



# WIRED TO LEAD

**Being the Leader  
the Church Didn't Think  
You Could Be**

**SUZANNE NADELL**

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*To young Christian women who are wired to lead  
and to the men who are strong enough to support them.  
You are not alone.*

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# Foreword

When I met Suzanne Nadell, I was struck by her sharp mind, witty humor, and depth of conviction. As we worked on her LifePlan©, she shared her story about being a young journalist, driven and eager to make a mark, yet finding herself conflicted in the newsroom because of both her faith and her gender. But Suzanne is a woman who doesn't back down, who uses challenges as fuel to grow, and who finds ways to lead authentically. Like the pages of this book, you'll also learn that much of Suzanne's story is filled with courage and persistence — and a perspective that resonates deeply with female leaders across all walks of life.

In *Wired to Lead*, Suzanne gives voice to so many of us who have wrestled with the complexities of leadership while feeling out of place in the rooms we were born to occupy. From her rural beginnings to winning an Emmy, she shares the hard lessons learned, the challenges faced, and the victories that have shaped her—and through her words, she invites all of us into a transformative conversation about what it truly means to lead as a Christian woman in today's world.

As someone who has spent decades developing female leaders in the church, I understand firsthand how difficult it can be for women to find their place in spaces often marked by invisible barriers. Whether it's the double standards of leadership, the social norms that still favor men, the unconscious biases that shape our opportunities, or the unique practicalities of the journey of womanhood, the road for women is rarely easy. Suzanne bravely tackles these realities with clarity and compassion, while also offering actionable steps for change.

What I appreciate most about Suzanne's leadership—and this book—is her ability to bridge the gap between personal growth and systemic change, and she does it with such passion! She doesn't just point out the problems; she provides solutions rooted in wisdom, faith, and experience. From dismantling biases like Jesus did to paving the

way for the next generation of women leaders, Suzanne challenges all of us to rethink our assumptions about leadership, gender, the role of church, and what it means to serve in the Kingdom of God.

One of the most compelling aspects of this book is Suzanne's ability to weave together her professional journey and her spiritual convictions. As someone who has worked in newsrooms and faced the pressures of leadership in a high-stakes environment, Suzanne speaks to the lessons she learned outside the walls of the church—lessons that often stand in stark contrast to the silence or resistance she encountered within them. She calls us, as the church, to be better – not by pointing fingers, but by challenging us to think about what it means for the church to become a place where women are *also* mentored, empowered, and championed to thrive in their God-given callings alongside our brothers.

This book is for every woman who has ever felt sidelined, underestimated, or unqualified simply because of her gender. It is also for every man who has the courage to champion the women in his life and his ministry. It is a call to action for the church to step into its role as a catalyst for justice, equality, and Kingdom-building.

I am honored to be cheering on Suzanne in this work and to recommend this book to you. Whether you are a seasoned leader or just beginning your journey, *Wired to Lead* will challenge and inspire you to step into the fullness of your calling. Let these pages ignite in you the same courage she has developed to lead with faith, wisdom, and love in every room God has called you to lead.

To Suzanne: Thank you for your courage, your voice, and your unwavering commitment to justice and truth. The church—and the world—are better because of leaders like you.

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# Introduction

If we introduced ourselves, you'd quickly learn that I love my job as a journalist and that I'm a Christian. Yes, I'm a Christian and a journalist. And yes, it's possible to be both. Am I a unicorn? No, not really. I've been in the industry since 1995; and while some media sources are agenda-driven, many really are driven by truth.

You might wonder: Is it hard to be a Christian and a journalist? Yes, sometimes it *is* hard. But it's just as hard to be a Christian teacher, nurse, or secretary. Being a *Christian* is what can be hard.

Unfortunately, such introductions often lead us off on political and gender tangents. These often stem from theological leanings that isolate and disqualify people—particularly women—from fulfilling their God-given gifts in a world that needs *all* Christians to stand up for the right things.

Inevitably, such tangents lead to another question: *Why would someone like you go into journalism?* For me, it's all connected to the roles of women in the church.

