

focus

Boston University School of Theology 2021

→ **Inside:**

Meet Sujin Pak, STH's new dean

Hospital and prison chaplains in the time of COVID

Resilience in Black collegiate gospel choirs



BREAKING THROUGH

2020 tested us again and again. Alumni adapted, persevered—and looked to the future.

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Boston University
School of Theology
2021

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Above Summit for BU Photo

STH WELCOMES A NEW DEAN



Sujin Pak

I am honored to be dean of a school with a future as bright as its legacy. As a historian, I know the importance of listening to multiple voices and perspectives. I know the necessity of reading contexts well and carefully. As a biracial person, I understand the challenges of conflicting identities, values, and priorities. Boston University School of Theology uniquely merges powerful prophetic witness with compassionate and humble listening. It seeks to listen well to a diversity of voices, pursue deep contextual engagement, and practice noncompetitive advocacy, where we recognize and honor intersectionality.

It is an exciting moment in the school's vocation! This school is strongly positioned to meet today's

challenges in the academy, churches, religious communities, and the world. With its gifted faculty, dedicated staff, amazing alumni, remarkable student body, and extraordinary centers for social transformation, practical theology, conflict transformation, and faith and ecological justice, the School of Theology cultivates transformative religious leaders who embody passionate prophetic witness and profound listening. In a world threatened by deepened divides and a shrinking ability to hold together conviction with humility and prophecy with love, I am proud to be a dean of a school that seeks to embody and practice these together.

—Sujin Pak

SUJIN PAK BRINGS EXPERIENCE AS AN ADVOCATE OF MODERN INCLUSIVENESS TO STH

BY RICH BARLOW

Methodism courses through Sujin Pak's DNA—"I am the granddaughter, daughter, and niece of multiple United Methodist elders and deacons on both the Korean and American sides of my family," she says. Yet the church "was also my crisis of faith."

"I too often saw a gap between what I understood to be the Christian message of love, hope, peace, and justice and the actual actions of various expressions of the church across time," says Pak. As a vice dean at Duke Divinity School, her alma mater, she tried to address that gap by, for example, welcoming LGBTQIA+ students, faculty, and staff.

Pak will continue that work as the new dean of STH. She takes the helm just months before her beloved Methodist Church may splinter over gay rights, an animating focus of her career.

Late this summer, the church is scheduled to vote on a plan to split the denomination, creating at least one traditionalist branch opposed to same-sex marriage and gay ordination. The vote, following years of emotional debate, would rend the second-

largest Protestant church in the United States.

The divisions are a source of pain for Pak.

"There is need today for prophetic witness to support all persons of faith in their calling to ministry and/or religious leadership," she says. "I am proud of this legacy of the United Methodist Church and can only hope that it will be on the right side of history in support of LGBTQIA+ persons." Lack of humility, listening, and condemnation, she says, "too often have been the stumbling blocks to churches' abilities to bear faithful witness to the Christian message of reconciliation and justice."

At Duke Divinity School, Pak oversaw all degree programs, admissions, financial aid, student affairs, field education, and ministerial formation.

In an email sent to the BU community announcing Pak's appointment, Jean Morrison, BU provost, wrote: "She thoughtfully led Duke Divinity School through significant transitions, advancing efforts to enhance diversity by providing greater flexibility to students of limited means, and to improve inclusiveness, particularly for LGBTQIA+ students, faculty, and staff." Additionally, Morrison noted, she had "a major role in successfully adapting the school's

"Dr. Pak's scholarly credentials, her gift for building community through consensus and collaboration, and her ability to provide vision and steady, clearheaded leadership through periods of change have prepared her well to lead the School of Theology."

—Jean Morrison, Provost

curriculum to remote teaching and operations amid the pandemic this past spring.

"It was clear early on that Dr. Pak's scholarly credentials, her gift for building community through consensus and collaboration, and her ability to provide vision and steady, clearheaded leadership through periods of change have prepared her well to lead the School of Theology."

STH is BU's oldest school, started in Vermont in 1839 as Newbury Biblical Institute. It relocated to New Hampshire and then, in 1867, to Boston, two years before BU's founding. Its history is one of the things that attracted her to the deanship,

Jackie Riccardi

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Previously served as the vice dean of academic affairs and associate professor of the history of Christianity at Duke University, where she had worked since 2008.

Published in peer-reviewed publications: *Church History*, *Church History and Religious Culture*, *Dutch Review of Church History*, *Reformation & Renaissance Review*, *Religions*, and *Calvin Theological Journal*

Member of the editorial board for *Encyclopedia of Martin Luther and the Reformation*, American Historical Association, Sixteenth Century Studies, American Society of Church History, Calvin Studies Society

Pak says: “The School of Theology at Boston University has an incredible legacy of advancing women and minorities in leadership, academia, and ministry—from the first woman to earn a doctorate in the nation to such key leaders in its history as Howard Thurman (Hon.’67), dean of Marsh Chapel from 1953 to 1965—the first Black dean at a predominantly white American university—and Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS’55, Hon.’59).”

Pak says her to-do list as she begins her deanship includes reviewing the rollout last year of remote learning. “I will seek to explore with faculty, staff, and students opportunities, discoveries, and silver linings that have emerged from their experiences,” she says.

She also hopes to enhance the faculty’s visibility in its academic and social justice work. In particular, “With a notable number of Latinx scholars,” she

says, “the School of Theology is positioned as a trailblazer in cultivating Latinx theology and fostering Latinx church and community leaders.”

Morrison’s email said Pak, who was also appointed to the STH faculty, is “recognized among the world’s leading scholars of Christianity in late medieval and early modern Europe,” with research focused on the Protestant Reformation’s theology, its relationship to Jews and women, and the history of biblical interpretation. She has published two books (see page 5).

In 2018, Pak won the United Methodist Church General Board of Higher Education and Ministry Exemplary Teacher Award and recognition as an “Emerging Woman in Leadership” by the Association of Theological Schools. She is a lay preacher and teacher in the United Methodist Church.

“There is need today for prophetic witness to support all persons of faith in their calling to ministry and/or religious leadership. I am proud of this legacy of the United Methodist Church and can only hope that it will be on the right side of history in support of LGBTQIA+ persons.” —Sujin Pak

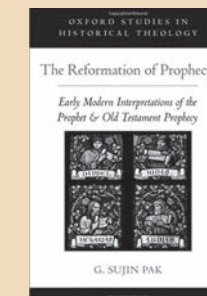


Pak led Duke Divinity School’s efforts to enhance diversity.

As for nonacademic interests, Pak says that in her “much younger years,” she was an athlete, particularly in basketball and volleyball. “Sports taught me invaluable life skills, such as self-discipline, perseverance, stamina, and teamwork,” she says. “I carry these gifts into my daily work and continue to look to athletic activities for leisure—plus, they are a great way to manage stress.”

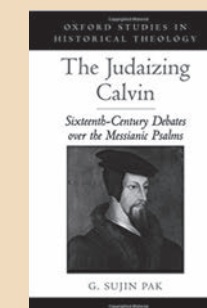
Pak succeeds Mary Elizabeth Moore as dean. Moore, the first woman to serve as STH dean, led the school for 12 years. □

BOOKS



The Reformation of Prophecy: Early Modern Interpretations of the Prophet & Old Testament Prophecy

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2018)



The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth-Century Debates over the Messianic Psalms

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2010)

The Minor Prophets: Reformation Commentary on Scripture, Vol. 13 (Westmont, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, under contract)

LEARNING FROM ANYWHERE

HOW REMOTE LEARNING HAS SPARKED TEACHING IDEAS THAT MIGHT OUTLAST THE PANDEMIC

BY ANDREW THURSTON

As surprise class guests go, Louise Pettibone Smith was a pretty astonishing one. The renowned biblical scholar and activist, who joined STH's Hebrew Bible class in fall 2020, died in 1981.

Smith's appearance owed nothing to miracles—and everything to video editing software.

Every week, the course's coteachers, Katheryn Pfisterer Darr and Brandon Simonson, film an online series where they take turns playing—and interviewing—ghostly apparitions of biblical scholars about their research. In episode one of *ghost writers*, Darr played Smith—complete with spectral video effect.

Darr and Simonson (GRS'19) weren't the only ones forced to experiment with new ways of teaching in 2020—though playing ghosts was admittedly one of the more out-there innovations. Last spring, STH went fully remote as the pandemic began surging; by fall, it was offering *Learn from Anywhere*, BU's hybrid plan that allows students to attend classes on campus, from home, or a mix of both. With long-established teaching routines thrown out, many professors embraced the opportunity to engage students in new ways.

Instead of only sitting through lectures in classrooms, Hebrew Bible students now watch chunks of them and other instructional videos, like *ghost writers*, online—then use more of their class time, virtual or otherwise, for discussion. Simonson and Darr, the Harrell F. Beck Professor of Hebrew Scripture, have also filmed a biweekly question-and-answer session.

Simonson, an instructor of biblical studies, talked with *focus* about which *Learn from Anywhere* innovations might outlast the coronavirus.

focus: Which elements of this approach do you think are here to stay?

Simonson: I love the prologue lecture component, the fact that students are engaging with the material outside of class and that we can spend that time in class talking about it. The videos we've created—a small series where I answer questions from that week and *ghost writers*—there's merit in keeping them as well, but really, they've functioned to keep us together as a community. It's the one thing that's lacking: something to keep everybody together to study the material as a group and to experience it as a group—adding humor has done that for us.

Are there things you really miss from having that classroom experience?

I think incorporating Zoom into my office hours is something I'd like to do in the future, but to have



my door open, to allow students to just walk in and stop by and have that sort of small talk is something we all miss. That's so often where the theology happens, in those impromptu moments.

Do you think there's anything that pastors or churches could take from what you're doing?

Definitely. If you put yourself and your material out there in as many ways as possible, it will resound with different people differently. What I've tried to bring to my teaching, both before and during the pandemic, is to approach the biblical texts through multiple media—whether that's song, literature, pop culture—to find as many ways to approach the subject as possible and not just catering to one way, not finding our own comfort zone and sticking within it. □

Britt Simonson

NEW LIFELONG LEARNING PROGRAM PROVIDES PRACTICAL ADVICE

BY MARA SASSOON

As STH was getting ready to launch its new Online Lifelong Learning Program in March 2020, COVID-19 cases started to rise, forcing schools and places of worship to close—or shift online. Eileen Daily, director of the program, saw an opportunity to tailor the courses to help people in a pivotal time. She pushed the program's launch to April and revamped the course topics.

The program offers an array of minicourses, which meet weekly for three or four sessions. The first two courses, *Leading Community Lament and Church Mission in Uncertainty and Adversity*, helped participants, many of them working in ministry, brainstorm ways to address the pandemic and its effects with congregants. “We hope these minicourses provide people with practical takeaways or even a plan to implement in their church, college, or hospital,” says Daily, who is also an STH lecturer and director of the doctor of ministry program. Another recent course offering, *Remote Ministry to Elders during Advent*, provided timely advice leading into the holiday season.

Spirituality groups, which bring participants together to discuss a special theme or topic once a week over five to seven weeks, are also available. In *Reflecting*

with Howard Thurman, students talk about themes in Thurman's book *The Living Wisdom of Howard Thurman* and reflect upon audio recordings of Thurman's speeches and sermons from the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center.

