

Rev. Leah Burns, (pronouns are she, her, hers) serves as Associate Pastor at historic Second United Methodist Church in Knoxville. This church was established in 1868 and early in its history became known as the "Red Cross Church" – a nickname that it retains today. Rev. Burns also chairs the Board of Directors of the UTK Wesley Foundation; is a founding member of the East Knoxville Freedom Schools planning committee; on the board of the Mechanicsville Community Association; on the board of Wesley House Community Center; on the Greater Knoxville Martin Luther King Annual Commemoration planning committee; as a member of the Knoxville F.A.I.T.H. Coalition (supporting the healing and prevention of HIV/AIDS); as member of the Tennessee Valley District Conversations on Race Planning Team; and in other Knoxville community organizations. In the Holston Conference and Tennessee Valley District, she heads the District Ethnic Local Church Concerns Committee; is a member of the Holston Conference the Clergy Sexual Ethics Task Force, a member of the Holston Conference COSROW, she's the facilitator of the District's City Missional Hub and she is a member of the Holston UMC-Next organizing team.

The list of Rev. Burns's pastoral appointments include:

- Second UMC, Associate Pastor (3 years)
- Church Street UMC, part-time Associate Pastor (1 year)
- Haven Chapel UMC, part-time Pastor (6 years)

Rev. Burns is a Local Pastor, completing the Course of Study for local pastors through Candler. Pastoral ministry is her second career, previously having held various executive level positions in both the corporate and nonprofit sectors. She received her undergraduate degree in International Relations with a minor in Spanish and French from Beloit College. Her college education and career choices have taken her to live in 10 states and abroad to several countries prior to moving to Knoxville in 2004.

Rev. Burns was raised in Shaker Heights, Ohio, a predominantly white suburb of Cleveland, Ohio where she was one of a handful of black children in her school and neighborhood growing up at that time. In childhood and as an adult, it was clear she was different and why. And if by chance she were to forget why, something would be said or there would be a situation that would remind her of this. But her parents, grandparents, teachers, and one particular pastor helped her to notice and not be afraid to name racism and discrimination, and just as importantly, to see beyond it. She comes from a background of strength, determination and strong faith from her family, she is not afraid of or deterred by barriers or challenges.

Rev. Burns is a faith-rooted activist...in ministry seeking justice and inclusion so that the United Methodist Church can live into its pronouncements in the Book of Discipline to be inclusive, multiracial and multicultural. A description of the inclusive church is found in Revelation 7:9 where St. John the Apostle said: "I saw many people. No one could tell how many there were. They were from every nation and

from every family and from every kind of people and from every language..." Rev. Burns seeks to help people to live into this vision where everyone...black, white, yellow and brown; male and female; young and old; from every place of origin, family, tribe, tongue and nation – all present together before the throne and before the Lamb in worship and in life. And we are to be God's hands and feet in building God's kingdom here on earth.

Rev. Burns seeks to cultivate racial literacy in churches and in the community bringing people together from disparate back to foster new relationships. She does this by creating tools and leading workshops, seminars, book studies, discussions, and Bible studies. She has developed resources in each the four dimensions of racism: Internalized racism, Interpersonal racism, Institutional racism, and Systemic racism (based on Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation). Some examples of her workshops include:

- The Illusion of Race Workshop Series – designed to uncover our implicit biases and microaggressions, (Individual Racism),
- The Trauma of Racism Workshop – developed in the aftermath of Charlottesville as a way of dealing with the trauma that so many experienced, (Internalized and Interpersonal Racism),
- Methodism in Black and White – a 2-day workshop for the 50-year anniversary of the UMC to foster a broader, more fully informed conversation about our UMC history and the implications for racial justice and reconciliation (Systemic and Institutional Racism),
- Understanding Stubborn School Segregation – a discussion on why this matters for our UMC churches, (Institutional Racism),
- Conversations on Race for College Campuses – series of discussion done at the Wesley Foundation with students to discuss various issues related to race, (Interpersonal Racism),
- Book discussions on White Fragility by Robin DiAngelo; The Cross and the Lynching Tree by James Cone; White Rage, by Carol Anderson; White Awake by Daniel Hill; and others.

In addition to her anti-racism, racial reconciliation work, Rev. Burns is a member of the Holston UMC-Next task force of clergy and laity working to mobilize those who reject the Traditional Plan adopted in the UMC Special Session of 2019. She participated in the UMC-Next Conference in Leawood, Kansas, with 600+ United Methodists from every conference across the US who reject the Traditional Plan as incompatible with the teachings Jesus Christ and seek to work on next steps for the UM church. Outcomes from the UMC-Next Conference included adoption of four core principles and the identification of three potential plans for the future. Details can be found on the UMC-Next website: <https://www.umcnextholston.com/>

Since the UMC-Next meeting last May, the Holston UMC-Next group has been working on several goals:

1. to help elect delegates from Holston to the General Conference and the Jurisdictional Conference next year who support an inclusive vision for the United Methodist Church,
2. to share the UMC-Next outcomes broadly throughout our Conference and lead conversations and discussions with clergy and laity on next steps, and
3. to build a strong network of people across the Holston Annual Conference to communicate and connect with one another to resist the implementation of the Traditional Plan.

