

Intercultural Ministry

HOPE FOR
A CHANGING WORLD

GRACE JI-SUN KIM | JANN ALDREDGE-CLANTON
EDITORS

Foreword by Dwight N. Hopkins

JUDSON PRESS
PUBLISHERS SINCE 1824



Join our mailing list for updates and special offers.
www.judsonpress.com/mailling_list.cfm



An Experiment in Radical Religious Openness

Rev. Dr. Brad R. Braxton

On October 8, 2011, fifty-five people gathered in a Baltimore library to initiate an experiment in radical religious openness. A library, a repository of ancient wisdom and emerging knowledge, seemed a perfect place to ask a poignant question: Is it possible for a community to love and serve God apart from the cultural discord and theological dogma that can make religion so dangerous? We dreamed a big dream about a bold, new congregation whose chief characteristic would be openness—openness to radically inclusive love, courageous social justice activism, and compassionate interfaith collaboration. At the meeting's conclusion, The Open Church of Maryland had begun.

Five years later, The Open Church is a viable faith community. With purpose and passion, The Open Church is pushing cultural boundaries and challenging theological assumptions. For example, The Open Church 1) considers the weekly worship service as a “political assembly” for creating citizens who are preparing to live in God’s inbreaking *kin-dom*;¹ 2) supports the moral and civic equality of LGBTQ persons; 3) sensitizes congregants about social injustices such as classism; and 4) embraces interfaith collaboration as an antidote to Christian arrogance and imperialism.

At a typical gathering of The Open Church, a thirty-something, white, lesbian agnostic with a master’s degree might sit next to a blue-collar heterosexual black nationalist in his sixties as they

INTERCULTURAL MINISTRY

collaborate to bring healing and hope to Baltimore's blighted communities. The Open Church is increasingly becoming a resource for local and national initiatives concerning diversity and inclusion. For example, The Open Church's advocacy for marriage equality received national attention through a PBS interview.

On the one hand, our progress in building an intercultural church has been remarkable. On the other hand, as the founding senior pastor, I realize how precarious the experiment still is. Some congregants remain reticent about the joyful embrace of radical inclusion and the discarding of problematic religious perspectives. For example, although there is a healthy balance between heterosexual and LGBTQ persons in the congregation, some congregants worry that The Open Church is (or will become) the "gay church." Additionally, the emphasis on Jesus' humanity and questioning of Jesus' divinity, dismissal of narrow definitions of biblical authority, and use of gender-inclusive language (especially when referencing God) have sparked discomfort and respectful resistance in some persons. And, some persons who say they desire an intercultural experience renege when they understand how many dimensions of culture and diversity The Open Church is audaciously exploring.

At The Open Church (and for the purposes of this chapter), culture is understood in an expansive way that includes and extends considerably beyond race/ethnicity. Sheila Davaney defines culture as "the process by which meaning is produced, contended for, and continually renegotiated and the context in which individual and communal identities are mediated and brought into being."² The Open Church is predominantly African American, with a growing presence of white members. Nevertheless, The Open Church is intercultural because of the conscious embrace of diverse cultural factors that mediate meaning and delineate identities.

This chapter will explore the historical background, theological commitments, and religious practices that have bolstered The

Open Church's development, guided by our vision statement recited in worship.

The Open Church Vision Statement

All: The Open Church is a sacred place where those who are hurting, confused, and in need can find healing and hope, regardless of color, culture, or creed.

Leader: It is a wide place where "Abraham's family"—Christians, Jews, and Muslims—can dialogue with Buddhists and Bahá'is and where Hindus can dialogue with Humanists.

All: The Open Church is a joyful place where children, seniors, migrant workers, people experiencing homelessness, and scholars eagerly learn from and teach one another.

Leader: It is a safe place where varied ethnicities and capabilities, genders and sexual identities, social and economic groups gather in peace to break bread at Christ's Communion Table, as we break down stereotypes.