Last summer, Andrew Kimble, STH assistant director of alumni and donor relations, led a spirituality group titled *Embodying the Spirit of Afrofuturism*. Students discussed films such as *Black Panther* and the animated documentary *Liyana*, music by Parliament, Erykah Badu, and Weldon Irvine, and readings like science fiction novelist Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. “The goal was to use this mixed media experience to imagine possible futures through a Black cultural lens without centering racism and marginalization,” says Kimble ('19). “Reflecting in this way amid the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and

anti-Black violence reminded us that the future is in our hands.”

The Online Lifelong Learning Program is funded by a grant from BU's Digital Education Incubator, part of BU Digital Learning & Innovation. Daily says there are plenty of new course offerings scheduled for 2021, including minicourses on building inclusion and equity and developing meaning-making activities and rituals.

“Alumni and the entire STH team have come together and been really supportive of this program, and have made it great,” Daily says. “And I'm extremely grateful for that.” □

To find out more about the Online Lifelong Learning Program, visit bu.edu/sth/academics/lifelong-learning. Courses are taught by faculty, staff, alumni, and visiting scholars and cost \$40 for alumni and \$50 for nonalumni.



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CAREER HONORS

Leaders. Advocates. Organizers. The four recipients of STH’s 2020 Distinguished Alumni Awards check all of those boxes.

“They have crafted new paths of ministry with migrants and people living on the streets, local churches, neighborhoods, children, denominational bodies, people living in crisis and postcrisis trauma, and contexts crying for justice and ecological well-being,” said Mary Elizabeth Moore, then STH dean, at a virtual event in September. “We are honored that they left their marks on STH and now serve as daring witnesses to the ‘Kin-dom of God.’”



LaTrelle Easterling ('04) was dean of the cabinet of the New England Annual Conference and superintendent

of the Metro Boston Hope District before being named the first woman bishop of the Baltimore-Washington Conference in 2016. She founded Seeds of Security, a network dedicated to helping victims of domestic and intimate partner violence, and is also a member of the board of the Anna Howard Shaw Center at STH and the STH Dean’s Advisory Board. You can read Easterling’s sermon from STH’s 2020 matriculation ceremony on page 42.



Allen Ewing-Merrill ('00) serves many roles in the Maine faith community. As executive director of the BTS Center, the

successor to the Bangor Theological Seminary, Ewing-Merrill oversees a range of programs and resources, including conferences, publications, and project funding, for the professional development of leaders in ministry settings. He’s also the founder of Moral Movement Maine, an interfaith group of clergy and faith leaders that advocates for social justice in the state, and serves on the board of the Maine Council for Churches.



Cristina Rathbone ('09) spent years advocating for vulnerable populations as a writer, publishing

books about women in prison (*A World Apart: Women, Prison, and Life Behind Bars*) and New York City teenagers (*On the Outside Looking In: A Year in an Inner-City High School*) before becoming an Episcopal priest. She has worked extensively with people who are homeless and is currently focusing her efforts on helping asylum seekers. You can read more about Rathbone’s work on page 26.



Katie Cole (STH'12) received STH’s Emerging Leader Award for her work as director of children and

youth ministries at Boston’s Fourth Presbyterian Church and as an organizer with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. In 2018, Cole established Peace by Piece, a free monthly trauma support program for adults experiencing stress, grief, or loss. —*Marc Chalufour* □

DMin DISTINCTION

STH’s Doctor of Ministry program has been recognized as one of the top online doctoral programs in the US by TheBestSchools.org. In its 2020 ranking, the higher education resource service ranked STH number two, between Duke University and Emory University, citing the program’s focus on transformational leadership for those working in both traditional and nontraditional settings.

The DMin program combines online learning with intensive on-campus classes and culminates with a thesis about transforming a practical problem. Read how David With ('20) has put his thesis project into practice, operating a BBQ food truck to support a Raleigh, N.C., church, on page 18. —*M.C.* □

Tony Richards (Easterling), Will Wohler (Ewing-Merrill), Courtesy of Cristina Rathbone, Courtesy of Katie Cole



Help us support students *called to serve* **Latinx communities**

The Raíces Latinas Program at the School of Theology builds on the strong foundation and commitment to Latinx initiatives found among faculty and curriculum. Available to all interested students at the school, this important program offers students the unique opportunity to pursue Latin American and Latinx studies, leadership formation, and research, as well as the opportunity to build collaborative partnerships within Boston University, the church, and the wider community.

Raíces Latinas Fellowships are designed to recruit and support students who are interested in Latinx studies. The fellowship may be awarded to one or more applicants who display commitment and dedicated service to the Latinx community.

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RISING TO THE OCCASION

ALUMNI AND FRIENDS STRENGTHEN DEDICATION TO STH, DESPITE TURBULENCE

Midway into the spring 2020 semester, the Boston University community joined the rest of the nation and world in an effort to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus by working remotely, hosting virtual classes, meetings, and events, and practicing humility, compassion, and courage. Over the past year, the School of Theology's alumni and friends have played an integral role in sustaining STH's well-being. From supporting the STH Student Aid Fund that served students' emergency needs

to leading thought-provoking conversations on creative approaches to Advent and the intersection of justice movements and the arts, your commitment to excellence in theological education has been remarkable.

Although we were physically distant, we've remained close, as evidenced by the success of our denominational social gatherings, Class of 1970 50th Reunion, Distinguished Alumni Awards, and retirement celebrations for Professor Emeritus Walter Fluker (GRS'88) and Dean Emerita Mary Elizabeth Moore. Your time, advocacy, and philanthropy continue to support STH's ability to pursue its mission.

IMPACT OF "ON A MISSION" CAMPAIGN GIFTS



Enriching the Student Experience: A Flashback to Arizona/Mexico Travel Seminar

Chris Greene ('19)
Administrative Coordinator, BU Center for Teaching & Learning

"To whom do you serve, God, or Caesar?" asked our Tohono O'odham Nation speaker, as he reflected on a question he posed to Samaritan volunteers afraid to cross legal boundaries making water drop-offs for migrants in La Frontera. From whom or

what does your fundamental identity emerge? From life, or from the state? From the lips of religious leaders, Samaritans, and local leaders in el barrio, or from border agents and judges passing sentences on teenagers? Through their own stories and displays of artifacts, we catch glimpses of life and death, hope and salvation, the local, embodied realities of political warfare in the desert, and the stories of real bodies who suffered from Caesar while thirsting for life. Without the financial aid of the Global & Contextual Engagement Fellowship Fund, I wouldn't have had the opportunity for such an enlightening experience of connectedness to self and other.

ALUMNI VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT

EVENTS: 41

ALUMNI VOLUNTEERS: 70

ATTENDEES: 950



Building Support for Centers and Programs: A Testimony

Judith Oleson
Director, Tom Porter Program on Religion & Conflict Transformation

The Tom Porter Program on Religion & Conflict Transformation Endowment Fund has reached the endowed level, thanks to many new contributions at the time of Tom Porter's retirement celebration in May 2019. This fund provides important stability for the program's future at a time when conflicts across theological and ideological differences are expanding and challenging our

faith communities. The endowment ensures that the last part of STH's mission, "to seek peace with justice in a diverse and interconnected world," is a priority in the curriculum and student formation opportunities. The fund brings leading theologians and practitioners in the field of conflict transformation to campus each fall and provides opportunities for interfaith partnerships for peace and justice. The endowment also provides an important match when applying for research grants and funding for new program initiatives. As a result, STH graduates are more equipped to address, facilitate, and mediate conflicts in their relationships, religious institutions, and communities, whether here in the US or around the globe.

WHY I GIVE TO STH: ALUM PERSPECTIVES



Yoo-Yun Cho-Chang ('94,'00, GRS'13)
Licensed Psychologist

It's my way of paying back and giving forward. I was a beneficiary of the United Methodist Church Women of Color Scholarship and had learned the importance of supporting students of color who often face cultural biases and a lack of support in an academic setting. I was aware that many Korean students juggle academic work, financial burden, and taking care of their families while

dealing with xenophobia and racism without finding enough community support. My husband and I wanted to help establish the Korean Student Scholarship Fund to provide ongoing support for the Korean students in the STH community.



Kevin Vetiac ('18)
Music Director at The Crossing and Senior Administrator at St. Paul's Cathedral

I give to STH because STH has already given so much to me. The generous funding provided to me through the Dean's Fellow Scholarship made my theological education at STH possible. I want to do my part, in the words of Mary Church Terrell, to lift as I climb and give back to students. Specifically, I am excited to help students through a scholarship in my mother's name. My mother worked tirelessly to put me and my siblings through private school because she valued our education. All of my academic achievements have been attained while standing on her shoulders. And so I feel honored to give to STH to establish the Claire Edouard Scholarship Fund, which will provide financial assistance to African American students pursuing theological education. I feel blessed to be able to publicly honor the sacrifices of my mother and in some small way help nurture the next generation of African American scholars at STH. □

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY FUND

Contributions to the STH Fund are vital, especially for unendowed programs, which support the following:

- 1. Contextual opportunities,** which provide support to students engaged in projects to learn from people in other cultures or to immerse themselves in their diverse ministries through Springboard Fellowships.
- 2. Spiritual life,** supporting our vital program of Saturday reading retreats, meditation groups, and other special activities that nourish the spiritual vibrancy of the STH community.
- 3. Outreach to alums,** which includes livestreaming of worship services, lectures, seminars, webinars, oral histories, regular e-newsletters, and our annual issue of *focus*.

If you would like to make a gift, please visit bu.edu/sth/giving.

BREAKING THROUGH

**FOUR ALUMNI SHARE
THEIR LESSONS FROM
THE PANDEMIC—AND
HOW THEY WILL APPLY
THEM TO THE FUTURE**

BY MARC CHALUFOUR

Tragedy, trauma, and loss shaped 2020. But through those hardships, most work continued—sometimes in dramatically altered forms—to meet the needs of a society navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools and offices went remote—and churches did too. A study published by the Pew Research Center in August 2020 showed that one-third of American adults had either attended an online religious service or watched one on television in the previous month—half of them having done so for the first time since the pandemic began.

But while that migration online has brought convenience for many people, it has translated into extra barriers for others. And for anyone whose work relies on personal interactions, especially with members of vulnerable communities—those often disproportionately affected by COVID-19—the transition hasn't always been as simple as scheduling a Zoom session. Community and religious leaders have had to reinvent organizations and ministries in order to continue delivering support to those who need it. In some cases, that has meant accelerating changes that had already begun and that will shape their careers and lives well beyond the pandemic.

Four STH alumni spoke with *focus* about their experiences over the past year—and how their outlook on the future has changed.

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CHARLES DANIELS ('20)
COFOUNDER AND CEO OF FATHERS' UPLIFT, BOSTON, MASS.

Charles Daniels was raised by a single mother and struggled with feelings of abandonment before eventually meeting his father. Now, he works with fathers of color in the Boston neighborhoods of Dorchester and Roxbury, helping them overcome barriers that might prevent them from being involved in their own children's lives. He and his wife, Samantha Fils-Daniels (pictured with Daniels above), founded Fathers' UpLift in 2011 to provide mental health counseling, coaching, and advocacy for fathers dealing with issues including racism, trauma, and substance abuse. Daniels received a 2019 Obama Foundation fellowship, which supports leaders working on transformational changes in their communities.

