BLACK AND EPISCOPALIAN

THE STRUGGLE FOR INCLUSION

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GAYLE FISHER-STEWART

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To my nieces, nephews, and grands,
let no one stop you from being who God has created you to be.

Until the lion can speak, the story will always glorify the hunter.

—African Proverb

I've spent my entire life proving that I belong in elite white spaces that were not built for Black people. . . . I decided I didn't want to do that anymore.

—Nikole Hannah-Jones

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FOREWORD

What is the connection between the Anglican/Episcopal Church, the cotton fields of chattel slavery, and Nat Turner's uprising? As Gayle Fisher-Stewart seeks to answer this question, she takes us through the complicated history of the Episcopal Church when it comes to the very sin of white supremacy that gave birth to the cotton fields and precipitated Turner's rebellions. Her search gives way to the stark pronouncement that the Episcopal Church is "racist to the core." Behind this unflinching pronouncement, however, is a nuanced truth-telling about this "racist core." It is, on the one hand, a core that makes peace with an "anti-Black" society that cast Black people as inhuman. For Fisher-Stewart, there is no better example of this than the wealth that Episcopal congregations accrued from their as well as their members' direct ownership of Black bodies.

On the other hand, the Episcopal Church's racist core is further seen in its obsequious neutrality when it comes to contentious racial issues. No greater example of this, Fisher-Stewart notes, is the Church's "point of pride" in not "officially" splitting "over the issue of slavery during the Civil War." Essentially, as Fisher-Stewart makes clear, the Church's esteemed unity laid bare the fact that "the Episcopal Church refused to take any position on the issue of slavery."

Overall, Gayle Fisher-Stewart paints a picture of the Episcopal Church—from its earliest beginnings in Jamestown, Virginia, to its nine provinces today across the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean—that is too often beholden to its Anglican origins as the "via media" (middle way). For what becomes painfully clear in this portrait of the Episcopal Church are the compromises that it makes with Black freedom, Black dignity, and Black lives in an effort to alienate no one and thus maintain harmony. In many respects, this book lays bare perhaps another truth of the Episcopal Church: a commitment to unity frequently supplants the concern for justice—at least when it comes to race. And, what is made abundantly clear in the story Fisher-Stewart tells, such a concession is not benign. Rather, it plays itself out on Black bodies through policies of exclusion, paternalism, and even hostility. Even more disturbing is that

such via media–like concessions too often render the church complicit in the sometime fatal disregard of Black lives in wider society.

This book, however, does not stop with history. Rather, the history gives way to hard theological/faith decisions regarding being "white or Christian," and more pointedly being "Black and Episcopalian." This latter decision is at the heart of this book, as it is a story not only of how the Church has or has not included Black people but also whether or not Black people should want to be included.

It is in this way that this book is about Gayle Fisher-Stewart's personal dilemma, but not one she faces alone. As she wrestles with the dilemma of being both Black and Episcopalian, Fisher-Stewart essentially engages in a dialogue with other Black Episcopalians, lay and ordained, who are likewise wrestling. We hear their stories, their everyday experiences, of the Church in "their own words." Yet, with all that is revealed, in all of its brutal honesty, what is most striking is that Fisher-Stewart and those with whom she speaks choose to remain in a church that has been described as "racist to its core."

In the final analysis, though a stark picture of the Episcopal Church is revealed, this book is not an unrelenting diatribe. Rather, it is a passionate call for the Church to live into its faith and its better self. It is a hard truth-telling from a priest who loves her church. It is a book that brings us just a little bit closer to "Becoming the Beloved Community." For as Gayle Fisher-Stewart makes clear from the very beginning of the story she tells, "the only way toward the Beloved Community, as is the call of the Episcopal Church, is to start by telling the truth—the complicated, hard, sometimes uncomfortable truth." *Black and Episcopalian: The Struggle for Inclusion* is a story of truth that Becoming Beloved Community demands.

The Very Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas
Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary
September 2021

BEGINNING WORDS

When we cannot tell the truth about our past, we become trapped by it.

