



The 2010 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture † Hope

Introduction

Hope. It's a catchphrase on our bumper stickers. It's a buzzword on the lips of our leaders. It's the youth sitting in our churches and the futures we dream for them, but still we ask: what is Hope? We see the word everywhere from ad campaigns to refrigerator magnets, but in an era of constant war, unending poverty, and pervasive indifference, we want to know: where can we find Hope?

The 2010 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture explore the radical theological and missional significance of Hope and the practical implications for our youth ministries. These lectures look at Christian Hope through the eyes of two current practical theologians and educators, a world-renowned university minister and author, and an ordinary radical.

The hope in the world, ubiquitous though it might seem, may be running out, but we do not despair. Because it's also the journey of the cross. It's the mystery of the empty tomb. It's the God who stands in the gap of a broken world and holds us in a divine embrace as we pray, "Our Hope, Lord, is in you."

The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original scholarship pertaining to youth and the contemporary church. The lectures are delivered as a series at the Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry and are published annually. Lecturers include scholars who are not directly involved in the practice or study of youth ministry but who can bring the fruits of their respective disciplines to bear on ministry with the young. May these lectures inspire you in your ministry with young people.

Faithfully,

Dayle Gillespie Rounds
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry
Princeton Theological Seminary

2010 Lectures

Kenda Creasy Dean	"Ascension Deficit Disorder: Youth Ministry as Laboratory for Hope"
Rodger Nishioka	"The Uniqueness of Christian Hope" "Hope as Cruciform"
The Reverend Peter J. Gomes	"The Christian Hope for a New Generation"
Shane Claiborne	"Becoming the Church We Dream Of"



Becoming the Church We Dream of † Shane Claiborne

Well it's so nice to be together, and I didn't have to come far; we just shot up from north Philadelphia and didn't even hit traffic. I came with one of my close friends for a lot of years, Jason Crouch. We're doing community together on the north side of Philly, but, as you can tell, I'm from Tennessee. Jason and I grew up in the hills of east Tennessee, which is a little different from the concrete jungle of north Philly. It's funny, because when I grew up in east Tennessee, youth ministry was pretty much what you did. I mean, the only other thing was shooting fireworks (which were legal), which made for all sorts of fun. But, I can remember going to youth group. I went to three or four different ones and one of them had a lot of money so they had a Velcro wall. You wore a sticky suit and you'd run and jump and stick to the wall, for Jesus, you know. I've got to be honest with you; I can't remember what half the stuff we did in youth group had to do with Jesus. In fact, some of it was really bizarre.

The first time I met my buddy Jason, he was in a sort of Pentecostal church, and I grew up United Methodist, so my mom was real worried that they were a cult. I remember the first time I met Jason. We were in the cafeteria in high school and I went over on a dare from my Methodist friends to ask him if he spoke in tongues. I did it sort of jokingly and then he invited me to a little "lock in;" you know, a revival sort of thing. My Methodist friends went and we all got born again, again. It was great! It really was fantastic. I can remember all those altar calls, because I got re-baptized to become more Pentecostal, you know. And I can remember though, it became almost a ritual. Every summer we would become "born again," again. You know, you sort of come to the altar singing "Just as I am," and then we'd leave just as we were and sort of keep living just as we always had. I started to see some things that didn't really make sense to me, like when I got saved again, they told me I had to get rid of all my secular music and, so, we had these CD burnings.

Then they had these charts where you could look at the secular band you liked and then you could get the Christian band. Do you remember these? Maybe you didn't have them up north, I don't know, but, I burnt my CDs and then I got the other ones, the Christian band, and I'm like, "ooh, that does not sound like Metallica." I have been hoodwinked! And I can remember so many of the things that we did. One of the things we had was this play we would do called, "Heaven's Gates and Hell's Flames." Do you know this? Where we would do these really terrible skits on stage where the kids would be on a bus and the bus would wreck and the demons would come. And, they would drag the kids to Hell and then they would give an altar call. And everybody got saved, including the pastor! Then I started to think; I did something really dangerous, which was that I picked up the Bible and I started reading it. I began to see the stuff Jesus talked about, and a lot of times it was real different from the stuff we were talking about in youth group. And, I began to see Jesus challenging so many of the things in my little world. I was in the "in" crowd. I was Prom King. I know that's hard for you to imagine; it was a small town!

