

**Resistance We Can Imagine:
Cultivating Ecclesial Imaginations for Racial Justice & Healing in Public Life**

By Rev. Michael-Ray Mathews

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*ⁱ

This project aims to spark the imaginations of pastoral and congregational leaders in their efforts to realize their commitments to intersectional racial justice and healing in public life. The creators pray that this resource will deepen and widen the vision of congregations to dismantle white supremacy at intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional (structural) and cultural levels.ⁱⁱ

Transformation of this scale requires an imagination that is deeper and wider than the dominant racial imagination of our culture. And for the Christian church, this imagination must be more than social, economic or political. It must have theological and ethical dimensions. It must be embodied within the congregation and made manifest in public life. The work of racial justice in congregations must be understood as an ecclesial practice with public impact.

It must be a practice that is intentional, ongoing and under constant examination for the theological and ethical wisdom it generates for the prophetic witness of the church. The church's ability to be relevant and helpful in moments of social upheaval depends on our commitment to be a practicing and reflective church. We must be willing to lean into uncommon encounters that may disrupt the equilibrium of prior assumptions and institutional arrangements and create space for the re-imagining and the organizing of faithful witness in any given moment and context.

This article seeks to explore and disrupt the racialized imaginations that dominate and shape our lived reality in communal and public life in order to cultivate an ecclesial imagination that facilitates the work of racial justice and healing. Specifically, we will explore a praxis model that communities of faith and moral courage within the faith-based community-organizing group, PICO National Networkⁱⁱⁱ, continue to nurture for this same purpose. This essay affirms our commitment to resist the logic and impulse of white supremacy and forge a new ontology, a renewed and shared identity.

Cultivating Our Own Imaginations: Nurturing a Theology of Resistance

In the wake of the police killing of Michael Brown, Jr. in Ferguson, MO in early August 2014, clergy and organizers of the PICO National Network, began to examine more deeply the theological and ethical imperatives that guide our faith-based organizing practices. In truth, this examination began much earlier than the Ferguson moment. From the rise of the Tea Party to Occupy Wall Street, from the Movement for Black Lives to the groundswell of support for Donald Trump, we were bearing witness to the tensions would shape the next decade of our nation's social imagination and policy decisions.

We were beholding a moment of transition, shaped by differences in worldview, but perhaps, more importantly, the fissures that people perceive between social promises made and social promises broken. If we hoped to fashion our collective journey towards a deeper understanding and realization of the Beloved Community in our society, we would have to do more than run powerful campaigns. Our campaigns would have to be deeply rooted in the theological and ethical commitments of our diverse spiritual traditions.

A question posed to a caucus of PICO religious leaders provided the spark for what we have been calling a Theology of Resistance (TOR): Are you a chaplain to the Empire or a prophet of the Resistance? This

provocative interrogation helped to initiate a national conversation about what informs our commitment to struggle together against injustice and dehumanization. TOR is a prophetic, multi-faith praxis model shaping the theo-ethical dimensions of our commitment to resist the hegemony of racial narratives, practices and policies that permit the exclusion of people, the extraction of resources from communities, and the degradation of our environment.

These narratives, practices and policies comprise what we have called “the logic and impulse of Empire,” with socio-political, economic and ontological (spiritual) dimensions. American Empire is founded on a fundamental “hierarchy of human value,” in which some lives matter more than others, especially white, heterosexual, and cis male lives. It is rooted in an economic narrative that justifies the unjust control of economic and natural resources, expressed in the racism, materialism, militarism that comprise Dr. King’s “giant triplets,” preventing us from being a “people-oriented society.”^{iv} These forces create a spiritual crisis as fear and extreme individualism drive us into isolated, corners of tribalism and alienation.

TOR is also a narrative model that explores the ancient and contemporary stories of resistance that fuel our pursuit of justice and revolutionary love. Borrowing from Marshall Ganz’s tool for engaging the power of public stories for social movements^v, TOR considers examines three narratives for cultivating a theo-ethical conversation that responds to the question: What does my faith teach me about resisting the logic and impulse of Empire in my self, in my relationships, within the systems and structures that shape public life and within the broader culture? In Ganz’s model, these three narratives are the story of self, the story of us, and the story of now.

