



The shadow of the lynching tree

by Belita Mitchell

The Sankofa Journey brought me face to face with a part of my history, my family history, and the history of this nation in a vivid and instructive manner.

In one of the resource pieces we were assigned as preparation for the journey, I became familiar with the phrase “the shadow of the lynching tree.” This was the beginning of the instructive and enlightening aspects of what would follow. Over the period of three nights and four days, I gained additional clarity about the “bubble” that has been a part of my lifelong existence.

As a native-born, black female raised in rural southern Illinois and urban Detroit, I was raised by parents and grandparents who taught me that we were a people group in the minority, subject to experience injustice and inhumanity merely because of the color of our skin. The “bubble” included that caution, added to the reality of 246 years of slavery, 100 years of legal segregation, and the prevalence of institutional and systemic racism into this millennium.

I’ve come to identify my bubble as “the shadow of the lynching tree.” This phrase is used as a metaphor to signify the importance of raising awareness about the legacy of racial injustice in America. No matter how far I’ve traveled in life and the achievements I’ve accomplished, this shadow lingers and follows my every path.

It was deeply meaningful for me to share some of my reflections and experiences with my traveling partner, sister Nancy Heishman. During our travels to several significant sites of the Civil Rights movement, I was reminded of living through those days and it was cathartic for me to share intimately with her about those experiences. These were desperately needed conversations I had not previously been able to share.

While living through many of these past times, I was careful not to get too deeply involved, lest I get drowned in the water hosing used by “Bull” Conner in 1963, or go up in the flames of the Watts riots in 1965. The journey included a rich diversity of ethnicity, socio-economic



“**SANKOFA**” is a Ghanaian term for looking back to learn from the past. It's represented by a bird carrying a precious egg on its back. The Evangelical Covenant Church's Sankofa Journeys are intentional prayer journeys of cross-racial pairs, who spend Friday to Monday on a bus, traveling to civil rights sites across the South. Seven Brethren have participated so far; Congregational Life Ministries is providing funding for additional participants. Contact Gimbiya Kettering at gkettering@brethren.org.

Above: Through thousands of jars of soil from lynching sites, a new National Memorial for Peace and Justice developed by Equal Justice Initiative remembers victims of lynchings. Right: Edmund Pettus Bridge was the site of Bloody Sunday in 1965, a turning point in the Civil Rights movement.

Joshua Brockway



Joshua Brockway

backgrounds, and intergenerational status. This added depth to our discussions, further expanding the meaningful impact of the experience.

I'm prone to say and believe that nothing happens by accident in God's realm; God's timing is perfect. Over the past two years, I've had an increasing awareness and growing urgency for the need to add my voice to the cause of seeking racial righteousness and engaging in the conversation regarding racial injustice. The opportunities for this engagement have been swift and consistent beginning with the 2017 Annual Conference and moving forward.

Jim Wallis, author of *America's Original Sin*, heightened this urgency in his keynote address at Inspiration 2017, the National Older Adult Conference. He issued a prophetic and deeply personal call to action for overcoming the racism so ingrained in American society. Wallis spoke to us candidly about crossing a new bridge toward racial justice and healing. For me, the Sankofa Journey was that bridge.

I am grateful for the compassion and curiosity of sister

Nancy as together we wrestled with the realities of our divergent backgrounds and experiences. At the same time, we acknowledged a common love for Christ and the church. Throughout the entire time, we were encouraged to pray, reflect, and journal about our thoughts and feelings. We were challenged to consider how we might contribute to the conversation the church needs to have regarding racial reconciliation.

Stay tuned. I believe the Holy Spirit will guide us in this quest. 

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A fierce togetherness

by Nancy Heishman

I am deeply grateful for the accompaniment of sister **Belita Mitchell** in a recent Sankofa Journey. While we have been colleagues in ministry for years, this journey afforded me the opportunity to look at our society’s racial history and my own experience through her eyes and those of our companions. The view was profoundly enlightening.

What words can capture such an intense experience of journeying through a weekend together as a busload of cross-racial pairs to explore the legacy of racial injustice that is an integral part of our shared American history? For me it was sobering and inspiring, eye-opening and heart-breaking, deeply sorrowful yet hopeful.

