

FULLER YOUTH INSTITUTE



# TALKING ABOUT RACE WITH TEENAGERS

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A Youth Leader's Guide for Exploring Race,  
Culture, Immigration, and Power

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## **Talking about Race with Teenagers**

### ***A Youth Leader's Guide for Exploring Race, Culture, Immigration, and Power***

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by Kat Armas, Jennifer Guerra Aldana, & Ahren Samuel

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Published in the United States of America by

Fuller Youth Institute, 135 N. Oakland Ave., Pasadena, CA, 91182

Cover and Interior Design: Macy Phenix Davis

Copy Editor: Joy Netanya Thompson

Senior Editor: Brad M. Griffin

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# FOREWORD

*Dr. Dwight Radcliff*

I love Batman.

I'm an academic dean, professor, pastor, father of college students, husband of more than 20 years . . . and yes, I love Batman. There are three major reasons why this particular hero resonates with me.

First, the darkness and grit of Gotham seem true to life when compared with other comic cities. Second, Batman has no actual superpowers. His training and resources are the key to his success.

My third point may honestly be an elaboration of the second: Batman's utility belt is something to behold. He always seems to have the right pellet, spray, or tool in his belt—even if it's another full suit (yes, this actually happened in an episode of the old-school TV series, and yes, this does represent some sort of dimensional paradox).

In youth ministry, we quickly realize that our job is not simply to provide easy answers to difficult questions in life. Much of what we do is equip young people with the tools they need to live vibrantly into their faith. We hope and pray that, by the Spirit, we have participated in the formation of young women and men who will blossom into the leaders their communities and churches so desperately need.

To be honest, though, how do they—or we, for that matter—live vividly in such dark times?

Systemic racism, cultural division, implicit bias, polarization, and media-fueled fear continue to contribute to histories and narratives of violence and marginalization. As a Black man raised in South Central Los Angeles in a single-parent home, and now serving in a predominantly White institution, I am cognizant of the lived realities of fear (and hope) that so many face each day here in the US. There are no easy conversations right now. Every dialogue regarding race or gender is fraught with complicated layers of power, class, culture, politics, identity, sexuality, economics, and more. It's enough to frighten experts

away from even the most introductory of conversations.

But what does the Jesus of the Bible call us to? Fearful retreat? Complacent comfort? Not the Jesus of Nazareth (which was the 'hood, or *el barrio*, of his day) who led a march straight into the religiopolitical capital city of Jerusalem. Not the Jesus who embraced the support and testimony of women as disciples in a strictly patriarchal society. Not the Jesus who overturned every orthodox interpretation of Sabbath that prevented life and freedom for the disinherited.

Jesus calls us to a bold, Spirit-empowered life of being witnesses to all people in all places. Yet we are human and prone to failure and mistakes. To partner with God in the work described here, we need training and tools to be effective. We need resources, boldness, and opportunities. The following pages are not everything—they are *something*. They are tools that can be learned and become part of the utility belt you need to do this necessary work.

Kat Armas, Jennifer Guerra Aldana, and Ahren Samuel provide insightful, painful, and authentic narratives that present the reader with vantage points that are not often centered—and very often othered. Hearing these women of color articulate their specific lived realities is necessary. It forces all of us to reconsider our own biases, acknowledge blind spots, engage voices, and advocate for perspectives that may not be our own.

I join with the authors in hoping that as you read this guide you are inspired to use this and other work as tools. Even more, we hope this work inspires you to have the courage to actually engage it. You do not have to be super. You do not have to have powers. You do not have to be someone else. You do, however, need to be committed to the work of reading, listening, and learning. May God be with you.

Dwight A. Radcliff Jr., MDiv, PhD  
Academic Dean for the Pannell Center for Black Church Studies  
Assistant Professor of Mission, Theology, and Culture  
Fuller Theological Seminary





## INTRODUCTION

# WELCOME TO THE CONVERSATION

*Jennifer Guerra Aldana*

I was rushing to the church building. I had just ended a long shift at work and was speeding to get to youth group on time.

Whenever I stopped at a red light, I would glance over to the passenger seat to read over the jumbled notes I had written on a napkin during my lunch break. My heart felt a sense of relief when I realized I would arrive 15 minutes before students tended to show up. I would have some time to take a deep breath and copy my scrambled notes from my napkin onto a fresh piece of paper. I hurried out of my car and walked as fast as I could so I could open the youth room and finally catch my breath.

To my surprise, there were already two students outside the door.

I could hear their heated conversation as I approached. They were discussing a race-related incident from school that day. All I wanted was 15 minutes to breathe. I said some quick hellos and told them they were welcome to come in while I set up for youth group. They found a seat on one of our couches, and as I was trying to transcribe my notes, I couldn't help but overhear what they were talking about: A young man had been beaten up at school by a group of peers.

Then I heard one of the students use a racial slur. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. *I just wanted 15 minutes* to finish prepping my lesson, and yet it felt like the lesson was being written on that hand-me-down couch. I was tired, I had already had a full day, and the last thing I wanted to do was engage in a conversation about racialized violence.

It was not the first time I had encountered a moment like this. I had been paying attention over the past few years to the national conversation about the death of Black men at the hands of local police and the increasing violence toward migrants crossing the border.

Stories of racialized violence inundated the news cycle, and soon after, my nightstand. I began to look for resources that could help me understand what was happening. I read books and attended conferences and seminars. While all of it was helpful, none of it was focused on helping me *navigate these conversations with young people*. I had been given a lot of resources, but when it came to translating my learning to ministry with young people, I was on my own.

That day in the youth room, I chose to show up with what I had. I decided to approach the students and ask more about what had happened. The story was sobering. All they knew to do in that moment was to pick a side, call the other side names, and debate. They didn't have language to process what had happened.

Neither did I.

As hard as it was to shift my attention and engage the conversation, something became clear on the couch that day. Young people are constantly exposed to racial and ethnic diversity. But they don't have the tools to navigate that diversity well, or interpret it through the eyes of their faith. The best thing I could offer that day was a listening ear.

## OUR WORLD AND THE WORLD JESUS KNEW

According to census data, about two-thirds of all census-counted US Americans today are White. But when you look at those under age 18, that percentage drops to one-half. Projecting ahead to 2060, estimates predict that young people under 18 will be roughly one-third Hispanic, one-third White, and hovering around 10 percent each for African American, Asian American, and multiracial groups. This means the percentage of multiracial young people in particular will double.<sup>1</sup>

Young people today have more opportunities to enter into friendship and relationships with more diverse people than any previous generation. We believe this is something to celebrate! Yet as the adults who accompany young people, we did not always have these same opportunities in our own childhood and adolescence.

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<sup>1</sup> Compiled from S. L. Colby and J. M. Ortman, "Projections of the Size and Composition of the US Population: 2014 to 2060" (March 2015): [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov); and US Census Bureau, *Quick Facts* (2018), <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045218>.

Jesus was no stranger to this kind of world.

He was a bilingual, bicultural, border-crossing, brown-skinned Palestinian Jew.<sup>2</sup> He broke all sorts of historic and socially constructed boundaries that had organized people groups as either “insiders” or “outsiders” and invited us into a new way of being the people of God. Jesus took his Jewish background seriously, but chose to extend himself to other cultures, language groups, immigrant communities, and even historically rival religious and political groups. (We will unpack this further in later chapters.)

At the Fuller Youth Institute, we believe these realities are important to God and important for human flourishing. Therefore, *they must be important to the church.*

We set out to write the guide that we wish we’d had when we encountered situations like mine that night at youth group. In the pages that follow, you will find explanations of commonly used terms that can be helpful when talking about race, a brief history of this conversation in the United States, and helpful next steps to take in the journey toward developing youth ministries that not only talk about race, but actively promote *antiracism*. (We’ll also define words like *antiracism* and how we’re using them.)

Wherever you find yourself, we welcome you into the lifelong work of learning about the complicated dynamics of race in our society. We hope that the next time you feel like all you have to offer teenagers are scribbles on a napkin, you can remember that sometimes our best “sermons” are spontaneous, vulnerable conversations on hand-me-down couches.

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<sup>2</sup> Jesus spoke Aramaic, Greek, and Hebrew. (For a quick reference, see “What Language Did Jesus Speak?” Zondervan Academic, <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/what-language-did-jesus-speak>.) He frequently crossed borders to engage with others (e.g., his stay in a Samaritan village in John 4). For more on Jesus’ cultural location, see “Jewish Palestine at the Time of Jesus,” *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jesus/Jewish-Palestine-at-the-time-of-Jesus>.

## *Authors' Note:*

The scope of this guide addresses race, culture, and ethnicity in the US. We also recognize the need for intersectional<sup>3</sup> conversations, and as authors we are committed to continuous learning. With that commitment in mind, we want to name the lack of Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) and Indigenous representation in this guide. Ahren is African American, Kat is Cuban American, and Jennifer is Guatemalan American. We are indebted to our AAPI and Indigenous sisters and brothers, and hope future projects on this topic involve broader collaboration.

In addition to this guide, you may find FYI's related conversation toolkits helpful, especially for volunteers and parents in your ministry: *Understanding and Relating to [African American, Asian American, or Latino/a] Young People*. Each toolkit addresses one specific culture group, and bilingual versions are available in Korean, Mandarin, and Spanish. Check them out—along with a host of free resources—at [fulleryouthinstitute.org/multicultural](http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/multicultural).

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<sup>3</sup> By *intersectionality*, we mean the interconnected nature of social categories such as race, class, and gender that can be experienced by an individual or group. The term was originally coined by Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, cofounder of the African American Policy Forum, and has come to be used widely across many disciplines, including practical theology.



## CHAPTER 1

# WORDS TO KNOW AND WHY THEY MATTER

*Jennifer Guerra Aldana*

I was born in Guatemala City, Guatemala. My mother is a fair-skinned, tall woman with light brown eyes. My father is exactly four inches shorter than my mother; he has chocolate brown eyes and skin that matches the soil in the garden. I am their firstborn.

My family lived in Puerto Barrios, Izabal, where my parents had purchased land near relatives. But because my mother's pregnancy was considered high-risk, my parents decided to travel over 180 miles to Guatemala City to access better medical care. They served as leaders in our local church, so after my birth, they were eager to return home to their family, friends, and the church community. My mother and I were released from the hospital and made the long trip home. Upon our arrival, the visits began. Out of the many visitors, one who stood out in my mother's memory was that of a missionary. Over my parents' years in ministry, they often worked with missionaries who would come for both short-term and long-term assignments.

When this missionary came to see me, my mother recalls that the woman took me into her arms and exclaimed, "*¡que indita mas bonita!*" ("What a beautiful Indigenous little one!") with lots of enthusiasm—and a dash of shock. My skin resembled my mother's, but my bone structure resembled my dad's. When recounting this visit, my mother is always sure to emphasize that this missionary had mostly worked with the Indigenous populations in our town and was not around many fair-skinned children.

As I grew older, this story shifted from being a fun remembrance at birthday dinners to a comment that deeply offended me.

Why was it that when the missionary made that comment, it came laced with the assumption that *beautiful* and *Indigenous* could not coexist?

Where did this missionary pick up that framework? Why was this story even retold?

While I was invited by my parents into an ethic of love and justice, words that had been spoken over me and around me painted a different picture. I lived with the mixed message that we are all made in God's image, but some of us are labeled "more beautiful" than others based on our skin tone.

I am sure this missionary did not intend her words to have such a harmful impact. If I were to encounter her today, I wonder how we would reflect together on the ways in which colonialism had impacted her language and assumptions. I wonder if she would be able to identify these biases in herself.

*Colonialism* refers to systems of rule by one group over another, where the first group claims the right to exercise exclusive authority, sovereignty, and control over the second group, often resulting in shaping the second group's destiny.<sup>1</sup> The process of colonization often involved the colonizers imposing their language, religion, and cultural practices on native or Indigenous peoples.

