richly suggestive contributions. First, we examine his call for institutions to become formational communities, capable of shaping character and culture rather than merely producing outcomes. Second, we explore his critique of educational systems and his insistence that leadership learning must prioritize responsibility and moral formation over credentialing or advancement. Finally, we consider his insight that vision is not a product of individual

charisma but a communal act of discernment, cultivated through patient, shared reflection. These three themes offer a framework for reimagining SL education in ways that resist performance and invite transformation.

### *Servant Institutions as Formational Communities*

In his essay “Ethics and Manipulation,” which he presented in February 1970 in Zurich, Switzerland, Greenleaf insists that institutions must do more than produce results or sustain themselves. They must become environments that nurture the growth and well-being of the people within them. “Looking at the two major elements, the work and the person, the new ethic, simply but quite completely stated, will be: The work exists for the person as much as the person exists for the work.”<sup>15</sup> This framing radically shifts the function of institutions from instruments of output to communities of formation pursuing public good (there is an outward-facing direction for community).

For educators, this is a foundational claim. If institutions are to be servants, then the way leadership is taught within them must also reflect a commitment to formation rather than just function. These educational spaces can serve as more than content delivery systems; they have the potential to shape formative experiences. To accomplish this, they must become spaces where students learn to grow in autonomy, courage, and moral responsibility. When institutions align their structures and cultures with the values of SL—prioritizing discernment, trust, and moral growth—they model the very formation they hope to inspire. In this way, the servant institution, like the servant educator, embodies the values it seeks to cultivate. In this sense, pedagogy is institutional as much as individual. Students are shaped not just by what they read but by the relational, cultural, and spiritual dynamics of the places where they study. If those places are not life-giving, then the leadership they produce will not be either.

Greenleaf’s pedagogical vision becomes especially clear in “Trustees as Servants,” where he portrays trustees and institutional

---

<sup>15</sup> Greenleaf, “Servant Leadership in Business,” 154.

leaders not merely as overseers, but as educators of institutional culture. Leadership, in this view, is an act of formation. Trustees shape the moral and relational environment in which people work and grow. “No person is complete; no one is to be entrusted with all. Completeness is to be found only in the complementary talents of several who relate as equals.”<sup>16</sup> This challenges the managerial myth that leadership must rest with one powerful individual and invites instead a shared model of authority rooted in mutual trust.

For those teaching SL, the insight that leadership is personal and institutional is critical. A course alone cannot form servant leaders if the institution’s governance culture rewards competition, risk avoidance, or self-protection. The behaviors modeled by those in power form a hidden curriculum that teaches what kind of leadership is legitimate and what kind of community is possible.

Greenleaf reminds us that tone is pedagogy. Trustees and senior leaders, whether they intend to or not, are always teaching. The ways they make decisions, distribute authority, or handle conflict become signals that others absorb. Their leadership forms the culture within which students, faculty, and staff come to understand service and responsibility. Educators, therefore, benefit from partnering with institutional leaders as co-formers of community. Institutions that claim SL must not only teach it; they must embody it in structure, tone, and trust.

### *Education That Forms Responsibility*

In his essay “Servant Leadership in Education,” Greenleaf offers a pointed critique of the American educational system. At its core, he argues, education has become too abstract and is designed for the few who thrive on conceptual learning while neglecting the majority who learn best through experience. This pedagogical misalignment, he warns, has real consequences: a failure to prepare students not just for careers but for the lives of responsible leadership.

Greenleaf faults the educational establishment on three major fronts. First, he argues that it actively resists the cultivation of

---

<sup>16</sup> Greenleaf, “Trustees as Servants,” 125.

leadership. Educators, he suggests, often administer “an anti-leadership vaccine,” implicitly discouraging students from seeing themselves as capable of leading.<sup>17</sup> Second, he challenges the dominant assumption that success means upward mobility. Rather than training all students to assimilate into elite ranks, he urges institutions to prepare those from disadvantaged backgrounds to return to their communities as servant leaders. This, he contends, might be the most effective and dignified way to address systemic injustice.

Third, he highlights a growing confusion over the role of schools in teaching values. Rather than helping students clarify their moral commitments, institutions have adopted a posture of neutrality that leaves them ethically unmoored. As Greenleaf asks, “Is it only appropriate to teach about values and make no judgments about what they ought to be?... Should not schools be importantly concerned with value clarification so that students are given as firm a basis as possible for making the choices they have always made?”<sup>18</sup> In neglecting this work of moral formation, education risks producing capable people without the conscience or clarity to use their influence wisely.

For Greenleaf, then, SL education must not simply confer credentials or transmit information. It must shape students into mature people with the vision, courage, and moral clarity to serve others. The measure of educational success, he insists, is not only performance but primarily the formation of morally grounded character and the development of communities committed to service and justice.

### *Vision Sharing as Pedagogical Act*

In *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf highlights foresight as a central quality of SL. “Foresight is the ‘lead’ that the leader has. Once he loses this lead and events start to force his hand, he is a leader in name only.”<sup>19</sup> Yet this foresight is not a product of technical planning or individual charisma. It arises from deep

---

<sup>17</sup> Greenleaf, “Servant Leadership in Education,” 177.

<sup>18</sup> Greenleaf, “Servant Leadership in Education,” 178.

<sup>19</sup> Greenleaf, “The Servant as Leader,” 40.

listening, collective reflection, and a patient attentiveness to what is emerging in the life of a community.

