

AN OPEN CONVERSATION:

Race Relations as a Part of Our Life Story

Bishop Alfred Johnson and Rev. Dr. Gil Rendle

Conversation #1- *Honesty: telling the truth about ourselves, and telling the truth to one another*
July 15, 2020 Recording: <https://youtu.be/3YXHpOeThTQ>

We are all a part of, and participant in, the problem. An honest national story and an honest personal story is required for change. Who am I in this, what have I experienced, what do I need to learn and do?

Conversation #2- *Uncovering our fears – and the blessings within them*
July 22, 2020 Recording: <https://youtu.be/LjulaYQ2AdQ>

What fear is at the base of our story, and how to we bless that fear and share the blessing with others?

“We go down into ourselves with a flashlight looking for the evil we have intended or done – not to excise it as some alien growth but rather to discover the holy spark within it. We begin not by rejecting the evil but by acknowledging it as something we meant to do. This is the only way we can truly raise and redeem it.

We lose our temper because we want things to be better right away. We gaze with lustful eyes because we have forgotten how to love the ones we want to love. We hoard material possessions because we imagine they will help us live more fully. We turn a deaf ear, because we fear the pain of listening would kill us. We waste time, because we are not sure how to enter a living relationship. We even tolerate a society that murders, because we are convinced it is the best way to save a life.

At the bottom of such behavior is something that was once holy. And during times of holiness, communion, and light our personal and collective perversions creep out of the cellar, begging to be healed, freed, and redeemed.

...the teacher, the Baal Shem Tov, interpreted “Turn aside from evil and do good” to mean, “Turn the evil into good.”

God Was in This Place and I, I Did Not Know, Lawrence Kushner

Conversation #3- *Reparations: repairing what was and moving forward*
July 29, 2020 Recording: <https://youtu.be/DE5vIg8YQIE>

Who we choose to be in the future depends upon our knowledge of history & what values we choose to live from. Who we, Black & White together, will be in the future depends upon our willingness to deal with the inequity that we have built into our history.

Foundational Assumptions: What lies behind these Open Conversations

- It has been 400 years since the arrival of slaves in America. Broken into 50-year segments, that is 8 segments. For the 1st 5 segments African Americans lived in slavery. For the next 2 segments African Americans lived under Jim Crow. For the last 1 segment African Americans have had civil rights. During this last segment, their civil rights have been limited by legislation seeking to reverse their equality. (Dr. Colette Pierce Burnette, President, UMC Related Huston-Tillotson University) This history is possible because of the historic mindset of White people that Black people are somehow less than fully human.
- Accurate data and history telling is critical to address the situation, but by themselves do not change the situation. We need to know this basic information. The history must be complete, including the story of African Americans and others. The data must be used to keep us connected to reality. But history and data by themselves do not change us. Information does not change our prejudices.

- Our institutions, laws and government will not change until White people take responsibility for the change, because White people hold the majority power within the institutional structures of government, law, economics, education and housing necessary to the change.
- Our situation is not a “white only” problem because people of color have been shaped to live in and contribute to a culture of unbalanced power and distrust.
- It is true that pragmatic issues such as policing, housing, and criminal justice need to be addressed. But at the core, we need to address our national values – what story we tell ourselves and what story we have chosen to live. We need a better story to live. It requires reforming our assumptions – for example: African Americans are not a problem people, but people with a problem. (Cornel West).
- Many (though not all) within younger generations accept friendships, working relationships, marriages, and families across racial divides, yet still live in the tension created by the history and practices that precede them. Racial prejudice is a lesser part of their lives, but when they see it many of them see a wrong and they want to change it.
- Narratives are stories that we tell ourselves that then direct our behavior. The national narrative and the personal narrative are the areas where the church is most suited to do its work. The task of the Church is to reset the stories that fuel racism, to challenge people to instead “reflect the mind of Christ” and the New Testament tradition of Galatians 3:27-28: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus...” This is the basic work of discipleship.
- A fundamental tool of discipleship is honest conversation, requiring both self-awareness and practiced listening.

Bishop Alfred Johnson and Rev. Dr. Gil Rendle

Both **Alfred and Gil** are United Methodist clergy ordained in the Eastern PA Conference in the 1970s. Both are graduates of Boston University School of Theology and served churches in Philadelphia.

Alfred has served both Black and White congregations as Senior Pastor. He has also served as the Director of Metro Ministries in Philadelphia, Conference staff Consultant, and District Superintendent prior to his election as bishop. He served as Bishop of the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference prior to retirement and now teaches at the New York Theological Seminary as a Visiting Professor of Urban Leadership and Director of the Center for the Study and Practice of Urban Religion.