Let me back up and tell you my story. I'm a “preacher's kid,” or PK, from a small town. My dad spent more than forty years in full-time ministry. He was going to be a farmer, but one year into agricultural school he received an anonymous scholarship to a Bible college. My dad loved growing things, but his focus shifted to growing people. Early on, he did some church planting. Later, he led congregations in rural Illinois and Missouri. While I know he aspired to lead bigger churches, he and my mom decided to settle to let their kids grow up in one town. My hometown is Neoga, Illinois. The population is less than two thousand people. I can't speak for what others thought of us, but I never felt like a transplant. It was my home. I had great friends. I love them and their families to this day. In Neoga I will always be referred to as “Suzy Lake” as well as Ron and Donna's daughter and Paul and Sarah's sister.



Neoga is also where I watched my dad lead. My dad doesn't merely *enjoy* growing things (and people): he's really good at it. He's a supporter and a shepherd who knows exactly what to say when people are suffering. He takes pride in researching and writing every sermon he delivers, and he understands "calling on people" (visitation) as fundamental to being a minister. My dad is driven, yet he always feels that there is more he could have done. While I learned and inherited a lot from my mom (a servant's heart, a penchant for gift-giving, and an extremely hard work ethic), I've always been my dad's girl. I look like him; I act like him; and, in his words, I am "wired to lead," just like him.

But as I grew up, it was clear that following in my dad's footsteps was never an option because my church didn't accept having women in leadership. I vividly remember hearing discussions between my dad and people in our congregation focused on whether it was right for women to work part time, let alone lead men in Sunday school. Fortunately, I did see such leadership as I grew up, but in our church women were not deacons or elders and certainly not ministers. I quickly realized my church community believed my only options were to be a preacher's wife or a children's minister. I admit that I resented that and that I spoke (loudly) about not wanting to be a preacher's wife. I didn't want to move around a lot as pastors often do. And I was vocal about not wanting to be a teacher, nurse, or secretary either. In my experience those were the professions of preachers' wives, and since I was not going to be a preacher's wife those were not jobs for me. Though I like kids, it was clear to everyone, including myself, that I should not be a children's minister.

This led me to obsess over one driving question: *What should I be?* In junior high school, I declared I would be an attorney. Then, during my freshman year, a new passion began developing in my heart. I started watching *20/20* with my dad on Friday nights—the old Hugh Downs and Barbara Walters version of *20/20*. I loved Hugh and Barbara, the stories they told, and that they uncovered who was behind bad things.

I decided I was going into TV news, and I made sure everyone knew it.

That summer I attended a Christ in Youth conference with my youth group at Milligan College in Johnson City, Tennessee. Milligan is a Christian liberal arts college affiliated with the movement in which I grew up. One of its early leaders is quoted as describing Christian education as the “hope of the world”—meaning that you need Christians of *all* professions to make an impact. This includes *all* media outlets, not just the Christian ones. The college’s communications program had a broadcasting and journalism concentration. It made an impression on me, and I knew I had found my place. I remember announcing to my youth group friends and leaders that had I decided I was going to attend Milligan and major in communications. And that’s exactly what I did.

It was 1995 when I first set foot in a TV newsroom. While a sophomore at Milligan, one of its alumni gave me my first job as a production assistant. I subsequently became a producer and reporter, all before graduating from college. After graduation I went the producing route, moving across the country and into management. Today I am the news director of the top local station in the country. I’ve seen ratings success and built newsrooms; and my office is filled with Edward R. Murrow, Emmy, and Associated Press awards. Television news embraced me, and I excelled.

As I developed as an industry leader, however, my soul became increasingly unsettled. At one point, resentment set in. Though I am wired to lead, though I knew I had something to offer and I wanted to give my all, my all wasn’t accepted in the church—simply because I am a woman. That was the heart of my struggle. I subconsciously determined that if the church wasn’t going to accept all of me, it wasn’t going to get all of me.

While I did stay connected and continued to grow in faith, my focus became my career. During that time some ill-informed Christians wondered aloud how I could be a Christian *and* be part of the media. But I learned valuable kingdom lessons in newsrooms. Some of those lessons came from fellow Christians there. Other lessons came from people who may not consider themselves to be Christians but believe wholeheartedly in justice, service, and love. Other lessons came simply

by getting out of my comfy bubble of people who think exactly like I do and becoming the hands and feet of Jesus. A great many lessons I learned by messing up and from amazing leaders who understood good principles of leading and who spoke candidly to me in love. They were my advocates. They taught me to do the right thing always. They taught me how to respect others and stay out of compromising situations. And yes, they taught me how to navigate the “boys’ club” of upper management.

