

“I just finished reading *Stakes Is High*. My hope and prayer is that this narrative of violence against black and brown people in the United States finds its way into homes, churches, schools, and offices of public servants across this nation. I will recommend it to the faculty, staff, and students of the institution that I lead, Duke Divinity School. Michael Waters’ straightforward account of brutality begins with slavery and leads us forward to our own day in which killings are repeated endlessly on social media. Waters speaks with prophetic authority, calling all of us to the way of justice and peace.”

– Elaine A. Heath, Dean, Duke Divinity School

“Timely and important. Too often these words are used for books simply well written; not so here. *Stakes Is High* is the rare book that brings a keen theological eye to contemporary events. In the midst of what has been one of the most important movements for human dignity, Black Lives Matter, in recent decades, hearing the voice of emerging Christian leadership dedicated to both chronicling the moment and changing the world is vital! The book is a resource for practitioners of public ministry and those of us dedicated to their preparation.”

– Stephen G. Ray Jr., Fisher Professor of Theology,
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

“Through raw emotion and critical analysis, *Stakes Is High* grapples with the race matters plaguing America. Shifting us away from sound bites, Waters takes us on a journey that is deeply historical, theological, cultural, and personal. In the end, we are challenged to view the complexities of the black experience in ways that are both familiar and fresh.”

– Rahiel Tesfamariam, Founder/Publisher of *Urban Cusp*

“Captivating and persuasive, *Stakes Is High* offers a poignant reflection on the social, political, and theological situations of Black people in America. With great skill, Waters reveals the contradictions in the American system of justice as well as the progress people of faith have made with prophetic resistance. This critical time in the Black freedom struggle requires revolutionary movements that dismantle systems of oppression and empower the next generation of change makers – Waters offers a personal account of leading in such a movement.”

– Stephen A. Green, National Director, NAACP Youth
and College Division

“Waters challenges us to consider the question ‘How often must we drink from this bitter well? of racism in America.’ His use of historical narratives juxtaposed with contemporary illustrations gives the reader a sense of this long arc of injustice. Waters mixes the names of familiar and lesser known people who have found themselves on the underside of this arc and challenges us to think critically and creatively about next steps toward liberty and justice for all.”

— Leah Gunning Francis, Christian Theological Seminary, author of *Ferguson and Faith*

“No one will remain unaffected as Michael Waters masterfully tells the stories of the struggle and gives powerful evidence for the hope that things are about to change.”

— Joerg Rieger, Vanderbilt University, author of *Unified We Are a Force*

“Michael Waters personifies the truthful image of a powerful, young, Black pastor/preacher/lecturer, raw cultural writer, boots on the ground, social justice advocate, and true lover of hip-hop music. *Stakes Is High* is powerful and thought-provoking.”

— Sharon Risher, Chaplain, gun law reform advocate, daughter of Emanuel 9 martyr

“In *Stakes Is High* Dr. Waters shares some of his most thought-provoking writings on race relations in the United States. Part theology/part commentary this book has a wide reach and relevance from seminaries to academic classrooms to book clubs. Dr. Waters will challenge you, inspire you, and make you question your own thoughts about the state of the nation.”

— John Thomas III, Editor, *The Christian Recorder* and General Officer of the African Methodist Episcopal Church

STAKES IS HIGH

RACE, FAITH,
AND HOPE
FOR AMERICA

MICHAEL W. WATERS

FOREWORD BY VASHTI MURPHY MCKENZIE



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*For my mother, the Reverend B. Williams Waters,
who taught me to love God, to love all God's people, and in
defiance of the deep-seated racism in our society,
to love myself.
I love you!*

*And to the martyrs of the Mother Emanuel A.M.E.
Church massacre in Charleston, South Carolina:
May you continue to rest in the presence of God;
and on that great and holy day,
may we take flight together as with the wings of eagles.
We will never forget you!*

SAMPLE

CONTENTS

Series Foreword	ix
Foreword	xi
Introduction	1
<i>On Martyrs and Ancestors</i>	11
Black Life Is Expendable	14
The Life and Death of Lennon Lacy: Strange, Still	17
Kendrick Johnson: Good Kid, Mad System	20
The Sound of God's Grief in Charleston	23
Deep in the Heart of Texas	25
She Held Us All: A Tribute to Amelia Boynton Robinson (1911-2015)	28
Of Bees and Butterflies: The Monumental Life of Muhammad Ali	31
Alton Sterling and the Ritual Performance of Black Death	34
Terence Crutcher and the Multiform Nature of Black Pain	37
<i>On Battlegrounds of Justice</i>	39
Any Negro Will Do	42

