

STAKES IS HIGH

RACE, FAITH,
AND HOPE
FOR AMERICA



MICHAEL W. WATERS

FOREWORD BY VASHTI MURPHY MCKENZIE

COMPANION GUIDE

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Welcome! We are glad you have sought this guide to accompany your reading of *Stakes is High: Race, Faith and Hope for America* by Michael W. Waters.

We envision this companion guide being used in multiple contexts, such as congregations, campus ministries, and community centers. We hope it will be engaged across race and class, thereby serving as an opportunity for people to think critically about their own social location as it relates to race, faith and hope for America.

The guide is designed to accompany each of the four sections of the book:

- On Martyrs and Ancestors
- On Battlegrounds of Justice
- On Struggle and Strongholds, and
- On Hope and Determination

It was written with the input of five pastors and Christian educators who come from different racial and ethnic contexts across the United States and represent various expressions of the Christian faith. We are grateful for their creative suggestions. Please find their biographical sketches at the end of this guide.

We recommend that groups discussing this book begin by creating hospitable space for an open and honest exchange of opinions. Consider beginning each gathering by agreeing upon conversation covenants. You can find a sample here: <http://fteaders.org/uploads/files/cop.pdf>.

Above all, we hope this guide will stimulate sacred exchanges between human beings. May these holy conversation comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, working within God's mystery to continue bringing about beloved community.

Section 1: On Martyrs and Ancestors

1. Is there anything in the reading that surprised you? Is there anything that you want to lift up as particularly troubling or inspiring? (This is a beginning question for each section. You may want to alter it, depending on how well you know each other. One person suggested beginning each week with the question: What made you cry?)
2. In the opening essay, Waters describes opening his church to mothers whose children had been killed by police. He states that the mothers wanted their loved ones to be known beyond the hashtag. Has the use of social media diluted or enhanced activism? In what ways?
3. Find and listen to a recording of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit." As you listen, pay attention to your own emotions. What does the song stir up in you? What message does it have to the white church?
4. Waters writes, "American racism is no less than a physical war on Black bodies and a psychological war on Black souls" (page 31). Do you agree with this assessment? What would it take to convince whites of this reality? Read Luke 4:18-19. Brainstorm together ways your faith community may respond to racism in all its expressions.
5. To what degree is affluenza a white church problem? What should the church's response be? "If affluenza works as a defense," Waters writes, "it would seem logical that poverty would too." (page 56) What could your church do beyond serving a meal or collecting canned goods to help with this divide?
6. What do you remember about your response to the Mother Emanuel AME Church shooting? How was it different from hearing the news of the taking of other Black lives?
7. What do you imagine the sound of God's grief is like? When have you heard it?
8. What does it mean to you to consider Jesus weeping over the racial tensions and violence in your community and/or in the country? Does it stir up in you a response?
9. The effects of implicit racial bias is a recurrent theme in *Stakes Is High*. What role do faith communities serve in addressing how implicit bias contributes to systemic inequities in housing, education, employment, and the criminal justice system? What are some tangible ways you and/or your congregation can mitigate the high stakes of systemic inequities?

Section 2: On Battlegrounds of Justice

1. Is there anything in the reading that surprised you? Is there anything that you want to lift up as particularly troubling or inspiring?
2. Kendrick Lamar's hip-hop lyrics are frequently referenced in *Stakes Is High*. Does Waters' use of hip-hop present an opportunity to discuss intersectional influences? If so, what influences? If not, why not? What extracultural productions influence members of your local house of worship?
3. Are Black lives expendable in your community? What does it say about humanity that any life is expendable? How do you envision the church's response to police shootings?
4. The majority of the cases of injustice reported in *Stakes is High* involved African Americans under the age of 30. How do these instances influence your view of life for young adult people of color in America?
5. How does our love of freedom relate to our love of guns as a society? Is a heavily armed society a free society?
6. How does the dichotomy between Dr. King's dream and the reality of the state of too many neighborhoods where his name adorns the street speak to the challenges we face in our society?