This understanding of vision as foresight challenges dominant leadership paradigms. While often associated with the charisma of individual leaders, Greenleaf's approach invites us to consider vision as the fruit of shared discernment. In pedagogical terms, this means that vision cannot be taught like a formula. It must be cultivated through communal practices of reflection, dialogue, and meaning-making.

Educators who teach SL are invited to move beyond presenting vision as a leadership tool to be deployed. Instead, they can model a way of learning and leading that makes space for the slow, uncertain, and often surprising process by which vision emerges. In doing so, they prepare students not to perform leadership, but to participate in the discovery of what is needed for the common good.

### **Pedagogy and Process for Teaching Servant Leadership**

The teaching of SL continues to focus on the leader rather than on the communities built and those served. As we argued in our first article, this results in a hidden curriculum that reinforces a more traditional style of leadership, albeit with performative humility. The lingering effects of SL's misapplication continue to (1) reinforce hierarchy, (2) support cultural and gender biases, and (3) avoid critical reflection regarding organizational structure and power. Research rarely examines outcomes that speak directly to Greenleaf's seminal test—whether those served grow as persons—and, given that empirical studies are largely leader-centric, it remains unclear whether the practice of SL reduces control and compliance or genuinely cultivates empowerment. In his original conception, Greenleaf focused on developing servant-oriented institutions and social responsibility, rather than elevating the individual as a moral leader. He envisioned an approach to leadership that fosters hope, empowers participants, and heals social and institutional wounds. A genuine SL pedagogy would cultivate structural change, strengthen institutional accountability, and promote cooperative empowerment.

Greenleaf's writings offered a compelling vision for practicing

SL but lacked a detailed plan for preparing leaders to implement these practices and make social impact. While he pointed to the need for a pedagogy to develop and form servant leaders, he left the design and delivery to future thinkers. As he asked,

Could we learn what servant leaders are like in real life situations and bring what we learn into teachable form, with an appropriate pedagogy, for that teaching? Somebody ought to do it if our institutions of the future become what we say they ought to become – true servants of society...I give [the task] to the rest of you.<sup>20</sup>

Greenleaf's challenge is clear: if SL is to shape the future of our institutions, someone must develop a pedagogy rooted in experience. "Somebody ought to do it," he writes. "I give [the task] to the rest of you." We take that encouragement seriously. The remainder of this article responds by identifying key pedagogical practices that reflect and extend Greenleaf's vision. While SL is often taught through trait-based models (like Spears's ten characteristics), Greenleaf pointed to experience, reflection, and service as essential to forming mature leaders.

We propose four areas of focus. First, we explore the curriculum of everyday life, where the use and experience of power shape leadership. Second, we examine how time and testing foster maturity, especially through storytelling, conflict, and feedback. Third, we reflect on the practice of building trust through discernment and transparent relationships. Finally, we consider how SL must adapt to diverse cultural contexts, drawing on womanist, indigenous, and diasporic wisdom. Together, these themes invite a more grounded and liberative approach to teaching Servant Leadership.

### **Taking Up the Pedagogical Practices**

Teaching leadership is a curious thing. In *Teacher as Servant*, Greenleaf offers the parable of Jefferson House, a residential learning community shaped by shared responsibility and

---

<sup>20</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, *Teacher as Servant: A Parable* (Cambridge, MA: Center for Applied Studies, 1979), 150.

intentional moral formation. At the center is Professor Billings, who serves as leader and participant. He guides students not through authority alone but through trust, example, and shared decision-making. Greenleaf uses this story to illustrate how servant leaders are formed through the integration of action, environment, and reflection. The parable introduces several teaching guests to imagine how SL operates in community. Rarely is this parable applied to classroom practice today, yet it evokes a way of life more resonant with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Finkenwalde* than with most contemporary universities or seminaries.

Greenleaf was frustrated by the legitimacy structures of academia—credit hours, seat time, workload calculators, and student learning outcomes. He acknowledged the constraints of the modern university, yet he consistently pushed the idea that forming servant leaders requires three variables: action, environment, and reflection.<sup>21</sup> This pedagogical imagination often stands in tension with traditional classroom teaching; however, when SL is taught in a classroom, wise instructors recognize that they are hosting an environment and a lived experience that invites deep reflection.

In pursuit of wisdom in teaching leadership, we engaged our friend and teacher, Craig Van Gelder (ARL charter member and past president), in conversation about ghost leadership and the formation of servant leaders. Through his experience and scholarship, he helped frame several pedagogical practices essential to teaching SL today. His reflections echoed Greenleaf's conviction that SL must be taught through action and reflection, particularly on context, timing, testing, and personal embodiment. What follows are pedagogical reflections that both support the formation of servant leaders and refine the broader aims of education, an explicit goal that Greenleaf held closely.<sup>22</sup> These include the formative role of everyday experience, the necessity of time and

---

<sup>21</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, "Education as Maturity," in *On Becoming a Servant-Leader*, ed. Don M. Frick and Larry C. Spears (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, "My Final Night in Jefferson House," in *On Becoming a Servant-Leader*, ed. Don M. Frick and Larry C. Spears (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 211.

testing, the challenge of building trust, and the importance of cultural and contextual adaptability.

