



Interwoven Congregations™

Quarterly

A journal of insight and expression on the road to racial justice and healing

Issue 3: November 2021

From the Editor

Our third issue of Interwoven Congregations Quarterly takes a personal look at how two pastors are building community across the barrier of race as they work to repair a breach that drove their congregations apart 170 years ago. We also step across the ocean for a view of community building that spans nations, religions and culture. Thanks for reading!

- Pat Jackson

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Pastor Julie and Pastor Darryl

*A Personal Look into a Historic Partnership
Between Two Baptist Churches for Racial Justice and Healing*

Interwoven Congregations (IWC): Cleveland, Ohio. My mom raised Pastor Darryl Roberts of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church and Pastor Julie Pennington-Russell of First Baptist Church (both of Washington, D.C.), thank you for joining us for this conversation about the partnership between your two congregations. Could I ask you to begin by sharing a word about your upbringing, what drew you into ministry, and why the work of antiracism is a part of your call?

Pastor Darryl Roberts: I grew up in a working class community in

me as a single mother with the help of a loving band of aunts and uncles and my grandmother. I came into ministry in that context. I had a lot more questions for God in terms of the pain, the suffering, the struggle, the racism that I and others around me experienced. We still had many in my community who didn't have access to healthcare, affordable housing, were denied the right to vote, particularly those who were felons, and inequalities in education. The church had a persistent



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presence in the community, but in many ways, I questioned whether the church was really relevant. I didn't see the church do enough to alleviate suffering. I knew that God had placed a calling on my life, but because of these feelings about the role of the church and society, I resisted that call for quite some time. A big shift happened when I met Rev. Otis Moss Jr. in Cleveland and I began to see another paradigm of ministry where the church was in the urban setting and had all these programs and services – after- school programs for children, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and other support groups. I began to see what was possible for ministry.

Pastor Julie Pennington-Russell: My father and mother were from Birmingham, AL, both the children of coal miners, so poor. My dad enlisted in the Air Force so I was raised across the United States. My father was an agnostic, my mom was and is a fundamentalist Christian. So I grew up in that interesting duality. My mom taught me by example that following Jesus means plunging all the way in. My father taught me by example not to muck up my faith by confusing it with religion.

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— Rev. Darryl Roberts

My dad, even though not a church goer, was one of the kindest, humblest, most caring people I ever knew. My call to ministry was a backwards call; I pretty much stumbled into it. I went to seminary and along the way, I did perceive a call. But because of the way I had been raised, I certainly didn't perceive it to be a call to the pastorate,

because in my mind, women couldn't be pastors. But then God opened up some sky over my faith. I grew up in predominantly white Baptist churches, Southern Baptist and American Baptist. In these churches, faith really was more of a personal thing. Paying attention to systemic oppressions, evils,

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rarely, if ever got promoted. The pivot for me would come years later, when I was in my second pastorate in Waco, Texas, and the church I pastored was in the poorest, highest crime-rated zip code in the state of Texas. It was a community of thirds – a third Anglo, a third Black, a third Hispanic. Living at the nexus there and trying to offer a gospel word there required all of us who were white to make shifts in how we saw ourselves and our neighbors. Fast forward, I lived in Atlanta and was involved in social actions there. Then in the last two years here in Washington, the white-hot light that's been shined on systemic racism has made us — me — realize that it's not enough in one's church merely to make an intellectual commitment to not be racist. We need to actively work against the evil systemic forces that perpetuate racial injustice.

IwC: What led you to form the partnership between your two congregations?

Pastor Darryl: I went to the New Baptist Covenant convention for the first time when I was an assistant pastor at historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. I was exposed to the work of the New Baptist Covenant (“NBC”) and the partnerships



that were happening between black and white churches that were committed to antiracism and the process of reconciliation – inspired by former President Jimmy Carter. I moved on to pastor Mt. Welcome in Decatur, GA and stayed in touch with NBC. Hannah McMahon of NBC then reached out to me to say “I have a church in Decatur, led by Pastor Julie, that could be a good partner for you.” So I reached out to Pastor Julie. But she was transitioning from Decatur to Washington, D.C. so that meeting never happened. I was then in a transition phase myself. Little did I know that when I accepted the call to Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., that First Baptist Church was the mother church of Nineteenth Street Baptist! Then Hannah (from NBC) reached out to suggest that I partner with Pastor Julie at First Baptist!

lwC: *(Laughing)*

Pastor Darryl: What drew her to our churches was that we had a history together – although one

tinged with racial division. To get the two of our churches, one white and one black, to come together would be historic since it was racial difference that caused the former black members of First Baptist to leave to form Nineteenth Street. So Julie and I met over lunch.