Mortal Men and the City of Baltimore	45
Swimming Pools	48
It's Complicated: On Tubman, Race, and Progress in America	51
American Justice in Black and White (And Green)	54
<i>On Struggle and Strongholds</i>	58
Stakes Is High: Redeeming the Soul of America	61
American Terrorist	65
The Empire Strikes Back (or Fear of a Black Planet)	68
Know Your Place, Boy! (I Mean, President Obama)	71
Make America Great, Again?	74
Trump: When Race Is as God	77
<i>On Hope and Determination</i>	80
Michael Brown and Our Great Opportunity	83
Rebirth of a Nation	86
We Gon' Be Alright	90
It All Falls Down	92
On Hills, Hope, and New Hearts: A View from Dallas	95
<i>Notes</i>	101
<i>About the Author</i>	103

Series Foreword

Cultivating Faithful, Wise, and Courageous Leaders for the Church and Academy

Welcome to a conversation at the intersection of young adults, faith, and leadership. The Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE) is a leadership incubator that inspires diverse young people to make a difference in the world through Christian communities. This series, published in partnership with Chalice Press, reimagines Christian leadership and creates innovative approaches to ministry and scholarship from diverse contexts.

These books are written by and for a growing network of:

- Partners seeking to cultivate the Christian leaders, pastors, and theological educators needed to renew and respond to a changing church.
- Young leaders exploring alternative paths to ministry and following traditional ways of serving the common good —both inside and beyond “the walls” of the church and theological academy.
- Christian leaders developing new ways to awaken the search for meaning and purpose in young adults who are inspired to shape the future.
- Members of faith communities creating innovative solutions to address the needs of their congregations, institutions, and the broader community.

This series offers an opportunity to discover what FTE is learning, widen the circle of conversation, and share ideas FTE believes are necessary for faith communities to shape a more hopeful future. Authors’ expressed ideas and opinions in this series are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of FTE.

Thank you for joining us!

Dori Baker, Series Editor

Stephen Lewis, FTE President

SAMPLE

FOREWORD

“If you get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people’s sins, if you are generous with the hungry and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out, your lives will begin to glow in the darkness, your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight. I will always show you where to go. I’ll give you a full life in the emptiest of places.”—Isaiah 58:9–12 (MSG)

“Action without reflection is mere activism and reflection without action is pure verbalism.”
—Paulo Freire

I wrote a letter to my toddler granddaughter recently expressing my hopes for her future in America. My hope was that she will inherit a United States that wasn’t so divided. We are a nation of “...huddled masses yearning to breathe free...” and at the same time a nation that supports violent, racist, misogynist rhetoric and actions. We are “...the land of the free and the home of the brave!” and a nation that applauds trash-talk, name calling, and uncivil discourse. We are a nation of diverse races, religions, and ethnic origins seeking inclusivity in an America that “...rings with the harmony of liberty...” and a nation with an ugly undercarriage of anger, fear, and hate.

Was “...liberty and justice for all” too much to hope for?

The great poet Langston Hughes asked questions of his Harlem Renaissance audience/20th-century America. “What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?” Playwright Lorraine Hansberry fleshed out an answer in her award winning play *A Raisin in the Sun*. Marvin Gaye asked “What’s going on?” in his seminal song of protest. Pulitzer Prize playwright August

Wilson snapshots a response with his *The Century Cycle* plays chronicling the stresses and struggles of 20th-century African Americans.

Gil Scott-Heron said, “The Revolution will not be televised” while the Winans sang, “It’s time, time to make a change, we are the people who can do it.”

An African American spiritual also asked questions, four to be exact:

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree? Were
you there when they pierced him in the side? Were you
there when the sun refused to shine? Sometimes it causes
me to tremble.*

This series of questions were not meant to be taken literally. The questions were meant to challenge the listener to remember. It is the kind of remembering that allows the past to reemerge with a fresh impact upon the present. It is like a form of anamnesis, a Greek word that calls the community of listeners to make what happened in the past a part of their present story. It is recalling of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and the “Do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22/ 1 Corinthians 11:23–26). It is a call to go from passive listening to active engagement.