### *The Curriculum of Everyday Life*

Greenleaf placed power at the center of SL. Although power often carries negative connotations, he repeatedly named it the crucible through which servant leaders are formed. He did not believe that power could be learned through books or lectures, but only through lived experience, particularly one's own experience with power, both as a user and as one acted upon. He wrote:

To become an effective servant leader, one must learn from one's own experience how to serve and be served by power. You won't learn all there is to learn about this in your four years here—I haven't at 56. But I think it is terribly important that you be alerted, experientially, while you are here, and at the process of learning from experience, be firmly established before you leave here. I have not found that an academic understanding of power contributes to this. The only way you will really learn about power is to be very close to its use. To really know, one must use power and have it used on oneself.<sup>23</sup>

The role of the teacher in forming servant leaders is, therefore, to remain attuned to the dynamics of power—both in their own pedagogy and within the broader teaching environment, including the classroom. These dynamics are always present, generating both creativity and disruption. In this way, they form the curriculum of everyday life.

The SL educator roots their work in the daily routines of life, seeing them not only as the context for growth but as the curriculum itself. Ron Heifetz, via Sharon Daloz Parks, describes how the classroom must become “part of the real world,” a site where individuals grow and develop in real time.<sup>24</sup> Alertness, which Greenleaf considered a central source of power, is essential to

---

<sup>23</sup> Greenleaf, “My Final Night in Jefferson House,” 211.

<sup>24</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2005).

noticing and engaging with the formative events and activities that shape others. Heifetz's "case-in-point" method reflects this well: the classroom becomes a living field of power dynamics. As he puts it, "the dynamics that take place in this classroom, including the dynamics between you and me and amongst you, will be available for us to examine."<sup>25</sup> He continues by emphasizing the costliness of attentiveness for the teacher. When the goal is the formation of servant leaders, then content becomes secondary to the educator's emotional and political awareness as a facilitator: "I cannot fully protect you from the ways you are prepared to hurt each other, but there will be lots of opportunities to learn from the wounds if it happens.... I will not keep you from doing what you do already in your workplaces. There are risks to taking this course as there are risks in the practice of leadership."<sup>26</sup> Educators can facilitate this kind of learning by inviting students to work together in teams on meaningful projects. While the professor remains a key figure, both Greenleaf and Heifetz emphasized that the real work of learning does not depend on the professor alone. Instead, it is most powerfully achieved through peer engagement. Greenleaf believed that leadership education should prepare students to live and lead among equals who challenge, question, and co-create. He identified the most essential learning outcome for aspiring servant leaders as "to use one's common sense and to live and work in community."<sup>27</sup> He was deeply concerned about practices, both academic and organizational, that centralized power in a single individual, whether executive or teacher. In response to students' frequent questions such as "Can you be trusted?" and "Will you intervene?" Heifetz offered his now-familiar challenge: "If you expect me to be the only one to intervene to protect you, we are going to learn a lot about dependency."<sup>28</sup> Peer learning, both formal and informal, becomes a pedagogy of empowerment that is capable of effecting constructive change in organizations and society alike. While much of this occurs apart from the teacher's

---

<sup>25</sup> Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught*, 82.

<sup>27</sup> Greenleaf, *Teacher as Servant*, 217.

<sup>28</sup> Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught*, 83.

direct influence, educators can foster such learning by organizing group collaborations. These settings offer rich opportunities for observation and become primary sites for what Greenleaf called testing ground pedagogies.

Another practice central to this pedagogy is storytelling. Stories function as reference points that shape institutional memory and illuminate what kinds of culture servant leaders are cultivating. While leadership education often focuses on principles grounded in quantitative data or psychometric assessments, Greenleaf, who formerly served as AT&T's director of management research, turned instead to qualitative formation. He saw storytelling not as peripheral but as central to developing shared purpose and deep identity.

Stories, including myths and parables, invite participants to embody the values of a community and re-narrate their lives in relationship to those shared accounts. In his essay *A School for Leadership*, Greenleaf highlights the power of stories in leadership formation. Of all the components of a curriculum, he gives special attention to the teaching of literature. Servant Leadership, he argues, is not taught through top ten lists or "irrefutable laws," but by immersing learners in stories: "The great literature of wisdom of the past sheds light on the predicaments of decision-making today."<sup>29</sup> In this, Greenleaf echoes Paul Ricoeur's conviction that the collision of stories—whether drawn from great literature or from our own experience—births new possibilities and moral imagination. Or as Greenleaf himself puts it, "the concerns of language are finally moral concerns," and "our style is betrayed."<sup>30</sup>

### *The Crucible of Time*

Servant leaders are best recognized by identifying those who demonstrate maturity, which Greenleaf defines again as "the ability to ride life's Bucky little horse – and stay on!"<sup>31</sup> Testing for maturity

---

<sup>29</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, "A School for Leadership," in *On Becoming a Servant-Leader*, ed. Don M. Frick and Larry C. Spears (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 161.

<sup>30</sup> Greenleaf, "A School for Leadership," 161.

<sup>31</sup> Greenleaf, *Teacher as Servant*, 207.

in SL requires time. The teaching of SL is often confined to courses that span fourteen weeks, and the crucible of maturity is barely touched by the traditional university experience, which typically includes passive classroom participation or part-time internships. Becoming a servant leader is a developmental process that unfolds gradually, often in the context of conflict, and passes through various phases of formation. The SL educator must be a careful observer, able to notice the early signs of maturity in moments of peer conflict, difficult feedback, and personal risk-taking.

