

Female church leaders of color urge more anti-racism action in open letter

By Egan Millard

[Episcopal News Service] As the United States celebrated Independence Day under the clouds of illness and injustice, three influential leaders in The Episcopal Church published an open letter to the church questioning exactly whose freedom the country and the church were celebrating, and pushing for extensive internal and external anti-racist action.

That action, the letter says, should “free ourselves institutionally and individually of that which stands between us and the dream of God: Whiteness itself.”

[The letter, titled “Speaking of Freedom,”](#) was written by the Rev. Kelly Brown Douglas, dean of Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary; the Rev. Stephanie Spellers, canon to the presiding bishop for evangelism, reconciliation and stewardship of creation; and the Rev. Winnie Varghese, a priest at Trinity Church Wall Street in New York.

The three priests, all women of color, used the church’s celebration of [Independence Day as a feast day](#) – including a collect that offers thanksgiving for the founders who “won liberty for themselves and for us, and lit the torch of freedom for nations then unborn” – as the basis for a discussion of how the church should respond when freedom is not granted to all. The letter also references Frederick Douglass’s speech “What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?” in which the former slave criticized America’s – and American Christians’ – celebration of liberties that were withheld from Black people.

“We must ask what is the meaning of freedom in such a time as this, when the COVID-19 pandemic [disproportionately ravages](#) Black, Brown and First Nations communities suffering the pre-existing conditions of injustice and inequality?” the letter asks. “What is the meaning of freedom, when Black bodies continue to be brutalized by policing that has its roots in slave patrols? What is freedom when our Breonnas are not safe in their homes, our [Ahmauds](#) are not safe jogging, and our Erics, Elijahs and [Georges](#) cry out, ‘I can’t breathe?’”

The letter lays out a vision for a different kind of freedom for the church to embrace – one that is “more than a song we sing or a flag we wave.” The church, the letter asserts, must claim freedom “from America’s original sin: White supremacy.” That freedom requires truth-telling, transformative letting-go, being born from above and living into baptism, the priests wrote. That vision is derived from the [Becoming Beloved Community initiative](#),

which has expressed the church's long-term commitment to racial justice since 2015, Spellers said. Although the ideas expressed in the letter are not new, the writers felt an urgent need to seize this pivotal moment in history to bring them to the forefront.

The U.S. faces intertwined crises that have commanded the world's attention: More than 130,000 Americans [have died of COVID-19](#), with Black and Latino Americans [being affected at higher rates](#) than white Americans. At the same time, the Black Lives Matter movement has shone a spotlight on systemic racism, as seen in everything from racial disparities in health care to the killing of George Floyd, with [protests continuing around the world](#). In an interview with Episcopal News Service, Douglas called it a "[kairos moment](#)" – a "moment of disruption and chaos, but a moment that is pregnant with possibilities and pregnant with the movement of God.

"And you can miss the moment or you can seize it," Douglas said.

The letter also presents Episcopalians with a stark choice: "Steeped as it is in White supremacy, our denomination must model transformative letting-go and decide whether it is going to be White (that is, allied with oppression) or be church." Whiteness, the writers say, is "not a benign construct" but the insidious driving force behind white supremacy.

The three priests, who have regular conversations about the problems facing the church and society, said they felt compelled to speak up and offer their perspective as women of color in a mostly white church. Although many Episcopalians feel overwhelmed and powerless to act against racial injustice, there is also a current of change running through the church now that feels different, they said.

"The combination of COVID and the uprisings that are happening kind of illustrate what systemic racism is in a way that I don't know has been illustrated in my life, in a way that the public can understand," Varghese told ENS. "And I see movement all over the church."

"I have felt a stirring to say a word – any word – to name the grief, to name the hope, and also to speak strategically about, 'What can we do as church? What must we do?'" Spellers said.

The answer to that, the priests wrote, requires more forceful anti-racist actions by Episcopalians, and more widespread participation in the work of anti-racism. To that end, Spellers said her office is conducting a survey of what each diocese is doing to dismantle racism, and how dioceses might be able to help each other.

“We haven’t just kind of sat by and received the benefits of oppression,” Spellers told ENS. “We have actively participated, blessed those systems, built the systems, maintained and protected the systems. The only way The Episcopal Church – and Episcopalians – has any credibility is if we do the external work on justice, and policing in particular, and our internal work on telling the truth about our church’s story, and healing our own identification with white supremacy.”

The leaders closed their letter with a nod to Pauli Murray, an early civil rights activist, fiery feminist and the first African-American woman ordained a priest in The Episcopal Church.

“We believe that we can become the nation and church that our first Black sister priest Pauli Murray called us to be, a “true community that is based upon equality, mutuality and reciprocity ... that affirms the richness of individual diversity, as well as the common human ties that bind us together.”

“As Jesus urged, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). It is then that we will be free.