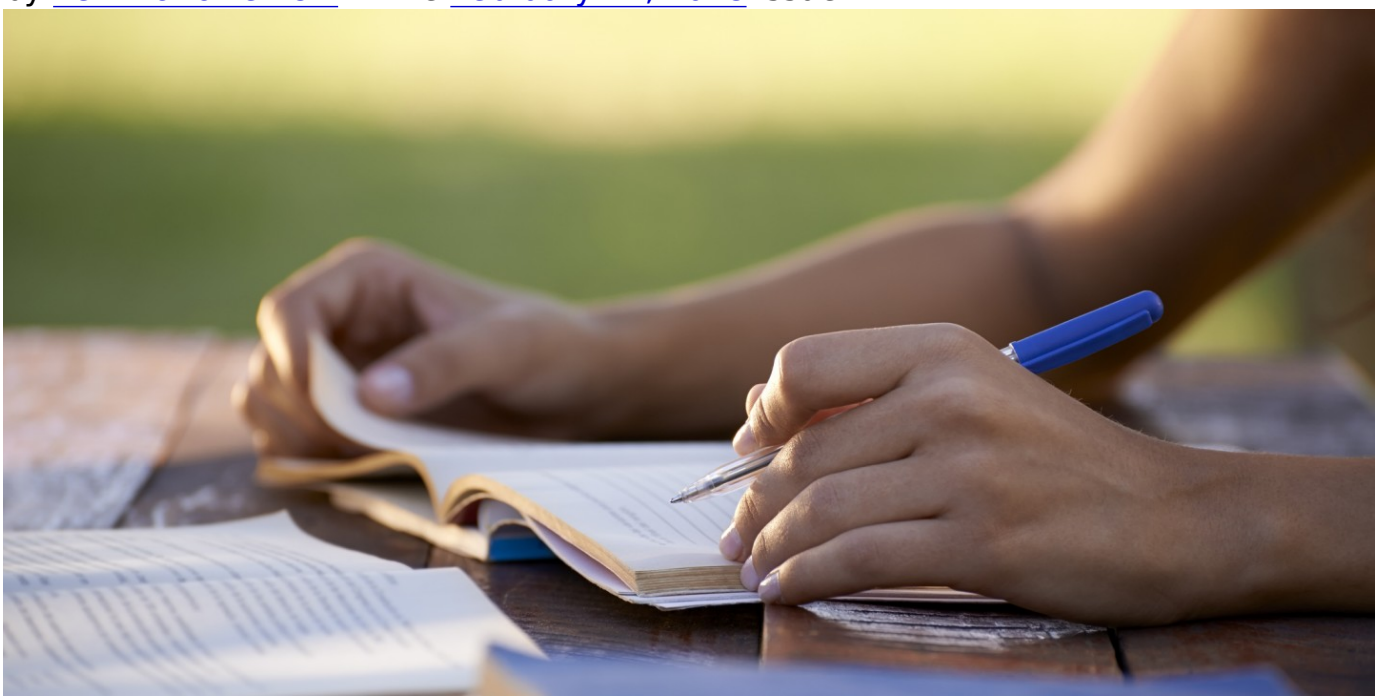
Grappling with race as a white college chaplain

I can choose to be in situations where I feel uncomfortable. My students of color can't.

by Teri McDowell Ott in the February 14, 2018 issue



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Every Sunday night, I lead a program for ten to 15 students. We eat dinner and discuss a topic of their choosing. The students mostly come from mainline Protestant backgrounds, as I do. I told myself that students of color weren't coming because they didn't know me yet and didn't know that I was an ally. But I hadn't reached out to them either. In fact, I felt insecure and awkward around them, aware of my white privilege and my ignorance of their reality. I wanted to find ways to connect, but also knew that doing so would lead me into unfamiliar territory. It was easier to believe that what I was offering was good enough, and if our students of color didn't choose to participate, that was OK.

Then I got to know Jocelyn Velacquez. Jocelyn was referred to me by a professor because she was struggling to find her place as a Latina at our small, predominantly

white school nestled in the cornfields of west central Illinois. Our relationship grew on a spring break trip to Washington, D.C., during which we discussed liberation theology and decided to read Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz's *Mujerista Theology* together over the summer.

Mujerista theology developed out of Isasi-Diaz's experiences as a Cuban-born Latina living in the States. For her, the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s was preoccupied with the experience of white Anglo women. She saw the need for a theological method that took seriously the religious understandings and practices of Latinas as a source for theology. Mujerista theology is more than a theory. It is itself a liberative praxis, a reflective action that empowers Latinas to be theologians themselves.