A particularly complex aspect of pedagogies of time in leadership formation is that, eventually, the teacher is sometimes required to make decisions about who shows maturity and leadership potential and who does not. This is a difficult and often contested task in educational settings that emphasize inclusion and belonging, where equal access to opportunity is a shared value. Nevertheless, effective teachers of SL learn to distinguish between those who will function as “good citizens” and those who are inclined and able to “exercise leadership.” This distinction includes helping students learn to manage the development of their relationships with others. Individuals vary in personality, temperament, motivation, and in intellectual and practical abilities. Over time, the servant leader can become attuned to these differences and understand how they influence relational dynamics. Some individuals will function more consistently as followers, while others will be drawn to leadership. Discerning these distinctions is rarely quick or obvious, but it is a vital pedagogical responsibility in the formation of servant leaders.

### *Testing the Ground*

Time requires a testing ground, and the most important testing ground is found in personal conflict.<sup>32</sup> Teaching is caught between principles of “do no harm” and welcoming an intersection of the classroom and the “real world” where conflict commonly happens.<sup>33</sup> How one engages with peers, maintains their position, and considers the interests of others are central factors in assessing

---

<sup>32</sup> Greenleaf, “Education as Maturity,” 67.

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Stephen D. Brookfield, *Powerful Techniques for Teaching Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013).

whether someone has the maturity to develop as a servant leader. The teacher of SL spends years cultivating the practices to discern the developmental phases people typically undergo and to recognize how individuals are growing and changing over time.

A balanced approach is needed, one that includes both the teaching of myths and parables and the intentional use of questions to foster self-discovery. Here, the pedagogy of teaching SL aligns closely with its practice. Servant leaders ask questions not to guide others toward a fixed conclusion but with genuine curiosity that inspires reflection and action. Greenleaf emphasized the power of questions in a world that increasingly no longer accepts positional authority. He wrote:

Questioning relates, not only to the act of listening in the development of vision, on the part of the servant, it is one of the most effective means by which the servant is able to relate to the consciousness and conscience of others. In an atmosphere that is free of personal competitiveness and the dominance of a boss, however benign, questioning becomes what I would call a higher form. And it is a great time saver because it minimizes hangups and facilitates the resolution of differences. And it produces, in the person like myself, who is designated as leader, but not chief, a wholly new style of relating to my colleagues. It is simply the most satisfying and efficient means of arriving at critical decisions that I have ever experienced.<sup>34</sup>

The teacher of SL is responsible for cultivating an environment in which participants are permitted to make mistakes and are then guided to transform those experiences into meaningful “learning moments,” free from guilt or shame. Another essential testing ground lies not only in how someone behaves in a conflict but in how they reflect on the experience afterward. The teacher must work attentively to create psychological safety while remaining responsive to the ways people inevitably harm one another. A

---

<sup>34</sup> Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*, 120.

good teacher does not shrink from those moments but invites both personal and communal reflection. This posture fosters bravery more than safety.

Empathy has long been recognized as a core trait of SL. It is an affective gift extended toward others. Empathy, while often directed outward, also requires internal awareness and emotional self-reflection on the part of the leader. It is important to support servant leaders in learning to process their feelings, especially those that surface in failure or conflict. Indeed, servant leaders often grow as much or more from their mistakes than from their typical contributions. Creating an environment in which participants are allowed to fail and then learn from those failures, without judgment, is a deeply empowering practice. It also reduces the fear of failure, which frequently inhibits individuals and institutions from reaching their fullest potential.

The final testing ground for SL lies in whether a community can both love and laugh. These two qualities must exist together—not in competition, but in harmony. In *Teacher as Servant*, Greenleaf begins and ends with a reflection on this very point: “We who participated in this experience came to feel it in our natures to love and to laugh and to live and work in community, and to reject the idea that our fellow humans are to be used, competed with, or judged.”<sup>35</sup> Later, he writes, “Love without laughter can be grim and oppressive. Laughter without love can be derisive and venomous. Together they make for greatness of spirit.”<sup>36</sup> Few course evaluations or educational assessment tools account for the presence of loving laughter, yet its presence may be the clearest sign that SL is being faithfully and effectively taught.

### *Building Trust – The Painful Practice of Discernment*

Greenleaf held a deep belief in the individual, not as an isolated or atomized person but as a differentiated self who is capable of both autonomy and connection. For the servant leader, this presents a paradox: how to deepen one’s commitment to community while remaining a distinct and autonomous self. Edwin Friedman, who

---

<sup>35</sup> Greenleaf, *Teacher as Servant*, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Greenleaf, *Teacher as Servant*, 220.

shares many affinities with Greenleaf, especially in his view of congregations as formative social institutions, later described this dynamic as being “differentiated yet connected.” He identified this posture as the key to building trust rather than fostering dependency.<sup>37</sup>

The growth of others, Greenleaf argued, must be grounded in the development of relationships that are formed through trust. He lamented that some professors and teachers misuse their influence by demanding loyalty rather than cultivating mutual trust. These educators may gain compliance from students, but they do not form servant leaders. The foundational work of fostering growth lies in building trust with those we hope to develop. This requires that servant leaders genuinely care for others and demonstrate that care consistently through their leadership. Trust grows through transparency, self-reflection, and the shared work of problem-solving.

