

Where We Stand Shapes What We See

Perspectives on current events from National Black Fellowship Leaders

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My 6-year-old daughter, Allie, is tiny. She is in the third percentile for height and weight in her age group. When we are standing in a large crowd, Allie will say to me, “Pick me up, Daddy! I can’t see.”

I always do. Allie’s perspective teaches an important life lesson: Where you stand shapes what you see.

Recently, Barna published an article about the stark divides on the topic of racism between white and Black practicing Christians. Consider the following four data points:

- Nearly 8 in 10 (78%) Black practicing Christians (BPC) definitely agree the U.S. has a race problem, compared to 38% of white practicing Christians (WPC).
- Three-quarters (75%) of BPC, but only 42% of WPC, strongly agree the U.S. has historically been oppressive to minorities.
- Asked which is the bigger problem in the U.S., 66% of BPC say, “Racial discrimination that is historically built into our society and institutions,” while 61% of WPC say, “Individuals’ own beliefs and prejudices that cause them to treat people of other races poorly.”
- Seventy percent of BPC are motivated to address racial injustice in U.S. society, compared to 35% of WPC.

These results come from a 2019 study and may have shifted somewhat in response to the killing of George Floyd, which has touched off a national conversation about racism. Nevertheless, the huge divide between the opinions of white and Black practicing Christians seems to confirm that where you stand shapes what you see.

For this edition of *Influence*, I’ve asked the executive officers of the National Black Fellowship of the Assemblies of God (NBFAG) to “pick us up” and show us their perspectives on current events.

I trust that our brothers’ words, filled as they are with both pain and hope, will help our ethnically and racially diverse Fellowship stand in the same place, see the same things, and move forward together.

George P. Wood is executive editor of *Influence magazine*.

I Can't Breathe

Walter Harvey

For nearly 400 years, Black people have been crying, "I can't breathe!"

When the first slave ship made the transatlantic journey to American shores, enslaved Africans, stacked as cargo below deck, cried out in their native tongues, "I can't breathe."

When thousands of Black men and women were lynched in America, they cried with their dying breaths, "I can't breathe!"

The horrific and broadcasted deaths of Eric Garner, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless other Black men and women have amplified our familiar cry and released a global cry of, "Enough is enough!"

ENOUGH is the theme of 2020 for the National Black Fellowship of the Assemblies of God. We prayerfully selected this theme in 2019 as a commemoration of the 40th anniversary of our ethnic fellowship. I believe it was also a prophetic mandate for the National Black Fellowship, the Assemblies of God, and the Church as a whole to continue to move in a new direction for Kingdom effectiveness.

Israel had been moving around the wilderness for 40 years until God said, "Enough. Cross the Jordan."

Racism is our nation's original sin. The Church was silent when Black people were deemed 3/5 human by law and constitution, mute during slavery, hushed as Jim Crow terrorized, and noiseless during the lynching of thousands of Black men and women.

The Church again was inaudible during segregation, reticent in the face of police brutality and the mass incarceration of Black men, and speechless at the demonization of Black skin in mass media.

We have wandered in this wilderness of sin long enough.

The silence continued as the creation of separate and unequal education and qualities of life were established through the institutionalization of this horrific sin. We were even tongue-tied when it came to calling out racism and discrimination in the Church and calling for positive action.

Enough is enough! We have been stuck in this rut of racism ever since Christopher Columbus landed on America's shores. We have wandered in this wilderness of sin long enough. It is time to move.

Whenever we go into unfamiliar territory, we naturally feel anxious and disoriented. White people will especially feel these emotions as they begin to navigate through the historic roots and vines of racism.

Some white people will get tired of the current global conversation, marches, and attention focused on racism and want to go back to the place of familiarity. But remember Black people have to navigate feelings of exhaustion, fear and insecurity

every day, wondering whether they will survive or become a victim of driving while Black, jogging while Black, bird watching while Black, shopping while Black, or even sleeping while Black.

As a Black man, father, husband, and leader, it is still difficult for me to breathe the free air proclaimed by Lady Liberty as she stands in New York harbor holding her torch and script that reads ...

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

I am ready to move together in unity to be the generation who completes the Great Commission. Are you?

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Will There Finally Be Justice?

Darnell K. Williams Sr.

My wife and I sat in horror as we heard the news of George Floyd dying in police custody. We turned to each other and tearfully said, "Again!"

Another life lost, another name joined to this seeming unending list of people — Black people — who have died. Our emotions were still raw as we were processing the senseless losses of both Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. We were battling through that all-too-familiar feeling of numbness mingled with frustration.

As we watched the horrific video of Floyd's life slowly draining from his body, hearing his words, "I can't breathe," and watching a restrained and helpless man cry out for his mother, we cried together.

We pondered that painful, aching question Black people in America have asked again and again: *Will there finally be justice?*

Sadly, this emotional space is well traveled. The space where I have to role play with my son how to respond if he is ever stopped by the police. The space where I hear his mother weeping before the Lord, begging for His protection. The space where we have to convince our white brothers and sisters that this is something real.

We are not like the proverbial scared child hearing noises and seeing ghosts in the night. The monsters of evil and racism are real! Now, with George Floyd, it feels like we are finally being believed, finally being heard.

One white friend called me and asked, "What can I do to help?" Here's my response:

As long as these issues remain Black issues, they will continue to be viewed marginally.

1. Listen. The dangers of building anything homogeneously, whether our personal lives or organizations, is that we can miss necessary and needed paradigm shifts.

The call to listen means inviting someone into your life who can help you understand and gain a different vantage point.

