



## BIPOC LISTENING PROJECT

Submitted by the LEAD Listening Team to Luther Seminary

10.27.2022

## THE BIPOC LISTENING PROJECT REVEALS THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

As Pastor Sunitha Mortha tried to explain decades ago:

- When you peel back the layers of a white person's values, the center is an individual.
- When you peel back the layers of a non-white person's values, the center is a community.

This focused research project points to shockingly different operating systems across cultures. The truth is that for the whitest denomination in America seeking to be more diverse, survival will never be a viable neighborhood outreach. Regardless of our pure hearts, forming faith among non-white people will take different practices. In short, it will take a new understanding of:

Invitation—giving dignity by listening to the wisdom of others

Belonging—connecting to multiple communities as church

Acceptance—engaging diversity as the humanity of Christ

Practices—honoring distinctly the traditions and heritages of others

By reading this report, you are opening yourself to see what has been right in front of us all along. Like the Priest or the Levite, in haste to lead the church, white people have led ministry like the white culture was taught to lead at work and in the family. We have done it the white way. In this country, this way has been lifted up as the highest valued way of being church. We are missing so much.

We must slow down, shift metrics, and share power. It turns out that we act like the Good Samaritan right up until the point that it truly cost us something. Then right before we fully invest, we reinforce the white identity as colonizers, as unintentional as this may be for many, to avoid offending a white person. This default behavior reinforces the trauma experienced by the rest of society.

Please join us in listening, with community-centric values. The work is worth the pain.

Respectfully Submitted,

**Deacon Darcy Mittelstaedt**, Bishop's Associate for Leadership & Lifelong Faith Formation,  
Southwestern Texas Synod, ELCA

**Pastor Irma Bañales**, Director for Evangelical Mission, Northern Texas-Northern-Louisiana Synod,  
ELCA

**Pastor Katy Miles-Wallace**, Inclusivity, Diversity, and Equity, Southwestern Texas Synod, ELCA

**Deacon Peggy Hahn**, Executive Director, LEAD, Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod, ELCA

## How did we listen to BIPOC leaders?

A small diverse team of ELCA leaders set aside their own assumptions to listen directly to 35 Black, Indigenous, and people of color, (BIPOC) people across the United States. We listened in 19 separate sessions, most often with an interviewer and notetaker in each session. Every interview was recorded.

This was a very brief, six-week interview window, during July-August 2022. Dozens of people who were invited to participate declined for various reasons. Some did not show up for their interview at all.

Most interviews were done with two people listening to a very small group of one to three people. This intentionally small group gave time for the interviewer to build a rapport, clarify answers if necessary, and for people to know they were heard.

The people who were interviewed were primarily church leaders (8) and pastors or deacons(19). Only one-third were under 35 years old. Most of those interviewed were ELCA Lutheran or formally ELCA Lutheran Church members.

It is important to note that most people had seen and reflected on their answers to the questions prior to the interview. The interviews were one hour in length, opened with introductions and closed in prayer. Those interviewed represented the following ethnicities:

- 2 Africans
- 7 African Americans
- 2 Arabic Americans
- 8 Asian Pacific Islanders
- 1 Indigenous
- 13 Latinx/e
- 2 Others

It is humbling to admit that none of these people expected LEAD or Luther Seminary to listen to their voice. This is a population that has not experienced being heard, by other people of color representing these organizations. Some, including pastors and deacons, shared a feeling of low value in their own congregations.

We asked eight questions. We encourage you to answer these personally as you read this report.



## INFLUENCERS

### **WHO ARE YOUR PRIMARY FAITH INFLUENCERS? OR WHO HELPED YOU GROW YOUR FAITH?**

"I couldn't think of any! Isn't that crazy? It's weird. I don't – it's weird, because I don't look at my spiritual growth and direction in that way, I don't direct it to any person." - Sabrina

"I think my mom and my dad, they come from a different denomination, but they gave me space to wonder. Family holds important roles for my faith formation." - Yesie

"Pentecostal roots – family, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, not just what they said but how they lived out their faith. Grandad was up at 6am in the sunroom, in the rocking chair, talking to the "headquarters" Very actively living out their faith, giving courage to her. Lutheran theology was instrumental in saving her faith and her life. Seminary showed so much grace and life to her. Active grace!" - Yvonne

This question created space for people to name as many faith influencers that came to their mind. People named an average of 3 faith influencers. Eight people struggled or were unable to name a person, pointing to the community that had nurtured their faith.

