

Bending the MORAL ARC

Courageous Conversations on RACE and JUSTICE

*“[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you but to
do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly
with your God?”*

—Micah 6:8

Bending the Moral Arc: Courageous Conversations on Race and Justice* is encouraged to be a lay-led program which pairs two churches interested in embarking on a racial and social justice journey together. Once organized into small groups, congregants of disparate races and backgrounds engage with tough questions. In this manual you will learn about the story of the churches that started this model and how you can use this model of ministry in your beloved community.

*“We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” While the words are attributed to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as he used them in several now famous speeches between 1965 and 1968, Theodore Parker (1810-60), an abolitionist and Unitarian theologian first used the phrase predicting the inevitable end of slavery. “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.” Parker’s words would later inspire speeches by many, including Abraham Lincoln and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Contents

How It Began	3	SAMPLE CONVERSATION 3:	
		Policing the Police	17
Beginning the Work	4	SAMPLE CONVERSATION 4:	
		Voter Suppression	20
Elements of Building a “Bending the Moral Arc” Small Group Ministry	5	SAMPLE CONVERSATION 5:	
		Reparations: Solutions to Violence and Injustice Against Black People	23
Evaluation / Wrapping Up	8		
What Might You See after Engaging in these Courageous Conversations?	8	Resources and Tools	26
		Covenant	26
		Prayers	26
		Books	29
What’s Next?	9	Suggested Topics for Courageous Conversations	29
		Study Guide	30
How to Hold a Courageous Conversation	11	Resources and Tools	30
		Soundtrack	30
SAMPLE CONVERSATION 1: Ava DuVernay’s 13th	12	Wrapping Up	31
		Evaluation Instrument	31
SAMPLE CONVERSATION 2: Dying from Whiteness and the Price of Defending Whiteness	15	Acknowledgments	32

How It Began

Nassau Presbyterian Church (NPC), founded in 1766, and Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church (WSPC) share long histories as Presbyterian congregations in Princeton, New Jersey. Originally worshiping as a single but segregated congregation, WSPC was founded in 1836 by ninety African American members during the construction of NPC's current building.

- At various times, the two churches were blessed with pastors and lay leaders who forged deep personal friendships that kept both churches working together on reconciliation and on racial and social justice issues.
- The 250th Anniversary Celebration of Presbyterianism in Princeton, which occurred in 2004 and lasted the entire year, was a seminal event for both congregations. The celebration offered ample opportunities for practicing reconciliation, building unity, and making friends by working closely together.
- Equally powerful and in connection with the 175th anniversary of WSPC, the two congregations campaigned jointly to persuade the Synod of the Northeast to retire the mortgage on the Paul Robeson House in Princeton, righting a wrong committed over 100 years ago when the Presbytery of New Brunswick terminated the call of WSPC's beloved pastor Rev. William Drew Robeson, father of Paul Robeson.
- The Joint NPC and WSPC Collaboration Mission Partnership was launched in 2018 to study and celebrate the resilience and legacy of Princeton's slave history, African American Christians in Princeton, the PC(USA), and the Church Universal. NPC acknowledged the ways in which WSPC is uniquely gifted to bear witness to the love of Jesus Christ in the neighborhoods surrounding Witherspoon Street, and desired to support and join in that work. With a shared witness to Jesus Christ, the churches expected to learn from and grow with one another.
- May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis policemen. Members present at the June Partnership meeting were speechless. The silence was broken when a WSPC member asked, *What am I supposed to tell my children?* By June 29, four members launched the Bending the Moral Arc lay-led project.

Beginning the Work

Bending the Moral Arc provides a beginning—a foundational entry point—for working to dismantle structural racism by coming together in courageous conversation to promote a deeper understanding and awareness of the profound impact of racism in all our lives.

As we enter into this work we acknowledge:

- Racism is a historical, social, and political evil deeply embedded in the structures of our nation.
- Christians must work with intention and urgency to dismantle the systems and institutions that maintain and support racist actions, behaviors, and policies.
- Courageous conversations among Presbyterian congregations are needed to realize the promise of our American democracy, as well as to achieve the goals of the Matthew 25 invitation which calls all of us to actively engage in the world around us, so that our faith comes alive and we wake up to new possibilities.

Congregations on this journey aspire to remain relevant and integral agents, bringing transformational racial and social justice change to their towns, cities, states, and nation in their lifetimes.

Participants:

- share individual perspectives on systemic racism through the personal experiences and observations of all group members.
- expand individual perspectives and create deeper relationships across disparate groups.
- work to broaden common ground and to be comfortable when there is no common ground.
- prepare for action and for becoming agents of change when called.
- become people of faith actively engaged in bending the moral arc toward justice in their lifetimes. They ask: *What will my church's legacy be and what is my part in this work?*

Elements of Building a “Bending the Moral Arc” Small Group Ministry

Holy Spirit

Each convening, invite the Holy Spirit in to inform and support the work.