Some people might say my life has worked out the way God planned, regardless of those who discouraged me or tried to hold me back. And perhaps it has. Others have told me I have reached more people by leading a newsroom than I would have reached from a pulpit. Perhaps they’re right. But imagine how much the world would change if we empowered our young female leaders in the church as much as we do our boys. Imagine how strong we could be by doubling our people investment. If we championed our girls, that’s what we would be doing.

Sadly, the church was not always there to mentor me in ways in which those outside the church were. And I am not alone. Have you experienced loneliness, confusion, or even abandonment in your church because you are female or because your career path didn’t fit people’s expectations? This isn’t right, and I believe it is high time for the church to be there for you. I believe God has called you to be more than a wife. Women who are born and wired to lead should be able to lead, and they should not have to go outside the church to do so. If God calls you outside the church, great. But perhaps God is calling you to lead *in* the church, just like your fathers, brothers, and male friends.

Dear church, it is time to step up! In newsrooms we are held to a high fact-checking standard. It’s time to fact-check our thoughts, approaches, and even agendas as believers in Jesus Christ and as his ambassadors to the world. It’s time we are there to support and teach young women the lessons I had to learn outside the church’s walls. Let’s enter into a discussion about the lessons I should have learned from the church. And let’s get it right for the girls and women coming after me.

## Together, We Can Make a Change

Throughout this book I share examples and stories of the lessons I learned in the marketplace. I then share action items for you to set these lessons in motion in your personal life or in the ministry to young women in your church.

What I say might prompt you to question your opinion or theology about the biblical role of women in the church. It's okay if you don't agree with me. But I do want to make you think.

This book is primarily for women wired to lead who want to know how they can use their gifts for the glory of God, no matter where their church stands on the issue.

It is written for those who believe there are opportunities for women in the church and in the marketplace and who want to make sure our girls and young women are equipped to embrace them.

In addition to the reflection questions, you'll see the book is broken into four sections. We're going to explore everything from justice and ethics, bridging the gender divide, taking care of yourself, and how you can help be the solution. These are areas in which newsrooms taught me valuable life lessons—lessons I wish I had learned in church. My hope is this book will prompt thought and discussion in small reflection groups and book clubs and among church leaders.

I don't believe it's a coincidence that the “#MeToo” movement along with increased attention to racial injustice are happening within years of each other. It's time for the church to stop being silent about these matters. It is time for the church to hear all the voices in the room. We in the church are alienating our children by limiting what we allow them to do. And when we do so, they will go somewhere else for acceptance. Let's be there for them. Let's hear them. And let's get out of our comfy bubble and make some real change in this world.

I am cheering you on.

— Suzanne

## SECTION 1

# Justice and Ethics According to Jesus

## Dismantle Unconscious Biases Like Jesus Did

I was working in an Atlanta newsroom during the fallout of the murder of George Floyd. A peaceful protest in our city led to a violent night of looting and vandalism, which led to a week of nightly protests. The governor called in the National Guard and police to maintain order. Just as that ended, an unarmed man named Rayshard Brooks died when police shot him as he ran away. The city erupted. The restaurant where the shooting happened was torched.

I have been in other newsrooms when black men were shot and killed by police. I also worked the night eight people died in two cities in metro Atlanta because a man who claimed to be a Christian said he was trying to eliminate sexual temptation by gunning down Asian women.

I have been part of passionate exchanges in newsrooms—exchanges about what information is relevant to a story; what is enough source information to report; what details are not necessary to convey the story adequately; what thoughts, statements, or perspectives only feed a narrative that we already know isn't true.

Then there are the opinions that surface about the particulars. Do past drug charges have anything to do with a man being shot in the back by a police officer? Or do those past drug charges explain why he ran? Does voicing such information plant a narrative seed in the community: “See, he’s a bad guy”? Is bringing up a decade-old prostitution charge involving a woman who was gunned down at a

spa relevant to the story? Or does that feed a narrative created by a system that sexualizes Asian women only to victimize them again, even in their death?

Anyone who thinks such discussions and the decisions on what to report are taken lightly hasn't been in any newsroom of which I've been a part. It's in covering such stories that I've learned about the power of unconscious bias and the devastating role it plays in discriminating against others, usually because of that person's race or gender.