### **Why does this matter?**

Themes centered on being taught the faith, mentored into the faith, and belonging to the community. When people pointed to their pastor, they expressed being taught to read the Bible, to pray, and feeling safe enough to ask questions. When they spoke about their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, spouses and other family members they pointed to observing people practicing the faith. When they reflected on others, they shared stories of encouragement, kindness, and different people in the community at different stages in their life.

Practices of prayer, worship, and reading scripture were talked about in community. There was no obvious separation between the Christian spirituality and their cultural heritage. Faith is a lived experience, not an event, or wrapped up in one person. Many noted a variety of denominational experiences in their life.

Reflecting on the question of faith influencers sparked personal stories and apparent gratitude to their community. This is not to say that their faith community and the church community were always the same. Many experienced rejection, pain, and marginalization from churches. It is important that we don't confuse belonging to the Christian community with membership, leadership, or support from a

congregation. The belonging we are referring to is a larger, deeper, more active belonging that resonates with the concept of spiritual communal understandings and practices of a living God.

#### The Details:

- Family Members—26 (mom 8, parents 5, grandparents 5, spouse 2, family 6)
- Pastor or Priest—8
- Godparents—2
- Friends—2
- Community—1
- Mentors—1
- Pastor's wife—1
- No specific people—3



## THINKING ABOUT GOD

### WHERE DO YOU EXPERIENCE GOD? WHERE DO YOU FIND HOPE?

"God shows up in different ways other than the ways we learned in Sunday school. Going to church is like getting a happy meal, you know what you are getting, lament is wishing there were more options. I find hope in when the church does something different, when things are aligned with vision, I find hope in the people who still feel called. I find hope in other mostly people of color who has walked away from the institutional church." - Anonymous

"I find hope in the willingness to help one another. I think that – from the perspective of the Latino community – hasn't been lost even in this country. There is a little temptation to become more individualistic and look out for oneself, but the spirit is still there and that gives me hope." - Walter

"I feel like I can experience God anywhere, often in church. I find hope in people, in my daughter. We're going through things in my home life and I've really seen people from our church really come together and help my mother and I." - Faith

"Hope, I think I find it in those settings on the margins, at times there are glimpses of hope in the institutional church and that would be in – for me – my white brothers and sisters who hold the differential power in the church yet, because of the experiences, epiphanies and gifts of the Spirit are given different eyes to see the reality and a different heart to feel the reality to embrace a reality outside the status quo." - Natanael

“Honestly, I will tell you, that is the exact question that I’ve been asking myself on sabbatical. I’ve been so exhausted by the day to day of ministry that I’ve lost that connection. Where I’ve been finding it again is in sunsets, and in conversations over ice cream, and in reunions with people I haven’t seen in 30 years. I find it in hearing people say that they love me and my queer kid, unapologetically, unconditionally. When folks say they will go to the wall to battle the people who are saying otherwise about my kid, I’m finding God in those places and spaces. Also, in the holy stories of my family history, that reveal the brokenness and the trauma of our generations and make me understand – not necessarily excuse – but understand, why things happened the way that they did, so that I can choose to do differently.” - Priscilla

“I experience God’s presence when I’m going through hard moments/problems. I find hope when I pray, read the bible, bible study in a group. When we hug each other and greet each other. When I meet new people that are doing ministry like me.” - Mireya

“I have experienced God by looking back on my life. God chose me, I didn’t choose him. I experience God in relationships with others meeting people where they are. On the theology of the cross. On the beauty of creation. On my prayers, walking. I experience God everywhere, all I need to do is open my eyes. Hope is the ability to listen to the melody of the future and Faith is the audacity to dance to its tune today.” - Mamy

This two-part question was intentionally designed to open up a vision of the experience of God as hope. We wanted to encourage a wide reflection of God active in our lives, beyond the ministry of the church.

