

Unitarian Universalist Prison Ministry of Illinois
UU Prison Ministry, Religion and Prison Abolition

August 12, 2020

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UU Prison Ministry – Religion and Prison Abolition

August 20, 2020 4:15-6pm PST

Unitarian Universalist Prison Ministry of Illinois

Rev. Lydon, Facilitator:

Welcome everybody to Abolitionist Theologies Virtual Roundtable-- my name is Rev. Jason Lydon, I serve at the Second Unitarian Church of Chicago and the Unitarian Universalist Prison Ministry of Illinois.

Thanks to everyone who is here and being part of this conversation. For all those who have long been forces in the struggle; all those who have continued this fight for freedom for people, for the end of anti-blackness, the end of white supremacy, and the closing of prisons and jails. The practice of getting equal freedom. So glad to be in this space with you all.

We recognize this is a group of people who aren't necessarily all on the same page; all hold the same politics, vision, and certainly the same theologies. And that we are in this space, at this moment to have a conversation. The conversation this evening is primarily and truly going to be between our panelists, we didn't set aside time for questions, but we can use the chat going forward.

We know there are many people here who have both questions and wisdom to share so please feel free to use the chat as you like to share resources and knowledge you have;

questions you have on how you have wrestled with your own theology or ways you have found theology that really speaks to you as we dream about abolition.

We are really excited to be in this moment and to be part of legacies of people who have struggled for so long to get everyone free. Thank you all so much for joining us.

In terms of our order of service for the evening, we will start with the chalice lighting, the symbol of our traditions, specifically a flaming chalice. We will begin there. Rev. Doris Green will lead a prayer for us and then I will introduce our panelists. Then we have 5 questions that our panelists will be engaged with. In the middle of those questions we have a musical interlude. Then we will have a closing prayer from Pastor Darryl. Then we will extinguish the chalice at the end. That is the plan for our time this evening.

Wherever it is you are, I invite you to take a deep breath as your body wishes. Let it out. Take another deep breath in and let it out.

We begin our time together in this virtual space, knowing we have so many others to be loved who are on other sides of concrete walls, kept locked in by steel cages, and that we do this shared work in honor of them, in honor of each other, and in celebration of life.

Rev. Allison will you lead the chalice lighting?

Rev. Allison Farnum:

Yes. So we are lighting the chalice. The chalice can mean many things to many different Unitarian Universalists. It is a sacred cup that reminds us that in this time we gather, we are ready to receive: to have open hearts, open minds, and to be ready to welcome new information. More than that, it's about welcoming experience that can call

us forward into action. In this spirit of all the different ways we named the holy, and in all the different ways we live and move in this world, it's with gratitude that we light our chalice, this sacred flame that will burn throughout our meeting, and that we will extinguish at the end. Blessed be. Amen

Rev. Lydon:

Rev. Green can you lead us in prayer?

Rev. Green:

Yes. I would be honored. In the spirit of our ancestors, I call upon to give us wisdom in this hour to do his will and his will only. Giving great love and power for us to do the work we have been called to do. May he also give us strength and determination with the real power to continue the work he has given us to do.

As we go forth today and embrace each other, in each other's thoughts, and come into oneness, his spirit. I thank God for this opportunity to be on the call and to expedite new friends in relationships, this meeting that has brought us together. In the name of our mighty God, amen.

Rev. Lydon:

Amen. Thank you, Rev. Green. Our panelists this evening are all amazing, powerful, beautiful, visionary thinkers, leaders, organizers, activists, spiritual beings, who have so much to share with us. It's my great pleasure to have the opportunity to get to connect to them a bit and go about bringing this conversation together.

One more moment about why we are coming together, more and more attention has been given to violent policing, more attention has been given to the prison-industrial complex. More and more attention has been given to the need to dismantle and destroy

white supremacy and anti-blackness to address the harms of-- colonialism. This is part of all of that system.

We gather because religion has something to say about that. As I said at the beginning, the panelists and myself, as a facilitator, come from different theological traditions, religious traditions, and one of my encouragements for this evening, as participants in this panel share their full selves, full theology, that our work of being interfaith-- isn't to get us to the lowest common denominator, the minimum of what we all believe, but rather asked to live fully into our theological selves. So whoever you are, you may not necessarily connect with everything theologically, that any one of our panelists says, and that's okay; that's the beauty of this moment, this diversity that shapes how we come into this conversation.

I invite all of you who have gathered this evening, whatever your theological grounding is, to open your hearts, mind, body, spirit to that which our panelists have to offer.

I have some bios of our panelists; I would like for you to know a little about who they are. I will read through kind of quick and then we will dive into our questions. Rev. Doris Green has worked as an advocate for the incarcerated population for nearly 40 years. The founder of Transforming Reentry Services, and was director of community health public affairs of the AIDS Foundation of Chicago for 13 years. Respected faith leader in Chicago, she has served as-- institutional review board, torture inquiry and relief commission and a member of the NCAACP's National HIV Faith & Social Justice Advisory Board and social Justice advisory Board in Washington DC.

Thank you so much for being with us Rev. Green. Laura [McTighe] has been a longtime organizer of the movement and currently she also serves in Women with A Voice in New Orleans, Transforming Reentry Services in Chicago, and Reconstruction Inc. in Philadelphia. Thank you, Laura, for being with us.

Zaynab Shahar focuses on the research in gender, public religious space within Jewish and Islamic law. They also research and teach about spiritual abolition and theological. Thank you for being with us.

