

Imagine With Me: Call to justice work

with Rev. Eddie Anderson

October 8, 2021

Transcript

Terri Hord Owens: Hello, Disciples, and welcome to another episode of Imagine With Me, where I have the awesome opportunity to talk with so many leaders and Disciples all across our church. Today my special guest is the Rev. [Eddie Anderson](#), senior pastor of [McCarty Memorial Christian Church](#) in California. And Eddie also has a unique distinction of being known as the pastor of the Black Lives Matter movement. Eddie has also been a leader in the [California Poor People's Campaign](#) state campaign and Eddie is just all over the place - lots of energy and lots of good work being done. So, Rev. Eddie, thank you so much for being with me today on Imagine With Me. It's so good to talk to you in this way.

Eddie Anderson: Terri, thank you for having me Madam President, for having me with you all and I'm glad to be here this early, you know, morning.

THO: Thank you. We must recognize I'm in Eastern time zone you're in Pacific, so again, thanks for getting up so early to talk with us. But tell us a little bit - tell the church a little bit about your ministry context at McCarty Memorial - what you're doing there, and then also about your role with Black Lives Matter.

EA: Sure. So, hey, church. How are we doing? McCarty Memorial is a historic - and not only Disciples church, but historic church, for the city of Los Angeles. It is placed in what Sweet Sugar Hill right now is known as West Adams, right, [historic West Adams neighborhood](#). And this neighborhood has a very unique history. And I think it mirrors a lot what's going on with the church because our congregation was built in 1931. It was all-white congregation, right. It was a great big cathedral. When you think of, you know, big cathedral in the middle of [South Central](#). Black people weren't allowed to live here and so in the '50s they did integration. The pastor Kring, Dr. Kring Allen which many of you probably know in the church, if you know church history. He did a lot of social justice - he came to the church and then they entered the integration. They became a Black congregation, did a lot of civil rights work, right, a lot of that fire was here. So, [Jesse Jackson](#) and all those folks came through here. Marches came through here. They helped elect the Black mayor. They did housing covenant busting to disrupt [redlining](#), you know. The community was not happy with Black people in the neighborhood, but the church welcomed them in.



In the '80s, you know, homeless people start to increase in Los Angeles, and Dr. Rousseau, Alger Rousseau - good Howard alum, good Black pastor, and Dr. Sylvia Rousseau, came to the church and they were in the thick of it, helping with homelessness, the housing crisis and the gangs that was going on in LA, right here at this church.

And I give that background because in a lot of ways - I talked to Dr. Sylvia Rousseau a couple of months ago. Her daughter, actually granddaughter, got married here - and I told her we're, in many ways, we are continuing the ministry, because our neighborhood, as in Los Angeles - if you don't know much about California we have like the largest homeless population. LA has some of that as well. We still have some gang activity around, but we're also a very much changing neighborhood, right?

So, our neighborhood was once majority white, then Black, is now majority Latino and African-American, right, with our Korean-American neighbors around. And so that really shapes what we do here.

We're right down the street from the historic [Leimert Park](#) and that's how I got involved with Black Lives Matter, because I saw and I heard that there - when I first got here it was 2016 - and there were, you know, Trevor Morgan had already been killed in 2016. Phillando Castile gets killed in Minneapolis. Alton Sterling is killed in New Orleans. And I had just met Dr. Molina Abdullah at who is one of the co-founders of [Black Lives Matter](#) in Los Angeles. It's the largest chapter of Black Lives Matter. She - I had just met her at a [Juneteenth](#) celebration in View Park, which is the Black well-to-do neighborhood in Los Angeles. And she said, "You're a progressive pastor. You're young, and you're from Morehouse. I'm gonna call you, let me see what you're about." I said, that's okay, cool. She calls me and says the community is gathering in Liemert Park, which is, traditionally, where, if you know anything about Los Angeles, that's where folks have met. That's where the African drum circles are. That's where the Black businesses are. That's where, when the riots and other rebellions and uprisings happen, you meet at Liemert Park.

So I said, "What do you want me to do?" They said, "Well, come pray." So, me, being a good seminarian - we're not a good, good little pray-er - roll up to Leimert Park. There's a drum circle going, and there's all these people around, and they're crying. I look down at my paper and I'm like, "It's not gonna work." So I take the paper and put it away, and I just sit there with the folks for a little bit. And I allow myself to feel my own insecurities about being a Black man in America, not just pastor, but what does it mean to be a Black man in America? And what would I want to hear in this moment? I pray from the heart, and after I prayed from my heart, I used Scripture and justice, because that is the God that we serve.

