

***Repairing the Breach:
Philadelphia Faith Leaders On the Pandemic, Protests, and the Polls***

Transcript:

INTRO: (MSNBC NEWS CLIP OF ALL IN WITH CHRIS HAYES)

LESLIE: *So March Eighth was our last Sunday in the building with Communion Sunday. So it's been almost five months.*

JASON: THIS IS REVEREND DR. LESLIE CALLAHAN, PASTOR OF ST. PAUL'S BAPTIST CHURCH, A PREDOMINATELY AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATION IN PHILADELPHIA.

LESLIE: *I had been listening and kind of paying attention to news reports about Coronavirus...*

LESLIE: *... Especially Chris Hayes, who on MSNBC, who I both listen to and follow on Twitter and probably by the middle of February. Chris Hayes was like, you could almost hear him screaming on Twitter. We're not taking this seriously enough. We're not taking this seriously [enough].*

JASON: TO TAKE MATTERS SERIOUSLY, LESLIE AND THE LEADERS OF ST. PAUL'S IMPLEMENTED PROTOCOL THAT WOULD HELP THE CONGREGATION PRACTICE SOCIAL DISTANCING DURING SUNDAY WORSHIP, ESPECIALLY DURING HOLY COMMUNION.

LESLIE: *We glove the deacons. We don't pass the trays. We don't shake hands. We don't hug that Sunday.*

JASON: TWO DAYS LATER, ON MARCH 10TH, PHILADELPHIA MAYOR JIM KENNEY ANNOUNCED THE FIRST CONFIRMED CASE OF COVID-19 IN THE CITY OF THE PHILADELPHIA.

AS CONFIRMED CASES INCREASED, LESLIE AND A TEAM OF 10 CHURCH MEMBERS GATHERED IN THE SANCTUARY TO PRE-RECORD ST. PAUL'S SUNDAY WORSHIP SERVICE.

LESLIE: *So we did two Sundays, one Sunday livestream, one Sunday prerecorded and then streamed and then they're after in part because I really wanted to model...I thought it is important to model. This to say with my actions, "this is really dangerous." And we should be staying at home. So we've been doing that since.*

JASON: AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINX COMMUNITIES OF FAITH ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTED BY THE SPREAD OF COVID-19. ACCORDING TO THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, AFRICAN AMERICANS ARE DYING FROM COVID-19 COMPLICATIONS AT HIGHER RATES THAN ANY OTHER RACIAL GROUP.

WHILE MANY CONTINUED TO PRACTICE THEIR FAITH WHILE STAYING AT HOME, FOR SOME, THE SHELTER-IN-PLACE ORDER CHALLENGED THEIR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM.

NAOMI: So there was some struggle...

JASON: THAT'S REVEREND NAOMI WASHINGTON-LEAPHEART. NAOMI IS THE DIRECTOR OF FAITH-BASED AND INTERFAITH AFFAIRS IN THE PHILADELPHIA MAYOR'S OFFICE OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT. NAOMI WORKS AS A LIAISON BETWEEN THE CITY GOVERNMENT AND FAITH COMMUNITIES.

NAOMI: The governor's office and the Doctor [Rachel] Levine, the health secretary for the state, I think, was trying to walk that line between protecting people's First Amendment rights together for religious purposes and protecting people's health. So I'm on a call with clergy and she's like, "Well, I'm not going to tell you not to gather. You have a right to gather." And I was like, [shrieks] you know, [laughs].

[Insert music break here]

NAOMI: ... So what we ended up having to say was, "Everything that is lawful for you is not permissible." I mean, we had to quote scripture to get people...[LAUGHS]...And so that helped.

JASON: WHILE CONCERNED FOR THE SAFETY OF FAITH COMMUNITIES OF COLOR IN THE CITY, NAOMI UNDERSTANDS THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT THAT COMES WITH NOT BEING ABLE TO PHYSICALLY GATHER FOR WORSHIP. SEVEN MONTHS INTO THE PANDEMIC, NAOMI IS STILL ORGANIZING AND CONVENING VIRTUAL MEETINGS FOR FAITH COMMUNITIES TO SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH DEALING WITH COVID-19 AND RECEIVE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS RESOURCES.

[Insert pause/music]

COVID-19 NOT ONLY PREVENTS MANY FAITH COMMUNITIES OF COLOR FROM GATHERING FOR WORSHIP, BUT IT ALSO PREVENTS THEM FROM ENGAGING IN SOCIAL OUTREACH AND POLITICALLY ORGANIZING THEIR RESPECTIVE COMMUNITIES.

[Inserts music]

JASON: THIS SUMMER THEY WERE BRUTALLY REMINDED OF ANOTHER, ONGOING PANDEMIC OF WHITE SUPREMACY IN THE WAKE OF THE KILLINGS OF AHMAUD ARBERY, BREONNA TAYLOR, GEORGE FLOYD, TONY MCDADE, AND RAYSHARD BROOKS.

[Insert protest clips]

JASON: IN THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, THOUSANDS, INCLUDING FAITH LEADERS, LEFT THEIR HOMES AND FILLED THE STREETS TO PROTEST DESPITE THE RISK OF CONTRACTING COVID-19.

MARK: Well, Mother Bethel did what Mother Bethel always does. And that's just to show up.

JASON: THAT'S REVEREND DR. MARK KELLY TYLER, PASTOR OF MOTHER BETHEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, THE OLDEST A.M.E. CONGREGATION IN THE UNITED STATES.

MARK: So our members were in the streets in demonstrations, risking their lives, you know, for many of us.

