

# Pastors lead honest conversation on race and the church

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WACO—In a deeply divided culture marked by a painful history, Christians can take courageous steps to build friendships with people in other racial and ethnic communities, two Dallas pastors told a Texas Baptist workshop.

Pastor Bryan Carter of Concord Church and Pastor Jeff Warren of Park Cities Baptist Church led the breakout session on “Race and the Church: A Conversation,” held in conjunction with the Baptist General Convention of Texas annual meeting.

The two pastors talked about how their friendship began and why they both felt compelled to follow Christ’s leadership in building that relationship.

Warren noticed a few years ago the pain many African-Americans shared after a series of shootings involving young black men—including some killed by police officers who abused their authority.

Carter and Warren began their friendship in 2011 when they first had lunch together. The next year, the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Fla., sparked a national debate about racial injustice and “stand your ground” laws after the man who shot Martin was acquitted.

Then in 2014, Eric Garner died after a New York City police officer put him in a chokehold. The same year, a white police officer in Ferguson, Mo., fatally shot Michael Brown, and local residents took to the streets to protest.

“One of us asked the question: ‘What if Ferguson had come to Dallas?’” Warren said. “If the church is to take a role, if the gospel really is the answer to social justice and racial reconciliation, then we realized we were not ready.”

Racial divisions have permeated the church in the United States to the point that the world does not see the church at the center of justice and racial reconciliation, he noted.

“I don’t know if you know this, but the white evangelical is seen as its own thing, as if we’re not in this together,” Warren explained. “If we don’t come together, then this is just a white thing.”

## **Come out from ‘safe spaces’**

When the church does not come together, then the watching world will not believe Christians, Warren warned.

Both Warren and Carter realized they had to invite others to join efforts to work toward racial reconciliation.

Both started with their own group of pastor friends and with the churches they minister to, Warren explained.

“We began with honest conversations, because we realized we had to come from our safe spaces and come along with those who come from other places,” Carter said.

While those conversations must come from an understanding that God’s love for others is the same regardless of the color of their skin, it also must engage in the systems of injustice to make them more equitable, Carter said.

Addressing injustice in education, wealth, health and other areas all are

part of racial reconciliation, because they focus on systems oppressing people, many of whom are people of color, Carter noted.

“The church should be leading the way” on these efforts, Warren said.

## **Be people of reconciliation**

Understanding the difficulty this may present for some congregations, Warren and Carter encouraged Texas Baptists to begin taking steps.

“Yes, it’s a conversation. And sometimes it’s a very hard conversation,” Carter said. “But that can’t stop us from preaching and teaching what the gospel says. We have an important role as reconcilers and being people of reconciliation.”

Other ministers in Dallas across denominational lines came together with Carter and Warren to form the [Dallas Clergy](https://www.dallasclergy.com/) group, Carter said. (<https://www.dallasclergy.com/>)

When a police officer entered the apartment of Botham Jean and shot him, the Dallas city officials approached Dallas Clergy, and the group gathered to pray for their city and those involved in the legal process that would follow, Carter said.

Some observers believe the public participation of ministers prevented an already tense situation from escalating, Warren said. But the ministers simply thought that is where they needed to be.

“This is something we think every city needs,” said Carter, referring to the clergy group.

While a conversation on race might make some people in the church uncomfortable, Warren noted, the conversation must take place before a community truly can live in peace.

“Peace without justice is no peace at all,” Warren said, summarizing the words of Martin Luther King Jr.

## **Get to know each other**

Park Cities and Concord Church now regularly schedule worship services in which pastors, worship leaders and others swap places so their congregations will know each other better.

People from non-Anglo communities step into spaces where they are a minority constantly, Warren said. To promote understanding and empathy, Anglo churches must expose themselves to the same feeling of being a minority, he added.

While their work on racial justice continues, Carter and Warren said they have seen their efforts bear fruit, as their churches have worked through difficult issues.

The two pastors honestly acknowledged that while they have seen progress, they also have experienced setbacks.

“There have been some great days, and there have been some days when we say, ‘Man, this will never end,’” Warren said.

Even so, the church must persevere in exposing injustice and working for peace, both ministers agreed.

“We see this as a process toward where we think God is calling us,” Carter said.