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UNTIL WE GET THERE.”**

**The Uncertain  
Journey North**

For many people in Honduras and elsewhere, leaving their home country is a matter of survival.

by Gregg  
Brekke



28

22

**When Conspiracy Theories Come to Church** How to deprogram followers of Trumpism and other extremist cults.

by Gina  
Ciliberto

32

**Choosing Whiteness Over Witness** History bends toward justice. Southern Baptist seminaries, on the other hand, seem to be going in a different direction.

by Kenyatta R.  
Gilbert

Voices

- **6**      **Spotlight**
- **9**      **Mobilizing Hope**  
The ongoing work for voting rights.  
**by Adam Russell Taylor**
- **Commentary**
- 12**      Truth-telling  
The need for a national truth commission on race. **by Joyce Hobson Johnson, Nelson N. Johnson**
- 14**      Pandemic  
Why we need global vaccination equity. **by Jonathan D. Quick**
- 15**      Libraries  
Amazon’s challenge to big and dangerous thoughts. **by Danny Duncan Collum**
- **Columns**
- 16**      Moving Mountains  
Will white people choose beloved community? **by Lisa Sharon Harper**
- 18**      The Hungry Spirit  
The call of the genuine in a disordered church. **by Rose Marie Berger**
- **Eyewitness**
- 20**      Dangerous climate narratives.  
**by Bee Moorhead**



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Vision

- **Culture**
- 39**      Fiction  
The complex lives of Black churchgoing women. **by Rebecca Riley**
- 41**      On Screen  
Showtime’s *Work in Progress* plumbs pain and humor. **by Da’Shawn Mosley**
- 42**      Eyes and Ears  
From the “hood to the holler.” **by Danny Duncan Collum**
- **Reviews**
- 43**      Books  
Jeffrey Bilbro on how we can best consume the news. **by Greg Williams**
- 44**      Robert Jones’ novel *The Prophets* shimmers with life. **by Elinam Agbo**
- **Poetry**
- 46**      The patron saint of comedians.  
**by Jeffrey Thomson**
- **Living the Word**
- 48**      Waiting and watching for redemption’s dawn. **by Isaac S. Villegas**
- **H’rumphs**
- 50**      Making your next ballot count ... and count again. **by Joey Chin**

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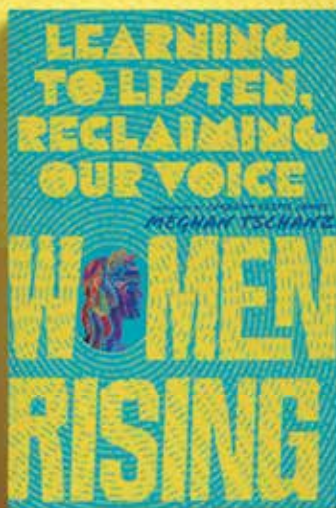
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## ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY FROM APATHY TO ADVOCACY



*"One of the many strengths in this book and what makes it so important and distinct is that Meghan doesn't just present the issues. She drills deeper to explore how the church's gender theology is part of the problem and needs to be reexamined against the wide-angle global perspective."*

—CAROLYN CUSTIS JAMES,  
author of *Malestrom*



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## From the Editor

Amazon's strong-arm tactics and disinformation campaign enabled the behemoth corporation to prevent workers from organizing in Alabama earlier this year. That Amazon used its overwhelming power and wealth—and some would say lack of scruples—to undercut its employees came as little surprise to anyone who's observed its treatment of any entity it perceives as competition. And, as Danny Duncan Collum explains in this issue, Amazon is going after public libraries the same way it attacks small businesses and union organizers—ruthlessly, methodically, and without remorse.

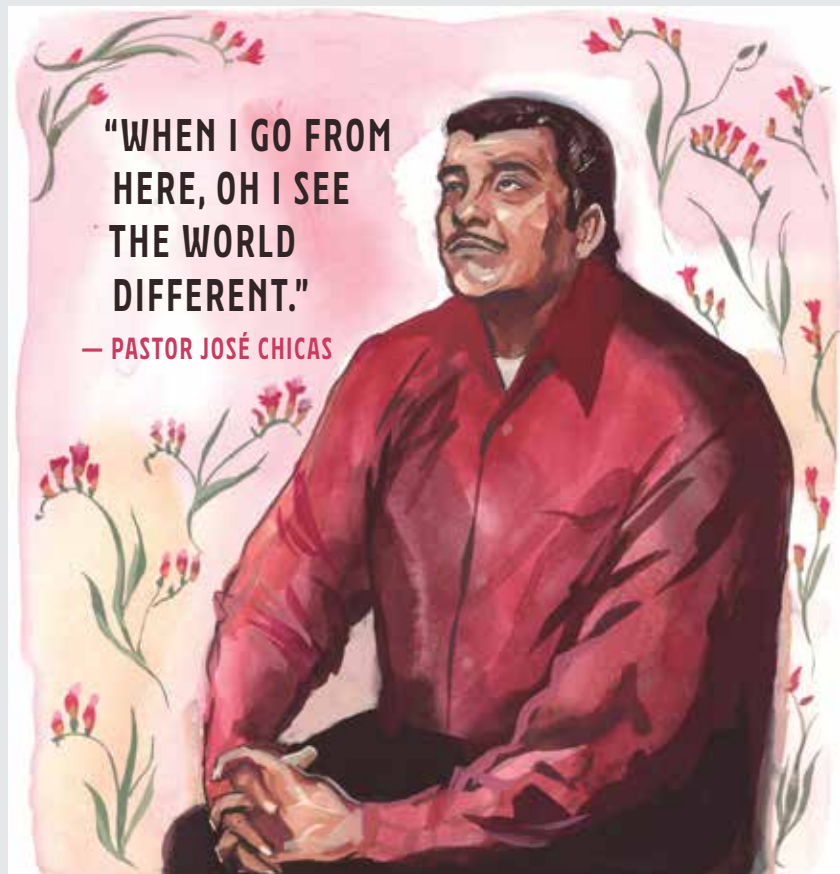
While Amazon's blatant abuse of monopolistic power is plain to see, the proper response is anything but easy, even for Christians committed to putting our purchasing power where our morals are. Often, using alternatives to Amazon means paying a little more and waiting a little longer for our order to arrive. But unless people with a conscience begin to send a message in the only language Amazon understands, the possibility of change will remain remote.

## RESPONSE

## Where Love Is

"God is love and where love is, there is God," Dennis Bruce wrote in response to "What God Has Joined Together" (by Lydia and Bill Wylie-Kellermann, April 2021). "As a Christian mom of a trans daughter, this article gave me hope," Grace Williams shared. "We had to part from an evangelical Baptist church after 30 years of participation when loneliness and lack of support finally took its toll." Carol Jachim addressed Lydia and Bill via email: "All you do for the community of Detroit and globally is much appreciated. Your work and values continue to inspire." Cheryl Ruhe added, "I look forward to the day when this new church becomes a reality!"

Write us: [response@sojo.net](mailto:response@sojo.net)



"I HAVE TO  
OFFER ALL  
I HAVE AND  
BELIEVE  
AND  
HOPE IT'S  
ENOUGH."

**Dianna Ortiz (1958-2021)**  
Anti-torture activist

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**Gina Ciliberto**

Gina Ciliberto (p. 22) has covered the 2020 election, the Jan. 6 insurrection, and more for Sojourners. "If you're doing political reporting or writing for an outlet that can be construed as the Right or the Left, it becomes sort of echo chamber-y," she says from her base in Minneapolis. "I enjoy this faith lens because that is where we can actually get a cross section [and] create spaces where people can dialogue." Her interest in religion and justice began when she interviewed 120 Dominican Sisters of Hope.



**Elinam Agbo**

"To be a writer is to be a witness," says Elinam Agbo (p. 44). Her mother's Ghanaian oral traditions sparked her writing life. "They were often epic and fantastic ... they were also about surviving a harsh world." Agbo, who lives in Michigan, is currently working on a novel. "The more I develop as a writer, the more I realize that I am unable to look away from the world—its beauty, complexity, and injustices."

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59%

Americans who find it hard to identify false information on social media

4 in 10

Americans familiar with the QAnon conspiracy theory

70,000

Twitter accounts suspended for QAnon content in the week after the Jan. 6 insurrection

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# 1

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 MOBILIZING HOPE

 BY ADAM RUSSELL TAYLOR
 

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## BUILDING ON THE BIG LIE

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The nation's commitment to "one person, one vote" is under assault. In the months after the horrific Jan. 6 violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, we have seen the greatest effort to restrict the right to vote since the Jim Crow era. A sobering report by the Brennan Center for Justice tracks the surge of legislation proposed by Republicans in statehouses across the country that would further restrict access to voting, all supposedly in the name of election integrity. As of April, Republicans in 47 states had proposed, introduced, or carried more than 360 bills that would further restrict the right to vote by limiting early and mail voting, imposing further ID requirements, enabling voter purges, and other tactics. The good news is that there has also been a push to expand voting rights, with 47 states having introduced 843 bills to *expand* voting access. The challenge is that

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**VOTER SUPPRESSION HAS BEEN A FIXTURE IN OUR DEMOCRACY SINCE THE FOUNDERS LIMITED VOTING TO LAND-OWNING WHITE MEN.**

# “THE SUPPOSED PROBLEM OF WIDESPREAD VOTER FRAUD IS A FABRICATED ONE.”

in 24 states in which Republicans have a majority in state houses and hold the governorship, many of the voter suppression bills will be difficult to overturn without a surge of public awareness and outrage.

Voter suppression has been a fixture in our democracy since the founders limited the right to vote to land-owning white men. The passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act extended the right to vote to everyone, including Black citizens who were disenfranchised through violence and Jim Crow laws. Now, more than 55 years later, we are witnessing a resurgence of voter repression efforts.

Building on the Big Lie that the last election was stolen, GOP elected officials often proposed and supported these bills under the pretense of ensuring election security and integrity. Yet the supposed problem of widespread voter fraud is a fabricated

one, designed to undermine public confidence in our elections and give cover to indefensible efforts to further deter and disenfranchise voters of color. These efforts include the recently enacted Georgia legislation that outlaws, among other things, providing food or water to people in voting lines; two dozen GOP-backed bills that would make it harder to vote in Texas; and many more across the country. The problem is that opposing and reversing these bills constantly places us on defense rather than on offense. What is really needed is legislation that can protect elections and safeguard the right to vote for the long term, which can no longer be left up to states. The capitulation of the GOP to voter suppression as a party strategy necessitates federal leadership and national standards for elections.

Does the GOP really want to be the party of voter suppression? We can't allow the right to vote to devolve further into a partisan issue. Otherwise, instead of being a contest over ideas and leadership, elections will be reduced to a contest over who can best suppress certain voters. Republicans have already signaled opposition to two critical pieces of legislation designed to ensure free and fair elections in the future: the For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. As Rep. Lewis said, “The vote is precious. It is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have in a democratic society, and we must use it.” Not only must we use it, it is imperative that we protect it. ✦



Adam Russell Taylor is president of Sojourners.

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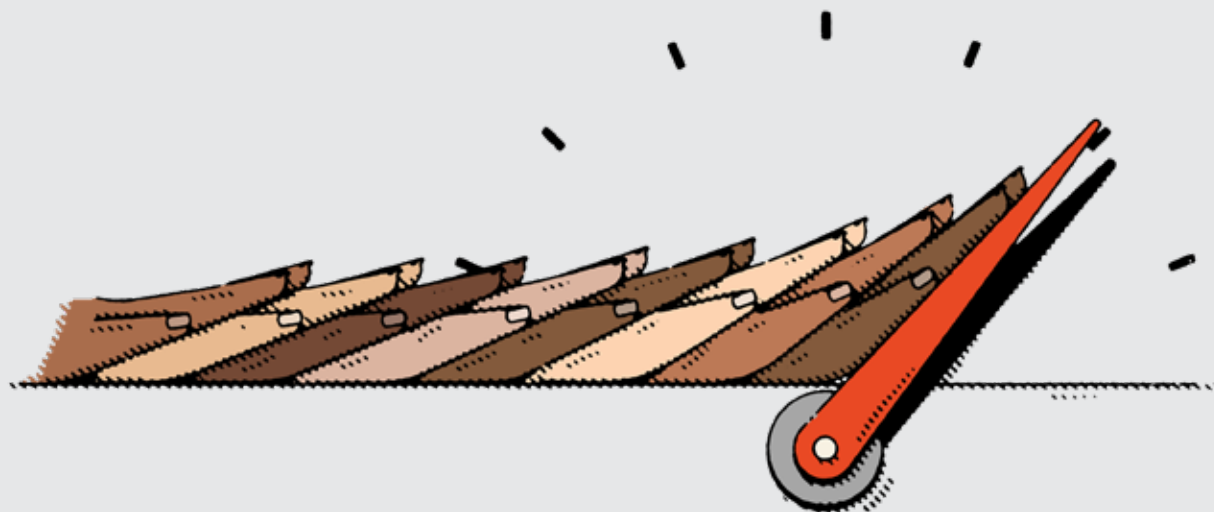


COMMENTARY

BY JOYCE HOBSON JOHNSON  
AND NELSON N. JOHNSON

# THE GREENSBORO MODEL

To accelerate racial justice, we need a national truth commission—lessons and warnings from those who have been there before.



# 2

**On Nov. 3, 1979**, five young labor organizers were murdered by Nazis and Klansmen in Greensboro, N.C. Ten were wounded. And a low-income, African American community was terrorized. The police knew the ambush plans and chose to be visibly absent. This tragic event eerily foreshadows what happened in our nation's capital on Jan. 6. Our country is at a boiling point. We are closer than many want to admit to losing this developing republic.

To address together growing national divisions, we must struggle with three evils: white supremacy, massive economic disparity, and a significant decline in the moral fabric of this nation. These issues must be addressed concurrently if they are to be effectively addressed at all. To do this, we need to design a process in which people can walk *toward* each other and, ultimately, *with* each other out of this moment and into a more just and equitable future.

Truth must be foundational in the process we design. Attempting to advance policies to address the legacy of racism and segregation without first establishing the truth of the impact of that lived history at the community level risks exacerbating our divisions.

We have great hope that a national Commission for Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation, as introduced in Congress by Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA) and Sen. Cory Booker (D-NJ), can provide such a process for this essential work. We support an executive order by President Biden to establish this commission.

Our hope is based, in part, on our experience with the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a local effort to establish an independent body (in conjunction with the International Center for Transitional Justice) to work toward community truth around the “Greensboro Massacre” in North Carolina.

In the aftermath of the 1979 murders, two all-white juries in criminal trials found the white supremacists not guilty. The jury (including one person of color) in a civil trial found them, along with police officers, jointly liable for wrongful deaths.

This marginal victory in civil court, however, did not address the deeper meaning of these events. Survivors and other community leaders believed it was irresponsible to leave the history unresolved. The Greensboro TRC began in 1999 and delivered its final report in 2006. Although the Greensboro city council originally opposed the truth and reconciliation process, in October 2020 the council formally apologized for the city’s role in the massacre.