## Lessons Learned about Becoming Aware of Our Biases

It pains me that I did not learn about unconscious biases in the church. I cannot remember a single occasion on which a preacher addressed bias and equality from the pulpit or a Sunday school teacher taught about it in one of my childhood classes. However, I applaud my parents for addressing racial prejudice in our house. My dad, who went to Bible college in a diverse city in the 1960s, had a roommate named Robby, a Black man from Barbados. He and his family were always part of our lives. My dad told stories of situations in which Robby had been discriminated against and how even people my dad loved had reacted poorly when he brought his roommate home to visit. It still grieved him years later, and he made sure we kids knew discrimination is wrong.

My dad had no tolerance for people using certain words around us to describe people of color. I vividly remember him shutting down a family member for using the N-word. My dad was well-versed in the civil rights movement, and when anyone brought someone diverse to our town or church, he made them feel welcome. After those visits, he explained to us the difficulties such folks often face in small, homogenous towns like ours and how he felt for them.

The subject that didn't come up in these conversations was the inequality some people face due to discrimination. The "why" behind people's actions he never discussed, with the exception of explaining why some people described some people of color as "good ones," a description I never heard others use of white people. This created

a narrative in my mind that I did not even realize existed until I was in my forties. Because my parents were very loving, accepting, and understanding compared to many people I knew, I thought I understood how to make a difference and combat racial injustice. Because people in my church opened their arms to Robby and his son when they visited from Barbados, I thought I was surrounded by nice people. I remained oblivious to the discrimination many people of color face every day—even from these otherwise kind, well-intentioned people.

It wasn't until after the 2017 Charlottesville, Virginia, "Unite the Right rally" of white supremacist organizations that I heard a pastor of a church I attended say: "This is wrong." Toney stood on stage that Sunday, after all of America had watched scenes of Nazi flags flying and KKK members marching, and boldly said that as Christians we cannot be silent about this atrocity toward God's children. He was right. Nothing about that rally represented what Jesus taught us to do when he commanded us to love each other as he first loved us. Furthermore, sitting and watching it while claiming that some of the people in the crowds that day were "good people," and that the media members sensationalized the messages of hate, was just as wrong as actively participating in the march itself.

Toney's proclamation of truth sat deeply in my soul. It still does. Yet I was sad I had never heard that message at church camps, conferences, Sunday school, and sermons in the previous four decades of my life. I could attempt to justify my ignorance or lack of backbone by saying I'd grown up in a different time and that back then we honestly did think we were "good people." I could try to justify my inaction by reminding myself that no amount of sadness, remorse, or non-active engagement in hateful or sinful behavior toward others changes what took place in the past. That's the argument to which many well-intentioned, "good" Christians resort when they don't want to consider the truth in the criticism. But moving forward we can—and should—take more responsibility. Let's change what we tell our children in the church today. In fact, let's lead the way in these conversations. Galatians 3:26–28 should be a passage we talk about



with our children so they understand the equality and unity God designed for *all* of humankind. Let's not gloss over it as if it were less important than other aspects of our biblical worldview. Let's really talk about it and help our children (and fellow adults) understand how valuable *everyone* is to God.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (NIV).

I learned the truth of this verse from reporting some difficult news stories, from mistakes I and others have made, and from some people who were brave enough not only to call me out for my unconscious biases but also to help me become better.

While I was leading a newsroom in Pittsburgh, I learned one of my hardest and most valuable lessons about unconscious bias. A very reputable source and numerous confirmations brought to light information in a story involving a young man whom a police officer had shot fatally in the back. The story was already drawing national attention because the teen was running away when the cop took aim. I was returning from vacation at the time, and when I got off the plane a newsroom leader called to tell me they had information that implied the teen had fired a gun at the officer. Journalistically, our team had followed all the steps. We had an appropriate number of sources corroborating our story who were well-connected to the information shared, and we involved multiple managers in reviewing all the information and making the decision to move forward with reporting the story. We had ample information confirming our reporting. Other sources said our information was wrong. But our sources maintained that what they had told was true, and they said those conflicting sources were just caught up in semantics and we had nothing to worry about.