Covenant

Agree on how people will interact with each other during group discussion. The small groups should discuss policies or practices that meet both church’s values. Discuss whether to record meetings, for example. In making decisions, be mindful of practices that maintain confidentiality and build trust and a safe environment.

- Have each participant review, edit, and agree with the Covenant. Such agreement builds unity and trust.

How to Find a Partner Church

Whether co-located or geographically distant, faith communities can engage in courageous conversations on race and justice. Pastors and presbyteries can be consulted for recommendations. Website reviews and Internet searches are other means. Troubled areas where there has been recent gun violence may be logical places to encourage courageous conversations.

- An important criterion in selecting a partner church is whether the church has been working on racial and social justice issues—where does this church stand on bending the moral arc toward justice? Preparatory groundwork should be in place or in process at some level.
- If this will be a lay-led effort, how comfortable is the church partner with lay-led initiatives? Do the churches have compatible values?

Venue

Virtual venues make it possible for church pairings to be unconstrained by geography. Small, rural, historically white churches can reach out to work with historically African American churches located far away in densely populated urban centers. Historically LatinX, immigrant, Asian, Muslim, Jewish, etc. faith communities can work with other diverse communities.

Small Groups

Groups should be large enough to achieve diversity and small enough that intimacy can evolve within a sixty- to ninety-minute meeting. A safe environment to tackle tough questions is desired and should emerge. Consider the following:

- Avoid too many like-minded participants. Contrarian views enliven and broaden discussion.
- Make sure the groups are equitable. Sometimes when pairing a large church with a small church, the larger church may have a wait list and the smaller church may need recruitment. Each church should have an equal number of participants.
- Use the first meeting to settle housekeeping matters such as day of the week and time of meeting, frequency of meeting, where to find the group's resource materials, venue decisions (in-person or virtual), topics of greatest interest, and exchange of contact information.
- Expect to lose members over longer series durations. This work is not for everyone. Individuals may find they cannot always make this work a priority.

Experienced / Paired / Rotating Facilitators

Consider beginning with a pilot led by two members from each church who have prior experience as facilitators. The four facilitators can use the pilot to both learn and model desired behaviors.

- These four facilitators can remain administrative leaders and fulfill such functions as setting up meetings, disseminating related resources, facilitating meetings when there are no volunteers, and serving as timekeepers.
- This intentional pairing of facilitators from both churches can bring racial and other diverse perspectives to discussions.
- Try rotating the facilitator role so that one member from each church would pair up and select the next topic, do the research, choose resources, and lead the meeting.

Study Guide

Create a plan for how the first discussion should unfold. This provides structure and helps shape participant expectations. The study guide can cover:

- program description and benefits of participation.
- statement of time commitments determined by the small groups—e.g. no more than sixty minutes of homework; sixty- to ninety-minute meetings; once a week, once a month; etc.
- topics and related homework examples.
- duration of program—e.g. one month, three months, ongoing.
- frequency of meeting, meeting length, and dates and hours, if pre-established.
- leadership roles.
- group size.
- content for a typical meeting—e.g. topics, resource materials, discussion questions, etc.
- logistics—e.g. virtual or in-person.

Resources

Use an evolving collection of articles, videos, TED Talks, sermons, music, racial literacy materials from colleges and museums that participants selected as homework. Paired facilitators volunteer to lead, choose the topics, and determine appropriate resource materials. Expect resources to grow organically. The paired churches should identify and select a shared-drive application that is accessible and works for both churches. Consider the following:

- Have one of the founding leaders set up and manage the resources.
- Provide guidance to participants on where to find resources. Organizations that are actively engaged in racial and social justice activism are helpful sources. The selection of newspapers, journals, cable and social media news outlets should reflect disparate national and local views.
- Customize the program by including participants' music selections relevant to the topic. Music enriches discussion. A shared soundtrack can result. Think of "What's Going On?" by Marvin Gaye, for example, when discussing policing the police.

Evaluation / Wrapping Up

At the end of each conversation, consider conducting a survey of participants to identify ways to improve the sessions and to discern the learning and change that occurred in participants' attitudes and behaviors as a result of the discussion. In the final meeting of a series, participants could be asked to recap their experience. Facilitators may wish to offer the surety that God is with each person on this journey. If another series is planned, this final meeting can provide the opportunity to begin recruitment and preregistration.