Pastor Julie: Right, we were making plans for the spring of 2018. Then the one-year anniversary of the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville was coming up and white supremacists were planning a rally at Lafayette Park, here in Washington. So Hannah reached out and said “Wouldn’t it be amazing if a white and black congregation could plan a counter-witness?” This was 5 or 6 days before the demonstration. We ended up having a communion service and prayer walk at the MLK Jr. memorial at the tidal basin. It sparked something wonderful.

Pastor Darryl: In that service, we had communion, Julie gave a powerful message, I gave a message on healing, forgiveness, racial reconciliation and hope – and I think that energized our congregations.

lwC: So wait -- that was your first interaction between the congregations?! That wasn't like a low-key meeting with a few people in the church parlor; it was in front of national media!

Pastor Julie: Yes!

lwC: Where did your partnership go from there?

Pastor Julie: We had another meeting at Nineteenth Street a month later.

Pastor Darryl: We wanted to do more than just have a historic moment with our two churches against racism. We needed to figure out how our congregations could do long-term work around spiritual growth and racial reconciliation. At that meeting, we wanted to gather our people together to see if there was a critical mass who were supportive of the two churches coming together. That was a watershed moment for both our congregations. There were people who shared that they had tried to get our churches to come together in the past and failed. There were those who said, "Why has this taken so long to happen?" There were people who cried about the possibility of our working together. It was a tremendous moment. One deacon expressed skepticism about the success of this partnership. But for the most part, everyone in the room was excited and asked where do we go from here? So we formed three committees -- around worship, social justice and history. The work on the history was not about trying to erase the past and creating a fictional history. But it was about how do we pull

together the histories of First Baptist and Nineteenth Street that are individually distinct, and then write a narrative that weaves both of them together. Even though we divided at a certain historical moment, history has led us to work in a shared way to advance our shared mission and vision. Worship was an annual event where we leverage our diversity as a strength as we collective-

ly celebrate the goodness of God. Through the social justice committee, we seek to create a consistent public witness that stands against racism and for justice on behalf of all of God's people.

Pastor Julie: One of the lovely things we did in February 2019 was to come together at the new National Museum of African American History and Culture. The curator opened the museum two hours early for our group and we got to tour it together with nobody else in the museum at the time. It was powerful and inspiring. And then, with regard to worship, we decided that Maundy Thursday would be our time to come together,



for communion, a meal and foot washing. We were able to do that in 2019 but obviously not these past two years because of Covid.

lwC: What were your social justice activities?

Pastor Darryl. There was a group of people from both of our churches who went to Christ House. We partnered on a homeless ministry and food pantry and we've done about four prayer vigils. The first was in response to the school shootings -- "March

for our Lives.” We came together with Ohev Sholom (Rabbi Herzfeld), Zion Baptist Church (Dr. Byrd) and the Church of Latter-day Saints. We gathered on the steps of our church. Each spiritual leader made a powerful statement about school violence and then we marched together to the mall and stood in solidarity with thousands of people from around the country.

Pastor Julie: After George Floyd’s killing we had vigils every Friday night in the month of June 2020. Then, Darryl and I were at a clergy prayer vigil just blocks from the insurrection that took place at the Capitol on the morning of January 6th of this year.

Pastor Darryl: We knew something was brewing. Some people were walking through our prayer vigil to try to antagonize us and then kept walking down to the mall. We could see the hostility. We were just standing there praying. We had no idea that, just a few hours later, that day would go down as one of the darkest days in the history of our country.

IWC: That was so shocking – still. Thinking about your work together, is there a theological premise or scripture that animates your commitment to this work of antiracism?

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Pastor Darryl: One is Galatians 3:28 – in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus. A lot of what we’re trying to do is to build and affirm the oneness that we all share in Christ Jesus despite the

fact that we live in a world that is always trying to exploit our divisions — whether along the lines of congregations, or churches vs. synagogues and mosques, male or female, white or black.

