

Faithful Resistance: Chapter 2

Dismantling White Supremacy

Black. Lives. Matter.

Annanda Barclay

I sometimes struggle when talking with white people about racism and how it functions, because I feel like I'm trying to explain how to breathe to another human. Our bodies already participate in the breathing process. We are inhaling and exhaling without thought. How do I share an awareness of breath when one is already breathing? I don't quite know what to say that will trigger the 'Aha!' moment, bringing others into that awareness that is so clear to me because of my lived identities. For too long, we have heard too many stories in the news of black people being murdered in disproportionate numbers by the police or white vigilantes. These stories have become as normal a part of life as those breaths we take.

Black Lives Matter is the current era in the continuum of the civil rights movement. The media primarily focuses on BLM's response to the deaths of black people due to police murder, but the movement is far more extensive than that. Just like the US Civil Rights movement of the 20th century, and the Abolitionist movement before that, this is an invitational movement that acts like a canary in a coal mine; warning us of the danger we are currently experiencing as a church and society. For all these reasons BLM is fundamentally relevant to the church and our discipleship as Christians.

How the church interacts, ignores, embraces, and denies people of color is a reflection of how the church participates in the violence of racism. For the most part, I do not believe the

church currently makes a conscious effort to be racist. However, to use my own home, the Presbyterian Church, as an example, we must take into serious consideration: our lack of black pastors in general, let alone as heads of staff in congregations; our token black people or families in the pews (if we have any in our congregations at all); and the consistently understood identity of the denomination as inherently white. Many of our local, national, and international mission projects consist of “helping” communities of color. All these things exemplify how the church, although well-intentioned and made up of good, kind, loving people, participates in perpetuating racism. All too often, historical Presbyterian congregations of color are forgotten or erased within their local presbyteries and new congregations of color are tokenized as trophies of church growth.

In early childhood I was raised in an historically African-American Presbyterian church on Chicago’s southwest side. I remember white people in our church only one time, and that was when a group of young adult volunteers stayed at our church to do mission work in the neighborhood. Later, in my early teen years, my understanding of what it means to be Presbyterian was expanded. My family moved to Georgia, and we were one of two black families in our church. This church became the family that loved and raised me just as my church in Chicago had. The difference I experienced can be summed up in two words, access and culture. In Georgia, I became aware of the important role of the Presbytery, the cultural significance of the Montreat Conference Center and youth trips. Both churches were similar in terms of numbers of active members, but it was clear the access and opportunity that I had and experienced at my predominately white church in Georgia was drastically different from anything I experienced or was even aware of existing in Chicago. It was truly a difference of night and day.

This example parallels my daily normalized experience of structural racism. It parallels the distinct historical meta-narrative of the black south side and central-north side white neighborhoods in Chicago. Both neighborhoods are a part of the broader community of Chicago. However, black neighborhoods in the south side cannot look to their police or local government for security or equal access and participation in all the city has to offer. The white central and north neighborhoods, however, can. Culturally, those north and central white neighborhoods, just like the church that raised me in Georgia, don't have to worry about representation, their children being shot or not having access to a great education. However, the church that raised me in my early childhood, along with the neighborhood in which it's located, has to worry about lack of access to jobs, healthcare, public transit, a police force and local government that are not really looking out for their safety, and a presbytery that needs to do better in giving them access and representation to the larger assembly.

The BLM movement is appropriately confronting predominantly white denominations like mine. Yes, this confrontation is a threat, but only to white supremacy. This literal crying out is only a threat to that which continues to prevent the church from living into Christ's gospel with greater integrity, and being a loving neighbor to people of color. BLM provides an invitation to participate in the reconciliation and mending of the complex and insidious institutional violence that is white supremacy, made manifest in racism.

The hierarchical system of race creates an inherent inequality of the worthiness of a human being, based on white supremacy. Notice, I say human being, because I firmly believe white supremacy and racism oppresses white people as well. The idea that whiteness is inherently better automatically creates a false sense of entitlement, control, power, and even a false sense of godly righteousness. All of these prevent us from recognizing that the systemic attempt to control black bodies is not a healthy

form of self-love or self-preservation. It is a relationship that abuses one's neighbor instead of loving them.