However, some of the information we presented did end up being incorrect. There was no video of the teen firing a gun. I remember

feeling sick to my stomach when this became clear. I remember wondering whether some people could be so dead set on supporting their agenda that they would lie to the media, burning relationships by changing the plot of a story.

That weekend I pulled aside a church elder who is black. I told him what had unfolded. He replied: “I don’t think they intentionally lied to you. People see what they want to see.”

I have kept that powerful statement with me: “People see what they want to see.” It is the perfect definition of unconscious bias.

On the website *Simply Psychology*, writer Charlotte Ruhl explains that the term “implicit bias,” or unconscious bias, was first coined in 1995 by psychologists Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald, who argued that social behavior is largely influenced by unconscious associations and judgments.

Ruhl breaks down this concept into simple explanations she calls “Take Home Messages” for us to understand and manage biases. Implicit biases are unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that can manifest anywhere, but perhaps most harmfully in the criminal justice system, workplace, school setting, and the health care system.

1. Implicit bias is also known as unconscious bias or implicit social cognition.
2. There are many different examples of implicit biases, ranging from categories of race, gender, and sexuality.
3. These biases often arise as a result of trying to find patterns and navigate the overwhelming stimuli in this very complicated world. Culture, media, and upbringing can also contribute to the development of such biases.
4. Removing these biases is a challenge, especially because we often don’t even know they exist, but research suggests hope that levels of implicit biases in the United States are decreasing.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Ruhl, “Implicit Unconscious Bias,” *Simply Psychology*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/implicit-bias.html>.

I appreciate Ruhl's last takeaway. She uses the word "intervention" to describe what might be leading to decreasing levels of biases. Thanks to her, I now understand past conversations with church leaders, coworkers, and friends as interventions in my life. Each of these people was brave enough to call out my actions and demand that I reflect on why I did what I did or believed what I believed.

Recognizing my unconscious biases only happened when I was able to examine my thoughts and actions candidly by opening myself to conversations with people who pushed me to understand how my thoughts—conscious and unconscious—affect my words, decisions, and actions. And now that I *know* better, it's up to me to *do* better.

One area in which I fed a bias in my workplace was my dealings with women's hair. In many newsrooms across the country, natural hair, especially for women of color, is considered unprofessional and even distracting to viewers. I was more lenient than many newsroom leaders in asking that each person be consistent in how they styled their hair. But I hadn't taken the time to understand the emotional and physical toll that took on some women who felt pressure to straighten their hair. I now know that, over time, scores of female journalists, including some who worked for me, endured their hair falling out as a result of such treatments and styling. Many white people don't understand that "twists" or "braids" are not solely a fashion statement; they are also "protective styles" created to prevent damage from weather and harsh "beauty" treatments.

I have very thick curly, coarse hair, and peers have advised me to keep it straight to boost my "executive presence." While doing so is difficult and costly, I can fairly easily get a blowout. Such straightening is nothing like the chemicals and heat needed to straighten Black hair. And while I applaud Black women for encouraging women to embrace their natural beauty and accept themselves, white women like me should not put their hair struggles in the same category. Our societal pressures do not come close to meeting a Black woman's pressure to meet Eurocentric beauty standards. Racial injustice and unconscious bias have permeated all levels of society—even our hair. Women are constantly being told they must look a certain way to meet basic (white) standards of beauty.

What has made all these matters worse is that we rarely listen to other viewpoints. We don't stop to listen to our conscience telling us that such a rule about hair is unfair, nor do we listen to our colleague's complaints or concerns. We rarely listen to people, let alone try to understand those who have struggles or perceptions that differ from ours. We let our unconscious biases get in the way. We convince ourselves that because we are required to look a certain way, others should be required to play by the same rules. We convince ourselves that some victims of violence, including violence involving police officers, must be bad people. We convince ourselves that it is only through our own hard work and because we deserve it that we've reached our professional goals. We don't listen to those who are "not like us." We don't listen to others' experiences. This failure to listen and these convictions and choices fuel unconscious biases.

## Lessons Learned about Acting on Your Knowledge

I am forever grateful to my colleagues of color who called me out, who said, "Suzanne, now that you know X, what are you going to do about it?"

