



Racial Justice and the Church: A Conversation

YOLANDA DENSON-BYERS AND SHARI SEIFERT

Shari: Hey, friend! I am glad that we decided to write this piece for *Word & World*. For me, the decision came down to if it would be impactful. It seems like a lot of ears are open right now. I am getting a lot of requests to talk to people and do trainings about antiracism, white privilege, and white supremacy culture. It is a little overwhelming because my professional life is busy, too. I feel like I must weigh my decisions carefully. Also, I am not sure how long people will be in this receptive mode, so I feel like if people are asking, it is time to write. The Spirit is moving—who am I to get in the way? I always learn more when I collaborate with you; I am grateful for your trust and ready for the opportunity.

Yolanda: As an African American pastor and theologian, I find that I have always been asked to “teach” about race in America. Sometimes I am happy to do so; at other times I find it very burdensome. I have been grateful for people like you, and your church, Calvary Lutheran in Minneapolis, who understand that when you call upon people of color to teach, preach, and advise, it comes at a cost to us. We give intellectual and emotional labor that others do not often see or even recognize. You were the first white person I encountered who acknowledged my sacrifice and paid me accordingly. I am hoping that during this time in American history, when

The work of antiracism in the church requires collaborative efforts across many longtime boundaries. In this conversation, a black pastor and a white layperson from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America talk about the sin of racism, ways to throw off the grip of white supremacy, and the importance of white people shouldering more of the church’s anti-racism labor.

many ears are open to learning more about the realities of racism, discrimination, and white privilege, my colleagues of color do not allow themselves to burn out—or be burned out—by well-meaning and eager European American colleges or parishioners. I know this happens all too often. Recently, I heard you say that you were hopeful that “this time would be different.” I wonder what you mean by that.

Shari: You are right. It is my ardent prayer that after George Floyd was murdered by a callous Minneapolis cop, who kept his hand in his pocket and his knee on Mr. Floyd’s neck, perhaps things will be different. I recently saw a poll in *Newsweek* that said that 54 percent of Americans thought that burning down the Minneapolis Police Precinct building was justified following the death of George Floyd.¹ This was stunning to me. As someone who lives in this community, I was profoundly touched by business owners who lost their buildings and livelihoods, yet did not mind the sacrifice if it meant that things would change for the better.

Yolanda: It does seem that we are in an unprecedented moment. My bachelor’s degree is in African American history. I am aware of the continuous struggle that we have had in this country to live up to the meritorious words of the Declaration of Independence which says, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”² Whenever I read these words, I am struck by how prophetic they were at a time when American Indians were facing genocide, African Americans were enslaved, women and children had few inherent rights recognized by the government, and the only people truly free to seek life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were European American, wealthy, land-owning men.

Previously, I did not have much faith that our country would instigate a moment of truth and reconciliation, similar to what the citizens of South Africa did after apartheid.³ I know that the process in South Africa was not perfect, but it was a step in the right direction. It validated the experiences and pain of black South Africans. Today, I am hopeful that European Americans of goodwill may hear and believe the stories of black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) in our own country, and labor with us to create a better world for all of God’s children.

Shari: Friend, when I first saw the raw video of George Floyd that someone sent to me in the middle of the night, I was horrified. I thought, “Here we go again.” At the time, I did not have any idea that it would lead to something so different for all of us. After all, I was here in Minnesota when Philando Castile was murdered less

¹ Matthew Impelli, “54 Percent of Americans Think Burning Down Minneapolis Police Precinct Was Justified after George Floyd’s Death,” *Newsweek*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/54-americans-think-burning-down-minneapolis-police-precinct-was-justified-after-george-floyds-1508452>.

² “The Declaration of Independence,” America’s Founding Documents (US National Archives and Records Administration), <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration>.

³ Mary Kay Magistad, “South Africa’s Imperfect Progress, 20 Years after the Truth & Reconciliation Commission,” *The World*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-04-06/south-africas-imperfect-progress-20-years-after-truth-reconciliation-commission>.

than ten miles from my house.⁴ The officer who killed him was charged, but then he still got off. This miscarriage of justice has been the dominant narrative for too long. It is what makes it hard for me to be optimistic in this moment, but that is what I am choosing to do. I am holding hope for you, me, my BIPOC friends, our nation, and our world.

Yolanda: Shari, thank you for your conviction. Your identity as an actively anti-racist person reminds me of Paul Kivel's book *Uprooting Racism*. In it, he says that it is very important to be a strong white ally by listening to people of color; not making assumptions; standing by our sides; not assuming what is best for us; sharing monetary resources; making mistakes; engaging in honesty; talking to other white people; interrupting racist jokes and comments; not asking us to speak for *our* people; providing support; and putting your body on the line.⁵

I see you doing this every day in George Floyd Square. I have also appreciated your ministry with the European Descent Lutheran Association for Racial Justice (EDLARJ). I am thankful for you, and other European American siblings in Christ, who have been issuing a clarion call to talk about racism and white privilege. I am thankful that you are owning your responsibility to fix yourselves, and the systemic injustices that you benefit from, every single day.