But then I started to see Jesus say, "If you want to be the greatest you need to become the least," and started thinking, Why am I working so hard to be the greatest? I started to see the people Jesus hung out with and they weren't just all the "cool" folks. And I really started to think about a lot of that and I ended up wanting to study the Bible, but I wanted it to intersect with the world that we live in. As Karl Barth said, "we want to read the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other."

I wanted to study the Bible, but I also wanted to study the world that we live in, so I came up to school at Eastern University outside of Philadelphia. Then, I started to see how small my world was growing up, and how broken the world is. But it wasn't just in the halls of academia that that happened; it was when some of my college friends took me downtown to hang out with folks that were living on the street. It was like the Bible came to life. I can remember, in particular, there's one sort of catalytic event that happened for us in 1995, and those of you who know the history of our community, may know this a little bit.

What happened was, in 1995, there was a group of poor, homeless families in Philadelphia who had moved into an abandoned Catholic cathedral. These were mostly women and children, and they moved into the cathedral; they were living there in sort of a desperate move of survival as they were on the waiting list for housing and so they started living there. What we heard on our college campus was this heart-wrenching story that they had been given forty-eight hours by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese that owned the abandoned cathedral. They had given the homeless families this eviction notice, which said that if they weren't out within two days, they could be arrested for trespassing on church property. Those were the kind of moments when you throw your hands up at God and say, "God, why don't you do something?" And we felt God say, "I did do something, I made you. Get out." So we went down and we found that cathedral and on the front of the cathedral the families had hung a banner that said, "How can we worship a homeless man on Sunday, and ignore one on Monday?"

And I think it was there that I began to see church differently. I began to see Jesus not just as one who came to help the poor, but who came as the poor, who entered the struggle. It was in that old cathedral that we began to read about the early church in the Book of Acts, where it says, "All the believers were together, they shared everything they had and there were no needy persons among them." And we caught that vision. We were seeing these families living it out and, ironically, it was sort of in the ruins and literally the wreckage of this abandoned cathedral that we felt a new vision for church.

A lot of us had different backgrounds. Some of my friends were raised Catholic, and some were recovering Evangelicals, but there came a moment when we said, "We're going to stop complaining about the church that we've experienced and work on becoming the church that we dream of, and that we see in scripture."

Now we were a little naïve. We kind of thought we were inventing this, for the first time in two thousand years. Then we started to look a little closer at history and you see that there are continual renewals that stir up the church. Of course, St. Francis and Clair of Assisi in Italy, in the thirteenth century, heard that same whisper of God in the middle of the materialism and militarism of Italy. They heard this cry say, "Repair my church, which is in ruins." Of course, Francis was very simple minded. He started picking up bricks, literally, and rebuilding the abandoned St. Domini Cathedral, but I think that same whisper to resurrect this church that's in ruins is a part of what people are hearing today. Phyllis Tickle and other church historians have said that every few hundred years the church needs a rummage sale where we get rid of the clutter and we cling to the treasures of our faith. I think maybe it's one of those times again, because it seems that, during the past few decades, what we have become infatuated with in the church is making believers. You know, in our fervor for evangelism, we've lost the art of formation and discipleship.

