

Knowing Jesus as he is

Reimagining a stained history

by Josiah Ludwick

This past April, we welcomed guests from across the country into our worship space at Harrisburg (Pa.) First Church of the Brethren to celebrate the life of our dearly departed pastor Belita Mitchell. It was a wonderful celebration that emphasized the impact of her ministry within our congregation and throughout the denomination. In my remarks, I alluded to the fact that “it brings me great joy to know that she lived to see the first fruits of a process that was a long time in coming.”

Those who have visited our space in the past will agree that our sanctuary is beautifully adorned with stunning stained-glass windows, installed decades ago. However, Pastor Belita was one of the first to begin a conversation about the images, their whiteness, and whether they still suited the faith community we have become. That conversation, begun nearly 15 years ago, fizzled initially before gaining steam in recent years.

For Harrisburg First Church, this has been an extensive journey, full of twists and turns. Some long-time members believed that the windows were fine as is and shouldn't be touched. A newer family, who has now become integrally involved in all facets of our ministry, shared that they almost didn't come back after their first visit because of the windows. When they decided that Harrisburg First would be their faith family, they did so with the understanding that they would continue to press this issue in hopes of moving the conversation forward.

So what's the big deal? Why is it important to be thinking about ethnicity in the images of Jesus in our stained-glass windows? Some may simply say,

“It isn't.” But here at Harrisburg First Church of the Brethren—where our mission says that “we are called to be a Christ-centered, multicultural community in the inner-city, sharing the love, healing, peace, and justice of Christ”—it has become extremely important to have these conversations. Our windows, which once brought people into worship, have for some become a stumbling block impeding their ability to do so.

In 2020, we were blessed to be taught about the whitening of Jesus



This is the original version of the window pictured on the facing page.

over time, and how that coincided with things going on in the world like colonization, chattel slavery, the Doctrine of Discovery, and the concept of manifest destiny. Dr. Drew G. I. Hart led us through a series of sessions in which we looked at who Jesus was, what he taught, and how he lived. We learned about Jesus centering his ministry on those who society saw as less than. We recognized how Jesus sought out the least, the last, and the lost in his society.

Then we looked at early images of Christ, which predated the age of colonization. It is striking to see how imag-

es of Jesus weren't about conquest. They didn't feature the cross at all. There was no standard depiction of Jesus. His likeness was contextual, depending on where the artist or viewers found themselves. In some areas, his complexion was darker. In others, more white European.

It was during the time of Christendom's height that the church had given Christians license to kill in the name of God and to “civilize,” proselytize, and in many cases just take land and property. In the eyes of the church, land inhabited by Indigenous non-Christians was literally considered empty and therefore open for conquest. The subjugation of people as property soon followed, all under the banner of a white Jesus. It was during this time of plundering and enslavement that the idea of whiteness and white supremacy was born.

It follows that Jesus as “White Savior” was constructed, justifying these ideals. This is when we start to see a white Jesus imposed on other cultures as the norm and the accepted depiction of Christ. The problem with a white Jesus is not just the historical inaccuracy. It is also a theological perversion “tying our Savior to the oppressors instead of the oppressed, the crucifiers instead of the crucified,” says Hart. This man who lived, died, and was raised to life, all for the least, last, and lost of his society, had been and still is utilized as “a mascot for social domination.”

Upon learning more about this, our church was eager to move on with this project. Holding space for those who were with us on the journey but were still working through questions they had, we hosted a world café congrega-

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tional discussion. Members shared their thoughts and questions about the iconography of the church and the window project. Through these discussions, we were able to receive feedback about how our members wanted to move this project forward.

We established an iconography team tasked with the creation of an iconography policy for our congregation. This policy states that we will be mindful of the images we use in worship, both in online and printed materials, as well as the art we display in our building. Further, we have decided to be intentional about not displaying Jesus as European. Instead, we use images that align with how we have come to know Jesus. For us, “Jesus came as a person of color, a Mediterranean Jewish peasant under the oppressive empire of Rome,” as our policy states.

