

Sarah McConnell: The number of people who say they identify with a religion is declining, but religion still plays a vital role in many people's lives. Most religions promote acts of selflessness, charity, and moral responsibility. But religious beliefs can also create divisions of hatred that lead to violence.

Sarah McConnell: From Virginia Humanities, I'm Sarah McConnell and this is With Good Reason.

Sarah McConnell: Today we bring you an episode of a new podcast called Sacred and Profane. It's hosted by two University of Virginia religious studies professors, Martien Halvorson-Taylor and Kurtis Schaeffer, and explores how religion can affect our experience on almost every level. And the relationship between religion, race, and democracy. We're about to play the episode about trying to heal 25 years after the Rwandan genocide. But first, I caught up with one of the hosts, Martien Halvorson-Taylor, when she was in Connecticut.

Sarah McConnell: Martien, I am moved by this episode on the complexities of forgiveness in the wake of the Rwandan genocide. Yes, it's 25 years later, but it is so hard to forgive someone who murdered your children, your family, and live near that person.

Martien H.: Yeah. There's a way in which you like to think of violence as being far away. The thought that for the last 25 years the people that you walk by every day, your neighbors, the people in your village are the perpetrators of the violence against you and your family, the proximity of that was really mind bending.

Sarah McConnell: The man you feature is promoting healing by doing the unthinkable. He's pairing up victims and perpetrators, putting them together so that they get to know each other, live together.

Martien H.: Yes. I think his point is that intimate violence needs to be overcome by intimate interests, right? That they'll never get over it unless they can truly work out forgiveness in a very close way.

Sarah McConnell: We haven't seen this here in the United States. Our perpetrators never admitted their cruelty to African-Americans, Native Americans, and so we haven't had forgiveness. We haven't had reconciliation in any large way.

Martien H.: Right. And in fact, often what people will say is, "Well, I never owned slaves." Or, "That was a long time ago." We continue to put distance between ourselves as white Americans and what we did to our African-American brothers and sisters.

Sarah McConnell: When I listened to this piece it was just a reminder of how we other everyone else, and we all do it. The rest of the world can't make sense of Rwandans finding any meaningful difference between Hutus and Tutsis, but others can imagine how Americans can have such venom over mere skin color, right?

Martein H.: Mm-hmm (affirmative), that's right. Yeah, and I thought that was another very interesting thing that Larisha Hawkins uncovered in the episode was the way that difference was actually constructed in Rwanda between Hutus and Tutsis. That that was not always a difference, right? That was a constructed social difference. That also I found quite startling.

Sarah McConnell: Tell me about the podcast series, Sacred and Profane. Why is profane in the podcast title?

Martein H.: Thanks for asking that. So, we're very interested in how religion plays out in our daily lives. We could have called it Sacred and Mundane. We could have called it The Sacred and the Daily. The word profane means sort of things that we think of as not sacred that are in fact often infused with the sacred or ideas about religion. So we're less interested in stories about the abstractions of religious practice. We're more interested in how people think with and act through religion. Their ideas about religion, religions that have been handed down to them for generations, new discoveries that we've made.

Martein H.: So the episode that Larisha Hawkins reported for us in Rwanda is an interesting example of a person taking his Christian faith and saying, "How are we going to work out forgiveness and repentance? How can I take it from the abstract," in his case what the new testament says about forgiveness, "How can I work it out in my family life? How can I enable my neighbors to forgive one another in a way so that they can see each other as fully human?" That's the kind of story that we're interested in telling. We have a whole bunch of stories, all of them in very different ways looking at how religious ideas and ideals have shaped the choices that people make in their day to day existence.

Sarah McConnell: Describe one that is among your favorites with the others that are to be released.

Martein H.: There's an episode that comes to us from the ancient world. It's about an emperor called Ashoka, who ruled one of the largest empires that included most of the Indian subcontinent in the third century before the common era. He actually modeled what we would think of us as a startlingly modern idea of pluralism back millennia ago. It's a very interesting thing for us to think with now as we're thinking about what does it mean to live in a global world in which we are increasingly encountering other regions and figuring out how to live with them.

Sarah McConnell: This must be so refreshing bringing academic stories to a wide public audience in this entertaining way.