In our society, this embedded inequality justifies the mass criminalization of black people, the zoning in big cities and small towns that creates the conditions of the ghetto, the unequal opportunities for jobs, and the murder of people of color by police and vigilantes. In the church, it justifies only referencing white biblical scholars and theologians in the pulpit and classroom, or not calling a black pastor. It justifies using MLK references and painfully ironic singing of spiritual hymns in February, and calling it enough. It divorces us from the ability to comprehend black people as neighbors who are living and ministering alongside us, not merely communities to be ministered to.

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Reform always comes from the margins. It occurs where mainstream society benefits from the status quo at the expense of the "othered". Black Lives Matter is calling us to empathize and cry out in solidarity regarding the injustices against black people. The movement is reminiscent, in many ways, of the prophets from Hebrew

Scripture through whom the Spirit speaks. BLM exists because we have failed in our ability to live out the second greatest tenet of our discipleship, to love your neighbor as oneself. Racism, though systemic, has always been about relationship between neighbors. Christ reveals to us that how we are in relationship with ourselves has a direct impact on how we interact with other people, and how we live into our discipleship.

BLM is calling for an end to the abusive relationship of white supremacy to which we are all currently bound. It is crying out, love! Love! Love! Love! We must find the roots of our humanity so we can see black people in their pain. Black people must also find the roots of their humanity to continue to acknowledge

our own dignity, worth and self-love, and not succumb to bitterness and hate. As part of finding those roots, BLM calls out to the mainstream black community to love the non-heterosexual members and women and trans and gender-nonconforming people whose existence in the black community has been historically ignored or met with violence.

We must love ourselves and, in doing so, reveal our inner courage by facing the unknown without fear. We must reject our craving for a false sense of power and entitlement, and have the courage to speak out and act on our conviction. As Christians, we are called to do this rooted in the truth that we are all made in the image of God, and are all worthy to be treated with grace and love.

God has gifted us with multiple identities in a singular body. We can define ourselves by age, biological sex, race, nationality, ability, sexuality, gender identity and expression, socio-economic status, education, addiction status, and so on. Claiming one identity does not negate our other identities. Identities are neither negative or positive, they simply are. These various identities bring the gifts needed to dismantle racism. It's time we acknowledge these intersections of identities as gifts that reveal our full humanity in relationships. What a beautiful gift! Each of us is more than one thing, or even a collection of identifying labels. Each of us is "other" in different parts of our lives. This is how our intersectional identities work as the essential tools needed to empathize and break the well-intentioned, but all too common, patterns of guilt, complacency, and comfort. Those patterns perpetuate racism far more than a hate group like the KKK. Guilt, shame, complacency, and comfort act as emotional and physical barriers inhibiting our ability to create change. White people aren't bad. White supremacy is bad!

The work of dismantling white supremacy will not be easy. It will be uncomfortable. It will be hard. There will be mistakes

made along the way. It is the road less traveled, but the reward will be shalom. We must find the roots in our humanity so we don't participate in reinforcing racial violence, but in ending it. Let us hear the cry of our sibling's blood from the ground, and respond in anger, pain and empathy. Hope is not lost. It does not have to be this way, it never had to be this way. There is still time to change. Let us recognize this ability to change within ourselves. Take courage in the hard path ahead, and embrace it with warm and loving hearts. All these things are steps toward dismantling white supremacy from the foundation.

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The Fight For the Soul of the Church

Rick Ufford-Chase

Here's the problem: the system of white supremacy works for me. It's not in my self-interest to challenge it. When public schools weren't working for my own kids, I had the choice to send them to a private school, and I took it in spite of all the things I have believed for most of my adult life about the importance of committing to public schools that afford equal access to a quality education for everyone. I used all kinds of mitigating circumstances to try to justify the decisions my wife and I made, but at the end of the day, what was undeniable was the access that I had because of the color of my skin.

I have access to generational wealth that it is extremely unlikely a black or brown person in the United States will have. I have never been at risk of not being able to find a job that offers a secure paycheck, in large measure because of the privileges I have enjoyed as a white person. Even more remarkable, it's hard for me to imagine not being able to find meaningful work that allows me to follow my passions and pursue my interests. My wife and I own a house, and I have a cabin on land my mother grew up on in the mountains of Vermont. If something bad were to happen in my

community that would threaten my family's health (such as public officials knowingly poisoning the water system as we've just discovered they did in Flint, Michigan), I have no doubt that I would have the resources either to ensure my family's safety or to move away from that "at-risk" community to protect them. I can continue to list the privileges that I have and have refused to give up, but it would be a very, very long list that would touch upon every aspect of my life.