I know that you were deeply informed by Lenny Duncan's book *Dear Church*. I thought of you when I read his words:

Church, you are gorgeous. You are full of some of the greatest people I have ever had the honor to be around—folks who are willing to lay it all on the line for the sake of the gospel. I know people in this church who are willing to lay down life, limb, career, and future just to help guide us to be better. That sort of selfless dedication to me and to you is enough to fill me with power and send me out into the streets screaming to anyone who will listen about God's love.⁶

What do you think white people need to do to own their complicity in the systemic racism of our country and to dismantle the white supremacy that adversely affects people of color? Lately, I have been saying as loudly and simply as possible, "*Racism is a sin.*" Framing it as a sin issue that grieves the heart of God seems to enable Christian European Americans to recognize the need for confession, repentance, reparations, and reconciliation. What have you found helpful in your conversations with white folks?

⁴ Associated Press, "Police Officer Who Shot Dead Philando Castile Acquitted of All Charges," *The Guardian*, June 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jun/16/philando-castile-death-police-officer-not-guilty>.

⁵ Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* (Philadelphia: New Society, 1996), 96.

⁶ Lenny Duncan, *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the US* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), 118.

Shari: I have been telling people that, first, *we need to realize that there is a problem*. Systems of white supremacy are so embedded in our culture that they are hard for white folks to see. I am amazed by the number of white people who negate the reality of racism. I have talked to many folks who are convinced that the civil rights laws of the 1960s took care of everything. Obviously, this isn't true, and I am grateful to you and others who have shared with me the manifold ways in which BIPOC folks are continually harmed by the racism and white supremacy in our country, even in the church. This is an *offense* to the gospel.

White supremacy does not want us to see what is going on. Susan Raffo, a local antiracism activist of European descent, taught me that it lives in our bodies. She says, "Whiteness hijacks the body's survival responses in order to ensure its own survival. . . . When the body feels attacked, it uses the tools that evolution has given mammals to find safety under threat. Fight. Flight. Freeze. Fold."⁷

I have noticed that sometimes my lips go numb and my throat tightens when I think about speaking up. I am bombarded by all kinds of messages about why I shouldn't say anything, like "They probably didn't mean anything by it. They are having a rough time; you shouldn't upset them. You should keep things peaceful right now—don't rock the boat." These messages want me to be a conspirator in upholding a right to comfort. I must trick my body so that I can do this work of making the church less harmful. I must run, so that I can throw off the evil of the white supremacy, which strives to possess my body and mind.

Yolanda: Wow, Shari! It sounds like what we are calling for is an exorcism of white supremacy. While I know that many people feel deep shame when confronted by sin, I pray that God's amazing grace will deliver them from silence and encourage them to try, try again! Brené Brown writes in her book *Daring Greatly*, "Shame derives its power from being unspeakable. That's why it loves perfectionists—it's easy to keep us quiet. If we cultivate enough awareness about shame to name it and speak to it, we've basically cut it off at the knees."⁸ I can't tell you how often I've wished my white friends of goodwill would ditch the shame and simply apply themselves—albeit imperfectly—to remaking our communities, nation, and church.

Shari: Understanding how white supremacy has a grip on me empowers me to resist it. Tema Okun outlines the characteristics of white supremacy culture, including perfectionism, defensiveness, either/or thinking, fear of open conflict, and right to comfort.⁹ These characteristics inform white folks' belief that we must

⁷ Irna L. Landrom, "The Sweet Lull of White Supremacy, or Why White People Hate to Be Called White," Daily Kos, August 17, 2017, <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2017/8/17/1690658/-The-sweet-lull-of-white-supremacy-or-why-white-people-hate-to-be-called-white>.

⁸ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2015).

⁹ Tema Okun, "White Supremacy Culture," Dismantling Racism (dRWorks), https://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture.pdf.

be perfect. Therefore, when we learn about the sin of racism, we take it as a personal failing. Since we are taught that failure is unacceptable, many of us fall into a spiral of deep shame. *We must learn to navigate this moral injury for the sake of the gospel.* I feel like a lot of European descent folks are afraid that there is going to be a “gotcha” trap out there that will expose them as racists. Therefore, rather than making it their central goal to eradicate racism, they make it their goal to prove that *they* are not racist, nor implicated in our white supremacist culture.

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Yolanda: Indeed! Even some of my closest white friends fall into this trap from time to time. I find that it takes real courage to learn from the BIPOC people in your life. I have always appreciated white people who were willing to center my story, rather than trying to prove their own innocence, when discussing the realities of racism in America.

For example, you know that it is common for me to enter a restaurant and be stared at, to choose not to drive through a neighborhood for fear of my safety, to feel sick when I see the flashing lights of a police car in my rearview mirror, or to be asked *what kind of Lutheran* I am when I show up to preach or preside in a church I have not served before.