MARK: I got to applaud the young people because they were just hyper-vigilant in making sure that we carried extra masks. You know, "hey, hey, you need a mask? You put this on." They're carrying water to hydrate people. There was an attempt to do social distancing.

[music]

JASON: ST. PAUL'S AND MOTHER BETHEL HAVE A LONG HISTORY OF NOT ONLY BEING PLACES OF WORSHIP, BUT ALSO PROVIDING VARIOUS RESOURCES TO THE COMMUNITY.

THEY PROVIDE FOOD AND CLOTHING AS WELL AS SPACES FOR COMMUNITY MEETINGS AND POLITICAL ORGANIZING.

ST. PAUL'S AND MOTHER BETHEL ALSO ADVOCATE FOR THE RIGHTS OF MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES, INCLUDING ACCESS TO ADEQUATE HEALTHCARE, AFFORDABLE HOUSING, CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM, AND PROTECTING THE RIGHT TO VOTE.

AND IN 2020 -- A YEAR FULL OF HOTLY CONTESTED ELECTIONS, OVERREACHES OF POWER, MISMANAGEMENT OF CRISES AND MISINFORMATION -- PROTECTING THE RIGHT TO VOTE BECAME A CRUCIAL ISSUE.

LESLIE: *We knew keeping people safe was important. We also knew the election was important. And so the question is, how do you do both?*

JASON: WHILE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CHALLENGES SAFE ACCESS TO VOTING, VOTER SUPPRESSION THREATENS TO SILENCE THE VOICES OF PEOPLE OF COLOR.

DWAYNE: Donald Trump is doing everything he can to delegitimize this November election by trying to question mail-in ballots.

JASON: THAT'S BISHOP DWAYNE ROYSTER, INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF PHILADELPHIANS ORGANIZED TO WITNESS, EMPOWER, AND REFORM. IT'S AN INTERFAITH COALITION DEDICATED TO FIGHTING FOR PUBLIC POLICY CHANGES ON BEHALF OF MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES IN PENNSYLVANIA, NEW JERSEY, AND DELAWARE.

BECAUSE PRESIDENT TRUMP AND THE REPUBLICAN PARTY HAVE SUED SWING STATES LIKE PENNSYLVANIA TO STOP MAIL-IN BALLOT VOTING, MANY PEOPLE OF COLOR IN PHILADELPHIA FEAR THAT THEIR VOICES WILL NOT BE HEARD IN THE GENERAL ELECTION.

DWAYNE: *There's already been talk about trying to delay the election. I also think in this whole conversation it causes people to be concerned about, "will my vote count? Should I even bother trying to vote? Is it safe for me to vote? If I want to go to the polls, will I be able to find a polling location because they're locating the number of polling locations? I think all of those things are issues that deeply concern me right now.*

JASON: IN MAY, LESLIE AND A GROUP OF LOCAL CLERGY RECORDED PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS ENCOURAGING THEIR RESPECTIVE CONGREGATIONS TO VOTE BY MAIL IN THE PENNSYLVANIA PRIMARY.

[Clip of PSA #1]

JASON: THROUGHOUT THE SUMMER, LESLIE RECORDED FOLLOW-UP PSAs ABOUT VOTING RIGHTS, INCLUDING VOTING ELIGIBILITY OF THE FORMERLY INCARCERATED.

[Clip of PSA #2]

JASON: SINCE EARLY VOTING BEGAN IN PHILADELPHIA ON SEPTEMBER 28TH - ABOUT A MONTH BEFORE THIS RECORDING - MORE THAN 291,352 PHILADELPHIANS HAVE VOTED. IN OTHER WORDS, MORE THAN 66 PERCENT OF THE REQUESTED MAIL-IN BALLOTS HAVE BEEN RETURNED.

JASON: EVEN AS THE PANDEMIC DRAGS ON AND ELECTION DAY LOOMS, FAITH LEADERS LIKE LESLIE, NAOMI, MARK, AND DWAYNE ARE STAYING COMMITTED TO TAKING CARE OF THEIR FAMILIES, LEADING THEIR CONGREGATIONS, AND FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHTS OF THEIR COMMUNITIES.

LESLIE: I'm motivated by the very real need that my daughter has for her mother and our congregation has care...

MARK: What motivates me [again] is the push from the past and the pull from the future...

DWAYNE: I have two daughters, one who is twenty-nine, and the other one is 16. I'm fighting for them every single day.

LESLIE:What it takes to do the things that are basic, what it takes it to lead worship, what it takes to sort of keep the team together...

MARK: It's the push from history, from our ancestors...The other side is the pull. And so I've got four children. My youngest is 15. My oldest is 24.

DWAYNE: And we stand in a long lineage of religious leaders that are constantly fighting for justice through time memorial. Going all the way back through Jesus back to Moses.

LESLIE: What it takes to feed and care for my daughter is more intense than anything I've experienced previously in life. This is the hardest I've ever worked.

MARK: So I don't think we can fix it all for them, but we can certainly leave it better for them like the folks before us have left it better for us.

DWAYNE: For those that are fighting for the liberation of their people and form them to be able to be set free and to be able to live their full best lives. That's the work that we fight for every day. I feel called to this work.

JASON: THIS AUDIO PROJECT WAS PRODUCED FOR THE RELIGION, RACE, & DEMOCRACY LAB AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA.

WITH HELP FROM THE LAB'S SENIOR PRODUCER, EMILY GADEK AND THE LAB'S EDITOR, KELLY HARDCASTLE JONES.

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MUSIC FOR THIS PROJECT COMES FROM *BLUE DOT SESSIONS*.