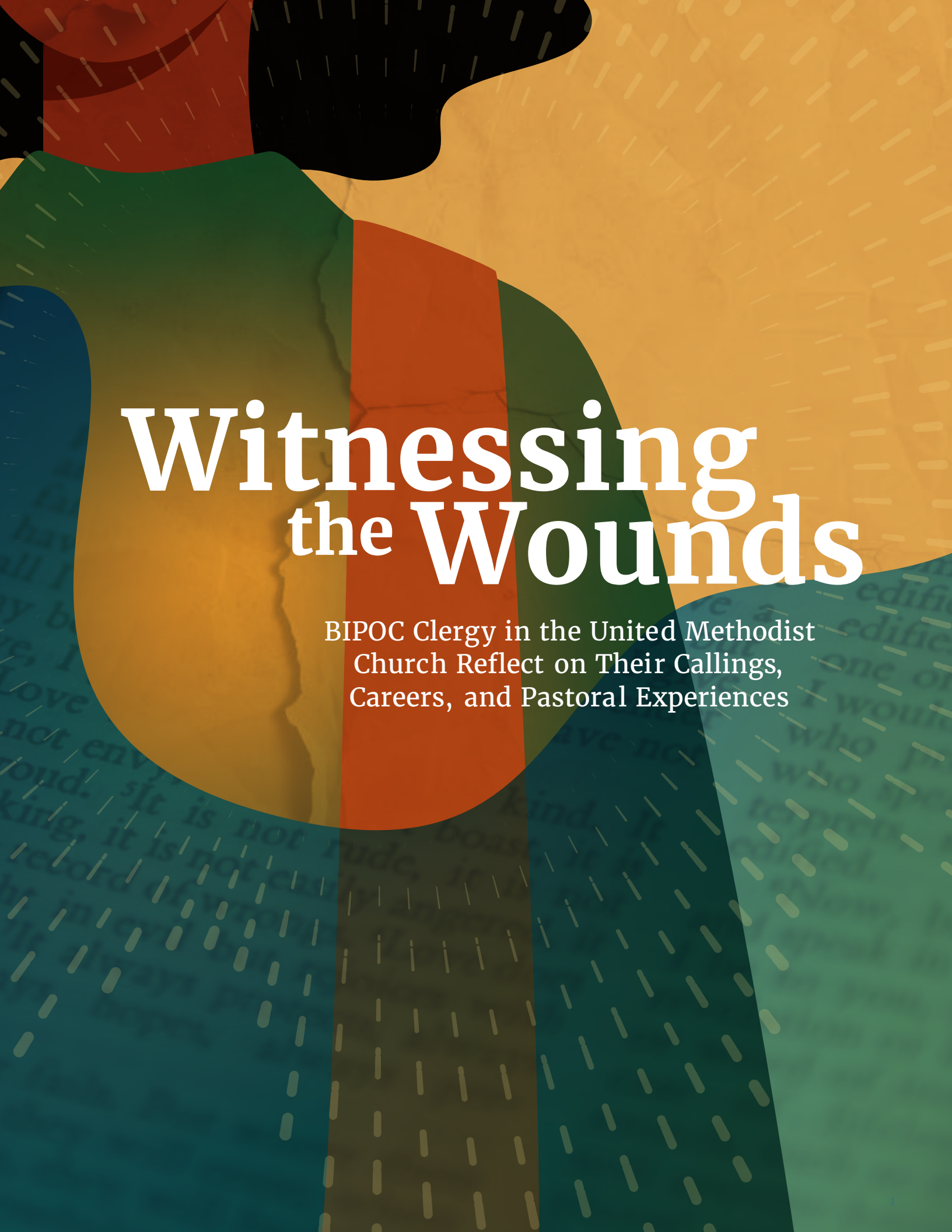

Witnessing the Wounds

BIPOC Clergy in the United Methodist Church Reflect on Their Callings, Careers, and Pastoral Experiences

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The Duke Clergy Health Collaborative (formerly the Clergy Health Initiative and the Religion and Social Change Lab) translates original research into shared resources that help United Methodist clergy in North Carolina—and beyond—serve well and be well at the same time.