Rev. Burns reports that the UMC-Next experience was reflective of Revelation 7:9 in its diversity. There was racial and ethnic diversity, LGBTQTIA+ presence, women, men, diversity of age and ability, and so much more. What a great expression of what it means to BE the Church. At that gathering...**all really means all.**

Biblical Perspective...

A quote from DeRay Mckesson from his book *The Other Side of Freedom* frames my thinking for the work we are going to do together:

"In each generation there is a moment when young and old, inspired or disillusioned come together around a shared hope, imagine the world as it can be, and have the opportunity to bring that world into existence. Our moment is now."

It's about a shared hope...to imagine the world as it can be...that we have the opportunity to do something to bring this into existence and our moment to do that is now.

Prophetic work should encourage and empower people to work to change the social order. It requires a couple of things: 1) a heart that breaks with the things that break God's heart; 2) a passion for justice; 3) imagination and the courage to speak words from God; 3) humility and a strong reliance on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. So, the question is: Where is the prophetic voice of today?

In his book *"Where Have All the Prophets Gone?"* Reverend Marvin McMickle takes American pastors to task, suggesting that many have sold out the God of biblical justice for something less...the prophetic voices of the pulpit are silent. He uses this quote from Garrison Keillor to make the point: *"God was saying to me, "witness to this," and "reveal the truth about this," and "be a prophet." And I said, No, thank you. I don't want it!" [God] said, "This will be a great service to people you love, to tell them the truth. "And I said, "They're not going to thank me for it. I know that for sure. People hurt prophets. They throw sharp things at them. ...I don't want that. I don't want any pain whatsoever. Many pastors today don't want that either...and avoid prophetic witness. The connection with God, with God's world, and with God's people is lost. How might we regain that connection?"*

I'd suggest we explore this using the testimony of the Hebrew prophet Amos in the Old Testament book of Amos, chapter 7. This is a counter cultural testimony that challenges the status quo of that time. He names what is not of God in the world, juxtaposed with the hope of what God will bring to pass in the future...a hope for a new day and the promise of liberation to God's oppressed people. Amos says "I am no prophet, nor the son of a prophet. Rather I am just a herdsman...one who treats the sycamore figs. YHWH took me from following the flock and told me to go and prophesy to the people of Israel. And so, here I am" (Amos 7:14-15). Amos is tough; Amos is blunt; Amos said things that no one wanted to hear 2800 years ago...things no one much wants to hear today either. And yet Amos proceeds to prophecy.

Also, I'd suggest we explore the prophetic witness of Jesus in the New Testament...and example of which for me is Matthew chapter 14:22-33. It gives an exciting example of the prophetic witness of Jesus that is radical, boundary-breaking, world-upending and anything but optional. Here Jesus tells the disciples (paraphrased): "go on over to the other side of the sea and I will meet you there. He said leave this place over here of comfort and privilege, where you are known and loved and feel safe. He says now team, you get in the boat, you go on across

to the other side. And he says to them yes, I know you really don't want to go there, but go on anyway...go on ahead, and I will meet you over there." So, Jesus **made** them get into the boat and go on across to the other side...because there was teaching and healing and Kingdom work to be done over on the other side.

Using these two lessons would make for good discussion of what we are called to do – to bring the healing and good news to those "others" who are marginalized. It speaks to how unpopular it is to do (Amos) and how reluctant we are actually to do the work Jesus required (Matthew).

While discussing all of this, it is good to lift up and always keep before us the vision of an inclusive church – written by St. John, the Apostle, in Revelation 7:9. Our call is to be God's hands and feet to bring about the kingdom here on earth where everyone...black, white, yellow and brown; male and female; young and old; from every place of origin, family, tribe, tongue and nation can be present together before the throne and before the Lamb. Getting unlikely, maybe even unwilling partners to be in the presence of people that are unacknowledged and not understood is the work. How might we model inclusive thinking and living, ways of seeing and hearing with the eyes of Christ?

The discussion is about what is just and what is unjust in the local communities in which we find ourselves; it's about bringing God's Word to bear on key events and at crisis moments in the life of the church and the world. It's about preaching toward the liberation of God and the upending of powers and principalities, bringing about peace and equality and justice for all.

Potential discussion starter questions come to mind (I'm certain we can come up with others):

1. In what ways does the need for justice influence the direction of your life and your ministry?
2. What factors might people use to discredit or disqualify us from our call?
3. Let's think together as a class (or group) about ways in which we can preach and teach inclusiveness, ways we might model inclusive thinking and living, ways of seeing and hearing with the eyes of Christ.
4. A phrase I came away from the UMC-Next Conference with was –"All Means All". What does that mean to you?

In closing, our moment is now for us to be where the people are, to listen and to bring shalom, wholeness and peace in our churches and with the people who are not in our churches. This life-giving work, Jesus invites us to walk the line between comfort and challenge, to lean into discernment and to continue to go deeper with Him, with ourselves. The world feels frantic and messy and broken, but we know that God uses our efforts to do beautiful things.

There is a wonderful hymn with wonderful words that brings this home. It's entitled "*Now Is The Time*" by Dr. Eli Wilson Jr., and might be sung at some point during our time together. Some of the words are:

Now is the time to let the whole world know

Love conquers hate, love for the human race...
Use my hands,
Use my feet,
Use my voice that I might speak
To the world...