It became immediately apparent to me at the beginning of the journey through the deep South that my whiteness had spared me from learning some of the most painful facts of American history, particularly the 75 or so years from the end of the Reconstruction in 1877 to the beginning of the Civil Rights era. This was an era of legally supported terrorism for black Americans by means of forced labor, nearly 5,000 lynchings, and widespread white supremacist oppression.

The resources we studied opened my eyes to the lingering effects of centuries of systematic and institutional racism in this country. The weight and emotional burden of racial injustice that people of color carry on a daily basis is something I have unfortunately been able to avoid understanding.

This journey helped me to begin to more fully appreciate the truth of the deep, painful daily suffering of African-American persons. Sister Belita’s willingness to share about



Courtesy of Nancy Heishman

Belita Mitchell (left) and Nancy Heishman.

her daily experiences of carefully and continually navigating between cultures impacted me greatly.

While I have moved in and out of various cultural settings during my life, it has always been with the advantage of my whiteness. Knowing that and having time to reflect on it with a busload of wise and courageous companions was a rare gift. Visionary organizations such as the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Ala., strive to help communities remember and learn of their painful past in order to find healing. As writer James Baldwin expressed in the film *I Am Not Your Negro*, “not all that is faced can be changed but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

What next, I ask myself, now that I have stuck my proverbial toe in the waters of a deeper awareness? Will I allow my faith to move my feet to action and cause some good trouble for God’s kingdom, as I heard Rep. John R. Lewis challenge the crowd in 2013 at the 50th anniversary of Dr. King’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail? Will I simply be a well-intentioned white leader focused more on my own safety and comfort and that of the institutions I serve rather than on courageous and bold Jesus-inspired prophetic actions for racial justice? Will I stay committed to being on the journey toward racial righteousness all my life by inviting honest conversations and building communities across racial and ethnic divides?

In the midst of all the pressures that threaten to divide the church as well as society, may Jesus’ followers embrace their urgent calling to join the Holy Spirit’s passion to create unity, end racial injustice, and draw humanity together in a fierce togetherness that reflects the beautiful will of the Creator. 

Nancy Heishman is director of ministry for the Church of the Brethren and a former Annual Conference moderator.

Resources

Banished: American Ethnic Cleansing: www.pbs.org/independentlens/banished/film.html

Equal Justice Initiative website on lynching in America: lynchinginamerica.eji.org

Drew G.I. Hart, *Trouble I’ve Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* (Herald Press, 2016)

James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Orbis Books, 2013)

The books are available from Brethren Press.

The stories we tell

Race, place, and the gospel

A conversation with Drew Hart by Joshua Brockway

Last July, I boarded a bus with Drew Hart. For four days we would travel together to Birmingham, Selma, Montgomery, Jackson, and Memphis on a Sankofa Journey, “an intentional, cross-racial prayer journey that seeks to assist disciples of Christ on their move toward a righteous response to the social ills related to racism.” Below is an excerpt from our follow-up conversation.

Josh Brockway: You’ve done trips similar to Sankofa before. What was unique about this trip?

Drew Hart: The intentionality around building relationships and dialogue is built into the Sankofa trip itself. They don’t want you experiencing all that is going on in the trip without talking with others about it.

Brockway: Relationships and intentional dialogue, both one-on-one and in the whole group, were powerful. It helped show the thought processes as well as the general emotional response.

You and I talked about the difference when white folk would share and when people of color would share. Noticing those differences and allowing that to happen and not manage it was a helpful experience. I feel like undoing how racism and supremacy impacts us is like detox. You have to go through, at least as a white person, these steps of embarrassment, guilt, and frustration in order to undo it.

Hart: I think you are right. At times, I could be frustrated with how people are processing everything, and at the same time they have to go through their own journeys. We are in different places, and coming at racism from different starting points. The fact that you can see people on the journey and see them processing what it means for them is very significant.

Brockway: The way the Sankofa journey is structured is a helpful model. I mean, you can’t get away! You are in this conversation from the moment you walk in the building for orientation to the moment you load into your car on the way out.