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James B. Duke
THE DUKE ENDOWMENT

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A deep gratitude is extended to all the beautiful BIPOC clergy who chose to share their stories. We hope we have the ears to hear and eyes to witness your wounds and your victories.

Research Background

In 2021 and 2022, amid the COVID19 pandemic and on the heels of the nationwide racial uprising and unrest following George Floyd's murder, a group of 17 Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) were interviewed about their pastoral experience. All 17 were North Carolina United Methodist Church (UMC) clergy (12 Black, 3 Latine, 2 Asian/Asian American). Another 8 AMEZ (African Methodist Episcopal Zion) clergy were interviewed later for additional analysis.[1]

In this study, clergy were asked questions regarding their call stories, ordination experiences, race and ethnicity impacts, and modes of self-care. These questions were raised partly due to the reported state of clergy burnout;according to one research outfit, 38% of U.S. clergy had considered leaving full-time ministry in 2021.[2] In 2024, that number had only increased.[3] Clergy burnout and the heightened state of civil and racial unrest in 2020 and 2021 in the United States were all factors in formulating the questions we asked of BIPOC clergy.[4]

1 Our team contacted BIPOC clergy who had previously agreed to being a part of the Clergy Health Initiative's research projects. In addition, as we reached out to BIPOC clergy and invited them to share their stories, we asked if they knew of any of their colleagues who would be willing to participate. We found a number of pastors through the recommendations of their colleagues.

2 38% of U.S. Pastors Have Thought About Quitting Full-Time Ministry in the Past Year," Barna Group, November 16, 2021, https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-well-being/.

3 Peter Smith, "US Pastors Struggle with Post-Pandemic Burnout. Study Shows Half Considered Quitting Since 2020," AP News, January 11, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/christian-clergy-burnout-pandemic-survey-24ee46327438ff46b074d234ffe2f58c.

4 Nicole Chavez, "2020: The Year America Confronted Racism." CNN, December 2020, https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2020/12/us/america-racism-2020/.

A Letter to Our Reader

My name is the Rev. Dr. Fatimah Salleh, and I feel it is important to address my own role as researcher and the sole interviewer in this project. I am a woman of Black, Puerto Rican, and Malaysian descent. I received my PhD at UNC in Mass Communication, where I studied how Black women found their means of self-empowerment during times of racial strife. After my doctorate, I went 9.8 miles down the road to pursue a Master of Divinity degree at Duke University, where I tried to take every course taught by professors of color. I am a student of Professors Willie Jennings, J. Kameron Carter, William Turner, Eboni Marshall-Turman, Esther Acolaste, and Valerie Cooper, to name a few. This is where my theology of liberation began its formation. I am an ordained Baptist minister.

How I approached these interviews with my colleagues in ministry is important and needs to be noted for you, the reader, and for me. I consider it a sacred responsibility to witness and hold these stories of ministry, call, survival, resilience, and thriving.

With the generous support of The Duke Endowment, I had been accompanying North Carolina UMC clergy, with special attention to women and clergy of color, for several years before I embarked on this project. Some of the pastors I journey with refer to me as the "pastor's pastor." This is a ministry and title that I do not take lightly and has been a source of much joy and heartbreak in my relationship with my colleagues of the cloth. In my work with clergy, through many one-on-one conversations and group gatherings, I started to notice common threads in the experiences of clergy of color within the UMC in both the North Carolina and Western North Carolina Annual Conferences.

The researcher in me felt the stories I was hearing needed to be carefully and sacredly collected. More importantly, I knew that these stories not only needed to be heard but held and wrestled with, in both the church and our community. And, after the long night of wrestling, the morning hopefully moves us to do justice (Micah 6:8).

When I started the interviews, one clergy person asked me a poignant question: "What are you going to do with our stories?" In response to her question, I began to explain how Duke University would hold the recordings and then transcribe them. She immediately interrupted me. "No," she said, "what are you going to do with our stories? Not them, ***you***."

I fumbled for an answer, but it was desperately lacking. She knew it, and I knew it. I've sat with that question a long time. And what follows is an extended answer. I write this report as one way to share these stories of our BIPOC clergy.