Martein H.: It's been interesting because people truly are curious about religion, and we don't educate about religion a lot in the high schools for example. People don't have facility with other religions that makes them comfortable to explore those religions more deeply and think about how those things shape policy and shape

national agendas. This has been sort of an interesting experience because it allows us to meet a real public curiosity, but it's filling a need out there.

Sarah McConnell: Well, Martein, congratulations on the new podcast and thanks for talking on With Good Reason.

Martein H.: Thank you so much.

Sarah McConnell: And now that episode of Sacred and Profane.

Martein H.: Welcome to Sacred and Profane. I'm Martein Halverson-Taylor.

Curtis S.: And I'm Curtis Schaeffer. We're both professors of religious studies here at the University of Virginia.

Martein H.: With the help of faculty and students here at UVA we explore stories of religion in daily life. We're interested not just in what and why people believe, but how they believe.

Curtis S.: Yeah, that is to say we're interested in how religious belief and practice effects how people see their place in society. How it shapes our identity and sense of self, and the actions we take because of our beliefs.

Martein H.: This year marks the 25th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda when roughly a million people were killed over 100 days. It was the culmination of years of growing violence against the Tutsi minority. It's an era that's still not resolved. After the violence, the new government's official stance was to promote unity and forgiveness, but Rwandans continue to debate how to remember the genocide and to ask if it's even possible to forgive. Our colleague Larisha Hawkins has come to us with a story about that very question.

Larisha H.: For me, the story started in 2014 when I was visiting a student of mine in Rwanda. She was working with an organization that was trying to help both victims and perpetrators in the aftermath of the genocide.

Kristoff: People don't believe that such power of forgiveness can happen.

Larisha H.: This is my friend, Kristoff.

Kristoff: I am Kristoff [inaudible 00:09:12]. I am from Rwanda and I am the director of CARSA.

Larisha H.: CARSA stands for Christian Action for Reconciliation and Social Assistance. By the way, I should mention here that I eventually joined CARSA's board. I got to know Kristoff during my trip in 2014. He's been working on these big questions

you raised, Martin, how to remember and how to reconcile, for over 20 years now.

Kristoff: Can someone forgive another person who has murdered their entire family members and all that truly? Can they live again together? Those are the kinds of questions and the doubt that people bring in. And I understand, because from the human perspective it seems to be impossible.

Larisha H.: Kristoff says the closeness of perpetrators and victims can be hard for outsiders to grasp. Rwanda then and now is a small country. People know their neighbors well. These were not anonymous killings.

Kristoff: The genocide was committed by the neighbors. It was a genocide of proximity. It was genocide where people had killed their friends, people with whom they grew up, people they knew well.

Larisha H.: He says that the other thing that's hard for people to understand is what led to the genocide in the first place, the divide between Hutu and Tutsi. It's very real in that people believed in it enough to kill, but it was a division that was encouraged and reinforced by colonial powers in the 20th century.

Kristoff: Those names existed, but they were more social classes based, not ethnic groups. Whoever had 10 cows and above was called as Tutsi, and whoever had less than 10 cows or nothing was called as Hutu.

Larisha H.: In other words, it wasn't an ethnicity and there wasn't a Hutu or Tutsi part of the country. Most villages and neighborhoods were a mixture of both, but when the Belgian colonial government began issuing ID cards suddenly these labels became a fixed identity.

Kristoff: And so when the colonial came in, especially the Belgian, they wanted to use their policy, which was divide for rule.

Larisha H.: After the genocide, Rwanda's new government had to make a choice. Should the country even continue to exist as one? The divide between the Hutu majority who had carried out the genocide, and the Tutsi who had largely been the victims, was very real. There were hundreds of thousands of perpetrators and survivors scattered all across the country. It seemed an impossible task to ask them to live together again.

Kristoff: That was actually some of the advise the government was receiving.

Larisha H.: Right, from the international community.

Kristoff: Yes, the international community would say no, it's impossible, these people cannot live together. You need to separate the country. You need to divide the

country into one half side the Tutsi and the Hutu and all that. That was one of the choice.

Curtis S.: Well, Rwanda still is one country today, so what choice did the government make?