All: As sacred siblings born to our Heavenly Father who is Divine Mother of us all, we practice radically inclusive love that proclaims and builds up the "*kin*-dom of God."

(Auto)Biography Is Theology

During the last fifty years, contextual theologies (e.g., black theology, women's theologies [feminist/womanist/mujerista], postmodern theology, postcolonial theology, queer theology) have insisted that responsible theological discourse must be grounded in our personal stories and cultural histories and context.³ My context is a priceless text to be thoroughly excavated for its insights and impact. The stories of who we are influence the stories of who we understand God to be. (Auto)biography is theology.

The Two Churches That Led to the Third

The Open Church is the third congregation that I have shepherded. The Open Church would not exist were it not for important experiences in my previous two churches: Douglas Memorial Community Church and The Riverside Church.

Douglas Memorial Community Church (1995–2000). My first pastorate was at the Douglas Memorial Community Church, a medium-sized, nondenominational church in downtown Baltimore. At Douglas Church, I inherited a congregation of tough-minded, tenderhearted believers who were ready to embrace change and welcome me as their spiritual leader. Many beautiful things blossomed across five years. For example, two hundred people joined the congregation. An intellectually robust Wednesday Bible study was created with a regular attendance in excess of one hundred persons. In addition, we engaged exciting interfaith initiatives with Baltimore's Jewish community.

Through a sacred partnership between people and pastor, Douglas Church had been revitalized.⁴ I came to Douglas Church as a scholar. In 2000, I left as a scholar and a pastor. It was now time for me to mentor other scholars and pastors.

Having completed my PhD at Emory University in 1999, I was called in 2000 to the ministry of university teaching and served on two distinguished divinity school faculties—four years as an assistant professor at Wake Forest University and four years as an associate professor at Vanderbilt University. In those years, I taught preaching and biblical studies to brilliant students; published three books; made three pilgrimages to Africa; and clarified the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of my progressive, intercultural agenda.

I thoroughly enjoyed my professorial ministry. Yet, I knew that at some point the professor had to return to the pastorate. The call to what I thought would be my second and final pastorate came in the fall of 2008.

The Riverside Church (2008–2009). I was called in 2008 to be the sixth senior minister of The Riverside Church in New York City. The Riverside Church is a large, historic, intercultural institution. At the age of thirty-nine, I was the youngest senior minister ever called by the congregation and the second African American. In spite of the challenges of my nine-month tenure at Riverside, I count it a privilege to have served that remarkable congregation.

After several months of serving as senior minister, long-standing internal tensions severely hindered progress in executing the church's stated intercultural mission and vision. Undoubtedly, I made tactical leadership errors: Nevertheless, the assaults on my professional pedigree and leadership, orchestrated by a small, organized, and influential group of congregants, revealed that I was a lightning rod for internal congregational storms that had raged for decades. Rather than create additional strife, I voluntarily resigned from the pastorate of The Riverside Church in the hope that all parties would benefit from new beginnings. My rapid resignation resulted in shock and sadness among many congregants.

Seven years have passed since my departure from Riverside. For approximately five of those seven years, Riverside was without a permanent senior minister. Amy Butler, my pastoral successor, is the first woman to serve as Riverside's senior minister. She has made generous gestures to foster reconciliation between that congregation and me, including my participation in her pastoral installation in 2014 and Riverside's eighty-fifth anniversary in 2015. Since my departure, hindsight has taken on its 20/20 character. I have increasing clarity concerning how the experience at Riverside prepared me for The Open Church.

During my yearlong candidacy for Riverside's pastorate, I read accounts of Riverside's history and interviewed many people familiar with the congregation.⁵ As part of my due diligence, I searched for clues to Riverside's institutional DNA. In addition to Riverside's splendid external reputation, my investigation

revealed an internal narrative of congregational divisiveness, unclear boundaries between clergy and lay leaders, and an ineffectual governance structure. For some people in the church, the most sacred text was not the Bible but instead the congregation's bylaws.