Fatimah S. Salleh

In Preparation

Indigenous Comanche scholar La Donna Harris offers tribal wisdom about the importance of hearing one another's stories. She suggests that when we care enough about each other, we open ourselves up to engage in "true dialogue." In true dialogue, we listen and learn from one another. Or, as she puts it, "We have to let the realities of others into our conceptual and emotional spaces."[5]

My aim is to invite the reader of this report to care enough for their brothers and sisters to listen to their stories and learn from them. To start, I want to lay some groundwork for the reader so that they may prepare themselves for what they are about to read. For that preparatory groundwork, I draw upon the wisdom of brilliant scholars and theologians of color and their counsel to those of us moving in racial dialogue. Because, in the words of noted theologian, Brian Bantum, "Race is not a history. Race is the story of our bodies, of our churches, of our faith."[6]

Here are some ways to start engaging in the true dialogue of listening and learning from these pastors of color:

I. Reverent Curiosity

"This may seem like a simple thing, but curiosity is one of the most challenging of human emotions to cultivate when it comes to race. Ultimately, being curious about our race and racial identity development means that you question old ideas, remain open to new ones, ...and you keep cultivating that curiosity over time." –Anneliese A. Singh, *The Racial Healing Handbook*[7]

II. Deep Listening

"Deep listening is an act of surrender. We risk being changed by what we hear. When I really want to hear another person's story, I try to leave my preconceptions at the door and draw close to the telling." –Valarie Kuar, *See No Stranger*[8]

III. Feeling the Feelings

"Feeling the feelings–which are an appropriate human response to racism and oppression–is an important part of the process. When you allow yourself to feel those feelings, you wake up." –Layla F. Saad, *me and white supremacy*[9]

IV. Acknowledging the Holy Spirit

"And when we talk about race today, with all the pain packed in the conversation, the Holy Spirit remains in the room. This doesn't mean conversations aren't painful, aren't personal, and aren't charged with emotion. We can lament and mourn. We can be livid and enraged. We can be honest. We can tell the truth. We can trust that the Holy Spirit is here. We must. For only by being truthful about how we got here can we begin to imagine another way." –Austin Channing Brown, *I'm Still Here*[10]

V. Courageous Action

"Progress is possible, but we must learn to discern the difference between complicit Christianity and courageous Christianity. Complicit Christianity forfeits its moral authority to devaluing the image of God in people of color. By contrast, courageous Christianity embraces racial and ethnic diversity. It stands against any person, policy, or practice that would dim the glory of God reflected in the life of human beings from every tribe and tongue." –Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*[11]

5 La Donna Harris and Jacqueline Wasilewski, "Indigeneity, An Alternative Worldview: Four R's (Relationship, Responsibility, Reciprocity, Redistribution: vs. Two P's (Power and Profit), Sharing the Journey Towards Conscious Evolution," *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 21 (2004): 489-503, 10.1002/sres.631.

6 Brian Bantum, *The Death of Race: Building a New Christianity in a Racial World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 10.

7 Anneliese A. Singh, *The Racial Healing Handbook: Practical Activities to Help You Challenge Privilege, Confront Systemic Racism & Engage in Collective Healing* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Productions, Inc., 2019), 11.

8 Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020), 143.