The first great wave of colonialism began in the 15th century when countries like Britain, Spain, France, and Portugal colonized lands across North and South America. As such, colonial logic asserted that these lands were first "discovered" by White Europeans, claiming superiority over Indigenous and native peoples, land, and culture. The idea of supremacy in relation to race was established, in which Brown and Black Indigenous people from the Americas and Africa were deemed "savage" and in need of "taming" and "civilizing" according to White European standards. In my experience, it also carried assumptions about who was labeled beautiful and why.

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<sup>1</sup> See S. Howe, *Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

## WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS

When we are children, we are introduced to the alphabet and the rules of grammar. Slowly but surely, we learn to cobble sentences together. We begin to make sense of the world.

Language is not just about threading words together, though. Theologian and church historian Dr. Juan Martínez likens language to a map. Any map we use today is filled with “perceptions, meanings and imagination.”<sup>1</sup> While we tend to think maps are straightforward and simply tell us where to go, the truth is, we also know where to go because we’ve learned to interpret the lines on the paper (or screen). I have never looked at a map with someone without some level of interpretation.

“Avoid that intersection, it tends to be violent.”

“That is a nice, calm road. It is well-paved.”

“Try to go this direction, you’ll encounter less traffic.”

“After a stressful day, I just love driving up that way and having a moment to myself.”

When we speak, we are translating our deepest assumptions and beliefs into statements. Those statements then get to interact with someone else’s experiences, perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions.

I have the gift of being bilingual. I carry two languages—and therefore two maps—in my head. I am constantly translating, not just words, but ways of understanding what happens next.

Whether in Guatemala or in the United States, the way we speak matters. The words we choose matter. We can either set up conversations that yield growth, or destroy any possibility of moving forward. We can either clarify what we mean or offer mixed messages. And when it comes to having conversations around race and ethnicity,

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<sup>1</sup> M. L. Branson and J. F. Martínez, *Churches, Cultures & Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 114.

language becomes even more important. When we show up for conversation, we show up with assumptions based on our own experiences. When our assumptions intersect with another’s social location, this can either enrich the dialogue or, when we misstep, cause harm.

Working with young people and talking about race and ethnicity requires our proficiency in reading and navigating maps. As someone who cares about young people, you probably attend to the ever-changing map of teenage vocabulary, as well as the complicated map of biblical texts. We hope to give you another layer to integrate into discussions about matters of race, ethnicity, and culture—like an overlay to the maps you’re already using; a filter through which you discover multiple meanings, some of which you don’t yet fully understand.

## USING THIS MAP TO TAKE NEXT STEPS

In this guide, we will distill historical and theological contexts and offer glimpses into different perspectives. Chapters 3-6 begin with key terms—“Words to know.” These are meant to orient you and offer language to use. (We’ve collected all of these words, plus a few more, into a full glossary at the end of this guide!)

The final section of every chapter offers practical ideas and suggestions to help you move forward in your work with young people.

We hope this guide provides you with tools to take next steps into awareness and action. As followers of Jesus, one thing we all share in common is a commitment to Jesus’ call to love our neighbor as ourselves.<sup>2</sup> Love is lived out in the ways we show up for one another. Love is lived out in the ways we choose to learn about each other’s experiences in order to move way from fear and avoidance and step into restoration and reconciliation.

Let’s grow and learn *juntos—together*.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:36–40, Mark 12:28–32, Luke 10:25–37.

## INVITATION TO RESPOND

### *Language to swap*

1. Instead of saying, “I totally understand you—I’ve been there,” try “Tell me more about what I might not know about your experience.”
2. Instead of saying, “Oh, you don’t look like \_\_\_\_\_ [ethnic group or racial label],” try “Would you be open to telling me more about your family’s cultural heritage?”
3. Instead of saying, “Your language is too hard for me. I am totally going to mess this word up,” try “Could you please help me practice saying this correctly? I’d like to learn.”

### *Questions for reflection*

1. Reflect on your conversations about race, ethnicity, or immigration. What stands out to you about your conversations? What’s different when you talk with young people and when you talk with adults?
2. If you haven’t had many experiences talking about race, ethnicity, or immigration, what questions do you have that could spark more conversations?
3. Can you identify other leaders who might want to travel on this journey with you?

### *Bring your students along*

1. Invite young people to give you examples of how they have talked about race. Maybe use sticky notes on which they can identify where, how, and with whom they have had either positive or negative conversations, and cluster these notes into common themes. Keep this inventory as a reference point when questions about race and culture come up again. You can also ask how students are using or hearing historically racist terms and reflect on how those terms are so deeply hurtful to the targeted groups.

2. If your group is ethnically and culturally diverse, invite students to self-select into different ethnic groups. In these groups, ask them to talk about language that has been directed at them—language they don't like as well as words they would like others to use. Then share across groups.
3. If your group is not very culturally and ethnically diverse, gather for a movie night that exposes your young people to a different reality than they know, and discuss together afterward.
4. Develop your own “inclusion ground rules” for your group to be mindful of race and culture. You can do this by asking students to get into small groups and suggest ideas around specific aspects of your gathering. For example, what games should we avoid, what language will not be permitted, and what will we do when something hurtful is said? Make a master list and post it in your meeting space or upload to your website. (Note: For help creating a set of ground rules for conversations about race, see Chapter 5).



## CHAPTER 2

# MOVING TOWARD JESUS-CENTERED MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY

*Kat Armas*

Growing up in Miami, an international city often called “the Latin American capital of the US,” meant that I was exposed young to multiethnic realities. As a Cuban American it also meant that I was part of “the majority.” It wasn’t until I left Miami that I realized my culture and experiences were among the minority, especially in traditional evangelical and mainline church spaces.

I learned rather quickly that true diversity must be intentionally sought after and fought for. I also learned that putting in the hard work of living multiethnic and multicultural realities is central not only to God’s kingdom vision, but to *who God is*.

To this end, the “image of God” is not only an individual reality, but a collective one. No one person or one group of people can fully bear all that is God’s image. Instead, each culture, people, and group offer a glimpse of a different aspect of the full image of God.

Isaiah 2 offers a prophetic vision concerning “the days to come,” in which all the nations come to the mountain of the Lord to worship. What’s beautiful about this vision is that the nations don’t join together as *one ethnicity*, but as *their own separate people groups*—representing different countries and races—worshiping God equally, in their own languages and with their own cultural backgrounds.

After Pentecost, we start to see the fulfillment of this as Jews and Gentiles begin to form a blended family in Christ in the book of Acts (which comes to a climax in Acts 15). Later, Paul makes it clear in his letters to the Romans and Galatians that Gentiles do not need to become Jews, nor do Jews need to renounce their Jewishness.<sup>1</sup> Instead, he affirms both

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Galatians 3:26–29.

groups in the distinct ways they worship Jesus. The early church was to be a bicultural body, the foundational principles being mutual submission, respect, and sensitivity toward each other's practices without imposing unnecessary burdens. Ultimately, they were to do everything out of love.

## TOWARD A REVELATION REALITY

The theme of the divine image in a diverse collective resounds as God's desire for a perfected world, culminating in John of Patmos' vision of the new earth as one that possesses "every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9). This "great multitude" of people is not a homogenous one, but one that represents a blended family made up of all races, ethnicities, and nationalities. As we can tell from Revelation 7, God is not "colorblind." Therefore, if we want to live into God's kingdom on earth, we must seek to emulate a "Revelation reality" that invites each person with their own unique cultural background to feel represented and seen—that who they are is elevated and celebrated in the midst of the whole.

I was able to glimpse the multicultural body of Christ while serving as a youth director in a small church plant in Miami. Together, the church reflected a body of diverse people, cultures, races, and ethnicities.

What made this church unique was the way the leadership team was intentionally designed to reflect the Black and Brown migrants who made up the congregation. Not only was everyone able to find themselves represented by those leading, but worship styles and languages were fluid throughout services and beyond. *Spanglish*—an informal mix of Spanish and English—was commonly spoken, and the music from a variety of countries could be heard blasting through small smartphone speakers on any given Sunday. It was a joy to glimpse that Revelation reality and witness God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Throughout the rest of this guide, we hope you can reflect on where you or your church may be on this journey toward a Revelation reality. You may feel like your church represents a similar image of diversity, or you may find it foreign or hard to grasp.

God's vision for a multicultural community is one we must work and struggle for, and we don't do this alone or in isolation. Invite trusted leaders alongside you in imaginative

conversations about how to live into Jesus' prayer that God's kingdom may be known "on earth as it is in heaven."

## INVITATION TO RESPOND

### *Language to swap*

1. Styles of worship and expressions of faith are as diverse as the peoples and cultures they come from. Instead of referring to any one (particularly US American evangelical) style of worship as "normal," try using inclusive language that values all equally.
2. Instead of saying, "Let's all be colorblind," try "God's creativity is on display through different cultures, ethnicities, and languages. We can name what's different without being divisive."

### *Reflection questions*

1. If you are part of a multicultural or multiethnic church, what is the leadership balance like? Who makes decisions? How can that process be more inclusive?
2. If you're not currently involved in a multicultural or multiethnic church, research some in your area and consider attending as a guest, whether in person or online. What are some ways they honor all peoples in their worship services? How do they do this in small groups or more specific ministries? What practices or observations can you take to your own church community?

### *Bring your students along*

1. Explore passages about God's multicultural kingdom together with your students—including Isaiah 2 and Revelation 7. What does it look like for each student to bring their whole cultural and ethnic selves to the table?
2. Help young people point out the discrepancies between God's vision and what they see in their own communities. Brainstorm ideas to address some of those gaps, and help students get to work on solutions.



## CHAPTER 3

# TALKING ABOUT RACE

*Ahren Samuel*

### WORDS TO KNOW

*Antiracist:* A person who is actively doing the work of fighting against racism through their words, actions, and thought processes.

*Colorism:* A form of racism that determines one person is superior to another based on the proximity to *whiteness* of their skin color and physical attributes (e.g., tall, slender, blue eyes, blond hair, thin lips, narrow nose).

*Cultural misorientation:* A specific type of *internalized oppression* that glorifies European culture, which Black people develop through the media, society, and family dynamics.

*Cultural racism:* Racism that exists within a person's own culture.

*Diaspora:* A group of people of similar cultural background who have been stolen from or who migrated from their land of origin and have been dispersed to different parts of the world.

*Internalized oppression:* The prejudiced beliefs we tell ourselves about our own race, culture, religion, gender orientation, and/or socioeconomic group that keep us from being our fully authentic selves.

*Mulatto:* Biracially mixed persons with Black and White ancestry.

*One-drop rule:* Dating back to 1662 in Virginia, this rule stated that anyone with any fraction ("drop") of African "blood" would be considered Black. People with no known African ancestry were called White.

*Person of color (POC):* Refers to any person who is non-White. Sometimes also referred to as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC)

*Prejudice:* A preset opinion about a people group based on culture, race, religion, or socioeconomic status because of false narratives learned through family, the media, conversation, or observation.

*Race:* A social creation that gives or takes power based on skin color and cultural background. Race is a social construct created based on the superiority of *whiteness* to all non-White people.<sup>1</sup>

*Systemic or institutional racism:* Racism that is displayed within our political, religious, educational, and economic institutions and systems.

*Whiteness:* A belief system of cultural superiority that serves as the organizing conceptual framework of Western society.<sup>2</sup> In this framework, blackness is based on what whiteness is not. All people, no matter what racial background, can step into and perpetuate the systems created by whiteness. *White supremacy* asserts the domination of whiteness throughout society and culture.

