JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Dr. Jamie Washington

Interviewed by Cana Scott

March 11, 2022
Interviewee: Dr. Jamie Washington (DW)

Interviewer: Cana Scott (CS)

Subject: Life of Dr. Jamie Washington

Date: March 11, 2022

CS: Could you tell me what is your favorite memory from when you were younger?

DW: So, interesting. I’ve got a lot of great memories from when I was younger. But the first thing that popped in my head when you said “The favorite memory from when I was younger”, was when I came downstairs on Christmas morning and found and emenee chord organ. It was probably the beginning of my moving into myself as a musician.

CS: Had you ever played before?

DW: I had not – I don’t think I had played before. I must have been playing around on the piano or something at church. And I might have been playing around at the piano at my grandparents’ house, but I don’t remember that. I don’t remember doing that. I do remember getting the organ. That was 5 or 6. So, I must have been doing something that would give my parents an indication that that would be something that I would want. But I don’t remember doing something before that. And I actually have never talked to them about that.

CS: Did you use it often?

DW: Oh, I used it all the time and it’s been my whole life! So, playing piano and organ and music, particularly gospel music, has been my whole life.

CS: You said that was like the origin of you loving music or do you think it started a little bit earlier?

DW: So, it might have started earlier? Again, as I say I think it must have started earlier for them to see that that was the direction that I
was headed in. I do remember singing my first solo in church at age 6 or 7. So, it was some time in that time that I went between my singing and my getting the chord organ that music kind of just started.

CS: What did you enjoy more, singing or playing the piano or the organ?

DW: I think I enjoy singing more. But playing piano is a very, very, very close second! It’s not even a second. It’s probably like a 1.2.

CS: Could you tell me more about the community that you grew up in?

DW: Sure! So, for most of – so, for all of my childhood between before I went off to college at age 18, I grew up in working class poor black communities in inner city North Philadelphia. And I lived in two of those. One was – I was just talking about this with a conference attendee. One was in one part of North Philadelphia at 27th and Thompson Street. And the other was – 2714 Thompson Street area was more poor. The 24th and Allegheny was more working class. So, I lived in two homes from the time I was born until the time I went off to college. The first home was rented. The second home my parents were purchasing. The cost of that home was $12,000.00. And we had a mortgage. Not more than $15,000.00 I think is what we paid for it.

My mother worked in a hospital in the kitchen as a dietician. My dad had various construction jobs and sanitation work until he made transition when I was 21. But the communities were close connected. I did not feel unsafe in my communities, it’s communities that people would have said don’t go into after dark or be careful where you go and all that kind of stuff. Then my mom and my sisters after I went off to college and my father died, then they moved a block away from the house that I grew up in. So, until I was 10, I lived in one place and then until I was 18, I lived in the other place. And then my sisters and my mom moved to a third place that was within a block of the second place. And that’s the home that remains the family home now. So, my sister continues to live in that space where my mom lived until she died. 42 years it’s been the family house.

The other place I think is significant in this is I would say that I also lived at my grandparents’ house in Conway/Bucksport, South Carolina. 30-25 minutes from Myrtle Beach. From the time that I was as young, as I can remember, 7 or 8, once school closed for the year, we got on the Trailways bus and were shipped to my
grandparents’ house and we stayed there for the summers until school reopened. So, I talk about my formative years – my social time outside of the time I was going to school – I was in the South. Right?

So having no school time feels like I lived in two places. That I was socialized in two places because the Philadelphia time was school time as well. But the South Carolina time was just being time with family, community. So actually, it wasn’t until I was 16 which was when I got a summer job. And then I stayed in Philly for the summer, but went to South Carolina for like a week to visit. So, my southern roots are very much a part of who I am as well.

CS: Do you think that you were a different person when you were in Philly versus when you were in South Carolina?

DW: At some levels I would say I was. The narrative that I carried as I went down south was, we were better because we were from the north. And some of that unspoken was because we were more racially advanced. So, I would go down South and I would make fun of my cousin’s accents. Southern accents. And, I would also try to mimic them. And I had them be less intelligent. Even to this day when I hear people speaking with southern accents, I have to move myself through hearing their accent to listen to their brilliance. Right?

Because that narrative of Southern accent not being as sophisticated or as smart is still one that’s very real. I know differently now but the old tape still comes up. We would go down South with our city clothes, our city music, our city dances. Always feeling like we was going to come down and show the country bumpkins how to live. And we had to navigate race differently in the ’60s and the ‘70s down there than I did in North Philadelphia.

CS: Can you talk about that race navigation?

DW: I didn’t have a lot of experience with white folks up in the North outside of teachers in the school. My communities were all black. Right? Down South we went to an all-black church, we hung out at family spaces, and so on and so forth that was largely black. There were white people who lived near and owned the things. So, the store, the local store was owned by white people. And there was a way we had to behave when we went to the store, what we could ask for, how we needed to behave.
And while my grandparents knew those folks well, there was still all the respectability politics. Right? So, we had to show up like Sherman and Elizabeth would want us to and expect us to. And then there was a white church that was right across the street from where my grandparents were. Black people didn’t go in there except those who were the cleaners. But I didn’t know that, so I went in. And I went in and saw a beautiful piano. And I went and played it. And there were some white folks in the church that didn’t say anything to me, but immediately got word to my grandmother that I had come into this space that I should not have gone into without being invited, and that I had touched the white piano.