Larisha H.: Well, it's complicated, but the short version is to stay together as one country. To find the perpetrators and take them to court and hold them accountable. But that presented its own problems.

Kristoff: It as difficult choice to make. One side was are we going to keep all these people in the prison forever? How we're going to judge 100 thousand people if we just go through the normal justice system? How long would this take? The cost. The burden and the weight for the country. It was difficult. Until the government decided to use a very traditional way, which is coming from our culture, which is called the gachacha court.

Larisha H.: The gachacha courts weren't perfect. There were allegations of corruption and false charges from both survivors and perpetrators, but they allowed survivors to speak out and sent over 100 thousand perpetrators to prison. Because the courts were convened across Rwanda with local community leaders giving judgment instead of criminal court judges, justice happened quickly.

Larisha H.: The gachacha courts also offered perpetrators a way back into society.

Kristoff: People were encouraged from the prisons to come forward, speak the truth, confess their crime, and with their sentences being reduced.

Larisha H.: If they confessed their crimes they would be allowed to return home.

Kristoff: I cannot say everything is 100 perfect, but I think it helped really. That showed the will. The political will of [inaudible 00:14:21] reconciliation after genocide.

Larisha H.: And all of this worked on a nation wide level. The country stayed together. People began to have faith in the new government. The economy improved. Daily life became routine for many.

Larisha H.: But Kristoff says that while this kind of legal forgiveness was working on a national level, that wasn't true on a personal level for many Rwandans. When perpetrators got out of prison they went back home. Survivors and perpetrators were once again living in the same towns and villages. They saw each other every day.

Kristoff: There is another journey to make with all the [inaudible 00:15:11] and the trauma, and what people had gone through, there was a need obviously of

helping people not only to recover socially, politically, economically, but also to recover psychologically.

Larisha H.: Both sides were living in fear of each other. The survivors of course feared the perpetrators would return and kill again, and the perpetrators feared the survivors too and the revenge that they might take.

Kristoff: You know it as human beings when you've been harmed, when you've been abused, the first reaction is trying to find revenge. I kept thinking for how long are we going to live under this situation? Asking difficult questions to myself, trying to find who is God and why God allowed all those things to take place. Covering that as a Christian we're called to be brothers and sisters. We're called to be ambassadors of reconciliation.

Larisha H.: Kristoff told me that the thing that he feared was that the genocide generation would be able to tolerate each other, but not truly forgive or trust one another.

Martain H.: It seems like the distinction that's being drawn is how to forgive each other in an abstract level, and then there's the hard business of actually waking up and looking your neighbor in the face, or looking your neighbors in the eye when you pass each other in the street.

Larisha H.: I think this distinction relates a lot to the question of what reconciliation actually is. You could have a legal agreement to forgive or at least to live in proximity to each other, but the trauma beneath the surface effects everything.

Larisha H.: The way that this also gets to identity and politics is that the government's mantra is there's no Hutu, there's no Tutsis, right? There's one Rwanda. It's choosing a kind of amnesia as one scholarly article talks about it versus remembrance towards the goal of reconciliation.

Curtis S.: So Kristoff seems to be implying that toleration doesn't require any memory, but forgiveness requires or moves through memory.

Larisha H.: Right.

Kristoff: We have a saying in Rwanda about you can run away from something chasing you from the outside, but you cannot outrun something chasing you from the inside. You're still carrying all the memories, all the experience, all the background with you. The best way then is not run away, say how can we not live forever with this? Because it kills. It destroys. It's not helpful.

Sarah McConnell: I'm Sarah McConnell. Today on With Good Reason we're premiering an episode of a new podcast called Sacred and Profane.

Curtis S.: So what do you do?

Larisha H.: Well, what Kristoff and CARSA did was go into the villages. They find what he calls direct survivors and direct perpetrators of the genocide. So they looked for a perpetrator and the surviving family of the perpetrator's victim, and some case victims.

Kristoff: We don't just pick any survivor/perpetrator. We will pair them based on what this person had done to this other person. You can imagine that people have never talked to one another. They have unsolved underneath issues.

Larisha H.: He starts by asking them to sit down in a group.

Kristoff: And we work [inaudible 00:19:02] with them. We start with workshop which takes seven days.