—James Baldwin

It was 1996, and I was driving south from Washington, DC, down Interstate 95. I was going to Wakefield, Virginia, to visit a friend who lived on a six-acre farmette. South of Richmond and east of Petersburg, Virginia, I drove, passing fields and farms, watching the dirt turn from dark brown to whitish-gray. The crop was something I had not seen before: green leaves with a small flower on top; the stalks held a white ball. I turned into my friend's driveway and found myself between two fields of this strangely beautiful plant, but these fields were different. Some plants had been defoliated, which made it easier, I was to learn, for the mechanical combines to pick the plants' bounty. Then I realized I was in the middle of a cotton field. The white balls were the cotton bolls. Some fields had already been shorn of their prize by the combines. My friend came up beside me.

"Cotton?" I asked.

"Yep, we grow cotton here."

As I surveyed the harvested fields, I saw some cotton on the stalks and on the ground. I looked at my friend, who is white, and said, "We would not have been permitted to leave all that cotton behind."

She looked at me, and an uncomfortable half-smile came across her face. "You're probably right."

Today, combines strip the cotton from the plants instead of the gnarled, broken, and wounded Black hands that did the backbreaking work all day, from "see to can't see." Cotton. A little more than one hundred miles from Washington, DC, I dug up a plant with the cotton still on its branches and brought it home. Every day, I look at that cotton plant and think of my people, their lives in this country then and our lives in this country today.

Later that day I continued exploring. I turned left out of the driveway, and less than fifty yards down the road I saw a county line marker that read "Southampton County." Southampton County, Virginia, site of

Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion: Black people fighting against their enslavement. The next day, we took the ferry across the James River and drove to Williamsburg, not far from Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in this country. In Williamsburg, we stopped in Bruton Parish Church, a former Anglican, now Episcopal church, that was established in 1674 and is still in operation. I could not help but feel a connection between cotton (the economic system), Nat Turner's uprising, and the Anglican/Episcopal Church. But how could it feel so current?

To hate a person or a group of people because of the color of their skin is a choice, an irrational choice. People choose to hate; therefore, they can choose to stop hating. Hatred—particularly racial hatred in the church—is an affront to God. I'm not concerned with why people hate, why they look at me and people who look like me and hate, because any reason is an excuse. The question I continue to struggle with is this: Can I be a part of a church or a denomination that acknowledges that racism is systemic, that racism is in its very DNA, and does not garner every single resource to confront and eliminate it? To say, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23) and not repent does not cut it anymore.

As Episcopalians, we understand that when we read the Bible, we must consider the context in which the people who initially wrote it lived and the context of those who later interpreted it.[1] We understand that people before us did not have as much knowledge and information as we have today. When we read scripture, what we might see as prescriptive could just as easily be taken as an observation. Yes, all of us have sinned, but we can control some sins, and the sins that denigrate God's people ought to be at the top of our list for elimination if we are true to our claim to follow Jesus. We don't have to wait until the Lord's return for things to be made right—especially if we care about the future of our children.

My grandmother was churchy. She was in the church every time the doors were open. She was one of the church ladies who sold chicken and crab cake dinners out of the back door of her house to support the church. In her later years, she became the "Mother of the Church." She was a member of the "sit-down" choir: the choir for the elders of the church.

1. Christopher L. Webber, *Welcome to the Episcopal Church: An Introduction to Its History, Faith, and Worship* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 56–57.

She prayed over every one of the multitude of pills she took each day. She was deeply religious, and she was a realist. My grandmother didn't suffer fools, in or out of the church. If the church wasn't doing what it was called to do, she'd leave. Over the years, she was Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, African Methodist Episcopal, and nondenominational. If the church wasn't working to make life better for others, then it ceased to expect her support. This was a woman who, when she decided paying rent didn't make sense, purchased bricks every week until she had enough to build her house, the home she lived in until she died. She purchased the bricks, and she built—not *had* built, but *built*—her house herself, alongside her minister, who was a contractor, a minister who was what we call bivocational. Even working alongside her pastor, she had a saying, one of many that has stayed with me since her death twenty years ago: "Shit or get off the pot." This sainted woman actually used that phrase and said it with emphasis. In other words, don't waste time; don't waste her time; don't waste resources. If you're not going to do something, if you're not going to give it your all, move over, get out of the way, and let someone else do what you won't.