My grandmother literally came home from the beach where she was a domestic and scolded me greatly. Because in her I should have known not to go into that space. Like that wasn’t a conversation she felt like she should have had to have with me. But black children down there probably would have known not to do that. I didn’t but I learned! Very quickly. I always had some judgement around that. I remember having some judgement and some attitude about that being backwards and that being wrong but then, it was the South. So, they were just slower to come along and understand that that’s not who we are anymore. And so that’s what I attributed it all to and because of that attribution was not able to see the systemic racism that was impacting my life every day.

CS: So how would you define, not just related to your childhood, but how would you define blackness in general?

DW: How would I define blackness? If I were to be writing a definition of blackness, I would be writing it as: complex and not monolithic. Beautiful and harmed. Brilliant and not trusting of its brilliance. Resilient, multifaceted, complex and evolving.

CS: Ok. So, I assume since you were talking about going to church when you were younger that you grew up in the church?

DW: I did! I tell folks I’ve been in the church all my life. I think I knew I was Christian before I knew I was black. So, I literally think I was born, I went to church, and I found out I was black at church.

CS: Can you talk a bit more about that?

DW: We simply were black. We didn’t talk about being black. But the church was something big. There was discussion about that. So, we went to Bible study or Vacation Bible School. We were going to
church every Sunday. That wasn’t even a question. That wasn’t a thing. So much that it wasn’t until I was in my 30s when I had something that I had a professional meeting that I needed to do on a Sunday morning. It was something that I really had to do because of the elected position that I had just gotten. And so, I had lunch at a lunch meeting with my colleagues from the professional association on a Sunday afternoon – Sunday morning. And I literally remember looking around the room and pausing, saying, “Oh this is what people do who don’t go to church.” While I knew that everybody didn’t go to church on Sunday – I mean like I knew that at a cognitive level. I just had no clue. Well, “what you doing? Like what they going be doing if they’re not in church?”

As we talk about my growing up in church, very much – the Christian church – very much a part of my DNA as I have experienced it. So, I really don’t know life without church. And it means something different to me today than it did when I was growing up. But there is a Sunday morning rhythm that I have. And a part of that Sunday morning rhythm is being in service in some way. And when I’m not it doesn’t completely discombobulate me today as it might have some years ago but I lose – I can’t figure out what day it is cause Sunday is the anchor. And church is that. And if I haven’t done that then what’s today? [Laughter] I didn’t get – I don’t know. Is it Wednesday?

CS: [Jokingly] Today is Friday! No, I get that. I hear that definitely. But could you talk a bit more about what your Sunday morning rhythm feels like now?

DW: As we talk about now there’s the COVID-19 now in that we are not getting up, getting dressed, getting coffee, getting in the car, driving, being in the space and in community with people, navigating the week-to-week dynamics of life of the people that we’re in community with both the highs and the lows. And then, finding our way from that space to what’s a grounding and preparation for the week. And that can look like fellowship with those who were with us in the space and having dinner, or going out for a drink, or musing over the sermon, or talking about the music that the choir did that day or whatever. So, from that space or to grocery store preparing for the week and then Sunday dinner is kind of the rhythm.

But that rhythm starts with being in community, in worship, and celebration, and grounding in church. Right? What that looks like today is in the context of COVID is still that getting up, getting coffee, getting ready and getting in the virtual space. Right? Cause
we are still in a virtual space. And spending that time there but there is no community time. And so now following the worship/virtual worship experience, it’s the settling in and there might be a meeting with church leadership or something after that. But then it’s the preparation for the week and it's the grocery store and it’s the preparing of a Sunday dinner. There’s still some talking about the sermon or the music or continuation of that but that’s just within the house. Right? So that was a community thing before. Other members of the church or ministers or whatever but now that’s much more – it happens but in a very different way. A smaller way. Yeah. So that’s what that rhythm is like.

CS: At what point did you start to feel like a more personal spiritual connection and you started to identify saying I am a Christian?

DW: I think I would say like there was a conversion experience at age 16. And what that means for me in the context of Protestant Christianity is that there is an acknowledgement of a Higher Power. In the context of my 16-year-old self, it was Jesus Christ as Lord. Accepting Jesus into my life, changing me, and stopping me from doing the things that were counter to what the Bible – what I was taught the Bible said. So, for example when I was 16, I smoked cigarettes. Not really knowing how to smoke a whole lot. I was just being cool. But after going to this street meeting, I threw the cigarettes. I still see myself throwing those cigarettes down the sewer, right? And from that point on trying to live the life of holiness.