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1 Race can be hard to define because it is a concept created and perpetuated by those in power. The office of Fuller's Chief of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion uses the following expanded definition: "A dynamic set of historically derived and institutionalized ideas and practices that (1) sorts people into ethnic groups according to perceived physical and behavioral human characteristics; (2) associates differential value, power, and privilege with these characteristics and establishes a social status ranking among the different groups; and (3) emerges (a) when groups are perceived to pose a threat (political, economic, or cultural) to each other's worldview or way of life; and/or (b) to justify the denigration and exploitation (past, current, or future) of, and prejudice toward, other groups." *Racism*, then, refers to "representations, messages, and stories conveying the idea that behaviors and values associated with White people or whiteness are automatically better or more normal than those associated with other racially defined groups." Based on H. R. Markus, "Pride, Prejudice, and Ambivalence: Toward a Unified Theory of Race and Ethnicity," *American Psychologist* 63, no. 8 (2008): 651–70. See also MP Associates and Center for Assessment and Policy Development, "Racial Equity Tools Glossary," <https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary#race>.

2 W. J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010) Loc 530, 634 of 8980, Kindle Edition.

## HAIR, PREJUDICE, AND CULTURAL MISORIENTATION

Growing up, my hair was a source of contention for me. I knew that as a Black girl my hair would never be naturally straight and long like that of some White girls, but that didn't stop me from wanting that type of hair. My mom would always braid my afro and emphasize the beauty of Black culture and hairstyles. I was excited when she braided my hair in small, individual braids all over my head so I could feel like my hair was long and I could flip it around like I would see some of my White friends do.

While you and I may have different stories about our hair, the majority of us living in the US have been exposed to pervasive messaging that reinforces European ideals of beauty. The ideal that really stuck for me as a kid was long, blonde, straight hair. I wasn't aware of it then, but at six years old, I was already starting to “breathe in the stereotypes, omissions, and distortions that reinforce notions of White superiority” as described by educator and author Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum. According to Dr. Tatum, my mom did the right thing in always emphasizing the beauty of Black hair and culture in order to help me see the authentic beauty I held next to my fellow White students. Dr. Tatum explains, “Black girls who receive protective and affirming racial/ethnic socialization and beauty messages at home may be less likely to accept negative stereotype images as reflective of all Black women or themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

But this internalized oppression never fully left my mind and spirit. Deep down, I wanted to be “beautiful” and have long, flowy hair because that's what the media labeled as beautiful. I had always struggled with my hair and the attachment it had to my identity. My *internalized oppression* kept me from being my fully authentic self.

The feelings I had as a girl are all too common among those of us who are Black in the US today. African American studies professor Dr. DeReef Jamison elaborates on the added layer of *internalized oppression* of Black people: “The psychological oppression experienced by people of African descent in the Americas finds its origin in an oppressive European cultural/socialization process that seeks to impose its own cultural values, beliefs, standards, and practices on other cultural groups that are different.”<sup>4</sup>

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3 B. D. Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 90.

4 D. Jamison, *Cultural Misorientation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2015), 5.

## UNPACKING RACE

I don't think there was ever a moment that I wasn't aware I was Black.

There was never an “aha!” realization. As an African American woman who grew up in a middle-class, highly educated family, doing well in school and going to college were ingrained into my psyche from the first grade. But I was also told by my family that I would have to work ten times as hard as my White and non-Black counterparts because, as Black people, we need to prove ourselves intelligent enough to get into the same schools, job interviews, and careers as White people. Therefore, getting as much education as I could was always the goal.

In high school I attended a college preparatory school, so I had massive amounts of homework every week. I also played sports with after-school practices, so I stayed up late to write papers and finish projects. I had two very close friends at my school, but otherwise, high school was a job to me—a vehicle to get me to college.

I was often stressed due to the lack of sleep and unending work, but I knew this was what would launch me into an excellent college. I needed to have the top-notch grades (never average), extracurricular activities, and sports and club participation in order to ensure my college applications were robust. I knew I needed to push harder than others in order to create a successful future for myself.

Also, I wouldn't go to just *any* college or university; I would go to a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) because that is a legacy in my family. My mom never wanted my brother and me to forget that our cultural identity was Black. I attended private, predominantly White institutions from kindergarten through 12th grade, where most of the time I was one of the only Black students in the classroom. It was important to my mom that I “go back to my roots,” as she often said, to continue my education.

Going to a Black college was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I attended an all-female HBCU—Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia—and it was an incredible experience. Learning in a classroom with other intelligent, ambitious, world-changing Black women who were there to thrive and learn from one another—it was true Black girl *magic*. The sisterhood, the life lessons, the encouragement and empowerment of our community were truly one-of-a-kind.

At the same time, my experience also had its challenges. The anti-Blackness and prejudice that exist within the Black *diaspora* both inside and outside of my college's gates are active and hurtful. As Jamison notes, "All people of African descent suffer from some degree of cultural misorientation."<sup>5</sup> My entire Black college experience, with all of its beauty, pain, and challenges, prepared me for a world that does not celebrate the Black woman, though it needs her majesty in every way.

## CULTURAL RACISM AND COLORISM

While attending college in the South, I encountered Black men interested in getting to know me who would see my skin and ask, "What are you mixed with?" They would tell me that they only dated light-skinned Black women. In one of the most culturally celebrated spaces for Black people, I felt the most detached from myself and my African heritage. How ironic, right? *Colorism* and *cultural misorientation* can run deep in the veins of Black people.

Jamison explains this phenomenon of *cultural misorientation*:

Skin color preference is grounded in the mulatto hypothesis, which states that higher preference is given to people with more European features than those with African features. Hence, light skin, slim noses, small lips, and light eye coloration are given preference over dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and dark eye coloration and, throughout the diaspora and on the continent of Africa, may result in better treatment and even higher salaries.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jamison, *Cultural Misorientation*, 10.

Let's go back in history and explain the origin of this hypothesis. According to church historian Jemar Tisby, author of *The Color of Compromise*, "The development of the idea of race required the intentional actions of people in the social, political, and religious spheres to decide that skin color determined who would be enslaved and who would be

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<sup>5</sup> Jamison, *Cultural Misorientation*, 3.

free.”<sup>6</sup> When Europeans came into contact with imported Africans and people indigenous to North America, they knew they needed to organize society, but didn’t have immediate answers about how. What they did inherently bring was a White superiority complex that lighter-skinned people were more attractive because they were more European-looking. Colonists had these internalized racist ideas long before chattel slavery was initiated.<sup>7</sup>

But due to the transatlantic enslavement trade that continued for over 300 years, chattel slavery in the South, and the conquests of White slave masters over their Black female slaves, the concepts of the *mulatto* (biracial) and the “one-drop rule” were developed. The one-drop rule was created to draw a clear line between Black and White. “In both legal and social practice, anyone with any known African ancestry (no matter how far back in the family lineage) was considered Black, while only those without any trace of known African ancestry were called Whites.”<sup>8</sup> The one-drop rule was officially put into the US Census in the 20th century: After 1920, the *mulatto* category was dropped and the term “Black” referred to anyone who contained Black ancestry.<sup>9</sup> All of these distinctions were created to keep Black people in a place of inferiority, and this is the very core of racism: *a system of advantage based on race*.<sup>10</sup>

## SEEING AND BREAKING THE CYCLES OF RACISM

I appreciate Dr. Tatum’s description of the cycle of racism using the metaphor of a moving walkway at the airport. *Active* racism or racist behavior is the equivalent of walking fast on the walkway. “The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of *White supremacy* and is moving with it.”<sup>11</sup>

*Passive* racism is equivalent to standing still on a moving walkway floor. “No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination

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6 J. Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 27.

7 Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 27, 29.

8 Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 301.

9 Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 302.

10 See Dr. David Wellman in Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 87.

11 Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 91.

as those who are actively walking.”<sup>12</sup> Some bystanders may see active racism taking place in front of them and choose to not participate, turn around, and walk the other way. But unless these bystanders begin “walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt—unless they are actively antiracist—they will find themselves carried along with the others.”<sup>13</sup>

The church has been both the passive and active racist, and this must change in order to dismantle racism within our systems and society. The first step for many of us is waking up to see that we are on the walkway in the first place.

As Americans and Christians, we are currently living in a time when it is evident that being “not racist” is no longer sufficient to create change. We are either acting in racist or antiracist ways. There is no in-between. According to Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, an *antiracist* is someone “who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, someone who is actively doing the work of fighting against racism through their words, actions, and thought processes—running the other way on the conveyor belt.

The wealth gap, prison industrial complex, inadequate funding for education in marginalized communities, harsh immigration laws, and the killing of Black and Brown people at the hands of police are all examples of *systemic or institutional racism* impacting our communities right now.<sup>15</sup> Systemic racism is all too pervasive within our political, religious, educational, and economic structures.

That is why, while each of us need friendships with people of another race, we can’t stop there. Tisby argues that while these kinds of friendships are critical, they aren’t enough to create real change. “Christians must also alter how impersonal systems operate so that they might create and extend racial equality.”<sup>16</sup>

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12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 I. X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 13.

15 For a thoroughly detailed example of institutional racism in our policing and criminal legal system, see M. Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010, 2012).

16 Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 193.

Tisby's recommendation for Christians and the church is to participate in the ARC of racial justice—a framework he created to help us move forward together. ARC stands for Awareness, Relationships, and Commitment.

In order to fight our complicity with racism, our growing *awareness* helps us expand our knowledge of marginalized groups and the issues they face. That means reading and learning about the racial history of the US, including what may not have been taught to us in high school. This creates awareness and gives us context for our present-day reality along with a theological perspective. (See Kat's work in Chapter 2 for more theological framing around race and culture.) For more ways to create awareness, Tisby also suggests:

- Watching documentaries on the history of the US
- Following leaders of color on social media, including those who have different social and political views than you
- Looking at websites and listening to podcasts created by, and about, ethnic and racial minorities
- Doing an internet search on a term, event, or historical figure instead of asking your Black friends or colleagues to educate you
- Participating in a march, protest, or townhall meeting to become more informed and show your support and solidarity with marginalized groups<sup>17</sup>

Awareness isn't enough. Fostering meaningful *relationships* with people of different ethnicities and races is also needed. Start by finding new places to hang out that you don't normally frequent, maybe even in different neighborhoods. Perhaps try joining a sports club or activity with people who don't look like you.

The last letter in ARC, *commitment*, is likely the hardest part of pursuing racial justice. Commitment necessitates a holistic shift in the way we think and live. Some action steps Tisby suggests for enacting this lifelong commitment to racial justice include:

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<sup>17</sup> Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 195.

- Find ways to create something—write a blog post, host a discussion group
- Join an organization that advocates for racial justice; consider donating money to their cause
- Speak with officials and candidates for elected office in your area about their views on racial justice and their policy commitments
- VOTE!<sup>18</sup>

Our participation and voices are needed in unison—it is the duty and privilege of the church to lead the charge in antiracism work. As Tisby encourages, “It is time to cancel compromise. It is time to practice courageous Christianity.”<sup>19</sup>

## RETURNING TO MYSELF

The long journey of learning how to love myself—in a world that so often tries to turn me against myself—has brought me into self-love in my beautiful Black body. Thanks to lots of internal and external self-work, I’ve realized my self-love and Black joy are forms of resistance.

After college, I began a journey of coming back home to myself. I surrounded myself with other Black people and people of color. I also made the active choice to continue to research African history, culture, African-centered spiritual practices, and my ancestry. I’m very grateful for my friends who have careers in African-centered psychology, Black liberation work, and activism. They have helped me continue to foster and cultivate my fully Black self that is profoundly rooted in the *diaspora* and my ancestry filled with deep pain, strength, and hope.

As an African American, I’ve always lived in two worlds at once. I’ve had to explore this more because it was part of my childhood but was never named until adulthood. The “double consciousness” about which sociologist, writer, and activist W. E. B. Du Bois spoke

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<sup>18</sup> Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 197.

<sup>19</sup> Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 215.

named my experience. Without realizing it, my parents would emphasize the importance of dressing in a more European (or “professional”) aesthetic when it came to preparing for interviews (black blazer and slacks) and to make sure my hair was pulled back—nothing too elaborate or creative. Or when going out with family or friends to a concert or restaurant, we would joke about trying not to be “those loud Black people” who get kicked out for having our Black joy mistaken for misconduct.