James Cones writes in *The Cross and The Lynching Tree* that the paradox of a crucified Jesus Christ is the heart of the Christian story. It makes no rational or spiritual sense to say that hope came out of a place called Golgotha. The broken body, shed blood on a cross, and the empty tomb invert the world’s value system. The Christian story says that hope comes by way of what looks like a defeat. It says to the believer that God can make a way out of no way. It says that death and suffering do not have the last word.

When our ancestors sang, “Were you there” it helped them to remember that although there was an ancient public spectacle accompanied by torture and shame, eternal life came out of death. They were just as valuable to God as any other human being. They too were a part of the “Whosoever” (John 3:16, KJV). There was still hope in their present reality.

In our 21st-century recalling of “Were you there when...” God radically altered social, political, and religious realities on a cross and from an empty tomb, we now have an opportunity to remember again how triumph came out of tragedy. It helps us to tread the dangerous paths from passive listening to active engagement when we are faced with the present social, political, and religious realities from the horrific events in Dallas, Texas, New York City, Ferguson, Missouri, Baltimore, Maryland, Florida. *“It causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.”*

The Rev. Dr. Michael W. Waters in *Stakes Is High* is the prophetic griot who tells the stories that upset our sensibilities. He asks the hard questions that can make you uncomfortable. He opens the door exposing our political, social, and religious realities so that the reader can begin the journey from passivity to active engagement.

In the same way that our ancestors sang, “Were you there?” Waters asks were you there when Michael Brown was shot in the middle of the street? Were you there when Freddie Gray was put in the back of the police van? Were you there when Sandra Bland was put in jail or when a bikini-clad teenager was slammed to the ground? Were you there in Bible study at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church when the pastor and eight members were murdered?

It is a call to remember beyond the hashtags of social media. Waters is asking us to reflect upon what has happened in the past and make it a part of our present day activism. Whatever shape or form of activism—the streets, halls of congress, city hall or the courts, business or education, pulpit or pew—as Paulo Freire states, “Action without reflection is mere activism and reflection without action is pure verbalism.”

Waters is a part of the emerging new generation of prophetic activists. He utilizes his gifts to preach, pray, march, rally, and speak truth to power. He and his family were there when five Dallas police officers tragically lost their lives at the end of a peaceful demonstration after the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile.

STAKES IS HIGH

The embers of anger and frustration still burn brightly because you can love and hug your children in the morning not sure what will happen to them during the day. You say goodbye before school or work praying that everyone will come home alive. In America we wear violence like a loose garment that we fail to take off at the end of the day. Senseless acts of violence are unacceptable, the senseless acts of violence against unarmed men and women and against those who are sworn to protect and serve.

Stakes Is High reminds us that it is past time for a new generation of prophets to roll back the stone from the tomb of a radically divided existence to set free the gallant aspirations and noble commitments of the Declaration of Independence. It is past time for a new generation of trustees who will work to protect and preserve our right to free press, free religion, free speech, and free assembly. It's past time to "get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people's sins and become generous with the hungry and give yourselves to the down-and-out so that your lives will begin to glow in the darkness, your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight. You will rebuild ancient ruins, repair broken walls, and restore the streets. God will always show you where to go. God will give you a full life in the emptiest of places" (Isaiah 58:9–12, MSG).

Vashti Murphy McKenzie,

117th elected and consecrated bishop of
the African Methodist Episcopal Church
Dallas, Texas
December, 2016

Introduction

I have long felt that by virtue of the year and month of my birth, I occupy a unique space in time and in the history of America. I am too young to claim the '70s as the decade of my childhood, but I am young enough to have had some formative childhood experiences to transpire in the early '90s. I am technically a member of Generation X, but just by a few months. I am old enough to have been alive when President Jimmy Carter was in office, yet young enough to have no memory of his service. President Ronald Reagan was the first sitting president I knew, and the Challenger explosion is the first national tragedy of my recollection.

Consequently my experience has always been dualistic, part Generation X and part Millennial, which are vastly different experiences. Another way of conceiving this unique space in time is as a member of both the first and second generations of hip hop. It is in and through this experience that I first discerned—at the age of 11—the call to ministry.

