

Life after evangelicalism

For those who are struggling, who have come to that realization they can no longer value one race over another, for those who ache with the poison of complicity, we have a faith of repentance and forgiveness.

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I stood before the sea of black faces and preached. My heart burst in gratitude for the people who had come for miles, on foot, to see the awkward white Bible school students. I waited every few moments for the interpretation of my words, and watched how they fell on the crowd. I had never expected to preach, as a woman with a Southern Baptist background. And yet, I often found myself in pulpits in Kenya and Uganda.

As beautiful and life-changing as that experience was, I felt increasingly uncomfortable each time I got up. As an evangelical woman, when I had a stirring call to ministry, I decided to become a missionary, because that's what evangelical women with a call to ministry do. I enrolled in a degree program in International Ministries and headed off to east Africa for my internship.

It was a beautiful time. I sang and danced. I learned how to cook flat bread over a fire. I discovered how to use my skirt as a baby-carrier and a picnic blanket. I found out how to roll a piece of cloth like a wreath, so that a water jug would stay balanced on my head. I tried (and usually failed) to carry water from the wells to the cooking huts. And, I learned to preach.

Though I never felt so alive in my calling, I also sensed a growing discomfort. It was like a splinter had pierced my skin, and became infected. This tiny bothersome

intrusion soon oozed with puss and poisoned my whole body. It wouldn't let me rest. As I stood in the pulpit, watching my interpreter, the wise black man who led me from church to church, I could no longer ignore the sepsis.

I would preach in Africa. My words would be welcome there, even though I was representing a Bible School. Yet, when I got back to the United States, I would not be allowed to climb into the pulpit. I could not ignore the truth of it any longer: I could minister in Africa, but I could not minister in the United States. **I could preach to black men, but I could not preach to white men.** The evangelical hierarchy became all too clear. My tradition was not only sexist; it was also racist. I was complicit.

I changed after that trip. I knew that I needed to preach, and I could no longer be in a church that de-valued black men and women. I needed to be in a faith tradition where they affirmed the promise that in Jesus Christ, there would be no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. I needed to be in a church where the fire of Pentecost burned through the barriers of language, ethnicity, race, and gender. I had to live into the fullness of my calling.

It has been a long time since that trip to east Africa, when I was welcomed into the pulpit, even as I supported the theological subjugation of that temporary congregation. I've remembered it, as our nation heals from the violence and turmoil of torch-carrying White Supremacists waving Nazi and Confederate flags on our college campuses. We denounce the hatred that lifts up one race over another. We affirm our commitment to diversity. We brace ourselves against the invasion of more Nazi, KKK, and White supremacist rallies in our country.

In contrast, Donald Trump indicated that Nazis and those who oppose them are on equal moral standing. Since then, [CEOs](#), [Republicans](#), and [military](#) officials have all denounced Trump's stance. Yet, [white evangelicals](#) have remained Trump's strong base of support.

The voice of diversity will drown out the hatred. Light will overcome the darkness. The Nazis and White Supremacists will not win. And, I do not know how white evangelicals will survive this massive moral failing. They will always be known as the ones who [surrounded the president](#) and [defended him](#), as Trump turned against the voice and cry of his own people.

Yet, many Evangelicals do not appreciate Trump. For those who are struggling, who have come to that realization they can no longer value one race over another, for those who ache with the poison of complicity, we can rebuild this. We have a faith of repentance and forgiveness. We can denounce the mess of our racism and our systemic oppression, and we can take concrete steps to lift up the voices of those who have been silenced—stop the gerrymandering, poll intimidation, and mass incarceration.

I knew, after I stepped off that pulpit, that I could no longer be a part of my tradition. Yet, there is life even after our faith communities have let us down, especially when we recognize our own complicity and commit to rebuild.