

A 21st Century Civil Rights Odyssey

SOMETHING
IN THE
WATER

Michael W. Waters

Foreword by Beto O'Rourke

COMPANION GUIDE

BY MICHAEL W. WATERS

Welcome! I am glad you have sought this guide to accompany your reading of *Something in the Water: A 21st Century Civil Rights Odyssey*.

I envision this companion guide being used in multiple contexts, such as congregations, campus ministries, classrooms, and community centers. I hope it will be engaged across race and class, thereby serving as an opportunity for people to think critically about their own social location as it relates to race and the ongoing legacy of white supremacy in America.

The guide is designed to accompany each of the four sections of the book:

- Poems and Petitions
- Dallas: America's Capital of Functional White Supremacy
- Laments and Public Liturgies
- Prophetic Proclamations.

I recommend that groups discussing this book begin by creating hospitable space for an open and honest exchange of opinions. Consider beginning each gathering by agreeing upon conversation covenants. Amid our current coronavirus pandemic, I would encourage virtual or outdoor gatherings whenever possible unless safely gathering with fellow vaccinated persons.

Above all, I hope this guide will stimulate sacred exchanges between human beings. May these holy conversations comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, working within God's mystery to continue bringing about beloved community.

Section One: Poems and Petitions

Is there anything from the reading that surprised you? Is there anything that you want to note as particularly troubling or inspiring? (This is a beginning question for each section. You may want to alter it, depending on how well you know each other. You might begin each week with the questions: What made you cry? What made you angry?)

After reading “Where Hope is Found,” where do you find hope present today?

In “I Resist: A Prayer for a Nation,” which I delivered before the United States House of Representatives, I write, “Grant that we become drum majors of justice, promulgators of peace, architects of an America freed from greed, hate, oppression, racism, suppression, indeed, the very threat of tyranny, replete with liberty and justice for all.” In your opinion, what are the greatest forces at work in America today standing in opposition to achieving liberty and justice for all?

ACTIVITY: Write a poem stating what you believe in. Try to be concise with your wording. Begin each line with “I believe...” If you feel safe in community with others, take turns sharing with each other your poem of beliefs.

Section Two: Dallas: American's Capital of Functional White Supremacy

What are the origins of your city of residence? Whose story is left out in retellings of your city's origins?

The Ku Klux Klan was active across America during the early 20th Century. Even Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts once had an active Klan chapter. Was there a Klan chapter in your city (or the nearest large city to where you reside)? If so, what was the name of the chapter? Who were some of its members? Were any of them elected officials?

If you were to make a list of demands for elected officials to enact that would help bring about greater racial equity in your community, what would that list include? Do you know any organizations or coalitions in your community that are working to address these demands before public officials? Name and list those organizations and coalitions. If you do not know them, look them up.

ACTIVITY: Locate the redlining map of your city (or of the nearest large city to where you reside). Look up the median wages and life expectancy averages for some of the zip codes that were redlined versus some of the zip codes colored in green. Discuss what you discover through your research.

Section Three: Laments and Public Liturgies

The late Ella Baker, a twentieth-century human rights activist and organizer stated, “Remember, we are not fighting for the freedom of the Negro alone, but for the freedom of the human spirit, a larger freedom that encompasses all [humankind].” What freedoms have been gained by non-Blacks because of the freedoms fought for and achieved by Black people in America? How should those who benefited from the freedoms achieved by Black people work to ensure even greater freedoms for Black people are secured?

In the sermon, “Show Up!” I write, “...if we want to be like Jesus, we cannot sit on the sidelines amid trial and tragedy. We, too, must show up with resources to make a difference, our bodies to make a witness, and our prayers to amplify trust in God.” In what ways can you and your community show up in acts of solidarity with the marginalized, oppressed, and persecuted within your community?

In the sermon, “To Hell with H.U.G.S.!” I write, “And in this nation, there is a long tradition of white people weaponizing Black forgiveness to escape accountability and to ease their consciousness.” Dr. King said, “The majority of white America consider themselves sincerely committed to justice for the Negro. But unfortunately, this is a fantasy of self-deception and comfortable vanity.” Do you agree or disagree with these assessments? Why?

ACTIVITY: Write a short public eulogy for someone in your community or in the media who has been murdered due to police violence and/or racial violence. Share the eulogy with others. Discuss what you heard communicated in the eulogy.

Section Four: Prophetic Proclamations

Breonna Taylor was murdered in her own bed by Louisville police on March 13, 2020. The lone police officer indicted in the shooting was not charged in the murder of Ms. Taylor but instead was charged for also firing shots into her walls which endangered the lives of her neighbors. In, "If These Walls Could Talk," I quoted Sojourner Truth, Zora Neale Hurston, and Malcolm X's sentiments that the lives of Black women are the most devalued in America. What should be done to elevate the myriad voices and experiences of Black women in America today?

In "It's Time to Resurrect the Radical King," I write, "What happens to the legacy of a public figure after death reveals more about the contemporary community serving as caretakers of that legacy than the public figure?" What do the ways in which Dr. King's legacy have been sanitized say about America's willingness to confront our past and present brutalization of Black bodies? In what ways can people go about the work of decolonizing the histories that they have learned?

White Christian evangelist, Paula White called for "African angels" to come to America to ensure that Donald J. Trump emerged victorious in the 2020 presidential election after false allegations of widespread voter fraud in America. Angels are messengers of God, and as such, must speak the truth. In what other ways have you witnessed false information being spread through theological or Biblical rhetoric for the purposes of certain groups retaining power over certain groups? How can you work to counter this misinformation in your community?

ACTIVITY: There are over 700 Confederate monuments across the United States. Many cities and states, schools, roads, buildings, and even military bases are named in honor of Confederates. Go online and research what spaces and places in your community continue to honor the legacy of the Confederacy. Identify as many as possible. Then look up which, if any, groups in your community are working to remove these monuments to white supremacy. If you cannot identify any groups, look up what steps must be taken to remove these symbols of white supremacy.

Epilogue:

The book's epilogue is entitled, "Can A Virus Heal America?". In it I write, "If after many centuries, our collective pain and sorrow can press us toward perfecting our union—a perfection that can be accomplished simply by loving our neighbors as ourselves—and if we embrace our network of mutuality, lay aside our needless divisions, and root out the hate that literally threatens the life of our republic, we can move forward as a nation to become a beloved community."

COVID-19 has both exposed racial disparities and has been the backdrop to the largest social movement for justice in American history, the Black Lives Matter movement. Ultimately, do you believe that the pandemic will result in a greater move towards reaching racial equity and racial justice in America, or do you believe that it will further divide and fan the flames of hate and white supremacy? Please explain.