Keep in mind Black people are working through the grief cycle: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. So, at any given moment, we may be emoting any of those feelings.

2. Learn. Recently, I was educated about learning. I was in a staff meeting, and I mentioned a female minister and declared, “She can preach as good as any man.”

One of my female staff members replied, “Being a *man* is not the gold standard of being a great preacher! If she’s a good preacher, Pastor, just say that.”

I learned! Learning is about having the relational vulnerability to be called out and corrected. As we are dealing with issues of racism and inequality, part of good leadership is becoming a learner.

3. Lament. Grieve with us. Shed tears with us. Practice compassion, empathy and pastoral presence. Let your voice be heard. It is not a time for the status quo to remain in place.

Joel 2 highlights the power of lament. The prophet uses phrases like “fasting and weeping and mourning” (verse 12). What if the body of Christ came together to fast, weep and mourn before the Lord?

Finally, as long as these issues remain Black issues, they will continue to be viewed marginally. What will give them wings to rise is the voice of white America declaring, “Enough.”

As Martin Luther King Jr. declared, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

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A Kairos Moment

Darrell Geddes

The George Floyd incident happened in the backyard of our church community. The site of his death while in the custody of four police officers is less than a mile from where we worship and conduct ministry.

When my wife and I first saw a recording of this incident on the evening news, we were both in shock and disbelief. As they played the video repeatedly on different news outlets, my shock and unbelief grew into anger and rage.

I knew before I could effectively lead my congregation through this difficult time, I had to release my anger and allow the Spirit of the living God to heal my offended psyche and fill my heart with love and compassion.

Our church, Christ Church International (AG), is located in the heart of the area where protests disintegrated into rioting, looting, and the destruction of property. We quickly realized the community would be facing food insecurity because the grocers, gas stations, and mom and pop shops had been completely destroyed. We decided we would become a hub for food distribution within our community.

We must exercise our prophetic voice and address the inequities that continue to exist within our society.

Through partnerships with suburban Minneapolis churches, such as Emmanuel Christian Center (AG) and Grace Church (independent), we have quickly become a part of the solution to those who live in the areas devastated by rioting. Our congregation rose to the occasion, distributing 581 boxes and 483 bags of food, and ministering to more than 400 families in south Minneapolis since the death of George Floyd on May 25.

I firmly believe this a kairos moment, a special moment in time, and that we must take full advantage of what has presented itself. This is the Church's opportunity to be the Church.

This is our opportunity to join with diverse communities and speak truth to power. We cannot afford to turn our backs or stick our heads in the sand, but we must exercise our prophetic voice and address the inequities that continue to exist within our society.

We must begin the process of open and honest dialogue between urban and suburban churches and urban and suburban pastors, exploring how partnerships can have an impact on the greater metroplexes across our nation.

Frank Bartleman, who observed the leadership of William Seymour, the one-eyed, African American leader of the great Azusa Street Revival, stated that "the color line was washed away in the blood." When the Azusa Street Revival faded, the Church missed an opportunity to continue demonstrating the equality of all people.

This situation presents another opportunity for the body of Christ to lock arms and demonstrate that the inhumane treatment of people of color by those in positions of power is an affront to the creation narrative.

“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7, KJV).

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Being Black in America

Gerard Ruff

Being Black in America is a journey filled with amazing highs and many agonizing lows, with a history that includes both slavery and the first Black president.

However, being Black in America today still means living with some of the same realities our predecessors faced.

Typically, what changes is how America categorizes and defines Black people, often with new but equally demeaning and devaluing terms — terms that stand in stark contrast to the way others are viewed.

While others are poor, down on their luck, rowdy or dealing with a sickness, Black people facing the same issues are called lazy, dependent, savages, addicts and dealers. The disparities are great.

George Floyd’s death is another reminder that we live in a country with too many inequalities to change overnight, and a future being held hostage by a past that refuses to let go.

“Succeeding while Black” is a tongue-in-cheek way of saying we are often profiled and presumed guilty for no other reason than the color of our skin.

I remember one occasion when I was traveling by car to an engagement two hours from my home. There was heightened tension in the Black community because of another officer-involved murder in the news.

***“My appeal to the Church is to remember that before
our cultures, customs or class, our politics,
pedigree or privilege, we are the Church.”***

While I was on the road, my wife called and said our daughters, then 23 and 24, were nervous. They insisted she call to caution me about getting stopped by police — not because I often do, but because of their fears for my safety.

I cried. I drove the rest of the way thinking of how my doctorate, clean record, and alcohol- and drug-free lifestyle meant nothing. If the wrong cop stopped me, anything could happen.

This is why Black parents have “the talk” with our kids: “Do not dress like that, talk like that, wear your hair like that. If you’re pulled over by police”

It’s sad but still true in 2020.

My oldest daughter, who has a master’s degree in family and child psychology, often says the physiological and psychological impact of racism and discrimination on African Americans is stressing us to death.

Guiding my family and ministry through this maze of emotional, psychological and physical challenges is a burdensome experience. We can see the history of inequality in America not only in events like the Black Wall Street Massacre (1921) and the false convictions of the Central Park Five (1989), but also in the daily news.

My appeal to the Church is to remember that before our cultures, customs or class, our politics, pedigree or privilege, we are the Church.

I pray the Assemblies of God would be courageous, disruptive, and innovative in our pursuit to eradicate racism and injustice. I believe we’re on the right course.

Micah 6:8 says, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Let’s stand in love and work tirelessly — with boldness, courage and faith — until we truly are one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

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