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— Rev. Julie Pennington-Russell

We’re trying to pull people together and recognize that we are one nation, as Paul also talks about, that we are all made of one blood, one family of God.

IWC: That’s powerful. I kind of wish though that I could edit Paul a little bit –

Pastor Darryl: Yes, Paul needs a lot of editing and critiquing! *(Laughing)*

IWC: *(Laughing)* – I wish he had said, “We are Jew *and* Greek, slave *and* free, male *and* female, *and* we’re all one in Christ Jesus.” I know Paul was being radically unifying in his time, but today that statement sounds a bit like “I don’t see color.”

Pastor Darryl: I’m glad you brought that up because I think we’ve been very intentional as we come together. It’s not to say that your identity is no longer important or is lost in the coming together. But rather, in the coming together, you bring the richness of your own identify that helps to enhance all our experiences and we celebrate that.

Pastor Julie: Yes, we all together stand under the broad, welcoming banner of God, the creator, who brings us together in that body. I was thinking of Ephesians 4 – There is one body, one spirit, one God, father, mother of us all.

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Building Community, an Ocean Away

A photo essay of interfaith connections and welcome

Text and photos by Pat Jackson



A sailboat with a red hull and a tall mast is on a body of water. The Dutch flag is flying from the stern. In the background, a lighthouse is visible on a distant shore under a hazy sky. The water is calm, reflecting the boat and the sky.

On a recent visit to the Netherlands, I had the opportunity to connect with a nonprofit organization called "Groningen Verwelkomt" (Groningen Welcomes). Our family was staying in the northern Dutch city of Groningen, and this organization, begun by a local church, is dedicated to helping immigrants, many who fled the war in Syria, acclimate to life in the Netherlands. One thing that struck me was the language the organizers use for the Syrian, Ethiopian, Jordanian or Trinidadian people in their midst. They don't refer to them as 'immigrants' or 'refugees' but rather as 'Nieuwe Groningers' – New Groningers. It's an immediate statement of inclusion and belonging.

On this particular day, a group of about 35 of us traveled together from Groningen to the northern coast of the Netherlands. There, we took a ferry over to the island of Schiermonnikoog, navigating the channels left at low tide.

We enjoyed the day at the beach, sharing stories, dancing, some even braving the brisk North Sea waters for a dip, before heading into the town for lunch. It was a time of great community.

As the day drew to a close, we returned on the ferry to the mainland, and then made our way back to Groningen. There, these New Groningers continue their efforts to learn Dutch, plan their next steps with schooling or their vocation, and seek to carve out their lives in this new adopted land. ■



Trekking across the half-mile wide beach at Schiermonnikoog. Below, Groningen Verwelkomt executive director Evert Sulman outlines the activities of the day.





With thanks to Groningen Verwelkomt for permission to use these photos in this issue.

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lwc: How important is the leadership of clergy and laity in your partnership? Who drives the ongoing relationship between your congregations?

Pastor Julie: I would say there's a give and take, ebb and flow. During Covid, our history team has done some really productive work. Over this time, Darryl and I have had more on our plate than we can say grace over, so we haven't done as much together in this time -- although during Lent, we had a joint Lenten service on Zoom and that was lovely. But some of the other teams have asked "When are you and Pastor Darryl going to get us together again?"

Pastor Darryl: We've been intentional from the beginning that it's not just top-down, but we wanted the members to have ownership and buy-in for the work we're seeking to do together. That is why from the very beginning we didn't do anything before getting the buy-in from leaders in the church. We've both learned that the worst thing to do as leaders is try to lead people and turn around and realize that you're standing by yourself! We want to be sure that people are a part of this at every stage of this work and that we are providing guidance and inspiration, when needed. We want to let people use their gifts and talents and run with it.

lwc: How important is the personal relationship that the two of you have to the partnership?

Pastor Julie: Indispensable.

Pastor Darryl: Certainly Christ, the Holy Spirit is the glue. But then I think our friendship, our rela-

tionship has also been the glue because people can see that there's love, there's affection, there's a kinship there. And that's the thing that rubs off and inspires our members to want to be a part of this work. I think it's so important for leaders to have a strong personal relationship when you're seeking to do this work of bringing two institutions together.



