

To Transform Systemic White Supremacy: Dismantle the Heroic Model of Leadership

By **Maura Conlon-McIvor**, Special to VOICE

REV. CHRIS BROWN, speaker at Word & Life's *Confronting Racism* series and pastor at Bethania Lutheran Church in Solvang, grew up in the racially mixed suburbs of L.A., listening to tales of his heroic male lineage. His great grandfather, a Quaker elder, marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma. A grandfather helped break ground for the first interracial housing at UCLA, then served as a state congressman for 35 years, advocating for farm worker rights alongside Caesar Chavez, and voting against funding for the Vietnam War.

"Born and raised a liberal," Brown said that he—living with the family boon of service and white privilege—began to feel the discomfort of doing "very little" in terms of his own involvement with the people his forebears aimed to serve.

Called to the ministry, Brown studied for his Master of Divinity at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, where he encountered "a whole new world of racism." The Hyde Park area reflected effects of 1940s/1950s gentrification, "white flight, redlining, food deserts, gun violence," he described. It is the "third most patrolled [locale] by police in the country." Brown enrolled in a class taught by guest professor and civil rights activist, Rev. Dr. Yvonne Delk, who arranged for students to meet with grassroots organizations and local leaders addressing social and economic issues impacting Black and Latinx communities. When the course ended, Delk queried her students about their commitment to fight social injustice. Brown proclaimed he felt called "to save the world," which, he said, incited among his peers "silence and dumbfounded looks, almost pity."

"I was raised to believe this about myself—to be the hero," he said, describing the norm "within white privilege" of "chasing the acknowledgement...the nodding approval." Brown noted how the hero narrative gets reinforced in our culture, evidenced in films such as *The Green Book* and *The Help* to name a few. He also cited *The Power of One*, the 1992 drama set in South Africa, where a white boy raised under Apartheid is called a "rainmaker," told he is part of a great prophecy of redemption. "This is wrong...that a white person has to come... to save everybody," he said, recalling his own earlier "conflated image." Brown added, "White people love to chase power. We love authority, we love the good feelings that come with the work of antiracism...to create brands for ourselves."

Even though the killing of George Floyd sparked multiracial outrage and protests around the country, Brown asserted that "the solidarity is gone now...the topic of fighting antiracism is no longer trending" in the media. Brown cited a recent Institute of Shareholder Services report indicating that, in the near year since Floyd's death, no substantive movement had been made in increasing diversity on national corporate boards of directors. He included his own affiliate, the Evangelic Lutheran Church of America— noted for its "progressive theology"—as currently constituting "the second whitest church in the country."

Serving as pastor of Bethania Lutheran Church, where Danish remained the congregation's official language until the 1940s, Brown encountered the book, *Dear Church:*



Rev. **Chris Brown**

A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the US, authored by Lenny Duncan, a queer, Black man rising within church leadership who challenged endemic racism and queer phobia. Brown met with a group within his synod—white people and those of color—to discuss how the book’s message impacted them and what constructive action might ensue.

At first “Four to five white people spoke up, expressing their passion to do the work...to get involved,” he said. Then one Latinx woman raised her voice, saying that she felt “scared to trust all of you...because I’ve been hurt so badly in the past by white people saying they are going to do something and failing in that promise.” A Black woman followed, stating she was “tired of having to fight for my survival.”

Brown acknowledged the road ahead demands getting beyond old comfort levels. “We are going to drift back into racism...none of us has to be engaged in this work—we can duck out anytime we want—we can go back to posting hash tags on social media, do the next thing that’s trending,” he said, “but our siblings of color are fighting for survival. We need to be there with them.”

Brown has reached out to school boards, city council, other organizations in Solvang and the Santa Ynez Valley, and worked within his congregation to call out racist procedures and support diversity in leadership positions, both appointed and elected. He cites as one example of this collaboration the local high school and elementary schools establishing themselves as sanctuary sites for undocumented kids while noting progress with local elections of mayoral and other political positions representing communities of color.

“As a white person, I am still learning and I am still growing,” he said. “Once we truly begin to awaken to our white privilege, to see systemic racism and its impact on our brothers and sisters, there is no turning back.”

Word and Life's series on *Confronting Racism* has archived presentations which can be found at www.wordandlife.us

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