The D.C. church that beat the Proud Boys in court now owns their name

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Jasmin Pittman interviews William H. Lamar IV

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William H. Lamar IV is pastor of Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. In February, a judge granted the historic Black church the rights to

the name Proud Boys, which the church sued for after the far-right group didn't make payment on an earlier suit over members' vandalism of the church.

What was your initial reaction to this ruling? And what does this victory mean for the congregation?

We were elated that in this case, justice prevailed. American justice today tends to favor perpetrators and not victims, as with the commutations and pardons for the insurrectionists. But in this instance, for us to receive justice from the American justice system is something to mark and to celebrate.

Did church members have complicated feelings about the decision? I understand the excitement at the opportunity that it represents, but I also wonder about fear over the attention it might attract.

It was both. I think there was joy but also pain. It is painful to know that people cannot live and worship in peace without White supremacist political violence designed to quiet us, frighten us, and keep us from fully embracing what it means to be a citizen.

I recently went to a rally and listened to the great Sherrilyn Ifill as she talked about the 14th Amendment and how people have always pushed against it, from ratification to the moment when Ronald Reagan gave his first big campaign speech in Philadelphia, Mississippi, talking about states' rights on the bones of the murdered civil rights activists Goodman, Cheney, and Schwerner. It has been an unbroken assault—sometimes muscular, sometimes as subtle as a dog whistle, but unrelenting.

I hear so much grief present in the weight of history.

Yes.

How do you hold space for lament?

Two people come to mind. First, the great Otis Moss Jr., who, as you know, was a serious lieutenant during the civil rights movement of the 60s. He said that the great unfinished work of the movement was that of grief and lament. He said that we were so busy burying people, fighting, organizing, and strategizing that we could not mourn what we had lost.

I remember hearing that and not quite being able to catch its brilliance and wisdom. And then one of my professors, André Resner, wrote a book and talked about how every church has a praise team, but every church needs a lament team—there are psalms of lament that express the challenge of grief and pain. We try our best to make space for lament in worship and in other communal spaces, because right now, here in Washington, the infliction of unnecessary pain on human beings is palpable.

We hear about people who have labored to serve the federal government with integrity and are not sure if they will have jobs or where their health care will come from. And these are people in the pews and their relatives and friends.

There is an unrelenting inhumanity in the American project that we as a people have tried to redeem. The question I often ask now is, Is redemption possible? I do not think it is possible if it is built on extraction. CENTURY readers who are in love with American mythology need to ask themselves, Must we continue to love this mythology that says one thing and produces another? Or can we come together, just like the White men who designed this system of inhumanity, and together design a system that is humane? That shares abundance? That believes that all human beings can thrive together as citizens?

There were two lawsuits, one in 2023 after the Proud Boys' initial act of violence against your church and then this second one after they failed to abide by the first ruling. Given the risk involved, were there mixed feelings at your church about the decision to go forward with the second suit?

There was no disagreement as to whether we should engage, but there was definitely a kind of risk calculation. Church members were asking me, What's going to happen to us? To you, to your wife? These people are violent. What kind of risk are we assuming?

But I think about it the same way as those in our tradition who also assumed risk: It was our time. Fannie Lou Hamer assumed the risk of sexual violence in Mississippi. Mamie Till-Mobley took a risk each time she would not let the death of her son go gently into a good night of silence. We kept saying this to ourselves in prayer—and the ancestors continue to say it to us. We can't do our work without ancestral conversation. The pattern is in the text: Jesus climbs a mountain and has a conversation with Moses and Elijah. The ancestors who communicate with us say,

There is a price to pay, but we call you to pay the price in your generation as we paid the price in ours.

I do not believe that anybody who paid a serious price desired to do so. But they could not say no to what the Spirit gave them to do in their age. We could not say no, either. I want to be clear: We were not rushing toward it, but we knew what we had to do. It is ingrained in us. So we rose, and I'm thankful that we did.

Are there any ancestors that you want to name right now?

Yes. I start with Elizabeth Freeman, who was enslaved and sued for her freedom, and freedom for others, in the 1700s. Beulah Mae Donald, whose son was lynched by the Klan. She sued the Klan in the 1980s, and along with millions of dollars she won the Klan's headquarters in Alabama. Pauli Murray, Charles Hamilton Houston, and Constance Baker Motley, who navigated the legal system as one strategy for freedom. The ancestors of the AME Church, who had to sue White Methodists for the right to exist as an autonomous body.

Can you speak to the power of naming things?

That's a beautiful question. We have to name things clearly, because we live in a time of obfuscation. We are inundated with disinformation. We swim in a soup of lies so thick that often the truth is not recognizable, not unless you pull back and nurture your ability to see and operate truthfully. So we name things to connect our humanity, to say that what we are feeling is real because we feel it together. We name it communally, and this allows us to address what we see.