It is essential to develop trust with others before making deeper commitments to them. Teaching trust is a delicate practice. Educators must navigate the balance between being transparent and maintaining healthy boundaries. Some students may perceive transparency as a form of status and may use it to gain influence or access. This is why discerning leadership maturity amid broad curricular access remains so difficult. Still, one of the most effective ways to test leadership readiness is to offer honest reflections about one’s work. The student who listens, understands, and responds with insight demonstrates maturity. The appropriate response from the educator is to continue investing trust. Effective teachers of SL learn to notice when trust has matured enough to support a deeper level of relationship.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of building trust emerges in educational settings where access to curriculum is broad, such as tuition-based programs. In these contexts, many students may have equal access to learning opportunities, but not all will be

---

<sup>37</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 2nd ed., ed. Margaret M. Treadwell and Edward W. Beal (New York: Church Publishing, 2017).

equally prepared for deeper formation. Greenleaf recognized this complexity. He believed that part of the educator's work involves "drawing circles"—not as an act of exclusion, but as a means of empowering those who have shown evidence of maturity and readiness. These circles may not be announced publicly, but they can take the form of increased responsibility, more intimate collaboration, or affirmed leadership within a group. Being included in such a circle affirms a person's identity and strengthens their sense of ownership in the organization's mission and vision. Greenleaf's mythical professor, Dr. Billings, articulates this insight with clarity:

I slowly realized that the success of this house really depended on my ability to select a group of students with greater than average maturity, who are ready for a more demanding experience than usual students are prepared for. I realized I should not try to select a group of people who are alike, but they needed to be ready for about the same depth of experience. Another five years were spent gradually learning—listening to students—how to do this.<sup>38</sup>

This discernment—selecting students with the maturity and readiness for more demanding formation—requires time, patience, and a willingness to learn from students themselves. It also requires courage, humility, and a willingness to listen. In the end, the teacher of SL does not impose formation; they invite it, observe it, and recognize it when it emerges.

### **Cultural and Contextual Adaptability**

If SL is to serve as a liberative force rather than a managerial performance of humility, it must break free from the cultural enclosure of its dominant framing. Though often presented as culturally neutral, SL education has been shaped by Western, male-centric norms that prioritize hierarchical benevolence, institutional loyalty, and individual virtue. Its moral grammar reflects not only a limited tradition but also an epistemology shaped by whiteness, as Scheurich and Young contend, in ways that constrain what can be

---

<sup>38</sup> Greenleaf, *Teacher as Servant*, 205.

known and who can be seen as a legitimate knower.<sup>39</sup> To reclaim SL as a pedagogy of liberation, it must be reimagined in conversation with leadership traditions arising from collectivist, indigenous, womanist, and diasporic worldviews.

These traditions do not merely supplement SL; they interrogate its epistemological core. Where Greenleaf begins with the morally formed individual as the servant leader, these frameworks often begin elsewhere: with the community, the ancestors, the land, or the historical memory of survival. Leadership is not the burden of the one but the rhythm of the many. In this sense, they offer what Scheurich and Young describe as alternative “race-based epistemologies” that are not additions to dominant frameworks but, rather, are rooted ways of knowing that emerge from distinctive cultural-historical experiences.<sup>40</sup>

Womanist ethics, for example, offers a transformative critique of the sacrificial expectations embedded in many SL models. These models often assume that Black women should serve endlessly, without recognition, reciprocity, or agency. Drawing on the work of Layli Maparyan, womanist epistemology reframes leadership as a practice rooted in spiritual alignment, communal care, and holistic well-being.<sup>41</sup> It does not glorify suffering or self-erasure. Instead, it centers joy, harmony, and healing as essential qualities of liberative leadership. Maparyan calls us to recognize the dignity and wisdom of those who have long carried the burdens of fractured institutions and to imagine leadership not as endurance but as a pathway to shared flourishing.

Many indigenous leadership traditions further disrupt the servant-leadership canon by refusing the leader-follower binary entirely. In Māori frameworks described by Chellie Spiller, leadership arises through relational well-being and *kaitiakitanga*

---

<sup>39</sup> James Joseph Scheurich and Michelle D. Young, “Coloring Epistemologies: Are Our Research Epistemologies Racially Biased?,” *Educational Researcher* 26, no. 4 (1997): 4–16.

<sup>40</sup> Scheurich and Young, “Coloring Epistemologies,” 10.

<sup>41</sup> Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

(guardianship) of land, kin, and community.<sup>42</sup> Authority is not wielded; it is entrusted and sustained. Knowledge is not extracted; it is shared through story, circle, and ceremony. As Scheurich and Young argue, “epistemologies that are not a part of the social history of the dominant race are automatically viewed as illegitimate or not as legitimate.”<sup>43</sup> Indigenous epistemologies represent entire cosmological systems that Western leadership models cannot easily contain. By their very presence, they expose the colonial underpinnings embedded in much Servant Leadership pedagogy.

Leadership models emerging from diasporic traditions that are shaped by histories of slavery, displacement, and resistance emphasize adaptability, storytelling, and spiritual endurance. These models are fluid, embodied, and transgenerational. Leadership is rooted in the capacity to remember, to reweave what has been broken, and to survive with dignity. Scholar adrienne maree brown describes this as emergent strategy, an approach to leadership that is decentralized, adaptive, and grounded in relationships, care, and the wisdom of lived experience.<sup>44</sup> Her work draws from the Black radical tradition and from movement-building practices that prioritize connection and transformation over control. These leadership forms resist assimilation and favor community coherence rather than institutional recognition. In doing so, they challenge SLs tendency to align too easily with institutional values while remaining largely silent on questions of race, empire, and epistemological exclusion.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Chellie Spiller, *Wayfinding Leadership: Groundbreaking Wisdom for Developing Leaders*, with Hoturoa Barclay-Kerr and John Panoho (Auckland: Huia Publishers, 2015).