Based on our work in Greensboro, we believe a national commission will be most successful if it is grounded in well-organized, local, truth-telling processes and in coalitions that engage a diverse group of people, particularly those most impacted. Our localities hold hidden histories that we refuse to look at. A truly transformative process will grow out of a strong base of supporters and coalitions during the design, implementation, and follow-up phases of a truth, justice, and reconciliation commission. This base is essential to support people in telling their stories to the commission, for shaping a process in which we can all see ourselves represented (thus giving legitimacy and moral authority), and for working toward recommendations that a commission may make to redress historic and ongoing harms.

The truth process in Greensboro has spanned decades. Some elected officials have been supportive and others have not, but the work of truth-telling moved forward continuously, precisely because

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**FOR A NATIONAL PROCESS TO BE TRANSFORMATIVE, IT MUST BE ROOTED IN A STRONG AND BROAD COALITION.**

of the strong support of diverse stakeholders throughout the city. For a national process to be truly transformative, it must be rooted in a strong, broad, and varied coalition from localities across the country who support the mission and perhaps even drive the process.

We appreciate the courage and wisdom of elected officials pushing for a national commission. We believe truth processes can be helpful, but they are not a silver bullet. And anything rooted only in politics is inherently connected to a flawed paradigm that assumes if someone is to win then someone else must lose. A truly transformative truth and reconciliation process will reveal that “winning” means drawing the greatest potential out of the broadest diversity of our people. This is the goal of the beloved community. This is what we are all striving for. ❖

**Joyce Hobson Johnson** and **Rev. Nelson N. Johnson** are survivors of the 1979 massacre, members of the National Council of Elders, and co-directors of the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro, N.C.

## Invite Rev. Adam Taylor to speak.

Rev. Adam Taylor is president of Sojourners and author of the forthcoming *A More Perfect Union: A New Vision for Building the Beloved Community*. He is recognized as a leader in addressing a range of peace and justice issues and can speak on global human rights, faith and politics, faith-inspired activism, racial and economic justice, and more. You can invite Adam to speak to your congregation, students, or co-workers at [sojo.net/AdamSpeak](https://sojo.net/AdamSpeak).

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COMMENTARY

BY JONATHAN D. QUICK



## SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL

**Why U.S. Christians should demand global vaccination equity.**

The **coronavirus pandemic** has claimed more than 3 million lives around the world and left tens of millions more with insidious aftereffects. It is reversing decades of progress in reducing child mortality, health inequity, poverty, gender inequality, illiteracy, and hunger. Immunization against COVID-19 is the single most powerful weapon we have to end the pandemic and reclaim lost ground.

More than a dozen safe, effective vaccines are now in use worldwide. The Global Health Innovation Center at Duke University estimates global production capacity to be 12 billion doses for 2021. This is sufficient to immunize 70 percent of the world's population and achieve "herd immunity"—the level of protection sufficient to stop community spread and eliminate surges. Through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) program, more than 190 countries made a joint commitment to secure enough vaccines by the end of 2021 to immunize 20 percent of the population in lower-income countries.

Despite these remarkable successes, the world is headed toward two parallel realities: By late 2021 or early 2022 most high-income countries will have achieved herd immunity and made significant progress toward a new normal. In contrast, lower-income countries are not yet on track to even reach the 20 percent vaccination target. Despite \$400 million in public and private pledges in April, COVAX is short more than \$22 billion for this year's budget. Rich countries have made purchase agreements with vaccine manufacturers that far outweigh the needs of their own populations. Based on the current trajectory, it will take several years to immunize enough people in lower-income countries to stop the pandemic.

The case is compelling for Christians everywhere to reject the prospect of two parallel worlds and demand global vaccination equity. In matters of both personal action and public policy a tension exists within Christianity between communitarianism and individualism. One values the community

above all. The other values the self above all. The balance between the two has varied over time, among denominations, and across national cultures. Western Christianity, exemplified by the United States, emphasizes individualism. Asian, African, and Latin American Christianity is traditionally more communitarian.

Jesus' parables as well as Paul's letters provide examples demonstrating the value of communitarianism as well as individualism, depending on circumstance. Infection with a pandemic virus is a threat to individual life that requires care of the whole person (*cura personalis*). A pandemic is also a collective threat that requires care of the whole community (*cura communitas*). Jesus' commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself," his parable of the good Samaritan, Paul's description of the church as one body, and his statement in Galatians that across ethnicities, genders, and economic status we are "all one in Christ Jesus" all speak to our Christian obligation.

Christian leaders have spoken unequivocally on the imperative of a *cura communitas* approach to global vaccination equity. More than 30 Christian health networks, whose teams have been in frontline combat with the coronavirus around the world, have appealed to "all leaders of governments to do everything in their power to make COVID-19 vaccines a global public good—accessible, available, and equitably distributed." Widespread vaccination is the only way to stop the emergence of mutations. Delayed vaccination deployment in developing countries will prolong the pandemic, with an estimated loss of \$9.2 trillion dollars in economic recovery needed to restore livelihoods and repair the damage to families and communities.

Through the God-given gift of modern science, the world now has the tools to end COVID-19. At present, however, there is no plan to do so. Even worse, the international community is not adhering to existing agreements.

Christians in the U.S.—indeed Christians everywhere—should demand global vaccination equity. We will stop the current pandemic and make the world safer from future pandemics only when we truly live by the Golden Rule. ✦

**Jonathan D. Quick**, author of *The End of Epidemics*, is managing director of pandemic preparedness at The Rockefeller Foundation. The Rockefeller Foundation is a financial donor to Sojourners.

A

## WHY IS JEFF BEZOS TARGETING PUBLIC LIBRARIES?

Amazon founder Jeff Bezos has never been seen in a top hat like the guy on the Monopoly board game, but, in every other way, he is a classic monopolist—the very model of a 21st century robber baron.

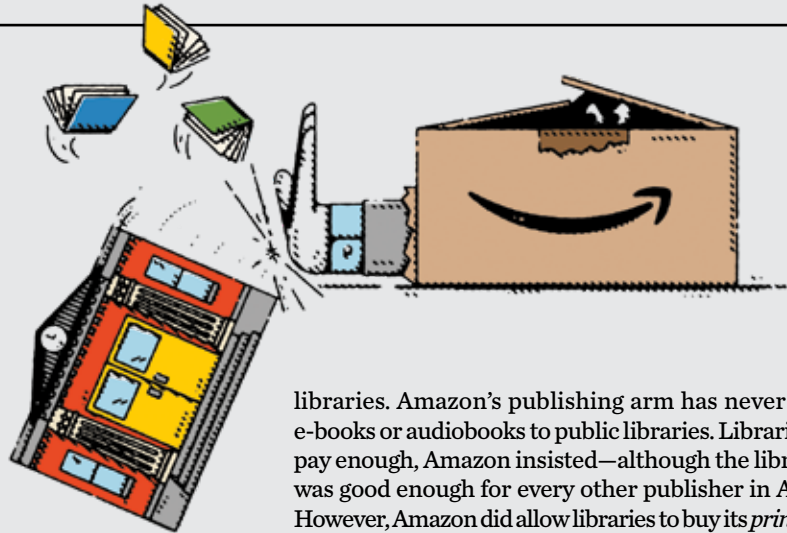
There's at least one difference, however, between Bezos and robber barons of the past. While steel baron Andrew Carnegie became famous for building nearly 1,700 public libraries in small towns across the United States, Bezos has turned his wealth and power to strangling them.

One mark of the monopolist has always been predatory pricing—selling an item at a loss to force a competitor out of business. As the first company to perfect an online ordering and delivery system, Amazon used that advantage to destroy its independent, brick-and-mortar retail competition. As rival online merchants emerged, Amazon systematically underpriced them until they shuttered or fled to the “shelter” of the Amazon Marketplace.

Another classic monopolizing strategy is vertical integration—controlling the supply chain from production to point of sale. When streaming video became the next big thing, Amazon didn't simply start a streaming rental service, it went into the movie production business.

And when e-books posed a threat to Amazon's book business, the company combined those two monopolistic strategies by developing the Kindle e-reader, which Amazon sold at a loss, and then became a major e-book publisher. Now Amazon controls much of the e-book market, from book proposal to arrival of a text in the reader's hands. As *The Washington Post* (also owned by Bezos) reported, six of the 10 best-selling e-books on Amazon were published by Amazon.

And that brings us back to the public



libraries. Amazon's publishing arm has never sold its e-books or audiobooks to public libraries. Libraries don't pay enough, Amazon insisted—although the library rate was good enough for every other publisher in America. However, Amazon did allow libraries to buy its *print* copies.

Then came the pandemic. Libraries closed their doors. E-book loans became a lifeline for low-income readers. Meanwhile, Amazon's quarterly profits tripled as in-person retail disappeared. You might think this would be a good time for Amazon to pick up a little goodwill by coming to terms with the libraries. But you'd be wrong. Amazon says it can't cut a deal with libraries because it is protecting the income of its authors. Never mind that some of those authors, such as Michael Pollan, say they want their books in the public libraries.

One of Andrew Carnegie's libraries was in my hometown of Greenwood, Miss., where sometime around eighth grade, I stumbled upon *The Past That Would Not Die* by Walter Lord (about the venality of the white resistance to desegregation in my home state) and *1984* by George Orwell—the scales fell from my young eyes.

That's what public libraries are for. That's why Ben Franklin started the first one in 1731, so that people without money or connections could be exposed to big ideas and think dangerous thoughts.

Today public libraries are one of the last American institutions untouched by the marketplace ethos. Libraries have become the United States' internet service provider of last resort, a sort of “WeWork for the impoverished.” In fact, a public library is the kind of place where some harried, abused, and surveilled Amazon warehouse worker might use a public computer and stumble upon, say, a union organizing drive. ✘

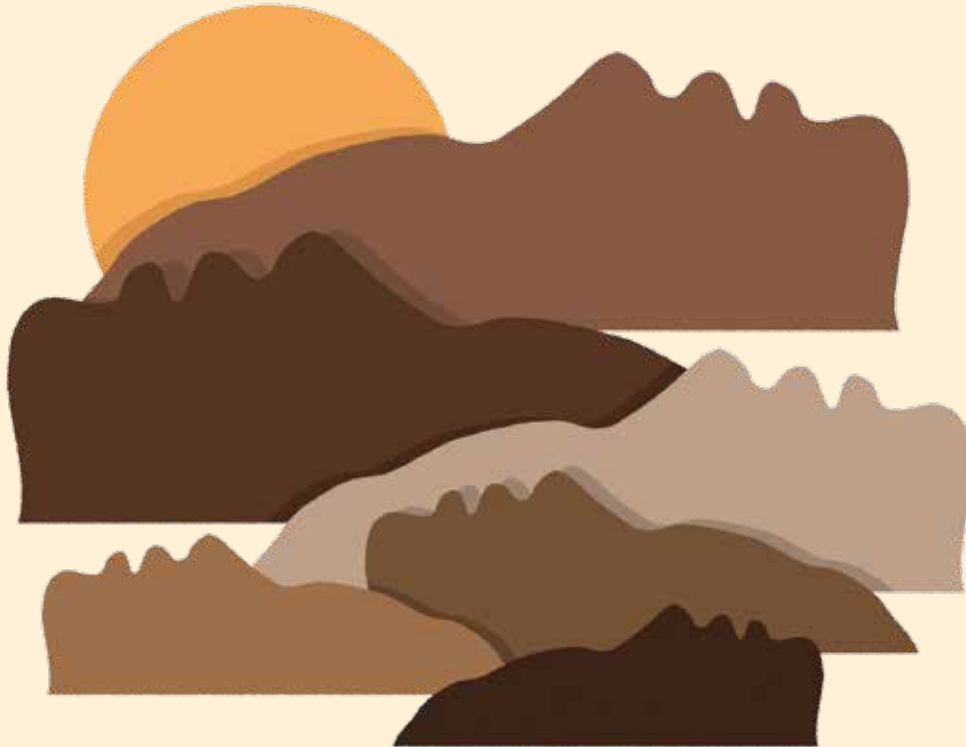
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**LIBRARIES HAVE  
BECOME AMERICA'S  
INTERNET SERVICE  
PROVIDER OF LAST  
RESORT.**

Danny Duncan Collum, a *Sojourners* contributing editor, teaches at Kentucky State University in Frankfort.

## RESTORATION

## 3



I scrolled through the “Moving Mountains” columns I’ve plunked out on laptop keyboards over the past decade. Each title marks a particular threshold in my own journey and understanding. As titles roll from top to bottom, one thing becomes clear as crystal: I have shared my life and my heart with you. This column has largely served as sacred space to reflect, from the perspective of a Black woman follower of Jesus, on the mountains we face, the strategies and tactics it will take to move them, and the faith it takes to move our feet at all. I am grateful to you, the Sojourners community, for all your emails and tweets. Thank you for reading my words.

A recent *New York Times* article, “Can This Amusement Park Be Saved?” did a deep dive into the fate of the Clementon Park and Splash World, located just across the Delaware River from my home in Philadelphia. Seeded by Civil War veteran and New Jersey Assemblyman Theodore B. Gibbs in 1907, this New Jersey amusement park found its heyday in the late ’40s and early ’50s, but fell into disrepair, refinance, and repossession, finally being auctioned off this year. Indiana-based developer Gene Staples won the auction with a bid of \$2.37 million and

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**BLACK, INDIGENOUS, AND OTHER  
PEOPLE OF COLOR ARE RETURNING  
TO OUR OWN STORIES TO FIND OUR  
POWER.**



aims to restore the amusement park to its former glory.

Reporter Kate Morgan writes, “the true draw, [Staples] believes, is the nostalgia itself; the promise that you can go home again, and when you get there, you’ll recognize the place.”

Our shifting world is decolonizing. What does that mean? It means it is quickly becoming unrecognizable to people of European descent. Yet, from the perspective of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, it is becoming more recognizable every day. We have survived, found ways to thrive, or floundered and died under the hegemony of European-descendant cultural norms, mores, and worldviews. Against that backdrop, we are no longer accepting the centering of whiteness. Across the globe, we are saying “No.” As we should.

We are human beings, too, after all. We have histories that do not begin with the first European explorers. We have cultural mores, disrupted by colonization and enslavement, but preserved and passed down by the griots in our cultures. We are returning to our own stories in order to find ourselves, our power, our call to exercise dominion in the world. And we need to do this. In 2045, we will be the majority peoples within the United States. We cannot receive the mantle of leadership wearing the emperor’s armor. It does not fit.