The TOR model employs this tripartite frame to tell the personal, sacred and organizing stories that inspire our vision for racial healing. The story of self examines the reasons for our personal participation in social change work. The story of us considers the shared vision, values and goals of a community committed to social change. The story of now outlines the challenge and opportunity for communities to organize for change in any given moment. The narrative arc of these stories follows a path of encounter, disruption, re-imagining, and prophetic action.

The personal story or “story of self” outlines the experiences of an individual that awakened them to the pain and suffering in their community, and that created space for a renewed, re-imagined vision and the resolve to take action in pursuit of it. The sacred story or “story of us” explores narratives in our sacred texts and traditions of inspirational leaders and communities who also journeyed the path of encounter, disruption, re-imagining and action to achieve just and right relationships in their own time. The organizing story or “story of now” considers the encounters, disruptions, renewed imaginations and prophetic actions required of this moment. The organizing story is the yet untold story that we create together as communities of prophetic resistance.

The TOR model was born out of a process of examining the personal, sacred and organizing narratives shaping the experiences of organizers, lay leaders and clergy in wake of the uprising in Ferguson, MO, following the shooting death of Michael Brown. Here I share a bit of how my personal experience in Ferguson, the power of the sacred spiritual Wade In the Water, and our collective commitment to change inspired the development of the Theology of Resistance narrative/praxis model.

Encounter, Disruption, Re-Imagining, Action: A Personal, Sacred and Organizing Narrative

Delegations of PICO clergy and organizers visited Ferguson four times from late August to late November 2014. The more we engaged the people, history, dreams and grief of the young people there, the more we could see a pattern, a culture, a way of life that was really a way of death, a way of numb hopelessness. From the economic, health and academic disparities between the majority black community and the nearly all-white leadership, to the now-proven corrupt practices within law enforcement and court systems in the region, we slowly began to understand the fear and broken relationships that could result in deadly encounters between the community and police. Such brokenness would result not only in Mike Brown’s death, but in a spirit of fear and distrust that

would leave Mike's body lying on the hot asphalt of Canfield Drive for four and a half hours, while his mother, family and community stood powerless, transfixed and transfigured forever.

The more we listened, the more we could see a bigger picture, discern a clearer pattern, and appreciate the deeper context and reality. In the light of tragic deaths like Renisha McBride, Trayvon Martin, Alex Nieto, Oscar Grant, Eric Garner and, later, Aura Rosser and young Tamir Rice, Mike Brown's death took on a significance that transcended the muddy and unclear details.

As a product of a lack black middle class church, I had to come to terms with how white supremacy and my own middle-class respectability was blinding me not only to the truth about what is really happening to and in our Black and Brown communities, but to the very presence of God and God's message in the midst of these tragic realities. In Ferguson, our clergy learned that we had been hearing but not really listening to the cries of our young black and brown youth. We realized that the future of our churches, communities and even society depended on our capacity to really listen and be changed.

By my third trip to Ferguson, I was experiencing a radical transformation. We all were. When you stare down the dragon of a police system that will use pepper spray, tear gas, rubber bullets, flash grenades, profanity and death threats at gunpoint against clergy and peaceful protestors, you begin to see things you could not – or would not – see before.

In October 2014, hundreds of clergy, from all over the country, stood in the rain outside the Ferguson Police Department, calling for repentance from unjust practices and for healing between the police and community. But before we could call the police to repentance, we had to have our own intervention and moment of repentance. We had to confess that we had let down our young people across the nation. That we had failed to listen, failed to show up when it mattered. In too many ways, the Church had failed to be a part of their lives. Generations ago some of our churches despised and turned away their single mothers and grandmothers, giving up on a whole generation of black and brown youth.

So as we stood in the pouring rain for four and a half hours calling the police to repentance and renewal, we knew that we, too, were being called to repentance and renewal. We were being baptized into a movement for justice. And like at the Baptism of Jesus, there seemed to be a voice saying to us, "These are my Beloved – these young black bodies – these daughters and sons of Ferguson and beyond...Listen to them, see them, love them. See me at work in them. And see me at work in you."

This is the message that drenched me as I stood in the pouring rain with clergy and young activists. The sky opened up. Drops fell like buckets. The rain was so hard; it was raining inside our umbrellas. We were literally being baptized. And so we began to sing, "Wade in water, wade in the water, children, wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water."