Larisha H.: So these workshops that I visited this past summer in Rwanda, the curriculum that's utilized in these workshops is essentially PTSD training. Because CARSA's a Christian organization it often is interlaced with Bible versus that a relevant to things like forgiveness or loving your enemy as your neighbor. And essentially over the seven days perpetrator and victim rehearse what happened during the genocide. They begin to realize that, for instance, the person that they feared all of their life also fears them. And so going to the workshop you realize how hard fought the process of reconciliation is, and that it's not a panacea, but the workshop is a step on the journey towards pursuing reconciliation.

Kristoff: And the workshop basically becomes a key to open up a starting point or the beginning of a journey of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Larisha H.: But the workshops aren't the end. The next step is a cow.

Kristoff: We provide a cow. It's a being shared by the survivor/perpetrator. That they take care of the cow together, they feed the cow together, they do everything together as a way of allowing them to meet on a regular basis. It's not just I forgive you but bye, I won't see you again. They share life. They work now in new life together. Not because the life is perfect, but because now they have agreed to actually deal with the challenges in their journey together.

Larisha H.: So the survivor and the perpetrator raise a cow together. It gives them a reason to assemble, to talk, and then there's a second step. When the cow has its first calf the survivor gifts that calf to the perpetrator.

Larisha H.: Why does the survivor have to give something to this person who killed their family, Kristoff?

Kristoff: Why? Why do the survivors would share the cow with the perpetrator? I think the question is why do we encourage survivors to forgive the perpetrator? The gift of forgiveness for me it's more important and powerful than the gift of the cow. But also in Rwanda a cow is the highest gift you can offer to someone. To a

friend, basically. You don't give a cow to an enemy, or to someone you meet on the street, or someone you don't know. I think it's a choice. Forgiveness is a choice. You know as humans sometimes we pretend. You might pretend and say, "I've forgiven this person." But I think the cow is just a physical sign to prove that truly it's not words. It's like for Christian, you believe but you request to be baptized. Why? Baptism is not important by itself. Baptism is important as a sign of belief in new life. It's the same way.

Martein H.: I'm really struck by this story thinking how much we could learn from it. We never had that conversation after, for example, the Civil War or after the eras of slavery. Kristoff's example is so powerful because the perpetrator has to recognize her or himself as a perpetrator and actively ask the victim for forgiveness. That's drawing on a Christian practice of confession, and repentance, and forgiveness that we often think of as being very personal, but it can be so politically important too. It's not something that in the US we've really seen in the past.

Larisha H.: Yeah. I think what CARSA has taught me is one reason we can't enter that conversation is because we've never had a real reckoning. A real truth and reconciliation process like South Africa did after apartheid. Our narrative in the United States from my perspective as a political scientist and someone who studies religion in history, accompanied by that and race, is that the perpetrators have never admitted either their direct involvement or their complicity in white supremacy. We talk about democracy and moving forward and everyone's on an equal footing. It's difficult to move forward when one side is willing to step into these conversations but the other side in essence isn't bringing anything to the table. It's a vulnerable process.

Larisha H.: That admission of guilt is part and parcel of what makes these communities in Rwanda remarkable. That it's the perpetrator themselves who have, yes, confessed guilt in a court, but who come to their neighbor and confess again the ways that they've hurt their community and hurt their neighbor.

Curtis S.: What I find so powerful about Kristoff's example is that forgiveness is not an idea. It's not a belief. It's an action. It's something that you do. There's something that strikes me as so powerful about the requirement to repeat it day after day, too.

Larisha H.: Yes. Part of the way that the workshop struck me was seeing the ways that individual who especially had committed acts, heinous acts of genocide, came forward along with the survivor and repeated in front of the entire group on the last day of the workshop how they had hurt their neighbor. How they had killed members of one's family. And somehow that standing together in solidarity with someone whose family's life they had literally snuffed out or in some cases tried to kill that very person and the person survived in some cases embodied solidarity with their neighbor, with their perpetrator. But the act of speaking,

the act of verbalizing and the act of also being stood with as a stance of forgiveness mattered as a way of practicing that.