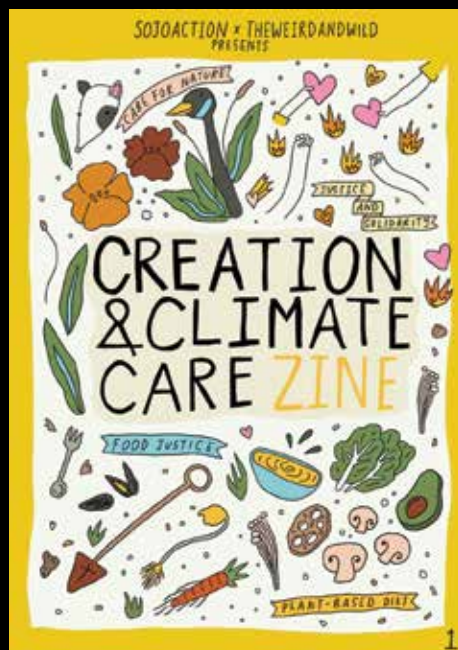
We have seen where the roadmap of white supremacist colonization leads: to de facto or de jure ethnic cleansing—in the name of Jesus. We reject that path.

People of European descent have a simple choice. People deemed “white” in the U.S. can continue their war for supremacy with God, attempting to dominate the image of God on earth. They can retreat into nostalgia. Or they can lean fully into the moment. They can renounce the scaffolding of human hierarchy they have built to protect their status.

They can join hands in the circle of humanity—the beloved community. I pray you choose beloved community. ✕

**Lisa Sharon Harper** is president and founder of Freedom Road and author of *The Very Good Gospel*. You can follow her work at [lisasharonharper.com](http://lisasharonharper.com) and [freedomroad.us](http://freedomroad.us).

## Curious about climate change?



**“If I want to talk to my church about climate change, where do I begin? How does climate change intersect with migrant and racial justice? In what ways can I take real climate action on my own or with my community?”**

**If you’ve ever wondered about any of these things, we’ve got you covered.**

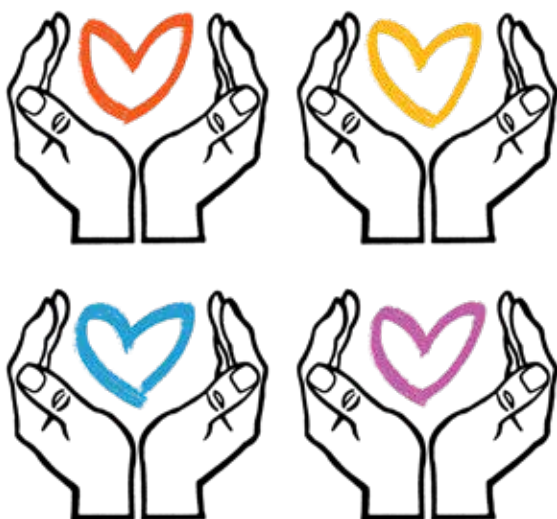
**This new resource is an easy, engaging way to learn, jump-start conversations on climate change, and act together to heal and protect our common home.**

**Download today at [sojo.net/zine](http://sojo.net/zine).**

**SojoAction**

THE HUNGRY SPIRIT BY ROSE MARIE BERGER

## THE SOUND OF THE GENUINE



# A

At age 43, I found the person I wanted to marry. At 50, I proposed. And she said yes. I, a generations-long Roman Catholic, was proposing to a United Methodist (with deep ancestry in Presbyterianism). We wanted our marriage witnessed and blessed by the church. We wanted to hear

our community pledge to uphold and care for us in marriage. But we were not of opposite genders—a prerequisite for marriage in both our denominations.

For seven years we prayed and wrestled over our “mixed marriage” and what to do with our respective denominations’ position, which amounted to “love the sinner, hate the sin.” The priests in our Catholic community recognized us as a couple and tended our wounds when anti-gay teaching came from the pulpit. But they could not invite us on couples’ retreats, consecrate our marriage, or even offer us a blessing. Our evangelical and Methodist communities defended our civil rights, but not our ecclesial ones. If we asked for liturgical rites, we became a “problem.”

Eventually, we found an Episcopal community that not only welcomed us but offered marriage preparation tailored for same-gender couples. We signed on the dotted line, completed the pastoral process, and sent out invitations for our April 2020 wedding. A

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### WE WERE NOT OF OPPOSITE GENDERS—A PREREQUISITE FOR MARRIAGE IN BOTH OUR DENOMINATIONS.

global pandemic scuttled our plans.

This spring, the Vatican office responsible for Catholic doctrine published a response to the question: “Does the Church have the power to give the blessing to unions of persons of the same sex? Response: negative.” The one-word answer was followed by a 975-word explanation that included a reminder that God “does not and cannot bless sin.”

In *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*, Southern writer Suzanne Pharr asked what would “the world be like without homophobia in it?” If patriarchy is held in place by sexism, Pharr argued, then sexism is held in place by “economics, violence, and homophobia.” I would argue this is the root of institutional Roman Catholicism’s homophobia: It sees gender and sexual identity issues as *existential* threats, not doctrinal ones. Give an inch on same-gender blessings and the whole patriarchal system falls apart.

Howard Thurman once said, “There is in every person something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in herself.” What if Christians were to say that sexual identity across the spectrum is neither sickness nor sin; it’s not “inherently disordered,” but holds a special place in the complex beauty of the natural order? What if church was a place where we raised our children to be judged not by their sexual identity but by the “content of their character”? Can our churches cultivate “the sound of the genuine”?

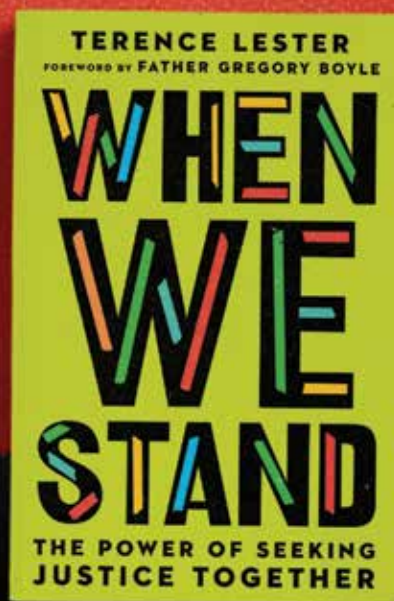
My wife and I married on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe at the height of the pandemic. Just the two of us, in a nearby oak and beech woods. Ironically, four generations earlier, an ancestor of mine in Louisiana relocated his unorthodox family into the wooded hinterlands to get “beyond the oversight of the [local] priest” and avoid the church’s anti-miscegenation laws. A commitment to Catholic faith and to the “sound of the genuine” still runs deep. ❖

Rose Marie Berger is senior editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

# SEEKING JUSTICE TOGETHER

*"Terence invites us to embrace a love that is without measure and without regret. It connects us. . . . In precisely this, Terence Lester is the shape of God's heart."*

**FATHER GREGORY BOYLE, FROM THE FOREWORD**



**TERENCE LESTER** is a minister, speaker, community activist, author, and founder of Love Beyond Walls, a not-for-profit organization focused on poverty awareness and community mobilization. His campaigns on behalf of the poor have been viewed by millions of people globally on *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, and more.



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## New Immigration Sermons Resource Hub



Rev. Cassy Núñez

**Sojourners has created a sermon resource hub to help pastors and lay leaders inform their congregations on immigration.**

Our immigrant communities, churches, and advocates have created a cultural moment where immigration is a priority for our country's leaders. We know that for promises to become realities, our churches have a crucial role to play as advocates. Use these resources to guide your communities in this work.

Visit [sojo.net/immigrationsermons](https://sojo.net/immigrationsermons) to listen to and read the sermons!

**SOJOURNERS**

EYEWITNESS

# 4



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**“CLIMATE CHANGE IS  
NOT GOING TO BE  
PREDICTABLE.”**

## ALL HAT, NO CLIMATE PLAN



“In most parts of Texas, we’re not prepared for [winter] weather. It’s not like people in Texas can’t individually have snow boots and mittens. It’s that the community is not prepared. There are no salt trucks. There aren’t snowplows. People’s houses are not insulated for severe, prolonged cold weather.

What we know about climate change is that it’s not going to be predictable.

For Texans, [the power outages] rubbed salt in what was already an open wound. It added insult to injury. Everyone already was feeling isolated because of COVID-19, and the storm created additional isolation. Everybody figured out they could sit in their car, which wasn’t safe to drive, but they could turn it on to charge their phone.

This isn’t a mechanical failure, it’s a failure of policy. More than that, it’s a failure of imagination.

Texas is so invested in some narratives. The state leadership is invested in fossil fuels—literally. It’s hard to say, ‘There is climate change, and we need to prepare our power grid to be resilient’ if you’ve invested in denying that there’s climate change.

What we as a state have to be willing to do is start acting with what the Catholic Church refers to as ‘prudence.’ You know the expression that you cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for a war? That’s not true with natural disasters because we are not in charge. We can live optimistically expecting [and] working for the best, but plan in case something goes wrong.

We’re working with legislators to advance climate plan legislation, similar to what a number of other coastal states have already done. Texas ought to have a plan because that’s the loving thing to do.”

**Bee Moorhead**, executive director of the interfaith organization Texas Impact, spoke with *Sojourners’* Ashley Ver Beek. Winter storms in February left millions of Texans without power; at least 111 people died, many from hypothermia.

# CAN WHITE EVANGELICALS



# FROM TRUMPISM?

# BE DEPROGRAMMED



THERE *IS* A PATH FORWARD IF CHURCHES  
TAKE SERIOUSLY THE SPREAD OF  
DANGEROUS CONSPIRACY THEORIES.

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BY GINA CILIBERTO  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY IBRAHIM RAYINTAKATH

**BEFORE 2020, REV. JOSH GELATT DID NOT KNOW MUCH ABOUT QANON. GELATT HAD BEEN LEAD PASTOR AT CASCADES BAPTIST CHURCH IN JACKSON, MICH., SINCE 2016. ON OCCASION, HE HAD HEARD CONGREGANTS ALLEGE THAT “DEMOCRATS, LIBERALS, AND SOCIALISTS ARE EVIL,” AND THAT “THEY’RE OUT TO CLOSE CHURCHES AND TAKE AWAY GUNS IN THE UNITED STATES.” HE HAD HEARD CHRISTIAN NATIONALISTIC CLAIMS, SUCH AS “WE ARE GOD’S CHOSEN COUNTRY.”**

Gelatt, who does not identify as a Democrat or a Republican, was reasonably concerned. Then in spring 2020, Gelatt noticed what he called an “alarming twist” in his congregation.

After the murder of George Floyd in May, Cascades Baptist Church erupted with QAnon’s apocalyptic conspiracy theories, which the FBI has warned may lead some adherents to domestic terrorism. In the church and on social media, Gelatt witnessed members share false allegations that then-presidential candidate Joe Biden had “an island with an underground submarine where he receives his pedophile orders” and that there were “underground railroads between various cities run by Hollywood elites.” Congregants claimed that then-President Donald Trump was going to “seize power, execute the liberals, and expose pedophile rings.”

Those lies festered “like a hand grenade in the middle of the faith community,” Gelatt told *Sojourners*.

Rev. Keith Mannes traces his concerns about Trumpism and conspiracy theories at East Saugatuck Christian Reformed Church in Michigan back to June 16, 2015, when he watched Trump announce his candidacy for president. Mannes was “spir-

itually troubled” as Trump descended the gold escalator through the atrium of Trump Tower in New York City.

Mannes told *Sojourners*, “Day by day, and week by week, when we saw what Donald Trump was doing and saying, and when we saw what the institution of the church was giving of itself to him, we just thought, ‘This is darkly spiritual, this thing that has a grip on the minds and hearts of the church.’”

A definition of “Trumpism” began to take shape—a political ideology and populist movement with a set of mechanisms for acquiring and keeping power that are associated with Trump, his political base, and neo-nationalist movements worldwide.

Like Gelatt, Mannes tried to be sensitive to his congregants’ beliefs. Then George Floyd was murdered, and “a beloved guy in the heart of the church said something really derogatory about Black Lives Matter” to Mannes, and Mannes confronted him.

A few days later, the congregant texted Mannes to say he would be leaving the church because he could not attend a church where the lead pastor supports a terrorist organization.

Mannes was shocked.

Gelatt and Mannes tried to address the misinformation swirling among their congregants. Both online and in church, Gelatt “lovingly” reminded his congregants that “this is a conspiracy theory, and it has no place in our minds and hearts as believers.”

Toeing the line between being respectful and preaching the truth grew increasingly more frustrating. When Gelatt read a passage from the Bible in church that contained the word “justice,” a handful of congregants left in protest. Rumors sprouted that Gelatt was a secret communist who wanted America to be run like communist Mongolia.

When Mannes tried to address the misinformation, he was misunderstood. “If I’m preaching about the most consequential issue of the day and nobody’s even noticing that it might have something to do with their allegiance and devotion to Donald Trump, then what am I doing? I’m doing nothing. This matters not at all.”

#### **BATTLING THE NEW HERESY**

**Gelatt and Mannes** are not alone in their struggle against QAnon, conspiracy theories, and Trumpism in church. Pastors

across the country see them raging within congregations: beliefs that powerful, hidden, evil forces control human destinies.

A poll released this year from Lifeway Research indicated that 49 percent of U.S. Protestant pastors “frequently hear members of their congregation repeating conspiracy theories they have heard.”

A survey conducted by the conservative American Enterprise Institute in January echoed this claim: 27 percent of white evangelicals—the most of any religious group—believe as “completely” or “mostly” accurate the widely debunked QAnon conspiracy theory that Donald Trump was fighting a global ring of child traffickers linked to the political left. By comparison, only 15 percent of all Americans believe the same theory.

“Christian churches resolve to be places focused on the truth,” said Scott McConnell of Lifeway Research, yet nearly half of Protestant pastors are hearing their congregants spread lies.

“At this time, it appears more of the theories are traveling in politically conservative circles, which corresponds to the higher percentages in the churches led by white Protestant pastors,” said McConnell.

Gelatt told *Sojourners* that conspiracy theory conversations “were happening in the church foyer almost on a weekly basis, with people truly panicked and truly worried. It’s divisive. It’s broken apart small groups.



It was so disruptive to community that, even when there’s actual relationships of people getting together and discussing scripture, it became these rage-fueled, fear-fueled, ‘the government is going to come and get us’ sessions.”

Experts say that while the politics of the Trump base has historical precedents, the psychological dynamics fueling Trump’s base is unlike other modern



U.S. political movements in a specific and frightening way: It is cult-like.

### **CRITICAL INFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS**

**“Cult” is a volatile term.** It is associated with religious groups far outside the mainstream that have overly controlling leadership or dangerous practices. But most experts understand cults as a system of beliefs and behaviors that arise in response to a central authoritarian figure.

Educator and author Robert Jay Lifton was an early researcher on how authoritarian leaders exert their power. In studying prisoners of war, Lifton mapped out the conditions under which the human mind can be “systematically broken down and remade to believe the exact opposite of what it once did,” according to cult expert Steven Hassan.

Decades ago, joining a cult meant leaving your community to physically join a group, Janja Lalich, a specialist in cults and coercive influence and control, told *Sojourners*. Isolation was a key ingredient in “brainwashing.” Now, thanks to technology, anyone can join a cult from the comfort of their own home.