Pastor Darryl Brown Jr. is the founding senior pastor of Kingdom Builders Christian Center of Omaha, Nebraska, starting in 2009, as well as a sexual health educator. As an author, spiritual life coach, and teacher, his work is at the intersection of spirituality, healing of black advocacy, and LGBTQ advocacy. His most recent work, *I'm Positive, I Forgive You. How I Forgave the Man That Gave Me HIV* candidly reveals how we navigated his shocking HIV diagnosis. His culmination of work that forms his belief for abolition moves him to performative and transformative practices.

What an amazing group of people to be with us this evening. Again, for people joining us, we do not have time set aside for questions at the end, but you are welcome to put your questions or comments in the chat, it's a welcomed place to share your ideas and wonderings. we will do our best to incorporate those into future meetings we have.

Today involves multiple questions in one. I cannot help myself, there are so many things I want to hear from our amazing panelists. Question one, tell us a little more about who you are and what your work in ministry looks like. Additionally, please offer reflections on what your theology tells you about abolition of the US criminal punishment system from police, to judges, electronic monitoring, to prisons, and all other pieces of the system. Darryl, would you start us off?

Pr. Brown:

Absolutely. Thanks for having us, great to be on this panel with all these giants concerning the subject matter. I'm grateful for the opportunity. As Jason advised, I have been preaching since the age of 15 and pastoring since I was 22. We don't have to get

into the math of what all that looks like, but Anywho it's been a while. Our church was actually founded with the idea that we would build something that was more about the various aspects of individuals lives, as opposed to just being really dogmatic and really doctrinal. We wanted something to help people's lives and help them discover by way of our scriptures, as to what that life could look like and how people could engage in that life.

We started back in 2009 and over the years. We've engaged in abolition work. Admittedly we just didn't have the language to apply. We were engaged in support work to individuals who are transitioning out of the penal system; we were supporting individuals that were dealing with immigration, and even still doing work with that today. In talking about these systems, we have had so many different interactions and we have done so many different things. We have done bail support. We've done all sorts of things for individuals throughout the years, as a small ministry out of Omaha. Not even realizing how necessary that work was. We didn't realize how intense incarceration was here in the state of Nebraska and what those stats really look like and how...we really had no idea. We didn't know what we were engaging in, we just knew we had an assignment to help what the Bible would identify as the least of these.

We don't mean in regard to status or worth, but with regard to the satte or situation in life is somewhat more challenging, if you will, or carries with it a little more of an upward Hill battle, than our own. Just reaching out and offering assistance; we believe in we are supposed to be the storehouse of the community. We have positioned ourselves to try to do that and be that.

Most recently, we created a partnership with Black and Pink and the entire lower level of our worship facility will be transformed into a living space for adolescents that are system-impacted. So ages 15-24, will have living space and houses at least 10-12 individuals that will allow individuals coming out of incarceration or individuals that have

even been impacted by the foster care system, because we know what that looks like, once individuals age out of the system and how they are left to fend for themselves. So this program will let them have stable housing, access to services, and prepare them to be their best selves, whatever that looks like for them. That's been our work and how we have engaged in this particular work with regard to abolition.

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you so much. We are so excited about housing, oh, what a dream! Zaynab, what about you?

Shahar:

I got involved with this work, I want to say almost eight years ago. I met the person who inevitably become my [unknown word] the late Ibrahim Farajaje who was a teacher at Starr King School of Ministry .So he was my introduction into the world of Muslims who were a part of the Unitarian Universalists who were abolitionists, because I certainly wouldn't have known that from my corner of Jewish and Islamic studies. Me and him would have very candid conversations about our theological responsibilities as believers as people whose order tells us we are people who don't value hierarchical authority.

Our work is to serve God through serving people. Alright? I think his message finally started to come together in my life while pursuing my PhD and also being a cofounder and Director of Spiritual Education at Masjid al-Rabia because through that I've been able to design spiritual and political education that goes beyond this is explicitly what our traditionsays about prisons and incarceration. WHY exactly would do we approach the Q'ran and ask ourselves how to punish or exile people? The whole point of divine revelation is that the nature of belief inherently changes; it is liminal moment that demans that your beef changes. What you believbed before, we ain't there no more, Aint no half-steppin in the new covenant, right?

So for us, in our study, in the program I have tried very hard to put on, while also being

a full-time PhD student and now as an adjunct in the fall, is getting people to approach things differently so that it's not only more dynamic and vocal than it inherently is, but also to focus on the many tools and ideas that our traditions offer us outside of just answering the basic question like, "Are prisons and policing bad" So, that's my work. It's a little more theoretical and also trying to innovate spiritual-political education.

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you so much. Really loving this piece around the idea that what we believe before doesn't have to be what we believe now. We are supposed to be evolving and changing. Amazing. Thank you. Appreciate you. Laura, what about you?

McTighe:

Beautiful. Thank you so much for the invitation to be here. Thank you to everyone who has tuned in today. It's incredible to be in the community that's right now rolling almost 80 deep. It's a beautiful beginning or continuing, however we want to think of this conversation today. I know it's one note in a much longer journey that we've been on and that we will keep being on. Often when I introduce myself, I say I was born in Baltimore, but I was raised in the Philadelphia movements to end AIDS in prison. I was politicized almost twenty-three years ago in the streets of Philadelphia, my very first day as a prison abolitionist, I was arrested blockading the Philadelphia District Attorney's office, trying to put an end to a whole lot of things were going down in Philadelphia who --at that time-- the DA prided herself being America's deadliest DA. My work over the past 30 years has really been much in the spirit of what Darryl and Zaynab has focused on. When you are doing this work for people, you do the next thing that's in front of you.