How has this trip impacted your work, your writing, your teaching?

Hart: I have been doing a lot of thinking about race and place the last couple of years. And then more recently, lots of conversations have erupted in the wider society about Confederate statues and monuments. There was something interesting about going on this trip to these places and seeing these markers to the Confederacy. A particular story is

being told in that land everywhere you go. We had really good conversations around the Edmund Pettus Bridge and what we should do with that.

At the same time, we went to the Equal Justice Initiative, where they are quite literally taking seriously the stories that are being told in Alabama and Montgomery, and trying to tell a different story by erecting monuments to lynching.

I guess all of that didn’t necessarily change my views. It concretized my thinking and gave more clarity about how this shapes people’s lives. We are being told stories and socialized into these myths, so to speak, and we aren’t even aware of it.

Brockway: We should note that we went on the Sankofa Journey in July, and the large gathering of white supremacists in Charlottesville happened just a week or so later. It made our conversation about the Pettus bridge being named after a confederate general who was later elected to the Senate on a racist platform more important.

Even before this trip I was wrestling with this idea of place, but it became so clear just standing in those places—walking through the 16th Street Baptist Church sanctuary, walking across to Kelly Ingram Park, and across the bridge. Standing in those places has a very different feel to it.

Once you know the story—both the dominant narrative and the stuff you don’t get told in history class—and stand there, it felt like thin places. It’s like that Celtic phrase—these are “thin places” where the trauma of the events makes the distance in time go away. You can almost hear the things that went on there. Place matters.

And then standing in Equal Justice Initiative and seeing those jars of the soil from the locations of documented lynchings was an unreal experience.

EJI has extended their study of lynching beyond the deep South. The predominant places for lynching outside of the South were the Northwest Territory states—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri. I was just in a setting where I showed EJI’s interactive map, and I showed Illinois, where there were 56 lynchings. Then I showed the picture of a lynching in Marion, Ind., and asked, “Where do you think this was? This is a North problem too.”

Hart: That’s good. I have often seen that challenge, especially with white northerners as they narrate themselves. There is often a discourse that this is a white southerner problem.



The book *The Condemnation of Blackness* looks at urban northern cities in the early 20th century as black people are fleeing and moving from southern to northern cities and how they were responded to. It is a really careful and intricate historical story being told—a lot of it in Philadelphia, which is my former home.

It is helpful for folks to pay attention to how those spaces practiced race. It horrifies my students, who were never aware of the history. How do we make sense of our own land and places without just making it a white southern story?

Brockway: I'll name my own baggage around this conversation. That dominant narrative, or what you said is identity shaped by the dominant culture, cuts across the liberal and conservative spectrum. This isn't a progressive issue or a conservative problem. No, this is all across! There's no pass on this one. There's no get-out-of-jail-free card because you have the right theology. Honestly, I understand how that is unsettling.

Hart: The kind of stories that we tell are powerful. We

have to talk about different kinds of stories, like the stories that show the more overt kind of racism that everyone is shocked and horrified by is actually much more embedded in American culture and our everyday lives. And then on the other hand, in my book I tell a lot of stories that are not just the shocking or horrifying stories, but the everyday little moments that reveal our lives.

That is very powerful. It can help people see that we have all been socialized, we have all been formed. We've all been disciplined by something, and it's not always Jesus.

Brockway: That aspect of story is key. What made the Sankofa Journey so powerful is the ability for the group to express themselves and give a window into their personal story.

Hart: You have layers of stories happening during the Sankofa Journey: the big story of thinking about US history, many stories in these places where you are going, you're sharing stories with your bus partner, and the collective stories on the bus. There are layers of stories that are hopefully unraveling the lies that we have been told.

180 years of statements on race

by Gimbiya Kettering

The Church of the Brethren has formal statements on slavery

or racism as early as 1837 and as recently as September 2017. There are also transcripts of sermons and published articles that articulate a scriptural and faith-based response to racial turmoil at various points of our history. As a denomination, we were against slavery and in favor of civil rights; Martin Luther King Jr. even had an office in First Church of the Brethren in Chicago.