Though more difficult to examine or to quantify in any meaningful way, I also pay a significant cost for the unearned privilege that I enjoy. Once I began to consciously locate myself in solidarity with communities of people who do not enjoy my same privilege, the dissonance between the teachings of the gospel that I profess and the privilege that I enjoy became inescapable, and the result is a steady eating away of my soul. I believe that the spiritual cost of that dissonance is actually quite high, though I hesitate to write the words for fear of how silly they will appear to people who do not benefit from the privilege of whiteness.

There is also the cost of separateness, a sense that no matter what I do to try to address this fundamental inequity, I quite likely will never overcome the barriers that have been carefully constructed to keep me separate from those who do not enjoy my privileges in the system of white supremacy. It may not be possible for me to ever experience the fullness of what Jesus described as the kingdom of God, or what Mark Lomax and other theologians have renamed the "kin-dom" of God, or what Dr. King referred to as "the Beloved Community."

The truth is, I've been raised to believe that such notions of community are naïve, and perhaps even irresponsible. The culture in which I was raised highly prized independence and rugged individualism, and the white world compounded those spoils when it taught me that I should always aim for complete

self-sufficiency. We see the need to depend on one another as weakness, and this is a fundamental problem for our churches today.

We say we want community. In my judgment we are totally dependent on radical expressions of community to resist the challenges of a system of Empire and white supremacy. Though these desires are deeply embedded in our biblical traditions, it is also true that there are huge impediments to actually creating communities like the ones that the Apostle Paul tried to nurture, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, master nor slave. This task confronts and confounds the church, and it is so daunting as to appear impossible.

First Presbyterian Church of York, the church in which I grew up, did so much to try to follow the gospel. At a time when segregation was still very much alive and well in communities across the north and the south, the congregations of First and Faith Presbyterian Churches (an historically black church) defied deeply ingrained racial prejudice and firmly entrenched racism to unite as one body. Given what was going in the Civil Rights Movement in 1965, that defiance was no small thing. Further, First Presbyterian made overt attempts to genuinely welcome the members of Faith into full participation in the life of the larger, white congregation. But this merged church community also presents a case study in just how high the bar is and how impossible the task confronting us may be. In the summer of 1968, less than three years after the two churches merged, and two months before my family moved to York so that my father could join the pastoral staff there, “racial unrest” began to make itself known in this small city. It appears to have started with the arrests of a group of young black men for breaking curfew (a law later proven to have been unfairly enforced), and quickly became nightly conflicts between the police, the African-American community, and gangs of young white men who escalated the violence. Keep in mind, “race riots” (which today we would call

protests) were taking place in cities all across the United States at that time.

A year later, and less than a year into my father's ministry with the youth program, the conflict again escalated when a young, white Police Officer, Henry Schaad, was shot by a black protester as he patrolled the streets in an armored vehicle. His wounds would prove to be fatal within a few weeks. The next night, on July 18th, a young African-American woman from South Carolina named Lilly Belle Allen was visiting family members in York. When their car made a wrong turn and ended up in a white neighborhood, a group of young men fired shots at the car and Lilly Belle Allen was killed. No one was convicted in either of these shootings until the District Attorney re-opened the cases following an investigative story by the York Daily Record more than thirty years later.

Here's what I can't get my head around: For all the power of the witness made by First and Faith Presbyterian churches with their merger in 1965, I can find no record of First Presbyterian Church acknowledging or responding to the clearly racially-motivated violence three years later. My father himself remembers little beyond the characterization of the unrest as "riots when the National Guard rolled down the streets in tanks," in spite of the reality that the events took place within six or eight blocks of the church. I have to imagine that African-American members of the church were gravely concerned about the shootings, because most – if not all – of them lived within the city and in close proximity to the violence.

In December of 2015 I visited the church for the fiftieth anniversary of the merger. I sat near the front of the sanctuary I had grown up in with two African-American women who had seen a poster that the Warren Cooper Jazz Ensemble would be doing a concert and had come to hear him, though neither of them were members of the church. After I introduced myself, the conversation quickly and logically turned to the topics of race, racism, and the system of

white supremacy, all of which was language with which the women were fluent and comfortable. When I asked what they knew of the summer of 1969, both immediately knew Lilly Belle Allen's name and could recount the story of what had taken place, though neither of them actually lived in York at that time.