According to Hassan, author of *The Cult of Trump*, Trump’s personal leadership style fits the mold of many gang, cult, or authoritarian leaders.

Trump, Hassan told *Sojourners*, demonstrates “destructive authoritarian” qualities, including “narcissistic, psychopathic, elitist, grandiose, power hungry, deceptive [claims to] absolute authority.” Trump’s followers often exhibit responses based in “hate, doctrine, dependency, and obedience”—all

recognizable as cult-like characteristics.

“Authoritarian leaders do ‘thought stopping,’” Hassan said, a cognitive behavioral technique to disrupt negative thinking and redirect thoughts to something that relieves distress. In the context of cult behaviors “thought stopping” is encouraged whenever a follower has questions or doubts. “They think all critical information is fake news. They tell their followers not to believe the mainstream media,” said Hassan.

Bandy X. Lee, a forensic psychiatrist and author of *Profile of a Nation: Trump’s Mind, America’s Soul*, agreed that Trumpism, conspiracy theories, and QAnon are cult-like, and frightening.

“Not to consider them in these terms, or the equivalent psychological phenomenon, is to misjudge their serious effects on the people and the culture,” Lee told *Sojourners*.

In 2015, Lee was not interested in politics: She was focused on violence prevention programs in prisons. Yet, when she glimpsed an interaction between Trump and his followers at a rally, she “realized within seconds” that Trump’s dynamic with rally attendees matched “the dynamic [she] witnessed, in prison, of street gangs.”

“Of course, Trump supporters range anywhere from someone who is simply supporting him because of pocketbook or policy advantages to those who are, frankly, detached from reality,” Lee said.

She diagnoses this “detachment from reality” as a form of *folie à plusieurs* (a madness of many), a rare shared psychotic disorder wherein healthy people take on the delusion of another person who already has a psychotic disorder and to whom they

have sustained exposure.

“I have seen it a lot in the public sector setting, in prisons, and with street gangs where many of the leaders are disordered and hold a lot of authority,” Lee said. “The fact that it’s happening at a national level should not turn us away from this interpretation.”

And, as noted earlier, another powerful element distinguishes many Trump followers from followers of other politicians or controlling leaders: religion.

“Many Christians believe that God is using Trump, that they are listening to somebody who claims to be a prophet or an apostle or an authoritarian who is directly telling them what God wants,” Hassan said.

This political trend and theological heresy—conflating the U.S. as the central actor for the purposes of the Christian God in history—has been of such concern that a group of more than 500 influential evangelicals published an open letter condemning “radicalized Christian nationalism” and the “rise of violent acts by radicalized extremists using the name of Christ.” Signers included Jerushah Duford, the granddaughter of the late Rev. Billy Graham, and Rev. Adam Russell Taylor, president of *Sojourners*.

### **ARE WHITE EVANGELICALS SUSCEPTIBLE TO AUTHORITARIANS?**

**Historians John Fea** and Kristin Kobes Du Mez believe that the *culture* of evangelicalism, not necessarily the doctrine, has made many U.S. evangelicals susceptible to a leader with authoritarian tendencies.

Du Mez, author of *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, points out that core factors of evangelical culture—such as a willingness to embrace conspiratorial thinking, culture wars, distrust of mainstream media and the secular world, and fears of the new world order—all fertilized evangelical communities to be susceptible to a leader like Trump.

Fea, author of *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*, agreed that evangelicals have historically been “anti-intellectual,” and that there’s precedent for evangelicals “to be swayed by charismatic leaders.”

“Evangelicals tend to draw toward people who speak to God: prophets who say, ‘God is telling me this,’ ‘God is leading me to tell you this is going to happen,’ or ‘God has revealed this to me,’” Fea told *Sojourners*. “There’s a wing of evangelicals who believe that Donald Trump was sent



THANKS TO TECHNOLOGY, ANYONE  
CAN JOIN A CULT FROM THE  
COMFORT OF THEIR OWN HOME.

by God and Donald Trump is somehow serving God's plan by restoring America to its Christian roots. They believe that he's a new King Cyrus who's delivering America from the grip of liberalism or the Left or socialism."

When a persuasive portion of a Christian community—such as those pastored by Gelatt and Manne—abandon critical thinking, stop watching verified news sources, and leave their old communities to focus unreservedly on Trump, then the problem is graver than an electoral vote or political ideology.

### **SELF-RADICALIZING THROUGH THE ALT-RIGHT PIPELINE**

**For Josh Shirley**, who secretly followed what he called the "the alt-right pipeline" in college, it was his Baptist high school that primed him to believe conspiracy theories.

At weekly Wednesday morning gatherings, the pastor would occasionally visit and give what Shirley calls "conspiracy-laden, almost political sermons." Topics included conspiracy theories that creationism is real but intentionally covered up by scientists and the concept that codes hidden within the Torah predicted events such as JFK's assassination and Sept. 11.

At the time, Shirley thought the sermons were bogus. He grew up in a liberal religious household and was "ecstatic when Obama won two terms," he told *Sojourners*. But by the time Shirley started at Calvin College (now University) in 2014, he found himself spending more and more time on Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube pages where a community of people espoused ideas that "pushed conservative politics and non-politically correct language" in videos and posts.

At first, Shirley considered the content to be entertaining and bizarre, much like his high school pastor. But he also recalls not being terribly happy at that time. The content on the alt-right pipeline placed the blame for "failure" on everyone else. Gradually, Shirley found himself thinking the same.

"A lot of the content starts tamer, but then progresses to outright bigotry," said Shirley. "For example, I got started down the pipeline when I watched

YouTube videos about 'crazy feminist fails' and other dumb stuff where the focus was on someone you could describe as 'progressive' being dumb on camera. From there it would progress from 'See this silly person' to 'See? Their ideas on society are bad for everyone.' This is the point where more outright bigoted or conspiratorial ideas show up."

Shirley engaged with the content "on [his] own time" and never talked to anyone in person about it. Eventually, the racism became too disturbing for Shirley, who is white, to ignore. He recalls a meme on Reddit about Black people. As he scrolled through a slew of racist comments on the post, it finally clicked that "the occasionally racist stuff I saw wasn't occasional," he said.

By the 2016 election, Shirley had stopped reading alt-right content. Still, there are times when Shirley catches himself harboring beliefs that "wormed their way in" from following those alt-right forums.

As Lee emphasized, Shirley's experience of unintentionally becoming indoctrinated "is common and can happen to persons of all backgrounds."

"The usual cult experience is that one accidentally steps into a cult or is tricked into joining," Lee said. "Many people in a cult will feel that way, none of them thinking how far it will take them."



According to Hassan, "there's a lot of hope" for those who are recovering from alt-right propaganda or conspiracy theories, or who subscribe to QAnon, if there is an open, receptive community waiting for them on the other side.

"Nobody wants to be in a cult," Hassan said. "Nobody wants to be brainwashed. Nobody likes being lied to and exploited."

### **FIVE WAYS TO LEAVE THE TRUMP CULT**

**According to Hassan**, there are five strategies that churches can employ to deprogram their congregants from the Trump cult:

**1. Deprioritize fear.** In Trumpism, QAnon, and the rabbit hole of conspiracy theories, followers are "being deceived and manipulated psychologically and indoctrinated into a fear state" that is common for cults, said Hassan. Followers instead become obsessed with fear of the other, a paranoia around widespread child abuse, and even exorcising demons.

These are deviations from Christianity, Hassan noted, rather than the practice of Christianity, which focuses on the actual teachings of Jesus.

"Remind people that God is all powerful, not Satan. Love is the great commandment, not hate," Hassan said. "We need to get back to a groundedness in our practices."

**2. Teach biblical and media literacy.** Christian churches need to teach critical thinking, how to identify misinformation and propaganda, and how to counter deceptive biblical interpretations both in church and on social media. Educate congregants on the difference between *exegesis* and *eisegesis* when approaching scripture. Teach them to bring an inquiring, objective lens to speakers, authors, pastors, and news sources. Once congregants deem certain information false, they will stop following its sources. "If we change the people who they're listening to, then there's a chance they'll listen to some other Christian authority figure who is more ethical," Hassan said.

**3. Practice informed dialogue.** When Hassan dialogues with Trump followers, or members of any cult, he finds that respectfully and patiently talking about "another group

that they would agree is a cult” is most successful.

For instance, Hassan discusses Chinese communist brainwashing, or “pimps and traffickers and how they recruit and indoctrinate victims.” Then, using the BITE (behavior, information, thought, and emotion) model developed in Hassan’s book *Combating Cult Mind Control*, he explains how a person is made over in the image of the cult with binary beliefs—all or nothing, good or evil. Usually, participants can agree that a cult is based on dependence and obedience rather than thinking for yourself.

“From there, you back your way into the thesis,” Hassan said. The key is to not try to persuade or attack anyone, but to illustrate benchmarks of cults and allow them to draw comparisons between what they agree is a cult and their unquestioning affiliation with Trump or QAnon.

“I take a frame of ‘I’m an intelligent person. You’re an intelligent person. We need to find out what’s the truth. Maybe I am brainwashed; maybe you’re brainwashed. Let’s learn what it is and evaluate it together,’” Hassan said.

#### 4. Center the stories of the deprogrammed.

Though counterintuitive, Hassan said, the church is exactly the place for education about exploitative control or undue influence. In fact, churches should invite testimonies from people who are survivors of sex and labor traffickers and people who have been in cults or abusive relationships, so that congregants can learn how these power dynamics operate—how influence can shift from constructive to destructive.

“If people understand the problem and understand what works to help people wake up, then we can develop training programs ... we can activate and empower former members,” Hassan said. “Aside from doing basic education about the [influence] continuum and BITE model, [ministers] can ask their congregants who have been affected by any cultic psychology—not just the cult of Trump—to share their testimonials and stories with the congregation.”

#### 5. Use the pulpit to repudiate Christian dominionism, nationalism, and a “prosperity gospel.”

These ideologies, which Hassan calls “the opposite of Jesus’ words,” provide a foundation for authoritarian ideology. “‘Morality vs. criminality’ and ‘Do unto others as you want them to do unto you’ need to be on everybody’s mind,” Hassan said. “We need to adopt a loving, cooperative, collaborative model rather than the

polarization, hatred, and fear model that the authoritarians are pushing.”

#### LIBERATION THROUGH THE ‘GRAND ARC OF SCRIPTURE’

Some pastors already employ Hassan’s suggestions.

For Rev. Kaitlyn Wood, lead pastor at United Church of Cohoes in New York, rampant conspiracy theories spurred her to “to move people out of an American mindset and into a kingdom mindset.” For her part, Wood models and teaches “a different way forward that doesn’t ostracize people.”

Using what Wood calls “the grand arc of scripture,” she has identified a narrative that contradicts dominionist, nationalistic theology and focuses instead on a justice-based approach. Her goal is to teach her congregation that neither Democrats nor Republicans “have a hold on Christianity,” without using those terms at all.

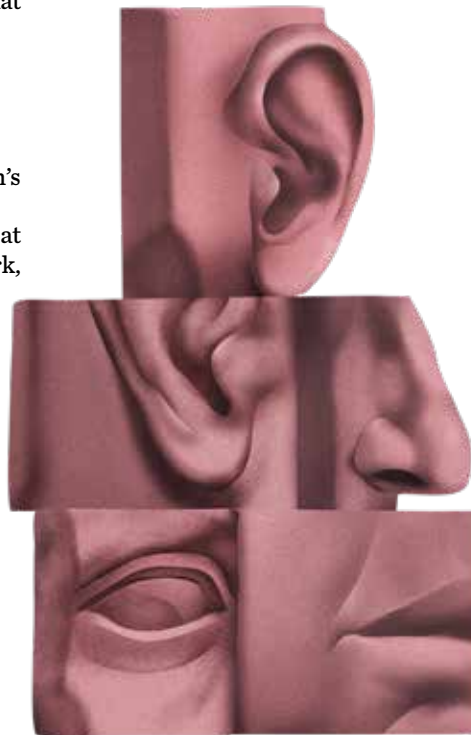
Wood told *Sojourners*, “Many people who would have been very staunchly conservative, very staunchly Republican, have stopped identifying with the party almost altogether, not moving to the Democrat party, but instead moving more into this tension of the in-between.”

In Minneapolis, Rev. Stephanie Williams O’Brien is creating her own “kingdom mindset” within her church. O’Brien has spent her tenure as lead pastor of Mill City Church creating “a place that’s psychologically safe” for her congregation “to ask hard questions and to be able to say, ‘I don’t understand.’” She urges congregants to message her with questions and concerns around what they see happening in the world.

And people *do* message her. Whether they hold beliefs about the tea party, Trump, or QAnon, or they are concerned about family members or loved ones espousing those beliefs, O’Brien wants them to know that she’s supporting them and that she doesn’t plan to stop.

Gelatt and Mannes both left their churches within a year of the experiences they described. Gelatt moved to Hays, Kan., where he became lead pastor at North Oak Community Church and began a doctoral program in biblical justice—a necessary step, he said, in countering the misinformation rampant in the Christian sphere.

Mannes not only left his congregation but left the evangelical church at large. He



found the Trumpism within the “church family” irreconcilable with his faith. “When you look at the violence that’s being done to people of other races, the church has turned a hard heart and a willfully blind eye to dangerous realities,” said Mannes, who is white. “If you can look at the violence and shrug your shoulders, you have fundamentally left the Kingdom of God.”

Josh Shirley, the Calvin student who found himself in the alt-right pipeline, says much in the alt-right community led him to believe he was lonely and single because “society was giving women too high a standard for men.”

“Obviously, that’s a load of crap,” said Shirley, “but it was an easy way to dodge blame for my personal failings. And so, on it goes until I have my little, secret worldview that leaves me scot-free of blame for anything bad happening in my life.”

O’Brien recognizes Shirley’s experience. “When they’ve done research on extremism, the only thing that has really been proven to help people is to be loved out of it,” O’Brien said. “This is the most Christian thing to say: The only thing that can deprogram somebody from misinformation, disinformation, and hate is love.” ♦

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**Gina Ciliberto** lives in Minneapolis. She writes about religion, social justice, food, and travel.



# THE UNCERTAIN JOURNEY NORTH

FOR MANY PEOPLE IN HONDURAS AND ELSEWHERE, LEAVING  
THEIR HOME COUNTRY IS A MATTER OF SURVIVAL.



**TEXT AND PHOTOS BY  
GREGG BREKKE**

**ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
BRIANNA ROBINSON**

**B**inizio Nuñez, Stephanie Hernandez, and their children sit in the shade outside the Honduran customs office at a border crossing with Guatemala, recuperating and replenishing themselves with food and water supplied by the Guatemalan Red Cross. The family members, who came from a farming community in central Honduras, were deported from Guatemala on the morning of Jan. 19 this year. They had attempted the journey north by joining a large migrant caravan that departed San Pedro Sula, Honduras, in the early morning hours of Jan. 15.