What was your biggest challenge this past year?

Creating community through a virtual platform. Getting our constituents connected to one another online is different from an in-person experience. So, the pandemic forced us to think outside of the box and innovate every single day, making deliveries to our constituents to help them meet their needs while also building that community remotely.

Were you still able to evolve and grow your organization?

We had to align our efforts with the needs of our constituents. This required us to add new services that addressed

unmet needs during the pandemic. One barrier that is especially difficult for the fathers we work with is coping with life after prison. When a man enters prison, the experience directly impacts his identity and separates him from his role as a father. One immediate response to the pandemic was an expansion of our Fathers Homecoming Program, where we work with incarcerated fathers months before their release to put together a comprehensive mental health plan. Our staff meet fathers at the gate of Suffolk County House of Corrections to escort them to their homes, monitor their mental health, and create a pathway for success. One of our cofounders, Samantha Fils-Daniels, created an additional component to the homecoming program called Bags for Dads, which provides fathers with necessities such as a comb, toothbrush, shampoo, and deodorant inside a sturdy duffel bag, so they have the fundamental tools and dignity to be a successful parent after release.

Will some of the changes you made carry forward into 2021 and beyond?

We knew we wanted to begin exploring ways to connect with fathers through an online platform, but we never imagined doing it this soon. Now that we know we can do it, we plan to offer both a virtual and in-person experience moving forward—making our programs more accessible and allowing us to expand more quickly. We can't wait.

This page: Courtesy of Charles Daniels; Facing page: Courtesy of Yara González-Justiniano



YARA GONZÁLEZ-JUSTINIANO ('14,'19) | VISITING ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT GARRETT-EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, EVANSTON, ILL.

Yara González-Justiniano is a visiting assistant professor of practical theology and community engagement at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. Her interests range from Latinx theology to popular culture but, she says, "I teach and preach about hope." In February 2021, she preached to the Hope Central Church in Boston's Jamaica Plain neighborhood, via Zoom, and spoke of the societal inequities that have led to so many COVID-19 deaths. She ended with these words: "The way to live an abundant life now is to pay the cost of creativity and creation together, and imagine ways of being that will inevitably require us to do differently—so that we all may live."

What was the biggest challenge you faced in your work in 2020?

As a professor, it has been trying to keep up under the pressure of productivity that hasn't allowed us to stop and really begin to practice and think through who we need to be as a society.

How were you able to adapt in the face of that challenge?

I have not been able to adapt. Also, I have chosen not to. The idea of adapting to a "new normal" when the pandemic became a pandemic, partially because of a lack of understanding of communal living and a capitalist model that doesn't care for humane practices, seems absurd. What I believe it has

done, and continues to do, is to truly question the distribution of resources and unveil the systemic injustices against essential workers.

Is there a change you've made that you expect to carry forward?

Especially as we continue the work as online learners and teachers, I'll be mindful of our bodies and the diverse practices around trauma-informed pedagogies. I take account of Zoom exhaustion as well as the limitation of mobility during class; hence, I incorporate breaks as well as assignments that are flexible. For example, they can submit video essays instead of written work and they also have plenty of opportunities for extra credit.

What comes next?

I continue to question what it means to teach and practice flourishing with my students. Therefore, I seek ways to still impart the content of the class, without needing to replicate in-person learning. I also try to eliminate the things that seem to be the causes of anxieties, as well as providing mutual boundaries since our private spaces have become public. We meet twice a month for 1.5 hours, everything else is done in their own time, and I always give an opportunity for makeup sessions. I also make sure they understand my focus is on the content of what they are learning and how they can incorporate it in their ministerial work, not on form.

"I have not been able to adapt. Also, I have chosen not to."



ART GORDON ('16)
SENIOR PASTOR, ST. JOHN MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH, ROXBURY, MASS.

“The pandemic has caused more families to be in need. In 2020, my church had several food giveaways, and we also secured grants that allowed us to help families in need with electric and medical bills. I hope to continue this work, focusing on feeding families and contributing to necessary bills.”

Art Gordon, a fourth-generation Baptist pastor, grew up in the church. He’s also been an activist and student leader, traveling to Ferguson, Mo., to protest the police shooting of Michael Brown, and visiting Israel and Palestine while he was at STH. He was vice president of the STH Student Association and received the Donald A. Wells Preaching Prize. In 2018, he received a Fellowship at Auschwitz for the Study of Professional Ethics to examine the role of clergy in Nazi-occupied Germany and Poland. In addition to being a pastor, Gordon, who had previously worked on the 2020 Senate campaign of Ed Markey (Hon.’04) (D-Mass.), now serves as a senior advisor to representative Ayanna Pressley (D-Mass.) in her Dorchester, Mass., district office. The pandemic forced him to reevaluate how he reaches the members of his church—as well as his role in helping members of the community meet basic needs.

What was the biggest challenge you faced as a pastor over this past year?

Like most people, I faced several challenges during 2020. As a pastor, the biggest challenges included communication with my parishioners and keeping people engaged. Being away from the church created a challenge for the majority of the membership.

What changes did you make to overcome that separation?

We had to switch to a virtual format that has been embraced, but many seniors without Wi-Fi or knowledge of social media have had a hard time adjusting. One of the things I had to do was to have check-in calls to see how folks were and if they were in need of any resources. Through the calls, I encouraged the use of online platforms, while also connecting personally. As time progressed, many eventually learned the mechanics of social media.

Do you think some of the changes you made will carry forward, beyond the pandemic?

My greatest changes came in the ability to gather resources, such as food, for my community. The pandemic has caused more families to be in need. In 2020, my church had several food giveaways, and we also secured grants that allowed us to help families in need with electric and medical bills. I hope to continue this work, focusing on feeding families and contributing to necessary bills.

What comes next?

What comes next for me is continuing to help families in the community, but also using my platform as a community pastor and leader to help bring more resources to the community. I plan to write op-eds and speak with local elected officials to advocate for further support.



MARY SCIFRES ('91,'91)
FOUNDER, MARY SCIFRES MINISTRIES, LAGUNA BEACH, CALIF.

“Consulting and coaching is so much more affordable for churches and nonprofits when we don't have to add the cost of travel and meeting space.”

Mary Scifres, an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church, is an author, a coach, and a consultant. Through Mary Scifres Ministries, which she launched in 2009, she offers a range of services, helping churches navigate transitions, resolve conflicts, and focus their missions. Despite losing the business of one of her largest clients early in the pandemic, then needing to reinvent how she worked with churches due to public health protocols, Scifres finds reasons for hope. When she looks back at the changes that 2020 forced, she sees a more efficient business, capable of reaching more clients with more affordable services.

What was the biggest challenge your business faced in 2020?

My primary client terminated our consulting contract very suddenly last summer. My staff, current clients, and longtime colleagues cheered me on and all jumped in to help me. Via video ministry, social media, phone calls, and email contact with the churches and leaders I’ve helped over the years, we quickly got the word out that I was available and ready to help other leaders and churches.

How did you adapt to the challenges of the past year—and do you see some of those changes becoming permanent?

Oh yes! My work is all video- and

telephone-based now, and I anticipate that being a permanent change. Consulting and coaching is so much more affordable for churches and nonprofits when we don’t have to add the cost of travel and meeting space. Honestly, my coaching clients show up more consistently and more fully engaged when they simply walk to their desk and turn on their computer. They can focus on their coaching goals and needs, and we’re completely open and available to listen to one another and to God’s still, small voice in this setting.

What comes next?

Figuring out how to host an all-virtual leadership training event in early 2022 will be the most exciting challenge my team and I are facing. As with the consulting, we anticipate the event will be more affordable both for us as the host organization and for participants. Hotel events are so costly, and travel is almost prohibitive in both time and money for churches, clergy, and small business and nonprofit leaders. We look forward to creating an interactive, participatory experience that still creates community—a high value in our work—but also promotes sustainability for everyone involved. It’s better for Mother Earth as well. □

These interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity.

Facing page: Courtesy of Art Gordon;
 This page: Erin Clendenin Photography

FROM SEMINARY TO SHORT RIBS



David With ('20)

DAVID WITH HAS A PLAN TO REVERSE SHRINKING CHURCH BUDGETS—AND IT STARTS WITH MOUTHWATERING BBQ

BY MARC CHALUFOUR

Much of David With's workday is spent in the driveway of his home outside Raleigh, N.C., in the back of a black food truck emblazoned with a colorful mosaic pig.

Around two in the afternoon, he fires up a stack of apple and hickory wood in a smoker mounted to the back of the truck. He brings the temperature up to 225 degrees and lays in seasoned slabs of pork shoulder. They cook for 18 hours. Brisket goes in next and cooks for 12. With's methods borrow from across the BBQ spectrum and include Eastern North Carolina's vinegar-based sauce and Texas-style slow-cooked beef brisket. This is no typical BBQ business, though. It's With's ministry of meat: a food truck run in partnership with a local church to fund their mission and help people in need.

With ('20) opened And Also With 'Cue in October 2019 while completing his doctorate at STH. And more than one year in, despite a global pandemic clearing the weekday lunch crowd out of Raleigh, his experiment in funding church programs with a for-profit business is paying off. He's posted profits every quarter, donated hundreds of meals to people in need, and provided his partner, First Baptist Church of Raleigh (FBC), with a source of revenue.

With looked at the financial struggles facing many churches even before the pandemic and saw the need for a creative solution. "Revenues are down, giving is going down, and millennials are strapped for cash," he says. In Raleigh, BBQ has provided a solution.

COOKING WITH PURPOSE

With leaves his pork and brisket to smoke all night, then he's up early the next morning to drive downtown. By 7:15 am, he's parked behind FBC where he stuffs chicken and ribs into the smoker. Then it's on to mixing side dishes like sweet and tangy slaw, smoked beans, and Southwest corn salad (special ingredient: Chili Cheese Fritos). At 11 am, he opens for business. Then it's back home to refire the smoker and begin again.

And Also With 'Cue caters to the employees at the North Carolina State Capitol and other downtown government buildings. Many of the customers come for the award-winning food, but others are drawn to the business' charitable story. Each lunch purchase pays for a sandwich to be donated to someone else. Customers can further pay it forward by buying a token for a future meal that With will provide to someone who comes up to the truck asking for food. Proceeds also help to fund FBC programs and pay his salary.

"As giving trends change and shift, churches are going to have to begin



David With (right) hopes his food truck will inspire other churches to explore for-profit businesses.

thinking outside of the typical tithing box," says Leah Anderson Reed, FBC's minister with community and With's primary liaison at the church. "This is an innovative approach to ministry that meets so many needs we have."

With first floated the idea of pairing ministry with for-profit enterprise when the staff at the Baptist church where he worked during the Great Recession were told that their budgets, salaries, and healthcare benefits were all being cut. Even after those cuts,

With, a student minister and associate pastor at the time, was expected to take kids on international trips for missional experiences, so he started looking for other ways to bring in money. "I asked the question: would it be possible for us to start a little business?" But, "I got shut down," he says. "That idea didn't float with that crowd."