We sang this song, mindful that the trouble was not ultimately from the police staring us down that afternoon, or the broader hegemonic power structures in our world. But God – God's own self – was the real trouble. The real trouble was the good news of abundant life that disrupts systems of injustice. The real trouble was the power of solidarity with the weakest and most vulnerable. The real trouble was in our commitment to deny ourselves, to risk our own lives and resist Empire. We were troubling the water.

We are co-creators with the Creator. We we have agency and vocation – that is power and a mandate – to cooperate with God in *tikkun olam* – the repair and healing of the world. If that is so, then we are troublemakers with the Holy. We are called not so much to enter troubled waters or to be a bridge over troubled waters, but to actually trouble the waters: to disrupt and confront injustice, to resist and tear down dehumanizing structures so that we can create new systems that honor our God-given dignity. We are called to trouble the waters so that we can heal the world. We are called to resist.

This commitment to trouble the waters and heal the world fueled the imagination of pastors and clergy returning from Ferguson. As clergy told their own stories of encounter, disruption, re-imagining and action, they also examined the sacred stories, songs, rituals – both ancient and contemporary – that inspire our prophetic preaching, teaching, congregational care and public witness in the wake of the uprising in Ferguson and across the nation. These stories of self and us helped us imagine new ways to resist the logic and impulse of American Empire in both local and national contexts. We endeavored to create a tool to support such imagining and action in real life.

Grace to Imagine a New Identity Together

Organizing is about re-organizing our relationship to self, others, systems and culture. The TOR model facilitates the integration of faith and values in the organizing process, by introducing opportunities for theological and ethical reflection on our personal experiences, our sacred traditions and urgency of the moment. Cultivating a commitment to racial justice and healing in congregations is an organizing project. Pastors and leaders are re-organizing their relationships at multiple levels.

Such re-organizing requires uncommon encounters, profound disruptions, sacred re-imagining and prophetic action. Learning to tell and interpret these stories in community can facilitate the pastoral and ecclesial imaginations necessary to realize transformative visions for racial healing. It will help us live into new stories about race, white supremacy, and racial healing.

Craig Dykstra, reflecting on the imagination that guides pastors and congregations, said, “every human being lives by the power of imagination.” The shared imaginations of pastors and congregants are critical for creating “a virtuous cycle” that informs the practice of intersectional racial justice and healing in our communities of faith. If we are not cultivating a social, moral and theological imagination about race, we are probably living inside someone else’s. We are likely perpetuating biases, practices and values that are incompatible with our Christian convictions about race and racial justice. We must build up our capacity to develop what Walter Brueggemann calls “a sustained, disciplined and emancipated imagination.”

Speaking on the role of white people in resisting white supremacy, Karin Case emphasized the importance of imagination or “consciousness” and action:

“The color of our skin is something we cannot change, but we can work to change our consciousness and actions and we can join with people of every race to create a better future. Our resistance may create vital opportunities for social transformation, and it can move us collectively and personally toward greater integrity and wholeness.”^{vi}

While there is unique and distinct work that white people and white congregations must do in dismantling racism, we all must confront internalized white supremacy within our selves, and in our relationships (or lack thereof), structures and culture. In order to forge a new and shared identity in our congregations and culture, we must resist the dominant imagination of our culture and cultivate new imaginations that propel us into prophetic action in local and global contexts.

ⁱ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 1987. Print.

ⁱⁱ Batts, Valarie. "Is Reconciliation Possible?" IS RECONCILIATION POSSIBLE? (n.d.): n. pag. VISIONS, INC. Visions, Inc., 2001. Web. 1 Jan. 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Unlocking the Power of People™." PICO National Network. N.p., n.d. Web. 1 Jan. 2017.

^{iv} King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." *Common Dreams*. N.p., n.d. Web. 1 Jan. 2017. <<http://www.commondreams.org/views04/0115-13.htm>>.

^v Ganz, Marshall. "Telling Your Public Story." (n.d.): n. pag. WordPress, May 2014. Web. 1 Jan. 2017. <<https://philstesthomepage.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/public-story-worksheet07ganz.pdf>>.

^{vi} Harvey, Jennifer, Karin A. Case and Robin Hawley Gorsline, *Disrupting White Supremacy From Within: White People On What We Need To Do*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 67.