Yet, we also must recognize that, when there is a preponderance of queries on a similar theme, we are not of one mind. There are statements about those who own slaves, those who hired slaves, and those who have been freed from slavery. There are recommendations for the behavior of individuals and for changes in the structure of the denomination.

Despite statements that affirm Christ's teachings that there is "neither Jew nor Gentile," queries rise again and again as we struggle with the fundamental command of Christ to love.

In the work of Congregational Life Ministries, love takes many forms but is unified in this: that vital congregations can transform our world by reaching out with genuine hospitality to people wherever they are. This is not new work. It was the work of the apostles, John the Baptist, Saul who became Paul, and the prophets of the Old Testament. It was the work of Alexander Mack, Brethren who spread across the United States, and missionaries and volunteers who traveled the world.

In our history of recorded conferences and publications, the Church of the Brethren has wrestled at various times in American history with how best to be Christ's disciples. We can ask of our forefathers and mothers:

What did you believe about the worth of people during slavery? What did you do?

Did you speak up loudly or have a quiet, neighborly witness? Or did you look away?

What was your witness during the Civil War? The Civil Rights movement?

Did you risk your safety to be sanctuary with the Underground Railroad? To stop a lynching?

Did you protest? Did you preach? Did you pray?

Did you know what was happening? Were you afraid?

What did the still, small voice of God call you to do?

These are also the questions that our children and grandchildren, the inheritors of our faith, will ask of us.

Brockway: Part of the storytelling aspect is also the re-storying that is the gospel. The good news is something that both incorporates us into a new, different story, but it's also something that disciplines us. And by discipling, I am saying it transforms the way we live and move in the world, and transforms the relationships we have. As we tell the gospel, as we tell that story, it is, in a way, undoing the lies. But also, it is discipling us into a new story.

Hart: And then, pushing it one step further: As we tell that story and it forms us, we think about Jesus, who is constantly turning to those who are most vulnerable, hearing their stories, and caring about what's going in their lives. It should be turning us towards the stories of those who are the most vulnerable, and those who have been most harmed in our societies. And giving us space and courage to tell more truthful stories, even when it feels scary and unsettling. 📖

Drew Hart is assistant professor of theology at Messiah College in Mechanicsburg, Pa., and author of *Trouble I've Seen* (Herald Press). Joshua Brockway is director of spiritual life and discipleship for the Church of the Brethren.



Josh Brockway (in cap) and his Sankofa partner, Drew Hart (to Brockway's right), stand with their group in front of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham.

Since 2015, the US has witnessed and recorded rising levels of racial anxiety and hate crimes in communities across the country. This is a significant time. We need to be able to fully articulate and live out our faith so that our ministry can reach those whose communities are affected by the evils of racism and white supremacy, which seek to separate us from God's vision of all people before his throne. It is a vision that we have shared throughout the history of our denomination. We have the opportunity to inspire faithful discipleship based on Christ's teachings and fulfill our own statements.

Below are excerpts from those statements. The full texts can be found through links on the Intercultural Ministries page at www.brethren.org/intercultural/resources.

■ **1835 Annual Conference (Cumberland County, Pa.)**

Article 1. How it is viewed to receive colored people into our church? Considered, to make no difference on account of color.

Article 12. How it is considered to receive colored persons into the church? It was considered, that

inasmuch as the gospel is to be preached to all nations and races, and if they come as repentant sinners, believing in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and apply for baptism, we could not consistently refuse them. But inasmuch we receive our fellow members with the holy kiss, and there is a repugnance in some of our white members to salute colored persons in this manner, the colored members should bear with that weakness, and not offer the kiss to such weak members until they become stronger, and make the first offer, etc.

■ **1837 Annual Conference (Rockingham County, Va.)**

Article 10. How it is considered if a brother buys and keeps slaves, and sells them also again? Considered, that it could in no wise be justified in a brother, according to the gospel.