We lived—and still live—with the tension of the societal- and self-regulation of our bodies and actions in order to be considered acceptable as fully human in society while also trying to live fully and authentically in our beautiful Black bodies. Although we know our roots are African, we are also American and we are constantly reminded that we are a stolen people who reside in a land that we were forced to build for free. The space we live in is part-American dream, part-African American reality.

Thinking back to when I was a teenager, it would have been so beneficial to have a proud Black or other POC mentor. I would have loved for high-school-Ahren to have had a youth group leader to help her walk through the stress and anxiety of being a young Black student in mostly White schools. And while my mom involved me in programs for college-bound Black high school students, I also wish someone had told me that the SAT and ACT didn’t define me as a person and that my future didn’t depend on getting a perfect score.

I’m not going to say I’m fully healed or that the internal oppression of *White supremacy* doesn’t still linger, but I will say that I am a proud and strong Black woman who stands firm in her culture, beliefs, values, and passions. I am “undaunted by the fight”<sup>20</sup> and wouldn’t want to look or be any other way than I am: unapologetically and unashamedly Black. I hope we can help the young people around us feel the same way.

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20 Spelman College Hymn. Words and music by Mrs. Eddy Money Shivery, Class of 1934.

## INVITATION TO RESPOND

### *Language to swap*

1. Instead of saying, “I don’t see race,” try “I’m learning how the social construct of race impacts us all.”
2. Instead of saying, “I have never heard that [perspective, term, version of history],” try “That is new to me; I’ll learn more about it. Thank you for sharing with me.”
3. Instead of saying, “You’re offended by something that has nothing to do with me,” try “I didn’t know that my actions were impacting your life. I will keep listening to you and take the time to explore my privilege and impact more. Thank you.”

### *Reflection questions*

1. What is the language used in your community when speaking about Black people or other people of color? Who are the people you have been told to avoid? Who has shaped those narratives?
2. If you are Black or a person of color, how have you seen colorism or other forms of cultural racism play out in your life? If you haven’t experienced colorism in your context, how have you seen it portrayed in the media?
3. Listen for stories that speak to experiences beyond your own close relationships and your own heritage. Listen for things you have in common and things you do not.

### *Bring your students along*

Ask students questions like:

1. What are some things you hear about the causes of racism and racialized violence? What do you know about the history of racialized laws and policies in America? How do you talk about this history at school?
2. What is hard about the racial dynamics at your school, in your neighborhood, and/or in your home?

3. Do you feel safe at school and in your neighborhood (physically and emotionally)? Why or why not?
4. What do you think needs to change in your school or community for racial dynamics to improve? Who can you talk to or advocate with to create change?

Begin to generate ideas together, considering:

1. What are the best ways we can address racial injustice and racial dynamics in our ministry or group? How can we begin to create new rhythms and practices together?
2. What do we want to accomplish out of these new rhythms? What is the new environment we want to create through our intentional actions? What Scripture verses can inform our work and commitments? How do we hope that will change us and our world?
3. Try increasing student awareness in small steps. For example, ask students to take note of the biases or prejudices they encounter in one specific day, whether in the media, at school, or in conversation. Tell them to come prepared to share what they noticed, how they responded, and how they felt afterwards. Wonder together how they could actively work against these everyday biases and prejudices.



## CHAPTER 4

# TALKING ABOUT IMMIGRATION

*Kat Armas*

### WORDS TO KNOW

*Migration:* The movement of people from one place to another with the intentions of settling, permanently or temporarily, at a new geographic region. Movements are often over long distances and can be from one country to another (*immigration*; see below) or within a country or region itself. People may migrate as individuals, in family units, or in large groups. Migration can be voluntary, out of necessity, or forced.

*Immigration:* The international movement of people to a country of which they are not natives or where they do not possess citizenship in order to settle as permanent residents.

*Refugee:* A displaced person who is forced to leave their country *due to war, natural disaster, or fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.*

*Exile:* The state of being barred from one's native country, typically for political or punitive reasons.

*Hispanic:* People who share Spanish as a common language; a term adopted by the US government in the 1970s to give people from Latin America a common identity.<sup>1</sup>

*Latina/o:* Any person of Latin American descent residing in the United States. Latinos can have many colors, languages, and cultural backgrounds. This is not to be confused with *Latin Americans*, which refers to the people actually living in Latin America right now.<sup>2</sup>

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1 M. Hugo Lopez, J. Manuel Krogstad and J. S. Passel, "Who is Hispanic?" (September 15, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/11/who-is-hispanic/>.

2 For a helpful brief overview, see L. Garcia-Navarro, "Hispanic Or Latino? A Guide For The U.S. Presidential

*Afro-Latina/o*: Latin Americans with African ancestry. The term may also refer to historical or cultural elements in Latin America thought to have originated within this community. In the US, Latinos with Caribbean roots are more likely to identify as Afro-Latino or Afro-Caribbean than those with roots elsewhere in Latin America.<sup>3</sup>

*Asian American*: Asian American became a US Census category in 1980, including persons who originate from “the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent.”<sup>4</sup> The term grew out of 1960s activism, and is sometimes used to show solidarity between cultural groups across pan-Asian backgrounds.<sup>5</sup>

*AAP/*: This common acronym stands for “Asian American Pacific Islander” and has been used to include Native Hawaiians and people groups from the Melanesian, Micronesian, and Polynesian island regions of the Pacific.

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Campaign” (August 27, 2015), <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/08/27/434584260/hispanic-or-latino-a-guide-for-the-u-s-presidential-campaign>

3 Gustavo López and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, “Afro-Latino: A deeply rooted identity among U.S. Hispanics,” March 1, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/01/afro-latino-a-deeply-rooted-identity-among-u-s-hispanics/>.

4 Asian Pacific Institute, “Census Data and API Identities,” [www.api-gbv.org](http://www.api-gbv.org).

5 See Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil, “After 50 years of ‘Asian American,’ advocates say the term is ‘more essential than ever’” NBC News (May 31, 2018), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/after-50-years-asian-american-advocates-say-term-more-essential-n875601>.

## GOD IS WITH THOSE WHO MIGRATE

Growing up in Miami, Florida—a city made up primarily of immigrants—carried a particular weight. As a Cuban American, I felt the deep longing for a land not my own—the same way Israel longed for their land within and during their own seasons of displacement.

This can be seen most vividly through the psalmist’s words of anguish in Psalm 137: “By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.” While in exile, the Israelites longed for their land: “How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?”<sup>1</sup>

Like the Israelites’ longing for Jerusalem, the longing for Cuba has shaped the collective identity of my community, particularly those of us in the diaspora. As such, we are a people perpetually in *exile*—a truth that informed my world even as a young person.

My grandfather fled Cuba one night after rumors that he would be arrested for speaking against Fidel Castro’s regime. The Castro Revolution in 1959 caused a swell of political uncertainty and economic hardship, forcing thousands to leave the island with only a few belongings. Many, including my family, arrived in the US with the hopes of one day returning to their homes. That day never came for the majority of them. Decades later, their longing for their island still remains.

I was raised in a Catholic home, and my grandmother often told stories of God’s people in movement: the story of Israel headed out of Egypt to the Promised Land, or Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem. Mary’s story was her favorite, and it soon became mine. The narrative of a young woman on the move, pregnant, in search of safety, offered a source of comfort and solidarity—the fear and uncertainty she must have felt for herself and her family felt familiar to me.

As a symbol, Mary became even more personal as I began serving as a youth leader and engaging with other young people shaped by similar notions of exile and displacement. One evening after sharing about Mary’s story of *migration* at a Protestant youth camp, a young girl whose family had immigrated from Venezuela approached me and shared her

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 137:4

struggle of feeling *ni de aquí, ni de allá* (“neither from here nor from there”)—a sentiment commonly felt by many immigrant or second-generation people who feel stuck between two worlds.

“Where do I find God in that?” she asked.

Because of how strongly both stories—Mary’s and my student’s—had resonated with my own, I was able to remind her of what spoke volumes to me: Mary’s story is what gave birth (literally) to the reality of Emmanuel—God with us. The truth is that even within exile, God is close, present, intimate, *with* us in the in-between. Like the way Jesus was with Mary in her womb while on their journey.

Living in the United States means that we will continually cross paths with those who are intimately acquainted with movement—it’s the backbone of our country and what makes it so unique, vibrant, and diverse. Migration is what gives flavor to our nation. It gives us new melodies and beats to dance to.

However, the songs of our migrant neighbors are often silenced, particularly by those in power. Many who arrive to this country because of desperate circumstances are dehumanized, stripped of their dignity, and referred to as “illegal” whether their actual status in the legal immigration system is “documented,” “undocumented,” or somewhere in between.

Echoing my Venezuelan student, I asked then and keep asking now, “Where do we find God in that?”—what does God have to say about people who are in movement? The notion of *immigration* is not only deeply personal, but also something I must consistently wrestle with both in action and reflection as a Christian living in the United States of America.

Understanding both the history and the reasons for migration from biblical times to the present day helps us develop a holistic immigration ethic that will inevitably inform how we pray, how we vote, and how we engage this conversation with others—including the young people in our lives. Ultimately, it will inform how we treat “the foreigner” in our midst.

## SCRIPTURES AND MIGRATION

Reading through the narratives of Scripture, we find that God is not silent on the subject of immigration. Instead, God gives strict instructions on how immigrants should be treated and protected. As a daughter of Cuban American immigrants aware of the unique struggles my family has faced, learning about God's heart concerning immigration has transformed how I view myself and my community as children and image-bearers of the Divine.

In many ways, the Bible was written by, for, and about migrants, immigrants, and *refugees*, with countless references to the movement of God's people.

For example, in the Old Testament we learn that God requires through the law that immigrants be treated just like those native to the land (Leviticus 19:33–34). Prophets delivered God's message to the people that they must not mistreat, oppress, or exploit the refugee in their midst (Jeremiah 22:3). Additionally, the Bible's stories are full of narratives of immigrants or "foreigners" including Ruth, Abraham, Hagar, Joseph, and the Canaanite woman who approached Jesus (Matthew 15:21–28).

Chicano studies scholar Robert Chao Romero refers to the biblical notion of movement in these terms: "migration as grace."<sup>2</sup> He explains that God uses the migration process to extend unmerited favor, lovingkindness, and compassion both to immigrants and the countries privileged to host them. This speaks not only to the notion of "welcoming" immigrants, but also that doing so leads to a *mutuality* in blessing.

Migration as grace speaks to God's law of hospitality with Matthew 25 as its foundation: when we feed, clothe, and look after the immigrant, we do so to Jesus; similarly, when we reject immigrants, we reject Jesus.

An enduring characteristic of Christianity is its sense of social responsibility to care for the poor. This can be seen most clearly through Jesus' ministry of perpetual compassion and inclusivity. During his life, Jesus was unafraid to transcend cultural and religious norms for the sake of a single individual's material and spiritual well-being. The life Jesus lived

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2 J. Nathan Matias, "Migration as the Manifold Grace of God: Robert Chao Romero" (August 5, 2017), <https://blog.emergingscholars.org/2017/08/migration-as-the-manifold-grace-of-god-robert-chao-romero/>.

(and that inspires our own way of living) is one that is overwhelmingly seen through the collective practices of hospitality and focus on the neighbor in need.

## JESUS AND MIGRATION

Jesus' own narrative is one intimately acquainted with, and affected by, the notion of displacement and belonging. In the second chapter of Matthew, we read about Mary, Joseph, and Jesus' "flight into Egypt" in which an angel of the Lord appears and warns Joseph to leave Bethlehem for Egypt because King Herod was planning "to seek out the child to destroy him" (Matthew 2:13). This narrative details the reality that Jesus' family was forced to flee their homeland for fear of persecution—making Jesus and his family refugees by definition.

Not only is Jesus' own life formed by the reality of migration, but he also articulates in Matthew 25 how we are to respond to the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned, and those needing basic necessities. According to Jesus, we are to treat those in need as if they were Jesus himself. Many of Jesus' parables also highlight the notion that we are to invite to the table outsiders—especially those who would otherwise be social outcasts. In the parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:13–23), Jesus even encourages his followers to invite guests who cannot repay the host's hospitality.