As your friend, it is important to me that you hear and validate my pain as a black woman in America. It hurts me so much when well-meaning people tell me that I must have misunderstood my own life experience. One of the most important things that white people can do to be in authentic relationship with persons of color is to confront your shame, and believe us when we tell you about the unbelievable things that happen to us every—single—day. Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote:

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White guilt does nothing. White guilt just makes us look for exoneration. White guilt leads to changes of only optics in which people of color are the object and not the subject. Once again. White guilt leads [me to] try and figure out how to relieve my white guilt and once again

it's all about me. So let's let white guilt go. It doesn't work. It only keeps us silent and immobile.¹⁰

Shari: I think another thing that immobilizes white people, even after they become aware of the realities of sin and white supremacy, is the idea that they—alone—have to figure everything out and come up with a comprehensive plan to fix racism immediately. I like Adrienne Maree Brown's ideas about "fractals" in *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. She writes, "How we are on the small scale is also how we are at the large scale. The patterns of the universe repeat at scale."¹¹ Little things have big reverberations.

Yolanda: Shari, I like the idea of starting small wherever you are. When I was teaching the course Race in America at St. Cloud State University, I spent a lot of time helping my students dream about how they could interrupt racism within their own spheres of influence. We talked about stopping racist jokes at the dinner table, educating younger siblings, amending their own language choices around equating darkness with evil or sin, having at least one significant relationship with a person of color, and investing money in small, minority-owned businesses, to name a few. I also love to remind white people about the importance of being teachable. I often ask, "When was the last time you sat under the leadership, teaching, or authority of a person of color? What was that like for you?"

Do you remember when we went to the African Descent Lutheran Association assembly together? I often wondered what it was like for you to be a white woman sitting in that room full of black people. What did you take away from that encounter?

Shari: I learned that when I show up, ready to listen and learn, and committed to antiracism, I am warmly welcomed. Over the past few years, as my relationships with African descent folks have broadened and deepened, so has my faith. I have noticed that African descent folks talk about *baptism* a whole lot more than European descent folks do. I now take my baptism, and baptismal vows, more seriously and have a deeper understanding of them. We are all baptized into one body—the body of Christ. When one part of the body hurts, we all hurt.

Yolanda: Recently, I had the privilege of confirming a cadre of youth at my church. We spent time in our one-on-one meetings, reviewing the baptismal vows that they were preparing to affirm at the end of October 2020. As members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we promise to "live among God's faithful people; hear the word of God and share the Lord's Supper; proclaim the good news

¹⁰ Nadia Bolz-Weber, "A Pastoral Letter," *The Corners* (June 5, 2020), <https://nadiabolzweber.substack.com/p/a-pastoral-letter>.

¹¹ Adrienne M. Brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 52.

of God in Christ through word and deed; serve all people following the example of Jesus; and strive for justice and peace in all the earth.”¹² All of these baptismal vows are beautiful, yet I am particularly struck by the promise to *strive for justice and peace*. It is a solemn promise that we *all* make, but I am not sure how many of us put it into daily practice. For me, part of being a Christian is to take seriously my vow to leave the world a better place than I found it.

Perhaps having been raised in the black church, I feel a greater urgency to address social justice issues, as we have a long legacy of doing that. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said in a speech titled “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence”:

We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity.¹³

That dialogue about the *fierce urgency of now* really sets me on fire! As Christians, it is important we recognize that agitating against racism and white supremacy is *the calling of the Christian church*. It is the ministry of anyone who professes to love God, and to love neighbor as self. According to Scripture, it is impossible to want one thing for oneself and one’s children, and accept something less for your neighbor. I cannot think of one European American mother or father who would be willing to see their child endure what happened to George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others, much less on national television.

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Shari: You are right. It pains me that so much of the body of Christ is hurting. Our baptismal vows include renouncing evil. The brown-skinned Palestinian Jewish man who was executed by the state, named Jesus, calls us again and again to stand with the oppressed and marginalized. How can we possibly be followers of Jesus if we do not address the sin of racism and white supremacy? We cannot! We are

¹² *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 236.

¹³ Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence” (speech), April 4, 1967, http://inside.sfuhs.org/dept/history/US_History_reader/Chapter14/MLKrivside.htm.

called to this, not just for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, but also for the sake of the world.

This is one way that we can bring about the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven. I do not have much use for a church that deals in abstractions. I do not have time for a church of respectability that prioritizes white comfort over black lives. I need a church that renounces evil, cares about the whole body of Christ, trusts in Jesus as our savior, and leans into grace. I tell people, “I sell houses and dismantle white supremacy in the ELCA,” and I mean that thing!

Yolanda: Shari, thanks for such a beautiful conversation. I pray that the Holy Spirit will awaken hearts, cause others to confront injustice, and inspire transformation throughout our world. ⊕

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