After serving two White urban congregations as Senior Pastor **Gil** has worked across many Christian and Jewish denominations as a consultant, teacher and author focusing on issues of conflict, leadership and change. His PhD training was in the area of organizational development and systems change. He served as director of consulting with the Alban Institute in Bethesda, MD and as Senior Vice President of the Texas Methodist Foundation in Austin, TX. He is the author of ten books. **Alfred and Gil** have been colleagues and friends for over 40 years. The conversations offered here are similar to conversations they have shared over the years.

Reminders Shared During Our Time Together:

-“Don't we think we need more than a conversation since this year makes it 401 years since we Black people have a knee on our necks? George Floyd's one was physical, but the one on our necks is systematic.”

-We think we're preaching to the choir, but folks are saying, “The choir needs rehearsal!”

-“It's not BLACK vs WHITE, it's BLACK vs. RACISM. Don't confuse the two.' I thought this was an excellent observation and distinction.”

-Achieving racial justice is a marathon, not a sprint. Our work to fix what we broke and left broken isn't done until Black folks tell us it's done.

Resources Shared During Our Time Together:

<p>To Do</p> 	<p>97 Things White People Can Do For Racial Justice: https://medium.com/equality-includes-you/what-white-people-can-do-for-racial-justice-f2d18b0e0234 <i>This is continually updated to ensure each item is accurate and needed today.</i></p>	<p>Ways to Support the Ongoing Fight for Justice from Tom Steyer: https://www.tomsteyer.com/support-racial-justice-today/?utm_campaign=newsletter&utm_source=sendgrid&utm_medium=email&utm_term=20200724_tomsteyer.com_&utm_content=09c5e548-cddb-11ea-8c0f-d6349b507452</p>	<p>-be intentional about cultivating conversation with people who don't look like you</p> <p>-continue the conversation with your family, your church, and your community</p>
<p>To Watch</p> 	<p>The Truth about the Confederacy in the United States: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOPGpE-sXh0 <i>Jeffery Robinson, the ACLU's top racial justice expert, discusses the dark history of Confederate symbols across the country and outlines what we can do to learn from our past and combat systemic racism.</i></p>	<p>13TH: <i>In this thought-provoking documentary, scholars, activists and politicians analyze the criminalization of African Americans and the U.S. prison boom. (Netflix)</i></p>	<p>The Color of Fear: <i>a film about the state of race relations in America as seen through the eyes of 8 North American men of Asian, European, Latino and African descent. The men reveal the pain and scars that racism has caused them. What emerges is a deeper sense of understanding and trust. (Amazon)</i></p>
<p>To Read</p> 	<p>The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson: <i>a Pulitzer Prize winning narrative history of slavery, Jim Crow and the migration of African Americans from the South into the North where they did not escape Jim Crow but experienced it in a different way.)</i></p>	<p>Between the World and Me by Ta-Henisi Coates: <i>Coates is often seen as a modern-day James Baldwin offering a deeply personal, thoughtful and critical assessment of his experience as a Black man.</i></p>	<p>Race Matters by Cornel West: <i>a master intellectual, West offers a short but very substantial argument to understand racism in a new light.</i></p>
<p>Quietly Courageous by Gil Rendle: <i>in a book about courageous leadership Rendle writes of the critical importance of conversation as a fundamental tool of learning and change.)</i></p>	<p>“What is Owed” by Nikole Hannah-Jones from the magazine, ‘It is Time for Reparations,’ republished by the New York Times here: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/24/magazine/reparations-slavery.html</p>	<p>White Fragility by Robin DiAngelo: <i>“Emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors including argumentation and silence, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium and prevent any meaningful cross-racial dialogue. DiAngelo ... [describes] what we can do to engage more constructively.” (Amazon)</i></p>	
<p>How to Be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi: <i>focuses on racist ideas and policies as vastly more significant than people's behavior. Kendi employs history, science, and ethics to describe different forms of racism; at the same time, he follows the events and experiences of his own life, adapting a memoir approach that personalizes his arguments.</i></p>	<p>Say The Wrong Thing by Dr. Amanda Kemp: <i>Kemp encourages us to engage in conversation with caring, trusting in good intentions, and forgiveness. Don't let your fear of misspeaking or learning more about your own missteps keep you from engaging in antiracist work.</i></p>	<p>That the Blood Stay Pure: African Americans, Native Americans, and the Predicament of Race and Identity in Virginia (Blacks in the Diaspora) by Arica L. Coleman: <i>her work shows how the indoctrination of White Supremacy affects/infects everyone — of all skin colors and ethnicities.</i></p>	