100% said they experience God everywhere. Most qualified this remark with, “I know this is the wrong answer but...” reinforcing our assumption that people might think the right answer was supposed to be church! Why is the messaging of the Christian movement pointing to God and the church as one-in-the-same? Can we separate God from, loose in the world, from the gathered people of God as two overlapping yet not identical experiences? How is opening this up an opportunity?

As people reflected on where they experience God and hope, the theme of community was everywhere. There is a strong sense of belonging to more than themselves, more than a family, and more than any one church. The experience of God is as close as their very breath, but most often felt in relationship with others:

- Humanness, pain, suffering, hospital rooms, coming out, on the margins of society, and among the poor resonated with many.
- Simple pleasures like ice cream or sunsets, prayer, and music were claimed.
- Timing like mornings, looking back on life, and birth of children were celebrated.

- Worship, the sacraments, and preaching were named by a few clergy and one lay leader.

Deeply listening to people share their experiences of God also revealed feelings of disappointment and rejection with the church. This question revealed pain as expressions shifted, tones of voices dropped, and people leaned in to admit they found God everywhere, but not always at church.

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### **HOW HAS HEALING HAPPENED IN YOUR LIFE? WHAT ARE YOUR LAMENTS AND JOYS?**

“Healing happens through the network of people who love and support me and people who reach out to me.” - Jay

“Healing is part of my life, it’s part of who I am, being able to heal and being used as a channel of healing is simply part of who I am. And I see healing not just as healing the body but as wholeness, the healing of body mind and spirit.” - Gigie

“We come from a country that went through a civil war and experiencing that civil war firsthand and then serving in a church that was persecuted so, healing began to happen to me over the years and it happened by sharing the stories. First, the stories were painful to share but over the years after telling and retelling those stories, those stories – I didn’t know – in the end were the ones that helped me to go through the healing process. Prayers have been part of the healing process too and also being connected to my community. So, I think sharing the stories, connecting to the community, and also connecting to God through prayers has been part of that healing process.” - Walter

“The church has relinquished some of the healing from the Bible, there is a lot of healing that can happen and I feel we need to reclaim, in teaching the adults for VBS I am teaching them about healing with plants, meditation, and oils.” - Ildiko

“Through our team I am learning how to deal with the lament and joy, relearning and resharing how to put those two things together, making sure that everyone gets recognized...” - Lea

“I have pulled away the scab versus covering it up.” - Sue

This question about healing brought a congruency between the body, spirit, mind, and community as people reflected on their laments. This area deserves more investigation as we barely scratched the surface of what it means to heal. The undercurrent was a doubt that healing could fully take place while we are still in this world. The gravity of suffering, of loneliness, of persecution, etc. were so deeply felt that we are at risk of trivializing healing without further listening.

Why does this matter?

Jesus's life on earth was primarily focused on healing. If we are called to live like Jesus, we have so much work to do in understanding what it means to be healers. This embodies reconciliation as we consider the suffering around us expressed in violence, addiction, etc.



## RELATIONSHIPS

**HOW DO YOU EXPERIENCE GOD'S LOVE AND AFFIRMATION OF YOU AND YOUR NEIGHBORS AND HOW DO YOU SHARE THAT?**

"I experience God's love through and in the life of the community." - Jay

"We have about 13 caucuses in the Asian American Pacific Islander community. We're so diverse, we represent about 2,200 of the world's languages. In our community alone we have Chinese, Japanese, Cambodian, Filipino, Tongans.... there are so many of us when we get together and we pray the Lord's Prayer, that's a Pentecostal experience because we can all recite that in our own languages. So how do we show that love. We are opening up to that experience of connecting with each other. It took us awhile." - Gigie

"I was attracted to the Lutheran church by the social work that they were doing during the time of war and so I recall asking them – this is a long story – but I remember going to get refugees that were displaced in El Salvador and the Lutheran church came to ask for help, they wanted us to go and get these people to safe place, a refugee camp that they were already setting up. I remember going to do that and it was dangerous, we were risking our lives, and when we arrived at the camp, I remember asking them who is Luther and then, why did you do that? Because they were also risking their own lives at that time and the answer I got was 'we can talk about Luther later, but we do this because God asked us to love our neighbors and didn't ask us to love anyone specific but all our neighbors and this is God's mandate.'" - Walter