In addition to a policy, the team was tasked with inquiring about costs and managing the project to change some of our existing windows. To be transparent about which funds would contribute to the window project, we formed a separate clearing account called the iconography fund and began to raise funds specifically for the window modifications.

To date, we have modified two windows in the front of our sanctuary. Jean Alexander, an African American stained-glass artist from California, designed the new images of Jesus. We worked with a local company for the glass installation.

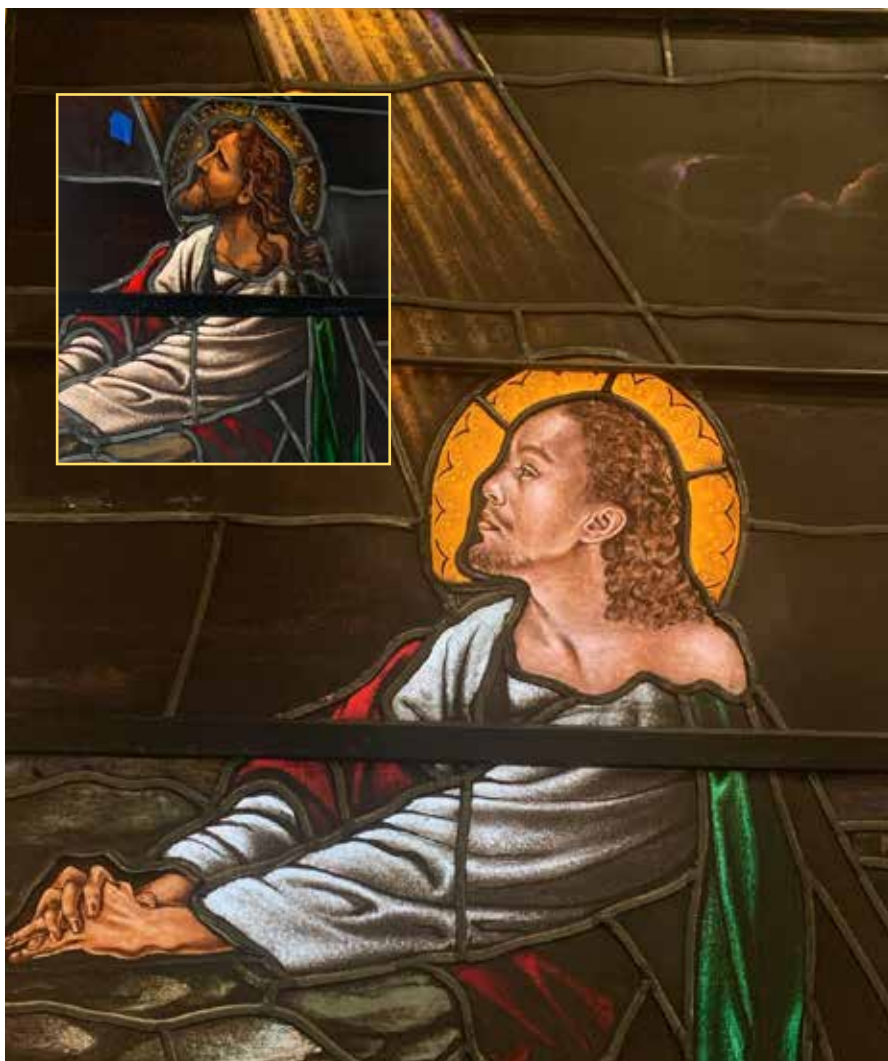
We are just beginning, but the results are beautiful and breathtaking.

We plan to modify other windows in our worship space and dream of one day creating an entirely new biblical stained-glass window scene.

For us, it’s about presenting Jesus as he is. A conversation that started long ago with observations from Pastor Belita, a conversation that died down and lost steam and then was reinvigo-

rated in the past five years, has manifested into something beautiful and new. Once again, I am filled with joy that she was able to see some of it come to be. ❧

Josiah Ludwick is a pastor at First Church of the Brethren in Harrisburg, Pa., and serves on the Mission and Ministry Board of the Church of the Brethren.



Alyssa Parker

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