Kristoff: You know this mantra to say there's no future without forgiveness. The question is what's the alternative of reconciliation in a broken society? What's the alternative? If we don't promote forgiveness, if we don't promote reconciliation, what's the other option? I don't see any. I think what people need is to acknowledge the realities and sit down at the table and look back. And not try to ignore the past, not trying to avoid the past. It's like driving a car. You have the side mirrors, it's so small, but you still look back. But you concentrate more in the future. It's when you ignore looking back because you're moving towards the future maybe you have an accident. Watch the past. Learn from the past and move towards the future.

Sarah McConnell: That was an episode of a new podcast called Sacred and Profane, produced for the religion, race, and democracy lab at the University of Virginia. The senior producer is Emily Gadek. For more on the podcast, go to religionlab.virginia.edu. This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

Sarah McConnell: Welcome back to With Good Reason. From Virginia Humanities, I'm Sarah McConnell. Many refugees and immigrants to this country bring with them the resilience that saved their lives back home. Part of that resilience is often a strong religious faith. Christy Kilby is a professor of religion at James Madison University who specialized in the study of Buddhism, but she says all religions at the community, family, and individual level can provide a positive resource for dealing with the refugee and migrant experience.

Sarah McConnell: Christy, part of the new research that you're doing is into a Buddhist concept called the gift of fearlessness. You're looking at this through the lens of the refugee masses throughout the world. What is the gift of fearlessness?

Christy K.: In Buddhist tradition, and also in Hindu tradition, there are three major kinds of gifts. There's the gift of material goods, food and shelter. There's the gift of intangibles, spiritual teachings, education, the gift of Dharma. And there's also a third category called the gift of fearlessness, which is protection for one's life, and it's really the opportunity to pursue either material or spiritual wellbeing. It undergirds the other two gifts. It's essential to our humanity and we don't talk about it enough.

Sarah McConnell: Even within the Buddhist and Hindu religions?

Christy K.: Yes.

Sarah McConnell: There's more focus nowadays on the other two gifts?

Christy K.: Oh, yes. Well, you know, monasteries are interested in getting some material donations, right? And the lay people are interested in getting Dharma teachings.

But fearless is this other more nebulous category. It's about states, right? It's about what governments can give people. Protection and security for their lives. But it can also filter down to the individual level.

Sarah McConnell: In the religion when it's taught, is it the idea that it's a gift we give others? We protect them, or is it more we are endowed with this gift and we need to find it within ourselves?

Christy K.: It's typically framed as a gift we give others, but it's a gift we receive ourselves when we give it to others.

Sarah McConnell: How are you looking at this through the crisis of so many millions of people seeing refuge in other countries?

Christy K.: When I look at just the sheer numbers of displacement we're experiencing today, 70 million displaced people. And in fact, while we're talking right now every two seconds another person is fleeing her home. But also when I look at the fear that is dominating a lot of nationalistic discourse and xenophobic discourse I think fear is the problem on both sides, right? Refugees, people who are being driven out of their homes are in fear for their lives. And then people in potential resettlement countries are afraid of these others that they don't know. Afraid of ethnic or religious difference. The gift of fearlessness is one of these categories that I think can cut across both sides of this divide.

Christy K.: Where's the fearless America? Where is the statue of liberty with open arms? Where's the fearless and power there? In Buddhist tradition and Hindu also, when one gives the gift of fearlessness to others it actually enhances one's own power and sovereignty. So it's nothing like the kind of debate we're having today that if we let in refugees we become weaker, endangered, poorer.

Sarah McConnell: But you also hear a lot of people say we need to protect the people we know. We need to protect our families, ourselves. We need to defend what we have.

Christy K.: If you're a terrorist you're not going to go through the refugee system. Do you know how long it takes to get resettled? How much bureaucracy you have to deal with? And only fewer than 1% of refugees actually get resettled in a permanent place of safety.

Sarah McConnell: Really? What happens to the rest, the 99%?

Christy K.: The 99% live in limbo. They're living in refugee camps, which are supposed to be temporary but I think the average length of stay now in a camp is 12 years. Entire generations of people are growing up in this state of limbo and uncertainty without any state protection.

Sarah McConnell: You've said 70 million. Where are 70 million people across the globe mostly in terms of living in limbo like this?