I am a member of a family deeply rooted in faith. My great-grandmother, the Reverend Willie B. Williams, was one of the first women to be ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the State of Texas. She was also one of the first women to pastor a congregation in the state. Roberson Chapel A.M.E. Church in McGregor, Texas, was founded in my great-great-grandmother Missouri Green's home in 1905. My great-great-grandfather, the Reverend William Leake, was a circuit-riding preacher, one of four who founded Paul Quinn College in 1872, the oldest historically Black college west of the Mississippi River. My mother, the Reverend Brenda Williams Waters, and my father, the Reverend Kenneth L. Waters, Ph.D., are both ordained

ministers, my father, one of a select few Black* Americans to hold an earned doctorate in New Testament Studies.¹

My family is also filled with educators, entrepreneurs, active laypersons in God's church, artists, and the civically and socially engaged. My grandfather's participation in the Falls County NAACP once earned him a personal home visit from the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. My late grandfather, Mr. Bishop W. Williams—the greatest man I have ever known—invited the Klansman in for coffee and assured him that nothing would stop my grandfather from his pursuits of justice. In my family, faith, service, and justice have always been married together. I was inspired early in life to join and continue my family's legacy of the same in and to my own generation.

Still, while my family of origin played a significant role in shaping my understanding of mission, service, and call, as did my upbringing as part of the A.M.E. Church, a denomination birthed two centuries ago out of the struggle for racial justice in America, hip hop played an indelible role as well. Through the speakers of my Boombox and through headphones attached to my CD Discman as a youth, urban prophets ministered to me daily—their voices of lament and pain, too, crying out for justice. One particular offering that greatly shaped the lens through which I viewed society was seminal hip hop group De La Soul's 1996 offering "Stakes Is High."

On the mesmerizing title track produced by the late and legendary J Dilla (listed as Jay Dee on the song credits), De La Soul exchanges bars critiquing the state of segments of hip hop culture, especially the rampant materialism and promotion of violence that had begun to dominate commercial rap. In one particular verse, band member Dave exclaims, "I'm sick of talkin' about blunts / Sick of Versace glasses / Sick of slang / ...Sick of name brand clothes." However, it is Dave's band member Posdnuos who offers several devastating lines regarding his observations concerning the racial politics of America. Declaring that "Every word I say should be a hip hop quotable," Posdnuos cements the following laments in rhyme:

* The B in *Black* is capitalized throughout the book. For more about the decision to capitalize, see nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html?_r=0.

"I gets down like brothers are found ducking from bullets/ Gun control means using both hands in my land/ Where it's all about the cautious livin'."

"Let me tell you what it's all about/ A skin not considered equal/ A meteor has more right than my people."

"Neighborhoods are now hoods 'cause nobody's neighbors/ Just animals surviving with that animal behavior."

"Experiments when needles and skin connect/ No wonder where we live is called the projects."²

A sense of urgency is present in each line of "Stakes Is High." A pulsating beat adds to this sense of urgency as De La Soul seeks to awaken the masses from their slumber concerning critical matters of race in our nation. The chorus offers no reprieve from the urgency of the verses, just the repeated proclamation that "Stakes is high/ Y'all know them stakes is high."

Fifteen years ago, during my first year in seminary, I was introduced to a paper on theology and hip hop culture in Dr. Harold J. Recinos's *The Church in Its Social Context* course at the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. I would later offer a classroom presentation based on my engagement with the text. The total experience served to enlighten me further as to the power of hip hop culture and hip hop lyricism to inspire change and movements for justice, a topic that would inspire my doctoral dissertation a decade later at Perkins.

Fast forward 12 years from the release of the song "Stakes Is High." In the same month that President Barack Obama was elected as the first bi-racial, self-identifying Black president in American history, I was appointed by my bishop to establish the first successful African Methodist Episcopal church plant, Joy Tabernacle A.M.E. Church, in over four decades in Dallas, the nation's ninth largest city in the nation's second-fastest-growing region. I had previously been appointed to serve three historic congregations in rural, peri-urban, and urban contexts, as well as be the dean of chapel at Paul Quinn College. Yet I was excited to be a part of something new, a church that could offer a wholly

21st-century witness to the opportunities and challenges facing our nation and our community.