By this time though, the other piece that was a part of the conversion was that I was no longer going to be gay. I’m not going to be gay no more. Because that’s not, that’s against the will of God according to what I was being taught at that time. So now I hadn’t talked about being gay in a whole lot of places. It was just a few of us who knew that and I was very clear that that was my truth. And in my first 12 years, 12-13 years of life, me and God was cool. So I wasn’t in religious spaces that told me that God had any specific problem with me being gay. I just wasn’t in any spaces that told me God was glad I was gay. And knew it, right? So, the absence of an affirming message was a message. Right?

And then by the time I was 13 and 14, or particularly 14, I had moved into a community in my high school with the gospel choir where I spent more time in more conservative and fundamental spaces that clearly said God is not ok with that. And so, my 14- and 15-year-old year, 16, was me navigating this tension of living in sin. And so, by the time I had got clear that I want to live for the
Lord, I was at a street meeting, Deliverance Temple, an Evangelical temple in Philadelphia. I was in a street meeting and I was going to be delivered from smoking, and homosexuality, and lying, and cheating, and all other kind of stuff that I really didn’t do because I was the best little boy in the world. Because I was a good kid.

I went to school. I went to church. I did all the right things. I tried to act like I was smoking to be cool but that was really so that I could see this little boy that had this really big afro that was really cute. And because he smoked, I was smoking with him so that’s the truth of it. I didn’t really smoke! [Laughs] But I threw all that away so that I could be acceptable to God. I was letting all that go so that I could be acceptable to God. And so, that was the first time that I was seeking deliverance. It didn’t really go—being gay didn’t really go away. It just kind of went and hid out in my toes or something so it was still in my body, but I wasn’t really acting on nothing. So, the desires that I had for other male bodied cis folks, cis male. Language I have today that I didn’t have then, but it was clearly a thing.

And I knew it, but I was too resistant. It was sin. It was my sin nature that was bringing that up. Right! So, I had— all I have to do is resist it and get a girlfriend and then I will be able to live as God would have me live. Right? So, none of that worked. [Laughs] None of that worked! None of that was real! It was just again the hetero-normative propaganda that we were taught in the church. Right? So, when I was 17 or so, I went before another Pentecostal church space and I really now—Lord, I need you to take this away! I mean it’s got to go! Right? The fact that I still have this desire is wrong because I’m sincere. I can’t be no more sincere in my love for you and my desire to live right. There’s no possibility for me. It was in the days when we actually had actual Bibles. And my Bible’s got red markers or highlighted everywhere. I’m reading. I’m studying the word.

I went to high school and people would see me in high school. I was carrying my books and my Bible as I walked down the hall. Folks referred to me—I was so holy. I was so heavenly bound I was no earthly good! People would say, “Hi Jamie. How are you?” “Praise the lord. How are you? Praise the lord. God is good. God bless you. Do you know the Lord and the pardon of your sins?” That’s who I was. I was that kid in high school and I was desperately seeking to live right. So, I went through my conversion. I refer to it as my conversion experience from 17 to 18 and a half that was the experience. And then one summer night
Ronald with an afro – again afros were big for me back then. I couldn’t really grow one [Laughs] but I was really into cute little boys with big afros. Anyway, he said hello to me one night and kissed me.

This was in my converted from homosexuality space. [Laughs] It was in the fight. I was actively fighting, resisting. After Ronald kissed me, I just let it go. I was like well, “This is just going to have to be my sin cause I can’t let this go. I can’t!” So, then I used the scriptures to justify my space which was – I would say “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God”. And so, this is just my sin. Again, I had no language or understanding of what sexuality, or sexual orientation, or gender identity. I didn’t have any idea what that meant. I had what I learned. You was born a boy, right? Not the sex you were assigned at birth. But you were born a boy. Therefore, you will like girls. You will marry a girl. That’s when you will – and you will maintain your struggle with your desires for sex until after you’re married, including masturbation. You won’t do that either cause that’s not – that’s against the will of God too. Right?

So that was the teaching and that was what I was trying to live into. And none of that was working. I did not begin to get free of any of that until I went off to college. And so, it was in the college space when I was out of the environment that was preaching that message every week, that I began to get free from that space and actually find my way back to the God I knew before I learned that this God had a problem with me. All right. So, the whole time – I talk about the intersections of race, and sexual orientation, and religion. When I got to college, I found college very much more welcoming of me as a gay person than as a black person. But I didn’t have any pain from not being welcomed as a black person cause I was in all black communities, in all black spaces.

So, when I was in college space that wasn’t completely racism free, I was able to make them ignorant and in the South. I chalked that up to being about the south, and ignorant, and this is just white people who don’t get it yet. I didn’t have it have the kind of saliency that the fact that I wasn’t being beat up for being gay every day had. So, the healing around sexual orientation was where my energy was. So, when I got to Slippery Rock [University], I knew I was black. Everybody knew I was black. I was part of Black Action Society. We all knew we were black. But the thing that I knew every day when I got up and moved about that was as salient if not more was that I was gay. And how do I navigate this space and this time?
So it was during that time that religion, sexual orientation and race took center stage in my life to navigate. Sometimes I engaged them separately. And even when I was engaging in them separately, all of the others were in the room. So if was doing religion, being black and gay was still in the room. If I was doing a sexual orientation, being Christian and black was in the room. If I was doing religion, right, being gay and black – all of it was always in the room. But I did some deep work around. So as a Christian here’s what matters and here’s what being a Christian means. So, I’m looking at well: ‘who is God, and how do you see God, and how do you make meaning of God?’