Dear church, once you know the truth about your biases, what are you going to do about it? Jesus spent his time on earth with people in the margins establishing justice and helping the oppressed. That is what being a Christian is about. Sadly, I have felt called to that mission in a newsroom more than I have inside the walls of a church because many churches are uncomfortable with the idea of getting uncomfortable. We Christians don't want to challenge our thinking or admit we might be part of the problem. Frankly, we're self-righteous. And while there are probably some people in every congregation who are willing to take the uncomfortable steps required to change, there are just as many who are afraid someone will get offended and leave if the church takes a stand for justice and changes the way things "have always been." It's easier to keep doing things the way we always have. But Jesus and Paul call us to be bridges to reconciliation. In 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 Paul talks about this ministry of reconciliation:

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (NIV).

A key verse in this passage is verse 14: "Christ's love compels us because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died." As Christians, we should be compelled *by Christ's love of us* to love and share the good news with *everyone*. Our drive shouldn't be based on protecting people who are just like us. God didn't count anyone's sins against them. No one is less worthy of his grace than another. Instead, he came with a message of reconciliation for all. Imagine the good we, the church, could do if we focused on being ambassadors of Christ's message. Imagine what would happen if we took the time to see with our hearts.

If you feel as if you are on the fringes, or if you are frightened by the idea of opening up opportunities to everyone, maybe you are too far from the margins. Maybe you are living inside your comfy bubble of people who look like you, think like you, and don't challenge your line of thinking. Christ calls us to live out *all* that he told us to do. Christ charged us to be ambassadors of the message that in Christ we are *all* one. We are *all* sinners. And Christ calls us *all* to the ministry of reconciliation.

I felt that call to the ministry of reconciliation through people I met at work, not church. It is through those relationships that I have learned of my role in preserving and strengthening these unconscious biases and of the privilege I had previously never consciously realized I had.

## Lessons Learned about My Privilege

Some of you may be questioning why you are even reading this book. You may be thinking, “Suzanne is a liberal journalist disguised as a Christian who tricked me into reading a book that discusses white privilege.” You may even be one of the many people who believe the term “white privilege” is racist. It’s not. When you really understand it, you realize it doesn’t mean “anti-white people.” It’s a term that describes a reality of our society. If you are white, you have experienced privilege. Even if life has been hard for you and even if you don’t know it, you have had some—and probably many—privileges that black people are not afforded. Think about your education, your access to fresh and healthy food and to good and affordable health care. Think about the times you have been stopped by police. Did you fear for your life? Do you fear for your son’s life every time he leaves the house? Think about the books you read in school, perhaps long ago. Did you study any non-white artists, philosophers, novelists, scientists, musicians? What unconscious norms were you taught? Was it challenging to get your first bank account, loan, or mortgage? Did the tone of real estate agents change when they saw the color of your skin? Has anyone ever rushed to lock their car door or cross the street because they saw you walking in their direction? I encourage you to study the topic objectively. Engage in constructive conversations with others who have opinions and information about privilege—or lack of it. Partner with someone who wants to use knowledge and conversation, and help each other grow. It helped me, and it may help you.

Understanding what white privilege is and identifying your own privilege is hard and often painful work. It means taking an honest look at yourself and your past to admit the advantages you experience. And it means doing something to shift the imbalances of power and

privilege in society—in your family, neighborhood, state, church, school, country.

According to 2019 U.S. Census data, the average per capita income in my hometown was less than \$25,000 a year.<sup>2</sup> Yet even though I did not come from money, I was privileged—had advantages—simply because I am white. I worked as a teen, and I worked full time through college. I bought my first car through a loan. I did not pay off my college loans until I was forty-one. And I really believed that because I had made it, anyone could. I denied having white privilege, was even unconscious of it. Yes, I worked. Pat me on the back! But the difference lies in the fact that my work was at my own will and determination. I didn't have to work too hard to get what I wanted. And every opportunity I chased was mine to grasp.

I was offered a job at Wendy's "on the spot" when I was sixteen, with no experience. I got a loan for a car at my small town's bank when I was sixteen thanks to my parents' good credit and them cosigning for the loan. I had access to the loans needed to go to the school of my choice, and I got any part-time or full-time job to which I applied to pay my way through. My professors at my Christian liberal arts college were able to pick up the phone to the general manager and news director of the TV station in town and tell them they would not regret hiring me. Because of those connections, I was able to graduate from college with a poor GPA because I had worked so much but with more than two years' full-time TV experience, some even on camera, which enabled me to land a great job right out of college. When I was financially irresponsible in my young adult years, there were people to bail me out. A car dealer even went out of his way to help me get a car loan when my credit was in the toilet.