<sup>43</sup> Scheurich and Young, “Coloring Epistemologies,” 7.

<sup>44</sup> adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> For a deeper exploration of how postcolonial and decolonial frameworks expand the understanding of leadership beyond dominant Western paradigms, see Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi’s essay, which outlines multiple, contextually rooted “leaderships” shaped by histories of resistance, hybridity, and communal agency. Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, “Frameworks toward Postdecolonial Pastoral Leadership,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 5–23.

These traditions are not “add-ons” to the Servant Leadership curriculum; they are invitations to reimagine what leadership is, how it is formed, and whom it serves. They require us to confront the hidden curriculum that shapes our models of moral leadership and to ask: whose values are we teaching? Whose stories are missing? And whose epistemologies have we failed to trust?

To equip learners for context-sensitive leadership, educators can support them in locating themselves within systems of power. Leadership education gains depth when it moves beyond abstraction or moralism and becomes rooted in the social histories and lived communities of students. Learners benefit from reflecting on how systems of compliance or empowerment have shaped them, and how they can cultivate practices of responsibility in ways that are accountable to their cultural contexts. In this way, SL education shifts toward discernment and testimony, allowing space for more grounded and responsive leadership formation.

Finally, we must make space for the hidden leadership narratives to be voiced and valued, rather than dismissed or shamed. True formation requires honest reckoning with the temptations of control, the allure of performative service, and the misuse of moral language to avoid conflict or maintain dominance. As Scheurich and Young note, the most destructive forms of racism are not the overt ones, but those that operate silently and are so embedded in our assumptions that we cannot see them.<sup>46</sup> If SL education cannot make space to name these dynamics, it cannot develop wise leaders. Shame silences; reflection liberates.

To adapt SL to our complex and plural world, we must do more than diversify its examples. We must recenter its pedagogical vision in ways that disrupt its cultural captivity. Only then can it become what Greenleaf perhaps always hoped for but could not yet see: not a model of moral authority, but a practice of shared responsibility, communal healing, and epistemological humility.

---

<sup>46</sup> Scheurich and Young, “Coloring Epistemologies,” 11.

## **Reclaiming Servant Leadership as Formational Practice**

In revisiting Robert Greenleaf's original insights and confronting the shortcomings of SL education today, we are left with both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is to recognize how easily SL can be co-opted, both knowingly and unknowingly, to preserve hierarchy, reward compliance, and mask privilege beneath the language of virtue. The opportunity lies in reclaiming SL as a dynamic, context-sensitive pedagogy that shapes mature, discerning individuals and liberative institutions.

To meet this opportunity, educators and leaders are invited to shift from content-centered instruction toward process-oriented formation. SL is not effectively taught through lists of traits or case studies of exemplary individuals alone; it takes root in environments that cultivate trust, empathy, reflection, and action. The classroom can become a space for moral encounters and testing, not just of ideas but of relationships and personal growth. Greenleaf's own pedagogical hints remind us that leadership emerges gradually, shaped by experience, conflict, and shared responsibility.

Educators must also resist the urge to universalize a particular cultural or institutional model of SL. Traditions such as womanist ethics, indigenous leadership, and diasporic wisdom do not simply offer supplemental examples; they demand a fundamental reorientation of what it means to lead, to teach, and to serve. Their insights call for a pedagogical humility that listens first, that recognizes the power of story and community, and that embraces leadership as a collective rhythm rather than a personal performance.

In this spirit, SL education benefits when it is guided by discernment rather than prescription. It must embrace the slow, often uncertain work of formation. Educators are not simply instructors of content; they are stewards of the environment and guides in discernment. Their task is not to produce uniform outcomes but to invite the emergence of authentic, courageous, and contextually rooted leaders.

Greenleaf never gave us a method because doing so would have gone against what he was offering in the first place. What he offered instead was a posture, a way of seeing, listening, and serving

that prioritizes formation over performance and community over control. Carrying his work forward involves more than codifying it; it calls for living into his questions with integrity and imagination. Servant Leadership, when taught with care and courage, can still become what he hoped: not an image to admire, but a life to embody, a pedagogy to practice, and a community to serve.

**Inviting your manuscript submission to the JRL**

Do you have an idea for an article to be published in the JRL?

Do you have a manuscript you would like to submit for consideration?

Contact Editor Robert Martin to talk about your idea or submit an essay by emailing [editor@arl-jrl.org](mailto:editor@arl-jrl.org).

**Book Reviews**

Book Review Editor Michael Wilson has a list of books to review (receive a free book!), or suggest your own, at [mwilson@lancasterseminary.edu](mailto:mwilson@lancasterseminary.edu). No unsolicited reviews accepted.

**Guidelines for articles and book reviews are found at the ARL/JRL website: <https://arl-jrl.org>**

---

## BOOK REVIEW

### *LAY LEADERSHIP FOR THE CARE OF SOULS*

BY: AARON PERRY

Bellingham: Washington, Lexham Press, 2025

211 pp. hardcover

ISBN 978-1-68359-778-0

In his book, *Lay Leadership for the Care of Souls*, Aaron Perry provides direction for church leaders seeking to expand the role of laity in church leadership. Perry is the director of Wesleyan Academic Initiatives, bringing academic and church leadership experience to this book. He sets out to provide a resource “about the pastoral work of leading the laity in ministry so that they become leaders as well” (1). His goal is to support church revitalization efforts that align people within the church to its mission.