"Every time I do a baptism – this week I'm preparing for two boys – and it just affirms for me and reminds me how much I'm loved and how much I'm called to serve and how much God

has called me through my baptism and that I was made God's child through my baptism and it's just a big affirmation every time I do that and when I think of it too." - Meheret

"I would say that most of the time I feel God's love and affirmation from certain people and communities of people that have been placed around me in my life." - Gabby

"I think that's one way that I experience love is always being around people that know me and love me even though some people might think there's something wrong with me for being gay or because I think differently." - Marco

People felt more comfortable talking with other people of color about their lives. There is a feeling that people of color listen more deeply when they explain their faith to each other. They generally feel that their mountain top experiences, pains, and fears are more similar. They use more emotion. It was felt that white people use more shallow language.

Largely people articulated that God's love and affirmation for all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, ethnicity, or culture, is meant to be shared without judgement. This is what it looks like to practice Christian community to those we interviewed.

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"Privilege is the opportunity to decide whether you want to be in disagreement or how often you want to disagree." - Anonymous

"As a leader to listen and to share, each person ensures that people are doing well. We don't have to accept other's ideas, but we need to listen, we have to be well equipped in handling disagreements." - Obias

"Metanoia, with respect, I tell myself when that situation happens, you have to listen carefully, of what the other person is saying, I also practice the reading between the lines of what people are saying and what people are not saying. Normally the part of the disagreement is what people are not saying. I want to respect the space to disagree. I need to respect the other person. I will defend the right for you to have your opinion. I remember the grace of God and my opinion is not absolute truth, it may be wrong, but maybe I will have changed my mind in 5 years." - Edwin

"It may irritate people and I ask clarifying questions so that I can understand. When it doesn't work well, we just have to share the space." - Colleen

“I am leading a book study on boundaries. No human relationship is perfect, there is disappointment and disagreements. Conflict is a part of human relationships. If we can set up boundaries and are aware of your boundaries, and others, you need to listen to their desires, frustrations, and goals. If you know your boundaries, respect other people and listen to God. Leave room for further discussion.” - Junfeng

## HOW DO YOU HANDLE RELATIONSHIPS THAT HOLD DISAGREEMENT?

There was an audible sigh when this question was asked. It was clear that people had experienced painful disagreements and knew disrespect personally. There was a strong personal responsibility for controlling ourselves. Yet we heard a generosity of spirit as people talked about valuing differing points of view. There was a direct connection between the liturgy and their practices of managing themselves when they disagree. Not only had these people experienced serious disagreement, including persecution and war, they had found tools to navigate conflict in their own lives.

Stories were shared about:

- The pain of people refusing to take communion from them.
- The impact education has in respectful communication and managing disagreements.<sup>1</sup>
- The value of asking questions and actively listening.
- The damage of power struggles.
- The idea of unity within diversity: we don't have to agree, but we can respect each other.
- Their personal part in managing conflict.
- Letting something go when you love someone.
- Truly working to understand and respect differing points of view.
- Releasing people who want to find a different church, as they will likely disagree at every church.

### Why does this matter?

Disagreement and brokenness are part of everyone's life. If the white church wants to earn the right to partner with non-white leaders, there is work to do on conflict, division, power, and forgiveness. The diverse church will be a place where differences are not marginalized or stereotyped, but studied and experienced. Fears will need to be faced. Grief will need to be acknowledged. Listening will be a primary strategy.

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### Notes

1. Kaleidoscope Institute: Respectful Communication Guidelines

R = take RESPONSIBILITY for what you say and feel without blaming others.

E = use EMPATHETIC listening.

S = be SENSITIVE to differences in communication styles.

P = PONDER what you hear and feel before you speak.

E = EXAMINE your own assumptions and perceptions.

C = keep CONFIDENTIALITY.

T = TRUST ambiguity because we are not here to debate who is right or wrong.



