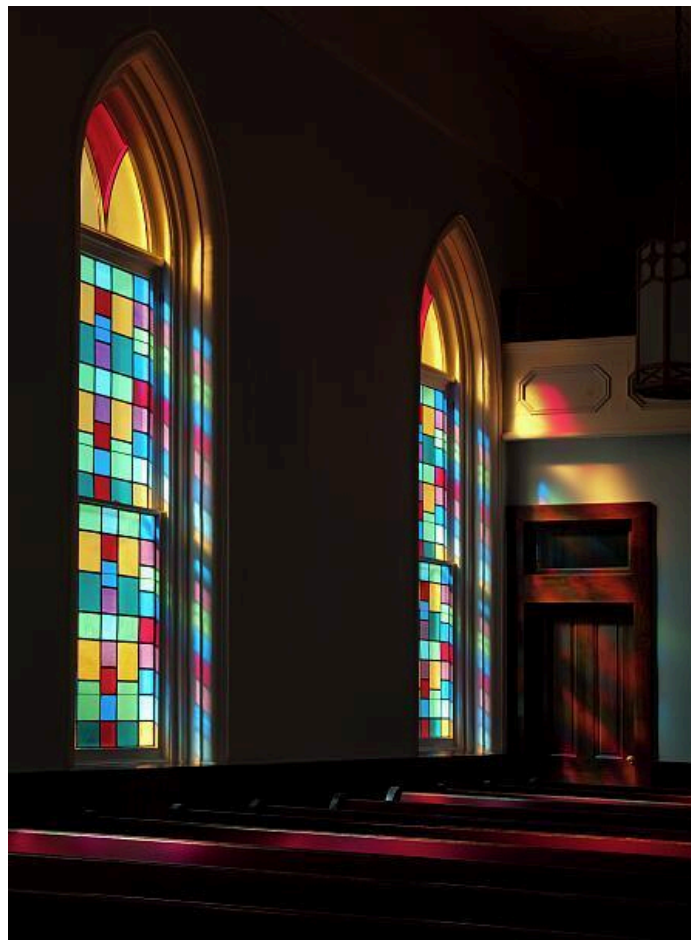


How Churches Can Be a Prophetic Voice for Racial Justice

Following the Footsteps of Jesus

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“In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Introduction

Throughout the Bible, prophets and disciples weren't content to "just" pray. They also did the work. They challenged kings and leaders, risking their lives. They spoke against slavery and oppression (Moses), injustice (Nathaniel), and sexual assault (Judges). At the same time, they reached out and blessed people who lived in the margins of society (Joshua, Elijah, and Moses).

Jesus and the prophets weren't satisfied with token gestures of service. They spoke directly to those in authority and pointed out their hypocrisy. (See [George Floyd, Empathy, and Making Room for the Fire](#))

Prayer is important. But it has to lead to action.

Churches for generations have been agents of oppression. This is a history we must examine and contend with. Let's not gloss over it. Change begins with facing uncomfortable truths.

Yet, churches have also been agents for good. Let's learn from those churches. Let's use them as inspiration. They didn't make a difference by prayer alone. They took to the streets, the town halls, the restaurants, and the voting booths.

Below are actionable ways that churches in the U.S. can be allies in ending racial and ethnic oppression.

Examine the Role of the Church in Oppression

From the crusades to witch trials to slavery to colonization--the church has not always been on the side of justice. How has this formed the identity of the church? What false beliefs or frameworks do we continue to defend even today that are rooted in our ways of justifying oppression? We need to have open conversations as a church. Otherwise, other people will have those conversations about us and for us, and will have missed the opportunity to do the self-examination the God requires for growth.

Rich Villodas has a good primer on the subject, titled "[Racial Reconciliation May Not Be What You Think It Is](#)." The article walks through the steps of the emotional work that needs to be done.

Black, LatinX, African, Native, Asian, Immigrants', and Women's History is Church History

The struggles of the early church had everything to do with race and ethnicity (Jews vs. gentiles and later East vs. West). As the Western Church became co-opted into the Roman Empire, it became an agent and an enabler of the military complex. Spend time reading the Bible and Church history from that lens.

Educate yourself and your congregation and mourn the role of the Church in slavery, subjugation of women, the genocide of Native populations, and oppression of people everywhere.

- What forms of oppression does the Church enable today?
- What false narratives does the Western Church still promulgate that are antithetical to the teachings of the Bible?
- Why have those narratives dominated?
- What will your role and your church's role be in changing that narrative?

Commit to changing this narrative as part of your mission and vision as a church. Find opportunities in your sermons to highlight the Bible's attitude towards justice. Note how often God talks about hearing the cries of the oppressed.

Teach Children about Justice in the Bible

How much does your Sunday school, summer Bible programming, or youth group curriculum talk about racial justice? If you're going to teach about kindness, make sure it examines what that means in the context of racial, social, and economic inequalities.

Let Churches that Represent People of Color Lead

Amplify the Voices of Black and Brown Churches

Churches that support communities of color have been at the forefront of civil rights and social justice for centuries. Learn from their wisdom, activism, and leadership. Allow them to lead. At the same time, be on the front lines when they need you.