I was actually preaching, I was keynoting that weekend, at the regional camp for youth. And I'm there, and they call me. They're like, "Pastor Eddie, it's not getting better. It's getting worse, like, people are really, really grieving." And I said, "You know what, let's

do a prayer and lamentation service at the church." They say, "Are you sure? The last time I was in a Black church we got kicked out. The police were called. It was on the news, the LA Times. You sure?" And I said, "Listen, the God that I serve always hears the cries of the oppressed. And if I'm being honest you know we have as Black people have always had a spiritual issue with God." I said, "You're welcome to the church. Let's do this together. The church should be a place where you can find healing, not a place where, that is telling you that you don't belong here because you are queer or Black, or because you've never been to church in a long time." And they said okay. I said, "Only rule is, if you in my pulpit do not use profanity in my church. Only rule. Everything else is free game. You can say whatever you want, but please don't cut nobody out of my church.

And I left from preaching at the regional camp that night and I drove back, because it was important to be here and show up and be present. And that's where my journey of Black Lives Matter began with a BLM LA and the larger movement. Truth Colors became a friend of mine and we even continue doing this work.

So, what does that look like? It means that the first the LA Times did a story on this, the first after this service, because they were like, "What? Five hundred people showed up to a Black church and it went okay?" They were confused. And I said, "Amos says - Amos who was a prophet, who is, you know, trying to figure out God - 'Are you still with my people or not while we're in this exile situation?' Amos says, 'Until there is justice established in the gate, there will be wailing in the streets.'" And I said, "So what you are doing when you are showing up at Leimert Park and in these streets? Actually, holy work. As the scripture says, there will be wailing in the streets."

And so, as people who call ourselves clergy, or prophets, or prophetic, you have to speak truth to power, to the times, and so, if the people are wailing, then your ministry is to be with those who wail until justice is established. And so that looks like, you know, us showing up.

We've showed up to, you know, the DA office saying that the DA, although she were a person of color, she wasn't really there for us in a way. So showing up in the street is part of part of that, and having protests at the church, and providing places for mothers who've lost their children, not only places to cry and lament, but also to be cared for and loved on, is what the church has been doing.

THO: Yeah, amen. I mean, as I think about that this notion of these four, what we're calling the four reimaginings - covenant, story, tools, and spiritual practice - you know that spiritual practice - you know I've been really focusing on spiritual growth and development, prayer, and Bible study - what you've just pointed out is how powerful and how necessary it is that we be engaged with the word of God, which then can direct us to hear what the prophets have been saying since the beginning of time - to speak truth to power, but also to name that what's happening in the move for justice, Black Lives

Matter and others. That there's always a point of lamentation and wailing about the injustices that are faced.

It's that people tend to focus on, oh, the anger. There's always the anger, but this is real hurt. This is real pain. This is a real grief, like you say, the wailing, until something happens. How do you see that particular practice? How do you see the invitation of the church to come alongside the movement as having made some important shifts with the movement?

EA: Absolutely. I mean, [James Cone](#) says that religion - he's talking about Black religion - but at its best, you know, deals not only with the souls of people but with their bodies as well, which is an invitation that if we are going to be serious about what God has been up to in history, right - we look at Moses, we look at Jesus, we look at Joseph even - if we're if we're being serious what God is doing in history, then the church has to be a place where folks who find themselves on the margins, when they come to the church, find themselves at the center.

And so, we have to shift our perspectives around this Table. We're Disciples, so we believe there's room at the Table for everyone, but I sometimes if we have said "everyone," but, you know, those things that we hated at the beginning in our history - those coins that says I'm worthy to be at this table with our theological test - or with maybe the color of people's skin, or people's gender, or sexualities, or backgrounds. And so there's room at the Table, but do you really believe the creed like I believe the creed, or do you really?

I quote scriptures. That's not what invitation is. Invitation is to welcome people to be a part of this movement of God, and when the Spirit breaks out as we saw in Acts, you don't control the boundaries. The Spirit tells you where to go and brings those who need the help, those who need feeling, who are hurt, into the faith. And so, I think we just have to wonder how are we dealing with the bodies as well.

THO: Right, right. And that's where, you know, I'm always talking about God's limitless love. And that limitlessness for me is that none of us has the right to control or limit what God has ordained throughout Scripture. We read that God is love, and if you don't know love, then you don't know God, because God is love and love and action not just in words.