My work beginning in doing anti-death penalty work, I somehow got myself on the floor of ACT UP Philadelphia meetings, -- and that got me involved with the jail work and organizing programs for people who were coming home. It was through that work which is how I met my spiritual mother who will introduce herself next, Doris Green. Also my

comrades in New Orleans and the folks who know my New Orleans people are on this call today.

Also several of the Muslim elders I've been working with. There isn't a sort of origin, that I feel like-- this path is defined by continuing to do my work. Some principles I go back to is a quote from Mariame Kaba that "hope is a discipline." That is something I've been carrying really deeply. I am now newly based in Tallahassee, Florida. Have been here for about a year and it's my first year adhere an assistant professor. I've landed with an opening to do nothing but teach abolition to folks who are in college and graduate school. I took that as a challenge and an excitement to be able to not teach abolition not just an intellectual exercise but as the praxis and practice it is.

I want to offer some of the words that ground me, and I will come back with some of the history with the next question. For me and what I've been trying to do on the ground here in partnership with the folks in Tallahassee; both at the university and the Tallahassee bail fund that we have just gotten off the ground and the work we are trying to do to get everyone out of the county jail in the midst of the epidemic. For us abiliton is both a vision and a practice. We envision a world without prisons, but we also must make that world together. For me, that means abolition must always be an ideological commitment to the absence of prisons, policing, detention and the economics of surveillance that undergird all of this. "Abolition is presence," for those who don't know those words are from Ruth Wilson Gilmore. abolition is the presence of life-giving institutions and presence with one another. So literally, where I began from; that in this space, we are building abolition. I will pass it back to Rev. Green.

Rev. Lydon:

Please Rev. Green.

Rev.Green:

Alright. First of all I want to thank all of you for inviting me. Especially my spiritual daughter, Laura, to make sure I'm staying on top of things I need to stay on top of. How I got involved with this, it's a long story, over 40 years of doing work, I wouldn't even call it abolition-if and I didn't name it any of that. I came into this to change. I was suffering myself. I was at a Christian church. I was going through so much pain in my personal life, as a woman who was a victim of abuse during that time. Because I pained so much, I needed to release that pain and help other people. It was through that in my church that led me to do work with a group that was going into the prison. And ended up inside prison, I never really wanted to go inside prison, I just wanted to support them.

As a volunteer going into prison, I ended up-- from the Jesus I saw in books, I saw that in folks who are incarcerated. I fell in love and for the past 40 years I have been doing that. Have been doing prison ministry work inside and out. Knowing a lot about theology-- I believe there's a God. Believing pain in my God in knowing I needed to do something about that. It took me to presence. For 16 years I was a volunteer chaplain in the state of Illinois where I went in, all the prisons and even youth prison, doing church services. That's all we really knew how to do in the beginning.

It turned into what we have now, a full agency with over 15 people employed right now. It's a small agency, but it also consists of people who were formerly incarcerated. Including myself. That's what makes the work so powerful. I married a man who was in prison. For 29 years he served in prison, he literally died in prison. He never got to go home, but he spiritually went home. It was a lot. That's what brought me in this and that's what keeps me in this.

I'm excited about the growth of the organization. We do lots of services. HIV, GED preparation, job readiness--we serve the people based on their needs. We create services for people based on the need. We follow the spirit when it comes to serving people.

I did a little studying; a theology piece to get a clear understanding, especially when you talk about abolition and everything I've been reading about slavery and mass incarceration--this is huge what we are embarking on right now. This group. Is really huge when talking about dismantling all this. One thing I know for sure, because of the work I do on the grassroots-level, in order to remove something, we must be repaired to replace something.

I know it can be done; I know it can be done to all of us. Talking about removing police and what it can bring to the community-- monitoring, taking care of others and learning how to care for ourselves and our communities in policing when it's needed. It's a lot I can share but I came to this work through the pain. Through this pain, the organization has grown to help other people who are in pain. Working with families who are dysfunctional, by design, to help them stay together-- when their loved ones come home. It's work we do every day, not just Monday through Friday. It's the work we do all the time, and the work that God has called us to do.

Again, thank you for allowing me to be a part of this. My work is on the people-level. If I've learned anything, the prison population in the population of the community is one in the same. Thank you.

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you so much Rev. Green and thank you so much for lifting up and sharing your own pain and reminding us the importance of acknowledging that suffering without glorifying it; that we are working to end it. Thank you so much.

Thank you, all of our panelists, for responding to our first question. Then on to our second question, how has theology-- there so many different ones, but how has theology been used to create the system we're living in today? What has been the role

of theology creating the system in what we live in today? Laura will start us off.

McTighe:

Thank you so much. This is part of the relationship with Rev. Green, where you left off is where I want to start. Something I would love to offer to everyone who's on here, and we can figure out how to make it available. This question is actually one that Rev. Green and I have been asking together. I have written an article we'd be really happy to share with everyone. We have to ask the question of how we got here, not letting Prison seem like it's always existed, and if we can begin to understand how it began how it started is how we can begin to see it end. Our current order teaches us that the prison has always been and always will be. We know that to be false.

