

# Building Conversations on Race and Social Justice

By Cameron Nations



**“If the Episcopal Church** was a character from *Star Wars*, which character would it be?”

The Rev. Marcus Halley laughs, a wide grin erupting into a glowing smile as he shakes his head in mock disapproval at my question.

I wait for his answer.

In addition to being an avid *Star Wars* fan, Halley currently serves as the rector of St. Paul’s on Lake of the Isles in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and is enrolled the School of Theology’s doctor of ministry program. Before that, he served on staff at a parish in Kansas City. Halley maintains an active online presence; you might know him from his popular blog or on Twitter, where he writes under the handle @word\_made\_FRESH. These platforms have allowed him to expand his advocacy work well beyond the four walls of his parish. His ministry through these digital platforms bespeaks his emphasis on the sharing of stories and

personal experience to encourage empathy and understanding.

Halley’s experience as a queer, African American priest in The Episcopal Church informs much of his writing—and certainly his preaching and approach to pastoral ministry, and he’s been involved most recently in the Church’s conversations around inclusive language and Prayer Book revision.

He comes out of a Baptist tradition that often saw his queerness as antithetical to his faith. While an undergrad at Johnson C. Smith University, Halley began to consider theological education at the urging of a university chaplain. Yet despite this consideration of theological education, Halley did not see ministry in his future.

“I did not want to emulate the examples of ministry I had seen growing up,” he told me. Instead, he wanted to pursue a possible life in academia, as professors—not pastors—had been the ones to show him the greatest care in navigating life’s

challenges. Their example resonated with him.

Thus, once he had graduated with his B.A. in history from JCSU, he headed off to the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta to pursue a master of divinity. While in Atlanta, his journey to a vocation in The Episcopal Church began in earnest—albeit perhaps in a rather non-typical parish, the predominantly black St. Paul’s Episcopal Church west of downtown.

“St. Paul’s is not the typical Episcopal expression,” Halley admitted. “My awareness of the demographics of The Episcopal Church was tempered by the fact that I was attending a church where 300 black people were packing the place every Sunday.”

The rector at the time? The now Bishop of the Diocese of Atlanta, Robert Wright.

The presence of such strong black priests in positions of leadership—not only Wright, but also the Rev. Nikki Mathis,



T'08, who served on staff at St. Paul's at the time—helped frame things for Halley. Wright in particular played a key part in Halley's spiritual journey, continually encouraging him to pursue the priesthood while always making him aware of the challenges of such a vocation as a queer person of color.

**H**ad Halley's encounters with The Episcopal Church been at a different parish, perhaps his denominational path would have looked different, too. "To see leaders that looked like me helped me to see myself in that role."

The moment he realized his experience of The Episcopal Church might not have been the most typical came after he had entered the formal discernment process for ordination and completed his degree at ITC. To go forward for ordination in The Episcopal Church, Halley would need to complete an "Anglican year" at an Episcopal seminary.

"My first realization that The Episcopal Church is really, really white was when I started going to the School of Theology in Sewanee, Tennessee." Halley began to notice a dissonance between his experience at St. Paul's—and even in the relatively diverse Diocese of Atlanta—with that of the wider church. He began to notice that certain conversations around race and social justice had yet to occur.

"There was a tradeoff," Halley remarked to me. "In order to find a space where my queerness was welcomed, I had to get to a space where my blackness sometimes would be called into question. There have been times where that tradeoff has been more acute, more painful. And there are also times where I am glad I made that decision—and that's more often than not, that I'm glad I made that decision. The work that I've been able to do in The Episcopal Church around issues of race and racial justice has afforded me opportunities to have conversations I wouldn't otherwise be able to have."

In 2015, The Episcopal Church elected the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry as the 27th Presiding Bishop, the first African American to serve in that capacity. Curry's tenure follows another notable incumbency: that of the first woman to hold the position, the Rt. Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori.

