

# Building Bridges

Amid ongoing cultural clashes about whether it's really necessary to learn and to talk about race (it is), one Austin woman's faith-based program brings dialogue and racial reconciliation to communities around the world.

BY SAMANTHA VINCENTY

**"I can say hard things really well with a smile,"** says Latasha Morrison, that high-wattage smile beaming at me as it did throughout an hours-long Zoom that flies by. **"A friend once told me, 'It's like you punch me in the face, but you're rubbing my back at the same time.'"**

**M**ORRISON'S UNCOMMON gift was put to the test in her new hometown of Austin, where she moved in 2012 from Atlanta. "I have pictures of my godkids and family up in my office. Now, I'm the only Black person that works at this place," Morrison, who goes by Tasha, says of the church where she'd begun working. A white coworker would routinely walk into her office and, her eyes falling to the cluster of photos, exclaim, "I just love little Black boys!"

At first, Morrison thought, *That is so weird*, and let the comment pass. But after the third time, she turned to her coworker and said, "Imagine me coming into your office saying, 'I just love little white boys!' What would you think? She said, 'Oh my goodness!' But she didn't get offended, so I asked her, 'Have you

ever worked with Black people before?' She's like, 'Why do you ask?' And I said, 'Because I can tell you haven't.'"

Nor had many of the white people Morrison met in her new community, people who often made well-meaning yet cringeworthy racial remarks or asked her unprompted, loaded questions about things like her hair and her political beliefs. "It felt as if people had saved all their 'ask a Black person' questions for me, and they unloaded until it almost drove me insane," Morrison writes in her book *Be the Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Racial Reconciliation*.

There was, for example, the time she attended a Christian organization's baseball game for work, where a pair of white parents quickly pivoted from small talk to the topic of desegregation and then began asking

questions about Black conservatives. And the time a white woman sitting next to her in the stands told Morrison that many slaves in the South had actually been "treated like family." In that moment, Morrison writes, she felt her "heart racing, emotions all over the place."

The cumulative weight of these experiences sparked an inner call to, as Morrison puts it, "truth-tell with grace." She began hosting an ongoing series of discussions with friends and coworkers. "I asked them to explore their own family histories, the ways they might have been complicit in racism," Morrison recounts. "Together, we talked, laughed, cried, ate, and prayed." There were movie nights, too (*The Color Purple, Friday, Coming to America*). Sometimes people didn't show up. Sometimes feelings got hurt. But they kept on meeting once a month.

When unarmed teenager Michael Brown was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, the members of the group told Morrison that their talks—about race, cultural differences, and the painful white supremacist history of places like East Missouri—had been invaluable in navigating the headline-making tumult. By 2015, Morrison's group was comprised of 10 Black, white, and Asian American women; they sat in a circle and passed around an elephant figurine to take turns sharing.

That same year, the organizers of the IF:Gathering, a religious conference for women, invited Morrison to share her emerging vision for bridging divides, particularly between Black and white Christian churches. Her first instinct was to

## the experts

say no. "This is a predominantly white conference," Morrison says. "You don't have a Black girl up there to talk about race! I thought, *Everybody's going to get mad at me.*"

Convinced by her supporters, Morrison crafted a handout for attendees, writing down the words that best captured the movements of her group's journey together. The booklet, titled *The Bridge to Racial Unity*, was the curriculum of Be the Bridge (BTB)—the nonprofit she would go on to found in 2016—in its earliest form. Onstage, she led a group meeting, modeling for attendees what a circle of trust could look like, and how healing could begin.

The positive response was immediate and overwhelming. In lieu of a website, Morrison directed people to a new Facebook group to get involved. From the day of the conference to now, that group has grown from 69 members to 90,500. Today there is at least one BTB group in every state and in several countries, including New Zealand.

Morrison's commitment to working through painful truths, and to leveraging the strength of preexisting community connections, are two principles that drive BTB. Though one doesn't have to believe in any higher power to benefit, the curriculum is rooted in concepts found in Morrison's Christian faith, such as lamentation and confession. Knowing how deeply segregated and politically fractured church communities are across the United States, Morrison based the program on core principles that could unite participants. "I wish that the church was the headlines in this conversation," she says, "but in a lot of the circumstances, they're the taillights. Jesus needs new PR."

**F**OR MICAH SMITH, a devoted Christian, Morrison's framework struck a deep chord—one that some might wrongly assume couldn't exist in someone from his background. As a kid in Georgia, Smith was a passionate Civil War reenactor. The first article he ever wrote for his high school paper asserted what he believed was a truth at the time: that the Civil War wasn't even *about* slavery.

College first introduced Smith to the idea that we all hold personal biases shaped by our experience, regardless of race. But it wasn't until the killing of Michael Brown and Eric Garner at the hands of police that he began to reconsider everything he thought he knew about history, and the ways Black Americans' lived experience might differ from his own. "Oftentimes it takes someone dying and suffering for us to have that spark," Smith admits. "I wish it didn't, but that

seems to be the way that it goes."

Realizing that he couldn't expect his few Black acquaintances to guide him through his many new questions, "I was a bit lost," he recalls. A Facebook post from author Jen Hatmaker, an early supporter of Morrison's work, alerted Smith to the very same 2015 IF:Gathering presentation where Morrison first introduced BTB. "I remember downloading the guide and reading it as I tried to get my kids to fall asleep," he says. "I was crying in the hallway, being like, *This is it. This is the thing.*"

"Here's this step-by-step conversation you can have that leads to growth within a community, that's biblically based," he says. "I feel like we're trying to reconcile back to the way God wants us to be, solid humans."