So, if you look at the studies coming out of mega-churches, they are not really very encouraging. Willow Creek Community Church, a mega-church outside of Chicago where I preached two weeks ago, surveyed the congregation, asking, "Are we really seeing people's lives transformed?" Have you seen this study? It's called, "Reveal." What it revealed, comes as actually, a very beautiful act of humility from Willow Creek, of confessing that we are not really seeing holistic disciples built. People are becoming believers, but then they are kind of continuing to live like they used to. So we still have a lot of work to do because our Christianity becomes a mile long and an inch deep. All our language is about how to make believers; however, we are not sent into the world to make believers, but disciples. So how do we really do that work? At the end of the day,

I think the things we believe are actually very, very important and we can't abandon good theology because there is a lot of sloppy theology out there. In fact, I heard someone talking about the emerging church. I am not sure if you are in that conversation, or if you even know what that is. I think that sometimes, the emerging church is just kind of like somewhere you can put people who are under forty and have any new ideas and you just write them off.

I heard one of my friends saying that all you need to start an emerging church is have a Bible, a candle, and a copy of the *Matrix* movie. If you don't get that, I'm not sure I can help you, but talk to me afterward. Some folks might say you don't really need the Bible; as long as you've got the *Matrix*, you're "cool." But I think there's a lot of dangerous theology and I think we need to do good theology, and we can't abandon the core beliefs of our faith. At the end of the day, the final judgment, as all of the nations are gathered before God, according to Jesus in Matthew 25, it's not a doctrinal test. It's not that God will say, "Virgin birth: agree, disagree, or strongly disagree?" That is not the question, is it? The question is, when I was in prison did you visit me? When I was hungry did you feed me? When I was sick did you take care of me? When I was a stranger did you welcome me in? How our faith gets embodied is what this is about. Scriptures say we can have the faith to move mountains and speak in the tongues of men and of angels and do all sorts of miracles and prophecies, but if we don't have love, it's still empty.

So I think we have a lot of thinking to do when it comes to this idea of what does it look like to cultivate virtue and disciples that remind people of what Jesus was like. That's why I kind of like the Amish. They understand a little what it means to be a peculiar counter-culture, I think. I don't say we all have to be Amish, but you can almost hear their kids growing up saying, "Mama, why do we dress like this?" And them being told, "Well, because we are a little different. We've got a different story. Our beauty doesn't come from what we wear but from who we are, so we just dress very simple." "Daddy, why don't we drive cars? Horses are so eighteen hundreds, dude?" Then being told, "Well, there are all kinds of problems associated with the cars. We go at a different pace because we are a different kind of people; we're not conforming to the patterns of this world—that's why you don't have an Xbox son."

When I speak, I have people kind of offset the carbon impact of my travels so that I can try to be responsible and have integrity when I travel, or, at least other people can help me have integrity. One of the places I spoke in Indiana was right near the Amish community, so the hosting group had the Amish pick me up in a buggy and they drove me thirty miles to my speaking event. I can remember riding in that buggy and my buddy was telling all these bad jokes like, "Can you guys turn up the radio?" But, we are driving along and we are watching the neon signs go by, like Burger King and Wal-Mart (incidentally, Wal-Mart has a place where the Amish can hook up their buggies, which I found weird). But, anyway, you're kind of going "what is real?" They talked about their life. It's a beautiful way to live and I think what's really, really, funny, is that the seeming irrelevancy of the Amish is becoming more and more relevant to the world we live in. They are not going to be devastated by the recession. They're going to make it. I think folks are starting to think about the way they live, and the way that they love people.

We might have all kinds of critiques of how much you should detach from the world and gender dynamics. I don't know, but I think that, at the end of the day, maybe it's not so hard to understand why they responded in the way that they did after the terrible school shooting a few years ago. Do you remember that? A deranged madman came and killed a bunch of their kids and then turned the gun on himself and killed himself. But the response of the Amish was unbelievable. The first thing that they did was to go to the shooter's family and say, "Is there anything that we can do for you, you must be really devastated?" Then people began to pour out money to the Amish and they took that money and created scholarships for the children of the man who killed their kids. And then, as the funerals rolled around, they went to the funerals of their own children. Next, they went together, as a community, to be with the family and go to the funeral of the shooter, the one who killed their kids. And, all of it, just fascinated the world. I was on the other side of the planet in Australia. I was speaking there when this happened, and what made headline news in Australia—Australia is not exactly a religious, friendly

country, very post-Christian—but what made headline news is “Amazing Grace.” Why would they do what they did? And it was a story of the Amish, and I remember one theologian saying, “The gospel of Jesus spreads best not through force, but through fascination.”