To begin to enter precisely, as Rev. Green showed us, in with the people, through relationships, understanding that it's in fact what this entire system is warring on and it is designed to destroy human relationships and families. We need to understand its beginnings so that we can make its ends. That is, like Rev. Green said, both a process of removal and a process of replacement.

one of the ways that Rev. Green and I talked about this, how do we simultaneously hold the fact that without religious ideas principles, ideas, and practices, mass criminalization would be unthinkable.. And religious ideas and practices offer tremendous possibilities for imagining different ways of doing justice and literally building a world without prisons. I hold those two things simultaneously and I hope everyone on this call is, in part, to refuse the idea that religion is just the bad part and if we got rid of religion, we could be in good place place. That's one of the ways this conversation waxes-- centering the question of abolitionist theologies and abolitionist religious practices.

And that sort of division, where is religion; good or bad, it's something we all traffic in the stories we all tell about incarceration. There are two stories we are familiar with, with

how did we get here. What of the roots of prisons? One, starts in the new American Republic above the Mason-Dixon line with the construction of prisons in the late 1700s, the early 1800s. And the story we get there is that it was a reform. Angela Davis says the reason “prison reform” rolls off our tongues is because this is literally what they were, they were reforms of corporal punishment.

The story we tell is romanticized--oh this is great, Quakers got together, this was going to be a way where it wasn't as violent, without beating people in public, and the experimentation went wrong. But there's something we cling to, that religious roots of prisons represent a good thing-- repentant. Narrating what Rev. Green said when we are talking about mass criminalization, we are talking about slavery and reparations that have never been paid. The narration of our current system of mass criminalization, and, in the words of Micjelle Alexamnder, the new Jim Crow, being able to draw a line in the current systems is immediately coming from slavery through Jim Crow through the present-day mass criminalization.

I think part of Rev. Green and I have been thinking about is, that both of those stories don't actually tell us how we got to right now. One of the things, and we have different historians that have been digging into this early American history, and they say it's never so simple that in fact, the very first prisons in this country were immediately places that become warehouses for people of color and people fleeing slavery. we don't have all the resources, but many of us are trying to document these stories. The religious history of this country has always been about race and white supremacy. We can't always understand the roots of mass incarceration without reckoning with white supremacist-Christianity.

I wanted to leave specifically from a quote with Ida B. Wells, this literally puts into words everything we've been trying to talk about. This is a pamphlet on the occasion of Chicago World's Fair when no black people were allowed to participate in it. She went to

the Haitian pavilion where Frederick Douglass was and handed out pamphlets. In it she talked about a religious and a co-constituted religion of white supremacy as an analysis of looking at lynching and the convict-lease system. She said that “Religious moral practices of the country, all the agencies that tend to uplift and acclaim degraded and ignorant are in the hands of the Anglo-Saxon. In word and deed they believed that to have black blood made them unworthy of consideration, a social outcast, a leper, even in church.”

Her second point, the judges, juries, and court officials are white men who share these prejudices; they also make the laws. So part of what Rev. Green and I are looking at is that legacy, it's a religious narrative of the system that we have lived through today. It's not premised on -- that's the analysis in history, those are the theologies we need to be eviscerating and what we need to be building, are theologies of the presence of care that are grounded in those virtues.

Lydon:

Thank you so much Laura. Darryl, would you like to add anything to this?

Pr. Brown:

Absolutely. I want to piggyback off that exact point, you're absolutely right that the origin, I think in my opinion it's necessary to find ways in which we go through the process of dismantling such a system, about being honest about the origin of that system. When we talk about ways in which religion has contributed, it's nothing new for us to see a religion using dualistic [indiscernible], that religion can both be utilized by the oppressor and the oppressed.

We've seen this Christian religion that says slaves obey your masters, the same Bible that supports the idea of liberation. Liberation theology. When we look and understand that history and understand that even going before the formation of the Prisons, we

have a Catholic Church that was literally policing and giving its stamp of approval for the enslavement of African individuals.

When we began to see this, The stamps of approval saying that if you go into these new territories and find anyone that is not of the same faith as you, that they are able to be enslaved and that's been sanctioned by these officials of the church. When you go back to the origin, it shows a level of cognitive dissonance that has infiltrated the system to date. Because how dare you come to new land and claim your desire is to be free from the oppression you've experienced in one place, while oppressing another group of individuals? The only way you can rectify that in the mind is if you dehumanize. criminalize, devalue, degrade.

There's constantly been this work to do that to the individuals who have experienced these systems; devaluing, degrade, dehumanize. And to criminalize. There's a constant perpetuation of the idea of them, like what Rev. Green talked about, they are the same inside as they are out. But we have been trained in such a way, and it's been put before us in such a way, that these are the worst of the worst, less than, more than-- someone in the chat said we need to abolish religion? I don't think it's about abolishing religion, I think religion has the opportunity to be a tool, we can utilize that tool in a proper way, in which that was supposed be utilized, or the use that tool in the wrong way, it could be harmful. I think that it's really about the ways in which we utilize religion. If we understand, at least from the Christian tradition, that the purposes of God are being redemptive, and we have no right to throw anyone away. The baseline of our faith is that transformation can occur.

it would do us well to seek ways that we look for transformative work. The reality is, without looking at it through the lens of religion, we don't even have to look through that lens- looking through a human lens, we see that none of these systems work. They do not work. Religion's stamp of approval on these oppressive measures that have taken

place still does not suggest that these systems work. They definitely do not work. We have to figure out a way, as the faith community, to do as Rev. Green said, figure out what is a replacement, and ensure that we lead the charge with regard to that replacement in the same way that oppressive minds led to the charge concerning the creation of the systems.