Pastor Julie: I so agree. This could not work if getting together was just something else on your agenda, as though it was obligatory. I believe the whole effort would implode. My friendship with Darryl is one of the things I'm most grateful

for. In addition to the joy of our congregations coming together, I know Darryl is a genuine friend. I can share things personally, collegially — things about my church, things about my family. There's a friend there on the other side of the table, and that means so much.

lwc: How do you nurture that same kind of connection among others between your congregations?

Pastor Julie: I think our role in this, Pastor Darryl and I, is to set the table and issue the invitation to our people to come. Some of our people are going to make that heart connection, others maybe less so. Some of the people on the worship team and history team stay in touch with each other. But not everybody does that. Some will come and continue with it because they really believe in the objective, the social justice piece. It's like, "I really like these people, but I'm going to come and hang in there because this is part of my own ethical, moral imperative." For other people, "The work is beside the point. I really want to see so-and-so at this

meeting because I like them so much.” I think it’s different for everybody.

lwc: I appreciate you saying that. Our readers might imagine that EVERYONE in your congregations are involved in the partnership. And I think sometimes people get discouraged with this work when they get 3 or 4 people here or there to participate.

Pastor Darryl: The 80-20 rule applies to this process — 20% of the people do 80% of the work. But that’s just part of doing volunteer work. We want the people doing the work to be excited about it, not burned out, and to provide support to keep things going.

Pastor Julie: Even though there may be just 20% of the congregation beneath the thing, I would say that 100% feel lifted by this endeavor. For instance, there was someone in our church who was talking to a friend. They were saying “Yes, our church has a sister church and we’re in the work of antiracism together, it’s so wonderful.” And I thought to myself, “Hmmm, they’ve never been to a meeting!”

lwc: (Laughing)

Pastor Julie: But they were claiming it! I don’t think we can underestimate the lifting and empowering effect that the work of the few can have on the whole.

Pastor Darryl: Absolutely.

lwc: We’ve heard from some African American congregations, “We’re tired. We’re trying to survive in this time when yes, there’s been progress, but there’s also the trauma around the killing of George Floyd and others. So joining a partnership with a white church feels like a

burden.” Pastor Darryl, as the leader of an African American congregation, why would the people of Nineteenth Street be up for this?

Pastor Darryl: You can’t afford not to do this work, because you will not survive just trying to pay your bills and do worship and ministry in a very traditional way. If Covid 19 has taught us one thing, it’s that we have to think about ministry in a very different way. We cannot afford to withdraw from the world. Our ability to thrive and make it is measured by our ability to respond to the needs of our community -- from engaging in partnerships with white churches and doing the work of antiracism to bridging the gap between those who are documented and those who are undocumented. What can the church do about that, or to help those who are food insecure or face educational inequity? It goes back to my own experiences and ambivalence about the church at an early age. I can’t go back; we can’t go back. Churches will close, ministries will die if we are not concerned and committed to addressing these issues in a meaningful way.



lwc: Pastor Julie, First Baptist is a predominantly white congregation but with significant diversity. Is there a tension for you in partnering with Nineteenth Street while you have people of color within your congregation?

Do people of color at First Baptist say “Hey, I’m here; talk with me!” Is there a pull to focus on cross-racial dialogue *within* your church?

Pastor Julie: I have not perceived that as a concern in our congregation. What I have experienced is

that most people in our congregation – white, black and brown — have been grateful to get out beyond ourselves to be in relationship with our sisters and brothers at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church who used to be part of this congregation. Many in our

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— Rev. Julie Pennington-Russell

congregation have become acutely aware that our 220-year history began with a pastor who, for most of his 50-year tenure, was an enslaver. We have this debt. It's become an imperative for our people. So we're really grateful for this partnership with Nineteenth Street. And we feel it's incumbent upon us to approach this work from a place of humility: “Please help us to see more clearly what we've not always been ready to see.” That is not to say that the burden is on the people at Nineteenth Street to educate their white sisters and brothers. It is just that congregations like ours need to put our hands over our mouths in some ways, and ask our Black siblings in Christ: “How can we be a part of what you are doing in the world?”

IwC: What's been most life-giving about the partnership between your two congregations? And what's been the hardest part?

Pastor Darryl: The most life-giving aspect of the partnership is the relationship that Julie and I have formed — and to see that our relationship has helped our congregations to be excited about taking this journey together. The most challenging is how do we continue to create space for creativity, fresh ideas about this partnership for years to come.