Christy K.: Yeah. Well, among the 70 million displaced people about 26 million are classified as refugees. 80% of the refugees are in developing countries. They're in places like Pakistan, Lebanon, Uganda. Places without the kinds of robust resources we have in the United States for example. In fact, in Lebanon, which is a tiny country, one in six people is a refugee. They have shown immense hospitality.

Sarah McConnell: Is there a deep history of generosity to the other and the stranger in those cultures?

Christy K.: Oh, yes. There is such a deep tradition of hospitality to strangers across the world, and I've experienced that myself just as a traveler. But when you look into some of the older wisdom, traditions of the world, religious traditions, you see this hospitality ethic articulated in so many ways. Loving the neighbor as yourself because you were once also a stranger and an alien in a foreign land. So the ethics are very deep. I think the challenge is that today the ability to offer hospitality to others is constrained by state control, right? Nation states get to determine how many people come in, and who gets to come in. Whose life is valuable enough to the state to come in. Local communities aren't equipped now with that moral agency to actively welcome those in need.

Sarah McConnell: As a religious scholar, where do you find religion comes into play most with refugees? People nowadays aren't seeking in particular relief from religious persecution, though they may represent a religion.

Christy K.: I'm fascinated by the ways religion shows up and how refugees are coping with their journeys and their trauma. It's incredible what creativity and resiliency refugees are showing and religion's a part of that creativity and how they're making meaning out of their unimaginably difficult experiences. One way that religion shows up among Central American migrants who are coming through Mexico seeking asylum at the United States border is among those who are catholic we're seeing them seek departure rituals from their priests to have some sort of blessing to send them on their way. Some divine source of mercy and care. We're also seeing a lot of this migrant community following pilgrimage paths on their way. So going to shrines, praying to saints, sometimes exchanging miracle stories when they feel that they have been miraculously saved from danger, creating these religious pathways as they approach their destination of safety.

Sarah McConnell: It's so interesting, because South American and Latin American refugees are as a group so much more likely to be Christians and to be practicing and churchgoing members of their faith.

Christy K.: Yes. They are. Somehow that religious kinship with many Americans sometimes has and sometimes has not been a compelling factor in how Americans are viewing the crisis at the border right now.

Sarah McConnell: What have you learned about whether churches or churchgoing people are embracing these migrants or turned off by them?

Christy K.: There are a lot of Christian groups that are leading activism and humanitarian efforts on behalf of these neighbors. We have the US Conference of Catholic Bishops that's been very involved in immigrant advocacy all the way over to evangelical Christians and everyone in between. But every human being who is religious also has political views and also has an economic situation and a cultural situation. Sometimes religion is not the dominant factor that might determine one's actions, so we see a variety of responses.

Sarah McConnell: What do you find when it comes to arriving in a new nation when people from other areas are forming communities, how much does their religion play a role in forming new communities?

Christy K.: It can play a very significant role. Many religions travel well. When you're uprooted from everything else you know you look for some kind of system of continuity or of connection. For many people that is religion. Communities take different shapes, they remake themselves. People might rise to leadership positions in new communities whereas they weren't as involved in their religion before. In some cases you see people interpreting their resettlement opportunity as a religious opportunity to spread their tradition.

Christy K.: Tibetan refugees living in India have been performing these large empowerment rituals at holy sites in India. Places where the Buddha lived and taught as a way of ritually reactivating the spiritual energy of those places. Tibetans are using their experience of exile from their homeland, their birth homeland, to recreate this space of India as their new spiritual homeland and to actually change the sacred character of the terrain. It's incredible what people are doing.

Sarah McConnell: What about long after communities have settled in new places? Long after Jews fled to America and formed new lives and community here did religious practices change at all?

Christy K.: Yes. The taste of exile is very bitter. Exemplified in the passover plate with those bitter herbs. Jews are still remembering that today. They're remembering it from thousands of years ago when their ancestors first fled Egypt as slaves. They're remembering it on behalf of refugees today. Some Jewish communities in America are adding a pineapple to their passover seder plate to commemorate the symbol of welcome and hospitality that they want to extend to other refugees. Another practice I've learned about is placing shoes outside your door on passover night as a reminder of that experience of exile from Egypt, which was so long ago, but it's still fresh. And the Jewish community has been in the United States very active in humanitarian efforts for refugees and advocacy because they remember. It was so recent.