■ **1845 Annual Conference (Roanoke, Va.)**

Article 2. In regard to receiving colored members into the church, it was considered, to leave it to the counsel of every individual church,

as it is done in all cases; but if colored persons are once received as members into the church, the members should be at liberty to salute them in like manner as white members, at the same time having patience with those who may be weak in the faith, and can not do so. The assembled elders, however, consider it as the more perfect way, to which we all should strive to come, viz., that love, which makes no distinction in the brotherhood, in this respect. (See James 2:1-10.)

Article 3. In regard to hiring slaves, it was considered but little better than purchasing and holding slaves, and that it would be best for a follower of Jesus Christ to have nothing at all to do with slavery.

■ **1845 Special General Conference (Elkhart County, Ind.)**

Article 3. Whether a brother has a right to withdraw the kiss from a brother without the decision of the church? Considered, that inasmuch as our Savior directs us in a case of offense to use all means to *gain* our brother (see Matt. 18), the gospel allows no brother to withdraw the kiss until the church has so decided.



■ 1846 Special General Conference (Washington County, Tenn.)

How, and whether a brother can be received who had been expelled from the church for selling and bill-of-saleing away his slaves; and afterwards wishes to be received again? Considered, that such a brother cannot be reinstated until he has used every exertion in his power to liberate them, and make full satisfaction to the church.

■ 1849 Annual Conference (Somerset County, Pa.)

Article 31. How are we to conduct, with colored members, at communions? Considered, that this ought to be left to the individual churches, in which such members are, only that these ought not to be debarred from the Lord's table, on account of their color.

■ 1849, Samuel Weir, first African American elder, from an 1897 tract "The Life of Elder Samuel Weir," by Landon West

And after the trial sermon was delivered, the members present were asked if they were willing that the colored brother should take part in the ministry, and their voices were unanimous in his favor. He was then given his charge as a minister, and instructed to go to his own race and hold meetings wherever appropriate.

■ 1963 Annual Conference (Champaign-Urbana, Ill.), "The Time Is Now To Heal Our Racial Brokenness"

The time is now to understand that racial reconciliation is built only on the foundation of racial justice, that justice delayed is justice denied. The time is now to heal every broken race relationship and every segregated institution in our society—every church, every public accommodation, every place of employment, every neighborhood, and every school. Our

goal must be nothing less than an integrated church in an integrated community.

■ 1963 Annual Conference, statement by Tom Wilson

What is at stake in this growing racial conflict? Apart from the restoration of human dignity and worth, and the need for bringing relief to those who have suffered long and patiently at the hand of injustice, nothing less than the integrity of the church itself



is at stake. The world, and more specifically, the Negro communities, have grown weary of the church's lofty pronouncements and pious platitudes. They await our answer today. They want to see, to feel, and to taste of the redemptive love of Christ.

■ April 25, 1968, MESSENGER, obituary for Martin Luther King Jr., by editor Kenneth I. Morse

Who was he? He was the Amos of his time. To a prosperous, hardhearted people, more attuned to property values than human values, more spiritual and law abiding than just and compassionate, he pleaded, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

■ 1975 Annual Conference (Dayton, Ohio), "Criminal Justice Reform"

Most of our correctional centers—prisons, jails, and lock-ups—dehumanize and brutalize individuals,

especially those who are poor, members of minority ethnic groups and generally the helpless members of our society.

■ 1982 Annual Conference (Wichita, Kan.), "Addressing the Concern of Undocumented Persons and Refugees in the United States"

In the biblical tradition the alien is under the special protection of God. The alien is among those who receive the special protection because they do not have land. This means that the alien is to be dealt with in the same manner as the native. This is true of religious rights and of civil rights. Furthermore, that which is set aside for the alien, the widow, and the orphan (such as the gleanings of the crops) is not an act of charity but an obligation on the part of Israel, who, in truth, is an alien in God's land.

■ 1989 Annual Conference (Orlando, Fla.), "Inclusion of Ethnicity into the Church of the Brethren"

The vision of greater ethnic participation in the life of the denomination is a church growth issue as well as a justice issue. . . . The vision is more than something outside of us. Rather the vision empowers us. The best example of this is found in the Pentecost story (Acts 2). The ethnic diversity and the challenge for inclusiveness were a witness to the work of the Holy Spirit then as today. We strive for a denomination with passion for the gospel to all people. Pentecost without passion is not Pentecost. Diversity without passion will not happen.