Jesus lives out this brand of hospitality in how he interacts with "the least of these" in society, including marginalized women. Jesus engages in theological conversations with women who were considered ethnic and cultural outsiders, like the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1–42) and the Canaanite mother who seeks healing for her daughter (Matthew 15:21–28).

## WHY PEOPLE MIGRATE

There are all kinds of misconceptions and false narratives about migration in our society. Most stem from a lack of knowledge about the *why* behind migration. Some people *choose* to migrate (to enhance career opportunities, for example), while others are *forced* to migrate due to safety reasons, which often stem from issues out of their control (like war or famine).

We are impacted by these various migration histories in the US whether we think much about it or not. For example, many of us live on land to which we or our families migrated from somewhere else. Most of that land was made available through the forced exile of Native peoples into geography with which they were completely unfamiliar—whether by the Trail of Tears from the southeastern states to “Indian Territory” across the Mississippi River, or the forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their original dwellings along the West Coast.

Uprooting your life to resettle in a new country is no small or easy decision, and it can stem from several factors.

### *People migrate for different reasons*

1. *Environmental:* Migration caused by environmental displacement is usually involuntary. Some examples include crop failure or famine, which can result in food scarcity and the loss of agricultural jobs. This can cause people to migrate in search of food and, ultimately, survival. Natural disasters also cause people to migrate. For example, tsunamis, earthquakes, and hurricanes have forced people to leave their homes in search of shelter and basic supplies.
2. *Political:* People migrate for political reasons, typically tied to danger from war or political persecution. Persecution can arise from civil or political unrest, forcing people to move as refugees in search of safer living conditions for their families.
3. *Social/cultural:* Many people migrate for cultural and social reasons birthed from human needs and the desire for a better quality of life, including, for example, relief from discrimination based on nationality, race, religion, or status. Migrants may seek better opportunities for themselves and their families for many reasons, from education to medical needs.
4. *Economic:* Migration for economic reasons is often what we hear about most. Sometimes people move to find work or follow a particular career path. However, it's important to note the role played by *push and pull factors*.

## Push and pull factors

*Push factors* are reasons people would want to leave their home country, or things that push them out. *Pull factors* are reasons people would want to go to a new country, or what's drawing them there. Push and pull factors affect the *why* in all of the reasons mentioned above.

Push factors include persecution, violence, and war. Pull factors include safety, stability, and freedom. Poor wages and lack of jobs push people out, while higher wages and job prospects pull people in. Crop failure, famine, pollution, and natural disasters are considered push factors, while food availability and better living environment are pull factors.

Lastly, limited opportunities, lack of necessary services, and family separation push people out of their home countries, while family reunification, better quality of life, and availability of necessary services pull people into new environments. Push and pull factors work hand in hand, making immigration complex and multifaceted.

## MIGRATION'S POSITIVE IMPACT

It's important to note the positive economic impact that migration has on both sending and receiving countries. In sending countries, immigrants have emerged as a critical source of economic aid to their homelands through the billions of dollars in annual remittances<sup>3</sup> they send home to relatives. According to Peter Hakim, the president emeritus of the Inter-American Dialogue, remittances are perhaps Latin America's most important resource.<sup>4</sup> US *Latino/a* immigrants, specifically, send upwards of \$50 billion a year to their home countries, which helps reduce poverty and improve long-term national development.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, in receiving countries, immigrant workers—including undocumented

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3 A remittance is a transfer of money, often by a foreign worker to an individual in their home country.

4 Inter-American Dialogue is a US-based research institute in the field of international affairs, headquartered in Washington DC, which intends to “foster democratic governance, prosperity, and social equity in Latin America and the Caribbean.” The Dialogue's research areas focus on the rule of law, education, migration, remittances, energy, climate change and extractive industries. P. Hakim, “All in the Family: Latin America's Most Important International Financial Flow,” Inter-American Dialogue (January 2004), 1.

5 E. Rosser, “Immigrant Remittances,” *Connecticut Law Review* 41 (2008): 1–62.

immigrants—expand the economy and generate economic benefits and growth. They do so by bringing in more revenue than they cost, and by contributing more toward taxes than the benefits they receive. For example, in 2014, immigrants paid an estimated \$328 billion in state, local, and federal taxes.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, their geographic mobility helps local economies respond to worker shortages, smoothing out bumps that could otherwise weaken the economy. Immigrant workers help support the US-born population, increasing the number of workers as compared to retirees and bolstering the Social Security and Medicare trust funds.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, because ambition is often necessary to migrate, immigration frequently brings people who are more likely to start small businesses. In fact, while immigrants accounted for only 13.7 percent of the US population in 2017, they made up almost 30 percent of all new entrepreneurs in the United States that year. Immigrants continue to be nearly twice as likely as native-born people to start businesses.<sup>8</sup>

Migrants also increase national collaboration and globalization. The bilingual and bicultural people who come to the United States as young children are very useful for companies wanting to do business across the globe, adding to the value of business ventures.

Besides economic impact, migrants from other countries contribute gifts to their communities, namely, a strong emphasis on family and community values. These gifts lend to the flourishing of both US society and Christian culture.

In regard to Christianity and migration, there is also the notion of “reverse mission,” where immigrants bring “the mission field” closer, giving US Christians the opportunity to engage with other cultures right under their roof. And as we welcome and dignify

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6 D. Kosten, “Immigrants as Economic Contributors: Immigrant Tax Contributions and Spending Power,” Immigration Forum (September 6, 2018), <https://www.immigrationforum.org/article/immigrants-as-economic-contributors-immigrant-tax-contributions-and-spending-power/>.

7 A. Sherman, D. Trisi, C. Stone, S. Gonzalez, and S. Parrott, “Immigrants Contribute Greatly to U.S. Economy, Despite Administration’s ‘Public Charge’ Rule Rationale,” from *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities* (August 15, 2019), <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/immigrants-contribute-greatly-to-us-economy-despite-administrations>.

8 Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, “2017 The Kauffman Index of Startup Activity: National Trends” (Kansas City, MO: 2017), available at [https://www.kauffman.org/kauffman-index/reporting/-/media/kauffman\\_org/kauffman-index/print-reports/startup-index/2017/2017\\_kauffman\\_index\\_startup\\_activity\\_national\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://www.kauffman.org/kauffman-index/reporting/-/media/kauffman_org/kauffman-index/print-reports/startup-index/2017/2017_kauffman_index_startup_activity_national_report_final.pdf).

immigrants, we are acting in accord with commands throughout Scripture.

## THE US CHURCH'S RESPONSE IN RECENT HISTORY

The US church's response to migration has varied throughout the years—often depending on the political and social climate of the day. In the early 1900s, migrant workers were welcomed with open arms for cheap labor during wartime. Some were able to naturalize, but others were pushed back to their countries and regions during the Great Depression.<sup>9</sup>

US churches started asking more questions about migration during World War II, when some began to support the rights of migrant workers and temper negative public perceptions of Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans.<sup>10</sup> While these actions were generally well-intentioned, they often came as a form of charity rather than seeing the migrant as an equal, or as a sister or brother in Christ. However, things began to shift in the mid-1900s as church leaders marched with farmworkers led by Dolores Huerta and César Chávez in the 1960s. This particular movement had a deeply religious core influenced by these leaders' Catholic faith.

The US began to see the beginning of the “sanctuary movement” in the 1980s, when many churches felt it was their task as Christians to support and help migrants needing protection. Over 500 churches participated, assisting people and preventing deportations. In the 1980s, there was also an influx of *Marielitos*<sup>11</sup> from Cuba. Often thanks to church influence, support and advocacy organizations began to rapidly develop, aimed at working toward protecting the undocumented. Similarly, as Mexico suffered through civil wars, historical Protestant churches and liberation theologians took the lead in supporting refugees.

In more recent times, bills like the H.R.4437 (passed in 2005) make it a felony to provide aid to the undocumented. While it never officially became law, the bill induced fear in pastors and priests, forcing them to wrestle with life-altering decisions in their ministry

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9 “Migration and Immigration During the Great Depression,” in American Yawp, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/ushistory2ay/chapter/migration-and-immigration-during-the-great-depression-2/>.

10 A. Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice, and the Japanese American Incarceration During World War II*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 3.

11 Marielitos was the name given to the Cuban immigrants who left Cuba from the Port of Mariel in 1980. About 135,000 Cubans left the country for the United States between April and September in what became known as the Mariel boatlift.

efforts. Christians have also played an important role in movements like “Day Without Immigrants” strikes, marches, protests, refugee resettlement, and calling for the support of immigration reform.

The church’s responses to immigration are complex and have often been divisive, even among Jesus-followers. With the rhetoric of “build the wall” the last few years, immigration has become a more partisan topic. However, this shouldn’t deter us from joining the thousands of churches across US history who have taken part in the ancient biblical practices of hospitality and solidarity with the marginalized. Engaging with these values can range from assistance with integration processes to education and advocacy for both policy and individual migrants.

Following Jesus on our pilgrimage through this world relativizes any national borders that define some people as “illegal.” While government processes may categorize individuals with a particular legal status, we are defined at our core by a greater source. A person’s primary identity is bestowed in Christ; and it is Christ we welcome when we welcome the stranger.

Immigration is not just an issue; it is an embodied reality young people bring to church, to their reading of Scripture, and to their expression of worship. If we are to welcome young migrant people as Jesus did, we need to foster processes and structures that humanize them.

It’s important to start with Scripture as we disciple our young people, but we need to be sure we’re reading it from where we live. How we interpret and apply Scripture is deeply influenced by our social location and lived experience.

Jean Carlos Arce provides three ways to read the Bible with immigrant youth in a helpful post on FYI’s blog at [fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/scripture-and-immigrant-youth](https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/scripture-and-immigrant-youth).

## INVITATION TO RESPOND

### *Language to swap*

1. Instead of saying *illegal*, say *undocumented*.
2. Instead of asking, “Where are you from?” try “Did you grow up locally?”
3. Instead of saying, “I bet you were raised on kimchi!” or “I love Mexican food!” try “What did you like to eat growing up?” or “What does your family like to eat during special holidays?”

### *Reflection questions*

1. Before you engage with someone else’s migration story, take some time to learn about yours. Call family members and get to know more details of your own heritage. Ask them what they remember and what they miss from living in another part of the world (or another part of the country).
2. Consider the last time you met someone with a different heritage than you. What assumptions did you make about them? What did you later learn that either affirmed or challenged those assumptions?

### *Bring your students along*

1. Do some research to find different organizations in your area that are working with migrant populations. Ask what kind of support they need.
2. Start a Bible study with students that highlights migration in Scripture. Invite them to point out the realities that characters in Scripture faced while they were in movement. Start with some of the passages mentioned in this section, or start in Genesis and Exodus—two whole books about migrating people!
3. Teach students about the realities of migration in the US and its effects—whether in a small group or a workshop. Get them to think about questions like “Who benefits from borders?” and the circumstances that would lead some people to cross them.



## CHAPTER 5

# PREPARING TO TEACH ABOUT RACISM AND OPPRESSION IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT

*Ahren Samuel*

## WORDS TO KNOW

*Multicultural context:* A group or environment that contains two or more cultures or ethnicities.

*Frame of reference:* The social location, culture, language, and background from which one comes or operates.<sup>1</sup>

*Bias:* Judgment based on a false narrative or stereotype.

*Generational trauma:* The impact of trauma experienced by a person's ancestors that is felt and echoed throughout two or more family generations.

*Urban exegesis:* Observing and interpreting an urban environment or neighborhood through sociocultural, systemic, and spiritual lenses.

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<sup>1</sup> C. H. Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 15.

## TEACHING IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT

By this point, you're probably fired up and ready to talk with young people about race—at least we hope so. Maybe you're already preparing your next youth group talk or Bible study lesson.