Partner with Churches of People of Color

For a variety of reasons, churches are often segregated by race. We should talk about that.

In the meantime, an important first step is to establish a partnership with a Black, LatinX, and/or Asian churches. The goal of the partnership should not be to “fix” them or change them. Instead, it should come from a place of humility and willingness to be changed by those churches.

Hear their stories. Listen to their concerns. Observe their resilience and love for their communities. And then act, under the direction of the black and brown churches. Be humble in this process.

Provide Financial Resources

While Black and Brown churches often act as social service agencies, they’re usually under-funded because their members are not usually wealthy. Commit to giving them a portion of the tithes you collect. It’s one way to balance the inequities.

As the partnership deepens, get their guidance on how you can be a resource. However, both sides agree to help, the side with privilege must always remember to trust the side without. (See [When Helping Hurts](#) by Steve Corbett, Brian Fikkert, John Perkins).

Pray “With”—Not Just “For”

Pray with the communities that are impacted. Listen to their prayers and make them your own. Show up.

Represent People of Color at Your Church

“It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning.”

-- Dr. Martin Luther King

Invite Black, Brown, and Women Pastors to Speak

Let your congregation see diverse leaders and hear a diversity of voices. Ask those pastors and speakers what's on their heart. What do they want to talk to your church about? What should your church understand? (See [Eight Black Church Leaders on Ahmaud Arbery Injustice](#))

Hire Staff from Diverse Backgrounds

Is your church staff and leadership team mostly white? Is it mostly male? Time to change that. Don't stop with one or two—avoid tokenism—aim to be as diverse as possible.

Feature Diverse Authors--People of Color and Women

C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, A.W. Tozer, Philip Yancey, and Tim Keller have deepened our understanding of the Bible. What about Cornel West, Lisa Fields, or Dwight Hopkins for Black Christian writers? (See "[25 Black Theologians Who Have Grown Our Faith](#)"). Or LatinX (see examples [here](#)), Middle Eastern, and Asian writers?

Look beyond the U.S. and read international authors. (See examples [here](#)). There are many amazing Christians who have been writing and speaking on the Gospel. Are their voices and images represented in your sermons, Bible studies, and workshops?

Work Towards Reconciliation

Participate and/or sponsor programs that promote racial understanding and healing. Research organizations and churches that already do this work well. Some examples include [Be the Bridge](#) and the [Undivided](#) curriculum by Crossroads Church in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Speak Out

When someone in the church, in your community, or in your country says something that's racist--be it subtle or overt--speak out. Let the groups that are the target of hate speech

know that you stand with them--that you won't be silent. Issue statements. Send out tweets. Bring it up in sermons. Hold town halls and meetings and allow the space for those who are targeted to speak, if they want to, and/or process (ask them what they want, first).

Speak Louder

The Apostle Paul wasn't shy about exercising his rights as a Roman citizen. Don't abdicate privileges and rights that you can use on behalf of other people. Encourage active citizenship. Write letters on behalf of those who are oppressed and encourage your congregation to do the same. Call your government leaders, when relevant, about topics that impact communities of color. Use your rights and privileges to advocate for structural and institutional change.

Act with Justice in Mind

Do you talk about the homeless or volunteer at soup kitchens but are reluctant to support having shelters in your community? Do you celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day but choose to not learn about and work with the Black Lives Matter movement?

Engage with the structures and the issues that create the inequalities. Learn about the causes of homelessness and the leading solutions. Learn about the needs of refugees and immigrants.

Just as it's not enough for Christians to show up to church on Sundays, it's not enough to do token acts of mercy.

Walk the Talk

The Son of God chose to be born in a manger, away from his home, lived under an oppressive regime, became a refugee during his early childhood, and returned to live in a city that was not well-respected, even by other Jews.

Think about where you live, where you send your children to school, and where you do your grocery shopping. What privilege do you have? How do they insulate you? How can you actively break down some of that insulation? How can you make your social network more diverse? How can you challenge your family, your staff, and others to do the same?

Look at a case study such as Crossroads Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. While tax increases are usually not an easy sell in a state like Ohio, the church was able to make the case and mobilize people to vote for a ballot measure to fund universal preschool program and support K-12 education (see "[Building a Bigger Tent](#)").

Racial and Social Equality is the Gospel--Not a Side Project

The pursuit of justice can't be seen as a side project. God made justice a central tenet of the Bible. It needs to be central to our identity and message as Christians. Visiting the prisoner, serving the poor, caring for the orphans, inviting in the stranger--that's our calling.

Resources

Organizations

[Crossroads Church](#) in Cincinnati, Ohio has launched a racial reconciliation program called [Undivided](#)

[Be the Bridge](#)

Readings

[“Racial Justice & Reconciliation: Taking the Next Step in Racial Justice”](#) by Rich Villodas

[“5 Ways Your Predominantly White Church Can Work for Racial Justice and Reconciliation”](#)
by Rich Villodas

[George Floyd, Empathy, and Making Room for the Fire](#)

[No Future Without Forgiveness](#) by Desmond Tutu

[When Helping Hurts](#) by Steve Corbett, Brian Fikkert, John Perkins