

# SEE ME, BELIEVE ME

AN UPDATED GUIDE TO DEEPEN ALLYSHIP  
WITH CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS OF COLOR

YOLANDA DENSON-BYERS

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AMPLIFYING  
VOICES  
FOR CHANGE

SEE ME, BELIEVE ME

An Updated Guide to Deepen Allyship with Congregational Leaders of Color

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*This book is dedicated to the many BIPOC clergy in predominantly white denominations, who, through the power of the Holy Spirit and their own blood, sweat, and tears, paved the way for me and my ministry.*

*I especially lift up Reverend Earlean Miller, the first Black woman ordained in the Lutheran Church in America, and Pastors Patricia Davenport and Viviane Thomas-Breitfeld, the first Black women to become bishops in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.*

*To those beloved pastors who shared their stories in this book, and to all BIPOC leaders of color, I see you and I believe you.*

*May this book lead to greater understanding and a more just way of being in relationship with leaders and congregations of color.*



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# FOREWORD

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*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer  
slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all  
of you are one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28*

Rev. Dr. Yolanda Denson-Byers, a beautiful Black queer woman, is inviting white people on a journey to become anti-racist. She uses an honest, vulnerable style to lay bare the open wounds and scars she has developed as a result of her experiences with overt and covert racism. Some of these experiences seem so outrageous and her insights are so painful that readers may find it difficult to believe that such blatant racism exists. But Rev. Dr. Denson-Byers assures us that her experiences are real—and more common than one would think.

Additionally, she shares the challenges of other prominent leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in the African Descent diaspora who have suffered their own wounds and scars from the racism they have been exposed to in this denomination. For those who identify as part of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, she offers personal stories that are relatable, revealing the many times and ways white people have traumatized us. She lifts her voice in a clarion call on behalf of BIPOC leaders who have been severely harmed by the ELCA.

Rev. Dr. Denson-Byers gives us an in-depth look at the bait and switch that happens with BIPOC rostered ministers after the interview, call vote, and installation. Using her own life journey, she reveals challenges that have caused BIPOC leaders to assimilate or wear masks of compliance, noting microaggressions that prohibit BIPOC leaders from being their authentic selves.

*See Me, Believe Me* is not another self-help book for white people. Rev. Dr. Denson-Byers uses academic writings, statistics, and scripture in this bold reach to lower defensiveness, acknowledge the abusiveness, and raise awareness of how white people can become allies for the leaders of color in their midst. Rev. Dr. Denson-Byers also appeals to BIPOC rostered ministers to claim their agency as called leaders in this church. There is an intentionality throughout the book encouraging white people to be active in efforts to dismantle systemic racism across the board—let it begin with you, your family,

your community. This book can become a tool that educates, informs, and inspires readers to deal with the original sin of racism in a way that is transformational. In each chapter you will find points of intersectionality between faith, public witness, and public action for all as children of the most high God. Each chapter concludes with concrete suggestions for the journey toward allyship, followed by a soul-rousing, spirit-filled prayer.

I applaud Rev. Dr. Denson-Byers's willingness to risk being a truth teller at a time when white supremacy is on the rise. This book is a bold attempt to call allies to take a stand and live as examples of what allyship is in our churches and communities, in the hope of keeping BIPOC leaders safe in the ELCA and the world.

Bishop Patricia A. Davenport



# INTRODUCTION



Dear Reader,

The fact that you have picked up this book means that you are eager for the types of conversations that appear within these pages. As the author, I'd like to share some of my assumptions about you, my reader:

- › You are a Christian who is yoked to a church or synod.
- › You are working with a BIPOC leader in your congregation, synod, or other church-related organization.
- › You desire to learn more about how you can be a faithful ally in that relationship.

I am grateful that you are willing to learn. However, I need to warn you that I have not sugarcoated my words or intentions. This book has been a balm to my soul in that it has allowed me to “say” many things I have never had the courage to speak out loud. It has been a cathartic and healing journey for me.

It may not be the same for you.

In fact, while I have worked to make these words palatable enough that my majority-white audience can get through this book and learn from it, I did not engage in politics of respectability. I made a conscious decision to say what I mean and mean what I say. At times, my words may evoke your discomfort, guilt, or shame.

**Push through it, beloveds.**

Don't punk out on this important work we are doing together. The truth is that your BIPOC leaders, friends, and neighbors are uncomfortable *all day long*. We hear words that cut us to the quick, and we experience actions that cause us to sob into our pillows at night. Unlike you, we don't have the luxury of turning away, giving up, or quitting on our lives.

**This is a book. You can persevere through a book.**

As you may already notice, the book is eleven chapters long. I do not believe that these chapters *need* to be read in sequence. You may choose to do that, however, especially for the first read or as you read it in the company of others.

But I hope that after you read it once, this book will serve as an ongoing guide for your experiences with BIPOC ministry leaders, friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues. I hope you return to it again and again when you are curious about “the thing,” want to understand an interaction better, or anticipate an opportunity to be a faithful ally in the future. To that end, you could pick up the already-read book and turn to a specific chapter to remind yourself of your best course of action in a given circumstance.

Chapter 1 is entitled “I See You. I Believe You.” These are words I hope you will memorize and use liberally in your interactions with your BIPOC leader. In order to deploy them well, you will need to get in the habit of suspending your desire to negate and/or excuse the bad behaviors of racists. No longer will you say, “I’m sure they didn’t mean it that way” or “There must be a reason for their behavior.” Instead, when your BIPOC leader reports misbehavior, your first response will be, “I see you. I believe you.” You can then follow up by learning how you can offer support or direct help.