These issues of power became acutely pronounced during the tenure of the third senior minister, Ernest Campbell. Governance matters prompted Campbell to resign from Riverside in 1976.⁶ Governance issues also beset the pastorate of the fourth senior minister, William Sloane Coffin.⁷

If Ernest Campbell and William Sloane Coffin, white pastors, struggled with these governance issues when the church remained predominantly white, one can imagine how these governance issues intensified during James Forbes's tenure and my own—a time when Riverside was led by its first African American pastors. During Forbes's historic pastorate, the racial dynamics shifted significantly, and Riverside became a predominantly black congregation.⁸ The shockwaves of that shift reverberated and complicated already contested governance matters by unearthing the heretofore unexpressed "white anxiety" that often occurs when intercultural ministry decenters white people and white cultural priorities.

Intercultural Lessons Learned at The Riverside Church

This abbreviated retelling of portions of my Riverside experience is germane to the founding of The Open Church in crucial ways. First, my Riverside pastorate compelled me to think more explicitly and theologically about issues of power when building an intercultural community.

The Power in Understanding Power. Congregational leaders often deem issues of power as unsavory at best or evil at worst. "Spiritual people" supposedly should not be preoccupied with power. Defining power by its worst manifestations, many congregations

operate with problematic understandings of power and avoid theological analyses of power. This avoidance can result in power imbalances, where unhealthy amounts of power are concentrated in the hands of an individual or a small group.

Furthermore, until issues of power are addressed, congregations interested in intercultural ministry often confuse representation for diversity. The influx of a minority community into a majority community does not necessarily equate to diversity. That influx might simply mean that there is greater intercultural representation in that community. Diversity genuinely surfaces when minority groups are represented in sufficient numbers to organize and thus challenge and change power structures in a community.

Even though Riverside's racial demographics had shifted, its overall cultural ethos and approach to religious practices remained firmly anchored in white cultural narratives and priorities. Racial justice educators and activists have long noted that covert, institutional racism—not overt, individual racism—is the more difficult form of racial injustice to overcome. Joseph Barndt insists, "The distinctive mark of racism is power—collective, systemic, societal power."⁹

Barndt's framework explains why even my small attempts at Riverside to question or decenter the assumed superiority of white perspectives and approaches aroused serious opposition, and the leaders of the opposition on some occasions were black people. Internalized oppression is often subtle and runs very deep. This explains why some women, ironically, are fierce opponents of feminist liberation efforts and why some people of color vigorously oppose efforts to dethrone white privilege.¹⁰

For an intercultural agenda to thrive in a congregation, leaders and congregants must consider power an appropriate topic for theologically nuanced discussion. Leaders must attend to issues of power with the same care that they attend to liturgical practices such as preaching and praying. I now tell persons aspiring to be

pastors, especially in intercultural contexts: "Spend as much time with the bylaws as you do with the Bible. Both the 'devil' who can harm you and the 'angel' who can heal you are in the details about how power is understood and applied in a community."

A Nimble Governance Structure. My experience at Riverside also influenced my desire to create an intercultural congregation with a nimble governance structure. In the years between leaving Riverside and founding The Open Church, I mused: How can a congregation have governance structures that are responsible to fiduciary matters yet open to the leadership of the Holy Spirit?

As Jesus says to Nicodemus in John 3:8, the wind of the Spirit blows wherever it wills. The unruly Spirit often disrespects the decorum and deliberations of the parliamentary procedures prescribed by *Robert's Rules of Order*. Governance structures can become so burdensome that they prevent a congregation from discerning the unexpected thing that God wants to do. Envisioning The Open Church and its governance structures, I regularly called to mind poignant observations from the theologian Justo González: "The function of the Spirit is not so much to create the structures and procedures by which the church must live forever, but rather to break *open* structures so that the church may be obedient as it faces each new challenge."¹¹

When faced with the opportunity of embracing genuine intercultural ministry, many faith communities across the millennia have said a defiant no to these opportunities. Their negations often have been inscribed institutionally in restrictive governance structures that frustrate the boundary-breaking movement of the Spirit.

