

It's time we stop washing our hands

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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**Ed: After years of wrestling, I settled in a predominately white church. My logic was this: if every white person concerned about racial justice leaves white churches, then there will be few women or men there to help. This Sunday, I worried that Ferguson or other police shootings of African Americans would once again go unmentioned in the sermon or a prayer. Sadly, this was true again. I marveled at the absence. What animated so many Thanksgiving Day conversations seemed off limits in church. What was unsaid seemed to mark whose bodies mattered (our white ones) and whose did not (their black ones). I imagined confronting the pastoral staff, telling them how wrong they are, and demanding racial consciousness. My life experience, however, suggests this approach backfires. As a lay person, I'm not 100% sure how to discuss such issues with our pastors. I decided to ask two ministers whom I respect deeply: Leslie Callahan and Carol Howard Merritt. I hope they could guide us in how to approach our churches about issues of racial justice.**

(The interview with Leslie Callahan can be found [here](#).)

**Should pastors of predominately white churches address issues of racial violence today?**

Carol: Absolutely.

I'm going to use the term "we," meaning white people, as I answer these questions. I don't mean to alienate any readers or assume everyone is white. I just want to locate myself as a white pastor in white communities.

I can't help but think that when white people don't talk about the issues of racial violence, we stand alongside Pontius Pilate, washing our hands as innocent men die.

When a black boy or man gets shot, we have seen a rush to discredit the person of color. The predominately white media points out his hoodie, how he skipped school, or how he sold cigarettes. We show sketchy surveillance footage. We plaster a picture of the young man--not smiling--on our news reports. We bring up any misstep that might have made it into his record. We talk about his height. We talk about black-on-black violence.

Why would we do this? It makes no sense. Why would we blame the victims?

It seems that we're setting up a scapegoat, a sacrifice, instead of taking responsibility for our actions. We're vigorously washing our hands, like we don't have any power over the situation, as innocent men die.

If we believe that black lives matter, then white people need to quit killing them in the name of "law and order." When white people do shoot or strangle, we need to take responsibility. If there is no indictment for the police officers involved, we need to demand justice.

We have washed our hands as the war on drugs has overwhelmingly targeted black men. We have washed our hands as our justice system has given longer sentences to people of color. And then, when an innocent man dies, we keep scrubbing our hands some more, as we blame the victim.

This has got to stop. In order for that to happen, we need to quit pretending that this violence has nothing to do with us. We are not going to get that blood off our hands until we hold our white communities accountable.

And where else can we hear that message, where else can we hold one another to our responsibilities, other than the church?

**Ed: If they do, when should pastors of these churches bring up these topics?**

Carol: Always pray. The people of Ferguson and the family of Eric Garner should be at the top of the prayer list. Prayer is powerful—not only because I believe that God is active in our lives, but it also helps the people praying to heighten awareness, increase compassion, and ignite hope.

If the idea of racial violence is new to a congregation, it's good to set a firm foundation. We can start our work in spaces where people can bring up their

concerns and have in-depth discussions, because we often need to do a lot of de-mythologizing when it comes to race in our society. So we can begin to talk about issues surrounding racial violence in Bible studies and Sunday school classes.

Studying our history (the book you co-authored, [\*The Color of Christ\*](#), has been an excellent resource), our justice system ([\*The New Jim Crow\*](#)), and our theology ([\*The Cross and the Lynching Tree\*](#)) are important steps as we address complex issues.

Then preach about it. I'm Presbyterian, and we're a contrarian bunch. We question the pastor all the time. So, I always forget how much influence a sermon has. And, hopefully, the Holy Spirit is moving, changing hearts and minds.

**Ed: What are key points or features would you recommend stressing?**

Carol: White people have a lot of myths, rules that we think are true across the board. These are things we hope for so much, that we can become blind to the injustice that occurs around us. When we talk about the issues of racial violence, it's important that we carefully deconstruct those myths.

We like to believe that there's a level playing field, and that anyone who tries hard enough will succeed. Studying our history will help us understand our system of privilege and oppression.

We believe that the police will protect us, and anyone who gets hurt by the authorities must have been doing something wrong. We believe that justice is doled out fairly. Learning about the New Jim Crow can help us understand that this is often untrue.

**Ed: Is there anything you would avoid saying or doing?**

Carol: As pastors, we often look behind the masks that people wear and learn things about people that we'd rather not know. When those masks come off, we realize that we pastor racists, pedophiles, and abusers. Sometimes, we hear things that make our stomachs turn. Disgust and hatred well up in us. We don't like knowing these things about people, so we can end up avoiding tough issues when we preach and teach.

But we are called to be pastors—working in a hospital for sinners. We juggle mercy, justice, and love. When we find out there are racists in our pews, we cannot hate them. As Martin Luther King, Jr. reminds us, hatred cannot drive out hatred. Only

love can do that.

**Ed: What biblical passages or themes do you find most helpful when discussing racial violence and justice?**

Carol: As we began Advent, we entered a season of longing. We pay attention to our yearnings for the reign of God, and we thirst for an “earth as it is in heaven.” In this particular season, our Advent longings have moved into the streets, they pulse with chants, signs, and vigils.

In this time, we think particularly of Mary’s life. She erupts in a song for social justice when she feels Jesus kicking within her--proclaiming how God cast down the mighty, exalted the lowly, filled the hungry, and sent the rich away empty. Mary could have been stoned for being pregnant. I wonder if Jesus had his mother in mind when he stopped the stoning of the woman caught in adultery. Then, of course, Mary had to see the life of her innocent son cut short. The whole narrative speaks to brutality and death. It's all extremely relevant.