

NEWS • News

In the wake of George Floyd's death, many struggle to begin racial reconciliation

'If you participate, you have to be prepared to carry the burden of someone else's pain,' says one minister



Pastors and marchers take a knee as they worship and pray outside LAPD Headquarters during a demonstration demanding justice for George Floyd on Tuesday, June 2, 2020 in Los Angeles. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

By **DEEPA BHARATH** | dbharath@scng.com | Orange County Register
PUBLISHED: June 7, 2020 at 6:00 a.m. | UPDATED: June 11, 2020 at 12:34 p.m.

In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. spent weeks in isolation, away from the rigors of the civil rights movement, to finish writing what would be his fourth and final book.

King titled the book “Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?” The ever-hopeful minister saw a future where all Americans would unite to fight poverty and create equity. In his writing, King viewed the pursuit of justice and equity as a nonpartisan effort, as a united social movement that would flourish within both the Republican and Democratic parties.

But 53 years after that book was written, the death of an African American man, [George Floyd](#), who was pinned under the knee of a white police officer on a Minneapolis street for nearly nine minutes, has ignited protests and riots nationwide, flummoxing faith leaders, activists and entire communities with the same question King posed several decades ago.

“Where do we go from here? Chaos or community?”

The hope for reconciliation

In a nation plagued by perhaps the most polarized political environment in its history, racial reconciliation may seem elusive. But after Floyd’s death, Americans appear to be questioning their respective roles in the reconciliation process.

White communities have been asking what they can do to help and African American faith leaders and community activists have taken the charge in expressing the need for systemic and attitudinal changes, especially as they are being constantly asked by white allies and counterparts what needs to happen to get on that path to reconciliation.

White people must take that important first step of acknowledging the wrongs that have been committed, said the Rev. Samuel J. Casey, senior pastor of New Life Christian Church of Fontana and executive director of Congregations Organized for Prophetic Engagement.

“First, there has to be an honest recognition by the dominant culture — the white community — that racism is still a reality,” he said. “We never told the Jewish community to get over it. There is a deep acknowledgment, as there should be, of the effect the Holocaust has had on the Jewish community. Reconciliation can come only after you admit you’ve done something wrong. That hasn’t happened yet.”

The conversation must shift from what the black community needs to do to what all Americans need to do, said the Rev. Chineta Goodjoin, pastor of New Hope Presbyterian Church in Orange, which is predominantly African American.

“What does ‘your’ congregation need from us as a white church? What do we do about ‘your’ pain? When the ‘your’ becomes ‘our,’ we move toward reconciliation,” she said.



Clergy march to LAPD headquarters to honor and demand justice for George Floyd on Tuesday, June 2, 2020 in Los Angeles. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

The power of empathy and storytelling

The ability to be able to listen to others’ stories and accept their pain is necessary if this process is to work, said Goodjoin, whose church plans to hold a virtual vigil at 7 p.m. Tuesday, June 9.

“But if you participate, you have to be prepared to carry the burden of someone else’s pain,” she said. “If you are looking forward to light candles and sing kumbaya, you’re going to be sorely disappointed. Stories must be heard with open minds. Stories lose their power if the recipient starts to feel defensive.



The Rev. Chineta Goodjoin holds a photo of her best friend, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, who was killed in the racially motivated Charleston, S.C., shooting. Goodjoin leads New Hope Presbyterian Church in Orange. (File photo by Ana Venegas, Orange County Register/SCNG)

“There is nothing to defend when you open yourself up to hear someone else’s pain — whether or not you agree with it.”

Candie Blankman, who has been having conversations about racial reconciliation with Goodjoin, said she doesn’t ever want this to be an issue that “blows over” and is forgotten until the next tragedy occurs.

