



Rev. Tami Forte Logan CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

A Black woman pastor provoking justice



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

"Provoking justice." This is a thread and theme running through the unique ministry of Rev. Tami Forte Logan, missioner with "Faith 4 Justice Asheville" (F4J). She has facilitated F4J since 2016, working closely with representatives of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) church as well as leaders of Baptist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, UCC, Unitarian Universalist and Jewish congregations along with a handful of non-profit organizations.

An ordained elder in the AMEZ Church, Tami also serves as the pastor of a small congregation in Old Fort. She comes from a Baptist background but graduated from the AMEZ's Hood Theological Seminary in Salisbury. She finds inspiration in the historic black tradition where identifying as "liberators" is centered in a church that stands as a "resource to do the work of justice."

We met at Hopkins Chapel AMEZ in Asheville to discuss her ministry and vision (Hopkins Chapel celebrated their 150th year in 2018). She explained there are many women pastors in the AMEZ and one female bishop. It is Tami's belief that tradition is important and should be respected but sometimes she doesn't "feel traditional." The "justice lens" is central and critical to her faith as well as the religious traditions that emerged from the black experience of chattel slavery.

The AME Zion Church was founded in New York City in the 1790s when black members of a predominantly white Methodist church chose to form their own congregation ("Zion" was added in 1848). As a Northern denomination, AMEZ became known as a "Freedom Church," with members who included Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass.

Asked what justice means to her, Tami was ready with a direct and concise response. Recognizing its importance in biblical teaching, justice means "no one has too much or too little—you have what you need." It is focused on "access; equity; balance" and every person has the "same opportunities."

Actions by F4J include attendance and participation at city council and other government meetings as well as public forums and press conferences while addressing racial equity in congregations. They wrestle with the "deep systemic racial issues" in Asheville, seeking to expose the "root causes" of inequity and injustice.

The central "root cause," as Tami sees it, is white supremacy. "We don't want to talk about it, but we have to," she explains. When I brought up patriarchy as another factor, she agreed this needs to be faced directly. She believes that "until we see white supremacy as an idol" that not only "distorts the gospel" but is "killing the church," we (especially the church) won't

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really practice justice, or love.

Tami has built relationships with all kinds of people across ethnic and religious boundaries. Faith for Justice has enjoyed the participation of many faith leaders including rabbis Meiri and Goldstein. She is clear that this is a collaborative endeavor we all must engage, yet must be led by "black- and brown-bodied people." Those who are most impacted need to lead."

I've found that the more I read great minds like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, the greater my appreciation for both the physical and mental strength required to "do justice," especially for those who live with inequalities every day.

As Tami describes it, Christians need to "embrace the paradox" that not every Christian is a "follower of Jesus." This becomes extremely obvious with an honest look at our history of racial oppression. Tami offered a provocative question: "Is a person's white identity more important than their faith?"

Her vision for the future — what she would like to see in our community concerning racial justice — is to the point: "The most you can do is YOU." She explained, "To repair the problem, start with yourself, do the inner work." Then, she believes, a person can "integrate the ways of Sojourner and Douglass in our lives."

Tami is positive and trusting, believing that "transformation is possible." She holds great hope that "shifting the culture of churches" can and will happen. In fact, she is encouraged by what she is already seeing in F4J: "It's incredibly healing to hear what people are doing," altering the language and liturgy in services, and getting more involved in the realities of black and brown experience.

"Just be in the room," is one primary action of F4J. Members show up in public meetings and events "to show we're paying attention, we're watching." She thinks this not only helps "create calm," when threatened communities feel alone, but, in religious language, it is the "presence of the holy." Tami believes this helps people "see more of the kingdom outside the church [or other religious institution]."

For Tami, collaborating for justice provokes a fundamental practice of being human: love for all people.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.