Smith has been a BTB educator since 2017, leading trainings and teaching a primer course called the Whiteness Intensive for

new white members who, like him, never learned how to discuss race and racism, to say nothing of doing it with someone who didn't look like them. "When you get shushed as a kid for even bringing up that someone is Black, you learn. *Oh, I shouldn't talk about race,*" he says. "But it's a privilege to not have to think about race."

In the first BTB student group that Smith co-led with a Black woman colleague at the Tennessee university where he works, the six Black students in the group shared the occasional slurs and frequent remarks that made them feel unwelcome on campus. Smith says that for him, it underscored what those students had long known: That often, "we're walking right next to each other in two parallel worlds that aren't overlapping."

"It's amazing to me how you can live in the same small community and not really understand other people's story," says Smith.



"And when you start to, it changes the way you engage in the issues. Because you're talking to real people, and it becomes about another person instead of just my ideology."

**O** **N A TUESDAY** afternoon last summer, I listened in on a BTB meeting of nine women—seven white, two black—who Zoomed from tidy homes and sparkling kitchens that would make Nancy Meyers jealous. Led by Andrea Middleton, a Black BTB member, and Margo Yoder, a white woman she'd gotten to know through a moms' meetup program near Atlanta, the group trades podcast and book recommendations as doorbells ring, dogs bark, and ovens beep to preheat.

When Middleton asks each member to share what brought them to BTB, Jeny and Lori tell me they'd started up their own racial reconciliation group in 2016, "not really knowing each other at all, other than as parents watching volleyball together." That experience informs their appreciation for the structured curriculum and extra support that BTB offers.

Lori, the group's self-described "pushbacker," came to Be the Bridge "kicking and screaming" at her friend Middleton's behest. "While I'm trying to process trauma in real time, I was also assisting this group of people through their own questions, which sometimes felt like an enormous weight" as a Black woman, she explains.

The nine women talk for more than two hours, alternately supporting and gently challenging each other with questions. One member just joined a new Bible study and was already steeling herself for racial debates that might surface in her more conservative circles. They discuss what "doing the right thing" even means, and how often people—women, particularly—are taught to favor peacekeeping over uncomfortable moments.

Listening to their conversation, it's striking how rare it is to hear people encouraging productive, healthy conflict. Their exchange feels quietly revolutionary, in a butterfly-effect type of way. Aside from a shared certainty regarding the facts of American history, no single member claims to have all the answers, because there's always something to learn from one another. Though there are likely dozens of apt Biblical verses, I'm reminded of the quote famously attributed to spiritual teacher Ram Dass: "We're all just walking each other home."

Or, as Morrison says, "There's several ways to do this work of anti-racism. We're just doing our little part, our little way."

## HOW TO START "TRUTH-TELLING WITH GRACE"

*Latasha Morrison recommends taking small, consistent steps within your local community, with the understanding that true growth and change takes time. "We do this work when there's a national headline, and when there isn't," Morrison says. "We're dealing with a centuries-old issue, so we prepare people: This isn't a sprint; it's a marathon." Here, a few ways to begin getting more comfortable discussing race and learning how racism affects us all.*

1

### FORM A BOOK CLUB.

There's no shortage of excellent novels and nonfiction by Black, Asian American, Latinx, and Indigenous authors. A book club is a fun, social way to spark meaningful conversation, and some releases include guided questions in their back pages. If you're not sure where to start, most-read recommendations abound online. Or ask a librarian at your local library for a curated list—if they don't have one, you may inspire them to create it.

2

### EDUCATE YOURSELF ABOUT WHITENESS AND THE HISTORY OF RACE IN AMERICA.

Research the racial history of the town you live or grew up in, including the roles your ancestors may have played, to gain awareness and to examine history's lasting impact. Seek out books and podcasts on the topic, such as Scene on Radio's *Seeing White* audio series. Be the Bridge also offers educational resources, including its primer *Foundations: An Introduction to Bridge Building*.

3

### ORGANIZE MOVIE NIGHTS.

Round up some snacks, invite some people into your backyard or living room, and screen a movie that centers on characters of another race. "Sometimes if people see that it's an all-Black cast or a Black lead, they automatically label it a 'Black movie,'" Morrison says. "I like to ask, 'Where does that thought come from? Let's explore that.'"

4

### CONNECT WITH MORE PEOPLE WHO DON'T LOOK LIKE YOU.

Morrison suggests taking a mental inventory of how many people you're in proximity with who are of your same race, from your friends to your family doctor. "Those are clues that you live in a homogeneous community," she says. Setting a long-term intention to meet a more diverse range of people creates the possibility of future cross-racial friendships. Exploring new playgrounds or churches, frequenting minority-owned businesses, and volunteering are a just few things to try.

5

### JOIN OR START A BE THE BRIDGE GROUP.

Want to join a preexisting group in your area? Request membership in the private Be the Bridge Facebook group to get started. When you feel ready to form a group of your own—made up of six to 12 multiracial acquaintances, per the program's design—head to [BetheBridge.com](http://BetheBridge.com).