It’s that kind of love that fascinates the world with the counter-culture of the church that is supposed to be this group of people who show the world what a society of love can look like, and what God’s grace can look like. Incidentally, in our Jesus for President project, we talk about the Amish a little bit, and we have a section called “Amish for Homeland Security.” I actually got a kid in our neighborhood making buttons. Really, what we are talking about is, how do we create a church that embodies God’s love in a peculiar way, that fascinates the world with God’s love. I think the real challenge today for us in the church is not just right believing, but right living. How do we embody those things that are really a part of being a people who don’t conform to the patterns of our culture? I want to suggest five of these.

The first one I would suggest is that, as we are raising up young people in the church, as we are thinking about what it is to be church-ed, one of the things we have to think is that we have a peculiar way of understanding suffering. For us, as Christians, suffering is not something that we are trying to flee from, but something that we are trying to grow close to so that we can help other people bear their burdens. That’s very strange because everything in our culture is built around moving away from suffering, moving away from poverty, moving away from people who don’t look like us, moving away from neighborhoods where there’s high crime, and yet the very nature of the incarnation is God moves into the neighborhood. Not just any neighborhood, but a neighborhood where they said nothing good could come. Jesus, born as a refugee in the middle of Herod’s genocide in that story, is about a God who is close to the suffering. So, I think, that takes cultivating young people with a different way of thinking about ourselves, right? That we are to use our gifts, and our vocations, to connect to the suffering and the brokenness of our world, and I think of one story with one of my colleagues from college who was an education major, one of the best coming out of the college. She came up to my professor, sort of bragging, because she had applied to teach at one of the most prestigious suburban high schools, and she said there were 300 people who applied for the job as one of the most prestigious, highest paying jobs in the city and she got it. My professor looked her dead in the eye and he said, “Why would you want that job. There are 299 other people waiting in line for that job. You are one of the best teachers that we have. You should be going to some of the toughest schools in this city.”

You know, that’s a little different way of thinking. Her parents were not real excited about that. So I think one of the real questions we are creating for young people is not just are you going to be a doctor or lawyer? But what kind of doctor or lawyer are you going to be? Not just what are you going to do when you grow up? But who are you becoming? That, I think, is such a beautiful question because there are young people who I see that want to do something in the world that is meaningful for someone else. Something that is bigger than themselves, and I am convinced that if we lose a generation of young people in the church, it won’t be because we didn’t entertain them, but because we didn’t dare them to do something meaningful with the gospel in light of the world that we live in.

So, next, I would suggest that we have a peculiar way of thinking about sexuality and we need a fresh conversation in the church, especially as we are raising young people. I remember hearing a children’s sermon growing up where, they brought all the kids forward and the pastor literally held the picture of a husband and wife and two kids, then prayed that all of the kids would find the one that God had for them. That’s terrible theology. Certainly I didn’t know it at the time, but I think one of the things that I have come to realize is that one of the things that we have got to understand is that singleness has been a gift to the church. So often, we get infatuated, as if everybody is supposed to be married, and if, in fact, you look at the scripture, you get a little different sense. In Matthew 19, or in Paul’s writing, you get the sense that our primary vocation is to pursue Jesus as our lover, and we choose whatever will allow us to pursue that with the most single-mindedness and the least distractions.