My experience at Riverside was both humbling and hurtful. Yet, that painful episode made me eager to envision a new intercultural faith community characterized by permissive power structures that enabled the default answer of a congregation to be yes.

The Open Church: Pursuing Openness on Purpose

After my departure from Riverside, I relocated with my family to Chicago, where I took a year-long professional sabbatical. After the sabbatical, I served for two years as Distinguished Visiting Scholar at McCormick Theological Seminary. McCormick administrators, faculty, staff, and students were invaluable dialogue partners as The Open Church's vision was conceived and born.

I wanted to form an intercultural community held together by three core theological commitments:

- **Progressive Ministry:** Progressive ministry believes that sacred texts and authoritative traditions must be critically engaged and continually reinterpreted in light of contemporary circumstances, or religion becomes a relic.

- **Prophetic Ministry:** Prophetic ministry insists that God desires to save us not only from our personal sins but also from the systemic sins that oppress neighborhoods and nations.

- **Pluralistic Ministry:** Pluralistic ministry is a liberating call to "uncertainty, to a sense of human and religious limitedness. It is an affirmation that what we think we know certainly and absolutely is, in fact, neither certain nor absolute."¹² By opening our hands and hearts, we make it possible to grasp, and be grasped by, larger truths.

Like sturdy beams supporting a floor, these three core commitments undergirded every aspect of The Open Church's founding meeting in October 2011. Thus, in the very foundation of the congregation is an explicit commitment to radical openness.

In the founding meeting, and subsequent meetings across these five years, we envisioned and have striven to be The Open Church, not just the The Open Door Church. Many churches have referred to themselves as "open door" churches. I do not disparage congregations with open doors. However, The Open Church has loftier ambitions in

INTERCULTURAL MINISTRY

its pursuit of openness. In some churches, the doors may be open, but the windows are nailed shut through denominational dogma, burdensome bureaucracy, and an obsession with outdated orthodoxies (to name a few nails). Consequently, the free-flowing Wind cannot circulate properly, and the air becomes stagnant.

We purposed to create a church whose entire existence was open. We envisioned: A church open to any persons and perspectives that are truthful, just, and compassionate. A church open to theistic and nontheistic religions and to humanist and atheistic moral philosophies. A church open to sexual diversity so that LGBTQ persons could emerge from the closets they often inhabit in religious spaces for fear of “assault and battery” by the Bible. A church open to the courageous reimagining and embracing of the feminine dimensions of God as an act of resistance to sexism. A church open to class diversity that would enable white-collar salary workers and blue-collar shift workers to learn with and from one another.

Although openness is an obvious commitment at The Open Church, an equally central commitment buttressing our intercultural work is purpose. Purpose must be the partner to openness. In a world where so many people are closed off from opportunities, from sources of abundance, and even from one another, intercultural communities will not occur by accident. Benjamin Mays, the sage who mentored Martin Luther King Jr., understood well the irreverent insistence needed to ignite personal and social transformation across cultural boundaries. Mays remarked, “I would rather go to hell by choice than to stumble into heaven following the crowd.”¹³

Too many faith communities are stumbling in their efforts to promote inclusion because they are comfortably following the crowd. They are afraid to engage in audacious, purposeful actions to create the conditions for diversity to thrive. I frequently offer in my sermons and pastoral exhortations at The Open Church my contemporary remix of Mays’s insight on purpose:

If radical inclusion sends me to hell, then I am going to hell *on purpose*, and I will take the express train there! God, if your heaven is exclusive, then it is a place I would rather not be because *all* my sacred siblings are not welcome there.