Around the same time, he had begun cooking in BBQ competitions—a continuation of the hobby he'd picked up while

tailgating at Wake Forest football games when he was in the university's School of Divinity. "I told people, 'I'll get there at six in the morning. Y'all come around three and it'll be ready,'" he says. "And it was awful—the food I was cooking was terrible." But he enjoyed the process and, when he graduated, his parents paid for a weekend BBQ workshop. The food began to improve and, when he and a friend entered their first competition, they placed second out of 85 teams.

Alex Boerner (x2)

“BBQ was a way for me to sit in my driveway and just chill out and not have to think about the funerals that were performed that week or the people I had visited in the hospital,” he says. Then he realized that if he could find a way to make his BBQ meaningful to other people, he wouldn’t have to work at a desk again.

So he headed to BU to study BBQ, beer—and theology.

SUCCESS IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

For his doctoral thesis, With searched for churches that used a for-profit model to fund their programs but he couldn’t find any in the Protestant world. What he did find were Trappist monks. So he spent several weeks in 2019 traveling through Belgium, France, and Germany, visiting abbeys that brew internationally known beers like Orval and Chimay.

Rather than capitalism contradicting their lifestyles, the monks he met spoke of business as a means of spirituality and prayer. “They look at profit not as coming out of greed, but as a gift of one’s work that you can then use to give back to others,” he says. After his business idea had been shot down a few years earlier, this was affirmation With needed to hear. His thesis, the 155-page *Post-recession mainline church revenue:*



On most weekdays, With serves lunch in the First Baptist Church parking lot in downtown Raleigh. The church is a partner in the business.

how a for-profit BBQ restaurant might transform a post-Christian ministry, just might be the most heavily footnoted business plan in BBQ’s long history.

With approached FBC, where one of his divinity school professors serves as pastor, and proposed his idea. A simple partnership resulted: the church bought the shell of the truck, With bought the cooking equipment. They shared a vision of the business not only providing revenue but also benefiting the community—

and if it didn’t work out, it would be easy to split up and go their separate ways.

One of their ideas was for church volunteers to serve free meals around the city, breaking bread with people they didn’t know. Then COVID-19 hit. FBC had to pause that program and, although With had to close the business for only three days—due to a meat shortage—his business plan had been flipped upside down. The bustling lunch crowd was suddenly working from home

“There’s a theology of service aspect to it: the whole idea of bringing people together to socialize through food and to provide a really positive experience is a big part of my satisfaction.”

—David With



And Also With 'Cue’s popular Texas-style brisket smokes for 18 hours.

and weekday business plummeted about 70 percent. Almost as quickly, though, residents unable to go to restaurants began booking food trucks to visit their neighborhoods. “We’ve seen our private event revenue quadruple,” With says. “So it’s balanced out.”

In its first year, And Also With 'Cue donated nearly 1,000 meals, most of them to the Helen Wright Center, an emergency shelter for women experiencing homelessness, and families who visit the FBC Raleigh clothing closet. Plus, FBC got a return on its investment and

With was able to support himself. Even in a year of unprecedented challenges to the food industry, his idea proved viable.

With acknowledges that the schedule is a grind, and he would like to eventually step into an advisory role to have more time with his wife and two young children. He also wants to take his idea to a bigger audience. He was invited to speak at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship annual conference in 2020, but that event was canceled because of the pandemic. “There were

going to be representatives from churches all across the country,” he says.

After years of study and working in the church, With has found peace working in the truck, joining his personal, professional, and spiritual lives. “There’s a theology of service aspect to it: the whole idea of bringing people together to socialize through food and to provide a really positive experience is a big part of my satisfaction,” he says. “But even more fulfilling is being able to do this in a way that helps the community.” □

Alex Boerner (XZ)

FAITH AND RESILIENCE IN A DIFFICULT TIME



Ylisse Bess ('17)



Heidi (Schulz) Kugler ('97)

TWO ALUMS REFLECT ON THE CHALLENGES OF PRISON AND HOSPITAL CHAPLAINCY DURING COVID-19

BY MARA SASSOON

COVID-19 has so ravaged prisons—infecting inmates at a rate more than five times higher than the general population—that many states have been forced to release inmates early, slow down new convictions, or close jails altogether. The virus has also taxed hospitals in unprecedented ways, overwhelming their bed capacities, forcing them to postpone or cancel elective surgeries, and bringing patients and healthcare workers alike untold stress and grief.

In these fraught times, the work of prison and hospital chaplains, who serve as voices of comfort and hope in often-isolating environments, is of heightened importance.

“Chaplains are essential in traumatic times like this pandemic,” says Shelly Rambo, an associate professor of theology who helped design STH’s Master of Divinity chaplaincy track. “They meet people in moments of crisis or pain, and COVID has added a particular visibility to the important work that they are doing.” But it’s also added a lot of new stresses and challenges.

For Ylisse Bess, a multifaith chaplain at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, one of the toughest adjustments has been the lack of physical connection with COVID patients. With strict quarantines around

COVID wards, she can only speak with them by phone. “It’s still powerful, but it’s just not the same as an in-person interaction,” she says. Bess ('17), whose role involves patient advocacy, says that these over-the-phone interactions require more prompting and deducing on her part. “If I was in person, I could see that someone looked cold and needed a blanket and I could get one for them, but patients don’t always say what is bothering them and, on the phone, I have to ask a lot of questions to figure something like that out.

“Everything is different because of COVID-19,” she says.

HOSPITAL CHAPLAINCY: LISTENING AND ADVOCATING

In March 2020, as hospitals began to admit more COVID-19 patients, Bess was forced to work remotely for two weeks while Beth Israel considered the best way to have its spiritual care team continue its work. She primarily visits cardiac patients and would normally go from room to room to check in on them. As a multifaith chaplain, she works with people of all religions, offering spiritual and emotional support.

“Most of my job is listening to people,” she says. “In our everyday life, people don’t get a chance to talk about their grief and their sadness. All of us are struggling with something. I try to create a space for patients to talk about what they’re going through.”



After two weeks of remote work early in the pandemic, Ylisse Bess returned to Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center where she is a multifaith chaplain.

Though she continues to meet with COVID-19 patients over the phone, after those two weeks were up, Bess was one of a few chaplains able to resume in-person rounds for non-COVID patients.

The pandemic has brought many changes, but it has also reinforced the importance of Bess’ role. Besides helping patients navigate their concerns and talk through their grief, Bess is an advocate for them and tries to make their visits as comfortable as possible. She often acts as a liaison between patients and other staff and medical professionals.

“Patients want their healthcare professionals to ask them about

their faith tradition, but that often doesn’t happen. And that’s a huge part of their life and their meaning-making,” Bess says.

She checks that patients are getting proper meals that meet their dietary restrictions, religious or otherwise. “Another big question I ask is, ‘Is this what you want?’” she says. Sometimes patients are faced with medical procedures, such as blood transfusions, that might not be aligned with their religious beliefs. Bess works with doctors to make sure they are aware of conflicts like this and to facilitate other options. “It’s making sure that ethics are acknowledged,” she

says. “It’s not just medical ethics. People have religious ethics, cultural ethics, and I make sure that’s a part of the conversation.”

COVID-19 has heightened the usual anxiety that might come from a hospital visit, and Bess works through these concerns with patients and their families. The virus has also compounded many issues of racism that Bess had been working to tackle before the pandemic.

“Another inherent part of my work, as a Black woman, is supporting patients and staff of color,” says Bess. Black Americans are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, facing hospitalization

Facing page: Courtesy of Ylisse Bess, Courtesy of Heidi Kugler; This page: Tim Pierce, CC BY 3.0

“In our everyday life, people don’t get a chance to talk about their grief and their sadness. All of us are struggling with something. I try to create a space for patients to talk about what they’re going through.”

—Ylisse Bess

rates 2.9 times higher than white Americans and a death rate 1.9 times higher, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Because of systemic racism, “people of color, especially Black people, have every reason to distrust our healthcare institutions, and my job is to help our staff understand why they have that distrust.”

She connects with patients by asking them if they feel safe and comfortable in the hospital and brings the feedback she receives to staff meetings. “I try to make sure we’re always thinking about power and privilege and how we bring that into our interactions with patients,” she says. “There are people who need to be there to encourage everyone to think about deconstructing these harmful thoughts, which inform our treatment of patients and then lead to worse healthcare outcomes. A chaplain can do that.”

COVID-19 has underscored these issues. “I heard some xenophobic and racist comments in regular times, but COVID has intensified that. It was shocking to me,” says Bess. “I heard people referring to COVID as a Chinese disease or an Asian disease, and I had to pull people aside and explain why that is unacceptable, racist, and xenophobic.”

To further support fellow staff of color, Bess is cofacilitating

an affinity space where staff can meet to discuss their experiences in the hospital. “Staff of color used to pull me aside in the hallway to talk, but now we have this safe space to gather. That’s our job as chaplains—we’re supposed to be conversation partners. We uphold ethics and we make sure that conversations are happening so that staff feel safe and patients feel safe and secure enough to get adequate healthcare. It’s so important.”

PRISON CHAPLAINCY: ADAPTING AND LIFTING

As chaplaincy administrator for the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Heidi (Schulz) Kugler oversees 252 chaplains across many faiths at 122 federal prisons. In March 2020, her office began helping prison chaplains find new ways to support inmates: worship groups and faith-based programs were moved outside, broken into smaller groups within housing units and chapel areas, or shifted to other worship formats. But Kugler (’97) says that chaplains have also continued to conduct in-person daily pastoral rounds—clad in personal protective equipment—since the pandemic began.

“COVID has challenged our ability to conduct inmate congregant worship and group religious programming, just as

it has in the wider community,” says Kugler. “When inmates couldn’t gather in larger groups in centralized chapel areas for their congregant worship and religious studies across faith lines, the chaplains went to them to meet their spiritual needs. We are committed to ensuring that inmates’ faith practices are protected.”

She says that’s been especially important for a population further disconnected from the outside world by a deadly pandemic. Many inmates have had to go without seeing loved ones as visitations have been shut down periodically. Some might have family or friends impacted by the virus, or might be experiencing outbreaks within their facility.

“The pandemic has increased the need to provide spiritual guidance to inmates and staff as they process the additional losses and grief brought on by the pandemic, but COVID has challenged our ability to conduct inmate congregant worship and group religious programming.”

“The pandemic has increased the need to provide spiritual guidance to inmates and staff as they process the additional losses and grief brought on by the pandemic, but COVID has challenged our ability to conduct inmate congregant worship and group religious programming.”

—Heidi Kugler

The chaplains have needed extra support, too. “Chaplaincy work is rewarding, but also inherently challenging,” Kugler says. Her office has connected them with mental health resources to address compassion fatigue and offered advice for healthy leadership

strategies to help them cope with pandemic-related stress. “Having wellness and stress reduction strategies and resources is vital to chaplains in correctional ministry over time.”

Also of high importance for Kugler has been ensuring that faith-based reentry programs, which help inmates prepare for life beyond prison walls, continue uninterrupted. The programs—which are open to inmates of all faiths, as well as those with no faith affiliation—guide participants in addressing issues of personal growth and life skills. They complete interactive journaling workbooks, working with the chaplains, volunteers, and mentors on topics like spirituality, goal setting, reestablishing family relationships, and conflict management.