And then where did you learn that this was was ok and that is not ok?’ How do you make sense of these other religions and so on and so forth? And so, I was doing all of this work around my religious identity and then the intersections of sexual orientation and race would show up. I was doing all this work around my racial identity, and then religion and sexual orientation would show up. And when I was doing sexual orientation work, then race and religion would show up. So, just all of it was happening and converging. And by the time I left Slippery Rock and went to graduate school – so all of this is in answer to when I became deeply connected to spirituality, not religion. While I still practiced religion, my connection with Divine Energy and power shifted. And that shifted by the time I got to graduate school.

And it was in graduate school that the journey that I started at Slippery Rock of kind of this healing from the spiritual abuse that I got, right. And I really do talk about my journey in high school and those religious spaces about being abusive. It was abusive space. And it did harm to me and many others. And I began the healing from that during my time because I wasn’t in the space where I was constantly getting the abuse but I had not unpacked the abuse. And I began to unpack the abuse and heal, really heal from that when I was in graduate school and working on my masters. I studied at the Kenzie Institute in Indiana. I learned about sexuality and the phenomena that it is. Learned the differences of gender, and gender identity, and gender expression, and sexual behavior that is different than sexual orientation. I just got some knowledge that I didn’t have before! And that coupled with my lived experience and my deep knowing and connection with the Divine had me then be able to name myself differently. So, I identify very much as a Christian but that being something very different than people would assume. And so, for me it is very much about a love
CS: Ok. So, this thinking that you were doing in your undergrad and grad years did this inform your decision to become a preacher?

DW: Well, interestingly enough – honestly, I had – that wasn’t even on my screen! I wasn’t thinking about being no preacher. [Laughs] I guess I still had some internalized homophobia around me. All right? So, it was like ok! So, when I left graduate school, when I left my master’s program and I moved back into – because I had lived in predominantly white spaces for all of those years, for 8 years or so. And there wasn’t a whole lot of black church space in those communities. And so again, the spaces that I was in because they were in college towns were spaces that were not hateful but not affirmative. Right? They weren’t gay hateful. They just weren’t affirming. I dipped in and out of a couple of hateful places but really, I didn’t spend a whole lot of time in there so they didn’t have a lot of energy.

So, when I left the, my time as I refer to my time in the wilderness, the white spaces, all white spaces. Which lots of learning and lots of wonderful things happened in the wilderness, but I just couldn’t get my hair cut and couldn’t find a black boyfriend. [Laughs] Easily I couldn’t. And white boys fetishized me. So, I didn’t feel fulfilled in that area. And then I moved to Baltimore and thought, “This is what heaven must be like!” [Laughs]. There was black church, there was black gay community, there was malls, and there was barber shops, and you could get a chicken box! So, I had found glory at the next level. And so, what I knew then was I needed to find a church that was going to – where I could be myself.

Because there was just no going to church. That just was not even an option for me. Right? And some of that was about – I was a musician. And as a musician, church was a part of my supplement income so it helped me to live a lifestyle, too. So, there was an economic factor to my continuing to be in church. But it was also this space where I found community, and family, and friends, and love. and warmth, and all the stuff I loved. And I remember saying – and I’ve always been a leader in church whether it’s a music leader, whether it’s on a deacon board or whether – that has been the case since I was 7 years old. I’ve been in some form of active involvement in leadership in church. So as the deacon, and as a member of the finance committees, and also as a minister of music, I just kind of found myself enjoying and
feeling like I was doing enough! I really did. I felt like I was doing enough.

So, folks would experience me as preacher like when I was doing music. Right? But I wasn’t calling myself a preacher or seeing myself necessarily in that way. I mean I remember having this moment where I thought if I want to get another degree that I would get it in religion. I remember that. But it wasn’t about me being a preacher or thinking about that. So, I was in a church where the pastor was not gay hateful in the pulpit, at all. And he was affirming of me outside of the pulpit. So, I was happy. I felt like that’s the best I’m going to get in a black church. So, if I want a gay affirming space that was going to be white space in the late ‘90s, early 2000s. There wasn’t a whole bunch of affirming black queer space 25 years or 22 years ago. Right? And the white affirming queer space just had – was just fraught with too much racism. And no consciousness around it.

So, I couldn’t be – and on top of that I couldn’t get the kind of worship experience that I needed to go to work the next week and deal with white supremacy. So, I needed the black worship experience that was not gay hateful, in order to navigate white supremacy on Monday, right? Monday through Friday. So, everyone in the church, black church that I was a part of for 12 years when I moved here, everybody knew I was gay. My partner was there. I tell folks all the time the black community has had ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ long before the military. So, we all know stuff, we just don’t talk about it, right? Except in our small circle of friends and so on.