I have been mentored by a couple of Catholic monks, so they kind of taught me that. One of my friends who says he's sixty years old and has been celibate since he was twenty years old and he took his vows back then, said, "We miss it in our culture because the conversation gets high-jacked by a culture that is obsessed with sex, but our deepest longing is not for sex, but for love. And you can have a whole lot of sex and not have love and you can go without having sex your entire life and experience love and intimacy very, very deeply. So we have to create communities where people can love and be loved. You look at folks like Mother Teresa and you don't think, poor thing, if only she had met her husband. But so many of the heroes, and the heroes in the church, have been people who have pursued Jesus with that single-mindedness. So, I think that we can appreciate singleness without also throwing out the beauty of marriage and family and how we can see God's image in that. And I think, incidentally, we can also make a new conversation that is a safe place for gay and lesbian people and sexual minorities who are wrestling with who they are. It becomes very difficult when the only option you've been given is to find your partner and pray that you find the one that God has for you. So I think if we can begin by saying, "we want to be a place where people can love and be loved and trust the spirit to work through this in the sense of a healthy community," it's a beautiful place to start.

Next, I would say that in the church we have a peculiar way of thinking about money, and sometimes I just read these scriptures. At some point, we just need to say, okay, we don't really think Jesus really meant this stuff, or it wasn't really practical. You know, this idea of considering the lilies and the sparrows, not trusting for tomorrow, not trying to put up stuff for tomorrow, that's nice storybook material. I think, really, that in the early church one of the marks of Pentecost, the birthday of the church, is that we think of this season when they ended poverty because their rebirth demanded something of them. We can't have more than we need while someone else has less than they need. This is what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves! It is the epic of the early church. They said if you have two coats, you've stolen one. Because there are still people who are cold. It affects us, and I think, as we think about this, we can find more creative ways to do economics, so that I actually think that we need to rethink the Catholic vow of poverty—that we all don't need to be poor.

We need to think about simplicity and the demand that the suffering of others calls us to, as when Proverbs says, "Give me neither poverty, nor riches, for in my poverty I might be forced to steal or in my riches I might abandon my God!" There's this third way of simplicity. As Gandhi said, "There's enough for everyone's need, but there's not enough for everyone's greed." You know God didn't create too many people or not enough stuff, but, we've created poverty because we haven't learned how to share, particularly in the U.S., when right now the average U.S. person is consuming the same amount as five hundred Africans. If we continue to pursue the current patterns we are living in, we will need four more planets. I think, everywhere, folks are starting to ask if the world can afford the American Dream. Maybe God had a different dream in mind. In 1965, a study was done of how much people were paid; that study showed the average worker was making \$7.50 an hour and the average executive was making \$330 an hour. That study was just re-done a few years ago. The average worker's wage is almost the same, but the average CEO makes more than \$1,500 an hour.

So, you start to look at that and you say, "We've got to be teaching our kids another pattern; not to conform to the patterns of Wall Street, but to conform to the patterns of the upside-down Kingdom of God. I think one of the things we can do is have a new imagination with that. Even within the church, we often mirror those patterns, right? If you look at the Empty Tomb, and other studies that have been done of church stewardship, we see that more than ninety percent of church offerings stay internally, to build buildings and pay professional staff. And so as we look at that, you start to say "Wow! That looks a lot different than the early church, where the offerings were put at the apostles feet and distributed to folks as they had need." One theologian, Ray Mayhew from the United Kingdom, wrote a paper called "Embezzlement: The Sin of The Contemporary Church." It has caused many of us to start talking about this and now we have started a project called, "The Relational Tide," which is a group of us internationally that put 10% of our income together and it doesn't matter whether it is \$10 a month, or \$10,000 a month, we give 10% of whatever we make and one hundred per cent of that money goes to meet needs in our neighborhoods, and in our villages.

I think of youth ministry; there are young people now who are starting relational ties of their own, where they are able to meet needs of friends and these are, I think, creative new ideas. Another option that's kind of similar to it is a group out in the Midwest where many of them didn't have adequate health insurance (like a lot of people). They said, "We can't wait on DC to solve all this; we are going to try to figure it all out right now because there are people today who can't meet their medical bills." So, they started passing the hat, and every month they put a newsletter out of who's in the hospital. They would pull their money together and meet each other's medical bills. That little group started with a few hundred people, and now it has spread and there are 20,000 of us. I'm one of them, and we get a newsletter every month of who is in the hospital. We pool our money together and, during the past twenty years, we've met more than \$450 million dollars in medical bills. We are doing about \$12 million a year.