Retreat / Reflection

Consider holding a retreat for the purpose of getting the two small groups together in one physical location or in one virtual meeting. Participants can describe what they learned and how the conversations affected them. What changes occurred in their hearts and minds? What are individuals now called to do? Set aside time for the two groups to talk about what is next and what actions should be pursued that address individual interactions and systemic racism. What are the implications for Matthew 25 church implementations? This can also be a time to further build personal relationships across the two churches.

What Might You See after Engaging in these Courageous Conversations?

- Participants took time and examined their own racial biases and fears.
- Participants moved on to becoming racial justice advocates/activists.
- The non-threatening environment encouraged participants to use antiracist tools and speak courageously in and outside of the groups.
- Participants are using antiracism tools they learned in the discussion to diplomatically halt racist speech
- Individual member relationships have deepened.
- White participants have a better idea of how Blacks are treated in schools, at work, while shopping, while driving, while walking, etc.
- Black participants may rethink some of their presumptions about white people.
- Long-held narratives about America and its history are altered.

What's Next?

Outreach

Joint social witness outreach efforts can be planned based on the goals and principles of the Matthew 25 invitation.

Alliances

Alliances with other groups and congregations working to support racial justice can be forged and put to work.

Buddy System

A church member from one church is paired with a member from the other. Buddy pairings can deepen relationships and provide opportunities and coaching for anti-racist behavior. Buddies should get together regularly to de-stress and connect with a Presbyterian from a disparate group.

Retreats

Hold a follow-up retreat in six months to ask: *What **will** the two churches do?* Hold another retreat six months later to explore: *What **did** the churches do?*

Book Club

Plan summer reading that culminates in combined congregation discussions in the fall. Books that lend themselves to this kind of congregational work include:

Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism by Allan Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung—discusses generational responsibility, generational victims, and generational beneficiaries.

How We Show Up: Reclaiming Family, Friendship, and Community by Mia Birdsong—offers a new approach to building community.

Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice by Brenda Salter McNeil—a guide through common topics of discussion and past bumpy social terrain and political boundaries.

Events

Initiate community events that stimulate racial and social justice discussion. Try organizing a community reading of Frederick Douglass' historic [July 5th speech](#).

Road Trips

As the environment permits, small group members may plan to take road trips together to civil rights and social justice museums and historical sites.

Youth Groups

Encourage creation of Bending the Moral Arc groups among high school and college-aged church members.

Testimonials

Record individuals' reasons for participating and what has changed in their attitudes, practices, and personal lives.

Targeted Activism

Museums, colleges, public libraries, and racial- and social justice-focused organizations have robust resources and ideas for how to promote antiracism and social change. Many institutions provide lists of activist opportunities in their regions. These institutions often need donations of time and/or money. The small groups can discuss ideas and promising opportunities for the two churches to pursue.

Broad-based Communication

Communicate successes and present reasons to participate within the congregations, on social media, and in news vehicles.

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.

Joshua 1:9

Imagine a fellowship of small group participants transformed through courageous conversations on race and justice. At annual retreats, group leaders would report actions taken that bend the moral arc toward justice in their neighborhood, in their paired churches, in their presbytery, and within the larger community. Imagine a growing national fellowship of transformed people acting as agents of change in their communities. This is the vision for this work.

How to Hold a Courageous Conversation

As you begin to plan for your own courageous conversations, the next sections will give you an overview of a session, sample conversations, and resources for topics. Ideally, a session would last sixty to ninety minutes, depending on the size of the group, and would provide a safe environment for a diverse group to tackle tough questions. Paired facilitators would alternate leadership for a session. A typical session is outlined below.

Homework

Participants are asked to prepare for the discussion in advance by reading articles, watching videos, and listening to songs provided by facilitators.

Welcome and Gathering (15 minutes)

Facilitators will welcome participants and begin with an opening prayer.

Covenant (5 minutes)

Facilitators will read the group covenant each session. It is important to be reminded at the start of each session that the conversation is taking place in a safe space where practices that build trust and new insights are crucial.

Discussion (45 minutes)

Facilitator will introduce the topic, review the homework, and then open the discussion to participants.

Closing (10 minutes)

The facilitator will offer a reflection, take prayer requests, and say a closing prayer at the end of each session.

Ava DuVernay's *13th*

Homework

Watch Ava DuVernay's film *13th*

Gathering

Welcome friends, let us open in prayer:

God of Justice, Mercy and Grace,

In your wisdom you create all people in your image.

*Through your goodness, open our eyes to see the dignity,
beauty and worth of every human being.*

*Open our hearts to repent of racist attitudes, behaviors and
speech which demeans others.*

*Open our ears to hear the cries of those wounded by racial
discrimination, and their passionate appeals for change.*

Give us the compassion, courage and resolve to become the light we seek.