I was just happy and I was fine and then the pastor left! In came a new pastor and she came in with an agenda to eradicate homosexuality from the church. And so, from the first Sunday that she got there, she began preaching against homosexuality, leaders who are living that lifestyle, and so on and so forth. And I was a minister of music. And what I learned in that moment, honestly, was what I had missed in being in a non-hateful church was not only was I not affirmed in my spirituality, but neither was anyone else in the space. So, no one knew how to engage her. So, she would be in the pulpit and say these hateful things and people would come up to me after service and say “we ain’t paying her no mind.” But no one would confront her. And again, she was new. Like she didn’t have any social capital in the space other than she was a pastor.
But what had happened in being in the space that was not hateful but not affirming, was no one had the skills, and the tools, and the capacity, and the knowing of how to engage religious harm and trauma when it was happening. There were all of these children that were in the space, all of these young people who were gay and queer. I didn’t know that at the time. I really didn’t pay any attention to that because I was loving my children as my children. I wasn’t thinking about them in terms of their sexualities and orientations.

It wasn’t on my screen! Until one Sunday, actually one Saturday. One of my youth choir directors who helped me with the youth choir. I said, “bring me some paper so we can write down the songs for tomorrow”. And he brought me a book and inside the book there were two hearts. And when he handed it to me, he said, “this is for your eyes only”. I said “ok”, I’m just trying to write down the music. Right? And I looked and I saw the heart. I mean it was kind of familiar in terms of what that might mean but I still wasn’t paying it attention. Until out of the corner of my eye, I saw him go to another young man and say, “he saw it”. I was like, “Oh ok. That’s interesting”.

And then right immediately following rehearsal, they came to me and said, “Can we go to Burger King? Take us to Burger King”. And it was the two of them and it was their girlfriend. So, there’s a little girlfriend who knew everything and the two boys. And so, we’re at Burger King and she starts saying to me, “did you see what was in the book?” And I said “yeah, I saw what was in the book.” And she says, “do you know what that means?” I said, “I kind of think I do.” She says, “Do you really know what that means?” I said, “Yeah, I know. I know what that means.” And she says, “Well why are you so calm?” I said, “Yes. And what it means is that I’m right here for you all. You’re right in the place that you should be figuring stuff out. And you might feel that today and feel something else tomorrow, feel something else next week. But it’s beautiful that you’re in a space where you’re finding your attractions and love. That’s a part of what being a teenager is about.”

And then they said, “She’s killing us.” I said, “What?” And they said, “She’s killing us.” One said, “My friends say to me after I’ve gone to church on Sunday that my light doesn’t come back until Thursday.” And I said, “what?” And so, it got clear to me that while her hateful message was making me sick, it was killing the children. And it was in that moment I said, “Oh hell no! That is not acceptable”. Like I can take it but you’re not going to hurt the
babies. That’s just simply not going to be ok. That’s not going to be ok for me. And so that was the beginning of the journey to the preacher. That was the first message.

The next message was a week later when someone said to me, “I just got a call from someone who asked me if I was riding with you to this retreat. And they told me to tell you that God said, ‘you have to answer the call to ministry’”. I said, “What?” [Laughs] I was like, “What! What are you talking about?” And they said, “That’s going to mean some changes for your life, but God says this is what you’ve got to do”. So, I went into deep struggle because I then began to feel like have, I been wrong all these years? This woman has come to pull me out of these ways that I’ve constructed as right. So, I was spinning down. And then two weeks later someone else comes to me and says, “God is waiting on your answer. God hears you saying ‘no, not you’ and God is saying ‘yes, you’. He’s got your back”. These are random people and I’m like, “What is going on?”

And so, then I go to my library and I realize – so this is the sidebar. From the time I began to reconcile that me and God was ok back in graduate school, everything that was written about homosexuality in the Bible, I had. Because I had to then reconcile what I had been taught. Right? So, any time a book would come out I had it. I hadn’t read everything, but I certainly had everything. I’d read enough to be able to engage Bible literalists with stuff, but I hadn’t read everything. And there was this one book called The Uncommon Calling of Christian and Gay. And I read that book driving down to South Carolina [Laughs] to my grandparents’ house and I realized that as I read it that – I think I’m having a calling and I’ve got to go into ministry. But I have to go into ministry as an out gay man. And I was like I think I’m – I think that’s what I have to do. I shared it with my partner, then partner that that was the thing. And was ok with it.

And when I got clear about that and I went to the grocery store that next Sunday a person in the line at the grocery store came up to me and he said, “You’re a Psalmist aren’t you?” And I said, “Yes”. He said, “God is waiting on you. You have a powerful anointing on your life and you have to do what God has set for you to do.” Honestly at that point, it was – my yes happened in the grocery store, literally. I said, “Ok God. No more strangers. I hear you. All I’m trying to do is get some chicken and go home. That’s all I’m trying to do. I don’t need you sending nobody else to me, sending me no messages. I will do this”. And literally, I went then to my former pastor – who is the one who left who was not gay hateful.
Right? I told him. He said, “Of course. I’ve known this for years, but you had to come to it for yourself,” and all of that stuff.