“Pandemic or not, federal offenders will continue to release back into their communities,” says Kugler. “So we want to equip inmates with practical tools and real-life strategies for reentry success so they do not return to prison.”

The pandemic, she says, has been a lesson in faith and resiliency. “Through it all, bureau chaplains have emerged stronger, with our shared values and collective resolve sharpened to best care, inspire, and transform lives for the better.” □

ON THE MARGINS



Cristina Rathbone ('09)

AS A REPORTER, THEN A PRIEST, CRISTINA RATHBONE HAS HELPED PEOPLE EXCLUDED FROM SOCIETY SHARE THEIR STORIES

BY ANDREW THURSTON

Cristina Rathbone doesn't normally wear a clerical collar, but the asylum seekers at the US border needed all the help they could get. If her collar helped nudge a border agent into waving them across, it was worth the effort.

A priest in the Episcopal Church in Boston, Rathbone ('09) spent six months in 2019 working with asylum seekers fleeing violence and persecution in Central America and hoping for sanctuary in the United States. Like many of the people she met, Rathbone ended up in Juárez. The northern Mexican city sits shoulder to shoulder with El Paso, Texas—border cities split by the Rio Grande, but tied together by four bridges that carry thousands of migrants every year.

"I would put my collar on only to go up to the checkpoint and seek to lend a bit of my privilege as a US citizen and an ordained member of the clergy," says Rathbone, "to try to encourage border patrol to uphold the laws as they

stand—that anybody asking for asylum should be allowed straight into the country to pursue that case."

Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

In recent years, it's become harder than ever to claim shelter in the United States.

During his four years in office, former President Donald Trump consistently reduced the cap on the number of refugees the country would admit. In October 2020, he set the limit at just 15,000; in 2016, the US had welcomed 85,000. According to the *Washington Post*, the courts have a backlog of more than 1 million pending asylum claims.

"My mother's Cuban," says Rathbone, "so I have always had a particular interest in stories of immigration, especially from Latin America."

IN THE HEART OF SUFFERING

Born in America, Rathbone spent her formative years in the United

"The homeless folks in Boston taught me everything I know about how to pastor to people even as they are in the heart of suffering. They taught me that mostly all I really need to do is listen and learn, and then I'll be given the skills that I need, as I need them, from the community on the ground."

—Cristina Rathbone



Cristina Rathbone (right), who received a 2020 Distinguished Alumni Award from STH, stands with Lee Curtis, of the Diocese of the Rio Grande, near a Juárez–El Paso border crossing.

Kingdom—her father's homeland—before returning to the States for college. After starting, but not finishing, a degree in documentary filmmaking in New York, Rathbone became an investigative journalist, publishing articles in a range of papers and magazines, including the *Miami Herald* and the *New York Daily News*. It wasn't until she was in her forties that she switched paths and joined the church.

"The kind of journalist I was and the kind of priest I am are so similar," says Rathbone. The people Rathbone wrote about—particularly in her two books, *On the Outside Looking in: Stories from an Inner-City High School* and *A World Apart: Women, Prison, and Life Behind Bars*—were on society's frayed edges. "My home lay out on the margins," she says.

It still does. After studying theology at STH, Rathbone

joined the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in Boston, serving as a canon missionary and pastor to people experiencing homelessness.

"The homeless folks in Boston taught me everything I know about how to pastor to people even as they are in the heart of suffering," she says. "They taught me that mostly all I really need to do is listen and learn, and then I'll be given the skills that

Facing page: Courtesy of Cristina Rathbone; This page: Episcopal News Service

“I went to the border thinking it was the place where I needed to be in order to be of the most use in this immigration quagmire. I’ve realized that the border is everywhere in this country already: people who cross the border go to literally every town and city. We can be of service wherever we are.”

—Cristina Rathbone

I need, as I need them, from the community on the ground.”

ON THE BORDER

When Rathbone arrived in Juárez in August 2019, she joined with the Episcopal Diocese of the Rio Grande in El Paso to do what she describes as small things: provide water, food, blankets, and clothing; later, she helped start a class for children and began walking with families to the border.

“I’m a great believer in small things,” says Rathbone. “Once we get sidetracked by trying to create big things, we spend more time thinking about the big thing than the actual work the big thing is supposed to contain and represent.”

“Having said that, it’s really hard doing small things in the face of such dire and multiple suffering.”

She says the resilience of the people she met—groups of moms and kids who’d banded together for the journey, parents whose children had been tortured and murdered by narcos—“enlarged and transformed my heart.” But caring for them required caring for herself too. Rathbone says she relied on encouragement—spiritual and financial—from the institutional church, as well as from friends and family.

“When one’s operating very much out on the edge of things,” says Rathbone, “it becomes very important, at least for me, to feel tethered to the center.”

In November 2020, Rathbone started a new program to train and guide others in the church who want to help those seeking safe harbor in the United States. Neighbor to Neighbor connects asylum seekers with local Episcopal churches to help them adjust to life in the country.

“I went to the border thinking it was the place where I needed to be in order to be of the most use in this immigration quagmire,” says Rathbone, who is leading the organization in collaboration with Episcopal Migration Ministries. “I’ve realized that the border is everywhere in this country already: people who cross the border go to literally every town and city. We can be of service wherever we are.”

Having spent so much of her life hearing and telling the stories of those excluded from society, Rathbone hopes Neighbor to Neighbor—which launched in the Episcopal Dioceses of Massachusetts, Southeast Florida, the Rio Grande, and New Jersey—will enable others in the church to spend more time with them too.

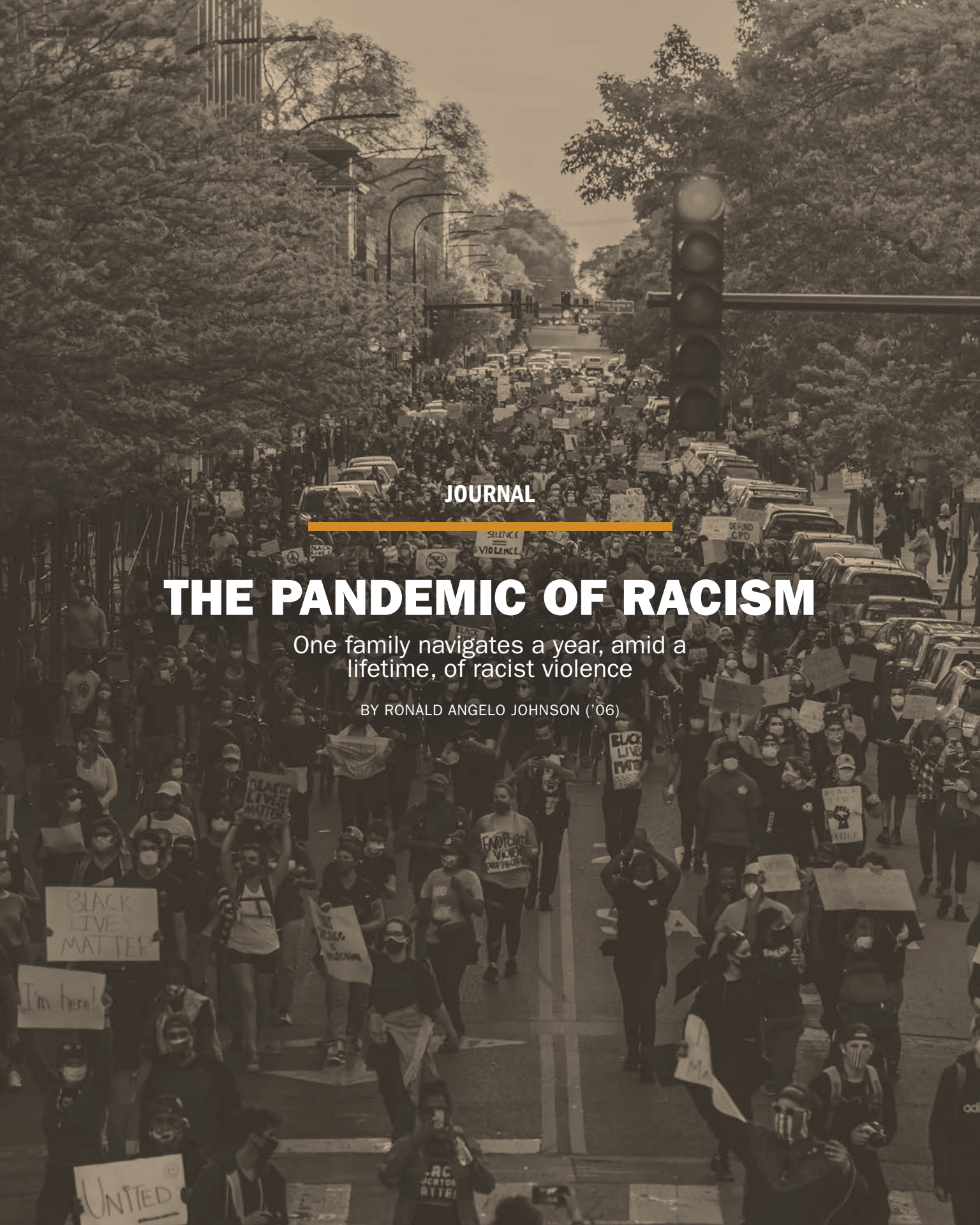


Thousands of people pass across the bridges between Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas, each year. Rathbone tries to help those seeking asylum in the US.

“We, the church, need to be in relationship with the people who are most suffering, because they have the most to teach us about love,” she says. “Those of us in the church tend to be particularly good at pretending we’re not broken. Being with people who can no longer pretend liberates us to confess our own brokenness; once we do that, the healing has already begun.” □

“We, the church, need to be in relationship with the people who are most suffering, because they have the most to teach us about love.”

—Cristina Rathbone



JOURNAL

THE PANDEMIC OF RACISM

One family navigates a year, amid a lifetime, of racist violence

BY RONALD ANGELO JOHNSON ('06)

The 2020 killing of George Floyd sparked Black Lives Matter protests around the world, including this march in Chicago.

In late May 2020, my wife, Colette, and I sat on our balcony amid the Texas twilight and absorbed the news that the Minneapolis police had murdered George Floyd. A rapt silence fell over us as we conjured images of the Black man, about our age, being brazenly suffocated by a white American police officer. One of us murmured, “Damn. Another one.” The other sighed an “amen.” The mild expletive expressed our rage over the senseless, repeated killing of our sisters and brothers. The breathy endorsement, a common refrain across Black America, presaged that more Black people would die at the hands of sworn protectors of the peace. Left unacknowledged was the grim fear held by many Black people: That could be me or someone I love.