Before you begin to teach about racism and oppression in a multicultural context, we recommend you first check in with yourself. Start with a few questions:

*Are you aware of your own biases and prejudices that impact how you see the world and people around you?*

*Do you have people who will both support and hold you accountable in this very important work?*

Vulnerability and teachability are key, especially when teaching and learning about race and oppression. I haven't always gotten it right when it comes to race and culture. I never had an African immigrant friend in my life until I started a graduate program at Fuller Theological Seminary four years ago. Before then, my interactions with African people were never pleasant. In my travels abroad and in the US, I felt like I received unpleasant stares from African people or had very short conversations with them, all of which I attributed to their arrogance.

I grew up feeling a disconnect with African people. I heard that Africans thought they were better than African Americans because they knew their family lines and history, while we were a lost, stolen, inauthentic, and diluted people. As a result, I never wanted to go to Africa—I didn't feel it was my "homeland."

But when I got to Fuller, my feelings changed. I met some wonderful African brothers and sisters who took the time to get to know me. I was surprised at first, wondering why they wanted to talk with me and be my friend. But I could feel the presence of God in our interactions and I knew I needed healing in this part of my heart and my own prejudice.

We talked about the very real divisions that exist between the African and African American communities. We ate meals together and talked about our similarities and differences, the beauty of Black people, our families—you name it! My mind and heart were transformed in an unexpected way by these interactions.

I am forever grateful to my African brothers and sisters for their grace and love through this process. This transformation in thinking helped me to love my African self and my African heritage even more. I am on the difficult journey with you, friends.

## IF YOU ARE A LEADER OF COLOR

As an African American woman, I've never known what it was like to *not* talk about race. How I am perceived and valued (or more often, devalued) in the world matters and it pervades my daily awareness. These are the layers I live with regularly as a leader of color, and I also need outlets to express this daily burden.

Ask yourself: "Am I aware of my racial triggers?" Racial triggers are things I may see, hear, or talk about that create a feeling of discomfort or anger in my body, mind, and soul.

Ask, "Am I aware of my own *generational trauma* that may get activated in these difficult conversations?" It's not just about my daily lived experience, but also about the experiences of my ancestors, which live in my body. As leaders of color, it is important to be aware of our emotions and the racial stress we hold in our bodies in order to be able to provide emotional space for ourselves and others.

Especially if, as a leader of color, you are working in a predominantly White context, the internalized oppression you feel may become intense. Make sure you have someone to talk to (ideally onsite in the same ministry or organization) when you start to feel emotions associated with inferiority or become burdened by a lack of representation.

"How do you do it? What are the strategies and practices you keep as you lead in White spaces?"

After being asked this question dozens of times, Jenn put together some ideas and practices that have sustained her in a resource on FYI's website: "4 Healing Steps for Leaders of Color Serving in White Spaces." Find it at [fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/4-healing-steps-for-leaders](https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/4-healing-steps-for-leaders).

If you serve in a marginalized community, you may not have the money to buy resources that are culturally relevant and specific. This can lead to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Make sure you have emotional support and a creative thought partner who can help you find ways to diversify your curriculum.

Take care of yourself mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally while doing this work. Draw courage and inspiration from our ancestors—those who came before us in the struggle for liberation and equality. “We are surrounded by a ‘cloud of witnesses’ who will give us courage if we let them.”<sup>1</sup> Evoking Hebrews 11, Dr. Beverly Tatum discusses the importance for her, as a Black woman and person of faith, of researching other Black women who have changed our society and world for the better, along with White leaders past and present.

Knowing our past helps us understand our present and build up our future. We are never alone, and those who came before us can give us a blueprint to follow.

## IF YOU ARE A WHITE LEADER

As a White or White-identifying leader, before you teach in a multicultural context, you must work to educate yourself. Do some research and learn the history that you may not have been taught growing up.

Talking about race and racism may be new to you, and you may have fears about bringing it up. Dr. Tatum speaks of a “White culture of silence” around racism. But silence is costly. “Unchallenged personal, cultural, and institutional racism results in the loss of human potential, lowered productivity, and a rising tide of fear and violence in our society.”<sup>2</sup>

Mindful inclusivity in your work is important. Invite a few people of color to be thought partners and mentors, and consider paying for training or coaching in diversity and inclusion led by people of color. Be careful not to place the burden on your friends of color to educate you about their struggles and experiences. Before you approach them with questions, ask their permission to have a conversation. It is not the job or duty of people of color to educate White people about their history or struggle. Being put in that position

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1 Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 340. Tatum’s own list of encouraging witnesses includes Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and Zora Neale Hurston.

2 Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 337.

is stressful and can often be triggering and retraumatizing.

At the same time, it is important to learn from a non-White cultural lens. Seek role models who are people of color, and identify and learn from leaders of color throughout history. Form groups with people from your similar background and listen to podcasts about race for White people and by people of color. Watch documentaries made by people of color about their experiences and history. Read fiction and enjoy music and artwork created by people of color. These are all ways to cultivate humility and teachability, which are key as you lead students in a multicultural context.

For up-to-date recommendations for reading, listening, and watching to educate yourself and others, visit [fulleryouthinstitute.org/multicultural](https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/multicultural).

## **BUILDING A LEADER-STUDENT CONNECTION AND SAFE ENVIRONMENT**

Whether you are a White leader or a leader of color, as a teacher, you are the group's guide. Your relationship with students is important to their feeling comfortable, emotionally safe, and empowered to ask questions and dig deeper into content.

Make sure the room where you meet is set up in an inclusive and non-linear way, so it feels inviting. If group size allows, gather in a circle. When the room is set up this way, everyone is physically on the same level and the environment feels less formal.

Before starting a group conversation about race, make sure you state your own frame of reference and have your students do so as well, so everyone knows the context from which people are speaking. For example, I am an African American 32-year-old woman whose first language is English; I am fluent in Spanish; I grew up in a two-parent household (my

parents have now been married 41 years); I have a master's degree from Fuller Seminary; and my passion is working with underrepresented youth.<sup>3</sup>

A young person naming her frame of reference might say: I am a first-generation Mexican American 14-year-old girl; I am in the ninth grade and I go to a public school; my first language is Spanish, second is English; I was raised by my mother and grandmother; and my goal is to be the first one in my family who attends college.

This exercise creates a posture of humility and creates an inclusive environment where everyone is welcome at the table. It can also expose your students' potential blind spots and encourage a posture of curiosity from other students who come from different backgrounds.

Art and music can creatively express one's frame of reference as well. We learn by listening and interacting with the world around us. *Urban exegesis* can be powerful and informative in helping us understand our young people and their community. For example, most people pass graffiti and murals in low-income neighborhoods on the street and see them as disrespectful vandalism. But when you take the time to understand the history and culture of Black and Brown people, you learn that graffiti and murals are frequently forms of public art and resistance. Often, they are the only way that marginalized communities are able to express themselves, and their graffiti reflects their life and struggle.

The same goes for music. Many people see hip-hop and rap as "loud" and derogatory, but this music is a way of life and an art form that often expresses the struggle and plight of BIPOC. We grieve, lament, celebrate, and learn through music and the arts. Encourage your students to express themselves through forms that resonate with their cultural backgrounds.

There is no right or wrong way to do this work. What is most important is that we start and that we faithfully commit to keep trying.

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<sup>3</sup> Depending on your context and the students with whom you work, it might also be appropriate to let students name their preferred pronoun.

## *Evaluating and creating diverse curriculum*

Diversity and representation matter when choosing curriculum for our ministries. Representation gives students a full view of history, which has proven to positively affect them in nearly every aspect of their development. An inclusive and diverse curriculum can empower underrepresented students, allowing them to experience higher self-confidence, which leads to more opportunities in the future. Evidence also shows that students who are exposed to diversity in the classroom are known to exhibit less racial prejudice. Reducing racial stereotypes and fostering cross-racial understanding is an important aspect in preparing students to be effective members in a global society.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the stories and faces we see and are exposed to have a lifelong impact.

Whether we use pre-crafted curriculum or write our own, it's critical to ask probing questions about diversity and inclusion. For example:

When teaching students about a culture different from theirs, are we seeking to engage in holistic education by uplifting other cultures?

Where are we allowing prejudice to seep into our message?

When talking about cultural elements like language, dress, and styles of celebration, are we honoring the beauty and richness of the customs?

Are we (perhaps unintentionally) teaching from a lens that keeps “whiteness” as “normal” and everything else as silly or deficient?

For more ideas and tips related to the content we teach, check out Kat's post on the FYI blog: “4 Steps to Evaluate or Create Inclusive Curriculum.” Find it at [fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/4-steps-to-evaluate-or-create-inclusive-curriculum](https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/4-steps-to-evaluate-or-create-inclusive-curriculum).

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<sup>1</sup> S. Washington, “Diversity in Schools Must Include Curriculum,” The Century Foundation (September 17, 2018), <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/diversity-schools-must-include-curriculum/>.

## INVITATION TO RESPOND

### *Language to swap*

1. Instead of saying to a BIPOC friend, “Tell me what it’s like being [your race/ ethnicity],” try “I will never be able to really know what it’s like to be you, but I want you to know that I will do the work to be more educated. While I’m on this journey, is it okay if I ask you questions about anything I may misunderstand? I want to make sure I’m not burdening you or our friendship.”
2. Instead of saying, “I don’t know how to find good books/podcasts by authors of color,” try “Could you point me to voices who may be helpful?”
3. Instead of saying, “I feel so guilty as a White person, like there’s nothing I can do,” try “I know there’s a lot I need to learn, but I want you to know that I am standing with you and alongside you. I will protest with you and speak up for you whenever it’s helpful.”
4. Instead of saying, “God is on the throne and God sees your struggle. God will bring you out of it,” try “I don’t have any answers and I honestly don’t know what to say. But when you hurt, I hurt, and I want to sit with you in God’s presence and just cry and be with you.”

### *Reflection questions*

1. When do you feel safe talking about race in a group setting? Name what your teacher, facilitator, or fellow students said or did that made you feel safe and open to share.
2. When was a time you didn’t feel safe talking about race in a group setting? Name what was at play there that didn’t make you feel safe.
3. Reflect on what rules can help establish an environment of safety and respect when you have conversations about race and culture. As you facilitate this process, start by asking, “What would make this a safe space for you, especially as we discuss potentially controversial topics?” Then if any of the following are not included, make these suggestions:

- Confidentiality: what is said here stays here
  - Respectful language: being “for” each other, recognizing each person’s story is real and true for them
  - Active listening: listen with grace and curiosity, while refraining from judgment
  - Honest engagement: authentically engaging in conversation, with a willingness to learn without bringing an agenda
  - Conflict resolution: addressing any conflicts individually outside the group prior to the next meeting
4. Once you agree on a list as a group, consider posting it somewhere that all group members can see in future conversations—or even reading it aloud at the start of conversations that will tackle tough topics.

### *Bring your students along*

1. Create an atmosphere of vulnerability to debrief and listen to your students’ stories and experiences. This starts with being a vulnerable leader. Be honest about your journey in this work, your mistakes, and your commitment to keep growing. The deeper you get into this work and the more comfort you develop with students, the more their stories and lived experience will be expressed.
2. Encourage young people to ask their parents and family members questions about their culture and heritage, especially if they don’t know much about it.
3. If there is a racial misunderstanding in the group, take the time to gather everyone to listen and ask questions. Understanding is what is first needed in these conversations. If interactions grow heated, be mindful about the implications of calling security or the police, especially for students of color. If possible, try to involve a leader with experience in group conflict resolution or restorative justice.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> If you’re unfamiliar with restorative justice as an approach to conflict resolution, you may want to start with the FYI article series, “Help Students Embrace a Justice that Restores,” by Mary Glenn and Johonna Turner, at <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/articles/help-students-embrace-a-justice-that-restores>. For deeper reading, see Z. Norris, *We Keep Us Safe: Building Secure, Just, and Inclusive Communities* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020).