Now, please don't hear me say this gets the government off the hook. The early church didn't have that much faith in politicians. They said they were going to do some of this together. I think it's good for young people to see creative economics in the church. If we don't show them that, they are going to go to other places that are better stewards of their money. Right? They are going to go where we are not just building buildings, but where we are actually doing something. I was in one congregation where, in their meetings, they were debating whether or not they needed a heater for the baptismal because it was uncomfortable when people got baptized, because the water was too cold. Young people see that contradiction. Actually, we've got brothers and sisters who don't even have water. They are dying because they don't have clean water. That reframes the conversation about whether or not you need a heater. I think those are exciting opportunities for us to model creative economics.

Next, I would say we've got a "mirror" reconciliation in the church. Young people are very aware that there is a global neighborhood. So, if we can't figure out ways of crossing cultural divides in the church, then we lose a little bit of hope. Dr. Martin Luther King said, "It should shame us all that the most segregated hour in the world is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning when we gather for worship." You go to pubs, or bars, or malls, or wherever. There are people mixed together; yet in the church we, of all people, should be just showing the beautiful diversity of the Kingdom of God. I'm so excited because I think there are communities all over the place that do that. You know, in church history, we can point to communities like Koinonia Farms in Georgia, and Antioch where black folks and white folks were living together when that was very culturally peculiar. In the middle of apartheid in South Africa, there was a community called "Hands of Compassion," where black and white South African families bought land together. It was illegal. Their lives were threatened. People threatened to burn down their houses and they said, "We will live together to teach the world reconciliation. We are to be a prophetic witness in our culture."

In Northern Ireland right now there are young people that are Catholic and Protestant moving into community together and saying, "In light of the history of our country, maybe if we can just learn to live together, and to pray together, that could be a part of the reparations of the church." Another community along the U.S.-Mexican border has been deeply disturbed and troubled by the immigration struggles of so many there and it created contemporary sanctuary houses of hospitality where they welcome people in along the border as they fight for their immigration. They have lawyers who are helping folks through the courts. But, one of the things that is so cool, is, they also said, "We want to actually teach the world how to do this kind of hospitality. We won't wait for folks in DC to tell us how to treat immigrants; we'll read Leviticus. We'll read the Book of James. We'll see that we are to give special favor to those who especially are troubled and strangers in the land. So they have started worship services along the wall. They have Christians living in Mexico who walk to the wall, that the U.S. has built, and they are met there by Christians living in the U.S. Then they worship Jesus together and they serve each other communion by throwing it over the wall.

How beautiful is that!

This reconciliation is something we have to teach young people and challenge them with, because it's in their schools; it's everywhere in our culture—segregation and racism—the legacy of slavery in this country.

Finally, the last thing I would want to point to, offering it as a suggestion of Christian practice today, is the idea that we should be pioneering peacemaking, and reconciliation, restorative justice, these sorts of things. As Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they are the children of God.” We have to cultivate young people who understand conflict, so we are able to resolve those conflicts without violence. I think, in some of our neighborhoods that is more difficult than in others. But, pretty much everywhere, conflict is difficult. Like teaching kids the idea of Matthew 18. If someone hurts you, talk directly with him or her. This way, we are going to create a culture where you can admit that you are wrong. That's really counter-cultural, to say you're sorry, and to trust that this is a community where you can be wrong. It's okay because we are all helping each other get better.

We're trying to teach kids in our neighborhood some of that. I remember one of them telling me about all the kids that were beating him up in school, and I said, “Rolando, that means you have got to work even harder to be a friend to them, because they may not know what it is like to be a friend. They may only have been beaten up all their lives, so you get to teach them.” And he said, “Oh, Shane, you're right! (He's like eleven years old.) Love is so hard!”

