

SEE ME, BELIEVE ME

A GUIDE TO DEEPEN ALLYSHIP WITH
CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS OF COLOR

YOLANDA DENSON-BYERS



AMPLIFYING
VOICES
FOR CHANGE

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

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,

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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