And then it was clear that I had to go to seminary. I had finished my PhD seven years by that time and I had – I was determined I wasn’t doing no more school. But this call to ministry for me was also about a call to preparation and so I had to be prepared academically to engage the resistance that I would engage. And that people needed to heal from religious and spiritual abuse, particularly through the lens of Christianity. And now 21 years later I’ve been pastoring, ordained, out as a black, gay, elder man coming out of Howard School of Divinity. Naming dynamics of Christian hegemony and Christian privilege and engaging a progressive theology as I live and have my ministry be more than just the building.

CS: So, when there Christians that try to come with that resistance saying, “Oh the Bible is not compatible with queer people,” what is your response to them?

DW: So, my response is, “Do you want to have a conversation about the Bible for real? Because we can engage that.” Because what you’re essentially saying is that what you understand about the Bible is this. Right? And I’m happy to engage you around that and how you come to that, if that’s what we’re really doing here. If you’re here asking me – so if you’re asking me, “How do I come to reconcile being a Christian and what the Bible says,” if you’re coming to ask me that, to really learn that that’s one thing. If you’re coming to tell me that I can’t be because the Bible says this and you’re not open to engaging how I get to a different meaning than you then I’m not engaging a conversation with you. Because I’m not here to convince, convert or convict you. That’s not my job. Right?

But I am very much open to engaging you around how I come to see it differently than you have. Because I too saw it the way you did – the way you do. And there’s a journey from there to here. If you want to be on the journey, I’m happy to be on it with you. But I’m not interested in trying to convince you that my arrival here is wrong or right. I’m not interested in that. So, I mean you get to believe and think whatever you want. So, it’s like, “Well you know you’re going to hell!” It’s like well, that’s a perspective. Right? [Laughs] And simply because you say it doesn’t make it so. And so, I don’t receive that. “What do you mean you don’t?” Well, I don’t! I simply don’t.
And you actually don’t have the power to define my relationship with God. And before I was healed, and delivered, and set free from the bondage of spiritual abuse, I did believe your relationship with God was stronger because you were heterosexual. I believed that. But when I got free of that lie, ain’t nothing you could do with me. I know that I know that I know! So, you get to believe whatever you choose. Yeah. Again, as the old song says, “This joy that I have, the world didn’t give it to me. The world didn’t give it and the world can’t take it away.”

CS: So why do you think there’s such like a stereotype that black people tend to be homophobic?

DW: Well because that’s what we see. That’s what media portrays and that’s a classic. So again, as we think back to – I think it was 2000, the Wedge Issue around Proposition Eight which was against supporting LGBT rights. And the way that the Religious-Right positioned the argument against supporting LGBT folks was to put black Christian preachers, conservative preachers up in front to have them speak against it. Because the dynamic of putting LGBT and race issues in the same bucket was, we need to have black people speak against this so that anybody that talks about LGBT as a civil rights movement and not a special rights movement, is really dishonoring and denigrating the civil rights movement of black people.

So, let’s get black people mad and use God and the Bible to do it and they just put up the conservative black preachers to speak out against. When in fact what we know is while the black church hasn’t always known how to deal with or certainly didn’t show up necessarily in affirmation outside of pulpits, many, many, many black families live and love in communities. They’re gay, lesbian, bi and trans folks and have done that long before it was popular. Right? And you will see black folks live into respectability politics in a very different way because of internalized depression. And so, we show up being the most holy of holies, the most conservative. And so even if that’s not true lived-in practice, that’s how we have to put our image up in that way. And I think a lot of that is about appearing holy for white people. And I don’t think that that’s all conscious and intentional but it’s a dynamic.

CS: How were you led to Unity Fellowship here in Baltimore?

DW: So that’s great! So, I have been connected to Unity Fellowship since 1992. And when we talk about LGBT affirming spaces, Unity Fellowship is the mother, if you will, the mother
denomination. There were other, a few other churches around the country that were black and affirming of LGBT pre-Arch Bishop Carl Bean in 1982. But in terms of developing and creating a denomination that was beyond a single space Unity is the mother of that. And I had attended Unity Fellowship services at the Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum when I was in Los Angeles. And just really was really – so you would put black queer and Christian in the same space. And it was a space of wholeness. So again, as I talked about my identities in college, religion, race and sexual orientation that those were the things that were bubbling.

And so, trying to find a space where I could be holy, me, Unity Fellowship was like, AH! This is truly everything! But there wasn’t one in Baltimore. Right? And so again, best I could hope for was not a hateful space. So I was in a space that celebrated my blackness, that celebrated my Christianity and the wholeness of it and a progressive. Not as progressive as I am today but it was again a progressive social justice active kind of preaching. And it was a place where I could be gay even if I couldn’t talk about it in the church space. I could talk about it outside all day and we did do all kinds of hanging out and plenty of stuff. So, it was very much a community so it wasn’t that we showed up in church and then we had to sneak off to be with other gay people. Like we were in community. Fully.