In 2008, much of the country was swept away with proclamations of hope. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the subsequent fighting of two wars simultaneously in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hurricane Katrina (America's worst natural disaster aided by historically and environmentally racist policies), and the Great Recession, the nation was anxious to experience hope anew. Surely the election of a Black president marked a new day in our nation, especially a nation that has experienced the pains of racial strife since its inception.

The flames of this hope, a hope built on the falsified proclamation that America was now a post-racial society, were soon diminished. During President Obama's first months in office, threats against the president increased by 400% with the United States Secret Service managing 30 potential death threats to President Obama every day.³ President Obama will end two terms in office as the most threatened president in American history.⁴

During the Obama era, the membership of hate groups in America skyrocketed, including a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. During the Obama era, the purchase of firearms exploded nationally. Throughout his presidency, President Obama and his family have been treated with contempt by both the media and by members of Congress in ways that further attest to the racial tension of this era. Numerous public officials have been forced to resign over eight years for racially-charged statements made against the Obamas, including disturbing statements made concerning their two daughters.

The years encompassing President Obama's service have also witnessed public outcries against police brutality and the frequent killing of unarmed Black women, children, and men. In the Obama era, grand juries have also frequently failed to indict police officers in these cases. In the Obama era, we have witnessed an increase in wealth disparity among the races. In the Obama era, we have witnessed massive protests in the streets and buildings set ablaze as frustrations for the absence of racial justice boiled over. In the Obama era, we witnessed the most deadly act of racial violence in generations in a massacre at a church in Charleston,

South Carolina. The Obama era witnessed the poisoning of the water supply of an impoverished American city populated mainly with African Americans.

History will undoubtedly record the years of President Barack Obama's service as racially tense and troubling years. These years have been defined largely by Black suffering and pain. As the Obama era now comes to a close, racial tensions throughout America remain high.

In fact, if the stakes were already high, they may have just become higher.

Enter Donald J. Trump, the New York-born billionaire and real estate mogul, reality television star, and now, at the time of this writing, President-Elect of the United States of America. In the wake of his election, thousands of Americans have taken to the streets in protest as President-Elect Trump has emerged from his presidential candidacy as an international symbol of hate and intolerance, one who, for many, "represents a bigoted, misogynistic worldview and an existential threat"⁵ to the security of our nation. For much of President Obama's terms in office, President-Elect Trump was one of the primary voices in America questioning President Obama's legitimacy as president by claiming that President Obama was not an American citizen, but was foreign born, baseless claims President-Elect Trump later recanted near the end of his own candidacy.

More persons voted for President-Elect Trump during the Republican presidential primaries than any other Republican primary candidate in American history.⁶ Although he lost the popular vote by over 2 million votes, his primary opponent, Secretary Hillary Clinton, conceded the election to him based upon the perceived results of votes to be cast for him in the Electoral College. As a voting bloc, "Despite reservations expressed by many evangelical and Republican leaders, white born-again/evangelical Christians cast their ballots for [Trump]...at an 81 percent to 16 percent margin over Hillary Clinton."⁷

Donald Trump ran for office under the campaign slogan "Make America Great Again." Throughout his candidacy, he offered a vivid and troubling platform for how, in his opinion, greatness would return to our nation. This platform included building a

multi-billion dollar wall to separate Mexico from America. He repeatedly stated that he would force Mexico to pay for it. His platform included banning all refugees from war-torn Muslim countries, including women and children, from entering the United States and creating a national registry for all Muslims currently residing within the nation, including those who are life-long American citizens.

Peaceful protesters at his political rallies were physically assaulted by some of Trump's most ardent supporters. Trump's own comments justified the use of violence against political opponents. In March 2016, after John McGraw, a white man, from Linden, North Carolina, was arrested on suspicion of assault and disorderly conduct for hitting a Black protester in the face at a Trump political rally in Fayetteville, North Carolina, Trump appeared on NBC's "Meet the Press." When asked whether he would pay for McGraw's legal fees, an offer he had previously made to his supporters who committed acts of violence against protesters, Trump responded, "I've actually instructed my people to look into it, yes."⁸

And although President-Elect Trump has disavowed their support, several hate groups, inspired by Trump's often equally hate-filled words, have become his most vocal supporters. As noted by the *Los Angeles Times*, "Trump's surprise rise to become the GOP presidential nominee, built largely on a willingness to openly criticize minority groups and tap into long-simmering racial divisions, has reenergized white supremacist groups and drawn them into mainstream American politics like nothing seen in decades."⁹ Just 12 days after the election, just blocks away from The White House, at a conference held in a federal building named after President Reagan, Richard B. Spencer, the head of the white nationalist group Alt-Right, stated:

*To be white is to be a striver, a crusader, an explorer and a conqueror. We build, we produce, we go upward. And we recognize the central lie of American race relations. We don't exploit other groups. We don't gain anything from their presence. They need us, and not the other way around.*¹⁰

Spencer's racist comments were met with ecstatic cheers and Nazi salutes.