Pastor Julie: I echo that completely. The most life-giving part for me is the real pleasure of getting to know my dear friend Darryl. The most challenging part — the logistics of getting people together in a city like Washington. I'm sure it's the same in other places. Our people often live full lives, so it can be a challenge to help them carve out time for this work from an already-full congregational agenda, their job and families, and keep them energized for this crucial work. But it's a joyful challenge.

Pastor Darryl: We can't say as a church that we're excited and committed to antiracism work and becoming a diverse congregation if we don't take care of our own family. So I've framed this partnership as us coming back home. First Baptist is not just some random congregation that we're in partnership with. But in a real sense, in partnering with First Baptist, we are coming back home. We can't fully be the church God wants us to be unless we're willing to come back to home base, which means that we courageously confront things about our past that is ugly, forgive, repair and seek to build something better.

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— Rev. Darryl Roberts

IwC: Final question. Do you have any suggestions for clergy or lay leaders who want to develop a partnership with another faith community like you've done?

Pastor Darryl: Look in your own backyard. Often, churches try to make partnerships with people they

don't know. But maybe there are connections between you and another congregation that might not be obvious. So have conversations with your leaders. What churches have you tried to partner with in the past? Which partnership failed or succeeded or plateaued? Try to reach out to organizations that can help you do this – New Baptist Covenant is one. You don't have to re-invent the wheel.

Pastor Julie: For me, I would say don't underestimate the importance of relationship. White churches are thinking "We need to lean into anti-racism, so let's DO this thing. And it's probably best to keep this effort in-house." Speaking from a white perspective, I think part of the fear is "We're not going to do this right, we're going to say the wrong thing, we're going to offend. So let's do this on our own." But when you invest in Christian relationship with people, then if something comes up that's uncomfortable, you have the confidence in knowing it will be received and talked about in a loving, receptive community. I believe that gives people courage. Relationship is so important.

Pastor Darryl: Amen.

IwC: Thank you both so much for this conversation. Could I ask the two of you to close us with a prayer?

Pastor Julie: Absolutely. Present, loving God, for all the ways you invite us to be a part of your beautiful work of grace in the world, we give you thanks. And for this conversation today with Pat and for my good friend Darryl and for his significant, prophetic pastoral work in this world. I pray this in the name of Christ who always goes before us.

Pastor Darryl: We thank you for the words of your daughter, your servant, my dear friend, and co-laborer with Christ, for the gift of her ministry and her courage, compassion, wisdom and her prophetic voice. We thank you for the work that Pat's doing with congregations to promote justice and we hope this article will inspire pro-justice and pro-love efforts in other congregations. We pray that you would knit us together – interwoven. We are all tied together, pieces of one garment. Help us to find these connections across congregations, so we can see that we are more alike than different, and that you have called us to be in partnership and relationship. As we go forward, we pray that we are more committed now than ever in this work of justice, love and peace. Amen.

Pastor Julie: Amen. ■

(To learn more about these two vital congregations, visit <https://19thstreetbc.org/> and <https://www.firstbaptistdc.org/>)



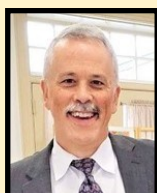
Gratitude

In this season traditionally marked by thanksgiving (a tradition we continue to re-examine), we want to express our own thanks and gratitude to the Executive Board and the Advisory Board, which guide and undergird Interwoven Congregation's work for racial justice and healing.

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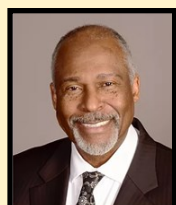
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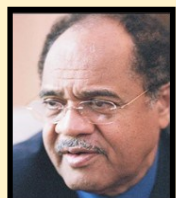
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2 Invitations for YOU!

First, if you are committed to the work of racial justice and healing, we invite you to support the work of Interwoven Congregations as we help organize and support partnerships of congregations across the barrier of race to help realize a society which is just and where all people are prized as part of God's intended wondrous creation. You can make a donation at www.interwovencongregations.org/donate.

Second, if you take part in the life of a faith community yourself and want to learn more about how your congregation could participate as an Interwoven Congregation, contact Co-Executive Director Pat Jackson at patjackson@interwovencongregations.com or 301-658-4457.

Thank you!