## CHURCH PERSPECTIVES

### **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE WAYS THE CHURCH CAN BE INCLUSIVE? WITHIN ETHNICITY, CULTURE, LBBTQ+, SOCIO ECONOMIC, ETC.?**

“If we are unapologetic about how we preach and how we express hospitality.” - Jay

“I think one of the many ways is to start opening their eyes and to be more curious about what’s happening in their neighborhood. And out of that curiosity to be able to engage, whether they are newcomers or new immigrants. And also asking the question who is missing here, who is missing from our table. And in addition to that, I think congregations need to learn more about implicit bias so that they can be able to free themselves from fear because most of the time fear is the driving force that makes congregations become more isolated. And so, I think that congregations should learn more about how to deal with their implicit bias. And willing – I think, yes – willing to learn and also to let go of some traditions that keep them captive and don’t allow them to grow.” - Walter

“I think by being open minded, having members of every church go through like training, I don’t want to say yearly, it could be yearly or every two years. I feel like generations change and every year it’s something different and not because things happened one-way last year, it doesn’t mean that this year is going to be the same. We are always changing. We are stuck in one specific way and if that’s all we are doing we are not going to grow, progress, or be able to assist others. I think by being open minded and being open to change that would be a great start.” - Abby

“Originally from Ethiopia where women are often excluded especially from leadership positions in the church. So, the church came up with like church council is required to have 25% women leaders. I think, in a way, for those who follow it, it helped to kind of push the including women in the leadership because it’s required and kind of law.” - Meheret

“I think for me, one big thing that comes to mind is being aware of the language that’s being used in the symbolisms and that kind of thing. The language that we use within our liturgy and within our music, all of those things, we get used to hearing it and we don’t see how things have changed since those pieces were created or put together and if you actually stop and listen there are some, I would say, shocking things, especially in our hymns more than

that send a different message other than inclusivity and we need to be aware of those kinds of things.” - Gabby

“Essentially if I walked into a Lutheran church that’s part of the ELCA I wouldn’t immediately feel welcome. Like someone would have to invite me because those spaces are so filled with white people and as a person of color its difficult to walk into a space with that many white people. That’s not exactly racism but you have to be careful here with who you are around. I don’t know how to fix that because there’s no real way to fix it because every congregation is filled with their own people, and we can’t control every person in that congregation so its hard to say how we can be inclusive. I guess interacting with us more in a non-icky way.”  
- Angela

“I don’t want us to forget that inclusion isn’t always about gender or race, it might be our young people, or people with different abilities, or people with learning differences, or processing differences, or sensory differences. As we talk about inclusion I don’t want us to always think about black and white but making sure that everyone has a space to be loved by God.” - Sabrina

The people of color interviewed resonate with the love of Christ. They find God everywhere. Relationships are rich, interesting, and diverse.

These same people do not feel connected with the institutional church.

Bridging this gap feels like worthy work to some and like we are trying to hard to others. Some responses are on the lists below. Please note, these lists are organized for easy reference. They are not intended to feel limited, tactical, or tidy. Each of these ideas should be further discussed with non-white leaders. They all offer wisdom drawn from painful experiences of the oppression in our congregations.

### RETHINK LEADERSHIP MOVES

- Teaching about diversities
- Learn to be welcoming and hospitable
- Pay attention to marketing with inclusive images
- Value different languages
- Remove what is making you exclusive
- Radical change teaching in seminary training
- Stop judging people, protect them
- Advocate for injustices
- Reject human supremacy, place God above all
- Teach a new language, new understanding for equality and equity
- Preach against capitalism and misogyny
- Include diversity in decision-making
- Invite all people into leadership

### RETHINK THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

- Leaders take responsibly to teach scripture to people
- Value and embrace different languages
- Build a big table, not a big wall
- Create culture that mirrors what you say you want
- Have people tell you what you don't want to hear
- Practice confession (racism, xenophobia, isolation)
- Pray for an openness to conversation
- Challenge identities and our life together
- Questioning the ways power is used
- Expect the church to speak with a prophetic voice
- Let go of the spirit of fear
- Rethinking what "is" church
- Remove discriminating liturgies, hymns, and Biblical references that put a gender on God

This short list is only the beginning of the ways BIPOC people hope the ELCA can build new ways of being church that are congruent with the churches social statements. They are asking for people to honor God, our creator, who designed the rich diversity we experience in our world.

The bottom line:

Inclusion is giving people the space and power to know love. Looking at this idea on one hand and the church on the other, their hope is in God's love, not the church. BIPOC people question why they are part of a white church. For those that are, they are clear that the church is not a safe place, they cannot be themselves, and they are playing a role for reconciliation between the white people and non-white people. They are especially clear that they carry the weight of representing their whole intersectional diversity: race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status.