That's how I feel when it comes to the Episcopal Church and racism. Racism in the Church reminds me of the story of Peter and the disabled beggar at the Beautiful Gate in Acts 3.[2] Peter and John were going to the temple to do what folks did at the temple. They encountered a disabled man who was brought by neighbors or relatives and placed at the gate to beg for alms. We can imagine the man at the gate every day. As people came and went, they either stepped over him or ignored him on their way into the temple to make sacrifices and ask God to tell them what they should be doing. If we look at the Church today, people come to get their praise on, to worship God, to ask for guidance in how they should live their lives, all the while stepping over or ignoring the beggar on the steps. Like the people going in and out of the temple, we fail to see that God has already given us our assignment. Racism is the beggar on the steps. However, we fail to see; we don't want to see what we are called to do. Yet we pray:

> O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family;

2. Acts 3:1–10.

> take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. ("For the Human Family," Book of Common Prayer, 815)

The prayer "For the Human Family" feels otherworldly. First, it says to do things "in your good time," to which we must ask, "When will that be?" Black and Brown people continue to labor under the evil of racism. There is another out in the prayer: "all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne." This is end-times talk, where it seems that nothing will happen until Jesus's second coming; therefore, we have no power to change anything in the present tense.

"Becoming Beloved Community: A Long-Term Commitment to Racial Healing, Reconciliation, and Justice" is the Episcopal Church's vision that "frames a path for Episcopalians to address racial injustice and grow as a community of reconcilers, justice-makers, and healers."[3] In it, we find another "out": "Becoming the Beloved Community will take more than one three-year cycle of the Church's life. *It will take more than our lifetimes*."[4] This is another excuse for those who don't want to work for justice, who believe that ending racism is not what they are called to do, who believe that systemic racism does not exist. And yet, as one who walks around under the threat of death because of the skin color God gave me, I do not find this to be satisfactory.

Let's tell the truth: the Anglican Church—the Church of England—and then, after disestablishment, the Episcopal Church have dealt with the race issue with questionable results. Consider these records from Bruton Parish in 1767, the church in Williamsburg:

> Baptism of Slaves
> Bruton and Middleton Parish Records
> 1662–1797, page 59

3. The Episcopal Church, "Becoming Beloved Community . . . Where You Are: A Resource for Individuals, Congregations and Communities Seeking Racial Healing, Reconciliation, and Justice," updated July 2020, *https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/02/BBC-Becoming-Beloved-Community-Where-You-Are_2020.pdf, 2*.

4. The Episcopal Church, "Becoming Beloved Community," 3, emphasis mine.

April the 5th Day: 1747
Gift Negroe Infant belonging to John Bryan Jur.
Nancy & William Belonging to Mr. Benjamin Waller[5]

The church records the baptism of the enslaved who belonged to its members. There is more in the parish records. In 1767 "Thomas" was born to "Molly," and "Molly" belonged to Bruton Parish.[6] This parish owned at least two enslaved persons. The Church owned enslaved persons. How many more Anglican/Episcopal churches owned human beings? How many more did Bruton Parish own? We cannot be afraid of where an investigation of history will take us. In the practice of becoming beloved community, we are called to tell the truth about our churches and race.[7]

A 2021 Racial Justice Audit conducted by the Episcopal Church acknowledges that systemic racism is embedded in the Church. "Since the church's founding, Episcopalians of color have in one way or another struggled to have the institution and its leaders recognize their dignity, power and gifts," the report reads.[8] Since the 1950s, resolutions have been passed at General Convention addressing racism; however, when do we get serious with the business of eliminating this sin that damages our relationship with God and each other?

For the Church, freedom must be more than a song we sing or a flag we wave. It must begin with the cross that calls us to claim freedom and to free our Church and nation from America's original sin—white supremacy. We long for the day when our Church might be free to become what we have aspired to be, a true Church following a crucified and risen Lord and witnessing to God's just future.[9]

"The Black body was never meant to be free." The Very Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas said those words in the aftermath of the police killing of

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5. *Bruton & Middleton Parish Register 1662–1797,* Bruton Parish, Williamsburg, VA, accessed July 29, 2021, *www.heritagecenter.brutonparish.org*.