Now, the family waits in the afternoon heat, one small group among several thousand people deported over the last few days, as other people expelled from Guatemala stream back into Honduras with their belongings in backpacks and trash bags.

Nuñez and Hernandez say they joined the caravan out of necessity. “There are no jobs,” Nuñez says. Back-to-back hurricanes, Eta and Iota, hit Central America in November 2020 and were especially punishing to Honduras. Nuñez says farm work has disappeared, and even the ever-growing clothing and assembly factories, or *maquilas*, aren’t hiring. The small *pulpería* (convenience shop) Hernandez operated was washed away by the storms.

They say they will make further attempts to reach the U.S., “probably California,” says Hernandez, holding her sleeping toddler. “We pray to God everything goes okay. There is nothing for us here.”

Sol Escobar, a bus driver hired by a Honduran emergency assistance agency to return those deported at the border to their homes, offers some context. He lived and worked in the U.S. for several years before returning to Honduras. “Mostly the young men, maybe some of the young women, will make it through,” Escobar says. “They will run past the police or into the forest or along the rivers to evade the checkpoints. But most of the families carrying their belongings or with children or older people will be stopped and sent back.”

Escobar’s assessment seems to bear out as most people seen returning to Honduras this day are families with children or senior adults. Still, clusters of young people also walk past.

#### **PUSH AND PULL**

The caravan had around 8,000 people, mostly Honduran with a small percentage of migrants from El Salvador and Nicaragua. Dramatic footage of clashes as migrants attempted to breach Guatemalan

police lines at the border crossings and checkpoints bears witness to the challenges at the beginning of the journey. Not only do people need to find a way to travel the 2,000-plus miles to the U.S. border, they also face extortion by traffickers, hostility from local residents, and the perils of undocumented border crossings.

Arne Kristensen, a Danish consultant to international nongovernment organizations, has lived in Honduras since 2016 and worked with marginalized communities in the country for 20 years. He was in Chiquimula, Guatemala, assisting a news crew when violent confrontations between those migrating and police occurred on Jan. 17. Kristensen says half of those migrating who he spoke with in Guatemala pointed to loss of property during the November 2020 hurricanes as a “push factor” for their migration. The hurricanes are part of a pattern of extreme weather events attributed to climate change. Others listed job loss, lack of opportunity, violence or threats of violence from gangs, and political instability.

But Kristensen, who has a master’s degree in anti-corruption studies, believes the root of these problems are corrupt systems that make life unbearable for all but economic elites and those who participate in graft. “The cause of the cause [for these push factors] is corruption,” Kristensen says. “There is money, there are resources in the country. If people felt safe, if they felt they were taken care of and provided for, if they had opportunities for education and to educate their children, they would not leave. But in corrupt systems, these things do not appear attainable, and for many they are not.”

A January 2021 study titled “Hopelessness and Corruption” cited high numbers victimized by corruption—25 percent of Hondurans said they were victims of corruption in the previous year—and found that nearly 80 percent of people in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala lack confidence in their government. Large numbers of people, the study reported, intend to migrate to another country—24 percent of Salvadorans, 33 percent of Hondurans, and 18 percent of Guatemalans.

Corruption in the region—which contributes to the sense of hopelessness

that leads many to migrate—is deeply connected to U.S. intervention over the years. In Guatemala, for example, the CIA helped overthrow a democratically elected president in the 1950s and subsequently supported authoritarian leaders who murdered thousands of Guatemalans.

Kristensen also points to a significant “pull factor” for many Hondurans: The perception that wealth and freedom await those who complete the journey. More than 20 percent of the current Honduran GDP consists of foreign remittances. “Everyone knows someone who lives in the U.S.,” Kristensen says. “And if you’re a kid working in a mechanic shop for a lousy salary and your cousin is having success working in Houston and he wants to pay for you to come up, why don’t you do it?”

### **NEW FACES OF MIGRATION**

**Estimates are only** now starting to emerge on the number of people who made it through Guatemala and into Mexico this year. Shelters in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, where hopping a freight train known as “The Beast” is the fastest but most dangerous way north, are reporting record numbers of arrivals even as they’ve reduced bed space to enforce COVID-19 distancing protocols.

People who may not have undertaken the journey last year due to the pandemic are now feeling bolder. That, along with a perceived loosening of immigration policies under the Biden administration and the annual spring migration uptick, is seen as the impetus for the surge in early 2021 migrations.

In 2019, at least 500,000 people attempted the journey to the U.S. through Mexico. According to a July 2020 study by Jesuits in Honduras, coyotes—people paid to smuggle others across borders and into the U.S.—transported nearly 60 percent of those migrating north. Those migrating via caravans accounted for 15 percent of the total.

The percentage of people abandoning solo migration in favor of caravans has grown steadily in the past five years. Before that, few people migrated in large groups. “If we go together, we just might make it,” says Josué Rivera Rivera, a Honduran based in Mexico City, describing the sentiment he’s heard from many joining the caravans. Rivera is regional manager for the Protected Passage Program at ChildFund International, which is dedicated to safeguarding those migrating,

especially children, adolescents, and their families, as they journey north.

“Children are the most vulnerable when it comes to migration,” Rivera says. “We really regret ... the [Trump administration] ‘Zero Tolerance’ policy and what it became: locking up children and systematically trying to make it as traumatizing as possible for the children, because they thought that would deter their families from migrating.”

Rivera points to other factors that have led to more families undertaking the journey. Prior to the U.S.-initiated war on drugs, the 9/11 attacks, and restrictions placed by the North American Free Trade Agreement, Rivera says, the border was more porous, and many people received worker visas to the U.S. annually to work in construction or agriculture. When the U.S.-Mexico border was militarized in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and migrant work visas became all but impossible to obtain, this seasonal flow of labor was halted, along with the flow of money that kept communities and families afloat in Mexico and Central America. “Going to the U.S. to work became a one-shot deal,” Rivera says. “The chances of coming back to your home country [and family] if you have gone to the U.S. are so much smaller. At the same time, other factors like political and social instability, murders, gangs, and extreme weather events became worse in Central America.”

Rivera has interviewed people on the migration path in Mexico; he estimates 80 percent reported experiencing a traumatizing event such as theft, gang violence, extortion, or police interference in their home country in the last six months. He added that they were headed for even more trauma en route, especially if apprehended along the way or at the U.S. border.

### **A HUMAN WALL**

**In fall 2018**, a 160-person caravan left San Pedro Sula, bound for the U.S. By the time it reached the Guatemalan border at El Florido, there were 3,000 people. According to U.N. estimates, the caravan temporarily swelled to 7,000 people as it approached the border with Mexico on Oct. 22. In response, then-President Donald Trump tweeted, “Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador were not able to do the job of stopping people from leaving their country and coming illegally to the U.S. We will now begin cutting off, or substantially reducing, the massive foreign aid routinely given to them.”



“Before Trump, nobody thought of caravans,” says Milton Funes, a consultant with Global Communities. Traveling with other people, Funes says, “There’s less risk of traffickers and extortion along the route. It also sends a message that there is a large presence of people suffering, looking for a better way of life, a dignified life.”

It’s unknown how many people in the 2018 caravan arrived at the U.S. border, given attrition through exhaustion and lack of funds, but on Nov. 23 the mayor of Tijuana, Juan Manuel Gastélum, declared a humanitarian crisis in his city as 5,000 travelers crammed into the city’s 3,000-person capacity soccer stadium in anticipation of seeking asylum. U.S. agencies were able to process fewer than 100 asylum applications per day, and tensions grew. In the following days, several confrontations with U.S. and Mexican border agents occurred as groups attempted to cross at the official port of entry in San Ysidro and at the ocean border wall.

In subsequent years, due in part to the threat of withheld aid funds, Guatemala and Mexico increased their enforcement policies and turned back migrant caravans. A December 2020 caravan that left San Pedro Sula was stopped before entering Guatemala. “When Trump said he was going to make Mexico pay for the border wall, people thought it was going to be a physical



detention, and removal of travel bans that targeted those seeking legal entry into the U.S. from predominately Muslim countries and asylum seekers. Additionally, the Biden campaign promised to extend naturalization opportunities for green card holders and young people without documentation who were brought to the U.S. as children. In practice, however, the Biden administration has taken a hard line against people entering the U.S. unlawfully: In February 2021, 72 percent of those crossing improperly and encountered by the Border Patrol were sent back to Mexico or expelled to their home countries.

The Biden campaign proposed a \$4 billion regional strategy to address factors in Central America that power migration, mobilize private investment, improve regional security, address corruption, and prioritize poverty reduction and economic development. The day President Biden took office he introduced the U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021 in which he outlined the goals of this financial aid with the hope of addressing the root causes of migration by “increasing assistance to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras,

**“IF PEOPLE FELT SAFE, IF THEY FELT PROVIDED FOR, IF THEY HAD OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION AND TO EDUCATE THEIR CHILDREN, THEY WOULD NOT LEAVE.”**

wall between the U.S. and Mexico,” Rivera says. “But what he effectively did with these policies is force Mexico to build a wall—a human wall of military presence—along its southern border with Guatemala.”

In opposition, the Biden campaign published materials such as “The Biden Plan for Securing Our Values as a Nation of Immigrants.” In this and related documents, the new administration proposed dismantling punitive Trump-era policies levied under the guise of a national emergency, including family separation and detention, an intentionally slow asylum system, and the reduction of asylum quotas. In their place was a commitment to partner with humanitarian and faith-based groups to provide assistance to those approaching the U.S. border, an end to prolonged

conditioned on their ability to reduce the endemic corruption, violence, and poverty that causes people to flee their home countries.”

At a March 10 press conference, Roberta Jacobson, former ambassador to Mexico and a senior adviser to Biden on border issues, said the administration had heard the concerns of some legislators and was taking a cautious approach to distributing the proposed aid to government entities. “I want to emphasize that the funds we’re asking for from Congress don’t go to government leaders; they go to communities, to training, to climate mitigation, to violence prevention, to anti-gang programs,” Jacobson said. “In other words, they go to the people who otherwise migrate in search of hope.”

But for many, these policy changes don’t yet fully address the critical needs of everyday people in the Northern Triangle. “When you lose hope, when you realize that what happens [politically] doesn’t matter, that things are not going to change,” Rivera says, “then the only logical path is to leave and not return.”

#### **LA TERMINAL**

**A second 2021 migrant caravan** was announced via social media shortly after the Jan. 15 caravan had reached Guatemala. Urged on by Facebook groups and WhatsApp chats, approximately 75 people gathered in the humid early evening hours of Jan. 24—before the 8 p.m. COVID-19 curfew—at the San Pedro Sula bus terminal, known locally as La Terminal, in anticipation of joining the caravan the next morning.

Bolstered by what they perceived as success in the previous caravan’s progress, this seed group had arrived on buses from around Honduras and waited for others to fill their ranks. Unfortunately for them, law enforcement and others determined to stop or apprehend caravan participants had also been monitoring social media. Before more people could gather at La Terminal as they had 10 days prior, a detachment of military police dressed in riot gear arrived in an armored vehicle. Joined by local police, they dispersed those gathered—families, groups of young men, a few individuals—and word quickly spread on the WhatsApp group chats urging others to stay away.

Before the police arrived, Rivera Hernandez sat on a median in the parking lot of La Terminal with his wife, Lorena, and his pre-teen son Jason, waiting for the caravan to assemble. The family traveled from the hurricane-ravaged town of La Lima, just outside San Pedro Sula. He spoke openly about his plan to go to the U.S. It’s the family’s first migration attempt. He said he’s heard things have changed and the United States is letting people seek asylum now that Biden is in charge. When asked where they will go in the U.S., or how they will get there, he’s less certain.

“We will just go north with the caravan, but we don’t know the route,” he said of their itinerary. “We will wander aimlessly (*deambularemos sin rumbo*) until we get there. Nobody is waiting for us.”

**Gregg Brekke** is an award-winning photojournalist and writer dedicated to telling stories of justice and faith.

# CHOOSING WHITENESS

**HISTORY BENDS TOWARD JUSTICE.**  
Southern Baptist seminaries, on the other hand,  
seem to be going in a different direction.

BY KENYATTA R. GILBERT  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK PERNICE

# OVER WITNESS





# I

**In the wake** of the horrific killings last year of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others at the hands of white vigilantism and aggressive policing, many institutions, companies, and other bodies sought to express their opposition to racism, even if their responses were merely symbolic gestures. But the presidents of Southern Baptist seminaries went in what seemed to be the opposite direction, issuing a joint statement in November that disavowed what is known in academic circles as “critical race theory.”

Many Black clergy were shocked but not surprised by the seminary presidents’ statement, coming from a denomination that had sought to defend its racist history and had criticized efforts at racial reconciliation and truth. Two prominent Southern Baptist-affiliated megachurch pastors—Ralph West and Charlie Dates—announced their out-migration from the denomination, and it’s possible that more Black clergy will follow.

Five weeks after the Council of Seminary Presidents released their statement—curiously, on the fretful day, Jan. 6, when a frenzied mob of homegrown white terrorists blitzed the U.S. Capitol—the six presidents, the heads of each Southern Baptist seminary, met with a group of Black Southern Baptist pastors. The pastors reported that the exchange was conciliatory, and that they felt heard—even as the seminary presidents doubled down on their rejection of critical race theory. The presidents offered gestures toward further conversations and a stronger commitment to recruit and financially back more Black students at their schools, but no counterproposal concerning critical race theory.

Such gestures from white cultural gatekeepers miss the point, at best, and will not drive improvement. Unless those gatekeepers are driven toward introspection, they will concede nothing and inevitably suppress discontent. And, ironically, given the date of the meeting, the seminary presidents’ decision to reject critical race theory fell in lockstep with Donald Trump’s September federal memo proscribing the use of employee training materials in federal agencies that espouse critical theory.

## **WHAT IS CRITICAL RACE THEORY?**

**The presidents’ statement** claimed that because of the alleged postmodern ideological origins of critical race theory, it could not be reconciled with the credal commitments of Southern Baptists. In fact, since the

origins of critical race theory are rooted deeply in the biblical call to justice, it’s fair to argue that they’re not “postmodern” or “ideological” at all, but profoundly biblical.

Similar to the inherently interdisciplinary field of practical theology, of which my discipline—homiletics (the academic study of preaching)—is a species, critical race theory is empirically oriented, critical reflection on the social systems, cultural histories, and power dynamics that contribute to racial problems in the world. Critical race theory/intersectional scholars note that since racism is never a stand-alone matter, investigation of issues such as class, color, and sexuality are indispensable to any sound analysis of racism.