This brazen statement encapsulates the ultimate sacredness of openness for me. In my theology, an inclusive hell is more sacred than an exclusive heaven. Below, I chronicle briefly examples of how The Open Church is purposefully supporting diversity and inclusion.

Wrestling with Biblical Authority on Purpose

At The Open Church, we question the Bible and acknowledge its moral ambiguities. We often say, “Not everything in the ‘Good Book’ is good news.” We intentionally renounce the regrettable role that the Bible has played in legitimizing vilification and violence, especially as it relates to women and LGBTQ people.

We are constructing notions of biblical authority that invite people to engage the Bible with intellectual honesty as well as reverence. In an early sermon at The Open Church, I placed biblical authority front and center in the congregation’s ministry of inclusion:

In my estimation, biblical authority is about engagement with the Book, not necessarily agreement with the Book. . . . Because I know what I believe and in whom I believe, I can listen to you talk about what you believe and in whom you believe. Biblical authority simply means, “Let’s engage!” . . .

So, as we ponder the meanings of biblical authority, I will not coerce you to agree with me. Rather I offer my perspectives as a catalyst for you to voice your perspectives, with the hope that from multiple perspectives, we might assemble some fragments of truth.¹⁴

Creating a Culture of Inquiry on Purpose

The Open Church also fosters an atmosphere where we lovingly question one another. Creating a culture of healthy, respectful inquiry is a critical component of the intercultural experience. We conceive of The Open Church as a republic—a sacred, political assembly where we are learning to share power for the sake of a better world. A key congregational mantra is: “At The Open Church, *everyone* is a minister.” Accordingly, everyone’s voice is crucial as we discern collaboratively what the good news is and how the good news compels us to act.

We amplify the voices of everyone by frequently holding dialogue-driven services dealing with major theological and social issues such as the humanity/divinity of Jesus, the interplay of sexuality and spirituality, immigration, homelessness, and violence. We regularly place in the bulletin discussion questions based on the worship service and sermon for that day, and the question-and-answer period occurs immediately after the sermon. On some occasions, discussion questions and the dialogue around them constitute the entire worship service.

At The Open Church, the invitation to dialogue is as important as the invitation to discipleship. Kathleen Neal Cleaver, the freedom fighter and legal scholar, said, “No one can speak truth to power until they know what is true.”¹⁵ In order to know what is true, we must listen to, reason with, and question one another.

Dethroning Sexist Language on Purpose

Language possesses both life-giving and death-dealing power. Thus, what we say and how we say it are matters of great moral consequence. At The Open Church, we embrace gender-inclusive language as a moral act that creates an inclusive environment. Early in the development of our congregation, I wrote the following statement and placed it in the bulletin:

As Christians, we are a people of the word. According to Genesis 1, God created in the beginning with the spoken word. We gather in worship to listen to and wrestle with the words of scripture in the hope that those words will lead us to the living word of God's truth for us here and now.

The lyrics of many of our sacred songs were composed at a time when God was thought to be "male." Unfortunately, the exclusive imaging of God as male has contributed to the horrific injustice of sexism, the assumed superiority of males. This injustice affects us all, but it especially injures women and girls.

Yet, we know that God is neither male nor female. God is a living Spirit. So, at The Open Church, we value inclusive language as a reminder that none of our terms for God can accurately capture God's majestic presence and infinite essence. There is nothing wrong with calling God "Father," but in fairness we shouldn't mind calling God "Mother" either. God is a good God. Yes, *She* is! Furthermore, when we have the opportunity to avoid pronouns, we should not mind simply referring to God as God.

Eboo Patel, a friend and noted interfaith educator, intimates that our language practices and stories can either build bombs to destroy or bridges to unite.¹⁶

Opening the Communion Table on Purpose

At The Open Church, the table where we share Holy Communion is radically open. In some Christian traditions, there are strict pre-conditions for who can serve and partake of this simple meal of bread and wine (or juice) that symbolizes the price that Jesus paid to justly resist injustice. For example, in some Christian denominations only ordained clergy and authorized lay leaders are permitted

INTERCULTURAL MINISTRY

to consecrate and serve the meal. Additionally, only baptized believers can partake of the communion elements.