Lydon:

Thank you, Darryl. Zaynab, do you have anything brief? We have to move on.

Zahar:

Sure. The idea is that something in this country makes prison seem ubiquitous. That's also true across traditions, across the world. As Christianity spreads as a colonizing force, the question of a civilized society and how you punish people, perpetually get opposed for the same way that when it becomes fashionable to abolish slavery, no everyone else has to answer-- oh this is how we can abolish slavery within our traditions as well. Slavery and Islam is not my area of expertise, but we have ways of manifesting the slaves in prisoner long before the movement to abolish slavery in Europe and the US. That only becomes legible by virtue of that conversation. It only comes into the atmosphere by virtue of that conversation. Something that's existed for centuries is all the sudden relevant because of Europe and the West being at the center of the world.

And so I think one of the things that the history of prisons misses, as well as religion, is what happens when one particular iteration of religion is at the center of the world and literally everyone else has to answer to that in one way or another in different parts of time and space.

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you so much. We are at the halfway mark. I want to invite everyone who wants to take a couple of breaths. Feel yourself connected to each other, to your family inside,

those wrestling with the challenges of getting out, and we know we are constantly creating space and a place for people to be. As we create abolition together, part of that is creating literal places, spiritual spaces, so I want you to briefly share this one-minute song put together by Amanda Thomas who is the director of music at the Second Unitarian Church of Chicago. She invited us to share. I will share my screen with you all.

[Amanda Thomas sings]

Thomas:

I've made a place for you where everything is new. Love has made a place for you. Where everything is new. Grace has made a place for you where everything is new.

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you to Amanda for sharing that with us. Our next question, and this will be started by Rev. Green, can you share any stories or practices from your tradition that can offer strength or comfort to the movement for abolition?

Rev. Green:

Okay thank you. Great question. Well, I came to my religious journey through Christianity. In my life, I don't claim any one denomination. I found from the work I've done in prison that there are so many different denominations, so many. For me, in order for me to serve them all, I had to become more of a universal spiritual-type person where I can relate to them through spirit, and not so much the religion. Even the organization that I founded years ago, there's many of those people with many different religions-- and because it doesn't matter within the group, we are not there to promote religion, we are there to help and serve people. I guess my strength would be able to reach people where they are and them to reach me where I am, and to identify their needs by listening to them. That has been a strength for me in the work that I do.

I have found through this type of work of spirituality that it draws people near. People don't have to feel they have to become anything. They just need to reach one and teach one. Because of all that is happened through slavery up until now, I just cannot allow myself or anyone in our group to force any kind of religion on anyone. We actually changed our name to make sure people didn't think we are a religious group. We want to have anyone come to our services and if we don't have something they need, we will find it. I moved through Christianity and in doing prison work-- it wasn't giving me anything to give others. It didn't give me much to give others; I found most of my strength from being inside the prison walls with those who are hurting. That's where I learned a lot of the spirituality things I believed in today-- is what I learned by working with people who were suffering like me.

So that's what I have to contribute to that question; I think the strength, again, is comfort in being able to work with people. Right where they are, we are. Life changes because people care. We don't ask people what kind of crimes--we don't get into that. We don't assume what they may have done. We don't get into that. It's an issue within our agency; if they show up, we will serve them. That's what I have to give to that question, I hope that has been helpful.

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you so much Rev. Green. Other panelists, what would you say? Could you share stories that offer strength or comfort to the movement?

McTighe:

I can pick up a little. So something I did not share in the opening, I was raised Catholic. I defected from the Catholic Church as a teenager and found my way to a small Unitarian church in Central Pennsylvania when I was in my late teens. The person there had just been-- it was the first time I ever met someone who understood if you see something that you think is wrong, you have an obligation to do something about it. When asked

about religion and the work that I do, and how my own grounding, faith, and spirituality informed that, I was convinced there was no way to be an activist without being a minister. I've since met people who of course thought that holds truth for, but I think it's been a space for grounding for me.

This work is just hard. Rev. Green has shared openly on this call already that there is no way to enter into this work without it leaving gashes in your own life, your family, the family you choose and claim as part of this work. I feel like one of the biggest things we have to offer to the movements for abolition is an understanding of how you feel. Healing is a process and healing is just as much implicated in the forms in white supremacist, Christianity, that's inseparable from colonialism, capitalism, in that myopic focus on first the West and everywhere else--like all of that violence.

Lack of prioritization of healing, spiritual, and somatic. That being is also what's a part of what's at stake. So when we are able to come together and offer those resources of how we get into relationships, how do we slow down, how do we recognize Spirit as present, that when more than two of us have gathered that God is present--having those tools and resources that we have, we literally have to figure out how to move into different relationships with one another until something different--that's what we do, and that's what we do best--

It is not to say we do it perfectly. Indeed plenty of things we are talking about as issues in society are present in all of our societies and we fight that as well. I also know from being in [*garbled*] with people who are on this call and who are here because of Zaynab that we have found ways of coming together and things that we can offer together--I believe we have those tools.

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you so much. Darryl and Zaynab, a brief response, if you have one?

Alright. We will move onto our next question. Zaynab will start responses here. The question is a 3-part connector question. What might an abolitionist theology look like, what might any abolitionist theologies look like? What would be part of creating it or them? Where are you seeing these theologies being created or lived into in this current moment?