The origins of critical race theory are tied to legal studies, and, curiously, like evangelical fundamentalism, critical theory was forged in reaction against liberalism. Black constitutional scholars such as Derrick Bell began developing critical race theory not as an engine for so-called “identity politics,” as often alleged, but to question the notion that the law was neutral and that every case had a single correct answer. For this reason, it should come as no surprise that critical theorists would draw on a range of sources and tools, both modern and postmodern, for interrogating claims of certainty, rejecting myths of objectivity and colorblindness, and calling into question unjust laws, policies, and structures that contribute to human oppression and inequality. One may rightly quibble about critical theory’s eclecticism, but it is intellectually dishonest to shut down conversations with “the Bible says” theological arguments, as evangelical fundamentalists and radical biblicists so often do.

The Bible is inspired, but it is not self-interpreting. Practical theologian Sally Brown rightly maintains that humans can’t *not* interpret because interpretative processing is the way all experience is navigated. Is it not possible for Christians to retain a high view of scripture and still have a fulsome approach to investigating sources that feed interpretation?

Must one be a critical theory devotee to find value in philosophical insights that come from sources other than the Bible? The Apostle Paul’s so-called Areopagus sermon, recounted in Acts 17, draws on Greek philosophy and stoicism to further his vision of the gospel’s agenda in the Greco-Roman world. “Both Seneca and Philo no doubt impacted Jesus’ teachings, if not directly at least indirectly, as they helped



to shape the intellectual climate of which Jesus was a part,” notes Kelly Brown Douglas, dean of the Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary, and “to be sure they had a bearing on the thinking of the apostle Paul.” Moreover, one can even find parallels between Augustine’s use of Platonic ideas and the commitment of critical race theory to locate, analyze, and cut off ideological allegiances that mar personhood and perpetuate racial bigotry, human inequality, and economic injustice.

Critical theory is threatening only to those who are fighting to preserve white propriety. The seminary presidents, in reasserting their position without offering any alternative to prompt racial repair or to do meaningful introspective work, decided that critical sociological analysis to understand and challenge the myth of white supremacy was not theologically useful. They decided which idol they would worship.

In the wake of the presidents’ decision, Black seminary faculty, who are now prohibited from using critical race theory for instruction, will need meaningful support, as will tuition-discounted seminarians and Black pastors who have received church loans—people who will have a higher price to pay for soul freedom should they decide to leave.

**WHITE IDENTITY POLITICS  
AND SOUTHERN BAPTIST LIFE**

**As long as** historically white denominations tether their theological vision to whiteness and its protocols, setting up public-facing anti-racism, diversity, and inclusion dialogues will continue to be deemed by whites

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**THE ORIGINS OF  
CRITICAL RACE  
THEORY ARE  
ROOTED DEEPLY  
IN THE BIBLICAL  
CALL TO JUSTICE.**

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as benevolent and even revolutionary. In ecclesial spaces where white presence dominates, people who identify as white carry policy-making privileges, and this has historically been the case with Southern Baptists. Consider the denomination's history of Black inclusion.

The Southern Baptist Convention was founded in 1845 by slaveholding Georgia planter and former U.S. Rep. Wilson Lumpkin and a few others. Lumpkin came to national prominence as Georgia governor and proponent of the Indian Removal Act. William Bullein Johnson was named the first president of the Southern branch of the denomination when it broke away from the General Missionary Baptist Convention over the issue of slavery. The SBC did not welcome its first African American congregation—Greater Friendship Baptist in Anchorage, Alaska—into its fold until 1951, and its second congregation—Community Baptist Church in Santa Rosa, Calif.—six years after the first.

Ironically, these were not even Southern congregations. Greater Friendship was formed in Alaska before it achieved statehood and Community Baptist was formed in a city where today the Black population is only 2.4 percent.

### **SCRIPTURE IS CREED**

**Attend virtually any** Baptist worship service and you will not hear the Apostles Creed recited in worship. Why? Because Baptists, historically, are anti-creedal people. For Baptist evangelicals, the determinative document of faith expression upon which all decision-making is said to rest is the Holy Bible. Scripture guides conduct, sets foul lines, and establishes governance.

But has the Protestant faith's most populous group lost its historical connection to this distinctive of rejecting adherence to formal creeds? Nothing says "creed" more than the doctrinal standard of the Southern Baptist Convention, the *Baptist Faith and Message* (which has been revised three times, in 1925, 1963, and 2000). Its meticulous wording communicates that the composition committee saw its work of extracting and articulating self-contained truths of scripture as sacrosanct.

The *Baptist Faith and Message (BFM)* is the contemporary SBC apologist's go-to when one has little time to thumb through the 66 books of the Bible. What it asserts the Bible says and means is crucial to Southern Baptists for an authentic life

of faith. Article one states: The Holy Bible has "God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter ... It reveals the principles by which God judges us ... [it is] the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried."

But what are these revealed principles by which all things are tried and judged? The changes in the year 2000 version of the *BFM* were in reaction against challenges to the truth of scripture as the sole criterion for guiding faith and practice. The end result: A quasi-authoritarian creed emerged, which wittingly or unwittingly erected a religious firewall for preserving evangelical whiteness.

What's missing in *BFM* 2000 and most other evangelical takeaway creeds is a full-throated doctrine on the principle of justice. What are the spiritual and sociopolitical implications if, in the 3,850 words of the *BFM* 2000, the word "justice"—which is so central in the Bible—is absent? And why is it absent? I would venture a guess: The powerless were not at the table when the statement was first crafted, and preserving whiteness must be upheld at all costs, especially if white Christians perceive their racial power is slipping away. (Similar dynamics can be found in questions around the ordination of Southern Baptist women.)

### **THE ROOTS OF BACKLASH**

**The recent actions** of the Southern Baptist seminary presidents grew out of the convention's annual meeting in summer 2019. The gathering of "messengers" from cooperating churches approved an edited version of a resolution that had originally stated, without equivocation, that critical race theory and intersectionality should be rejected and not taught in Southern Baptist schools.

Along with 12 other resolutions up for convention approval, the critical theory resolution—known as Resolution 9—had come from the multiethnic Committee on Resolutions, chaired by African American Kentuckian Curtis Woods of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In step with the resolution's original author Stephen Feinstein, Tom Ascol,

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**CRITICAL THEORY  
IS THREATENING ONLY  
TO THOSE WHO ARE  
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PROPRIETY.**

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who serves as president of Founders Ministries, proposed an amendment that reasserted the view that critical race theory is incompatible with scripture, which the committee rejected. At the voting, the messengers overwhelmingly approved the “don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater” version of Resolution 9, which had acknowledged, essentially, that the theory held value, especially as an analytical tool for probing the effects of racism and oppression. The committee asserted that as a self-critical tool, critical theory—while clearly subordinate to the total sufficiency of scripture—could yield useful insights.

Within a few months of the summer 2019 meeting, public rebukes against the resolution started. Famed white tele-evangelical theologian John MacArthur mockingly declared that the Southern Baptist Convention had officially stepped into the netherworld of liberalism. When a worldview is perceived to be outside the Bible, SBC evangelicals are quick to put skilled apologists to work countering it with what they consider a biblical theology. That process soon led to the action by the seminary presidents.

#### **WITNESS OR WHITENESS?**

**What are the** political implications if polities are shrouded in evangelical whiteness instead of evangelical witness?

Whiteness, as theologian Willie J. Jennings describes it, is not about

biology or even culture. Whiteness is based on choice. Whiteness is a way of calibrating life hierarchically toward one group’s advantage, a way of being in the world built upon the propagation and cultivation of mechanisms of control, possession, and mastery of the world.

Jennings contends that the inability of many white Christians to deal with the fact that their whiteness is a blemish on their Christian witness is why talking about reconciliation in this deeply troubled moment is unhelpful. As a consequence, there will forever be an impasse in terms of theological progress because instead of affirming reconciliation’s intended agenda of promoting freedom and wholeness, the theological concept is used as a foil to constantly reinforce the status quo.

If Black Christian preachers are not thinking about how whiteness works in Southern Baptist life, they can become merciless critics of movements such as Black Lives Matter and the Poor People’s Campaign while simultaneously being, at best, uncritical, passive allies of evangelical fundamentalism bound politically to pro-establishment right-wing politics. At worst, they can serve as unwitting sympathizers for Confederate flag-wielding, “anti-establishment,” right-wing extremists.

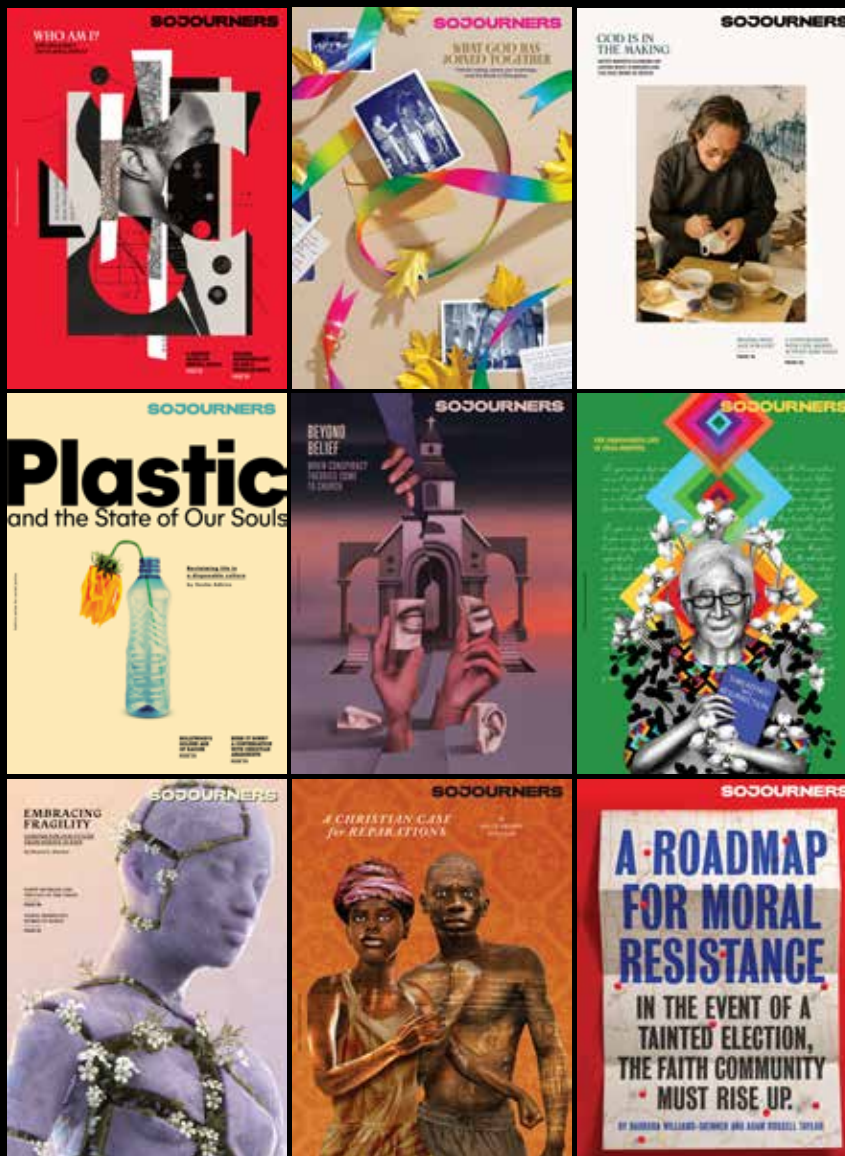
Still, it is important to note that Black evangelicals have aligned with the SBC not simply because of material resources the denomination can provide church planters, community revitalizers, and mission and evangelism efforts. Many join ranks because they are persuaded that race relations can be improved and that, in Christ, reconciliation, one with another, is always achievable if individuals are prayerful and willing to repent of their sins and work collectively in love.

If justice is rooted in and emanates from God, and as a biblical principle is not separable from righteousness, then Christian preachers and teachers who fail to work toward its liberative goals—including unmasking idolatry and other self-serving, self-deceiving practices—will have nothing of consequence to offer a hurting world. ❖

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**Kenyatta R. Gilbert**, founding director of The Preaching Project, is professor of homiletics at the Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, D.C. He is author of *Exodus Preaching* and the new e-book *Just Living*.

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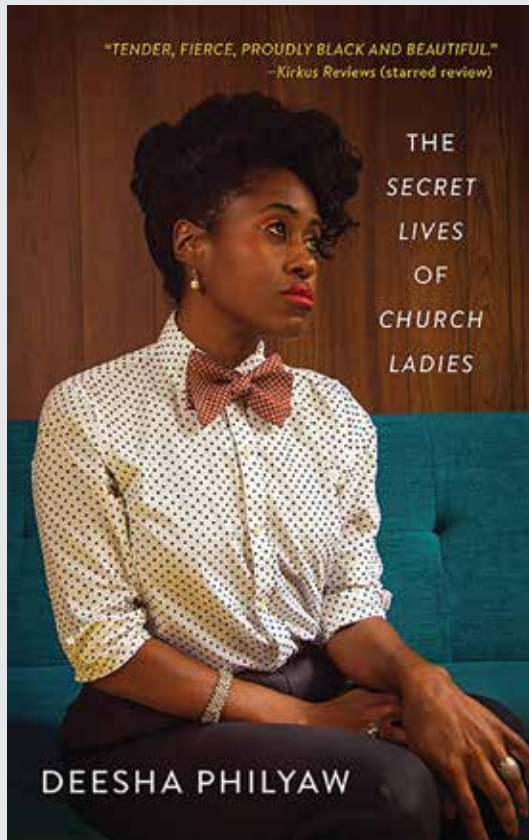
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**SOJOURNERS**



**BLACK CHURCHGOING WOMEN  
HAVE LIVES BEYOND THE  
SANCTUARY. FICTION WRITER  
DEESHA PHILYAW EXPLORES  
THEIR COMPLEXITIES. ———→**



**I've never really** thought about what church ladies do when they're not at church. My interactions with them have always been tied to the building and its activities. In pre-pandemic times,

I would see them at service and maybe hug or shake hands, chat briefly, or just wave goodbye on my way out the door. But easy smiles and they've-got-it-together appearances belie the "less presentable" parts of everyone's story, bits that, if shared, could create a space where we no longer feel isolated, but instead are comforted by the fact that each of us is trying to deal with at least one hot mess in our lives. *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* by Deesha Philyaw unflinchingly tells the stories of a few of those messes, stories of the things that we hide.

Each narrative in the collection aches with a desire for connection, and Philyaw provides the reader a sometimes uncomfortably intimate view of how these

"church ladies" try to meet this need. Some characters turn to intimate affairs, choosing partners with whom they can envision more or partners with whom there can never be more than fleeting and secret arrangements, sometimes due to the damage of homophobia. Other stories aren't about romantic desires at all, but feature characters longing to connect with family, carrying a deep-seated, perpetual wish to simply be seen, valued, loved, and embraced for who they are by the people they thought could be expected to do so.

I particularly love that this collection features characters of diverse ages. I'm so tired of how not-entirely-subtle ageism has crept into various avenues of storytelling, as if all significant human experience, growth, and formation is wrapped up by the time you're 40. Philyaw rejects this notion and delivers fully formed characters of all ages.