*And fill us with courage that we might work to heal wounds, build bridges, forgive
and be forgiven and establish justice and equality for all in our communities.*

It is in your Name, we call. Amen.

Covenant

- Listen openly and be fully present.
- Use “I” statements, speak only for yourself.
- Share airspace (step into the conversation and step back).
- Consistent, timely attendance.
- Act and speak to build trust, and respect confidentiality.
- Understand that intent does not equal impact.
- The goal is to leave with deeper understanding and faithful questions, not uniform opinions.
- Actively invite God's presence into our convening and direct our thoughts toward God's presence.
- Be mindful of preconceived notions and be open to one another.

Discussion

Background

Facilitators provide background and context for the discussion.

- *13th*. Combining archival footage with testimony from activists and scholars, director Ava DuVernay’s 2016 examination of the US prison system looks at how the country’s history of racial inequality drives the high rate of incarceration in America. This piercing, Oscar-nominated film won Best Documentary at the Emmys, the BAFTAs and the NAACP Image Awards.
- Keep in mind the words of John Lewis as we listen to and learn from each other:
 - “Sometimes you have to do something out of the ordinary. Sometimes you must make a way out of no way. We’ve been quiet too long. Now is the time to get in the way. We will be silent no more.”
- As we discuss *13th*, think about four themes that run through the film:
 1. African Americans portrayed as criminals.
 2. Mass incarceration as a replacement for slavery.
 3. Corporate interests shape prison population.
 4. The dehumanization of African Americans.

Sharing

We’ll start our discussion with each of us sharing our overall reactions to *13th*.

Discussion Questions*

1. Have you ever been affected by any of the issues presented in the film? If so, how?
2. Have you ever had to confront direct or systemic racism in your life? If so, how were you affected?
3. How do you reflect upon the systemic privileges you may or may not experience because of race, gender, age, class, sexual orientation, religion, physical/mental abilities, etc.?
4. Where do you see imagination offering an alternative to mass incarceration?
5. Do you see yourself making any personal changes in your life after having watched *13th*? If so, what kinds of changes?
6. As Christians who are seeking justice, what do you see as the role of the Church? What does it mean to witness to God’s love and justice after hearing these voices?

*Several questions were adapted from the Influencers Club [discussion guide](#) for the film *13th*.

Closing

Moment of Reflection

“[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?”

—Micah 6:8

How do you feel as we conclude today’s discussion?

Prayer Requests

Closing Prayer

Let’s end in a prayer for truth:

Honest God,

We confess that we, as individuals and nations, have avoided the truth of our histories out of self-protection and delusion.

Let this be a season when we reclaim the practice of telling the truth, that we would no longer shield ourselves and others from the harm they have caused by coddling their guilt and insecurities.

Let ours be a love made of unapologetic truth telling. Let those of us who have been gaslit or made to believe our perceptions of reality are dramatized or false, find our stories centered and affirmed in this season.

Guide us toward spaces that have grown weary of delusions and desire to see the world for what it is, in all its complexities, beauties, tragedies, and oppression.

And as we cultivate honest space, let our healing and liberation rise to meet us.

Amen.

—Cole Arthur Riley

Dying from Whiteness and the Price of Defending Whiteness

Homework

Watch “How People are “Dying of Whiteness” amid Covid-19” by Dr. Jonathan Metzler and Rev. Dr. Roger L. Ray’s sermon “The Price of Defending Whiteness”

Gathering

Welcome friends, let us open in prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ,

You crossed ethnic boundaries to show us the way to love, understanding, and reconciliation. Help us to break down the boundaries between faith communities and other groups. Help us to see the reality of racism and the devastating impact of this in all our lives. Free us to challenge and uproot this racism for ourselves, our society, and our world.

You are the God of endurance and encouragement and support. In our conversations, help us speak truth, listen with love, and follow where you lead. Move the Holy Spirit more fully in our lives as we pray in your name.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Covenant

- Listen openly and be fully present.
- Use “I” statements, speak only for yourself.
- Share airspace (step into the conversation and step back).
- Consistent, timely attendance.
- Act and speak to build trust, and respect confidentiality.
- Understand that intent does not equal impact.
- The goal is to leave with deeper understanding and faithful questions, not uniform opinions.
- Actively invite God’s presence into our convening and direct our thoughts toward God’s presence.
- Be mindful of preconceived notions and be open to one another.

Discussion

Background

Facilitators provide background and context for the discussion.

- Dr. Jonathan M. Metzl is the director of the Center for Medicine, Health, and Society at Vanderbilt University. His book *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America's Heartland* is an in-depth look at why so many working-class, white Americans support politicians whose policies are literally killing them. You watched Jonathan Metzl's video as homework.
- Rev. Dr. Roger L. Ray is the pastor of Community Christian Church of Springfield, Missouri. His sermon builds on Jonathan's Metzl's thoughts. You watched Rev. Ray's sermon.