So how is it that I was raised in a multiracial church and never once heard these stories between 1968 (when I was four) and 1985, when my father took another parish and my family left the community? The answer, I think, is that this congregation did so much that was right in terms of welcoming people into their community, but then did not make fundamental changes to address the cultural and racial dynamics of the newly merged congregations. Worship stayed the same, Christian Education stayed the same, and the question of what was considered "polite conversation" does not appear to have changed. The congregation does not appear to have felt called to address the crisis that was taking place in their community any differently because they had black members, and there is no mention I have been able to discover in the public record of the pastoral staff showing up to work with African-American pastors in the city to address the violence.

I love this church for the ways in which it showed courage and for the ways I was shaped because of it. First Presbyterian Church of York, Pennsylvania, stands for all of us who are white and "progressive" in our thinking about race. It represents the best of who we have been as a denomination that is 92-percent white and steeped in the reality of privilege associated with being white, Protestant, economically advantaged, and supposedly well-educated. It highlights the fundamental problem we confront – that we are still largely unaware of the ways in which we ourselves are the beneficiaries of a system of white supremacy that offers us significant privilege that is not accessible to most other people.

Our failure to address fundamental questions of racism, white privilege and a system of white supremacy that remain deeply entrenched in our church and in our society is, at root, a failure to be faithful to the gospel. It is a structural reality that actually impedes our ability to be church. It is a time for all of us to embrace Dr. King's vision – Jesus' vision – of the Beloved Community.

Annanda Barclay's description of the Black Lives Matter movement makes it clear that this is a rich and complex part of the broader, decades-long Civil Rights movement. It offers an opportunity to enter into a significant conversation as allies to people who are trying to get to the heart of a system that has worked against them for generations. Here's how Claudia Rankine describes the reorientation we will need to become a people who can be genuine allies in this movement, in an article titled "The Condition of Black Life is Mourning," published by the *New York Times Magazine* in the summer of 2015¹:

I asked another friend what it's like being the mother of a black son. "The condition of black life is one of mourning," she said bluntly. For her, mourning lived in real time inside her and her son's reality: At any moment she might lose her reason for living. Though the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black suffering, there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no

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¹ Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life is Mourning," *New York Times*, June 22, 2015.

entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black.

And now juxtapose Claudia's words with this excerpt from "White Debt," an equally powerful essay by Eula Bliss, published later that year by the same magazine²:

Sitting with [Claudia Rankine's] essay in front of me after the Charleston church massacre, I asked myself what the condition of white life might be. I wrote "complacency" on a blank page. Hearing the term "white supremacist" in the wake of that shooting had given me another occasion to wonder whether white supremacists are any more dangerous than regular white people, who tend to enjoy supremacy without believing in it. After staring at "complacency" for quite a long time, I looked it up and discovered that it didn't mean exactly what I thought it meant. "A feeling of smug or uncritical satisfaction with oneself or one's achievements" might be an apt description of the dominant white attitude, but that's more active than what I had in mind. I thought "complacency" meant sitting there in your house, neither smug nor satisfied, just lost in the illusion of ownership. This is an illusion that depends on forgetting the redlining, block-busting, racial covenants, contract buying, loan discrimination, housing projects, mass incarceration, predatory lending and deed thefts that have prevented so many black Americans from building wealth the way so many white Americans have, through homeownership. I erased "complacency" and wrote "complicity." I erased it. "Debt," I wrote. Then, "forgotten debt."

² Eula Bliss, "White Debt," *New York Times*, December 6, 2015.

And from later in the same article by Eula Bliss. . .

. . . Once you've been living in a house for a while, you tend to begin to believe that it's yours, even though you don't own it yet. When those of us who are convinced of our own whiteness deny our debt, this may be an inevitable result of having lived for so long in a house bought on credit but never paid off. We ourselves have never owned slaves, we insist, and we never say the n-word. "It is as though we have run up a credit-card bill," Ta-Nehisi Coates writes of Americans, "and, having pledged to charge no more, remain befuddled that the balance does not disappear."

These two remarkable authors pose a huge challenge to the church. Are we interested in creating a community in which we can affirm more than one cultural reality and make space for more than one kind of work? Can our churches become a place of mourning – the kind of mourning that is grounded not in naïve grief that has no desire to know how we are complicit in the tragedy, but instead in a grief that recognizes our responsibility for a system of domination based on skin color, in which we all are participants and for which we all bear some responsibility?