Chapter 2 emphasizes the importance of safe(r) spaces. I have some news for you. You are likely not a safe space for the BIPOC leader in your life. No matter how well intentioned, well meaning, or concerned about racism you may be, there are just times when we BIPOC leaders need to get away from white folks because we can only feel safe in the company of those who have been through the experience of being non-white in America. If you want to be a good ally, get out of the way when the people of color in your life ask you to get scarce so they can get healed.

Chapter 3 encourages you to acknowledge your own ignorance. I have an acquaintance who is a white male. We went to the same university. We both majored in African American studies and religious studies. As young adults, we had the same friends and lived in the same spaces. He is now married to a Black woman and has Black children. Yet his experience is *not* the same as mine. No matter how diligent he may be, he always has an opportunity to learn more, to discern gaps in understanding, and to admit that being white in America confers benefits and privileges that make it impossible for a white person to be a subject-matter expert on actually *being* BIPOC in America. Only a person of color can claim that intelligence. Be willing to learn and grow through this process.

Chapter 4 *demands* that you respect the boundaries of your BIPOC leader. Please notice that I said *demands*, not “asks” or “suggests” or “recommends.”

## INTRODUCTION

For too long, our white congregants have taken liberties with our bodies that they would never take with a white ministry leader. You have made insensitive comments out of ignorance that leave scars that last a lifetime. Stop—just stop! Most of what you want to know about the Black experience, you can learn from other sources instead of asking your leader of color. Most of what you want to feel, you have no right to feel. When you respect the boundaries of your leader of color, we will all be better for it.

Chapter 5 invites you to celebrate with your BIPOC leaders, neighbors, and friends. We have our own holidays, celebrations, and ways of being that you know nothing about and that we are going to celebrate with or without you. Learn about our history, heritage, and cultural holidays. Make space for these celebrations as you craft opportunities for paid time off. And finally, rejoice when the BIPOC leaders in your life invite you to participate. Recognize the precious gift it is to be invited into the inner circle. Be present without judgment or criticism. You can learn and experience a lot when you allow your leader of color to take the lead.

Chapter 6 reminds you that to be a faithful ally to the BIPOC ministry leader, you must commit to being present for their joys *and* sorrows. Frankly, if you only show up for the good stuff, you are nothing but a voyeur. In the installation rite for pastors in my denomination, the congregation promises to pray with the pastor, help and honor their work, and in all things strive to live together in the peace and unity of Christ. This covenant to stand with your pastor in the good and bad times of congregational and personal life is essential. Your leader will learn to trust the community of faith if you do not abandon them when things get hard, dangerous, or costly. Creating this bond of trust where a leader does not fear they may be abandoned at every turn is what it means to be siblings in Christ.

Chapter 7 affirms that it's not a competition when it comes to the realities of -isms and phobias in America. It will guide you to stop saying, "I know just how you feel because . . ." and then name your intersectional identity. I know you are well intentioned, but your statement is ignorant. You do not and can never know what it feels like to be a person of color in America unless you *are* a person of color in America. You do not and can never know what it feels like to be a ministry leader of color in this church unless you *are* a ministry leader of color in this church. Please stop comparing oppressions. Learn humility and be willing to listen with empathy, compassion, and silence.

Chapter 8 shouts this from the mountaintop: "Please see color!" I want to assure you that your BIPOC leader, friends, and neighbors never again want to hear you say, "I don't see color." First of all, unless you are visually impaired

or colorblind, you see color. Second, we know what you mean, but it still feels dismissive of our culture and person to say you don't see a large part of what makes us who we are today. I want you to see me, I want you to appreciate my beauty, and I want you to engage with my culture. This well-meaning four-word phrase is best left in the garbage heap of history.

Chapter 9 makes the case for reparations. In my family, when someone hurts another, they say, "I am sorry. How can I make it right?" We know that words are not enough when harm has been inflicted. Actions are necessary to rectify the situation, rebuild trust, and create a level field to try, try again. In the case of racism in America, much is owed to the Indigenous people upon whose stolen land we prosper and the BIPOC people who built this nation without remuneration sufficient to their labor. At every opportunity, I encourage you to find ways to help make this situation right. We can't go backward in time, but we can build a more equitable and just future together.

Chapter 10 offers an injunction to do your own work. Since you are already holding this book, you are off to a great start! You must understand that it is not your BIPOC leader and other people of color who need to eradicate racism. **It is you!** White folks made the problem, and white folks need to fix it. By committing to do your own work, you cease just talking the talk and start walking the walk as well.

Chapter 11 is a new addition to this updated book. It is an invitation for us to receive the new leadership of Presiding Bishop Yehiel Curry and Secretary Lucille "CeCee" Mills. By sharing some of the content of an interview I did with Presiding Bishop Curry, we get to know him in new ways while learning more about what type of leadership he may provide and what he most values. I also offer some concrete suggestions regarding how we can best honor and respect our new leaders as we seek to become a more actively anti-racist denomination.

Together, I believe that we can create safe(r) spaces for your ministry leader of color and all BIPOC folks in your lives. So buckle up, buttercup! Store your fragility under the seat in front of you, and let's take flight toward a better tomorrow for us all.

Thank you for reading.