Perry has developed an eight-step process designed for pastors seeking to foster robust activities among the laity, ultimately empowering them to lead. He maintains that the pastor’s role is to assist people in discovering their calling in the world. The impetus for his eight steps flows from his understanding that “misguided conflict, missional complacency, and ministry incapacity” are the issues facing the church (8). From these three stumbling blocks, Perry guides pastors through his eight steps for building a functioning laity: lead, cast, ask, task, train, track, thank, and start. Perry argues not for a cookie-cutter plan for success but for guidelines for the potential growth of laity, built on biblical truths and acknowledging potential roadblocks.

He grounds his eight-step framework in three core theological convictions. His first principle is that Jesus Christ is Lord over the entire church (12). This theme is consistently present throughout Perry’s writing, conveying that Jesus is the ultimate authority, encompassing laity and pastors. The second principle is that ministry is the work of all people, as it originates from Christ and is rooted in the work given to Adam and Eve in creation (14).

Perry's third principle is built upon Ephesians 4:11-13. For Perry, this means that "pastors are given so that the people of God may confess the lordship of Christ and be equipped to serve Christ" (18). The Ephesians passage highlights the biblical truth of equipping all saints for ministry, not merely credentialed pastors. These three principles, spread across the eight steps, enable the pastor, under Christ's authority, to build a participatory and active laity that fulfills the church's purpose and mission as it moves toward revitalization.

The practical aspect of Perry's work also provides church leadership with a perspective on potential pitfalls that may arise in the development of lay leadership. However, his work does not substantially address the issue of resistance to change common in most churches. This chapter on tracking would be enriched by including monitoring what types of change create resistance. These areas need addressing and encouragement for church leaders, as resistance is often a common barrier to revitalization but can be overcome.

*Lay Leadership for the Care of Souls* is a book that is theologically grounded and practically applicable to ministry challenges and revitalization efforts. It is a resource that can be utilized by pastors and leaders within the church, as well as by those in seminary who seek change and growth and to empower the laity. Perry's work will be an asset to those who seek positive change within the church.

Thomas W. Baran  
Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary  
Lynchburg, Virginia

---

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***EVERYDAY CHRISTIAN TEACHING: A GUIDE TO PRACTICING FAITH IN THE CLASSROOM***

BY: DAVID I. SMITH

Grand Rapids: Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2025

221 p.p. paperback

ISBN 978-0-80288-300-1

In *Everyday Christian Teaching*, award-winning professor of education David I. Smith starts from the premise that teachers “can and should connect faith and pedagogy,” and sets out to lead teachers to develop ways that they can go about doing so (8). Rather than focusing on stand-alone technical solutions, Christian activities, or programs that teachers can add to their instruction, Smith incorporates concrete opportunities for readers to engage in both action and reflection regarding their teaching practices and convictions.

In doing so, he aims to help teachers integrate faith in a way that both informs and is an extension of their being and their teaching—thus building habits that embody convictions even in settings where overt discussion of Christian themes would not be welcome. Smith uses cognitive science to argue that “we get better at the thing we practice, and not necessarily at the thing we think we are doing” (9). Thus, an emphasis on engaging in mutually informative cycles of action and reflection shapes the structure and the content of the book, as well as the suggested approach to reading it. He encourages readers to read a chapter, think about it, go try it out in the classroom, discuss it with a colleague, and come back to the book to repeat that process with the next chapter (11).

*Everyday Christian Teaching* is structured to mirror the teaching process. Chapter titles and topics reflect different phases of teaching a course: Invitation, Beginning, Connecting, Framing, Assigning, Pausing, Repeating, Ending, and Close. As he walks the reader

through each phase of the teaching process, Smith encourages teachers to examine their posture, words, gestures, practices, attitudes, assumptions, and habits to consider how those could be rooted in faith (19). Throughout the book, he uses pictures, metaphors, history, and analogies to highlight Christian themes and their role in teaching (e.g., mutual love, hospitality, justice, humility, valuing students as people and wanting good things for them, etc.).

Every section concludes with exercises containing prompts and questions for engaging in action and reflection in concrete ways. For example, “With which opening words do you typically begin a course or semester? What do they imply about your vision of learning and student growth? Write them down to gain some critical distance, then share them with a colleague for their reaction. Ask some of your students for the impressions of how classes typically begin at your school and what they infer from that beginning about what the school values” (21). While the book is sprinkled with tips for effective teaching practices, the volume’s primary focus is to lead teachers to actively engage in the process of their deep transformation so that their teaching is a resonant expression of their convictions. Through multiple examples in multiple types and levels of classrooms, Smith demonstrates how this work can then serve to engage students in learning that also expresses Christian values (e.g., not just telling students *what* to read, but teaching them *how* to read—with justice, patience, humility, and charity) (30-31).

As someone who teaches many different subjects at many different levels, I found myself imagining ways I could embody the theories and practices presented in this book in various settings. Thus, I would recommend this book to any teacher desiring to embody faith in the classroom. As a seminary professor preparing students to lead in religious contexts, I found much of the content of the book to be useful (e.g., teaching students how to read, work in groups, or engage in assignments in ways that develop character). However, I found the emphasis on an example of teaching through action and reflection (rather than simply presenting theory to be applied) to be most relevant.

Professors of leadership who are willing to engage in the slow, intentional, deep work of transforming their being and their teaching approaches would benefit from engaging this book in the manner recommended by the author—slowly, iteratively, and actively reading, practicing, reflecting, discussing, and revising. Students of leadership would benefit from professors who can then also teach them to learn leadership in the same manner—through active, reflective, dialogical practice in their contexts as well as in the classroom.