At The Open Church anyone can serve Holy Communion, and everyone who desires the meal is welcome at the table. In a world full of hungry and thirsty people, it is unconscionable to me to serve a meal, even a symbolic one, and not attempt to invite as many willing people to the table as possible. Furthermore, in light of Jesus' deep affection for children (e.g., Matthew 19:13-15), placing children's hands on Holy Communion makes the meal even holier. Thus, at The Open Church, we especially delight in inviting children to serve the meal. I typically use some variation of the statement below to invite the community to the table:

At this table, no reservations are needed, and no priority seating is allowed. At The Open Church, God's welcome table is open, radically open, to whosoever will. You don't even have to believe in God to come to this table, because even if you don't believe in God, God still believes in you. Come!

The response to our radically open table has been overwhelmingly positive, even if some congregants come to the table questioning why they previously belonged to faith communities that placed fences around a table designed to foster communion.

Next Steps: Playing A Love Supreme on Purpose

I am thankful for how far The Open Church has come and mindful of the long journey ahead. As the congregation's chief visionary, my primary responsibility is romantic in nature. Pushing the boundaries toward radical religious openness will involve wooing people to open their hearts even more to a love supreme. The Open Church's vision is bold, global, and even cosmic. We believe that radically inclusive love is the heartbeat of God and the ultimate

impulse in an infinite and expanding universe. Through the ages, apostles and prophets have tried to seduce us with this love.

In 1965, the acoustical apostle John Coltrane released his monumental album entitled *A Love Supreme*. With his saxophone, Coltrane preached a sermon. A love supreme—a soaring, unconditional love not detained by dogma or constrained by color or creed—is the missing note in the jam session for restorative justice and intercultural inclusion. The Open Church is a tool through which God can push boundaries. The Open Church is an instrument on which God can play *A Love Supreme* . . . on purpose!

Notes

1. Kin-dom is a term coined by feminist theologians to disrupt the unjust assumption that God is male. The term also accentuates relationality: our relationships with God and our relationships with one another. We are all *kinfolk*.

2. Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis," in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, ed. Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

3. For concise explanations of these and other contextual theologies, consult Daniel Patte, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

4. *The Baltimore Sun* chronicled Douglas Church's revitalization: David L. Greene, "Here to Have Church," *The Baltimore Sun*, July 10, 2000, accessed January 31, 2016, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2000-07-10/news/0007100109_1_braxton-church-pastor.

5. For example, Peter Paris et al., eds., *The History of The Riverside Church in the City of New York* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

6. Paris et al., *History of The Riverside Church*, 46.

7. Paris et al., *History of The Riverside Church*, 47.

8. I use here the more inclusive term "black" instead of "African American" to include the appreciable number of Riverside members who are from Africa and the African diaspora.

9. Joseph Barndt, *Understanding and Dismantling Racism: The Twenty-First Century Challenge to White America* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 143–44.

10. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 43.

INTERCULTURAL MINISTRY

11. Justo L. González, "Reading from my Bicultural Place: Acts 6:1-7," in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 146 (emphasis added).

12. Joseph M. Webb, *Preaching and the Challenge of Pluralism* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1998), 108.

13. Benjamin E. Mays, quoted in *Walking Integrity: Benjamin Elijah Mays, Mentor to Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. Lawrence Edward Carter Sr. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 12.

14. Brad R. Braxton, "Interpretation for Liberation: Working with the Book," preached on August 5, 2012.

15. Kathleen Neal Cleaver, quoted in *Disrupting White Supremacy from Within: White People on What We Need to Do*, ed. Jennifer Harvey, Karin A. Case, and Robin Hawley Gorsline (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 9.

16. Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), xi-xix.