Did I work hard? Yes. Did I have some natural talent and skills? Yes. Did I deserve a second chance when I was so exhausted from working multiple jobs and my self-esteem was so depleted that I thought material things would make me happy and I put myself in

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<sup>2</sup> "Neoga, Illinois Income Map, Earnings Map, and Wages Data," *City-Data*, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.city-data.com/income/income-Neoga-Illinois.html>.

debt even though I could not pay my bills? Yes, I thought I did. And I got more than one second chance. Did anyone ever regret hiring me or giving me a reference? Nope.

Those things are all true. Yet I have learned that many equally talented people of color would not have had all those chances. I can pat myself on the back for everything I have done that has led to my success—and it is a lot—but I cannot deny that I have had opportunities unavailable to most people of color.

The saddest part of this is that I learned this lesson in the marketplace, not in church. Indeed, many Christians have fed unconscious biases by assuming we understand the plight of others and by not encouraging diversity in our congregations and social circles. Shame on us! It is time for the church to take ownership in this area and lead the ministry of reconciliation.

I am far from perfect in this area, but I am learning thanks to some amazing women who have helped me understand the hurtful inequity in our society. I now know that I will *never* have to take my son to introduce him to our new neighbors when moving into a neighborhood so they know he lives there and is not there to cause trouble. I work with women who live a life where that is what they must do. And sadly, they also have to tell their kids not to wear hoodies or how to act when being pulled over. I will *never* have to do that either. While acknowledging this to a coworker, she said: “This is great. It’s going to take white awakened women to awaken other white women.” Yes, it will. So, dear church, what are we going to do about it?

## Lessons Learned about Uncomfortable Conversations

What can the church do? Well, I believe we must start by talking about this. Nothing will happen without taking that first step. Honest conversations will be uncomfortable, and that’s okay because discomfort leads to vulnerability and transformation. You’ve probably heard the saying “nothing grows in a comfort zone.” I believe that to be particularly true when it comes to reconciliation. Create opportunities for dialogue. Then, when you invite someone who doesn’t look like you to open up, try listening more than speaking.



We also have to invite people who are not like us inside our social circles, churches, and communities. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said the most segregated hour in the week is 11 o'clock on Sundays.<sup>3</sup> We can save for another day the debate on why that is because you and I both know that's a whole different book on a topic that deserves a lot more attention than I could possibly give it here. Suffice it to say that you might have to make a deliberate effort to surround yourself and your children with people who are unlike you—and that is necessary if you really want to understand and love your neighbors.

Christians have become masters at creating their own comfy circles. Jesus challenged the thinking of everyone around him—from his interactions with the woman at the well to the story of the good Samaritan. He even dragged the disciples along with him to sit at the table with a tax collector to show us we are all sons and daughters of the King. Who have you let inside your circles to challenge your thinking? Whom do you unconsciously not consider an equal son or daughter of the King?

I vividly remember my youth group going to a predominantly black church to sing. That congregation was so welcoming. It was a great experience. My youth group leaders were on the right track. They showed us there are people who don't look like us and churches that don't worship like us but love God as much as we do. They also showed us that at the end of the day we all have the same goals to love God and love people. The problem was that the conversations centered around stereotypes based on traditions, attire for church, or styles of worship took place before and after our visit because of a lack of exposure to diversity. And since we weren't surrounded by people of diversity, nobody was around to explain why those traditions existed or how they were to be celebrated, no matter how different they were from our own.

The marketplace has done a great job at making diversity and inclusion a priority. Businesses partner with organizations, pursue

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<sup>3</sup> *Meet the Press*, "Martin Luther King Jr. The Most Segregated Hour in America," *Meet the Press*, April 17, 1960, posted April 29, 2014, YouTube video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1q881g1L\\_d8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1q881g1L_d8).

create initiatives, and bring in experts to help make it happen. Maybe the church can take a page out of that playbook. Partner with another church from another part of town. Bring in a facilitator for honest and open conversations with church leaders and groups. Be prepared to be uncomfortable. Have uncomfortable conversations. Maybe then we can grow to be the ambassadors in the ministry of reconciliation.