When I messaged Jocelyn on Facebook about our reading, she messaged back saying she had been on the phone with her best friend and roommate, Andrea (another Latina), reading *Mujerista Theology* aloud. "Teri," she wrote me, "This book is rocking my world. It's gold. Pure gold."

Later, Jocelyn helped me understand the impact of Isasi-Diaz's work. "When I first started reading," Jocelyn said, "I was confused how this woman knew what I was thinking. It was hard to keep reading because I had to stop every few minutes and reread—I just couldn't believe it. Isasi-Diaz dives into ideas or thoughts that we know as Latinas."

"It's back here," Jocelyn described, waving her hands behind her head, "but we can't bring it to the forefront. We can't put it into words. She does that for us."

Jocelyn couldn't stop smiling as she spoke. Isasi-Diaz helped Jocelyn articulate why she felt out of place at a predominantly white college with white norms and white expectations. Isasi-Diaz also helped Jocelyn understand herself in a way that did not discount or degrade her as "the different one" but empowered her as a Latina with unique gifts and perspective to share.

Before these conversations with Jocelyn, I had assumed, out of my insecurity, that I didn't have much to offer students of color, that my white privilege disqualified me from being their chaplain. But I had underestimated the role of being a willing listener to a young person seeking to understand herself and her world. I had also underestimated the power of placing the right book in the right hands.

Jocelyn and I decided to start a special study group for Latinas on campus. We debated the makeup of the group—whether it should be all Latinas, or Latinas and other students of color, or Latinas and other allies. Just as Isasi-Diaz came to realize that Latin women needed a theology separate from liberationists and white feminists, Jocelyn and I concluded that the Latinas on our campus needed this space for themselves. I would drop in on the group, but only occasionally.

Jocelyn began recruiting and quickly had 14 Latinas committed to the study group. They were not all Christians. As Jocelyn described it, the group included an atheist, a few strong Catholics, some spiritual-but-not-religious types, a Protestant, and one who was searching for faith. All were drawn, though, to the study of theology written by a brown woman like themselves.

When I visited the group, I found my place by asking the students to use me as a sounding board, a vehicle to practice articulating what they were learning. I didn't say much in these meetings because it felt like my presence alone was appreciated.

We gathered in the living room of an old Victorian home that our college had renovated, a popular meeting spot because of its large couches and comfy armchairs. For each meeting, Jocelyn prepared a handout with questions for the group to consider. As I read over the sheet she handed me one night, I paused to take in this paragraph Jocelyn posed to the group:

> *Isasi-Diaz states: "If there is not mutuality among the oppressed, they can very easily become tomorrow's oppressors." What do you think this means? As the Latinx population continues to grow, it is expected that our community will be a majority in 2050, what sort of implications does this have for us as Latinas that advocate for justice? What is our responsibility to the rest of the world?*

I was struck by the grace of the question. I knew these young Latinas were angry and upset after the presidential election and all the anti-immigrant rhetoric it inflamed. Yet here they were contemplating how they would care for the world, how they would exercise power and privilege. I sensed a wisdom in these young women—a wisdom that I did not know. It felt like a physical presence in the room. It was a wisdom born from the struggle they lived and shared as Latinas.

Andrea said, “I can’t wait for the day when we’re not under this pressure to change ourselves.”

Maria added, “I’m tired of the message, ‘You can’t do this. You can’t have that.’”

Belinda spoke about her white roommate who didn’t like her Latin music, which is part of the soul of her culture. “My brother came to pick me up in his car and he was cranking his music, and she looked at him so weird. I just got in the car and bawled. Why am I hiding and adjusting myself for a society that doesn’t want me? Why can’t I listen to my music?”

Jocelyn said, “Sometimes I think about going back to Mexico. *¿Me entiendes?* But I have new knowledge. I can’t just forget everything and go there. There’s stuff to do here.”

These young Latinas were growing in solidarity and reflection, finding within themselves and their shared stories the resources needed to continue in what Isasi-Diaz names *la lucha*, the struggle for liberation.

When I asked students if the program went OK, I was really asking if I had messed up.

The more I listened, the more I learned. This group began the school year feeling disenfranchised and disenchanted with the church. Jocelyn had always thought of Christianity as “whiteness.” In fact, the Protestant Christianity she experienced in the States made her question whether she was really a Christian.

“When I got to college I was told by some Christians that I needed to be rebaptized. And I kept seeing students get re-baptized. But I wanted to honor my baptism in Mexico. I was baptized as a baby in the church of my family. Flowers were picked from my uncle’s garden for the occasion. This holds special meaning for me. But in the church I experienced here, that part of me didn’t matter, it didn’t even exist.”