Zahar:

Oh boy. So, I think what an abolitionist theology would look like ultimately, depends on your tradition and the tools of your tradition. I would be really reluctant to say that aside from a commitment to building an anti-carceral world- that an abolitionist theology has to have “x,y,z” pieces cuz I intimately know the struggle of trying to get people to understand, that yes, jurisprudence is part of theology. You cannot separate those two things. So when I’m talking about abolitionist theology, I’m also talking about all these things too. Right?

I think the stuff of what would make up abolitionist theologies, or at least ones I would be interested in is what do our traditions have to say about how we manage conflict, how do we redistribute resources, how do we build this thing called the commons- which is something I am playing with in the building my dissertation prospectus--what is our common ground. Where do we go to meet each other and when we are in that space together, how do we expect to behave with each other? What are the things we are doing in that space that live in an abolitionist world that we want to see?

Also I think about--- I’m trying to find a way to put this-- I also think about what do our religions have to say about innovation, right?. As a scholar of religious law, one of the hardest things to get people to wrap their head around is whether it's actual divine revelation or religious laws themselves. They all have mechanisms for change within them that can be applied to different situations in different contexts. What are we then innovating in the thing that we call abolitionist theologies?

How are we taking what's already been done and turning it into the direction we want it to, I think is an important question because oftentimes when it comes to religion, people just want to throw out the things that do not work for them. And, I'm like, the way you actually avoid repeating that mistake is you remind yourself that at one point in time this was an ideological commitment that either you had, or your community had.

Because to me part of the work of white supremacy and Euro-coloniality is when something falls out of favor, everyone wants to pretend like they had nothing to do with it. It sprung up from the sky like a rainbow mushroom. And nobody knows how it grew, nobody knows who planted the seed, nobody knows who's watering this thing, we just know it's a rainbow mushroom that's out there. In order to avoid future generations coming back to this point, abolitionist theologies can't just throw out the ugly parts of our past and of our theologies that make us uncomfortable for fear of repeating the exact same thing, the systems of harm- foundational violence over and over again. If this country owned up to the fact, they enslaved people, we probably wouldn't be having a conversation about mass incarceration or abolitionists.

Because people would have had to, on an everyday basis, sit with the fact that in order to be a part of the greatest nation in the world, blood had to be shed, labor had to be stolen, and people had to be incarcerated. Right? So it's also for me a project of theological collective memory so that we are not just simply doing what has constantly been done, which is silencing the past, as Michel Rolph-Trouillot would say, in writing things out of history of things we are not fond of anymore.

Rev. Lydon:

So many thank yous. So many amens from the chat about "theological collective memory." Other panelists, what are things necessary; what are things resting in abolitionist theology? What's creating it for you? Darryl or Rev. Green?

Pr. Brown:

I think healing justice and transformative justice are definitely pieces that would have to be included in an abolition theology. Again, if we are talking about doing away with the system we know-if it definitely does not work, depending on who we are talking to, or works the way we it was intended to to work. If we understand that our foundational goal, then, is transformation--our foundational goal is healing and understanding that putting someone in a cage doesn't offer me healing, for the harm that was done to me. That putting someone in a cage does not create transformation for either the person who was harmed or for the person engaged in the harm. It does not transform anything. So I think that as a part of that theology, those two pieces are critical, the healing and transformation pieces.

Then to Zaynab's point, I think redistribution- a economic redistribution- is a necessary piece of that conversation as well. When we talk about some of the harm that has been done, it's been based particularly on resources and access to resources, access to opportunities, and feeling like there's a game that people have not been invited to play or have been given a disadvantage in playing the game. So these things have led to defenses that we are so lay-down-the-law about. So I think abolition theology needs include those pieces.

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you. Rev. Green, anything you like to add to this piece when thinking of abolition and theology together? You are muted, if you're talking, we cannot hear you. Okay. I am going to-- Laura, did you have anything to add abolitionist theologies?

McTighe:

I could, but I think Rev. Green is unneeded and might be ready.

Rev. Lydon:

Oh. Rev. Green, please.

Rev. Green:

Can you hear me now?

Rev. Lydon:

Yes. Wonderful.

Rev. Green

This is really challenging, but I'm learning. Yes, thank you so much for the person speaking right before me, I did not get his name when he talked about the healing, that really struck for me because healing has to take place. Also when we talk about some form of resources like reparation, now reparation is being talked about more, which is a way of making people whole in a way-- it helps give some type of resources to help people's lives. The healing part is very important to me because it doesn't matter how much you have. If you don't heal--money cannot heal you, it can make you whole and other ways, but the healing that comes from the inside is very important for our community and to have services to help them heal from all that's happened.

I just wanted to add on to what I already heard and make sure that in some of my conversations, I know in my circles we are talking about the reparation and the need for reparation, and what that looks like for us. So thank you for allowing me to bring that here on this call.

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you. Laura, I'm gonna skip you to go to our next question. It's our final question for panelists this evening. What wisdom do you have to share, this is for all of you to

answer and we will go in the same order that we went the first time, I will remind you who's up next. What wisdom do you have to share about how you hope people would get involved? Particularly, people in faith, religious communities, in this movement, abolition work, solidarity, anti-policing work, and this moment we are in? Pastor Darryl, I will start with you. We lost your video, and you are on mute, Pastor Darryl, if you want to start us off.