6. John Vogt, ed., *Bruton Parish, Virginia Register, 1662–1797* (Athens, GA: New Papyrus Co., 2004), 52. (Available at the Alexandria Library, Alexandria, VA, noncirculating collection).

7. The Episcopal Church, "Becoming Beloved Community," 3.

8. The Mission Institute and the Episcopal Church, "Racial Justice Audit of the Episcopal Church: Executive Summary," January 2021, *https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/04/RR-Racial-Justice-Audit_Exec-Summary_ENG.pdf*.

9. Kelly Brown Douglas, Winnie Varghese, and Stephanie Spellers, "Speaking of Freedom," July 6, 2020, video, 12:31, *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WX94bgC7dBM&t=21s*.

Baltimore, Maryland, resident, Freddie Gray.[10] Her words spoke to the past and the future of Black life in this country. When the "20 and odd negroes" were off-loaded at Port Comfort (now Hampton), Virginia, they were being traded for supplies. While they were not technically enslaved, they were not free. They might have been held in the same conditions as the indentured European servants, but they were not free. They were already dehumanized because they were being traded for things. There was no plan for manumission at some future time. They were in a state of un-freedom. They could not get back on the *White Lion*, the *Jesus*, or the *San Juan Baptista*—the ships that would bring millions of Africans to the Americas and head back home to Africa. They were not free without having to be told they were not free. Their color marked them as not free. They were the fly in the buttermilk, and the church, the Christian church, as Jemar Tisby writes,[11] was complicit in the creation and maintenance of that state of not being free.

Our color means that our lives can come to an end at any moment, not by disease or accident, or natural death, but by state-sanctioned violence; therefore, we are un-free. As activist Kimberly Jones has proclaimed, when your skin color is your weapon, you are always armed and dangerous. We are not free. We are not free, even in the Church because there are still some churches, including the Episcopal Church, where you might be tolerated, but you are not truly welcome, even if you are the priest—the white church's Black priest.

"How does it feel to be a problem?" It is difficult to discuss race in this country without at least referring to Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois. How does it feel to have two warring bodies inside you struggling to be free?[12] How does it feel to always see yourself through the eyes of those who would have you un-free? Du Bois wrote that the color line was the problem at the beginning of the twentieth century,[13] and that problem still exists. It is only by the grace of God, a great High God, a Creator God, that this entire country has not been burned to the ground. Why is it that

10. Kelly Brown Douglas, "Kelly Brown Douglas on Expanding Narrative of Race," April 25, 2015, interview by WBAL-TV 11 Baltimore, video, 3:09, *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fblH5AnMmAY*.

11. Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019).

12. W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 12th ed. (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1920), 1–15.

13. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1.

rules, regulations, laws that deny the humanity of people are so easy to obey, while those that lift up the humanity of all people are fought tooth and nail? For the church to be part of all of the -isms and phobias that shame the image of God revokes the church's right to call itself the body of Christ.

What is three-fifths of a human being? Certainly not fully human. Less than human? What is less than human? That is how we are memorialized in the founding document of this country, even though the Constitution has been appended with the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. Our humanity still does not matter. We have not mattered since we stopped being beasts of burden that created the wealth the 1 percent of people in this country enjoys. Our lives didn't matter during slavery any more than a wagon, or a pig, or a horse. A Black man ascending to the highest position in this country did not make our lives matter. President Barack Obama's election actually has brought white backlash. Those who once hid behind white sheets are now free to share their racist propaganda through print, electronic, and social media. They felt free to storm the United States Capitol building on January 6, 2021, erect nooses on the Capitol grounds, and stand fully armed with their arms around police officers to take selfies.

In 2015 I watched with tepid anticipation as Michael B. Curry was feted by the Union of Black Episcopalians at the DC Armory the day before he was to be consecrated as the first African American to be elected presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. The sonorous singing voice of Dr. Sandra T. Montes took us to church. The cultures were all mixed in the worship service. It was upbeat, it was spiritual, it was the picture of Revelation 7:9 but here on earth—right here, right now. It was Black Church on steroids. And yet I knew, just as it was with the election of Barack Obama, the election and consecration of Michael Curry was not an indication of a postracial country or a postracial Church. Racism is real. Racism is ever-present. Racism is deadly. Watching the Church party on that day was a "yes, but" experience. Yes, today we can forget, we can imagine a different country, a different Church . . . but tomorrow the real world, apparently one beyond the reign of God, will return in all its deadly habituations.

