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THE VIRUS OF WHITE SUPREMACY

What are white Christians willing to risk to secure safety, health, and equity for their brothers and sisters of color?

BY JIM WALLIS



Illustration by Jackson Joyce

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A WHITE COP'S knee on the neck of a Black man revealed the old and ongoing pandemic underneath the current pandemic. The coronavirus had already laid bare the systems of racial injustice that accelerate the spread of sickness and death among people of color—the fundamental racial disparities in health care, economics, housing, education, and every other institution in America. Structural racism was exposed as a precondition for getting and dying from COVID-19; white supremacy is the virus that has made America's soul sick for 400 years and continues to kill Black people.

Over the last weekend in May, including Pentecost Sunday, Sojourners helped organize faith communities to lament the first 100,000 COVID dead in this country. We were joined by Muslim and Jewish brothers and sisters in their services, and we helped unite Christian families across all our divisions—mainline Protestant, evangelical, and Pentecostal, Catholic, Black, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American Christian leaders and their congregations—in honoring and memorializing those who died from the virus in only three months, many of them separated from their loved ones. On June 1, we were joined by mayors from more than 60 cities who, with interfaith clergy, announced a Day of Mourning and Lament.

Just before that weekend, a white Minneapolis police officer pressed his knee against George Floyd's neck for almost nine minutes in front of cameras and, ultimately, the whole world. We all heard Floyd say “I can't breathe” as life was squeezed out of him, sparking weeks of protests that filled the streets of Minneapolis, the rest of the country, and the world, with millions of people calling for justice.



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I have never seen so many white people involved in the movement to confront America's original sin of racism and its many consequences. Many white people are learning what Black people already know: that the white knee on a Black neck is a system, a culture, a false idol, and a brutal violence that permeates every aspect of American life and structures.

The scale and energy of these protests are inextricably linked to the ongoing pandemic that is taking a vastly disproportionate toll on Black and brown people, in both health and economic impacts. Even in this period of lockdowns and social distancing, people of all races flooded the streets, risking their lives and livelihoods to confront racialized law enforcement and to stand up for the life and dignity of Black and brown people.

The public health risks stemming from structural racism are even more dangerous than the coronavirus to people of color, and they are deeply embedded in nearly every aspect of U.S. society. The question before us is: What are white people—especially white Christians—willing to risk to secure safety, health, and equity for their brothers and sisters of color?

In the months ahead, and in post-election America, we will learn what the growing awareness will mean and how much it will lead to change. I believe that faith communities across the country must play a vital role in those changes and that the battle ahead can be rightly called “spiritual warfare” with “forces of wickedness in high places” (Ephesians 6:12). It's time to fasten on the “whole armor of God” to engage in that spiritual warfare.



Jim Wallis

Jim Wallis is president of Sojourners. His new book *Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus* is available now. Follow Jim on Twitter [@JimWallis](#).

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