Sarah McConnell: You grew up in Harrisonburg, Virginia, which is an area in the Blue Ridge Mountains that has become one of the great resettlement areas by church agencies and by the government and private nonprofits.

Christy K.: Harrisonburg is usually allotted as a really successful example of refugee integration, but it doesn't mean it's easy. There are people in every town across America who are fearful of those that they don't know much about. I think we have an ongoing obligation to help educate our communities about the world and these differences that others are bringing to our communities to make sure that we continue to have positive community dynamics. It's an ongoing process.

Christy K.: For example, a few years ago when the local mosque was vandalized hundreds of people from the community, all different faith groups, came to help clean up the graffiti. I think Harrisonburg has been a microcosm of what American is or could be, right? We have fear, but we also have incredible resiliency and warmth.

Sarah McConnell: Christy, thank you for sharing your insights with me on With Good Reason.

Christy K.: Thank you so much, Sarah.

Sarah McConnell: Christy Kilby is a professor of religion at James Madison University, which is holding a conference on religion and migration October 3rd. Coming up next, what happens to the churches when new people move into old neighborhoods?

Sarah McConnell: Many parts of cities in the south are undergoing gentrification. Church Hill in Richmond, Virginia is one such historically African-American neighborhood that has seen an influx of mostly young white people moving in. Annie Blazer, a professor of religious studies at William and Mary, is looking at how congregations, both black and white, approach the challenges of urban gentrification. She says it's even spurred some churches to change their religious missions.

Sarah McConnell: Annie, you live in an area that was once white, became African-American predominantly, and is now re-gentrifying. More young white people are moving into the area.

Annie B.: Yes. It's called Church Hill because there's an old church there called Saint John's On a Hill. That's the church where Patrick Henry gave the famous give me liberty or give me death speech. But in that neighborhood there are 31 churches and a mosque. Most of the churches are African-American, but when the churches were first founded they housed white congregations. Then most of these congregations sold their buildings to African-American congregations after World War II. With the successes of the civil rights movement, school integration, neighborhood integration, a lot of white folks with means left neighborhoods that were becoming African-American to move to the suburbs.

Sarah McConnell: So the white flight from this area also brought about an influx of African-American neighbors who peopled these formally white churches.

Annie B.: Yes. So they bought the buildings, and what's interesting now is these buildings are historically registered sites in Richmond and these congregations are getting older, which means they're also getting poorer, and they don't have the resources to keep up the historical requirements to have these beautiful buildings. So one example is this church wanted to put in an elevator for their aging congregants that have trouble with stairs, and the permit process was horrendous for them because the building is a historical landmark.

Sarah McConnell: I'd love to hear you tell the story of Lee Baptist Church. This is a white baptist church that was built around the time of the civil war.

Annie B.: Yes. They were a thriving congregation throughout the last 19th century. Then around the time that all of the white folks were leaving church hill they had a very charismatic pastor who said, "We're not leaving. We're going to stay here. Trust me, the white people are going to come back." So that church has a very small regularly attending membership at this point. When I visited there were about 12 people in the congregation. It's a huge building. A beautiful old building with an organ, but it was sparsely attended.

Sarah McConnell: What problem do they face? Do they think they can make a go of it?

Annie B.: No. They don't think they can make a go of it. When Lee Street Baptist first formed in the 1850s this was a white baptist church and they were a slave holding population. When they built their sanctuary they allowed the enslaved Africans that they owned to worship in the basement of the church. The way that Lee Street Baptist tells the story is that this enslaved population organized and formed their own church called Fourth Baptist Church. And the way that some of the members of Fourth Baptist Church tell the story is that the Africans worshipping in the basement were just too loud and got kicked out. Either way, they formed a new church called Fourth Baptist Church and they built a new building about half a mile further north. That church remains to this day and is thriving, which stands in stark contrast to Lee Street Baptist which has a declining membership.

Sarah McConnell: So Lee Street Baptist Church you've discovered has actually wanted to give its beautiful, old, giant church building to Fourth Street Baptist.