Tell the truth: too often the church and religion do not include; both exclude. If you don't believe right (orthodoxy); if you don't do right (orthopraxy); if you don't pray right, look right, dress right, have sex right; if you

don't sing the right hymns, use the right sacred text, adhere to a particular liturgy, or hold fast to ancient doctrines, you are excluded. If you don't believe Jesus is the only way, you are excluded. The history of the church has been one of exclusion: division over who Jesus was, division over one line in the Nicene Creed, division over whether we are justified by faith alone, division over whether the pope is infallible, division over how we do church, division over whether Black people were (are) human. We have continued to fracture the body of Christ with the many denominations, nondenominations, and interdenominations. We are divided because we Christians think we have the truth that no other faith tradition has. Within the Christian faith, several claim that mantle of the only one true church and see all others are pretenders to the throne.

It is always difficult when generalizations are used to discuss groups of people or when a system is critiqued, but there are no apologies here. Every single white person in this country benefits from the racism[14] that has existed since the decision was made by white Christians to enslave Blacks and to use the Bible to justify their racism. My apologetic is in the mold of Henry McNeal Turner, Marcus Garvey, Ida B. Wells, Jarena Lee, and Pauli Murray, all of whom worked to force the Church to see itself as it is: racist to the core. Kehinde Andrews tells us that we must decolonize our knowledge; we must decolonize our minds about how to worship a God who is the God of all and not just of whiteness.[15]

Whatever we need to do as Black people—the face of exclusion in the Episcopal Church—we need to do. However, whatever, and whomever we need to worship to keep our minds, souls, and bodies intact, we need to worship, and we don't need anyone's permission to do so. Call it syncretism, call it blending, call it religious fluidity; call it whatever you want. Pray to the God, a god, no god, if it keeps us from doing as American Christianity, the American Christian church, has attempted to do to us: destroy us. We need to do whatever keeps our souls and bodies intact. What might be orthodox to whites just might not be orthodox to Blacks. We don't need white folks' permission to thrive.

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14. Whites generally do not have to think about race, that race could keep them from owning a home or receiving a loan. They move into Black communities without wondering if they will be welcome. They usually don't think about whether the schools their children attend will have the necessary resources or if they will be welcome in a church of their choice.

15. Kehinde Andrews, *The New Age of Empire: How Racism and Colonialism Still Rule the World* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2021).

At the entrance of the library at Virginia Theological Seminary, an Episcopal seminary in Alexandria, Virginia, this quote from William Sparrow, a nineteenth-century dean of the seminary, is chiseled into the stone at the door: "Seek the Truth; come whence it may, cost what it will."

The truth concerning racism in this country and the church is not complete; it's partial, just the tip of the iceberg. We don't like complete histories in this country, especially if that history shares an ugly side of the church or the country. When a more complete history that does not gloss over racism is presented, it is met with cries of revisionism—especially if whiteness is not given top billing in all things good and noble. I, for one, did not receive the full picture of how the Anglican/Episcopal Church was complicit in the enslavement and continued degradation of Blacks when I took the class History of the Episcopal Church at Virginia Seminary in 2014. How many before me left with an incomplete picture of the role their Church played in the dehumanization of Africans in this country? How many since 2015? Becoming Beloved Community compels us to tell the truth, and that truth will hurt because it implicates us all. If we tell the truth, we will have to admit that the Episcopal Church "perpetuated white supremacy and racist practices and beliefs, and . . . it continues to benefit from, participate in, and perpetuate(s) racism to this day."[16]

In 2015 the Very Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas was invited to speak at the historically Black Calvary Episcopal Church in Washington, DC. As she mesmerized the packed audience for four hours discussing her book, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*,[17] she told of the complicity of the Christian church in the debasement and dehumanization of Black people in this country. She told of a plantation theology (my term), a plantation eschatology that told the enslaved that if they were good slaves and obeyed their masters, one day they would get to heaven. This heaven, like life on earth, would be segregated. There would be a fence down the middle of heaven separating the Black heaven from the white heaven, and Blacks could peek through a hole in the fence and catch a glimpse of the white heaven.