Bishop Curry's tenure has been characterized so far by his insistence on, and greater promotion of, evangelistic endeavors throughout the Church. This emphasis on evangelism has brought to the fore questions of denominational identity that highlight some of the denominations' struggles over diversity and inclusion.

For years, The Episcopal Church has touted itself as progressive and welcoming. Bishop Curry's installation as presiding bishop at Washington National Cathedral, for instance, included readings in different languages, and other bishops' ordinations often include similar gestures of inclusion. Yet the diversity of its festal liturgies and promotional materials does not necessarily match up with the Church's actual demography.

Halley notes this dissonance and its relationship to the Church's evangelistic push in light of an uncertain future, taking aim at one of The Episcopal Church's most notable (literal) signs of hospitality and inclusivity: those ubiquitous "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You" signs.

"The Episcopal Church is afflicted with the same problem that society in general is afflicted with," he argues, "and that is that I think we're struggling with what it means to go deeper into the actual work of justice and equity. One of the real rubs that I have about The Episcopal Church is the phrase 'The Episcopal Church Welcomes You,' because I think it leads some people to say 'Well, we have a sign saying we welcome you, what more do you want?'"

He goes further: "There are people who are just satisfied with putting 'all are welcome here' on the sign or the website or the church bulletin, but when it comes down to really interrogating what welcome actually means and what welcome actually demands of us—I think we're struggling with that." There's a difference between a posture of actual welcome and a kind of empty tokenism.

It doesn't take long to see what he means. Just this past year alone, for example, we have seen the debate over Confederate monuments explode in our national discourse. Cities have had contentious debates about the placement of Confederate monuments, with some opting for removal or relocation while others decide to dig in their heels and leave monuments

alone. Fierce arguments have raged over the place and purpose of such monuments in our society—one side claims that such monuments constitute paeans to a racist past unbecoming of our higher national ideals, while the other side insists that their removal is tantamount to historical erasure.

The Episcopal Church has not escaped scrutiny in this debate. Given the denomination's history, it is not surprising that some parishes have their own monuments to Confederate soldiers or slaveholders. One Virginia parish in particular drew national attention when this year it decided to change its name from R. E. Lee Memorial Church back to its original name of Grace Episcopal Church. Though discussion of the name change had gone on for years, the decision finally occurred in the wake of the deadly Charlottesville riots. Other parishes have had their own conversations about what to do with plaques, monuments, and stained-glass windows.

While your church might not contain an actual monument to the Confederacy, Halley points out some other ways in which it might communicate something about who is and who is not welcome in the space.

Growing up, Halley had always attended churches that contained large stained-glass windows depicting a black Jesus, with black angels in attendance around the Savior. This depiction, he argues, says something about who the space is for, and it has something to do with the work of justice.

"It wasn't until I walked into the Cathedral of St. Philip (in Atlanta) and I looked around and had this moment where I tried to find the black people in the windows and could find none. So I say to people today: take a good look at your space and ask what it says about who is welcome here in this space."

This line of questioning leads to the kind of sacrificial welcome for which Halley advocates. "If you are really willing to engage in the work of inclusion, ask yourself: Are you willing to engage so deep that it transforms your worship space?"

For a denomination that loves its buildings as much as we do, this kind of question can be hard for Episcopalians—even threatening. Halley encourages folks

to explore what feels threatening about those kinds of conversations, as our love—though not inherently bad—of our buildings can become idol worship, thereby impairing our ability to do mission.

This conversation around welcoming others gets us back to the topic of evangelism and diversity: if The Episcopal Church is concerned about its decline, is it pining for the past? And if so, what past is it seeking to reclaim?

In discussions about evangelism, sometimes the Church's desire for the past conflates a desire for growth with a desire for the kind of influence the Church once wielded in society. Halley warns about the dangers of this conflation, noting that while we may not hold as many seats of power as we once did, The Episcopal Church still enjoys the vestiges of its societal prestige and privilege.