Annie B.: Yes, but it's actually a complicated story. And so they have this beautiful old building that was built in the 1860s, and they first offered it to an interracial congregation in the neighborhood called East End Fellowship. East End Fellowship is a really interesting worship group because they are really about 50/50 black and white, which is quite rare to find in a congregation. They worship currently in the Robinson Theater, which is a historically African-American theater that's been repurposed as a community center.

- Sarah McConnell: That's so interesting. Tell me more about this integrated fellowship, East End Fellowship. Are they unique?
- Annie B.: They certainly are in my experience. I have found when you encounter an interracial church you still end up with a dominating racial presence that usually matches the pastor of the church. So if you have a white pastor, you end up with a predominantly white congregation. Likewise, if you have a black pastor you wind up with a predominantly black congregation. There's still a sense of a dominating racial group. East End Fellowship really is split in a way that's quite interesting to me, and they've also decided conscientiously to have their leadership be racially integrated as well. The head pastor is black. The assistant pastor is white. The majority of the leadership are black women. They're much younger than the average congregation. The average age for their member is 27, which is very young.
- Annie B.: The way they went about creating new worship music was really interesting. They recruited young people from all over the country from very different backgrounds to work together to write worship music that's oriented towards social justice.
- Sarah McConnell: Why didn't they just stick with the classic hymns most people have been singing?
- Annie B.: So they really felt that white church music and black church music spoke to different demographics, and they needed to find a new kind of music that would speak to the Black Lives Matter generation and the white people that are re-urbanizing Church Hill.
- Sarah McConnell: What did they notice about how hymns sung in white churches are typically oriented and how that's different from hymns sung in black churches?
- Annie B.: So the founder of this internship told me that worship music in white spaces tends to be about the fall, and worship music in black spaces tends to be about salvation, but there's just not any worship music about social justice.
- Sarah McConnell: That's fascinating, isn't it?
- Annie B.: It's amazing. So they started it more than five years ago now and they've been graduating 20 or so songwriters every summer from this program. Then these people are taking these same music writing skills to their churches across the country.
- Sarah McConnell: What challenges do you hear have been harder to overcome for them? If any.
- Annie B.: They started this organization with a radically local focus. To be a mission focused church, an outreach focused church to the neighborhood of Church Hill. But that neighborhood is changing. When they started their church they

thought of their target population as predominately impoverished African-Americans. But now you have a lot of middle class white folks and middle class black folks that are moving into Church Hill. One struggle for them is if we maintain this radically local focus does that mean that we actually need to focus on middle class folks instead of the population that brought us to the neighborhood in the first place?

Sarah McConnell: In addition to all this gentrification, there's great change going on in demographics in churches. What do you think Sunday morning feels like in your neighborhood now that might be different from how it was in the past?

Annie B.: Oh, it's definitely much older. When you walk into a church, almost any church in Church Hill, you will see people in their 60s, and 70s, and 80s. You do not see a lot of young people white or black. There are, I would say, two congregations in the neighborhood that explicitly cater to younger whiter people. Those are thriving. Those are full, but most churches are older. And they really struggle with this. This is something they talk about all the time. How do we get young people in here?

Sarah McConnell: What about African-American churches? It sounds like Fourth Baptist is thriving, but that's mostly an older congregation?

Annie B.: It's mostly an older congregation. What you see is a trend of grandparents bringing their grandchildren to church. There's an investment in thinking about the upcoming generation, but most congregants have told me about a skipped generation where their children are not interested in church but they're trying to interest their grandchildren in church.

Sarah McConnell: Annie Blazer, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

Annie B.: It's my pleasure.

Sarah McConnell: Annie Blazer is a professor of religious studies at William and Mary. Major support for With Good Reason is provided by the law firm of McGuire Woods and by the University of Virginia health system. Using advanced cardiac imaging to better diagnose conditions before they become serious health issues, uvahealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Elliot Majerczyk and Cass Adair. Jeannie Palin handles listener services. For the podcast, go to withgoodreasonradio.org. All of us at Virginia Humanities are mourning the loss of a dear colleague and friend, Karin Wood. Karin was director of Virginia Indian Programs, an accomplished poet, and a member of the Monacan tribe. Our hearts go out to her family.