But if we start drawing the lines, right, about who can be where, and who is a part of the church, or who is a part of our communities, we have then started to limit the God who is limitless, and we simply have no ability to do that. We have no right. We have no authority to do that. And so, what I hear you saying, Eddie, is that we have to call ourselves to account, to really be the church we say we are, right, if we're welcoming all then that means all. That means understanding this expansive love of God that we may not understand. We may not agree with it. I always say, you don't want me to be God because you, with your hypocrisy and attitudes or whatever - there may be lots of reasons why we might limit who's in our community, but that's not

that's not how God operates. The power, I think, of what you're naming is - I love what you said, those who find themselves on society's margins, right, should find themselves at the center in the church - that's what Jesus declared in his own ministry, right? Luke 4:18. "I'm here to preach the good news to the poor, to bind up those who are broken-hearted, to liberate those who are oppressed."

Jesus named that as his work, and that scripture becomes, as you know, one of the pivotal scriptures for Black liberation theology. Where Cone says Jesus is with the oppressed, because the oppressed and marginalized can sometimes wonder, as Cone did, "Is this Christianity thing for me?" Can I be Black and Christian? Can I be queer and Christian? Am I welcome? Can I be female and Christian? Am I welcomed? And I think the answer has to be that all are welcome. It's not our Table. It's not our church. And the power of the church coming alongside those who are wailing, those who are crying out for justice, representing a God who loves all, and is in all, and can work through all.

How would, what would you say, because I know there are a lot of people who are watching this and they're going to be like, "Black Lives Matter? They're talking about Black Lives Matter?" I think you've made some important connections there spiritually for why it's important for the church to come alongside. How would you invite the church - our whole church - to think about Black Lives Matter? Why is it important that we understand it, and that we support it?

EA: Yes, one of my mentors was Rev. [James Lawson](#), who was a civil rights giant and legend, and he said something to me one day, it was in a conversation, and he said, "In many ways, Black Lives Matter has become a chaplain to folks who have lost their children to state-sanction racism and violence, police violence." He said, "And the church has some tools that they can help with the movement. You don't have to lead the movement from the front in order to be a leader in this movement."

Black Lives Matter is a leader-full movement. You have to just provide presence. And so, I think when we look at our job, our job is to be midwives. Midwives don't give birth to babies. Midwives are actually doing some of the hard pushing of work, but they're there to help with the breathing. They're there to help make sure things are comfortable, make sure that the frame is good. Hey listen, what's going on here? Is there a context in which we can translate and understand what is going on? And so, I would invite the church to sit with folks - not with a preconceived notion of what needs to happen, which we often try to do, but to sit with folks like Jesus would do.

And here, do you want to be made whole again? When people tell you how they want to be made whole again and what that looks like, it's not for you to judge. It's up for you to make a decision around, "Does this align with what God is telling me I need to be at right now?" Or maybe it's not your calling to do that kind of work, but it's okay to sit with folks, and to provide the presence.

You talk about reimagine, and I think about one of the books that I will suggest to folks is Rev. [Kelly Brown Douglas](#)' *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (2015), right, talks about moral imagination. And for the for the biblical folks, you know, think about everyone having their own tree and being able to sit underneath it.

THO: Right, yeah, yeah. But what is your moral imagination on society where the church is relevant, not because just of the sermons that we preach, but because the sermons that we live and embody, and that's, I think, your invitation to work that out in your theology, among your folks.

Well, that's powerful stuff, Eddie. That's powerful stuff, being midwives to make possible the reign of justice. I always say that clergy are really called to mediate the presence of God, right, to make sure there's space - that we're making space for what God desires to happen and to be present. This has been so, so powerful.

I hope, Disciples, that as you've been listening today that you have come away with really some important insights on not only Black Lives Matter, but the role that the church can play. And Rev. Eddie Anderson, I want to thank you so much for spending time with me this morning and sharing more about your work and ministry: the important, historic work that McCarty Memorial is doing there in Los Angeles; your connections, not just with Black Lives Matter, but that came as an extension of your communication and your connection with the community, right, in which you live and serve, both geographically and as a person, as a Black man in America. As the mother of a Black son and the wife of a Black man, I totally understand and resonate with that existential crisis that we often face as Black people in society. And we pray that our church understands of the real work to which we're called.

Disciples say - we say all the right things. We say all the right things. Imagine what the world could be if we were to truly live into being the church that we say we are.

So, thank you, Eddie, for spending time. And Disciples, thank you again for listening to this episode of Imagine With Me with Rev. Eddie Anderson. I hope you'll share it on your social media platforms so that others can hear this important conversation.

And stay tuned next time for our next episode of Imagine With Me. And remember, as always, that God loves you and so do I.