Sharing

We'll start our discussion with each of us sharing our overall reactions to these videos.

Closing

Moment of Reflection

"[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?"

—Micah 6:8

How do you feel as we conclude today's discussion?

Prayer Requests

Closing Prayer

*Lord of all times and all places,
thank you for this space together.*

Remind us this week of what we have heard from one another.

Fill us with your desire for righteousness and peace.

Equip us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. Amen.

Additional Resources

[Trevor Noah Breaks Down Reparations and White Privilege](#)

Policing the Police

Homework

Review discussion questions and related readings
Listen to "A Change Is Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke

Gathering

Welcome friends, let us open in prayer:

*O Holy One,
I hear and say so many words,
yet yours is the word I need.
Speak now, and help me listen;
and, if what I hear is silence,
let it quiet me,
let it disturb me,
let it touch my need,
let it break my pride,
let it shrink my certainties,
let it enlarge my wonder. Amen.**

Covenant

- Listen openly and be fully present.
- Use "I" statements, speak only for yourself.
- Share airspace (step into the conversation and step back).
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*Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1981).

Discussion

Discussion Questions and Related Readings

1. What can be done to reduce the power of police unions such as the one described in this [New Yorker article](#)?
2. Discuss your reaction to this [New Yorker article](#) on Darren Wilson, the Ferguson, Missouri officer who shot and killed Michael Brown. Does the description of the interaction between Mr. Brown and Officer Wilson that culminated in Brown's killing suggest police strategies, policies, and procedures that could have saved Mr. Brown's life?
3. What are your thoughts on the effectiveness of the six proposed methods of reducing police violence in this [Business Insider article](#)? Do any of these methods appeal to you as an approach that would be worth supporting at the community level? How might we go about doing that?
4. The statistics on police killings of US adults (especially males) show that Black men are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than white men.
 - Over the last five years, the number of people of all ethnicities killed by law enforcement averaged over 1,000 per year. Half of them were white.
 - At levels of risk existing in 2019, Black men face a 1 in 1,000 risk of being killed by police over their lifetime, compared to 1 in 2,000 for all men (and 1 in 33,000 for all women).¹
 - Police force is the sixth leading cause of death among young adult Black men after: 1. accidental death; 2. suicide; 3. other homicide; 4. heart disease; and 5. cancer.²
5. What can be done at the community level to improve the data available both to track the effects of racial bias and violence in police departments and the effectiveness of potential solutions? Is there an opportunity here in our church?

Closing

Moment of Reflection

"[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?"

—*Micah 6:8*

How do you feel as we conclude today's discussion?

Prayer Requests

Closing Prayer

*Ever-present Lord,
thank you that you sent Jesus Christ as our sibling and friend,
thank you that you sent the Holy Spirit as our advocate,
thank you that you send us out not alone, but as a community of faith.
Strengthen us to join in your work of love and justice as we pray,
“Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Amen.*

Additional Resources

[Khalil Gibran Muhammad’s arrest experience](#)

[Trevor Noah’s reaction to the killing of George Floyd](#)

[Recommendations from the Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing \(beginning on numbered page 85\)](#)

[“Policing the Police,” NPR documentary](#)

Equal Justice Initiative resources:

[“Policing in America,” study](#)

[“Reconstruction in America,” video](#)

[“Political Violence and Racial Inequality in America,” article](#)

Infamous Cases of Excessive Force by Police

[Sandra Bland](#)

[Breonna Taylor](#)

[The Trenton Six](#)

Eric Garner: [*New York Times*](#); [*The Guardian*](#)

[Isaac Woodard](#)

Additional Music

[“I Can’t Breathe” by H.E.R.](#)

Voter Suppression

Homework

Review discussion question, videos, and audio

Listen to “Someday We’ll All Be Free” by Donny Hathaway

Gathering

Welcome friends, let us open in prayer:

Heavenly Father,

We are here with open hearts and hands ready for you to prepare us for the journey of reconciliation, peace, and understanding. We come to you today asking for your guidance, wisdom, and support as we continue this dialogue. Help us to engage in meaningful discussion and allow us to grow closer as a group while nurturing the bonds of community. Continue to remind us that what we do is in your call to serve and love with compassion and understanding. We place our hopes for racial healing in our committed action and in your presence in all.

Your faithfulness endures generation to generation. May your peace be in our hearts, your grace in our words, and your love in our actions.

May all peoples live in peace. Amen.