And while Philyaw's stories explore universal themes of desire and rejection, hope and despair, growth and acceptance, her stories are distinctly Black. As a Black woman I felt a particular familiarity as I read about shower caps, sweet potato pie, church hats, colorism, and hot combs. The clincher for me was the laughter that bubbled up when I read about a Black woman at a conference playing "Count the Negros," a game I play often, having existed in predominantly white spaces my entire life. All of these details sit firmly under the "if you know, you know" umbrella, and I know. It's comforting to read stories and feel like an insider instead of an interloper. And, yet, even in their specificity, these stories are accessible to folks who "don't know." To write stories that can be universally understood and unequivocally Black bespeaks Philyaw's skill and her personal understanding of her identity as a member of the human collective who also exists in the specific context of life as a Black woman.

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**ALL OF THESE  
DETAILS SIT FIRMLY  
UNDER THE "IF YOU  
KNOW, YOU KNOW"  
UMBRELLA, AND  
I KNOW.**

*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* has received much critical acclaim, as well as the Story Prize, the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, and a nomination for

cont'd on page 45





On Screen

New & Noteworthy

## THE BOOK OF ABBY

By Da'Shawn Mosley

T

The prophet Job had a hard life, but I think even he, if listening to Abby's story, would say, "Damn."

He's not listening to her troubles, though: Abby's therapist is. No, wait, she's not listening either, for a reason that will spur Abby's friends to joke about just

how sad Abby's life really is.

I'm describing *Work in Progress*, a scripted comedy produced by Showtime and co-written by Tim Mason, Lilly Wachowski (*The Matrix*, *Sense 8*), and Abby McEnany, who stars as a fictionalized version of herself.

"Abby is a mid-forties self-identified queer dyke whose life is a quiet and ongoing crisis," Showtime's website describes, not revealing that Abby lives with OCD, washing her hands repeatedly and recording her life meticulously in notebooks, in case she forgets anything she's ever done. It doesn't reveal that Abby, throughout much of her life, has been called Pat—a reference to the *Saturday Night Live* character from the early '90s—and is often mistaken for a man, asked to leave public bathrooms, and struggles with her weight. It certainly doesn't reveal what we learn in the first few minutes of *Work in Progress*: In a couple of weeks, if Abby's life doesn't get better, she plans to take her own life.

*Work in Progress* orbits a dark hole of clinical depression, but it's hilarious, containing meta elements like *SNL* alum Julia Sweeney playing a version of herself, apologetic for how her character Pat negatively affected Abby's life and eager to make it up; a brother-in-law who has a Kenny Loggins cover band called

Danger Zone; a therapist who gives new meaning to the phrase "nevertheless, she persisted"; and a nun who just wants to see Dolly Parton in concert.

*Work in Progress* also features a trans man as a romantic lead, as well as several other queer characters, and allows Abby to be an imperfect queer woman surviving oppressive systems but also inflicting great pain herself.

The show is filming its second season—which, I guess, (spoiler alert) tells you something about whether Abby will decide to live. I wonder if it will incorporate COVID-19, which would likely be her biggest obstacle thus far. Several scripted television series already have their characters dealing with COVID-19 while we suffer through it ourselves, but, apart from the OWN Network's *Queen Sugar*—which has a largely Black cast and a strong racial justice focus—none of the shows are as perfectly poised to consider this moment as *Work in Progress*.

For now, though, we have just these eight episodes of superb television. I think Job, if he were here, would be a huge fan. ❖

**Da'Shawn Mosley** is associate editor of *Sojourners*.

## NO MORE DEATH

In the 98-minute documentary *Us Kids*, survivors of the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., organize the monumental March for Our Lives against gun violence while they honor their dead and take back democracy.

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### Flesh Bears History

Natalie Wigg-Stevenson expands our theological imagination with *Transgressive Devotion: Theology as Performance Art*. Rooted in Baptist, Catholic, Anglican, feminist, and queer theological traditions, Wigg-Stevenson explores the emotional depths artists access by crossing boundaries in hopes of coming closer to God.

**SCM Press**



### Egalitarian Faith

In *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*, Beth Allison Barr illuminates how women have been erased from the Bible by male translators, explains how those decisions have affected women for centuries, and recounts her own struggles against Christian patriarchy.

**Brazos Press**

KENTUCKY  
COALITIONBy Danny  
Duncan Collum

Eyes &amp; Ears

**My beloved adopted** state of Kentucky doesn't rank number one in many things. In most measures of health, wealth, or education, we rank somewhere in the mid-40s. However,

Louisville's *Courier-Journal* recently unearthed a statistic in which Kentucky totally wrecked the curve—number of people per capita arrested for their actions during the Jan. 6 attack at the U.S. Capitol.

As of this writing, Kentucky's number of apprehended insurrectionists equals that of neighboring Ohio, a state with almost three times our population.

I doubt that surprises many readers, but there's another side to the Kentucky story that might: There are important voices in the state denouncing the riot—members of the African American community, which is mostly concentrated in our cities, but also members of our other left-out and left-behind community, the mostly white population of Appalachian eastern Kentucky. And there are even signs that some people among those two groups are reaching out to each other.

Charles Booker is a 36-year-old African American former state representative from predominantly Black West Louisville. In 2020, in the primary to select a Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate, Booker ran on a "Bernie-crat" platform against Amy McGrath, the favorite of the party establishment. The killing of Breonna Taylor by Louisville police occurred during that campaign, and Booker's leading role in the protests that followed made him better known statewide. In the end, he lost the primary, but narrowly.

Charles Booker (right), then-member of the Kentucky House, greets John Wright during a campaign stop in Louisville.

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**AS IF IN ANSWER TO CHARLES  
BOOKER'S CALL, A VOICE RANG  
OUT FROM THE HOLLER.**

In the course of that election, Booker spent a lot of time campaigning in eastern Kentucky, preaching a message of interracial unity for economic empowerment. He talked about a coalition that spanned "from the hood to the holler." After the election, he founded an advocacy organization called Hood to the Holler.

Later, as outrage over George Floyd's murder spread across the nation, a voice rang out from the holler as if in answer to Booker's call. Tyler Childers, from Appalachian Lawrence County, Ky., is a 29-year-old singer-songwriter, and if country music has a future, he is it. He writes songs filled with sharp, evocative observations of life around his hometown, and even when his lyrics are about snorting pain pills, his tunes sound like they could be 300 years old.

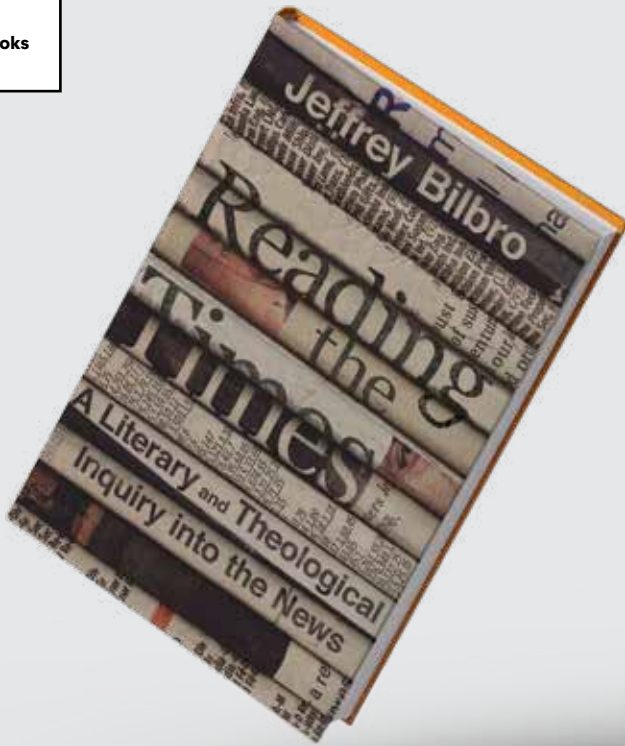
In fall 2020, Childers dropped an album, *Long Violent History*, that consists mainly of old-time fiddle tunes, with one original song, the title tune, at the end. In that song, Childers asks his white Appalachian neighbors to consider how they would feel if the authorities didn't just "[take] them for ignorant" but actually made them "scared just to be."

"How many boys could they haul off this mountain?" the singer wonders, imagining his listeners would roar into town after the haul "armed to the teeth."

In a six-minute video, Childers has stated plainly that his white, rural fans need to "stop being so taken aback by Black Lives Matter." He further suggested that "the people allowing this [police violence] to happen are the same people keeping opportunity out of reach for our own communities."

Hood to the holler. That's the only hope for Kentucky. But if it can happen here, it can happen anywhere. ❖

**Danny Duncan Collum** teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort. He is the author of the novel *White Boy*.



## CONSTRUCTIVE PRACTICES

Reading the Times: A Literary and Theological Inquiry into the News, by Jeffrey Bilbro

IVP Academic

Until recently, I had a boss who kept CNN on all day in her office. I work in communications, so this made sense, but it made me wonder: How can we best consume the news? Does the news make us anxious and divide us? Or does it serve as a way to learn about the world and how we can better love and serve our neighbors? Though the evidence is mixed (we rarely have simple answers in life), Jeffrey Bilbro's verdict on news consumption in *Reading the Times* is mostly negative.

Bilbro's analysis suggests that modern media—understood broadly to include everything from newspapers to social media—divides our attention among trivia, binds us to the daily rather than allowing attention to the eternal, and diverts us from local, embodied concerns to national ones outside our scope of influence. His argument ranges broadly, integrating thinkers from Thoreau and Auerbach to the more modern Wendell Berry and Charles Taylor. The reader feels like they are in a college classroom, in a good way, with a professor who isn't afraid to synthesize

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### HOW MUCH CAN LEARNING A CRAFT INOCULATE YOU AGAINST THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA?

broadly to make their point.

While making sweeping claims, Bilbro doesn't neglect the ethical question at the root of his work: How should we live? Each of his three sections exploring how the media can be destructive closes with constructive practices for how an individual can better balance their life. These notes follow James K.A. Smith, Justin Earley, and Tish Harrison Warren (among others) in their focus on praxis. Although these practices feel insubstantial when compared to the pulverizing forces facing them (how much can learning a craft, or walking your neighborhood, inoculate you against the power of social media?), they provide a useful counterbalance to his general pessimism and a guide for the concerned reader.

*Reading the Times* has limitations, stemming mostly from the scope of the project. As Bilbro points out, his mission is to provide wisdom for the individual rather than suggest structural reforms. My question, still, is: How can we ethically consume news under our current conditions? Perhaps structural reforms are necessary for any healthy engagement with media.

I am concerned that Bilbro's moderate evangelical tradition leads him to make a few key missteps. Bilbro sees our modern public sphere as holding competing and parallel polariza-

tions. This fundamentally misreads our time: Our U.S. right wing, from members of Congress to news media to churches, has become far more radical than its counterpart. A right-wing mob stormed the Capitol under the incitement of a right-wing president, after all. Similarly endemic to Bilbro's tradition, I worry that some of the practices Bilbro suggests could guide us toward quietism in spite of his best intentions. Loving our neighbors amid a media maelstrom should include having difficult conversations across difference, rather than simply praying the Daily Office. In the middle of massive residential and occupational segregation, does our attention to embodied communities, as Bilbro recommends, simply further enforce racial and class division?

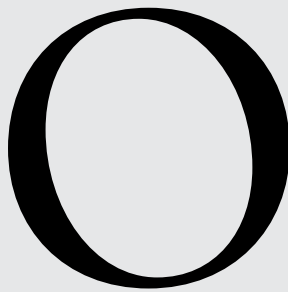
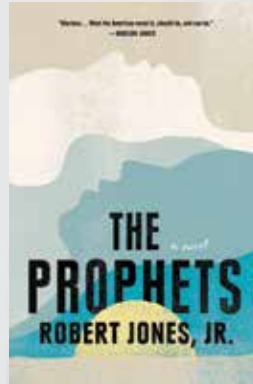
*Reading the Times* still does an excellent job probing the media landscape, how it changes us, and how we can, with God's help, return to ourselves. The questions raised by my CNN-loving boss with me. What news am I listening to? And what is it doing to my heart? I'm glad for Bilbro's wisdom. ♦

**Greg Williams** works in digital communications at an advocacy organization in Washington, D.C.

# REBELLIOUS PEACE

The Prophets,  
by Robert Jones Jr.

G.P. Putnam's Sons



**O**n a Mississippi plantation known as “Empty,” two young enslaved people work and live in the barn, tending to the animals and each other. Despite opposing personalities, Isaiah and Samuel fit together: Where Isaiah is soft and accommodating, Samuel is hard and unyielding. As Samuel actively fights the system that seeks to bend him, Isaiah bends to survive, even as he mourns the name that was stolen from him. While Empty constantly seeks to erase their humanity, these young men find a quiet peace in their love, which touches the community around them.

In *The Prophets*, Robert Jones Jr. richly renders the perspectives of the enslaved and their enslavers, allowing for a complexity that a story with a single point of view would miss. The novel contains multitudes, among them a love story, an epic, an origin story, and a spiritual journey. This formidable debut weaves the ancestral past with the characters’ present to illuminate histories, realities, and possibilities that are just beyond reach. In his testament to Black queer love and storytelling, Jones confronts questions of gender, power, and consent in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade.

As the owner of Empty, Paul’s priority is to breed more slaves, and Isaiah and Samuel’s union poses a threat to these goals. In his own attempt at survival, the slave Amos proposes a solution: In exchange for “being learned in the ways of Christ, which meant being learned in ways forbidden by law,” he would preach to his fellow slaves and instill that “docility was treasured over rebellion.” For Amos, a glimpse of freedom means access to doors that have been closed to him. But for Amos to succeed, Samuel and Isaiah must give up their ability to choose who they can love.

Despite Amos’ attempts to turn the others against Samuel and Isaiah, the pair’s love possesses a force not unlike gravity, pulling in those who seek respite from the cruel demands of Empty. While Empty and the world

takes and takes of their personhood, the enslaved find their humanity: They find it in caring for their skin, washing away the day in the river, and plaiting one another’s hair. Sarah finds it in memory, a story only she can tell. Maggie finds it in her connection to the ancestors and her ability to hold power over a man by never speaking his name. Even Be Auntie, who has been “molded into the shape that best fit what they carved her into,” finds it in her desire for the men who are thrust upon her. In this way each claims love, skepticism, rage, spite, dreams, and memory.

*How can memory be prophetic*, Jones asks throughout the novel. There is no simple answer, but we find a confluence of light and shadow, a place where past, present, and future meet. Here, Samuel and Isaiah’s love takes form—a solid presence with a voice, a history, an identity. We could call this resistance. Because despite all that Empty strips away, their love belongs to them. ❖

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**Elinam Agbo** earned an M.F.A. from the University of Michigan Helen Zell Writers’ Program. Born in Ghana, she grew up in the Midwest.



cont'd from page 40 the National Book Award for Fiction. Actor Tessa Thompson will be widening the book's reach by bringing these stories to the screen. Thompson and Philyaw will serve as executive producers of the HBO Max adaptation, with Philyaw also writing its scripts.