"We have trouble articulating a desire to grow the Church apart from this desire for power," Halley contends. "How do we do kingdom work for the sake of the kingdom, and not kingdom work for the sake of our own ego?"

Indeed, few rectors would admit that they want to grow numerically while still not being able to afford to replace the leaky roof on their church's parish hall. Many of these rectors also want to see society transformed—to see a more just and equitable society. Would it not be helpful to have the folks who create those structures in your pews? Could this kind of influence help aid in the work of racial and social justice?

This question of influence, like the idea of going back to a past of numerical strength, leads to uncomfortable questions of cultural understanding—there are very few good "pasts" for black folks. "There are stories of people on vestries who were redlining cities," cautions Halley, "so I think we need to be very careful when we say 'if we just had more power, think of the work we could do.' My answer to that is 'Well we had power, and look what we did with it.' You know, we dispossessed people. We had power, and we often made things worse for people. We need to figure out how to do the work of the Church when we don't have power. How do we dismantle these systems with-

out seeking entry to them?"

Halley envisions a Church that stands adjacent to power structures but that does not support them. Rather, Halley likens the Church to the persistent widow in the Gospel of Luke, seeing the Church's role as constantly nagging, constantly challenging, constantly stretching, the world around it. The Church should be an example of what a different way of life—one of justice and peace—can look like.

Though each parish needs a clear missional vision, every parish does not need to feel the pressure to solve every social issue on their own. "What if every church said 'we can't do everything, but we can do something?'" asks Halley. Those small transformations would have enormous impact. "Not every church is equipped to do intentionally and directly the work of racial justice. I want to say that. But every church can get involved in some issue of

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social or racial justice in their context." Education, environmental issues, poverty, hunger—all these have a racial component.

Though Halley advocates for the Church's engagement with tough issues of racial and social justice, he makes it clear that this engagement must remain firmly rooted in the mission—the life, death, and resurrection—of Jesus Christ. There is a way to talk about issues of justice that Halley calls "Gospel agnostic."

He elaborates: "There's a way that we can sometimes talk about social justice, and if you listen, there's no connection to the work of Jesus. No connection to Jesus being anything other than a community organizer." This way of talking about social justice excludes not only the salvific aspect

of Jesus Christ, but also a connection to the Creedal or Gospel tradition. "That is the challenge of the church: not to forsake the tradition, the orthodoxy, the practice of the Church in order to fold in what we feel is necessary. It's my view you don't have to give up the tradition of the Church to get there."

In fact, we need to dive deeper into our rich history to tell not only our difficult stories of oppression and slavery, but also our stories of abolitionists and reformers—not only our stories of numerical decline, but of courageous missionary bishops willing to chart new courses of ministry and plant new parish communities. Above all, we need to allow ourselves to be changed and transformed by the God we claim to serve, which brings me back to my original question.

So, which *Star Wars* character would The Episcopal Church be, exactly?

"I'm going to go with Luke Skywalker," Halley says, with very little hesitation. "For this reason: I think the church generally—but TEC specifically—has within it the ability to do great good, but I also think that the Church more generally—but TEC specifically—has oftentimes lost its way, has lost its faith in the Force—in God—to actually be with us."

I nod along, interested to see where he takes his answer.

"We've given over so much to this narrative of decline that we've just lost faith that God actually *does* raise the dead. Like, this is *literally* a part of our faith, and so why we're freaking out about this I do not know. We've lost faith. But if we can find our faith again—particularly in empowering younger people, empowering a new generation of leaders—I think we have the ability to do great work against the forces of evil in this world."

He pauses briefly before continuing, "I think we *can* do that. Even if that means—and this is a spoiler alert for those who have not seen the newest *Star Wars*—even if that means we give up ourselves. Even if that means we completely give it away to a new generation of people, a new *something*, whatever that next incarnation, that next reality of what the Church can be. Are we really willing to give ourselves away to that extent?"

Good question. ❧