Covenant

- Listen openly and be fully present.
- Use “I” statements, speak only for yourself.
- Share airspace (step into the conversation and step back).
- Consistent, timely attendance.
- Act and speak to build trust, and respect confidentiality.
- Understand that intent does not equal impact.
- The goal is to leave with deeper understanding and faithful questions, not uniform opinions.
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- Be mindful of preconceived notions and be open to one another.

Discussion

Discussion Question

The Voting Rights Bill was signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon Johnson. In what year did the US Supreme Court essentially gut it: 1978? 1995? 2013?

Videos

Who's Vote Counts, Explained (25 minutes)

The Fight to Vote: Black Voter Suppression in Tennessee (27 minutes)

Who's Vote Counts (53 minutes)

Audio

Why voter suppression continues and how the pandemic has made it worse (28 minutes)

Sharing

We'll start our discussion with each of us sharing our overall reactions to the homework.

Closing

Moment of Reflection

"[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?"

—Micah 6:8

How do you feel as we conclude today's discussion?

Prayer Requests

Closing Prayer

Source of All Being, Creator of All Life, may your goodness find its way into the hearts of all your children. May those who wield power do so with a balance of wisdom, justice and compassion. May those who feel powerless remember their intrinsic worth, and also act with a balance of wisdom, integrity and compassion.

May we all feel called to action based on the injustices of racism, and see ourselves not as enemies of one another, not in struggle with one another, but as human beings, created in the image of God, connected to one another's well-being.

May all of us come to acknowledge the racism that is pervasive in our region and our nation.

May we commit to sitting down with one another in honest dialogue, opening our hearts in compassion to one another, bearing witness to the pain and fear of one another, even if—and especially if—“the other” looks and seems so different from ourselves.

May we commit to joining together in acts of justice that will bring about equality in education, economic opportunities, law enforcement, and judicial proceedings.

May each of us come to understand that, ultimately, “my” experience of freedom, justice, and peace is inextricably linked to the freedom, justice, and peace of every other person in our county and city, our country and our world. May we open our eyes to the invisible lines of connection that unite us and, with clarity of vision, continue to work for a world where every person’s life is valued, cherished, and loved. Amen.

—Rabbi Andrea Goldstein

Additional Resources

[A Call to Arms to Fight Voting Restrictions](#)

[Voter Suppression in New Jersey: A Pivotal Episode that Still Reverberates](#)

[Vote Suppression: Ensure Every American Can Vote](#)

[How GOP-backed voting measures could create hurdles for tens of millions of voters](#)

[Voting Rights Milestones in America: A Timeline](#)

Music

[“A Beautiful Noise” by Alicia Keys and Brandi Carlile](#)

[Stevie Wonder On Racism, Voter Suppression, and Trump](#)

Reparations: Solutions to Violence and Injustice Against Black People

Homework

Review discussion questions and related readings

Listen to "What's Going On?" by Marvin Gaye

Gathering

Welcome friends. Let us pray for social justice and peace:

*Almighty God, source of true justice and peace,
in you there is no distinction of persons,
for in you we are equally loved.*

*Reconcile us that we may live and work with each other and with you to establish
your Kingdom on earth where there is no poverty, war, or any oppression, through
Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.**

Covenant

- Listen openly and be fully present.
- Use "I" statements, speak only for yourself.
- Share airspace (step into the conversation and step back).
- Consistent, timely attendance.
- Act and speak to build trust, and respect confidentiality.
- Understand that intent does not equal impact.
- The goal is to leave with deeper understanding and faithful questions, not uniform opinions.
- Actively invite God's presence into our convening and direct our thoughts toward God's presence.
- Be mindful of preconceived notions and be open to one another.

*From the *Manual of the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross* (Boston : Wright and Potter Printing Co., 1909). Submitted by Judith Lockhart Radtke.

Discussion

Videos

[Bryan Stevenson: There's a Direct Line From Lynching to George Floyd \(18 minutes\)](#)

[Created Equal: Carol Anderson on the Lasting Implications of White Rage \(30 minutes\)](#)

[Jonathan Metzler on "Dying of Whiteness" & NYCHA Settlement Hearing Update \(28 minutes\)](#)

[Reverend William Barber: Addressing Injustice Requires Moral Action \(21 minutes\)](#)

Discussion Questions

1. What can white Americans do to eradicate injustices perpetrated against Black people?
2. What is racism?
3. Do you agree with the sentiment that racism is the problem of all Americans, not just black people? If so, how?
4. Should white people acknowledge their collective responsibility in implicitly and/or explicitly maintaining the system of white supremacy in America? How does that impact individualism, if at all?

Sharing

Let's begin our discussion by sharing our reactions to the homework.

Closing

Moment of Reflection

"[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?"

—Micah 6:8

How do you feel as we conclude today's discussion?