Across the year, as ubiquitous suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic offered Americans of all backgrounds a comparable “it could be me” feeling, Black Americans endured the personal and communal ravages of what scholars like Ibram X. Kendi—BU’s Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities and founding director of Boston University’s Center for Antiracist Research—call “the pandemic of racism.”¹ According to the American Psychological Association, “Racism is associated with a host of psychological consequences, including depression, anxiety and other serious, sometimes debilitating conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder.... The impact of these repeated horrific incidents is inflicting trauma on the broader African American community.”² Honestly, it *has* been exhausting to be Black in the United States over recent years, as government officials normalized

casual racism and grand juries refused to indict murderous cops. Gospel great Mahalia Jackson melodiously asked, “How I got over?”³ Taking a moment to “look back and wonder,”⁴ the Johnson family endured the anxieties of the racism pandemic through a renewed commitment to the Black Church and individual efforts of antiracist activism.

My faith in God was shaken to its core in 2016, after the ascendance of a racist, misogynistic, xenophobic political campaign evoked a deafening silence from our church. My time at Boston University’s School of Theology had provided the intellectual and relational foundation that informed and nursed my spiritual grief. I eventually understood my experience as “a dark night,” from the St. John of the Cross poem we had read in seminary.⁵ In a desperate search for something “real,” I found purchase in the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to *(Continued)*

1. Ibram X. Kendi, “Why Don’t We Know Who the Coronavirus Victims Are?” *The Atlantic* (theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/stop-looking-away-race-covid-19-victims/609250). April 1, 2020.
2. “‘We Are Living in a Racism Pandemic,’ Says APA President,” American Psychological Association (apa.org/news/press/releases/2020/05/racism-pandemic). May 29, 2020.
3. Mahalia Jackson, “How I Got Over,” Columbia, 1976.
4. Ibid.
5. St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, Third Revised Edition (New York: Image Books, 1959), 13.

Facing page: Max Bender/Unsplash; This page: Robert Rogers

About the Author



Ronald Angelo Johnson ('06) holds the Ralph and Bessie Mae Lynn Chair of History at Baylor University. He studies transnational African American history. His current project, *Shades of Color: Racialized Diplomacy and the Haitian Diaspora in Early America*, examines the impact of Haitian immigration on early US religion and culture.

which Wesley Wildman’s theology class had introduced me. An STH classmate offered relentless friendship as I trekked along the path of unbelief. I emerged from a state of deep spiritual despair with a new and profound appreciation of koinonia, Christian fellowship with God and with each other.

Our family united with Ebenezer Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, a community of Black Christian believers whose religious *raison d’être*, like ours, stems from the theology of Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS’55, Hon.’59). In his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, which I assign to US history freshmen, King proposed, “He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it...a righteous man has no alternative but to refuse to cooperate with an evil system.”⁶ The Ebenezer community seeks social justice through love-inspired resistance to systemic racism. As a Black family living in an incessant pandemic of racism, our spiritual resilience is replenished through communion within the Black Church. My research illustrates the roots of the Black Church in early African Protestantism, a determined effort to establish churches in open contrast to racist, white Christian theology, as Black Christians “identified their movement with God’s mercy and the history of deliverance of God’s people from slavery.”⁷

Worship at Ebenezer offers racial and spiritual affirmation through our collective disgust at the countless microaggressions endured by our community. We remember in prayer the names of the fallen, including Sandra Bland, Jonathan Price, and Eric Garner, because, in a very real sense, they are

members of our congregation. Scholar Michelle Wright employs the particle physics principle of superposition to explain the multidimensionality that intersects Blackness in the African Diaspora across space-time.⁸ As Black people who experience tragic deaths across our community, we understand the fallen could be us, and we accept that we could be them.

Black people in the United States exist in what W.E.B. Du Bois termed “double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”⁹ It is important for Black people to understand who we are and how others perceive us. My son, RJ, does not enjoy “the talk,” difficult conversations about the dangers white American (mis)conceptions can pose to the lives of Black adolescents like Emmett Till and Tamir Rice. RJ is a six-foot, two-inch teenager and will be viewed as a threat despite his genial demeanor. We must teach him to identify the perils of others’ implicit biases. Social activism during the pandemic by Black NBA players bolstered RJ’s resilience. Their “cool” stance against racism inspired him to resist damaging language and practices through Instagram.

Colette and I, like many Black professionals, continue to seek acceptance for our family as full members in American society. She took to Facebook during the pandemic to engage our neighbors in more direct discussions about race. After the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, she expressed, “My son jogs every

6. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 51.

7. Ronald Angelo Johnson, “Africans and Immigrants: Haitian Contributions to the African Protestant Movement in Early America,” *Revue Française d’Études Américaines*, 164 (2020): 43.

8. Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 22–25.

9. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Dover Thrift Editions (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 2.

Soleil Johnson

10. Ronald Angelo Johnson, “The Rebel past,” *Hays Free Press* (haysfreepress.com/2020/06/24/the-rebel-past/), June 24, 2020.

morning. I feel a sense of anxiousness until he comes home. My heart goes out to Ahmaud Arbery’s mother. Something must change.” On the birthday of Breonna Taylor, she posted, “I cannot fully express the pain and sorrow felt, coupled with my own imminent fear for my daughter, my son, and my husband.”

After the killing of George Floyd, our teenage daughter, Soleil, resisted racism through expressive art. She sketched a tearful Black girl adorned with flowers, wearing a mask with the words “No More.” Ebenezer posted the sketch during a virtual program to discuss racial justice. Soleil explained, “I want to be able to walk in my own neighborhood and actually feel safe. I don’t want to fear for my life every time I see a police car. My heart aches with every injustice that steals another son or daughter from this world.” Referring to the flowers in the sketch, she described, “Amaryllis signifies determination. Jasione signifies justice. We need both to grow as a nation.”

Soon after our balcony discussion of George Floyd’s murder, I penned an op-ed discussing “a culture of racism responsible for a jarring disruption of my childhood innocence.”¹⁰ My father endured racist, emasculating treatment and empowered me to become a first-generation college graduate. Racism persists. Therefore, the Johnson family will continue to have “the talk.” We have no universal answers about stopping the pandemic of racism. Our acts of resistance are riddled with fear and sadness. But, we endure together. Resilience against racism is our history, our theology, and our way of life. □



Following the killing of George Floyd, the author’s daughter, Soleil Johnson, was inspired to draw. Of the flowers surrounding the masked woman, “Amaryllis signifies determination. Jasione signifies justice,” she says. “We need both to grow as a nation.” A full-color version of the drawing, and other artwork, can be seen at justsoleilart.weebly.com.

*BU's Inner Strength
Gospel Choir performs
in Marsh Chapel.*

JOURNAL

SINGING WITH PURPOSE

How historically Black collegiate gospel choirs
build pride and resilience

BY TEDDY HICKMAN-MAYNARD ('03,'15)

1. Cheryl J. Sanders, "Resistance, Rebellion, and Reform: The Collegiate Gospel Choir Movement in the United States," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, No. 27, 1999–2000, 210.

2. Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, "Worship in the Lives of Black Adolescents: Builder of Resilience and Hope," *Liturgy*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2014, 24.

3. Ibid, 25.

4. Sanders, op. cit., 210.

5. Terrell L. Strayhorn, "Singing in a Foreign Land: An Exploratory Study of Gospel Choir Participation Among African American Undergraduates at a Predominantly White Institution," *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2011, 142.

Facing page: Maddie Malhotra; This page: Dave Green

Christian ethicist Cheryl J. Sanders describes the collegiate gospel choir movement as "one of the most vital ongoing institutional expressions of the ubiquitous [Black college] student rebellions of the late 1960s."¹ Despite the significance of these groups, Sanders laments that their past and present development is largely ignored by religious scholars. In response, I conducted a practical theological study of historically Black collegiate gospel choirs (HBCGCs) at three universities in the Boston area. In exploring the structures, practices, and public discourses of these groups, I sought to understand the ways in which these HBCGCs continue to transpose Black Church worship practices into the social context of predominantly white institutions of higher learning (PWIs).

Anne E. Streaty Wimberly identifies Black worship as a primary "means whereby youth form a vital spiritual resilience."² Wimberly cites the Black Church's historic function of building and sustaining Black communities in the face of their marginalization and argues that "Black youths' formation of spiritual resilience is a nonnegotiable purpose of worship."³ All three HBCGCs in my study were born in the late 1960s and early 1970s as Black students gathered informally to sing the songs of Zion in a strange land, seeking to harness the resilience-building power of Black worship as fortification against the soul-trauma of the racism they endured on the campuses of these PWIs to which they now had greater access, but in which they were not truly welcome.

Derided as "counterrevolutionary" measures at the time by students favoring more radical reforms, HBCGCs have proven to be effective and enduring vehicles for "the cultural resistance of black students to the pressure to assimilate the particular values, practices, and attitudes of the university setting and the social classes it emulates."⁴ In his work on Black college student success indicators, Terrell L. Strayhorn has argued that higher education administrators have missed the enormous role that traditional cultural practices—and, specifically, spiritual practices such as participating in gospel choirs—play in enabling Black student persistence in the face of experiences of marginalization. In Strayhorn's study of 21 Black collegians who sang in an HBCGC named "Black Voices," the students reported that participating in the choir helped them to establish a sense of belonging, develop ethnic pride, and nurture resilience.⁵ (Continued)

About the Author



Teddy Hickman-Maynard ('03,'15)

is associate dean for students and community life and assistant professor of Black Church studies. His research addresses the public witness of the church in contemporary American society with particular emphasis on the future of the Black Church tradition.

While Strayhorn cites these three benefits of HBCGC participation as separate contributors to academic success among Black students, my research on HBCGCs found these to be interrelated dynamics. I discovered they emanate from the Black Church context that is the natural *habitus* of the worship practices that comprise the communal life of these groups. HBCGCs do not merely transport Black sacred music into the foreign territory of PWIs;

rather, they do their best to conjure the spirit of the Black Christian faith tradition from which those songs spring by transposing Black Church worshipping practices into the life of these communities. Rehearsals end with large prayer circles during which members hold hands while sharing praise reports and prayer requests before engaging in extended intercessory prayer. Teaching (and a fair bit of preaching) occurs as the directors or student leaders explain the meaning of the lyrics to a song, offering biblical interpretation in light of contemporary circumstances. Testimonies of God’s activity are shared both in rehearsals and during concerts. Meals are shared, time is spent, griefs are mourned, and burdens are borne. As one student put it, whenever anyone in the choir is in need, “people just come.”

Historically Black collegiate gospel choirs cultivate alternative communal spaces within predominantly white institutions of higher learning that privilege the particular testimonies and collective witness of Black people to the good news of God’s liberating and loving reign.

Edward P. Wimberly argues that the pastoral care that takes place through the worshipping life of the Black Church is not confined to the corporate worship service, but extends to the various small groups in which worshippers gather to pray, interpret scripture, rehearse, and meet.⁶ Wimberly (’68;’71, GRS’76) describes how liturgical formation extends into these communal spaces:

These small group settings are often informal, but ritual is present nonetheless. Here ritual is referred to as repetitive actions that have as their goal the drawing of people into the major story of the faith community. Whenever the goal of ritual draws persons into the major story of the faith community, worship takes place. Moreover, when ritual and worship draw persons into the major story of the faith community, worship and communal resources are brought to bear on personal needs; and when the emotional, interpersonal, and psychological needs of persons are met in the context of ritual and worship, pastoral care takes place.⁷

Wimberly’s description of worship as ritual action that draws persons into the major story of the faith community mirrors my own theorization of the central culture-shaping tool of HBCGCs, which I have identified as

8. Theodore Hickman-Maynard, “‘Black is My Home Country’: Re-Membering Race on Gospel Grounds,” *Ecclesial Practices*, 5, 2018.

the practice of “narrative discipline.”⁸ HBCGCs cultivate alternative communal spaces within PWIs that privilege the particular testimonies and collective witness of Black people to the good news of God’s liberating and loving reign. In turn, the identities and communal practices of HBCGCs are shaped by this discipline of learning about, recalling, reinterpreting, and appropriating the meaning of those stories for the contemporary moment.