Western Christianity has been and continues to be largely complicit in the dehumanization of Black bodies. Many people will go down to the

16. The Mission Institute and the Episcopal Church, "Racial Justice Audit of the Episcopal Church."

17. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).

grave defending their white Jesus. There are whites who believe that God is white and heaven is for white people—at least the white side of heaven is for white people. White racism gave birth to the Black Church. Born out of oppression, born out of racism, born of a people who also struggled with a white Jesus and then learned much later that "God is a Negro,"[18] the Black Church stood in opposition to Western Christianity. Had it not been for white Christian racism, there would be no Black Church or Black congregations in white denominations. Whites helped create the Black Church in America.

What does it mean to be Black in a country that is steeped in anti-Blackness? What does it mean to be part of a faith tradition that has anti-Blackness as a value? What does it mean to be Black in the Episcopal Church, born out of the Church of England, which, if it did not birth slavery, was its midwife and breathed life into it, and which also has anti-Blackness in its DNA?

Can I be Black and Episcopalian?

I am Black, and I am a member of the Episcopal Church. Toward the end of 2020, I spoke at an adult forum for a colleague's church about my book, *Preaching Black Lives* (*Matter*). I received an email that indicated the session had been well received; however, one comment had a different tone:

> Churches are not Black or white! You are a racist! The color of your skin is irrelevant! Humans are humans! All the same! "As a Black woman, as a Black priest"—identifying yourself by the colour of your skin—just treat everyone the same and the issues will disappear! ALL LIVES MATTER! Stop dividing!

Can I be Black and Episcopalian? In this time of Black Lives Matter and civil unrest as a result of the killing of Black people by the police, the increased incidents of racial hatred stoked by the rhetoric of the former president, and the continuing backlash to a more inclusive history of race being taught in our public schools, how is it to be the only Black person or among a few Blacks in a congregation that is overwhelmingly white? And what are the resources available to clergy and laypeople through the church—or are there any resources? Is there the belief that if you are ordained, you ought to be able to thrive in any congregational situation?

18. As proclaimed by AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner. Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 152.

As discussions have highlighted, many clergy, Black and white, find it difficult to preach about race or Black Lives Matter in predominantly white congregations. Rather than face backlash, many just don't broach the topic. Others have attempted to preach race and have had members walk out in the middle of the sermon, send emails threatening to leave or withdraw their financial support, or "greet" them at the end of the service and chastise them for preaching politics.

As for laypeople, several have indicated they have yet to hear a sermon on race. For these laypeople, the names of George Floyd or Breonna Taylor or any other Black person killed by the police or who has faced racism has not been mentioned from the pulpit where the priest is white. The question, then, is why do you stay? Why stay at a church that appears to have no real interest in dealing with the dehumanization of Black people?

This book is a journey, a journey to wholeness in which we first explore the struggle of Blacks to be fully included in the Episcopal Church. Then we move to the question of which comes first—Black or Christian? It might seem a strange question; however, many Black folk have struggled with the question and have decided that Black trumps being Christian. Then, there is the Black Church. Born out of the crucible of racism, there is no way in these few pages to cover the Black Church in all its fullness. What is the Black Church, and how does it continue to be a safe space against the racism so present in the white church? Every organization requires that its members and adherents change in the image of the organization. The church is no different. We call it formation. Yet the question is formation as what—disciples of Christ or white Episcopalians? Formation or education, in the words of bell hooks, is political because it is rooted in the antiracist struggle. It is a counterhegemonic act in which we resist every strategy of white racist colonialism.[19] Along this journey of history, lament, and hope, I had the privilege of interviewing Black clergy and lay members of the Episcopal Church. They shared how they have navigated the whiteness of the Episcopal Church. These interviews, all of which were more than one hour in length, have been compressed, and quotations are found interspersed between the chapters. I wish I could have used the interviews in their entirety because they, too, provide a window into the lament, despair, and hope that is part of the Black experience in the Episcopal Church. We end with "Sending Words" that include

19. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

recommendations for the Episcopal Church to rid itself of the racism that is embedded in its DNA so that it can live up to its mantra, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You." Ultimately, I am answering this question for myself: Can I be Black and Episcopalian, and if not, then what? Like the old hymn says, this is my story, this is my song.