“Someone from my church actually said it’ll blow over in a couple of weeks,” said Blankman, pastor of discipleship and care at San Clemente Presbyterian Church, which is predominantly white. “That’s what fueled my indignation. This veneer of civility won’t hold anymore. Yes, the violence we’ve seen is bad, but it’s created an awareness of a pain that has existed for a long time. There are people (in the African American community) whose lives are violently disrupted every day.”

Blankman said white people like her need to “figure out what needs to be done.”

“It has to be more than getting together and praying,” she said. “As a minister, I believe you can change one heart at a time. When you change hearts, you change communities. That means listening to people, to their stories. It means empathizing not just with words, but with action. And there needs to be a lot of education.”

Guarding against apathy

In the African American community, there is hope that Floyd’s death would become a game changer, said Derric J. Johnson, vice president of the Los Angeles Human Relations Commission and founding director at the Equity and Justice Institute at Crossroads School for Arts and Sciences in Santa Monica.

“I’m hoping that this is the catalyst that gets everyone aligned with the viewpoint that we have to do better,” he said. “We need to find different ways to participate in society that can bring about real change.”

Hope is all he has and hope is all the community has at this moment, Johnson said.

“If we’re not hopeful, apathy sets in, and then what’s the point?” he said. “I care about my own existence. I want to step out the front door and not have to wonder if I’ll return at the end of the day. If I can’t hope and fight for my existence, then we’re lost.”

Johnson says he sees hope in the form of projects such as an ad hoc commission for policing and human relations of which he is a part. The panel will meet this week to look over a final draft of recommendations for policing reform.

“These situations (involving police brutality) are like Groundhog Day,” Johnson said. “I don’t ever want it to become normalized. I don’t want to see a scene like this again and be like, it’s just another Thursday in America.”



Ivan Pitts, senior pastor of Second Baptist Church in Santa Ana, the oldest African American church in Orange County. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)

The role of evangelical churches

As pastor of the [oldest African American church in Orange County](#), the Rev. Ivan Pitts would like to see predominantly white evangelical churches get on the forefront of this issue.

"I'd like to see them admit that there is a serious problem with racism in this country," he said. "Nothing can happen if you don't admit it."

Pitts would like megachurch pastors in Southern California and nationwide to make fighting for racial equality a part of their ministry.

"You have multimillion-dollar ministries that do amazing work with powerful members," he said. "This is as important as any work we do in the church. If they put their efforts in this direction, don't tell me the needle will not move."

Pitts believes the cries of the African American community are reaching at least some evangelicals. He sees the impact of Floyd's death on white people who have come out to protest in large numbers.

"But the question is how do we keep the fire burning and make sure it doesn't go out when the news cycle dies out?" he said. "If we don't have practical action, there is no point in having a conversation."

A [2016 study by The Barna Group](#), an evangelical Christian polling group in Ventura, concluded that the evangelical church "may be part of the problem in the hard work of racial reconciliation."

The study, titled "Black Lives Matter and Racial Tension in America," found that while a majority of black and white people surveyed (84%) believed there is a lot of hostility among racial groups, only 39% of white people agreed that racism is still a problem. Also, 71% of white people surveyed believed "reverse racism" or prejudicial treatment of white people is currently a problem. Only 13% of evangelicals said they support the Black Lives Matter movement and its message.

"If you're a white, evangelical Republican, you are less likely to think race is a problem, but more likely to think you are a victim of reverse racism," Brooke Hempell, vice president of research at The Barna Group, noted in the study. "You are also less convinced that people of color are socially disadvantaged. Yet these same groups believe the church plays an important role in reconciliation. This dilemma demonstrates that those supposedly most equipped for reconciliation do not see the need for it."

In Orange County, Rockharbor Church in Mission Viejo, a predominantly white evangelical congregation, broke the mold by [forging a relationship](#) with Christ Our Redeemer African Methodist Episcopal Church in Irvine. Rockharbor members reached out to the African American congregation after a mass shooting at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., in June 2015 when a self-proclaimed white supremacist shot and killed nine people during a Bible study group.