Sara Stabe  
Fuller Theological Seminary  
Pasadena, California

**Inviting your manuscript submission to the JRL**

Do you have an idea for an article to be published in the JRL?

Do you have a manuscript you would like to submit for consideration?

Contact Editor Robert Martin to talk about your idea or submit an essay by emailing [editor@arl-jrl.org](mailto:editor@arl-jrl.org).

**Book Reviews**

Book Review Editor Michael Wilson has a list of books to review (receive a free book!), or suggest your own, at [mwilson@lancasterseminary.edu](mailto:mwilson@lancasterseminary.edu). No unsolicited reviews accepted.

**Guidelines for articles and book reviews are found at the ARL/JRL website: <https://arl-jrl.org>**

---

**BOOK REVIEW*****WHEN CHURCH STOPS WORKING: A FUTURE FOR YOUR CONGREGATION BEYOND MORE MONEY, PROGRAMS, INNOVATION******BY: ANDREW ROOT AND BLAIR BERTRAND***

Grand Rapids: Michigan, Brazos Press, 2023

156 p.p. paperback

ISBN 978-1-49344-1945

For those familiar with Andrew Root's work through his "Ministry in a Secular Age" series, this book is an attempt to "provide a book that pastors can read with their board, session, or council" (xii). He partners with Blair Bertrand, a friend and colleague who teaches at Zomba Theological University in Malawi, Central Africa. For those not as familiar, this book translates concepts from Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (an almost 900-page history of Western thought!) into practices accessible to those who are "working in sales, IT, education, e-commerce, or not working at all—pretty much any job but pastor or professor" (xii).

Root and Bertrand begin by acknowledging the challenges facing (most) churches in North America—anxieties felt in church council meetings when contributions are not meeting the budget and in sanctuaries when the size of the room dwarfs those present. They say, "We agree with those who say that there is a problem in the church today. We just don't agree with them that the problem is too little influence, too few people, too fragile belief" (6). They also believe that the standard answer of "effective innovation" actually worsens the crisis by "driving us deeper into the secular age we find ourselves in" (7). For them, the church needs a deeper understanding of the social construction of the culture in which it now lives.

For those who have not read Charles Taylor, they provide a brief summary of what a "secular age" looks like—1) the church with less influence in society, 2) a culture with a split between the

private and the public that leads to fewer people in church, and 3) an increasingly “non-enchanted” social world around the church. Then, weaving together narratives from Scripture (Book of Acts, Sarah’s waiting for a child, etc.) and from contemporary society, they seek to answer, “What does it mean to be the church in a secular age?”

Chapters 2-5 describe the world and what the church can look like as it lives faithfully in a secular age. After explaining an accelerating world and a busy society, the authors advocate that the church stop trying to compete (e.g., keep up with the modern world by adding programs and activities) and “just be.” Through a process of humble death, confession, and gratitude, a church can develop the capacity to wait for the Spirit. They note that learning to wait is challenging and that “anxiety and anger have a way of committing us to a story where our own needs and wants take center stage” (72). If a church thinks it is in decline, frantic activity to resist that decline can seem like the only answer. However, waiting does not bring death. It exposes that the church often wants community without tension and God without crisis. Since “God can never be made smooth or controllable” (99), through worship and listening, a church learns to wait on what God is doing.

Having established the need for waiting, the authors turn to what the church is waiting for—a watchword. A watchword is not a mission statement, which points to modernity and humanity’s attempts to control their own future. Instead, a watchword is a “story of a deep experience that has shaped a people” (105). They tell the story of Martin Luther King Jr. hearing God say, “When there is no way, I’ll make a way.” This became the watchword of the civil rights movement. When a church receives a watchword, it shapes actions and gives a deep sense of purpose. However, it is not self-constructed; it comes from God’s action in the community.

The authors then end with two stories of a watchword in action. The first is a nuanced story of a church waiting, finding a watchword, acting on it, seeing God at work, experiencing newness and then tiredness, and finally wondering about who God is and how God is at work. This story concludes with ambivalence in terms of ‘worldly success’ and hope in terms of God’s presence. The

second story is a more upbeat story of a church finding a watchword and acting on a watchword. That story includes the observation “their [the church’s] focus was never again on decline” (151).

Three observations about this book. First, it is clearly a congregational leadership book. It isn’t meant to be used in a seminary classroom, and it lacks the footnotes and nuances to make it useful in such a space. As a conversation starter with a congregation, however, it is an absolute ‘yes.’ Second, for those of us working on issues of leadership theory, this book opens conversations with leadership literature that highlight the ability to innovate/lead change and expect it to be at the center of the leader’s duties (e.g., Ronald Heifetz’s framework for solving adaptive issues and Otto Scharmer’s work on ‘presencing.’)

Root and Bertrand would share the goal of a new and better future. They push back firmly at any modernist concept of a humanly constructed future. This book opens rich conversations about secular concepts underneath leadership models. Finally, it is important to note that this book is certainly time-bound. As an example, comedian Aziz Ansari is referenced in a critical case study in Chapter 2 (and if you don’t know who that is, that probably makes my point). This is a great book for churches and opens up important topics for Christian leadership theorists.

Michael Wilson  
Princeton Theological Seminary  
Princeton, NJ





**Journal of  
Religious Leadership  
3216 Rankin Road  
St. Anthony, MN 55418**

---