That's the love Dostoevsky spoke of: “The love that we are talking about is not the sentimental love of story books and fairy tales, but it is the harsh and dreadful love that keeps you up at night.” It's the love that leads us to a cross, to die, even for our enemies. It's the love that can stare evil in the face and say, “Forgive them, for they really don't know what they are doing.” And, of course, Doctor King was also so poignant when he said, “I've told the kids in the ghettos that violence won't solve their problems, but, then they ask me, ‘Why does our government use massive doses of violence to bring the change that it wants?’ And I knew that I could no longer speak against the violence in the ghettos without also speaking against the violence of my government.” He was killed shortly after that. But that connection is, I think, that we have to challenge the notion of redemptive violence everywhere it pops up its head, whether it's in video games, or on Fox News, or on CNN. We have to challenge the myth that violence can bring peace. Of all people, Christians should be the hardest folks in the world to convince that violence is necessary. I think that is what has confused many of the young people as they watch this, is that right now, we could blow up the world. Recently, I was able to talk with some scientists in DC, and I was trying to get a sense of what is the nuclear capacity that we have in the U.S.? They said, “Well, if you use the Nagasaki bomb as a measuring unit, and sixty of those would blow up all of Russia, we have about one hundred and twenty thousand Nagaskis right now.”

And as Jesus wept over Jerusalem for he didn't know the things that would lead to peace, I think Jesus is still weeping now, don't you? We have got to be leading the way of championing active non-violence, not passivity, but active non-violence to challenge everything that destroys life from the womb to the tomb. That we challenge poverty, we challenge racism, we challenge terrorism and war, and as many of you know, that's what led me to Iraq to try to challenge the patterns of violence there. I went seven years ago, some of you may know that, but I just got to go back a couple of months ago. I went back to Iraq as a Christian peacemaker to continue to build relationships with the Iraqi people. On our way out seven years ago, we were leaving Baghdad, where we lived during the “shock and awe” campaign, during the bombing of Baghdad; I was part of a Christian peace team there.

We left and had a car accident on the way out, and all of us were injured. It was a really bad car accident; two of my friends had head injuries, one of them went into shock and could have died, but what happened was that the first car of Iraqi civilians picked us up and took us into a little town. The doctors came out of the hospital and told us that one of the bombs had just hit their hospital two days before, and so the whole hospital was closed. Then they said, “But, don't worry, we will still take care of you because we don't see American, or Iraqi, we see brothers and sisters.”

They literally saved my friend's life. So we went back seven years later, in January of this year, to say thank you and we found those doctors and we were able to connect with them and they said, "When we heard that you were coming back we thought you forgot something, like your computer. But when we heard that you came back to say 'thank you,' we were deeply moved." The whole town got together and we were able to listen to each other's stories. One of the things that was so powerful in all of this was that there was one worship service that we went to where there were thousands of Christians, and I can remember talking to the bishop afterward because we sang "Amazing Grace" in Arabic and we said the Lord's Prayer. I was so moved that I talked with the bishop and I said, "I cannot believe that there were so many Christians in Iraq." He was very gentle with me, but he said, "Yes, this is where it started." And then, he said, "That's the Tigris River and that's the Euphrates. Have you heard of them, son? You didn't invent Christianity in America; you guys just domesticated it." That's what he said. He said, "You go back and you tell the church in the United States that we are praying for them, praying for them to be the church."

I am so excited today because I genuinely think that there is a generation coming up that is aware that the world that we have been handed is very, very fragile. As Dr. King said forty years ago, "The question isn't whether or not we are going to be extremists, but what kind of extremists are we going to be." Are we going to be extremists for hatred or for love? Are we going to raise a generation that is not bombing abortion clinics and holding signs that say, God hates fags? But that is living into the extreme grace in radical non-violence, and into the beautiful reconciliation of our lover, Jesus. May it be so!