In Their Own Words

It began as a simple Facebook post, asking for Black volunteers to speak about their experience either serving or worshiping in predominantly white Episcopal churches. I was also interested in hearing from folks who had served or attended historically Black parishes. What follows, having condensed over fifteen hours of interviews, is just a glimpse of how Black clergy and laypeople navigate the white space that is the Episcopal Church.

Male Clergy

The majority of my white members, just from a numbers standpoint (I would say 5 to 10 percent), have adopted children from Africa: one adopted an Ethiopian boy, or they have adopted Black children. Either both parents are white and the kids are Black or one spouse is Black and the other is white. Our biggest growing edge has been either white parents with Black children or multiracial parents who then have, you know, multiracial children who are biologically their own. The white parents I talk to, with children who are Black, say their families are in white spaces all the time—school, primarily white neighborhoods, at home is white—and they wanted a place where their children could see themselves and see Black leadership on the altar, and also become friends with other children who look like them.

Female Laity

However we define our Blackness, it is important that we keep the space safe for Black people. Since the Black Church has been a place of safety and support and where we learn our leadership skills and how to deal with the public, it is important to maintain that. We know our acolytes have to be trained in an exact way to do their duties so if they're out in the

diocese, people don't say, "Oh, they don't know what they're doing." So we have to overtrain. Everybody who was going to be part of a diocesan event is overtrained, so they know what to do better than the white folks know what to do. We had to make sure that the clergy leadership understood that they had a very important role when white folks would come in and say, "Oh, well, we want this kind of music." And we say, "You know, we do this kind of music. We also do Taizé, and we do the traditional Anglican hymns; we do all of that. If you need to have that all the time, you need to find another church." We also needed to have clergy understand their role as the clergy of a congregation that, while welcoming all people, want to maintain their Blackness. We did have clergy who wouldn't like the spirituals or the gospel music or clapping hands when the bishop was there, which called for a conversation. We know that being an Episcopalian is joining a predominantly white denomination, but you're not going to put us in that box. We're not going to be that all-white congregation. So, if you need to have that all-white congregation, as our clergy you need to ask the bishop to move you someplace else.

Female Clergy

There have been times when I've been invisible. For example, while in seminary speaking with a white faculty member, a young, white female student came up and just started her conversation, and the faculty member began talking with her, and when she left, he turned back to me. I had to tell him, that's not good to do when you're speaking with a Black person. I've also found that I've been asked to either join an all-white staff or apply to be called as rector for an all-white church because they needed some color. I've also been in some places where there wasn't another Black person for miles around. I've been asked because a church really wanted to change, wanted to come into the twenty-first century as it pertains to racial issues, and I've also had to remind them that I was not there so they could check the appropriate boxes. At one church where I was rector, people actually left because I was called.

Female Clergy

I stayed in predominantly white contexts throughout my career. I went where the bishop sent me after graduation and ordination. The congregation called itself diverse, but it was really white. There were some people

of color: Black, Asian—some. But what we really dealt with was my sexual orientation. My rector didn't want to tell anyone. He said, "I don't want it to be the first thing you tell them." It was during the time when Gene Robinson was consecrated. All things became contentious. What I figured out about myself is that I've worked really hard to be liked, and it hurt very deeply. I feel like I wasn't liked. Almost twenty years later, I still haven't really shaken that. But I think the way I coped in predominantly white spaces is to figure out how to make them like me so they wouldn't treat me like shit.

Female Laity

When an African American became rector, the atmosphere was different; there was covert stuff, there were microaggressions. I was surprised at the racism. I must give [the rector] credit for holding her ground and doing her job well and with dignity. I never asked her how I might have helped. She and I never talked specifically about racism and how it was affecting both of us. I regret that we never had that conversation. I thought about [another rector] who said, "At what point does it become too much for a congregation when too many Black folks show up?" Just my family [being the Black members] didn't matter, but some members did have problems with [the Black rector] being the authority.