And, can our churches become places where we commit to truth-telling and offer ourselves up to an unflinching and faith-filled commitment to become communities of resistance? Can we model a different way of being?

This pivotal question confronts the church. Forgotten debt robs all of us – black, white, Native American, Latino, Asian, Caribbean, African, multiracial together – condemning us all to a system of white supremacy that will assure another generation in which Black Lives Really Don't Matter.

Claudia Rankine describes why this is the fundamental civil rights question of our time.

“The Black Lives Matter movement can be read as an attempt to keep mourning an open dynamic in our culture because black lives exist in a state of precariousness. Mourning then bears both the vulnerability inherent in black lives and the instability regarding a future for those lives. Unlike earlier black-power movements that tried to fight or segregate for self-preservation, Black Lives Matter aligns with the dead, continues the mourning and refuses the forgetting in front of all of us. If the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s civil rights movement made demands that altered the course of American lives and backed up those demands with the willingness to give up your life in service of your civil rights, with Black Lives Matter, a more internalized change is being asked for: recognition.”

Can we become that kind of church? Can we respond to the prophets who call us back from the moral abyss in our time just as the prophet Amos called the people of Israel back from that abyss in his own? Can our church re-create itself as the Apostle Paul imagined it, where the distinction of privilege has fallen away? Can we embrace not only Dr. King’s beautiful image of the beloved community but also the hard work he insisted upon that moves to an entirely new way of being in relationship with one another? Can we, as in Annanda’s vision, see Black Lives Matter as an opportunity to truly become the church?

- This will be a Confessional church – a church that unflinchingly confesses its complicity and its access to privilege every single week without rationalization.
- This will be a church of solidarity, which moves out and takes risks to stand with people who are working to address this reality.

- This will be a church willing to challenge its own privilege, and to model that every privilege we carry must be examined, and no privilege accepted without the insistence that it will be accorded to all of us and not just to some of us.
- This will be a church that makes space for more than one cultural expression, welcoming and protecting the heritage each of us bring to the table without succumbing to temptation of cultural appropriation nor insisting on homogenization into one community that pretends difference doesn't exist.

In short, this will be a church that embraces the intersectionality that Annanda and many activists in her generation are lifting up as the only acceptable way forward – a space where embracing one identity does not come at the expense of other identities that may be carried by the very same person or held by others in the same community.

For white people, and for a church dominated by white culture, this will be a hard row to hoe. As Eula Bliss wrote in her article:

Refusing to collude in injustice is, I've found, easier said than done. Collusion is written onto our way of life, and nearly every interaction among white people is an invitation to collusion. Being white is easy, in that nobody is expected to think about being white, but this is exactly what makes me uneasy about it. Without thinking, I would say that believing I am white doesn't cost me anything, that it's pure profit, but I suspect that isn't true. I suspect whiteness is costing me, as [James] Baldwin would say, my moral life.

I find Ms. Bliss's words deeply compelling. In the context of the church, it makes me think that how the church navigates our collusion in the system of white supremacy is a struggle for our soul, and the failure to do so is likely to cost us our moral life. After several decades of personal anti-racism work and working to create

intentional anti-racist spaces, I am not clear that the white church has it in us to be this honest, to take this level of risk, and to let go of the benefits we enjoy because white supremacy is real.

On the other hand, we are a part of a story that is built upon the notion that God is not done with us. Stories of personal transformation abound, and I believe in them. Each time we who are white manage to question our unearned privilege is a step in the right direction. Each moment we summon the courage to stand with those who do not carry that privilege and demand a change builds up the whole community. When our churches do a thoughtful inventory of the ways in which they support the system of white supremacy they are taking a step toward the Beloved Community, and I believe that it pleases God.

-RUC

Discussion Questions:

1. Annanda shared her experience of growing up in two different churches - one with access to the privileges associated with white supremacy, and the other without. Have you had personal experiences where you have noticed such differences? If not, why not?
2. Rick began with a confession of the clear ways in which he benefits from a system of white privilege that favors him. Share examples in your own life of access – or lack of access – to privilege based on the color of your skin.
3. Do you think that members of your faith community are prepared for this conversation? Why or why not?
4. The entire text from each of the two New York Magazine articles in 2015 that made such an impact on Rick are available here. Read the entire text of the articles and discuss what they bring up for you. This may take several weeks, but it's worth it.
 - a. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html?_r=0 - Claudia Rankine
 - b. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/magazine/white-debt.html> - Eula Bliss