In the wake of the racist vandalism of your church, how have you balanced pastoral care needs with public prophetic witness?

It is my dedication to pastoral care that has made this possible. If I had not been visiting people—standing at their bedsides before and after surgery, standing with them at the time of birth and death—they would not have risked this with me, and they would have been right not to risk it with me. You do not take this kind of risk with someone who has not shown that they love you. That's what allows me to say and do prophetic things—it is rooted in the pastoral. And they have proven that they love me as pastor as well.

I think that if you look at the ministry of Jesus, his deep compassion for humanity is what allowed him to say and do what he did. You cannot make prophetic withdrawals if you do not make pastoral deposits. I hate to use market banking language, but you just can't do it.

Speaking of banking language—in a recent interview you mentioned the idea of "reverse capitalism" and putting the funds received from the trademark back into the community. Could you say more about that idea?

I don't see how following Jesus can square with American extractive capitalism. Now, like all of us I am deeply ensconced within the capitalist milieu. But I want to exist there the way Madam C. J. Walker did. She leveraged capitalism, but her mind was not captured or colonized by it. She used her resources to build wealth within the Black community.

We have to build a solidarity economy where we can. And though we are deeply entrenched in capitalism, we must know that the system itself is built on oppression.

In *One Nation Under God*, Kevin Kruse explains how corporate America cranked up its power to get the church to preach a gospel of capitalism—just as Franklin Roosevelt was seeking to do something different with the New Deal. It's all documented. Do I love Franklin Roosevelt? Not a whole lot. The New Deal was able to pass because he cut my people out of it—agricultural workers and domestic workers. Still, he was trying to say that the government should serve those who are poor and struggling. And, corporate America built and funded a church that would fight solidarity.

It's a church we see the remnants of today. It supports Donald Trump. It was created by money, by a view of the world that says we have to use people's religion to build a system that keeps us in power. I think it aligns with the Constantinian capture of the church—*by this sign you conquer*. The American church is captured.

We in the Black prophetic tradition have always said, "follow us." Here's the example I give: The people who founded the National Cathedral were so morally small that they built a church and said that people like me could not enter it. Metropolitan AME was founded 187 years ago, and the people who founded it never, ever had a theology or an understanding of segregation. How is it that the people who founded Metropolitan AME were such moral giants compared to those who founded the cathedral?

What are we enraptured by? What are we imprisoned by? This city venerates Washington, Jefferson, Monroe, and Madison. People often excuse their failings by saying, "they were men of their time." No. The gospel was readily available then. There were other communities they could have looked to, in the sweep of world history, that chose *not* to build an extractive and exploitative system. They do not get a pass because they were men of their time. I'm a man of my time. I don't own no damn body.

When you excuse them, you give safe harbor to those people today who are whispering similar things–that government that's competent has to be led by White men.

Has this whole series of incidents made it harder to do ministry in D.C.?

The last few weeks, when it's time to preach—right up until the last moment—I feel empty. I feel like I'm giving so much away that sometimes when I need resources for myself, my family, for the vocation, more often than not I'm feeling spent. But I'm doubling down on the practices that give me joy. Music. Watching the sunrise. Sitting down and intentionally remembering the voices of my grandparents. Hearing their voices, seeing their smiles, smelling their clothing in my mind's eye and knowing that I am surrounded by innumerable witnesses. They push me forward and caress me when I lie down to sleep.

What would you say to churches that want to take a firmer stance of resistance but are feeling hesitant or afraid of what they might lose?

I understand the very human desire to protect what we have and not to "wade in the water." I sang that song as a child, but now I'm 50 years old, and I think I'm beginning to understand. When you ask about those who want to wade into resistance but are afraid, I hear my ancestors singing: "Wade in the water / God's going to trouble the water." Our God is a water-troubling God. Unless we wade into the waters that God has been troubling since the primordial moments of creation, unless we move through those waters to what God is still seeking to create today, we will never become what we confess that we are in our creeds and in the best of our theologies. We have to take up the mantle as co-creators with God and find out what is possible.

Is that easy? No. And nobody wants to say this, but some of us will die in the troubled waters. It is not God's will that we die. It is God's will that we live. But not

all of us will survive.

The question is, if you sit and watch, what kind of life do you have? Is it worth living if you quietly sit in your quiet churches and watch this system, which is wedded to American Christianity, kill human beings? We are not always strong. Sometimes we’re immobilized by fear. But we wade in the water. I’m looking for fellow waders, and I know they’re there. I know they exist.