Some participants are not worshipping in a white church. Their voices are slightly different. Unlike popular opinion, they think there is a time to come together and a time not to be together. Going to church might not be one of those times. Some things just need to die.

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### WHAT IS A VISION OF CHURCH WITHOUT BUILDINGS?

"Wherever we are is church. Where two or three are gathered we are the church. Any place where healing takes place that is church. Living out our vocation is church without buildings. Early church didn't have buildings." - Jay

"I'm still trying to figure that out. It's true though, the more I see all these churches that are around us in the city, you see them, are closing left and right. And the old style of church is no longer what we can look at and say, "oh yeah, that's church!" We're moving in a different direction, it's like a revolution. So, are we going to move in that direction or are we going to let everything die around us? Are we going to keep going or hold on to our buildings and land?" - Jackie

"I think church without buildings would kind of ask people to refocus or recenter and that may be something that throughout this time where the building has been this really comfortable space where people can come and be comfortable without having to think about what's going on in the community, it could really open up a lot of doors and opportunities for the church to kind of come back to itself in a way." - Gabby

"I don't think it's meant to be a zero-sum game, but a both/and. I think about the Hebrew Bible and the temple and after the destruction of the temple and after the diaspora that synagogues were set up so that there were places of worship even after the destruction of the temple. And then I think about the ministry of Jesus who didn't stay in one place very long, but he did stop at the synagogue. I believe in the refiner's fire of the Holy Spirit, but I have problems discerning between a refiner's fire and an out-of-control fire and that there are consequences to arson." -Tuhina

"Maybe I need to qualify that, most of our non-church people were hurt in the brick and mortar. Church of tomorrow has to be flexible, incorporate nature, brick and mortar doesn't allow that, need to embrace functioning in nature." - Lea

"We are going to be somewhere, some people don't live in safe spaces, I live in NYC, it doesn't have to be the church building but you are going to be somewhere, shelter, safe space, there are people who can't be outside." - Anthony

"We don't have to blow up the buildings. I love a church building that is busy. It hurts my heart to see buildings only being used twice a week. I love church without the buildings. We preach people are the church. People who felt connected by their call by God." - CeCe

"[What about] a gathering of some sort outside, more in nature?" - Zaira

"I agree with Zaira, churches are really community. Bible stories reflect a community, that has value. Opportunity to gather in a space where we don't focus on all the stuff we are attached to the building. That stuff takes so much energy." - Colleen

"The purpose of the church is worship, discipleship, etc. Jesus prayed with his disciples everywhere they went, it wasn't always in a building. Pandemic – worshiped online, not in a building." - Maha

"One of the things that we're trying to build within our church post-pandemic is the idea that church does not have to happen inside a building but happens inside, outside, anywhere you

are with anyone. My idea that I talk with my pastor about is that idea that we should use our building to support community so that people can say “Oh there’s that church, that building that supports the community through food banks or childcare.” If someone comes to church or not on Sunday morning is not the goal. If people come to church on Sunday morning, great, you make them feel welcome. It makes me really uncomfortable when the goal of things is to bring people into church on Sunday morning. If the goal is to help the community and to be a part of the community then do it. We want to be that location that within the community.” - Gail

“I definitely agree that the church is not a building. Having access for people to gather and be relational is absolutely necessary. I’ve been really looking into home churches which have been popping up in our area – Christians diving into the word and serving whoever is in their area. And that I would consider to be church.” - Jessica

The primary reason to stay attached to a building was to provide a safe space for people to gather. There is recognition that homes or public spaces may not be safe.

Pause here to feel the tragedy in this moment.

People want or need a safe space so they come to a church building for sanctuary. They find a lack of welcome, security, or even value for themselves in this experience.

White church, we are earning our reputation, every time someone trusts our buildings to be safe spaces for them. Truly a place where God’s presence can be felt.

We would love to see the whole church wrestle with this question in the same way those interviewed reflected on the church, church buildings, and God’s mission.