## CHAPTER 6

# NAVIGATING POWER

*Jennifer Guerra Aldana*

### WORDS TO KNOW

*Power:* The ability to influence others and impose one’s own convictions. All power is relational, and different relationships either reinforce or disrupt one another.<sup>1</sup>

### TONGUE TWISTERS

My name has never been appropriately announced at my commencements from high school, college, or graduate school.

After all the hugs and pictures were taken on my high school football field, my family and I sat down to have dinner and celebrate my academic achievement. One of the first things my *abuelita*<sup>2</sup> said was, “*Yo no sabia que te habias cambiado el nombre*” (“I didn’t know you had changed your name”).

Everyone at the table laughed, and then began recalling the ways my name had been mispronounced by the teacher who was reading the names at the ceremony. I added context that made that moment even more painful: I had been a student of this teacher for four years. Graduation was not the first time they had seen my name. They had a lot of opportunities to practice and become familiar with the double “r” in my first last name and the melodic beat of my second one.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the Racial Equity Tools glossary, <https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary#power>.

<sup>2</sup> Spanish for “grandmother.”

I looked at my *abuelita*, and she just said, “*Lo bueno es que yo se tu nombre y estoy orgullosa de tus logros*” (“The good thing is that I know your name and I am proud of all your accomplishments”). My eyes filled with tears. I kissed her cheek and looked up to join in the laughter at the table—a table filled with family members who had traveled for this moment, some from as far as my homeland, Guatemala.

While I had to force my tongue to learn how to say names like Shakespeare and Tolkien over the years, I had become used to excusing others’ inability to pronounce mine: *Guerra Aldana*. It became the family joke to recall each new rendition of my name as I later earned my bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

Although my family has learned to brush off the mispronunciation with humor, it is always interesting to me that this experience is so common—mostly because I was also introduced to the idea of “tongue twisters” after migrating to the United States when I was nine years old. During recess breaks at school, kids took turns saying things like, “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.” And, “How much wood would a woodchuck chuck, if the woodchuck could chuck wood?” Teachers would encourage us to practice these tongue twisters, promising they would help us with our pronunciation.

Although the United States does not have an official language, English is the language that continues to be reinforced. When we look at census data, we see a diversity of languages spoken—Spanish being the second most-spoken language—and yet, my last name will continue to be mispronounced at various events and ceremonies.

This reality exposes a *power dynamic*. Although there have always been other languages present in the US, there is power in speaking English.

## UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF POWER

Power is unequally distributed, both in the United States and globally. Certain groups of people are granted greater access and control over available resources. We see this inequity, and its ongoing reinforcement, in many of the systems and structures we count on—ranging from education and government to entertainment and business. From the disparity of wages, to the lack of funding for public schools, the deregulation of banks, and the prison pipeline, those who hold power continue to make choices about the redistribution of goods.

The realities perpetuated in our government and economic systems trickle down to our students and ministries. Here are a few examples of what this looks like:

Decisions made about education leave some students seen by the system and others forgotten.<sup>3</sup>

The policies that keep low-income families living paycheck to paycheck mean some students don't think twice about going to summer camp, while others avoid it because they know it is not an expense their family can afford.<sup>4</sup>

The policies around language make it possible for teachers to both expect students to learn tongue twisters in English and have no accountability to learn how to pronounce students' first or last names.<sup>5</sup>

## LEARNING TO SEE

It can be easy to hear about these structures and grow frustrated. I often feel that way. This is when following Jesus makes a difference.

While power may continue to be withheld from many communities in the United States, as Jesus-followers, we can opt for a different ethic. We can choose to see where power is held and engage in conversations that begin to redistribute that power. In all four Gospels, we read story after story in which Jesus faces the power structures of his time and chooses to challenge and redistribute that power. This echoes God's call throughout Scripture to care for the vulnerable.

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3 For an overview on education inequity, see L. Darling-Hammond, "Unequal Opportunity: Race and Education," Brookings Institute (1998), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/unequal-opportunity-race-and-education/>. Also see the work of The Expectations Project, founded by Nicole Baker Fulgham, which seeks to help churches respond to these disparities by pairing congregations with local high-poverty public schools: <http://www.expectations.org/issues/>.

4 For a recent research roundup on these statistics, see I. Glink and S. J. Tamkin, "A Breakdown of What Living Paycheck to Paycheck Looks Like," *Washington Post* (August 17, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/08/17/breakdown-what-living-paycheck-to-paycheck-looks-like/>.

5 One example of a legislative move away from this kind of policy is explained in A. Hopkinson, "A New Era for Bilingual Education: Explaining California's Proposition 58," EdSource (January 6, 2017), <https://edsources.org/2017/a-new-era-for-bilingual-education-explaining-californias-proposition-58/574852>.

Women were called to be disciples,<sup>6</sup> the poor were given preferential treatment,<sup>7</sup> the immigrant was commissioned as a theologian and evangelist,<sup>8</sup> children and widows' faith were set as patterns to follow.<sup>9</sup> These were all examples of power turned on its head, reversed in light of the new inbreaking kingdom. As you continue to take steps in this journey, learning to see how Jesus turns power upside down is the first step.

When left to ourselves, it is easier to opt for one side over the other. But this is the work we are invited into: to stand in the chasm and build a bridge. It is no small task, and can only be accomplished with others. Thankfully, it is also one that Jesus has modeled for us.

John 4 introduces an example of this kind of bridge-building. The narrative explicitly tells us that Jesus *had to go through Samaria* (v. 4). This was scandalous. For many years, Jewish people had *avoided* Samaria because the people were ethnically mixed. Alternative routes had been devised to go around it. Jesus was stepping into complex terrain. He knew the stories. Yet, when Jesus makes the decision to enter Samaria, he breaks through history, culture, and social narrative.

Jesus then busts through more walls of division by starting a conversation. It's a conversation that confronts preconceived assumptions and a history of discrimination, and engages wholeheartedly with a particular woman at a particular well. The conversation is a scandal, and it gets personal. Jesus asks the woman about her relationships, her heartache, her reality; he asks questions and listens to her story.

After the encounter, the woman goes on to proclaim and evangelize her town. Jesus does not go with her. Instead he affirms her own authority to proclaim the gospel. She steps out in confidence and shares the good news. A formerly powerless woman from a marginalized community meets Jesus and is filled with new power.

## REDISTRIBUTING POWER

Our world is governed by the myth of scarcity. In our economic, educational, and consumption patterns, and even in our relationships, we are told time and time again

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6 Luke 10:38–42; Romans 16:7.

7 Exodus 22:20–26.

8 John 4:1–42.

9 Matthew 18:2–4, Mark 12:41–44.

there isn't enough to go around.

That we are not enough.

That if we only had that perfect pair of jeans, or lost those pounds, or worked harder, something would magically shift in us. I am constantly bombarded with advertisements as I navigate social media, watch streaming services, and drive around town. We are surrounded by messages that poke at our fear that what we have is not enough. And even more deeply, that *who we are* is not enough.

In contrast to the myth of scarcity, we can embrace the true *abundance* found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Scripture, we see Jesus constantly making a way for abundance.

Where opportunists made a quick buck on migrants who had no sacrificial animal to bring to the temple, Jesus overturned their tables and reminded everyone that the temple was to be a house of prayer.<sup>10</sup> When those who had broken the law were brought before him to be punished, he asked that whoever had never broken the law throw the first stone.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus did not give in to the myth of scarcity. He constantly modeled how to upset the way scarcity limits power to the few.

We are called to be people of abundance. People who do not keep tabs on who is taking what. Instead we invite others to take all they need. When we live into abundance, generosity is extended. When we live into abundance, we more easily release power and invite others to carry it forward.

The most recent display of abundance I've witnessed was at a local protest in the Los Angeles area. After months of unrest over police brutality, a group gathered at the local city hall to mourn the lives that had been taken too soon. The leaders of the protest let us know that we would march on the streets and pray with our feet. But first, we were going to listen to stories of individuals in the community so that we would not march just for the sake of marching, but with true conviction.

I had come ready to be told what to do by the leaders of the protest because that's what I have been trained to expect. Leaders give instructions. But that day the leaders of this protest taught me a lesson in abundance.

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 21:13

<sup>11</sup> John 8:7

First, they set up a microphone and asked people in the crowd to share how they were feeling. For the next hour and a half, we all sat and listened. After many shared, the leaders invited a couple of these people back up again to take the microphone and lead us in the chants we would repeat. Only then did we fill the streets—filled with stories and led by storytellers. The leaders placed themselves on the sides and in the back of the group as we marched.

Where scarcity says to you, “Take the mic,” abundance says, “Step away from it; let others speak.”

The truth is, power is not fundamentally bad. It can be used malignantly or it can be used intentionally to do good. It can be hoarded or shared. It can be stuck in the past or reimagined. Our task is to take stock of the power we hold and use it wisely. Many of us have power that can be redistributed so that others can have access to speak, decide, shape, and lead—in other words, to be the church.

As a woman of color in ministry, I have often been met with suspicion and roadblocks. As I look back, I remember feeling powerless and frustrated in those moments. Yet while there were many decisions that I wasn’t able to make, I did have power to make some decisions. I could choose what I taught, how I told the stories, what we would do during our gatherings, or who I would invite to participate and lead—and I made sure I learned the appropriate pronunciation of all our students’ names.

Cultural consultant Adrian Pei sums it up well: “Leaders who are in touch with pain can see and serve people with compassion. Leaders who are in touch with power can become incredible advocates for the most vulnerable in society. Leaders who are in touch with the past can teach and guide others with great humility and wisdom.”<sup>12</sup>

In order to continue to dismantle the systems that keep people oppressed—especially people of color—let us be leaders who choose to see and redistribute.

Our young people are waiting.

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<sup>12</sup> Adrian Pei, *The Minority Experience: Navigating Emotional and Organizational Realities* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 106.

## OUR RESPONSE

### *Language to swap*

1. Instead of saying, “I didn’t make the rules,” try “Thanks for making me aware of that. Let me reflect on how I can contribute to change.”
2. Instead of saying, “Your name is just too hard for me,” try “Can you help me again to say your name correctly?”
3. 3. Instead of saying, “\_\_\_\_\_, you haven’t said anything in this conversation,” try “I wonder whose voices haven’t been heard yet?” or reach out to those who tend to be quiet to have a one-on-one conversation so they can share after they have had more time to consider.

### *Reflection questions*

1. What are the decisions you have power to make in your local ministry?
2. In what ways have you experienced a lack of power to make decisions in your ministry? How do those experiences help you empathize with others?
3. Who would be considered an outsider in your local ministry? How can you include them?

### *Bring your students along*

1. Ask your students to name ways they would like to be more involved in your ministry. Encourage them to think of possibilities ranging from teaching, managing finances, planning events, running IT, leading outreach, and creating content. Make a commitment to provide onramps for them in some of those areas.
2. Explain to young people how decisions are made at your church. Share how your church’s denomination, network, or governance affects decision-making. Help unearth where the power to make decisions lies so students know how they can advocate for themselves and others. Invite students to think more critically about decision-making and power.
3. Take a group of students to public gatherings and protests to raise their collective voices and see the power of speaking up together.



## CONCLUSION

# GUIDING VALUES FOR MULTICULTURAL YOUTH MINISTRY

*Jennifer Guerra Aldana*

On the outskirts of Los Angeles, there is a multicultural group of young men who have committed to live together under one roof. Their decision to live together did not come primarily from a desire for cheaper rent, but out of a deep commitment to live and serve together.

Over time, their home has become a hub for ministry meetings, youth group, church potlucks, birthday celebrations, and everything in between. As we got to know the ways their church was faithfully engaging their multiethnic neighborhood, this shared home was frequently mentioned as a highlight of what God is doing. These young men offered their home as a safe place for several students who came from difficult family dynamics and challenging socioeconomic realities. They put love into action.