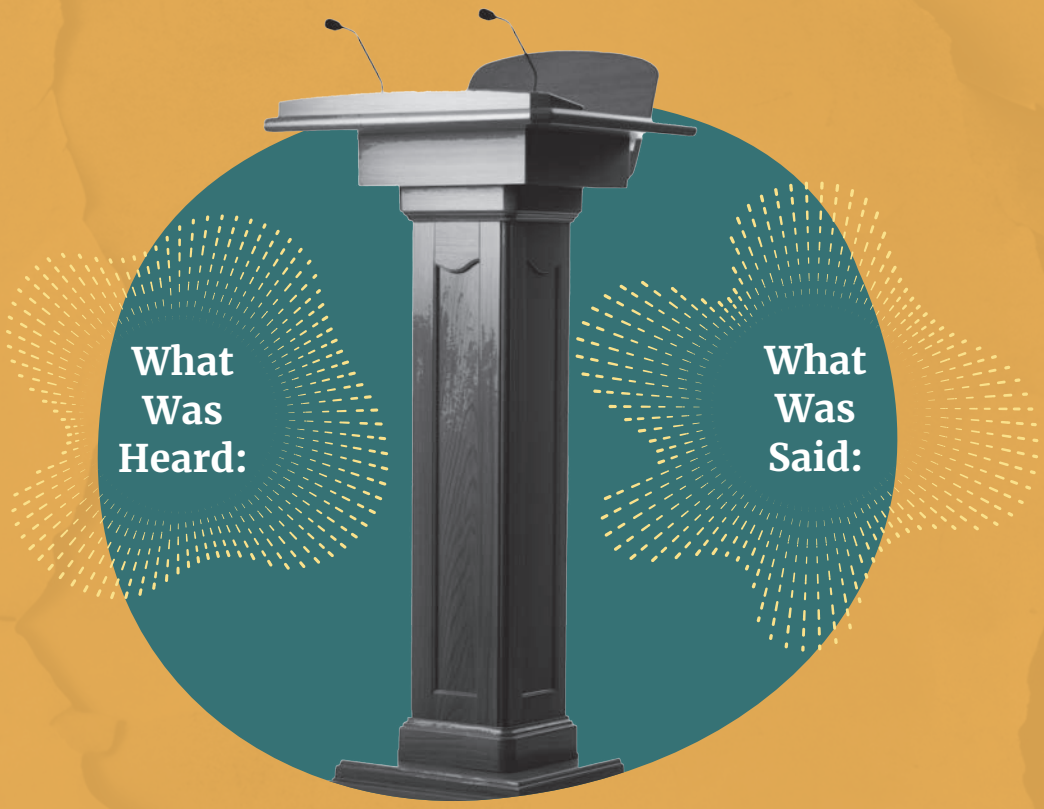
9 Layla F. Saad, *me and white supremacy: Combat racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2020), 23.

10 Austin Channing Brown, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity In A World Made for Whiteness* (New York: Convergent, 2018), 118.

11 Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise:The Truth About the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Reflective, 2019), 24.

As part of preparing to hold and bear witness to these stories, I offer an abridged prayer from Cole Arthur Riley, from her book, *Black Liturgies*.

"God of renewal, We confess that too often we have desired justice without repair. Liberation without healing. Other times, we have demanded a rushed unity of the oppressed, without fully contending with all the ways the union is still to their demise. Have mercy on us in our resistance, that we would pursue repair and enter the healing we were meant for. Amen."[12]



The Stories

The interview question guide consisted of Seven opening questions and ten in-depth questions about clergy's call and faith journey. As a disclaimer, this report does not contain all the responses from every question but, rather, some responses to some of the questions. The specific responses shared in this report in no way aim to place one story above another. In many circumstances, quotes that were not included were part of a much larger story, making it difficult to share and maintain anonymity and brevity.

The questions are divided into two sections: *What Was Said*, which are the direct quotes from the clergy and *What Was Heard*, which contains my brief summary and analysis of all the answers given for that interview question.

The editorial method for presenting these interviews is framed by the direction of oral history researchers and the need to present the material as clearly as possible. So, I chose to leave out repetitive conversational statements such as "uh," "mmmm" and "you know" as well as other forms of speech that would be distracting to most readers.

12 Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, And Meditations for Staying Human* (New York: Convergent, 2024), 152.

How important do you feel United Methodism is to your identity and why?

"Yes, (it's a part of my identity.) I am with the United Methodist Church theology, and I pray it stays because that's what I identify with more than any other religion in any other theology. The issue is just that the people who are teaching and the polity and leadership are just wrong, but I still love the core, like the values and the beliefs."