Just weeks following President-Elect Trump's election, the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, which tracks hate groups nationwide, released a study noting 900 reports of harassment and intimidation in the first ten days following the election. The report stated, "Many harassers invoked Trump's name during assaults, making it clear that the outbreak of hate stemmed in large part from his electoral success."¹¹ Social media are now filled with videos of incidents from Starbucks to Delta Airlines with Trump supporters berating fellow Americans and telling them to leave their country. Video recorded at a middle school lunchroom in Royal Oak, Michigan, and at a high school volleyball tournament in Archer City near the Texas – Mexico border featured students yelling "Build that wall!" in the presence of their Latino peers. Safety concerns amid this our nation's increasingly hostile racial climate have also led to an explosion in firearms purchases as sales have quadrupled in Black and minority communities since the election. Black gun groups have also noted that attendance at their meetings has doubled.¹²

If America's first few weeks with President-Elect Trump are any sign of the years to come, there is cause for great concern.

As tragic events unfolded in recent years across our nation, I personally found myself occupying another unique time and space as a young pastor given an international platform to speak out concerning these issues. Provided the opportunity during this particularly challenging season to be a contributor to *The Huffington Post*, my observations on race and America have quite frequently been published on the front page. With my pen, or rather, with my keyboard, I have sought to speak out with the same urgency as De La Soul two decades before, proclaiming to all who would read and hear that when it comes to the racial politics of our nation, the stakes are *still* high!

Humbly, my observations found an audience. They have been read and shared by tens of thousands of people in America and abroad. These writings have been engaged in college classrooms and small groups in congregations, read on air, included in essential reading

syllabi with other commentaries on social matters, and cited in sermons and academic research. Most touchingly, these writings have reached the persons most intimately impacted by many of the tragic and racially-charged events of this era: the families of the victims.

In this offering, I present a lightly edited compilation of some of my most engaged works covering this critical period of history. These works are assembled in sections related thematically to overarching concerns. The section “On Martyrs and Ancestors” speaks about the martyrs whose blood has watered our new movement for justice and on the ancestors recently departed, from whose strength we continue to glean strength. “On Battlegrounds of Justice” speaks of the new capitals in the struggle, spaces and places where the fight for racial justice prominently rages on. “On Struggle and Strongholds” addresses the ongoing presence of systemic issues of racism and situates our present struggle as part of this historical narrative. “On Hope and Determination” offers a way forward, prophetically laying claim to victory while still in the struggle.

As an introduction to the works in each section, I include a reflection on an occasion of my personal engagement with the theme as a pastor. I attest that faith without praxis is dead. Therefore, I offer ways in which I have sought to live out my faith for the cause of justice.

This remains a critical hour for our nation. It is important to note that, even at the time of this printing, several of the cases of brutality and injustice contained within these pages remain unresolved. It is my hope that you will be inspired to learn more about the historical and present-day tragedies contained herein. On matters of race and justice in America, the stakes are exceedingly high. We urgently need a new generation of prophets in this space and in this time who are unafraid to speak truth to power and to commit themselves to working toward the liberation of all God’s people.

The late 20th-century urban prophet Tupac Amaru Skakur once said, “I’m not saying I’m going to rule the world or change the world, but I guarantee that I will spark the brain that will change

the world." I join with Tupac in similar refrain. As you engage my voice and the voices of others in these pages, you may find your own, and then go forth to change the world. At minimum, I pray that you are compelled to make a statement for justice and to work toward the same in whatever time and space you occupy.

For the future of our nation and our world, stakes is high!