Andrea never connected to the Catholic church her Colombian parents attended in the suburbs of Chicago. There were other Latinos in the congregation, but there was no mass in Spanish, and the leadership was all white. “I just didn’t think those people could relate to the experiences of my family,” Andrea said. There was a potluck meal after church every Sunday, but her family was never asked to contribute food or help.

It wasn’t just the church community that was isolating for Andrea, though. The church’s theology was isolating as well. “I knew praying wasn’t enough—for the things my family had to go through to live. I saw my parents working really hard, jobs that were shit, working with all their passion, but still not getting ahead. Then the church emphasizes ‘don’t sin, be a good person.’ It was just so individualistic.”

Hearing this, I couldn’t help reflecting on my own ministry. The lack of ethnic diversity in my Presbyterian denomination and in the programs I had developed as a college chaplain bothered me. So I decided to try doing things differently.

I hired Jocelyn as an intern, recognizing that our students of color needed to see people like themselves in leadership positions. She began to invite her friends to the Sunday evening program, especially when we focused on issues that were important and relevant to people of color such as the Black Lives Matter movement, understanding privilege, and Latin American liberation theology.

I knew our program had taken a faithful turn when our white students witnessed our Latino students get emotional as we read Gustavo Gutiérrez’s words about God’s preferential option for the poor. “Why are we 20 years old and we have never heard of liberation theology before?” Jocelyn asked in front of the large, racially diverse group of students.

As Jocelyn asked this question, the white students in the room sat quietly, listening to the emotion in Jocelyn’s voice and observing the tears welling in Andrea’s eyes. They seemed surprised that these theological words could mean so much, and confused because they didn’t feel the same. In fact, they didn’t seem to feel anything at all.

Liberation theology often confronts the privileged with the uncomfortable truth that we don’t know we need to be saved. One of the most important lessons I have learned, though, is that I, as a person of privilege, must grow comfortable with being uncomfortable if I want to faithfully attend to the lives and experiences of people of color.

When Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals order would be rescinded, we dedicated a Sunday program to the topic. The students affected by this announcement were hurt and afraid. Adding to their pain was the lack of knowledge about DACA shown by their white peers. So we discussed DACA, shared information about what it was, who it affected, and how we

could help by writing letters to legislators. I invited the students to share whatever they were thinking or feeling as we concluded in what I deemed “a time of listening.”

As I broached this time of listening, I was anxious to do right for our students of color. One of them was Dontae, an outspoken African American student who was passionate about justice. She was sitting partially hidden behind the pocket door that separated the two parts of the living room where we were meeting. It bothered me that I could hear her voice but not see her face. Keeara, attending for the first time, stood to my left like an uneasy sentinel in the doorway leading to the dining room. She participated in the discussion but never sat down. Jocelyn sat on a couch to my right with two other Latinas. Andrea sat in the back of the far living room in my direct line of sight. I focused on her thoughtful, kind face as I led the discussion.

Dontae and Keeara were critical of our college’s response to the news about DACA. Why did the college do this? they asked. Why didn’t the college do that? I shared what I knew from the college’s perspective and defended our administrators against critiques that I felt were unfair. My words were met with silence, and the mood in the room grew tense. In the moment, I couldn’t figure out why this was happening or where I had gone wrong, so I just kept talking, affirming our students for their thoughts while also trying to help them understand the college administration’s perspective. Nothing I said improved the mood in the room.

At the end of the night, I pulled Andrea aside to ask her if she thought the program went OK. What I really needed to know, though, was if *I* was OK. Did I mess up? Did I say something I shouldn’t have said? My insecurity was running on overdrive.

Andrea confirmed what I already knew. In my attempt to be fair to the administration and present its perspective, I came off as defensive to students who, feeling betrayed by their country and their community, simply needed a place to talk—and needed the white leader in the room to simply be quiet and listen.

I own the mistakes I have made, as well as the mistakes I will continue to make because I plan to keep placing myself in uncomfortable situations. How I felt during that program—trying to find the right words, trying to express myself, my opinions, and my perspective without offending the students of color—was excruciating. But Jocelyn and Andrea feel this way every day as they seek to express themselves at a white institution within a dominant white culture. They never have the choice to be

uncomfortable or not. Why, then, should I?

In these moments of discomfort, it is impossible for me to deny my need for salvation. I need to be saved from my comfortable life that deludes me into believing I don’t need salvation. I need to be saved from the belief that my white privilege disqualifies me, or worse, excuses me, from offering anything to my students of color. I need to be saved from failing to see how God is especially and preferentially at work with and within marginalized lives, and how, by growing close to the marginalized, I grow close to God. I need to be saved. The more comfortable I am with this uncomfortable truth, the better chaplain I will be.

A version of this article appears in the February 14 print edition under the title “Necessary discomfort.”