As they extended an array of invitations and welcomed others into their home, they transformed their living space into a holy space—a space for God to meet all who were seeking to belong. It was in listening to and facing the realities of local young people that they began to offer meals and empathy to all who would walk through their door. What may have been perceived as another group of young adults with mismatched furniture was in fact a taste of heaven on earth. This work does not come easy, but it is a work to which they are committed.

Like these young adults, all over the US there are young people who are leading the way in engaging the complex realities of our neighborhoods and responding with a commitment to see God's love in action. We have never been more hopeful for the future of the church.

As young people in our nation grow increasingly diverse, our ministry approaches must adapt. In response to the gap between where our ministries are and where they need to be, we at FYI have intentionally worked to develop deeper relationships with leaders from African American, Asian, Latina, and multiethnic churches.

Through our listening and research,<sup>1</sup> we've received a glimpse into what God is doing through courageous leaders all around the United States. Our learning has been sprinkled throughout this guide, and we conclude now with suggested values to help you move forward in your own ministry.

## NAMING VALUES AND COMMITMENTS

We see diversity as a gift. But often when we talk about all the layers of that gift of diversity, our temptation is to be overwhelmed by the challenging reality of the work. While the work *is* challenging and complex, and it is helpful to name that, it is also important to see the world of opportunities that accompany the challenges.

To be faithful to this belief, we have named values that are guiding our conversations and resources at FYI. We encourage you to consider how these shared values might impact your own ministry's approach to working with diverse groups of young people.

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<sup>1</sup> The Multicultural Youth Ministry project consisted of a year of qualitative research with 12 diverse congregations as well as a comprehensive literature review. The 12 congregations participating in the study included three Asian/Asian American churches (two Chinese, one Korean), three African American churches, three Latina churches (primarily Guatemalan, Mexican, and multi-Latino/a respectively), and three multiethnic churches (defined as 20 percent or more of at least one nondominant cultural group). The research explored congregations' best practices in their engagement of young people (ages 15–29 by our terminology, and expanded to however each church defines “young people”). We included an average of 25 formal research participants for each church site, for a total of 265 participants (who were generally included in interviews and focus groups), in addition to observing gathered worship and youth-specific programming. The research project was led by Mary Glenn and included Jennifer Guerra Aldana, JC Arce, Irene Cho, Stephen Finkel, Tyler Greenway, Brad Griffin, Patrick Jacques, Ruben Nuño, Giovanni Panginda, and Kara Powell, FYI executive director.

### *Abundance:*

Too often the framework for conversations about ethnicity and race centers on the lack of resources, the few research opportunities, and how much work remains to be done. However, we believe there is an abundance of stories, practices, theology, innovation, and growth to be found in a variety of local contexts. They simply are not being spotlighted in current systems. We believe that God is already at work, and that there is an abundance from which to glean. Abundance leads us into generosity.

### *Diversity:*

We are surrounded by a diversity of languages, cultures, generations, socioeconomic statuses, and more. We are navigating terrains with complex topography; we choose to see that complexity as a gift: a gift that comes to disrupt our current systems, to ask deeper questions, to call us to question our motivations, and to move us to see beyond our social locations. How we respond to the layers of diversity in our world is a litmus test for our convictions of hospitality—welcoming the stranger as a gift from God.

### *Intersections:*

Honesty will bring us to name things we do not all agree on. Intersectionality is a sign that divergent approaches, opinions, and perspectives are being shared. In this work, we are easily tempted to fall into one of two responses: overly simplistic answers or paralyzing cynicism. We believe intersection is the space from which the best ideas are birthed.

### *Listening:*

Our young people are swimming where many of our churches and leaders have been afraid to dip their toes. We believe that young people have the imagination and vision to lead us into what it means to be the church today. We commit to ask hard questions and lean into the tensions. We see young people as bridge-builders in this work.

Based on these values, we are committed to:

- **Context:** Naming and elevating the assets each community has to teach the broader church.
- **Culture:** Holding the tension to be faithful to the realities and not to settle for overly simplistic answers. We will honor the intersectionality.
- **Communication:** Listening well to young people who are navigating these waters, respecting each other, and being descriptive rather than prescriptive.
- **Christ:** The one who modeled what it looks like to take our social location seriously. We strive to be faithful disciples of Jesus, a marginalized bicultural man from Bethlehem.

This is an invitation to join us. This work cannot be done by one person, one organization, or one church. As you look more deeply at the diversity with which your local church has been gifted, to what values are you pointing? What is your next step?

# GLOSSARY

*AAP/*: This common acronym stands for “Asian American Pacific Islander” and has been used to include Native Hawaiians and people groups from the Melanesian, Micronesian, and Polynesian island regions of the Pacific.

*Afro-Latina/o*: Latin Americans with African ancestry. The term may also refer to historical or cultural elements in Latin America thought to have originated within this community. In the US, Latinos with Caribbean roots are more likely to identify as Afro-Latino or Afro-Caribbean than those with roots elsewhere in Latin America.<sup>1</sup>

*Antiracist*: A person who is actively doing the work of fighting against racism through their words, actions, and thought processes.

*Asian American*: Asian American became a US Census category in 1980, including persons who originate from “the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent.”<sup>2</sup> The term grew out of 1960s activism, and is sometimes used to show solidarity between cultural groups across pan-Asian backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

*Bias*: Judgment based on a false narrative or stereotype.

*Colonialism*: Systems of rule by one group over another, where the first group claims the right to exercise exclusive authority, sovereignty, and control over the second group, often resulting in shaping the second group’s destiny.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Gustavo López and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, “Afro-Latino: A deeply rooted identity among U.S. Hispanics,” March 1, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/01/afro-latino-a-deeply-rooted-identity-among-u-s-hispanics/>.

2 Asian Pacific Institute, “Census Data and API Identities,” [www.api-gbv.org](http://www.api-gbv.org).

3 See Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil, “After 50 years of ‘Asian American,’ advocates say the term is ‘more essential than ever’” NBC News (May 31, 2018), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/after-50-years-asian-american-advocates-say-term-more-essential-n875601>.

4 See S. Howe, *Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

*Colorism*: A form of racism that determines one person is superior to another based on the proximity to *whiteness* of their skin color and physical attributes (e.g., tall, slender, blue eyes, blond hair, thin lips, narrow nose).

*Cultural misorientation*: A specific type of *internalized oppression* that glorifies European culture, which Black people develop through the media, society, and family dynamics.

*Cultural racism*: Racism that exists within a person's own culture.

*Diaspora*: A group of people of similar cultural background who have been stolen from or who migrated from their land of origin and have been dispersed to different parts of the world.

*Exile*: The state of being barred from one's native country, typically for political or punitive reasons.

*Frame of reference*: The social location, culture, language, and background from which one comes or operates.<sup>5</sup>

*Generational trauma*: The impact of trauma experienced by a person's ancestors that is felt and echoed throughout two or more family generations.

*Hispanic*: People who share Spanish as a common language; a term adopted by the US government in the 1970s to give people from Latin America a common identity.<sup>6</sup>

*Indigenous*: People groups considered original to a geographic area, also called "Native peoples" or "First Nations."

*Immigration*: The international movement of people to a country of which they are not natives or where they do not possess citizenship in order to settle as permanent residents.

*Internalized oppression*: The prejudiced beliefs we tell ourselves about our own race, culture, religion, gender orientation, and/or socioeconomic group that keep us from being our fully authentic selves.

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5 C. H. Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 15.

6 M. Hugo Lopez, J. Manuel Krogstad and J. S. Passel, "Who is Hispanic?" (September 15, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/11/who-is-hispanic/>.

*Intersectionality*: The interconnected nature of social categories such as race, class, and gender that can be experienced by an individual or group. The term was originally coined by Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, cofounder of the African American Policy Forum, and has come to be used widely across many disciplines, including practical theology.

*Latina/o*: Any person of Latin American descent residing in the United States. Latinos can have many colors, languages, and cultural backgrounds. This is not to be confused with *Latin Americans*, which refers to the people actually living in Latin America right now.<sup>7</sup>

*Migration*: The movement of people from one place to another with the intentions of settling, permanently or temporarily, at a new geographic region. Movements are often over long distances and can be from one country to another (*immigration*; see below) or within a country or region itself. People may migrate as individuals, in family units, or in large groups. Migration can be voluntary, out of necessity, or forced.

*Mulatto*: Biracially mixed persons with Black and White ancestry.

*Multicultural context*: A group or environment that contains two or more cultures or ethnicities.

*One-drop rule*: Dating back to 1662 in Virginia, this rule stated that anyone with any fraction (“drop”) of African “blood” would be considered Black. People with no known African ancestry were called White.

*Person of color (POC)*: Refers to any person who is non-White. Sometimes also referred to as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC)

*Power*: The ability to influence others and impose one’s own convictions. All power is relational, and different relationships either reinforce or disrupt one another.<sup>8</sup>

*Prejudice*: A preset opinion about a people group based on culture, race, religion, or socioeconomic status because of false narratives learned through family, the media, conversation, or observation.

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7 For a helpful brief overview, see L. Garcia-Navarro, “Hispanic Or Latino? A Guide For The U.S. Presidential Campaign” (August 27, 2015), <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/08/27/434584260/hispanic-or-latino-a-guide-for-the-u-s-presidential-campaign>.

8 Adapted from the Racial Equity Tools glossary, <https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary#power>.

*Race*: A social creation that gives or takes power based on skin color and cultural background. Race is a social construct created based on the superiority of *whiteness* to all non-White people.<sup>9</sup>

*Refugee*: A displaced person who is forced to leave their country due to war, natural disaster, or fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.

*Social location*: The way we are shaped by our gender, race, ethnicity, social class, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, and geography.

*Systemic or institutional racism*: Racism that is displayed within our political, religious, educational, and economic institutions and systems.

*Urban exegesis*: Observing and interpreting an urban environment or neighborhood through sociocultural, systemic, and spiritual lenses.

*Whiteness*: A belief system of cultural superiority that serves as the organizing conceptual framework of Western society.<sup>10</sup> In this framework, blackness is based on what whiteness is not. All people, no matter what racial background, can step into and perpetuate the systems created by whiteness. *White supremacy* asserts the domination of whiteness throughout society and culture.

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9 Race can be hard to define because it is a concept created and perpetuated by those in power. The office of Fuller's Chief of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion uses the following expanded definition: "A dynamic set of historically derived and institutionalized ideas and practices that (1) sorts people into ethnic groups according to perceived physical and behavioral human characteristics; (2) associates differential value, power, and privilege with these characteristics and establishes a social status ranking among the different groups; and (3) emerges (a) when groups are perceived to pose a threat (political, economic, or cultural) to each other's worldview or way of life; and/or (b) to justify the denigration and exploitation (past, current, or future) of, and prejudice toward, other groups." *Racism*, then, refers to "representations, messages, and stories conveying the idea that behaviors and values associated with White people or whiteness are automatically better or more normal than those associated with other racially defined groups." Based on H. R. Markus, "Pride, Prejudice, and Ambivalence: Toward a Unified Theory of Race and Ethnicity," *American Psychologist* 63, no. 8 (2008): 651–70. See also MP Associates and Center for Assessment and Policy Development, "Racial Equity Tools Glossary," <https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary#race>.

10 W. J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010) Loc 530, 634 of 8980, Kindle Edition.

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**Ahren Samuel** is a Multicultural Project Assistant at the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI), where she is committed to diversity and making sure that inclusion and equity are tracked across race, gender, and socioeconomic status. A Pasadena native, Ahren holds a BA in International Relations with a minor in Spanish and Latin American Studies from Spelman College, a culinary arts degree from LA Trade Tech College, and an MA in Intercultural Studies with an emphasis in Children at Risk from Fuller Theological Seminary. Her passion is working with marginalized high school students and making sure they have all the resources and opportunities to be empowered, encouraged, enriched, and supported. Ahren was always taught that “one who learns must also teach.” Therefore, she feels it is her duty and mission to work with and empower marginalized youth in her community.