Section 3: On Struggle and Strongholds

1. Is there anything in the reading that surprised you? Is there anything that you want to lift up as particularly troubling or inspiring?
2. What memories, if any, do you have of segregation in the 20th century? What impact do these memories have on you? How would you describe race relations in your community?
3. In the book *Race: A History Beyond Black and White* (New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2007), author Marc Aronson provides a historical overview of the development of the ideology of racism. As European Christians in the Middle Ages applied the biblical allegory of “light” representing “good” and “darkness” representing “evil” to skin tone, the following conclusion was drawn: “Blackness was associated with sin in the medieval mind, and dark skin suggested that these [persons of African descent] were particularly demonic people. Some scholars think that this negative view lingered long after the Middle Ages and is one reason why Europeans were later so willing to hold Africans as slaves.” How do you see this ideology (belief system) still in operation today in light of the stories we have read about in *Stakes is High*?
4. What do you think Jesus looked like? What images of Jesus did you grow up seeing? How would the church be different today if Jesus was portrayed in our art as the Palestinian Jew he was?
5. At the time of Waters’ original writing, the election of Donald Trump was an unlikely event in the political forecast. Since then, Trump has been inaugurated the 45th President of the United States. How does the election and inauguration of President Trump enhance your reading of *Stakes Is High*? What kind of world do you imagine will be possible in light of the narratives expressed in *Stakes* in the wake of a Trump presidency? What opportunities exist as a result of a Trump presidency? To use the analogy of the book, is a win possible (and for whom) or are the stakes simply too high to play on?
6. Waters highlights that the problem goes beyond police brutality. The problem is a result of multifaceted forms of injustice. What do we do about systems of justice that are broken?

Section 4: On Hope and Determination

1. Is there anything in the reading that surprised you? Is there anything that you want to lift up as particularly troubling or inspiring?
2. Waters asks, “What hope can we find to sustain us and strengthen us for the road ahead?” (page 99) Discuss this question: What do you imagine God’s canvas of peace and justice would look like?
3. In the chapter titled “Rebirth of a Nation,” Waters says that “we serve as the midwives to our nation’s rebirth.” Where do you see yourself or your community helping along the emergence of something new? What does it mean to be a midwife rather than an architect, artist, gardener, or parent? Which image seems most fitting to you right now?
4. *Stakes Is High* moves through horrific stories of injustice yet ends with themes of hope and connection. How do you fight against the tendency to shut down or look away in the midst of great violence and suffering? For persons of color: what kind of self- and life-affirming practices do you engage in when inundated with death-dealing stories? For white persons: how do you move beyond a paralyzing sense of guilt to a mobilizing sense of righteous indignation?
5. Based on your knowledge, wisdom, and assessment of the “height of the stakes,” what would be an effective Christian (or faithful, or spiritual) strategy to address the injustices chronicled and advocate for the lives of African Americans and other groups of Americans who face discrimination? Can you think of passages of scripture to support the development of your strategy?
6. Read Ezekiel 36:26. What does it mean to receive a new heart? What work needs to be done in have a new heart as a people?

Contributors

Delano Douglas is the director of United Campus Ministries at Virginia State University (UCM FLOW – Faith, Love, Outreach, and Worship) and the associate pastor at Ettrick United Methodist Church. His primary context is ministry with emerging adults (including undergraduate and graduate students) at a Historically Black College and University.

Shonda Nicole Gladden is the senior pastor of Allen Temple AME in Marion, Indiana. She envisions using *Stakes Is High* to supplement young adult church school and social justice ministry at her congregation, an historic church in a city wrestling with race-related tensions resulting from both a 1930 lynching and a 2015 noose incident.

Cassidhe Hart is a seminary student at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary who can see using this text either in a small group at the seminary or at Reba Place Church.

Jason C. Stanley is an ordained deacon in the United Methodist Church serving as the coordinator for church revitalization for the Elizabeth River District in the Virginia Conference.

Joe Clifford serves as pastor of the Myers Park Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. Growing up as the son of two public school teachers in inner-city Washington, D.C., he has always found questions of racial equity and justice stirring to his soul.