The two churches have continued their relationship over the years, even attempting [a racial reconciliation discussion](#) last year.

It is time for white evangelicals especially to accept that “the problem of racism is one we all face and we all have to face it together,” said Jeff Gill, pastor of the 10,000-strong Calvary Chapel South Bay near Gardena, an evangelical congregation that is about 20% African American. “We as the church need to be better listeners. We have historically ignored things as battles that have already been won.”

Gill said white Christians need to “tone down the rhetoric and turn up the compassion.”

“The church has been guilty of turning off the very people we hope to reach,” he said. “We need to be able to talk to one another.”

Reconciliation is hard work

Daryl Davis, an African American blues musician who has “converted” close to 100 Ku Klux Klan members to leave the movement just by talking to them, said it is important for everyone to recognize that all people have voices.

“Police and community members should be able to talk to one another,” he said. “We need to be proactive instead of being reactive. Why wait until the next incident? Let’s start having conferences between police and the people. We need to do that during times of peace so we can avoid these times of crisis.”

Davis said he is also encouraged by the large number of white people coming out to the rallies to support the African American community.

“These are genuine people who recognize our plight and want to join us,” he said. “I believe that might also be a contributing factor to why people at the top are starting to listen.”

‘A difficult dialogue’

Orange County Sheriff Don Barnes and Irvine Police Chief Mike Hamel participated in a teleconference Monday, June 1, that involved a diverse group of Orange County leaders from the faith community, law enforcement and higher education. Both men say they are not ignoring the issue of injustice and have taken steps in their own departments to better train their officers in de-escalation tactics and to hold them accountable for rogue actions.

Later in the week, Barnes also decried the actions of [one of his deputies caught on camera at a protest](#) Tuesday, June 2, in Costa Mesa, one of hundreds around the country to condemn the killing of Floyd and call for deep reforms. The unnamed deputy, whose image was shared on social media, wore patches on his tactical vest that are associated with a right-wing paramilitary group.

The Sheriff's Department placed the deputy on leave pending an administrative investigation.

The "difficult dialogue" that the entire community must engage in on race will require "leaning shoulder to shoulder and holding each other up," Barnes said during the teleconference.

Both Barnes and Hamel recalled participating in a 2016 march for solidarity attended by more than 1,000 people representing a cross-section of police officers and those of different religions and races — white, black, Latino, Asian. The unity march, held in Irvine, came in the wake of police shootings that had roiled local communities and attacks on police officers that unnerved law enforcement.



Steve Gish with Amy Biehl's mother, Linda Biehl. Gish wrote the book "Amy Biehl's Last Home."

Finding common ground

Reconciliation doesn't happen overnight and is hard work, said Linda Biehl, mother of Amy Biehl, a Fulbright scholar from Newport Beach who was killed by an angry mob of black youth in a township outside Cape Town in 1993. Biehl was dragged out of her car, stoned and stabbed to death two days before she had planned to return home.

But her parents returned to Guguletu, the township where their daughter was murdered, [established a foundation in her name](#) to serve the youth with after-school programs and food distribution. Two of the men convicted of killing Biehl came to work for the foundation and Linda Biehl says they have become like sons over time.

Both Linda Biehl and her husband, Peter, testified in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission spearheaded by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It was a raw, gut-wrenching process in which people shared their stories.

"The path of reconciliation is very difficult," Linda Biehl said. "South Africa decided that instead of reprisals and prison cells, they wanted to create something for people to share their agony and tell their stories. The commission wasn't perfect, but people became more aware of each other's humanity."

Linda Biehl says in this country there is opportunity for storytelling and dialogue in individual communities, perhaps through community action groups.

"For reconciliation to happen, dialogue has to increase significantly," she said. "Not only do stories have to be told, but we also have to find something common in these stories. Finding common ground is crucial."

[Link to the OC Register's full article \(Subscription maybe necessary\)](#)