Prayer Requests

Closing Prayer

Let us close in a prayer for peace for the children of God:

*O God, all holy one, you are our mother and father, and we are your children.
Open our eyes and our hearts so that we may be able to discern your work in the
universe and be able to see your features in every one of your children.*

*May we learn that there are many paths but all lead to you. Help us to know that
you have created us for family, for togetherness, for peace, for gentleness,
for compassion, for caring, for sharing.*

*May we know that you want us to care for one another as those who know that
they are sisters and brothers, members of the same family, your family, the
human family.*

*Help us to beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks,
so that we may be able to live in peace and harmony,
wiping away the tears from the eyes of those who are less fortunate than
ourselves. And may we know war no more, as we strive to be what you want us to
be: your children. Amen.*

—Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Additional Resources

[The Case for Reparations](#) by Ta-Nehisi Coates

[This is what white people can do to end racism](#)

[Racism Defined](#)

[Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for
African-Americans Act](#)

Resources and Tools

Covenant

This covenant is inspired by the expectations established in the Crossroads Anti-racism Training workshops.

- Listen openly and be fully present.
- Use “I” statements, speak only for yourself.
- Share airspace (step into the conversation and step back).
- Consistent, timely attendance.
- Act and speak to build trust, and respect confidentiality.
- Understand that intent does not equal impact.
- The goal is to leave with deeper understanding and faithful questions, not uniform opinions.
- Actively invite God’s presence into our convening and direct our thoughts toward God’s presence.
- Be mindful of preconceived notions and be open to one another.

Prayers

Prayer 1

Faithful Father,

We thank you for being fully present as we gather. Take our lives and use us to love and serve in your name. Give us gifts of humility and generosity of spirit to celebrate the similarities and differences among our brothers and sisters.

Disturb us with your presence as we seek new ways to understand and reconcile and open our hearts that we may be bold in speaking and action as we challenge the systems which oppress.

Help us to be strong, to stay the course, continue the conversations and take courageous action as we work together in your name and will.

With all our hearts and minds we pray. Amen.

Prayer 2

God of Peace and Reconciliation,

You have promised that, when your people gather in your name, your presence is here with us. Give us the gifts of love and understanding as we meet to continue these critical conversations. Help us to come together to promote racial reconciliation within ourselves and in our neighbors. Give us the will and courage to change the systems which perpetuate racism and injustice.

We choose to look to you as we begin this meeting. Lord, we offer you our hopes and fears and expectations as we work together toward the building of your Kingdom.

In your Name we pray. Amen.

Prayer 3

Father, Mother God,

Thank you for your presence during the hard and mean days.

For then we have you to lean upon.

Thank you for your presence during the bright and sunny days, for then we can share that which we have with those who have less.

And thank you for your presence during the Holy Days, for then we are able to celebrate you and our families and our friends.

For those who have no voice, we ask you to speak.

For those who feel unworthy, we ask you to pour your love out in waterfalls of tenderness.

For those who live in pain, we ask you to bathe them in the river of your healing.

For those who are lonely, we ask you to keep them company.

For those who are depressed, we ask you to shower upon them the light of hope.

Dear Creator, You, the borderless sea of substance, we ask you to give all the world that which we need most—Peace.

—Maya Angelou

Prayer 4

Our Little Lives

*Our little lives, our big problems—these we place upon Your altar!
The quietness in Your temple of silence again and again rebuffs us:
For some there is no discipline to hold them steady in the waiting,
And the minds reject the noiseless invasion of Your spirit.
For some there is no will to offer what is central in the thoughts—
The confusion is so manifest, there is no starting place to take hold.
For some the evils of the world tear down all concentrations
And scatter the focus of the high resolves.
We do not know how to do what we know to do.
We do not know how to be what we know to be.
Our little lives, our big problems—these we place upon Your altar!
Pour out upon us whatever our spirits need of shock, of life, of release
That we may find strength for these days—
Courage and hope for tomorrow.
In confidence we rest in Your sustaining grace
Which makes possible triumph in defeat, gain in loss, and love in hate.
We rejoice this day to say:
Our little lives, our big problems—these we place upon Your altar!*

—Howard Thurman

Prayer 5

*Lord, open unto me
Open unto me—light for my darkness.
Open unto me—courage for my fear.
Open unto me—hope for my despair.
Open unto me—peace for my turmoil.
Open unto me—joy for my sorrow.
Open unto me—strength for my weakness.
Open unto me—wisdom for my confusion.
Open unto me—forgiveness for my sins.
Open unto me—love for my hates.
Open unto me—thy Self for my self.
Lord, Lord, open unto me!*

—Howard Thurman

Prayer 6

“Lord, make me an instrument of Thy Peace.”