And then in 2000, the Baltimore church opened. The very year that the gay hateful preacher came to my former church. And it was like, “Oh what is this?” And I wasn’t sure honestly that I was going to go to that. I wasn’t sure that I was going there. What I was sure about was that I had to answer call to ministry. And going to Howard for the Divinity School, there was a part of me that was feeling like I might just go on and get me a nice AME church with a nice parsonage, and a nice retirement plan, and a nice staff, and stuff. I’m going to – there’s some good stuff for preachers or for pastors and they got some stuff for you! I was like coming out of Howard, I was set up! I was in the network. I was in – I had MDIV from one of the Meccas of black preacher training.

So, I was like I can go anywhere, right! Because right at that time in 2000 because that’s when Bishop Gene Robinson was ordained in the Episcopal church and about split it. Right? So, the first gay, out gay bishop that was messy. So, when that happened, the AME Church had to come out very clearly and say, “That ain’t going to happen over here. We ain’t ordaining nobody who declares that they live that lifestyle.” So, they did an official statement. The United Methodist Church which was another – which is kind of
that middle space between the AME Church and Episcopal Catholic churches.

The United Methodist Church – so they’ve got more Black leadership in the United Methodist Church than in the episcopal churches and other protestant churches. But they said, “It’s not that they won’t ordain you. You simply can’t say that you are”. So, in the AME Church if they know you are or whatever you can’t be ordained. In the United Methodist Church, there’s a question that they ask you if you live a homosexual life. When you get asked the question through the ordination process of the United Methodist Church, you have to lie or else you can’t be ordained. Now that was then! Now that was 22 years ago. Right? And I’m not – I haven’t followed all of it that closely so I don’t know. I don’t want to misrepresent. I don’t know if any of that has changed. I know it hasn’t in the AME Church but I’m not sure if it’s changed in the United Methodist Church.

What I do know is there are gay AME pastors. Gay, lesbian, bisexual AME pastors as well as LGBT pastors in the United Methodist Churches as well. And some of those local congregations, once their pastor has been established as their pastor, like they don’t care. And so, they celebrate and don’t wish to oust them, so on and so forth. So, I was deciding between the United Methodist Church where I was supported by my father in the ministry and Unity Fellowship. Because when this new woman came and she was preaching all the gay hateful stuff what I was doing was – cause she came in April of 2000. Unity opened in November of 2000. She started her hateful messages and I was getting sick in that space. Literally physically sick hearing all of the hateful stuff. And so, I would go, I would leave the service and go to Unity in the afternoon cause the services were in the afternoon when Unity first opened. And so, I would leave the AME Church where I was still Minister of Music and a Deacon – a steward actually is what we’re referred to as in that space. And I would go to Unity to be put back together after being beat up.

And so, when I answered the call to ministry and decided that I was going to walk in my truth and my calling I confronted her and came out. She knew, but I declared it. Right? And so, when I went forward in the church to say that I’m answering this call to ministry – and I was really planning to go through in the AME Church! I didn’t know that it was going to be that strongly that, “No, we’re not. Not if you’re telling us you’re gay you’re not going to get ordained.” So, I learned all of that in the process. And she told me quite frankly she, “didn’t believe that God was calling
people to ministry with this kind of mess in their life. So, we was just going to pray.”

Now in the AME Church, it is your pastor that decides your process. And if your pastor doesn’t put you into the process starting with an initial trial sermon, then you don’t get any process. Right? And she clearly wasn’t putting me in the process until I was no longer gay. So, I knew that in that space – which was my spiritual home for more than 12 years – that I was going to have to leave. That was very hard and I was very angry. I was wanting to wait her out and go through – because all of the church was in high support of my calling. They trusted my call to ministry and my spiritual leadership very much. But yet and still they were not able to engage or challenge her stance. So, I waited.

And the Divine said to me, “Well you do have to go actually. But you can’t leave until you love her.” I was like, “What?” It was just as clear as we’re talking right now. It was like, “No, you can’t leave till you love her.” And I didn’t know what that was about then, but 18 months later when I was very clear that I had no animosity towards her and that I loved her I could leave. Why that was so important for the journey was I was going to have to remain in the love and light of a divine spirit of Christ even in the face of hatefulness. And that as I was embarking on this journey as an out, black, gay, Christian apostolic-Pentecostal-bapticostal, AME person that I was going to have to have a love that deep. Because stuff is going to come.

And I remember very clearly as I continued my journey and experienced so much of people not believing, or questioning, and doubting I understood then why. What the process of loving thy enemy was really about. I had to be able to do more than say those words. Cause I hadn’t really felt like I had a whole lot of enemies before. Right? So, I could quote the scripture. You must love your enemy. But I didn’t have none [Laughs] so I wasn’t tested on it. And it was the first time I felt like I had one who was out to do me harm. And how was I still going to show up in the love and light of God.

CS: You mentioned this a bit earlier but how do you practice this love ethic and justice ethic in your daily life?