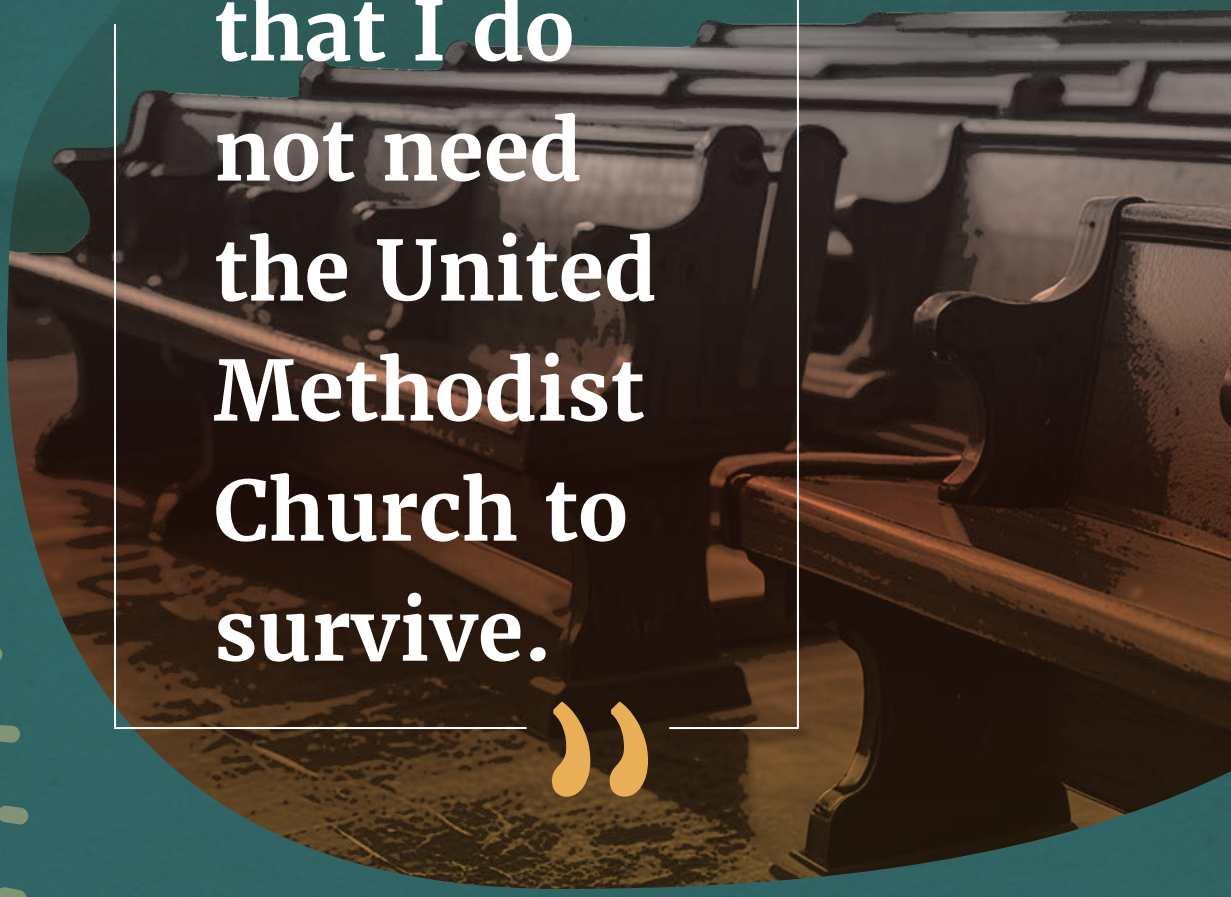
"I guess in some sense, I do identify with the United Methodist Church. Women are called. Not just white women, but women of color. Women affirmed, for the most part. I'm basically, really, affirmed in the church I serve now."

"Yeah. I would say that even though I'm pursuing ordination in another denomination, theologically, I still hold very faithful to Methodist ideologies and Methodist theology. Partly because of the emphasis on holiness but the evolving of our understanding of holiness and being made into the Imago Dei."

"I do think it is a part of my identity now. Again, all the traditions that I've been part of, have their faults, but I think God called me to this tradition for this reason. If God wants me to be here, this is the place where I belong. If God ever asks me to move on, I'm just going to follow His lead, God's lead, because I don't know. I think it's important to know where God wants you."

"No. No, not for me...cause I got a whole lot of United Methodist mindset in my mind, you know, from the way they treated me. And my son does too. He grew up having n*** [redacted] written on stuff, tires being flattened (sic), all of that from white United Methodist, older, white United Methodist churches that were not welcoming and did not treat us well. So, no, it does not relate to my identity."