I like to imagine what “on earth as it is in heaven” would look like. In heaven we have no fear. We are all God’s children. I think we should return to looking at things as children do. They don’t possess any unconscious biases; they just see people as people. Wouldn’t it be awesome if it were that way with adults? Wouldn’t it be awesome if the church led the way instead of making earth different than heaven?

## ACTION ITEMS

1. Look into organizations like Be the Bridge, which states its belief that complete racial unity and justice cannot happen apart from the reconciling work of Jesus Christ on the cross and the power of the Holy Spirit to move individuals to make peace with God and all humankind.<sup>4</sup> They train people to be “bridge builders.” Organizations like this one are dedicated to helping the church “be the bridge” in racial inequality.
2. Ask yourself when the last time was that you made a diversified hire or went out of your way to add diversity to your leadership team. The marketplace has led in this, but the church has a long way to go. When looking to add diversity on your team, it’s important that you realize some diverse candidates might not have had previous opportunities, so they might not seem as qualified. Give people a chance, and fully support them once they are in the door. We all need diversity in the room to bridge this gap.

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<sup>4</sup> “About Be the Bridge,” *Be the Bridge*, accessed January 29, 2022, <https://bethebridge.com/about/>.

3. Find a cultural/diversity partner. After the murder of George Floyd, I realized some of my unconscious biases. I was talking this out with a diverse leader at my TV station, and out of nowhere she said, “I’ll be your cultural/diversity partner.” She and another diverse coworker, who unofficially became a partner of mine, became my safe spaces. I needed people who were diverse with whom I could speak openly without feeling judged. I also needed to be called out in love. If you don’t have diversity in your church to facilitate this, work with another organization or another church. And if you are a leader, start with yourself.
4. Read as much as you can on the matter. The first assignments made by my cultural/diversity partner were reading assignments—lots of books and eventually some documentaries. Reading can illuminate inadequacy and probably make you feel uncomfortable. Be okay with being uncomfortable and realizing you have messed up. Then take what you’ve learned and help others be better.

### **Self-Reflection Questions for Church Leaders**

1. How have you discussed unconscious biases in your church?
2. How have unconscious biases stopped you from being the hands and feet of Jesus?
3. Are there any instances in which your leadership team has “seen what they wanted to see”?
4. How have you facilitated conversations about privilege and the impact it may have had on your church’s decisions?
5. Do you create “safe spaces” for uncomfortable conversations?

### **Self-Reflection Questions for Female Leaders**

1. Have you thought about your unconscious biases?
2. Who in your inner circle can call you out on your unconscious biases?

3. When have you “seen what you wanted to see,” and what did it cost you or others?
4. What would make you more comfortable having uncomfortable conversations so you can grow?
5. How has privilege helped you in ways you might not have realized previously?

## About the Author

With an extraordinary 30-year career in journalism, Suzanne Nadell has led some of the nation's leading newsrooms, including WSB-TV, one of the top local TV stations in the country. Since Suzanne returned to WSB-TV as News Director in 2019, the station has brought home dozens of Emmy Awards, regional Edward R. Murrow Awards, and a Gracie Award, which recognizes women in media.



Prior to WSB, Nadell led the news team at WPXI in Pittsburgh. In her time there, she led the station to new ratings heights. The station's 11:00 p.m. newscast ranked as the highest rated late newscast among the largest television markets. WPXI also brought home ten Mid-Atlantic Chapter Emmy Awards and a regional Edward R. Murrow award for best newscast.

Nadell has also worked as the news director of KOKI in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Under her leadership, in just three years the station went from third to first in adult viewers aged twenty-five to fifty-four. The station also received a national Edward R. Murrow for best newscast, six regional Edward R. Murrow awards, and ten regional Emmy Awards.

Nadell has also worked as an executive producer at WSB-TV in Atlanta, and as a producer at WFLA-TV in Tampa, WFTV in Orlando, and WBBH in Fort Myers.

Her career started at WJHL in Johnson City, Tennessee, as a production assistant, producer, and reporter.

Nadell received a BA in communications from Milligan College, in Johnson City, Tennessee. She and her husband, Michael, have a teenaged son named Price. They are active members of Atlanta Christian Church and live in Brookhaven, Georgia.

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