Pr. Brown:

There we go, sorry. I think ways for folks to get involved--for me, education is huge for me. I think that particularly in our religious communities, I think finding ways in which we can introduce the topic to begin with, I don't know if we have these conversations enough. So introducing the topics and principles behind the topics, providing the education to help folks understand why it is that we are even engaging in this work and why it is of such significance is going to be critical to the movement because I think that in reality, the average individual actually understands that prisons do not work; actually understands the level of violence that does transpire in these systems.

They cannot fathom another way of doing it because it's the way it's always been done. I think we have a responsibility in these faith communities to open up the dialogue and provide even more education on the levels of harm that people are enduring in these systems and how they are not transforming individuals, creating restoration, creating healing, they are not creating any of these things the systems are promising, but rather inflicting more harm in creating a worse predicament, not only for those individuals who have been incarcerated but for their families and the communities in which they will be placed back in at the time that they would come home.

I think us having these conversations and having the dialogue about the history is super important as well. For me, that education piece is top priority for me, because I think that it is the foundation for how folks begin to process simply how to engage in the work

themselves.

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you. Zaynab, how about you?

Zahar:

So I would say the way I've been encouraging people who would like to get involved is to think about what both Sylvia Winter and Walter Rodney call their "dwelling place." Where do you live and who's the community in your immediate surroundings? What is the stuff of that community and how it functions? That is going to inform that you understand both the need for prisons and policing or the need to move to something different. I live in a neighborhood that is hyper-policed that literally has a police station, that houses police horses at a golf course down the street.

I also live in a neighborhood that for ten years did not have a grocery store, doesn't have the robust resources that I grew up with in the suburbs, and I think the task of abolitionist hospitality is not simply telling people like prisons are bad because like Darryl said, they are bad but the carceral never really invites people to think about where they live and how they could actually be involved in the solutions that would transform your community. At most, you can testify at trial, or you get to be a participant within some piece of the system but none of that is actually getting you to think about-- well if I see domestic violence on the corner, like is there anywhere in my immediate neighborhood that I can refer somebody to? is there a group nearby that's deconstructing that kind of toxic behavior-(and I'm trying not to make it gender-specific, because that's a huge flaw of interpersonal frameworks). Carceral logic does not invite us to do those things. As it is, it not only tells us police and prisons are necessary but it asks us to put our absolute trust in the system. And if we are going to put our trust in each other, we have to ask ourselves where we are, what are our communities are missing or don't have, and how could certain practices, certain direct service providers, whatever

you want to call it, actually be the response to problems.

In my experience, even in a hyper-policed neighborhood, most of us are responding with each other. We try very hard. There's a small group of us who recognize that calling the police is just infinitely going to make things worse, nice times out of ten. We aren't calling it abolition in the most literal sense of the term, we are practicing with each other about trying to get resources in an area that is hyper-policed and under-resourced, at the same time. Right? So I would ask people about your dwelling place because I feel like it's been so popular to talk about abolition far and away from your community. So you go to this meeting at the opposite side of town, then you go back home where there are none of those alternatives. You look around and say well, that's great for this neighborhood over here, but there is no alternative over here.

If we had abolitionist dwelling places, we might actually have more localized resources than trying to concentrate things in very finite pockets of the world.

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you so much. Thinking about that, especially in terms of religious communities. If you are part of a faith community, that has a literal space, there are so many opportunities to create abolitionist dwelling out of your own religious community, there's so much opportunity out of there. Laura you are up.

McTighe:

How I wanted to close out aligns with what Zaynab and Darryl shared. There are two things that come to mind any time opening space. Zaynab was talking about the sense we get that justice is always out of our hands and far away from us. How would we ever get out of the ways that carcerality has colonized our imaginations unless we figure out different ways of being with one another. That is the foundation and it is also hard as hell. And it is almost eminently impossible. Part of my work is held to get in relationships

with one another and not practicing abolition. If we know that a prison is everywhere, then abolition must be everywhere. Exactly what Zaynab said, what are our abolitionist dwelling places? How do we make abolition literally in our interactions all the time? Because abolition can't be just "no prisons." It has to be more constructive. Because at some point we are going to get past this whole carceral mess and we have to know what this thing is we are building. This thing we are building together, there are no sidelines; no places where you can punch from the side and ask about these people, those people or that thing. We must do it together and we have to figure out how to build those relationships and those capable of doing this work together.

There are a couple of tools that I wanted to offer with the folks I'm in communion here in Tallahassee with that we've been using. One is we have been deeply faithful to the work of adrienne maree brown and all the people who have come together to build emergent strategy principles. The mantra we use in our work is that we are moving at the speed of trust; that's the foundation. Sometimes that is painfully slow, sometimes you don't think you're getting anywhere, that you're circling the drain and never going to get to the conversation nor figure out how to get beyond that. It is literally moving at the speed of trust. Being aligned with that, the principle is that there's a conversation the only these people in this room can have and we must find that.

There something that matters with those of us were working. There's something that matters with us walking out of the door of the room and being in fellowship with people that we need to live with right now. That is where I began. There is a conversation that I can only have with them. There is a conversation we can only have together. Another I want to offer is a practice I learned from every abolitionist organizer and every former incarcerated person I worked with. That every meeting should start with a check in and close with a check out. Any conversation- that is the way you get in tep with one another to the level of intimacy-in a system that keeps us from getting to know each other. That is how we move closer in relationship. Repeating that time and time and time again.