As those stories are centered, those who find themselves on the margins of the HBCGCs are welcomed to engage the Black Christian witness to the extent and in the ways they choose. A white, agnostic student shared, “I noticed those things that I was

uncomfortable about and was like, I gotta find out more about these things, both about my own faith—what I believe in—and about race. What does it mean for me as a white person to be singing this music?” A Muslim Pakistani-American student said of her HBCGC experience, “It’s not just a gospel choir; it’s a family....But, it didn’t make me want to become a Christian. It made me want to be a better Muslim.”

HBCGCs that were created by and for marginalized Black students, by singing their own song, are helping others find their voices. Through Black Christian worship practices, HBCGCs not only build resilience and hope; they transform the social context for which resilience is necessary. □



6. Edward P. Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2008), 17.

7. Ibid, 18.

JOURNAL

RETHINKING RESILIENCE WITHIN GLOBAL CHARITY

What international aid organizations miss about the importance of family and community

BY NICOLETTE MANGLOS-WEBER

Facing page: iStock; This page: Dave Green

1. Alessia Contu and Emanuela Girei, "NGOs Management and the Value of 'Partnerships' for Equality in International Development: What's in a Name?" *Human Relations* 2014; 67(2):205-32.
2. Susan Dicklitch, *The Elusive Promise of NGOs in Africa: Lessons from Uganda* (London: Macmillan, 1998).

I was raised in a family concerned about charity. My parents sponsored several children through the organization Compassion International. We never met these children, and tellingly I do not recall where they lived or what language they spoke. But to us, sponsoring a foreign child was a normal ritual of a Christian home. Their photos were on the refrigerator door next to our report cards and artwork. Sometimes we prayed for them, that they would believe in Jesus and do well in school. When they turned 18, we were assigned to someone new.

Today, I am a sociologist who studies religious practice and social welfare in postcolonial nations of Africa. I'm currently researching community-based organizations (CBOs) in Uganda, which are domestic agencies with a social welfare focus. Such organizations have proliferated in recent years. Official estimates suggest there are now about 3,000 of them in Uganda, focusing on problems like healthcare, education, and vulnerable youth.¹

In this work I have encountered child sponsorship from a different angle. For those unfamiliar, this model involves organizations, like Compassion International, which recruit donors to support a foreign child into adulthood. That support is often executed by a CBO, in a partnership between foreign donors and indigenous leadership. Yet my research has uncovered many tensions between such models and the demands placed on local leaders.

It has sparked in me a deep and growing unease with how such charity works function, and the model of human resilience they presume to support.

On one afternoon in the metropolis of Kampala, my collaborators and I talked to a group of parents and relatives caring for Compassion-sponsored children. Most of them had multiple dependents in the home, some their biological children and others not. They were financially stretched from all angles: rents and food costs were rising, school fees were going up, and accidents or job losses were regular stressors. Many spoke well of the sponsorship program: It was helpful to have one child's food, clothes, books, and school fees paid for. Others, though, complained that their hands were tied by the individual nature of the support. They could not (Continued)

About the Author



Nicolette Manglos-Weber, an assistant professor of religion and society, is a sociologist who studies global religious communities, focusing on Christianity in Africa and US immigrant religion. Her first book is *Joining the Choir: Religious Memberships and Social Trust Among Transnational Ghanaians* (Oxford, 2018) and her current work is on lived religion, caregiving, and social welfare in Uganda. More information is available at ugandacaregivers.com.

use the money for any other member of the household nor for general household incidentals.

A later conversation with a CBO leader, whom I'll call Sylvia, provided further insight. She was a program facilitator for a sponsoring organization, and she told me the following story. A boy sponsored through her program was in a severe accident.

To pay his medical bills, Sylvia approached his foreign sponsors. They only agreed to pay about \$500, which was not enough. She pleaded the boy's case to the doctors and contributed her own money, so the boy got his treatment. Still, the ordeal left him with epilepsy.

Sylvia then took him back to his family. When she returned to check on him later, she found him in pain from bed sores and nearly dead. "I had no option but to take him to my place, and I have had him for 12 years now," she told me. He is a permanent dependent: "He can wash his clothes, bathe himself, and he is on medication, which I have to buy every month."

Sylvia also took in one of the boy's brothers, who was healthy and did

well through the years. At the time we interviewed her, the brother was a student at a local university. The two brothers now stay together, she says: "I rent for them a room, but we have meals together. So, the only hope for this boy [with epilepsy] is his brother. If J. makes it, he will take care of P."

On one level, this story is about an exceptional woman's compassion, how she went above and beyond to rescue a child. Yet it also reveals so much more. Sylvia felt a sense of obligation toward this boy that was absent in his foreign sponsors: she "had no option" but to take him in. In her community, where relations of reciprocity are deep and essential for survival, she had become his benefactor; and she would be failing her role if she left him to die.²

Sylvia likewise sees, in a way that the sponsor organization does not, how supporting this boy means supporting his key relations. She ensured his future by investing in his brother as a caregiver. Her story thus tells us as much about resilient relations and relational systems as it does about individual compassion. It suggests that the sponsorship model falls short when

This story is about an exceptional woman's compassion . . . Yet it also reveals so much more. Sylvia felt a sense of obligation toward this boy that was absent in his foreign sponsors: she "had no option" but to take him in. In her community, where relations of reciprocity are deep and essential for survival, she had become his benefactor.

2. China Scherz, *Having People, Having Heart: Charity, Sustainable Development, and Problems of Dependence in Central Uganda* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

3. Nicolette D. Manglos-Weber and Jade Avelis, "Expanding the Reflexive Space: Resilient Young Adults, Institutional Cultures, and Cognitive Schemas." *Sociological Forum* 2019; 34(3):664-684; George A. Bonnano, "Uses and Abuses of the Resilience Construct: Loss, Trauma, and Health-related Adversities." *Social Science & Medicine* 2012; 74:753-56; Carol Aneshensel, "Social Stress: Theory and Research." *Annual Review of Sociology* 1992; 18:15-38.

4. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

it ignores, bypasses, or fails to support such relations.

Well-meaning scholars, NGO directors, and religious leaders alike have sought to understand and support resilience as an adaptive response to stress and trauma, especially in places where stress and trauma are tragically common.³ Yet these professional communities almost always approach resilience as an individual quality, or a trajectory of individual behavior. It is something that individual persons are or do, in spite of less-than-favorable conditions.

From that framework, the child sponsorship model makes sense as a way to support resilience. Yet in Sylvia's story, we can see how the individualistic approach is out of balance. It runs counter to how people solve problems as dependent and relational beings.

My intent is not to isolate any specific program or organization, or to negate the idea of personal resilience. Certainly, persons can be resilient too, and it is worth studying

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and supporting such a quality. My point is that much global aid and charity, and scholarly research on those topics, is infused with an Anglo-European cultural commitment to what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls the ideal of the "punctual self": a personhood that is most fully achieved in a mode of self-reliance and autonomy.⁴ As a result, we have given undue attention to personal resilience, to the detriment of the relations on which persons depend.

As I near the final stretches of this project, it is those very resilient relationships—and models of relationship—that have most captured and inspired me. Sylvia is just one of many leaders who I have seen act as mothers, fathers, aunts, or uncles to a

needy child, creatively adapting the extended-kin model of dependent ties. The resilience of such relational systems, through decades of civil war and exploitation, is what most gives me hope for those I've met in my research. It is a kind of resilience that, I believe, can actually generate collective recovery after trauma; and it is one I hope more scholars, and more religious leaders and activists, will actively work to support in our world. □



SERMON

MAKE SURE YOU GIVE A DAMN

A calling for the next generation of students

BY LATRELLE EASTERLING ('04)

Facing page: Kalman Zabarsky. This page: Tony Richards

This sermon was delivered during STH's matriculation ceremony, held online on September 16, 2020. References to current events reflect what was happening on that date.

Beloved of God,

Here we are, or there you are... you're out there somewhere, right? This pandemic has robbed and keeps robbing us of so much. Whenever I have the opportunity to be in Marsh Chapel, I am excited because it feels like home. I have great memories of being in that sacred space. And, when I am asked to preach there, I look forward to it with great anticipation. But we are not gathered in those pews looking at the beautiful pipe organ and feeling the presence of those depicted in the stained-glass windows. No, we are gathering virtually and trying to pay attention as the cat climbs across the keyboard or someone is watching the news in another room.

One of my mantras is, "Let's keep it real." That is certainly what this year demands, cutting right to the heart of the matter and immediately getting to the deepest things we know. We're going to keep it real today.

You are embarking upon a journey that will challenge you, stretch you, vex you, bless you, and take you to places you have not yet imagined. There will be late nights, early mornings, too much coffee—and perhaps a few other beverages as well—endless research, and all of the other components of pursuing an advanced degree at a prestigious institution. And, you begin or continue this journey at a time unlike any other in modern history. We are yet in the grips of a pandemic that has invaded 27 million

bodies and claimed 881,000 lives across the globe. It has disrupted, disconnected, displaced, and discombobulated the entire planet. The sins of racism, supremacy, and privilege, which have infected our nation since its inception, have been laid bare, and the feet of those who are sick and tired of being sick and tired have created a drumbeat for liberation and justice worldwide. The strides made against heteronormativity and econeglect are being reversed at record pace. We are facing an election that will test the core tenets of our republic and the strength of our democracy. We are also in a time in history where truth, honesty, morality, and integrity are on the auction block of situational ethics and too often sold to the highest bidder.

And yet, amidst all of this, you have been given the opportunity, the privilege, and the time to matriculate into the School of The Prophets. Don't take that for granted.

I graduated with the Class of 2004 and perhaps I have some understanding of your situation. We were *(Continued)*

About the Author



Bishop LaTrelle Easterling ('04) is the episcopal leader of the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the UMC. She is the first woman to lead this conference. She formerly served as a DS and senior pastor in Boston. She is married to the Rev. Marion Easterling, and they are the proud parents of two adult sons.

sitting in class when news came that the World Trade Center had been struck and our nation was under attack. It shook us to our core and shaped both our personal and academic environments. I share that to say the world rocks and reels from the vicissitudes of life every day, but, beloved, this is different, and we all know it. So, as I thought about today’s matriculation service and what message I could bring to bear on this moment, the statement that kept and keeps rising in my spirit is, “Make Sure You Give A Damn.”