"To not be white in this space also can, in some ways, feel like it's more trouble than it's worth. I've realized that I do not need the United Methodist Church to survive. And you know at some point, like some of my friends who I believe were led by the Holy Spirit... God might call me to step back. But that moment is not now."



> “I’ve realized that I do not need the United Methodist Church to survive.”

What Was Heard:

More than half the pastors interviewed did not feel that United Methodism was important to their identity, often citing feelings of racial exclusion and racist experiences as part of their disconnection of Methodism from their identity. In the cases where clergy felt that United Methodism was important to their identity they often spoke about the theology of the church–most highlighted was John Wesley’s beliefs about God’s grace–as what resonated with them and, therefore, their identity.

What sustains or keeps you in the UMC?

"The words that come to mind is... to prove a point."

"I have, I guess, kind of, for the most part, severed ties. Actually, just recently I had another terrible experience with the Methodist church. And so I'm currently pursuing ordination with another denomination."

"Cause I don't see the grass is going to be greener any other place."

What Was Said:

"I think my commitment to Christ and understanding that I know this was a call by God to the United Methodist Church, not anything that I sought out. So, I am resting in what God has called me to, and that's what's keeping me in the church. This mistreatment, the name calling, the refusal to even turn an eye to me, and not just myself but my family as well. Those things are difficult to come to terms with. So, so yeah, I've faithfully cultivated a prayer life. That's what I try to stick to, is loving my neighbor as myself, and I don't get to choose who my neighbor is. And as of right now, I really believe strongly and faithfully that God has placed me into the United Methodist Church to be here, not for a short time, but to be here until He tells me my time is up here."

"You're not going to run me out. You didn't run me in. I know that sounds very simplistic, but it's the basic truth."

"I believe in what I am teaching. I believe God has called me into this place, to be not only a servant but to be an agent of change."

"I was born Methodist, and growing up Methodist, and I have strong roots in Methodism, and I am so proud."

"It's beautiful. There's connectedness, you're not isolated. And the theology that undergirds this, Wesleyan kind of emphasis on grace. There's beauty in it, but I don't see myself staying long term in it."

> You're not going to run me out. You didn't run me in. I know that sounds very simplistic, but it's the basic truth.

What Was Heard:

There are a wide range of reasons why pastors are staying in the denomination, but most of them focused on the connectedness to the theology. Around 25% of the clergy interviewed spoke of eventually parting ways with the UMC or had in fact already left the UMC citing, again, racism as the key reason for departure. Clergy within the AME and AMEZ church felt a connection to their congregations, especially in their united fight for racial justice and liberation. This work of racial justice and liberation was deeply tied to their call and commitment to the church.

In what ways, if any, has race and/or ethnicity impacted or shaped your experience?

"Oh, in every way, every way, in every way. I've been rejected in the hospital because I'm a certain color, by members that were of a certain race."

"Every day. Every day."

"Yeah. A ton. I mean, as a kid, my mom was always a really conscious person, so for me, my mom talked about racism regularly in my household. Talked regularly about the kind of barriers that I faced as a black man, what she wanted from me, and so where there was a gap, though, was that it was not always clear to me, explicitly, how my understanding of race and my understanding of faith were connected."

"In many different ways. I don't know. Last year was very tough for me, my previous appointment. Because I really believe that was part of the struggle, my ethnicity..."

"So it has shaped my ministry and it has shaped my ministry to educate and let my people be a voice in the community, let's be a voice for justice, let's be a voice for peace, a voice for inclusiveness. It truly has shaped my ministry."

> “... it has shaped my ministry to educate and let my people be a voice in the community, let’s be a voice for justice, let’s be a voice for peace, a voice for inclusiveness.”

What Was Heard:

Nearly every pastor interviewed felt that their racial and/or ethnic background had a definite impact on their experience in ministry. One pastor had threats against her, and police were stationed outside the church to protect her. Another pastor recalls his congregational members making fun of immigrants and their accents while he, too, is an immigrant with an accent. In addition, UMC clergy also felt the need to speak against racism and advocate for anti-racism work in their congregational communities. In contrast, AME and AMEZ pastors did not speak to the internal racism of the church but more of the external racism in the country and how their ministries called them to empower and encourage their Black members in the midst of so much anti-Black sentiment in the United States.

What was your experience with ordination?