One of my coworkers, Gabby, had a slogan that “we are being like Quakers,” how do we input deep levels? that was her slogan. Also “How do we get off the sidewalk and into the grass?” Innovation and experimentation, something that's come back, and that Zaynab has said to us on the last question, the sidewalks that we are supposed to be walking on, it's really easy to stay on. But how do we get into the cracks or the grass? How do we know if we are actually in the grass? That Became one of the mantras we were asking. Are we into this life space where we are building something new?

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you. Rev. Green, what about you? What would you invite people of faith into at this moment?

Rev. Green:

Before we do that, if you don't mind, I was going through the chat and I read a chat from our sister Nina and it touched me deeply. I'm hoping that she is still on. She quoted Luther and mentioned that we are all ministers. That's truly a true statement. She also offered herself as an ally to the struggles of injustice and white supremacist. And that really touches me. If we have enough allies who understand what has happened to us, to our world, and we have people who will stand up for justice-- she seems to be a person who puts all into serving people in social justice so I wanted to say thanks to her, thank you so much, I will remember your chat and I will always know you are there in the spirit in whatever form of prayer you are doing, whatever it is, that I am receiving it on my end, so thank you so much for being in ally.

What I want to leave you with, each one of us are ministers. We are to reach and teach and to embrace. What I've learned from 40 years of doing this work and for all you young people with all their degrees and all of that, please know you can have all of the degrees in the world, but if there is no passion in what you are doing, you are going to

be lacking in that. You can always get an education, which is great, and I love that you're doing that, make sure you have a measure of passion to go along with it. It'll take you a long way. The passion and the love of people have taken me all the way through. And I tell anyone who comes to our agency, I can send you to class, I can help you get your GED, I can make sure to get you through. In my interviewing, I want to know where your heart is at. I need to know that you care. If you can get hired can know you will get hired with my agency. Show that you are in it for the service. I would love to invite people like Nina; she's courageous and we need to put this out like this. That's what I think we need to do. I want more Ninas around me; people to care enough to unveil what's really going on and not try hide behind it. My closing is, thank you Nina, for giving me something I needed from this call today, and that's to know that you were there.

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you, Rev. Green. Oh, real quick, Nina, I want to just take just a minute.

[laughs]

Rev. Green:

I'm sending my love to you, thank you.

Nina:

Right back to you! Thank you.

Rev. Green:

Real time.

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you, friends. A facilitator privilege moment, if you are not inside prison and you

do not write to someone who's currently in prison, you can change that. There are so many organizations. Churches of the Larger fellowship, Black and Pink, HIV-positive folks inside, many organizations who have opportunities to write people inside so please build relationships with people across the walls.

In this particular moment, any particular opportunity you have, legislators and governors of your states and any other executive official, demand to release as many people as possible during this current pandemic, they are literally killing people by leaving them inside the prisons. Please, yes, with Masjid al-Rabia, in terms of writing to Muslim folks inside, thank you. There are many opportunities. Please connect with folks and help get our people free as quickly as we possibly can.

As we continue in this larger conversation of Imagining and dreaming of what we can create together. We are going to run about two minutes over because Pastor Darryl will pray with us and then we have 2 quick closing things and then we will wrap it up, beloveds. To Pastor Darryl.

Pr. Brown:

Alright, let us pray. Lord, we thank you for tonight, thank you for the establishment of these relationships. We thank you for the words spoken tonight. That these words have creative power and can create something going beyond this moment. We pray, as we conclude this moment, that what we have begun to imagine and what we worked collectively towards these moments, that it can be with us and rest upon us, that we will feel compelled to continue to engage in this work in whatever way we can, whatever platform we have, whatever circle of influence we stand within, we pray that you will ignite the fire within us so we can continue this work and do the work of liberation, which truly is your work. We honor you and thank you for this moment, it's in Jesus's name I pray, amen.

Rev. Lydon:

Amen, thank you. And these words come from current political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, in his book *Death Blossoms*, these are some of his words: “As human beings, we are, at root, social creatures. Outside the bonds of our familial and social relations, we cannot truly live. We are birthed in and into community. We grow in community. Community determines who we are and is not the individual self, per se, but is placed in the broader social network of human society that defines our identity and gives our life meaning.

Mumia continues to live inside a Pennsylvania prison cell and we continue to fight for his and everyone else's freedom.

Rev. Allison, can you extinguish this chalice for us.

Rev. Farnum:

It's in the spirit of the fire that has been ignited, giving thanks for this flame we have lit, and sending the warmth of this flame to everyone inside, to everyone who is lonely, a reminder of our connection, we will carry the flame with us, until we meet again.

Rev. Lydon:

Thank you all. thank you to our panelists who brought so much brilliance, grace, the love of divine, to surround us, I hope wherever it is you are in this moment, friends, and beloveds, that you feel the love from these people, community, and that you figure out in your own ways and relationships with each other what's possible. Our dreams of abolition come true, and our prayers of abolition come true when we make it happen.

Thank you all and for those who have made their time to make this possible, many, many thanks.

If you did not register and just got on somehow, feel free to send an email to friends who are here, we will make sure everyone gets all the resources and recording of this event will be available by the end of the month. We will keep having these conversations.

Thank you all and have a wonderful night.

Panelists: Thank you.

>>Thank you. Bye y'all.

>>Thank you, love all you.

>>Love you. Thank you. Bye you all.

[end]