DW: Well, it starts with me. And what I say by that is I just love this new Jamie. Totally and completely. Very like minimal judgement, just minimal judgement. It’s when I ate that second cookie late at night. I have like minimal judgement [Laughs] when I know I
should have just stopped at that first one especially when I’m talking about a big cookie. Right? But even at that it’s like, “You’re still wonderful. I still love you. You still are wonderful.” So, but that wasn’t always the case. Right? So, the part of the work of loving thy neighbor as thyself, was my journey. Right?

And it was loving my neighbor, not just while I’m loving myself, but also the way I love myself. So that “as” was both a time thing and a way thing. And as I got clear that I not only had to be there for other people, and take care of them, and always be of service, I also had to be there for me. So, as I was loving them, I was not giving you my rent. I wasn’t giving you your rent money and not being able to pay for my rent. Right? That’s not loving to myself if I’m putting myself on the street so that you can have a house – some place to live. Right? That’s not loving me. Right? So, loving you as I love myself. So, while I love myself but also the same way. And if I’m not loving me then I can’t be loving you. Right? Cause I can’t give you what I don’t have. Right? So that’s one of the ways that I practice. And I practice radical self-love and then I share that with everyone else. And I also in that radical self-love I practice radical justice. Using my voice to speak for what I deserve and where there is injustice to hold and shine a light on that and to do my very best to live in a way that values all humanity.

And where there is inequity and justice, if I’m benefitting from that, to really do what I can to try to level the playing field or shine a light on it so that folks know there are people being harmed by this practice or this way of being or this attitude or this energy. So that happens in formal ways in my role as a pastor in a Christian church. It also happens in formal ways in my role as leader and elder in the Ministry of Social Justice Education, and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion work. And it happens in incidental ways in the conversations that I have after service or the conversations that I have when I’m standing in line waiting to get on the airplane. So, I bring a love and justice ethic into everything that I do. And so, like I said, formally in role and just as a human being navigating the world. I don’t drive by an accident without sending energy of healing and love and light. So, as I drive by, I just pause for a moment and just send energy of love and light and healing.

Where I witness or see folks being treated as less than human, if I don’t confront it, I find a way to try to remedy it by bringing message of hope and affirmation. Right? So, if I’ve seen a worker be mistreated by a patron that was before me, I remind them of how beautifully they handled that situation and themselves in that situation. And note, I want you to know that I saw you. So that’s
how I try to live my life every day. I look for opportunities just to show up as an unexpected blessing. Right? As I am those unexpected blessings come at me tenfold every day. Yeah.

CS: Is there anything I did not ask you that you would like to talk about?

DW: Yes! What I’d like to talk about is what makes me laugh, and what gives me joy, and how I stay resilient in this whole process of living into that love ethic and ethic of justice. And so, the things that bring me joy are family. I have radical love for my family, my siblings, my partner, my children, my grandchildren, my in-laws. And so those are the biologic folk and then there’s my chosen family, my work family, my professional families. I spend lots of energy in loving and being loved by people and in laughter and in play. I tell folks I do adult well. So, when people engage me, I engage as an adult. I do that pretty well. But I’m really about six or seven years old. I’m really a kid.

All I really want to ever do is play. That’s all I really want to do. I know I have to do stuff like go to work and make money and all that stuff but that’s all overrated. Cartoons are what you should really be doing and eating ice cream with sprinkles and cheeseburgers. And so, I’m a big, big, big – and I’ve just begun to live into not being ashamed or saying this unapologetically. I’m a TV nut. So, TV series, just give me a good series. And some of those series are funny. I love good, some good comedy. 20-minute comedy shows, love those. COVID-19 has given me my life with Netflix and Hulu so streaming series is so much fun for me. I love that so much that I can’t remember half the ones that I’ve seen, but I love streaming.

And the other thing is I am an enormous dog person. I love all dogs, old dogs, young dogs, little dogs, big dogs, funny looking dogs, very cute, attractive. I just love dogs. Now I also enjoy cats, but they don’t get my attention the same way dogs do. Right? So, I work really hard when I’m in, particularly in this context where lots of folks have service pets, right? In the airport, in the grocery store, and so on and so forth cause I know it’s inappropriate to go and touch and engage them and the person and all those things. So, I know that but it’s hard for me cause I just want to grab the dog and hug them, and kiss them, and ask them questions, and all that kind of stuff. So those are the things that give me complete life in addition to being a huge foodie. Love new food. I’m always seeking to find the best fried chicken and when I’m in a space and get really good fried chicken you get to be on my list of spaces.
And yeah! And I’m very appreciative of the journey of my parents, who both are gone and my grandparents. And so, all of the models whose shoulders I stand on who loved me into this person. So, I was able to navigate the tensions and the abusive spirituality and all those things because I never felt unloved at home. I didn’t always feel understood at home but I never felt unloved. And I do recognize the privilege of that. Always feeling loved positioned me to live into loving myself where others might not have had that be such an easy thing.

[End of Audio]