It would be easy to engage in this year, and each year of your degree program, as just another intellectual exercise for no other purpose than the acquisition of another diploma or fulfilling a credentialing requirement. But that would be a shame. Because you have the opportunity to expand your horizons, disabuse yourselves of poor theology, free your minds of old tropes, and wrestle with heretofore unchallenged assumptions. You will engage persons with completely different worldviews, theological frameworks, and cultural norms. You will be called upon to read authors you would otherwise never select. There will be classes you may find heretical—take them. There may be theological constructs you believe to be inferior—engage them. There will be colleagues who revere everything you hold in disdain—converse with them.

“The world rocks and reels from the vicissitudes of life every day, but, beloved, this is different, and we all know it. So as I thought about . . . what message I could bring to bear on this moment, the statement that keeps rising in my spirit is, ‘Make Sure You Give a Damn.’”

Learn how to care about, and learn from, and engage a world larger than yourself—not just to debate and degrade it, but to understand the perspectives and respect the people who hold them. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The first service one owes to others in a community involves listening to them. We do God’s work for our brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them.”¹

There is a question that continues to walk around the existential room of our current milieu asking, “I really don’t care. Do you?” Well, we know what happens when we don’t care. When we don’t care, we live for ourselves at the expense of others. When we don’t care, we hear the cries of the suffering and mock their neediness. When we don’t care, we read only to confirm our own biases. When we really don’t care,

we contribute to an ethos of division and exclusion. When we do not care, we pour fresh fuel on the embers of anger, thereby igniting fires that foment violence and cement hatred. When we couldn’t really care less, we glorify greed and shame sacrifice. Selfishness and self-centeredness and othering are the currency of our transactional lives, the caste system created during chattel slavery continues to elevate one race while condemning all others, and the question begging to be asked in 2020 is, “Does anybody give a damn?”

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954).

2. M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 403.

3. Brittney C. Cooper, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018).

Some scholars posit that as Jesus entered Jerusalem, in what we call his triumphal entrance, he found the city in turmoil and asking, “Who is this?” The crowds that went before and behind him responded, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee” (Matthew 21:11). Jesus then approached and entered the temple precincts. It was the place where the Gentiles could gather for worship and prayer, but also the place where they acquired their offerings for sacrifice and exchanged their local coins for ones that could be given within this sacred space. The kiosks for currency exchange were brimming with business and the local Stop & Shop was competing with Whole Foods for the best “dove deal of the day.” Can’t you see it: the lines were long, and the travelers

were talking and laughing and perhaps comparing images of their children and grandchildren as they stood online at the Mall of Jerusalem. Jesus must have looked around and been consumed with how irreverent it had all become. As irreverent as the “Hosannas!” that greeted Jesus during his entrance into the city, once understood as part of the Hallel psalms and used as a prayer, they had now become in the words of M. Eugene Boring, “nothing more than a religious

‘hurrah!’”² What was intended as a space for worship and prayer and sacred singing and deep meditation had become just another hangout. And those who should have been about their Creator’s business were consumed with the world’s business. Just beyond their activity were the most vulnerable, and it looked as if they really didn’t care.

And I can imagine that Jesus went into what queer feminist scholar Brittney Cooper calls, “an eloquent rage.”³ In his prophetic protest, Jesus rearranged furniture and interrupted trading. Channeling *Isaiah* and *Jeremiah*, he reached back to the Hebrew texts and cried out, “*My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers*” (Matthew 21:13). Scholars suggest that the courts were too

large for Jesus to have completely halted the business taking place there. It is unlikely that he disturbed trading even for the day. But, for those who saw with their own eyes and heard with their own ears, I’m sure the moment was jarring. Jesus engaged in protest at the repugnant and vile disregard for God’s people just beyond the wall while they satisfied themselves with the façade of holiness.

Let us be clear, this was not about transactions taking place or price

“What was intended as a space for worship and prayer . . . had become just another hangout. And those who should have been about their Creator’s business were consumed with the world’s business. Just beyond their activity were the most vulnerable, and it looked as if they really didn’t care.”

gouging or chastising the merchants for taking advantage of the poor, because Jesus scolded the sellers *and* the purchasers alike. He threw them all out. This was not about cleansing the temple in a traditional sense of that term because that would have required a purification process. No, this was about secularizing sacred space. We obsess about respectability politics, but Jesus was calling out respectability Christianity. Hear these haunting words of Howard Thurman,⁴

To those who need profound succor and strength to enable them to live in the present with dignity and creativity, Christianity often has been sterile and of little avail. The conventional Christian word is muffled, confused and vague. Too often the price exacted by society for security and respectability is that the Christian movement in its formal expression must be on the side of the strong against the weak. This is a matter of tremendous significance, for it reveals to what extent a religion that was born of a people acquainted with persecution and suffering has become the cornerstone of a civilization and of nations whose very position in modern life has too often been secured by a ruthless use of power applied to weak and defenseless people.⁵

“A religion that was born of a people acquainted with persecution and suffering has become the cornerstone of a civilization . . . whose very position in modern life has too often been secured by a ruthless use of power applied to weak and defenseless people.”
—Howard Thurman

That described the temple precinct then, and, if we’re honest, it describes too many of our temples now.

And, in the Matthean rendering of this pericope, Jesus taught by his actions. He immediately turned to the ministry of healing and attending to the most vulnerable among them by restoring sight to the blind and movement to the lame and welcoming the children. Jesus told us from the beginning and demonstrated it

again at the end of his earthly ministry that his anointed purpose was to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release of the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Jesus embodies this by building a community rather than hiding within a stone edifice.

One of the blessings of the pandemic is that it has forced us to leave the comfortable, convenient echo chambers we call sanctuaries and engage the outside world. To leave the precincts where we seek shelter from the compartmentalized lives we too often lead, singing salvation and grace on Sunday, but voting for and supporting nationalism and condemnation on Tuesday. The Lord cried out then and cries out now, “My house shall be a house of prayer and will not be turned into a den of robbers” (Matthew 21:13).

4. Howard Thurman (Hon.’67) was the dean of Marsh Chapel from 1953–1965.

5. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and The Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949).

6. *Hamilton*, music and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda, dir. Thomas Kail, chor. Andy Blakenbuehler, Richard Rodgers Theatre, New York, NY, February 2, 2016.

7. William J. Barber, *We Are Called to be a Movement* (New York: Workman, 2020).

Beloved, we know Jesus gave a damn because he cared enough to:

- challenge corrupt customs,
- not be silenced by bullies,
- elevate the individual over the institution,
- offer healthcare to the sick,
- include the excluded,
- expand his own worldview,
- dismantle systemic barriers that robbed God’s people of having life to the full,
- discipline and disciple,
- offer true reconciliation and restoration to all.

This is the ministry. This is the calling. This is the task to which you have set your minds and your hearts and your parents’ bank accounts. We are glad about it because we know

you will take up the sacred mantle and, in the words of Lin-Manuel Miranda, “you’re not throwing away your shot!”⁶

You are the preachers and prophets and theologians and academicians and entrepreneurs and missionaries and social workers and business leaders who will lead us away from Christian nationalism and back to true Jesus-centered ministry. You are the ones who will disrupt the status quo. You are the ones who will resist hatred masquerading as righteous indignation. You are the ones who will

call us out when we major in the minors and minor in the majors. You are the ones who will demand that all the intersectionalities of oppression and privilege be acknowledged and dismantled simultaneously, rather than playing the hierarchy of harm’s game. You are the ones who will continue to get into trouble, *good and necessary trouble*. You are the ones who will cancel cancel culture and work toward

true reconciliation and restoration of God’s liberated vision for humanity. You are the ones who understand that we need a revival more than a revolution, and in the words of Bishop William Barber, that “the rejected must lead the revival for love and justice because rejected stones make the best cornerstones.”⁷

As you engage this year, may you

be empty pitchers before a full fountain of opportunities and experiences and relationships and pedagogical experimentation and exegetical excellence and failing greatly and rising strong and risking extravagantly. As you engage this year, please make sure you give a damn. Because if you do, you and the world will be the better for it. Praise be to God. □

Watch this sermon at youtube.com/watch?v=rkN5E_gwSQg, beginning at 42:00.

“You are the preachers and prophets and theologians and academicians and entrepreneurs and missionaries and social workers and business leaders who will lead us away from Christian nationalism and back to true Jesus-centered ministry. You are the ones who will disrupt the status quo.”

BLESSED AND BROKEN

FINDING PURPOSE AND STRENGTH IN TRAUMA

BY ZINA JACQUE ('97,'05)

We have been broken open. The sound of shattered dreams, damaged relationships, and cracked bodies seems to describe so much of our world. These are not good things. Breaking is not, usually, a good thing. And though I do not diminish the pain any have felt in this season of breaking, sometimes, only after the breaking can the new emerge. Flowers cannot grow unless the seed is broken open. The delectable taste of your favorite cake is impossible without the breaking open of eggs. And no child would ever be born unless the mother's body gave way to a process of being broken open.

So, what are we as people, as communities of faith, as a world, to do with the pieces of our dreams and high ideals laying about? Humpty Dumpty would say there is no putting back together what is broken. However, here is where I want to focus on the power of two words, not one. "Broken" suggests shattered and ruined. But, "broken open" hints that the breaking has a purpose.

We have been broken open for a purpose. Within our particular and universal spaces, many have grown accustomed to the prevailing way. Police brutality is codified as a few bad apples. Economic injustice is named as the fault of a community. Disparity in health and educational outcomes and mass incarceration is

labeled, *you reap what you sow*. We begin to believe this line of thinking, or we are so fatigued by it, our fight seeps away. But we have been broken open, for a purpose.

The protests in the street, comprising every hue and age, broke open our separation from one another and announced a new understanding of our connectedness. Speeches from young poets and passionate advocates broke open generations of images of who has voice and who does not. Shouts from pulpits broke open the gospel in potent ways. Children in cages, speaking in other tongues, broke open our hearts as we heard the words of Jesus, "and a little child shall lead them!" (Isaiah 11:6). Pandemics, food lines, unemployment, and deep worry broke open the lines between rural and urban, Black and white, LGBTQ+ and cisheterosexual, reminding us we are bound together in that single garment of humanity. We have been broken open, for a purpose.

What are we to make of this process of our protective shells being broken open? What do we do with this feeling of being exposed? Our first step is to acknowledge what is lost in the act of breaking. We lose the familiar. We lose our sense of safety. We grieve. Yet grief, in a Christian world view, is appropriate, for we do not grieve without hope.

Our second step is to accept the blessing that is inherent in the

breaking. We know this blessing for we experience it in the breaking of the bread and in the breaking open of the tomb. We are blessed to be broken open because new room for growth is created and the ability to stretch toward new horizons becomes ours. We must, in whatever language fits our tongues, thank the Divine One for loving us enough to refuse to allow us to remain captive to old spaces and former places. We must be thankful for the breaking.

Next, we must gather the good that is left. We must bring it forward to mingle with the common good of others. We must join together and gain wisdom from one another's lessons and lives and dreams and declarations of a better day.

We move in this direction because we are resilient, made so by the power of God's renewing Spirit. We move in this direction because we have a confident expectation that God is at work in us, on us, and through us. Break us open, God, that we may be used by you in blessed ways, we pray. So be it. □



Zina Jacque ('97, '05) received her MDiv and ThD from STH. She has served in both the church and non-profit world and loves being a grandmother.

Thomas Balsamo (Barrington, IL)

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—Casey Darmody ('12)