"Long, tedious, grueling. It got to a point in the process that I gave up. I was like, this is not for me. I don't need to do this."

"I'm one of those people that had a great ordination process. I had somebody. [He was a] little bitty white man. Well he made sure that I had people around me that were going to read my papers. That was going to help me interview. And he did that on a district level. He was instrumental."

"I constantly felt like, in my ordination process, that I was...what's the word, the way it relates to hazing. I'm searching for a word, I'm going to describe it to you. That's the only way I can do it. We would go to these meetings where I was one of two black people in my ordination cohort, everybody else was white, and it just constantly felt like this is really for them. That's what I mean by hazing, in the sense that this is really not for me."

"I guess, sadly, I didn't even get that far because of those gatekeepers? Because I didn't fit the norm, they were so focused on my speeding tickets, that my call was hardly entertained at all. And it just wasn't, it was disheartening because I put all that work in, I was really looking forward. I loved how I saw the Methodist Church living out of what it meant to be the body of Christ to only, to go and only experience, this disheartening, this disheartening let down. Just being reminded that it doesn't matter the institution that I went to or the call on my life. At the end of the day, whiteness was right in this space."

What Was Said:

"My experience with ordination was grueling. I thank God that in my nature and in what He did, you know, how the Holy Spirit stayed with me, that I was never bitter, but I was certainly tired, I was certainly disappointed, and I was certainly hurt in the process."

"The experience was kinda tough...I was given wrong advice..."

"It was a bad process...it felt punitive..."

"In some places, you feel supported, in other places, you don't feel supported. So, it's not been an easy process whatsoever. It's hard to really put a label on it because it's been somewhat of a rollercoaster. I think this is where you have those people that should be supporting you and making themselves available who aren't doing that."

"I have decided not to go through the ordination process. I began it a couple of times. But just my experiences with DCOM (District Committee of Ordained Ministry) and a little bit in the BOM (Board of Ordained Ministry). I think the major reason I don't want to pursue ordination is because I'm recognizing my own theology, my own growth, is diverging away. Away from the white Supremist core of Christian faith, Christian nationalism, I guess is how I would describe it."

> My experience with ordination was grueling. I thank God that in my nature and in what He did, you know, how the Holy Spirit stayed with me, that I was never bitter, but I was certainly tired, I was certainly disappointed, and I was certainly hurt in the process.

What Was Heard:

An overwhelming majority of pastors interviewed cited encountering racism at all levels of the ordination process. A Latine pastor referred to the ordination process as the "Border Patrol," likening it to how immigrants are so poorly treated and vetted at the US-Mexican border. The few that did find the process easier readily mentioned having good support and guidance to help them through the process. In addition, most of the pastors had to make several attempts at ordination; a rare few were approved for ordination on the first attempt.

Where do you find spiritual wellness for yourself?

"I actually have found it in several different places. One, I've maintained my own prayer life. I have a spiritual director. My closest and dearest friend, we talk every Monday night at 7 o'clock and catch up on the week. And then we always pray together."

"I really get my spiritual wellness and my personal wellness, too, when I'm able to reflect by myself, just for three days, just for me, to just read the Bible. I don't want to read books or study. No, I just want to open the Bible and read the Bible, watch a movie. You know, just be with myself."

"From the Bible, and when I struggle and strive to find a message to proclaim, through that work, I feel spiritual wellness."

"I have found it in nature."

"I find it with my people. I find it with my family."

"Through a couple of close, close friends that I bonded with during the experience. And they're very, very few. They're probably six female friends that have walked with me through this (ministry)."

"My husband...he's my friend. And we have crazy good conversations, and we've been married for 26 years, and we're still doing that."

"At yoga, I started doing hot yoga. I have a fantastic therapist. I go to the beach, like, this morning, I went on a beach walk."

"When life gets me low, grandbabies, they fill me with life. I am reminded of the joy that only God can bring with my grandchildren here."

"Ever since my first appointment, I have made myself take retreat days. Silent retreats. Me and Jesus. Those are the things that have kept me through this."

"I have found spiritual wellness in groups that are aware of the pain and the hurt clergy of color have experienced through the United Methodist Church. I've also found a lot of support with those that are doing the work. You know, a lot of people are doing the work, not just Black people but white people, too."