Michael W. Waters

Dallas, Texas, November, 2016

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On Martyrs and Ancestors

She entered my office one Sunday afternoon after worship, an extra large manila folder tucked under her arms. The pages in the folder were as liquid brimming at the edge of its container. All that kept the pages from covering the floor was her sure, tight grasp.

I had not known of her before she called and left a message at the church earlier in the week. Presently residing in New York City, she was a long way from home in Dallas, Texas. In her voicemail, she mentioned that she had come across several of my writings, and she was compelled to come and speak to me in person.

The folder contained files concerning the death of her college-aged daughter. She died in police custody while matriculating at a Texas junior college. The authorities claimed that her daughter may have overdosed on drugs and succumbed to them while in their custody. Her mother informed me that her daughter had struggled with depression since the tragic death of her older brother several months before, yet she could not accept her daughter's death as reported.

The facts just did not add up. Her daughter's autopsy report revealed bruises and contusions on her upper and lower torso, on her face, and on many other parts of her body. The cause of these injuries had not been explained. Additionally, video footage of her daughter's final moments in custody had not been released despite multiple requests. She believed the authorities were hiding something.

She then opened her massive files to remove a single sheet of paper. It was a picture of her daughter. Looking me intently in my eyes, she asked me whether I could help her tell her daughter's story.

Two years later, she left me another message at the church. She was about to return to Texas. This time, she was not coming

alone. She had organized a nationwide gathering of mothers and sisters who had lost their children and their siblings to police brutality. After a few days of organizing and demonstrating in the area, these women desired to hold a “speak out” where they could share in community their stories of sorrow and overcoming.

Unfortunately, their attempts to reach out to older, more established churches in the city had been met with resistance. She wanted to know whether our young church would open its doors to them. Without hesitation, I said, “Yes.”

One Saturday evening, I stood at the main entrance of the church as the women arrived. In many of their faces I saw looking back at me the face of my own mother. They all squeezed me tightly in their embrace as only a mother can. Most uncomfortably, they called me their hero, noting ours as the only church that was willing to open its doors to them.

Honestly, I did not feel as if I had any choice in the matter. Is this not the purpose of the church, to open its doors to the afflicted, to provide them a space to find peace and comfort in the presence of God? Our opening of a door was incomparable to all they had done and experienced. If there were any heroes present, it clearly was them.

As the program began, I was asked if I intended to offer any words. I declined. My purpose that night was to listen and bear witness to what was spoken.

One by one, these courageous women stood and spoke of loved ones lost to police brutality. They spoke of delays and denials in receiving records from the authorities. They spoke of grand juries failing to indict. They spoke of final conversations held and of dreams left unfulfilled. They even spoke of loved ones calling out for them in their dreams. For these mothers, these dreams had become nightmares.

Somehow, they also spoke of the power to forgive.

Amid their gathering, one particular statement reverberated above the others, something these women wanted to make unmistakably clear. They wanted the world to know that their loved ones were much more than mere hashtags on Twitter. They

were real people with real hopes and real ambitions who suffered unconscionable pain before their demise, whose absence left a gaping hole in the hearts of all who love them. And for them, their loved ones had still received no justice.

After a repast later that evening, another mother entered my office. She too held in her arms a folder overflowing with papers. She said, "I guess you can handle this. This is the most important thing that I keep in my possession."

She opened the folder to reveal pictures of a corpse. She carefully pointed to the bruises that covered the body. She pointed to a throat that had been crushed under a knee. She pointed to a botched autopsy effort and revealed that she had to order a second, independent autopsy. The only thing that brought her comfort was her belief that her son had not suffered long. She believed that God had reached down and taken her son quickly to heaven as his broken body rested upon the cold pavement.

I nodded my head and smiled. Inside, I was unconvinced. His looked like a brutal, agonizing, and lonely death. I was angry that far too many Black bodies for far too long have met this tragic and unnecessary end. Had there truly been no way to apprehend this unarmed young man of slight frame on that bridge than to crush him under the weight of many officers?

At times, the mantle of ministry mandates that you both see and hear difficult things. Prophetic ministry then requires that you speak out concerning what you have witnessed. Always, the mantle of ministry requires courage.

The young college-aged woman's name was Ahjah Dixon. She was 23 years old. She died March 4, 2010, while in police custody in Corsicana, Texas, jail. Say her name. Continue to say her name "until justice flows like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24, paraphrased).

Only then shall we have no need to speak such names any more.