■ 1994 Annual Conference (Wichita, Kan.), "Community: A Tribe of Many Feathers"

Unity and reconciliation in Christ are central teachings of the New Testament. . . . We find people from different racial, cultural, or religious

groups, as well as former enemies, brought together in Christ.

Jesus exemplified this commitment to inclusiveness in a variety of ways. He gathered a diverse inner circle that included tax collectors for the Roman government, Zealots, and fishermen. He taught his disciples to love others, including those considered enemies. In his ministry he reached out to welcome Samaritans, Romans, and others from beyond Israel.

■ **1991 Annual Conference (Portland, Ore.), “Brethren and Black Americans”**

Because racism is built into our way of life, it is extremely difficult to unmask it and honestly face the radical changes that need to be made in ourselves and our institutions if it is to be eradicated. . . .

The Church of the Brethren has affirmed that war is sin. It is time we acknowledged racism as sin—sin against God and against our neighbors—and mount a concerted effort to combat it. If we do not take on this struggle, there is little hope we will ever become an authentic multi-racial, multi-cultural denomination.

■ **2001 Annual Conference (Baltimore, Md.), “Ethnic Representation”**

Standing Committee recognizes that the need for ethnic/minority involvement, regardless of culture, at all levels of the church goes beyond issues of fairness and equal representation but is a necessary movement for the life and vitality of the church in this day and the future.

■ **2007 Annual Conference (Cleveland, Ohio), “Separate No More: Becoming a Multi-Ethnic Church”**

After much prayer, study, research, and deliberation, our committee concluded that one essential part of the answer to that question is for us to be SEPARATE NO MORE. We accomplish this by deliberately and



intentionally moving toward becoming much more intercultural than we currently are. Our reasons for this conclusion are biblically based.

We began with the Revelation 7:9 vision: “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.”

The text goes on to describe the profound worship experience of God’s angels and people of diverse backgrounds. We believe that this vision is not merely a description of God’s church at the end of time, but a revelation of the true intended nature of God’s church in the here and now.

■ **January/February 2015 MESSENGER, “The Ongoing Debate,” by Eric Bishop**

The protests, anger, and frustration go beyond Eric Gardner and Michael Brown. They are about Trayvon Martin and Rodney King as well. But, to some degree, they also are about Emmett Till and James Chaney. The feelings of fear and frustration are so deep that they transcend a single generation. At the root of our problem is that our society does not consider black men to be educated, upstanding human beings. Our society has gone from once viewing black men as property, to today seeing them as thugs and criminals. And so black men in America know that, regarding Gardner and Brown, “There but by the grace of God go I.” Good,

law-abiding black men live with this constantly. Day in and day out, we must choose whether to stay safe or to stand up for our rights and demand to be treated as equal human beings—as men. The latter may get us detained, arrested, beaten, or even killed. But the former doesn’t guarantee safety, either.

■ **July 12, 2016, Congregational Life Ministries statement following the Charleston church massacre, “When Lamentations Are Not Enough”**

In a sense, we are praying for ourselves, a nation caught in a cycle of racialized violence. We are being asked to forgive and to be forgiven, though we barely understand our transgressions.

We Brethren are a people whose Christian faith finds expression through work—by rebuilding homes, building schools, replacing pipes, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and washing feet. Throughout our history, this is often how we have made peace. Today, we do not know how to be peacemakers for our country when the source of the violence seems as unpredictable as a storm—and like a storm, the violence seems destined to come again.

■ **September 2017, Northern Indiana District Conference, “We Reaffirm that Racism Is a Sin Against God and Our Neighbors”**

We confess that we as the church have not taken the lead in transforming the understanding or the agency of racism in our society whether to African Americans or to people of other minorities. We confess our need to recommit to Bible study, prayer, and lament, and to reaffirm the witness of Jesus Christ in response to white supremacists, hate crimes, and an awareness of social injustice; we must connect our faith with our actions. 

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