- If we are going to continue to support buildings, how can these places speak of God’s love?
- What should or should not happen in these buildings?
- How do we deal with an empty building?
- What does this mean for our digital space?
- How can genuine hospitality begin in our homes?

The bottom line:

- Buildings preach.
- Buildings offer a portrait of Jesus to the neighborhood.
- Buildings can be shelter, places of healing, recovery from pain.

Every church building can be assessed by the stewards of the spaces to wonder how they open or close doors to non-white people. The church is not the building, but the building can be a strategy for God’s mission in a particular place.



## THEMES

Listening to BIPOC Leaders 2022

- **THE INVITATION**

People were honored to be sought out. They did not expect the church to care deeply enough about their perspectives to actually ask. It mattered that the listeners were non-white people. As an act of dignity, each person's time was honored with a small financial gift. The people we interviewed have had the opportunity to read this report first.

What happens to what has been heard? The next step is invite these people to lead us. We can create a more robust research project to ask different questions, going deeper into these and other themes. We should innovate with new leadership. The point is not to build a practice of simply listening. What is heard can teach us to become the inclusive church.

- **THE BELONGING**

Church and faith community are not the same thing. With or without walls, people are spiritually hungry, theologically curious, and empowered by God to lead. Gifted BIPOC leaders are everywhere. They belong to a world that white people resist because they are afraid. Resistance to diverse languages, orientations, or lifestyles are threatening to people who have been taught that there is a right way—their way.

Some people can spend their time cultivating a community of belonging (not membership) among white people. Everyone else is free to be the church in all the ways they can imagine and lead. A partnership between these two spaces can

happen when trusted leaders honor one another, in community, belonging to God's mission. Everyone has something to learn, but the white people have much to unlearn.

- **THE ACCEPTANCE**

God has created a dynamic humanity. Acceptance feels like a low bar, yet this starting place is real. Accepting that Jesus is alive in the humanity of others as fully as in ourselves is an essential core understanding. Acting out of genuine friendship, actually seeing all people in the uniqueness they bring, is the first step. This acceptance is an element of love that celebrates the Holy Spirit poured out on all people. Acceptance is a practice of grace as people let go of one worldview, which never fully existed, to welcome many different worlds around them. This is theological work.

- **THE PRACTICES**

Ancient ways of knowing, worshiping, and honoring God include more than white euro-centric traditions. By welcoming new practices that bridge cultures and worldviews, new generations of people will encounter the love of God. These practices will live out of the pain, suffering, hope, and joy of the people in the congregations neighborhood.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach here. Rather leaders are free to discover the practices that speak of Jesus most clearly to the people in their community. Honoring local culture, sharing the Gospel in the language of the people, and learning how to live in a changing world together are all opportunities to be the church in new ways.

This will require a new ecclesiology as power is shared generously across humanity.



## CONCLUSION

Thank you for this work of learning by listening to non-white leaders across the country. The experience has been life-giving for those who have listened. We have found ourselves in the words of others. We have been empowered to lead out of our own identity.

This short project, focused on only 35 people, is enough to spark a bigger work. We want to learn more from these people, and others. We want to practice the faith in a wide network of non-white people who are not caught up in the politics and power struggles of the church. We can curate new space where people can connect and equip each other. We can encourage new thinking, especially prompting new questions to leaders in congregations across the country.

How does the humanity of Jesus intersect with the tapestry of people around us? What do we do to truly honor diversity as we steward our traditions in a changing world? What has to be thrown out in order to make space for others? How do we get out of our own way as we lead?

If listening to 35 people can spark a curiosity, what would happen if we were serious about this as a major research project?

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As an organization, LEAD feels called to do more work like this. We have a burning desire to join the church in being inclusive. We lack funding to move forward with the many visions sparked in these conversations. Funding was not a topic of this project, yet it was implicit in the conversations about power, control, inclusion, and values.

If there is a next step, let's figure out:

- How to fund the work, including research, networking, and learning together
- How to build a wide network of inclusion
- How to create space to learn from non-white people
- How to work together as God's people to be the church

This may all sound lofty but the visions are grounded in the pain and suffering of people representing more than six ethnicities. There is a call to be a younger, diverse church. Listening is one strategy.

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### Notes

The names in this report are used with permission. Recordings and notes from interviews are confidential.