Teach me how to order my days that with sure touch I may say the right word at the right time and in the right way—lest I betray the spirit of peace.

Let me not be deceived by my own insecurity and weakness which would make me hurt another as I try desperately to help myself.

Keep watch with me, O my Father, over the days of my life, that with abiding enthusiasm I may be in such possession of myself that each day I may offer to Thee the full, unhampered use of me in all my parts as “an instrument of Thy Peace.”

Amen

—Howard Thurman*

Books

Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle* (Augsburg Fortress, 1981)

The Anti-Racism Team of Trinity Church Boston, *The Anti-Racism Prayer Book: Poems, Prayers and Reflections from Various Sources* (Trinity Church Boston, 2014), free download.

Suggested Topics for Courageous Conversations

Confederate monuments and the
cult of the Lost Cause

Critical race theory

Gun violence

Housing discrimination

Mass incarceration

Murders by police

Policing the police

Race and education

Race and healthcare

Race and mental health

Race and the military

Reparations to descendants of slaves

The US government’s “Safety Net”

Voter suppression

Whiteness and white privilege

*Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey: Meditations on the Spiritual Quest* (Friends United Press, 2007). Adapted from the Prayer of Saint Francis.

Study Guide

The Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church and Nassau Presbyterian Church study guide for Courageous Conversations can be found at this link.

Resources and Tools

The Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church and Nassau Presbyterian Church offer these Courageous Conversations resources in a shared Google Drive.

Soundtrack

“Amen” and “We Shall Overcome” medley performed by the Shades of Yale a capella choir

“A Beautiful Noise” performed by Alicia Keys and Brandi Carlile

“A Change Is Gonna Come” performed by Sam Cooke; see also this heartfelt cover of this song by a talented young person.

“Ella’s Song” (We Who Believe in Freedom) performed by Sweet Honey in the Rock

“I Can See Clearly Now” performed by Jimmy Cliff

“Jesus Is the Best Thing” performed by Rev. James Cleveland

“Let Us Carry Out That Dream,” song by Steven Sametz, performed by The Lehigh University Glee Club; lyrics based on the announcement of the death of Martin Luther King Jr., given by Robert F. Kennedy, April 4, 1968

“On Racism, Voter Suppression, and Trump,” commentary by Stevie Wonder

Seven Last Words of the Unarmed, cantata by Joel Thompson, performed by the Men’s Glee Club of the University of Michigan

Kenneth Chamberlain, Sr., “Why do you have your guns out?”

Trayvon Martin, “What are you following me for?”

Amadou Diallo “Mom, I’m going to college.”

Michael Brown, “I don’t have a gun. Stop shooting.”

Oscar Grant III, “You shot me! You shot me!”

John Crawford “It’s not real”

Eric Garner, “I can’t breathe”

“Someday We’ll All Be Free” performed by Donny Hathaway

“The UK Blessing” performed by The Blessing UK, an assembly of members of

churches and social justice organizations from all over the United Kingdom

“The Way It Is” performed by Bruce Hornsby and the Range

“We Can Rock the World’s Foundation’: 1971 and Black Music in Revolt,” article and selection of music videos by Mark Anthony Neal, produced by National Public Radio

“What’s Going On?” performed by Marvin Gaye

Wrapping Up

This letter is a good example of how to wrap up a Courageous Conversations session, present additional resources, and offer the surety that God is with each person on this journey.

Evaluation Instrument

This survey is used at the conclusion of a Courageous Conversations session by the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church and Nassau Presbyterian Church.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the leadership of Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church and Nassau Presbyterian Church for bringing Bending the Moral Arc to the larger Church. This small-group manual is the result of a partnership between the leadership of these churches and Theology, Formation and Evangelism in the Presbyterian Mission Agency.

This manual was written by **Denyse Leslie**, a member and ruling elder of Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey. She is the 2021 facilitator of the WSPC/NPC Joint Mission Partnership and one of four founders of the Bending the Moral Arc: Courageous Conversations on Race and Justice project. In her role as board vice president and managing director of the Paul Robeson House in Princeton, she is active in racial and social justice initiatives and in promoting the legacy of Princeton native son, Paul Robeson. Denyse started her career in general management consulting at Towers Perrin in New York City, advising clients in the publishing industry and K12 online school. She served as senior development leader at ETS for many years pursuing education markets. She serves on the board of CASA Children of Mercer and Burlington Counties. Denyse grew up in Brooklyn and raised her son Chris in Hopewell, New Jersey, where she currently resides. Leslie holds an undergraduate degree from Middlebury College and a graduate degree from the Yale School of Management.



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[BACK](#)

[BACK TO
CONTENTS](#)

[NEXT](#)