Not long after finishing *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies*, I encountered a quotation from Frederick Buechner's memoir *Telling Secrets* that captures what I feel is the heart of Philyaw's book: "I have come to believe that by and large the human family all has the same secrets, which are both telling and very important to tell. They are telling in the sense that they tell what is perhaps the central paradox of our condition—that what we hunger for perhaps more than anything else is to be known in our full humanness, and yet that is often just what we also fear more than anything else."

I think back to the church ladies I've known over the years, and one stands out in particular. A Black woman married to one of the pastors on staff, she always wore a thick layer of makeup and a too-bright smile, creating a seemingly impermeable mask. I wonder, what secrets was she hiding? And what secrets did we bear in common? It's possible we were more alike than my casual observations could fathom.

*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* serves as a poignant reminder of this truth and beckons us to consider better embracing ourselves and others in the fullness of our secrets, our brokenness, our pain, our joy, and ultimately, our humanity. ❧

**Rebecca Riley** is a writer, filmmaker, and former multimedia/online assistant at Sojourners. She lives in California.

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## INFINITE JEST

By Jeffrey Thomson



Lorenzo was mortar for the church  
 he built, gathering wild birds  
 for the rafters and fruited trees  
 for their food. He carted stone  
 and hoisted, he pestled, he block-  
 and-tackled. Persecuted  
 by Valerian and about to be  
 arrested, Lorenzo goat-herded  
 the church's wealth, distributed it  
 to the poor. He paid the unmade  
 orphans, clothed the lepers  
 in money. He sold the sacred  
 vessels, the varied trestles.  
 He chased out the birds—  
 all to increase his offering  
 to the world. Valerian demanded  
 Lorenzo deliver the money  
 and so Lorenzo pointed to  
 the lepers and said,  
*This is the treasure of the church.*  
 For this jape he was immediately

seized, was released from  
 holding on to some of his blood,  
 for this he was grilled alive  
 on the steps of the temple.  
 and called out half-way through,  
*It is well done, turn me over.*  
 For this jest he became  
 the patron saint of comedians  
 but what's funny is that  
 no one mentions what Valerian  
 said in return, some sorry heckler  
 on a throne of gold.  
 The story finishes in the grill  
 marks across his chest  
 like rafters of pain holding him  
 aloft. No one mentions  
 the absolute end when  
 Lorenzo's head left his shoulders  
 with a snicker of the blade  
 and the birds chortled away  
 into a sky fraught with distant clouds.

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**Jeffrey Thomson**, author of the forthcoming *Museum of Objects Burned by the Souls in Purgatory* is a memoirist, translator, and editor. He lives in Maine.



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# GOD DOES NOT LEAVE US 'EARTHLINGS' BEHIND

Scripture passages are from the Revised Common Lectionary, Cycle B

By Isaac S. Villegas



## Living the Word

and loved ones. Later, as an adult, she almost died from a mysterious illness. After her recovery, Julian received visions from God that she wrote down in a book of theological reflections.

God “made everything that is made for love,” Julian writes, “and the same love sustains everything, and shall do so forever.” On page after page of *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian dwells on God’s steadfast care for all of creation. She offers—to herself and to her readers—words of comfort and hopeful reassurances (“All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well”), while staring clear-eyed at a life of suffering (“all the pains and sufferings of all creatures, both in body and spirit”).

When I can’t sleep, I repeat Julian’s line in my mind. “All shall be well, and all shall be well.” Her words have accompanied me through night after night of pandemic anxieties and despair. Her repetitions (“all shall be well, and all shall be well”) remind me of Psalm 130: “My soul waits for God more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning” (verse 6). We wait and watch for the glow of morning, for redemption’s dawn when all shall be well.

**Isaac S. Villegas** is pastor of Chapel Hill (N.C.) Mennonite Fellowship and president of the governing board of the North Carolina Council of Churches.

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## THE SAME LOVE SUSTAINS EVERYTHING.

**JUNE 6**

## WHERE ARE YOU?

GENESIS 3:8-15; PSALM 130;  
2 CORINTHIANS 4:13-5:1; MARK 3:20-35

**God takes an evening walk** in the garden to visit Eve and Adam, but they hid.

“Where are you?” God calls across the Eden landscape. “I heard the sound of you in the garden,” Adam responds, “and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself” (Genesis 3:10).

This is the first conversation between God and human beings in the Bible—the first divine-human dialogue, question and answer, call and response. This conversation will go on for generations, the beginning of God’s relationship with God’s people, with us. And the exchange starts with God seeking out companions who conceal themselves from the presence of God because they are afraid. They think God will be furious. Adam and Eve have come to believe in a wrathful God, a disciplinarian who wants to punish them for eating the forbidden fruit.

In elementary school my dad would sit at his desk. When he thought his teachers weren’t looking, he’d slide his pencil from his right hand to his left so he could write with ease. They forced all students to use their right hands. Left-handedness, the teachers believed, was a sign of the devil’s work. But my dad couldn’t help himself, so he’d secretly shift the pencil in order to write naturally. Sooner or later, a ruler would crack down on the back of his hand, forcing him to release his pencil.

Is that how we think about God and sin? Do we believe that God makes up strange rules and commands us to obey them—and if we don’t, God will hit us with some form of punishment? We’re afraid of God because we misunderstand sin. It’s not about breaking an arbitrary rule. Sin is like eating something that isn’t good for us—a food that looks tasty but turns out to be toxic. In the garden, Adam and Eve eat what God warns them isn’t good food. And they get sick with shame and fear.



JUNE 13

## OUR MIGRATORY LIFE

EZEKIEL 17:22-24; PSALM 92:1-4, 12-15;  
2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-17; MARK 4:26-34

**My parents planted** a tree when I was born, then another when my sister was born. In those early years, she and I would gloat about our height in comparison to the young trees. Soon the trees overtook us. Their branches shot into the sky, leaving us earthlings behind. Several years ago, I drove by our old house. The two trees were much bigger than I had remembered them. They looked at home, glad for their decades of undisturbed growth. Unlike my migratory family, trees thrive when provided with a stationary lifestyle.

Despite what trees prefer, Ezekiel 17 describes a God who transplants. Sprigs from cedars migrate with God from hill to mountain, from one habitat to another. The calculus for these relocations defies the natural predisposition of trees. “I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree,” God declares. “I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish” (verse 24). The trees grow not for themselves, God reveals, but for the birds who come and go, nesting for a season then off again (verse 23).

Jesus picks up this imagery—although, in Mark 4, Jesus replaces the majestic cedars of Lebanon with a humdrum shrub (verse 32). The shift from the cedar in Ezekiel to the bush in Mark upends assumptions about the nature of God’s reign. Jesus promises the glorious presence of heaven in places that look more like a storefront church in a strip mall than the historic cathedral downtown.

The imagery in Ezekiel 17 and Mark 4 makes the same point: God’s trees and shrubs provide shade for “winged creatures of every kind” (Ezekiel 17:23) and branches “so that the birds of the air can make nests” (Mark 4:32). We are transplanted peoples, making homes for others wherever God replants us. God invites us to bear fruit wherever we land.

JUNE 20

## CHRIST RECRUCIFIED

JOB 38:1-11; PSALM 107:1-3, 23-32;  
2 CORINTHIANS 6:1-13; MARK 4:35-41

**Six years ago** this week, I saw a man walking slowly, as if part of a funeral procession, through our neighborhood. His hands stretched out from his sides, his body in the figure of a cross. I stepped out of my car and onto the sidewalk as he passed across the street. He gave me a nod, and I nodded back. I watched until he disappeared over the hill—a Black man, in the form of a cross, moving somberly through the streets. A few days earlier, on June 17, 2015, nine African Americans had been killed during a prayer meeting at Mother Emanuel AME Church in South Carolina.

Every year on Good Friday devoted Christians around the world carry life-sized crosses on their backs, reminding themselves and others of Christ’s passion. The person in my neighborhood six years ago didn’t carry a cross; instead, his body *was* the cross. He was a walking reminder of the crucifixion of African Americans at Mother Emanuel, a living sign bearing witness to the legacy of white supremacist terror in the United States. “The South is crucifying Christ again,” Countee Cullen wrote in 1922 about lynching—a poem he titled, “Christ Recrucified.”

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” the disciples ask Jesus (Mark 4:38). A storm engulfs their boat. Terror seizes their lives as the frenzied waters threaten to swallow them whole. They startle Jesus awake with a cry for survival, a supplication for another day: “Do you not care?”

The man who processed through our neighborhood as a cross presented his body as that kind of prayer—a plea, a demand for all of us to confront the legacies of white supremacy. A tidal wave of anti-Black violence flows through our society. We await the rebuke of Jesus, who has promised a reign of peace.

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**GOD CALLS TO US ACROSS  
THE EDEN LANDSCAPE.**

JUNE 27

## JESUS AS FOLLOWER

LAMENTATIONS 3:22-33; PSALM 30;  
2 CORINTHIANS 8:7-15; MARK 5:21-43

**Jairus collapses** to his knees and begs; he pleads with his whole body. Jairus is a religious leader, a person with authority in the community, someone with power. He’s probably more familiar with others asking *him* for favors than adopting the posture of a beggar himself. His daughter’s illness has brought him to this act of desperation. “My little daughter is at the point of death,” Jairus implores Jesus. “Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live” (Mark 5:22-23). And Jesus follows him.

Over the past 20 years, I’ve seen ministry centers and publishing houses fund the “Christian leadership” industry. Their programs and books design an image of Jesus as a corporate leader, a quintessential manager, a visionary entrepreneur. Jairus’ story in Mark 5 calls into question depictions of Jesus as a model for CEOs or board presidents or executive pastors. Jesus, in this passage, is a follower, not a leader. He wanders as the Holy Spirit directs his work—and the leading of the Spirit takes the form of people such as Jairus who disrupt any pretense to a “purpose-driven” life.

Jesus welcomes disruptions because grand programs don’t rule his life. *People* redirect his attention. He drops everything to follow Jairus—and even *that* purpose gets disrupted along the way when he stops mid-course for a woman in need of healing. Jesus delays, he lingers, he searches for who touched his cloak. He postpones his mission to encounter her face to face, to be fully present to her (verses 25-34).

Jesus reveals the presence of a God who is always available, never on a mission more important than our lives. We are never a distraction. Jesus displays the nature of God as a love that wanders through our world, awaiting our redirection. ✱

“Preaching the Word,” Sojourners’ online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at [sojo.net/ptw](http://sojo.net/ptw).

Guest H'rumpus



## LEAVE NO VOTE BEHIND

By Joey Chin

**Across the country** a number of places are using or are considering adopting ranked choice voting for state, local, or federal elections. If you're unfamiliar with ranked choice voting (RCV), that's too bad, because other than the most recent here's-how-to-make-the-perfect-garlic-bread TikTok video, this is just about the biggest news there is right now. But let me take a moment to explain.

Ranked choice voting is a process in which voters rank their candidates in order of preference. If no candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and the voters who chose that last place candidate as their first choice have their vote shifted to their second choice, and so on, until there is a winner. If you're with me so far and like the idea, feel free to stop reading and go sign a petition for RCV. If you're still confused, let me offer an example.

Earlier this year, the children's ministry team at my church needed to decide which book our K-5 kids should read for the upcoming quarter. Each of the 21 teachers submitted the name of a book we felt would be appropriate. We then ranked the submitted books in order of preference. Of the 21 books, my top three picks were *The Mueller Report* by Robert S. Mueller III, *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, and *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

*The Mueller Report* was one of the lowest ranked books and was quickly eliminated. I thought it could teach the kids some valuable lessons about the corrupting influences of power and greed. But sadly no one else agreed that it would be a good idea to subject 5-year-olds to a rehashing of the

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### **GILEAD CAME UP SLIGHTLY SHORT AFTER A COLLEAGUE MIXED IT UP WITH THE ILIAD.**

last four years. As a result, my vote moved to *Gilead*. I actually think this book could have won, but it came up slightly short after one of my colleagues admitted that they had gotten *Gilead* mixed up with *The Iliad*.

"Did you even read the voters pamphlet that clearly stated that *Gilead* was not an epic poem with warring gods in ancient Greece?" I demanded.

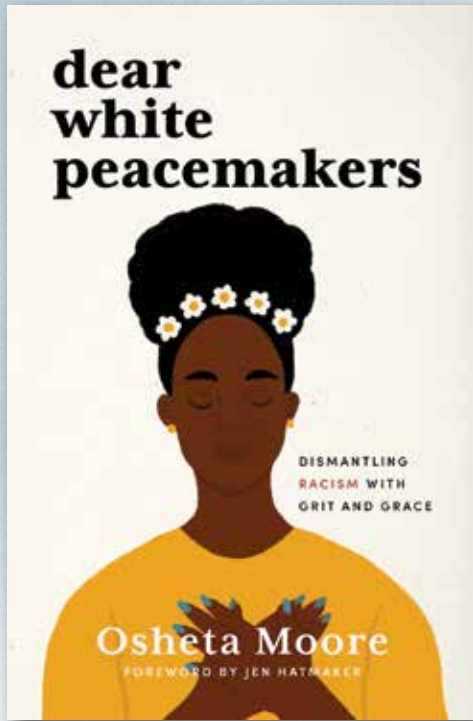
With the removal of my first and second choices, my vote shifted to *The Cost of Discipleship*, which garnered enough votes to make it over the 50 percent threshold and into the hands of our youth. There were some concerns about the sheer length of this book but since other submissions included *Anna Karenina*, *Les Misérables*, and the *Guyton and Hall Textbook of Medical Physiology*, I thought these concerns were misplaced. So even though my first choice didn't win, my third did, and my vote wasn't wasted.

Proponents of ranked choice voting argue that the process allows people to vote their conscience without having to worry about wasting their vote on a candidate who might be less electable or splitting the votes if there are two factions of candidates. This situation played out at a neighboring church where the children's ministry team had to pick a book for their kids: Halfway through the contentious race, *The Polar Express* and *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* were eliminated, with their support going to *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, enabling it to overtake George Orwell's *1984* and leave it in the dust.

I'll admit that making the transition to RCV won't be easy, and it will take some stellar messaging and public education. But if my second graders can easily tell me that their preferences for our Friday night movie are *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and then *Toy Story 4*, I think we adults can give this a go. ✦

**Joey Chin**, a former Sojourners fellow, is an elementary school teacher in Redmond, Wash.

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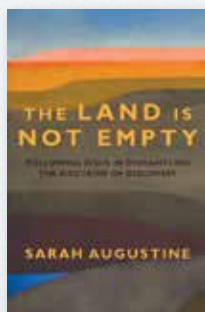
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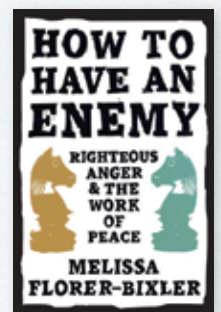
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