> My closest and dearest friend, we talk every Monday night at 7 o'clock and catch up on the week. And then we always pray together.

What Was Heard:

An overwhelming number of UMC pastors mentioned their close relationships as part of their spiritual wellness–everyone from supportive communities, spouses, siblings, friends, and grandchildren. These close relationships allowed pastors to be themselves, share their experiences, and find themselves cared for. A few named the importance of time alone, time for quiet, and reflection as their pathway of spiritual wellness. AME and AMEZ clergy held some of the same sentiments for their spiritual wellness, citing their close relationships as well as taking time to do things that bring them joy, such as listening to jazz music and reading good books. It was remarkable how all the clergy interviewed expressed ways that they sought to take care of themselves.

The Questions We Did Not Ask (But Still Got Answered)

There were certain themes that ran through these interviews that were unexpected simply because there was no specific question about these topics. The following themes were noted consistently throughout the interviews

(1) Most interviewees felt drawn to the UMC because of its doctrine and the work of John Wesley. Few of the clergy (around 5%) were raised within the UMC. The majority chose to make it their church home in adulthood. For many, the church's expressed doctrines and beliefs still hold a profound draw and pull.

(2) For female BIPOC pastors, the intersection of race and gender was regularly mentioned. For them, their race could not be separated from their gender identity. A few female clergy mentioned that they specifically left their previous religious tradition because they would not ordain women and that the UMC offered them a chance at ordination.

(3) Most pastors expressed frustration with the church and its work towards anti-racism and diversity. As one Black male pastor said, "Folks want to have multiracial spaces, which, of course, means they want your Black face, but not your Black lived experience, or your brown face, but not your brown lived experience."

(4) Several pastors often spoke about the immense value of good mentorship, so much so that it required a separate subject category. Here are the words of a female pastor who spoke of her beloved mentor: "You know, he had my back. He spoke up for me. My ordination, I did mine in record time. I went straight through. I had no problems. I never had to rewrite anything. I never had to go before the committee more than once. I understand people going through and having those difficulties."

Conclusion

One of the final questions I asked of these pastors was "What would you want from the denomination now?" Indeed this question, I now know, could have caused more harm than good. Miguel A. De La Torre has stated that "Constantly having to explain to members of the dominant culture how they have been exploitative while also providing remedies for one's own mistreatment takes a psychological toll on the marginalized."[13] In hindsight, I would have changed this question, not hinting at asking BIPOC clergy for the solutions. Yet, the question was posed, and the clergy answered. In truth, a couple of pastors blatantly said that the church could do nothing for them now, while many others had varying ideas on how to begin tackling the racism within the North Carolina UMC.

So, I bring you, the reader, back to the beginning, where I offered the invitation from Comanche scholar, La Donna Harris, for you to take a posture of receiving–listening and learning from these sacred stories. Here are the answers to the question:

What would you want from the denomination now?

What Was Heard:

1. Offer and provide widespread training for congregations and their leadership on receiving clergy of color and women as pastors.
2. District Superintendent training that speaks explicitly to the needs and emotional/spiritual skill set of accompanying pastors of color.
3. An accountability process and/or designated group committed to evaluating and investigating the ordination process on behalf of ordinands, with particular attention to BIPOC and women candidates.
4. Consider increasing retreat and Sabbath space offerings for women and BIPOC clergy.
5. An evaluation and extension of mentorship and how it can be more effectively rooted in beloved relationships with BIPOC clergy.

13 Miguel A. De La Torre, *Decolonizing Christianity: Becoming Badass Believers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2021), 3-4.

Reflection for the Reader

What did you hear?

What did you learn?

And now what will you do?

As we started with a prayer from Cole Arthur Riley, I would like to leave you with a prayer of my own-

To The God Who Beckons Us,

May we, as a people, hear one another well. May we know that our discipleship is intricately knitted into one another's stories.

We are called to witness each other's wounds. We will not turn away. And in the witnessing, there is the abundant presence of the Holy Spirit beckoning us...to feel, hold, learn, and move humbly in ways of deep liberation.

May we be brave in our encounters with the sacredness of story.

In the name of our God who calls us into community,

Amen

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