

# Reconciliation Reconsidered: Advancing the National Conversation on Race Among Christian Social Workers

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*This paper is based upon a keynote address that was given by the author for the Alan Keith-Lucas Lecture at the 2017 North American Association of Christians in Social Work Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. The theme of this convention was Advocating for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation. The author entitled her talk, "Reconciliation Reconsidered: A conversation about race among Christian social workers." This compelling conversation challenges Christian social workers to examine the role they may be taking in reconciling the racial, social, gender, and economic injustice that exists within their communities. The author also conducts a historical survey of the works of Alan-Keith Lucas and discusses Lucas' views about the role that Christian social workers should take in reconciling racial injustice.*

*"Doom to those who pronounce wicked decrees, and keep writing harmful laws to deprive the needy of their rights and to rob the poor among my people of justice; to make widows their loot; to steal from orphans!" (Isaiah 10:1-2).*

Just as in the days of the prophet Isaiah, we are in a time period when there is concern that oppressive policies are legislated that have a negative impact on the most vulnerable members of our society. These policies directly impact the way in which social workers engage our client systems. Racism

is a complex layer of concern for vulnerable members and for social work practitioners. This article seeks to examine the role of Christian social workers in addressing racial oppression in America. Furthermore, this article highlights the writings of Alan Keith-Lucas to provide a framework towards racial reconciliation.

Dr. Alan Keith-Lucas was born in England in 1910. He came to the US in 1937 after earning a degree in English from Cambridge University (Ressler, 2010). Upon his arrival to the United States, Keith-Lucas earned a Master of Science in Social Administration from Case Western Reserve University, and a Ph.D. from Duke University. He joined the faculty of the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1950 (Powell, 1996). Although he retired in 1975, he continued to contribute to social work scholarly discourse related to residential childcare during his retirement years until his death on August 5, 1995 (Ressler, 2010).

I entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Social Work as a doctoral student in 1999. During my short time there, I never heard the name, Dr. Alan Keith-Lucas. So, while we have the Chapel Hill connection, that is the only connection that I thought that we had. Then, I began reading Dr. Keith-Lucas' work. His lecture series on "Social Work, Religion and Academia" was quite powerful (Keith-Lucas, 1981b; Langley, 1981). Keith-Lucas spoke about "Two sorts of social work, two religions" (Keith-Lucas, 1981c). He delineates a religion of grace and a religion of morality. Keith-Lucas states that the "religion of grace provides the proper approach to social work because it emphasizes God's love for undeserving sinners." He goes on to suggest that because of God's love, we as social workers must reach out to help those in need. Keith-Lucas contrasts this notion with the religion of morality. He saw this form of religion as a hindrance to social work because it produces a "sense of pride, a doctrine of salvation by works, and the repression of those who disobey God's law." Keith-Lucas saw this as a capitalist-Puritan work ethic which saw financial success as a sign of election, and which saw poverty as a sign of sin. Today we refer to this as a prosperity gospel, where we openly thank God for our good jobs, our nice homes, and good health. We couch these things as evidence of blessings from God. However, we don't really think about what this means for those who don't have good jobs or nice homes or good health. Does this mean that they are not blessed by God?

In Keith-Lucas' lecture "Theology and the Helping Process" (Keith-Lucas, 1981a; Langley, 1981), he states that "the most important ingredients in a Christian approach to social work are a Christian view of man and the ability to express kindness." He saw a compatibility between social work and Christian values. Keith-Lucas states that a Christian social worker, regardless of work setting, should

“See that love comes first, respect choice, not push one’s own solution too much, emphasize responsibility, recognize that suffering is a part of growth, refrain from judgement, and avoid a negative diagnosis that the client is beyond help (Langley, 1981, 28).”

In his seminal text, “So you want to be a social worker: A Primer for the Christian student” (1985), Keith-Lucas provides pragmatic advice about how one practices as a professional social worker and a confessing Christian. He writes,

“It perhaps does not need saying, but yet should always be kept in mind, that the most effective Christian witness is not talking about religion but treating people in a Christian way oneself. And perhaps one should add a word of warning to the worker who, in his or her desire to share his or her experience of God, makes a personal testimony. The most dangerous of all helpers is the one who has solved his or her own problem and has forgotten what it cost.”

### **Let’s Talk About Race**

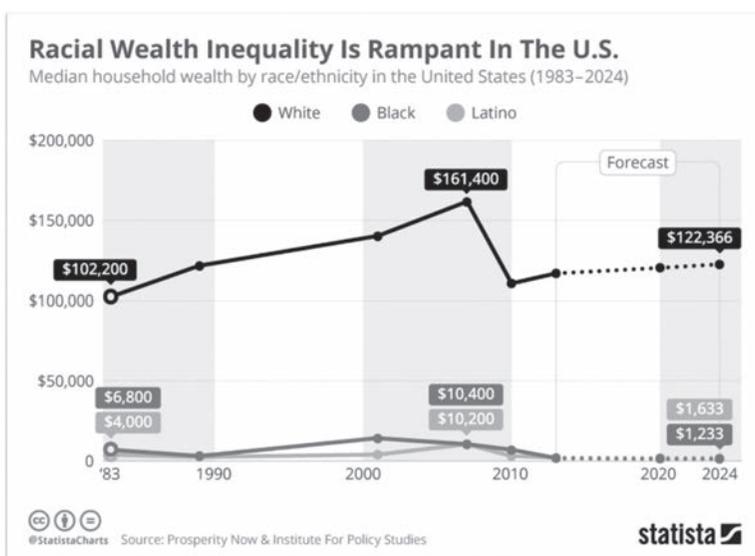
It is in this context that guides my thoughts about advancing NACSW’s conversation on race. We are in a time where overt racism has been released and reintroduced as a fashionable cloth. While there has always been a tenuous relationship between law enforcement and the Black community, from the use of slave patrols during the institution of chattel slavery to today’s iteration of law enforcement (Durr, 2015; Hawkins & Thomas, 2013), the use of videos and social media has put a spotlight on an issue that might have been hidden from broader society. And even with this spotlight, Black men, women, and children are beaten, mishandled, shot, and murdered on film by law enforcement with no justice. It is very rare for law enforcement to be charged, much less convicted, of unjustifiably killing a Black person in the line of duty (Hirschfield, 2015; Park & Lee, 2017; Zack, 2015). However, the municipalities where these crimes are committed are more often prepared to pay millions of dollars to the victims’ families for the wrongful death of their loved ones (The Marshall Project, 2017; Wing, 2015). And Christian social workers are silent.

### **The Economics of Race**

While it is very easy to fall into the diversity trap by focusing on gender, ability, geographic location, and other forms of diversity, all of these forms of diversity are affected by race. “Race matters,” to quote Dr. Cornel West

(1993). And in this country, race is tied to economics. It is significant that White households (see figure 1) in the middle income quintile own nearly eight times as much wealth as middle income Black earners and ten times as much as middle income Latino earners (McCarthy, 2017; Asante-Muhammad, Collins, Hoxie, & Nieves, 2017). Researchers state that it will take an average Latino family 84 years and the average Black family 228 years to reach the same level of wealth enjoyed by White families today. How can this be? Is it that Whites work harder than Latinos and Blacks? Is it that Whites are more blessed than Latinos and Blacks?

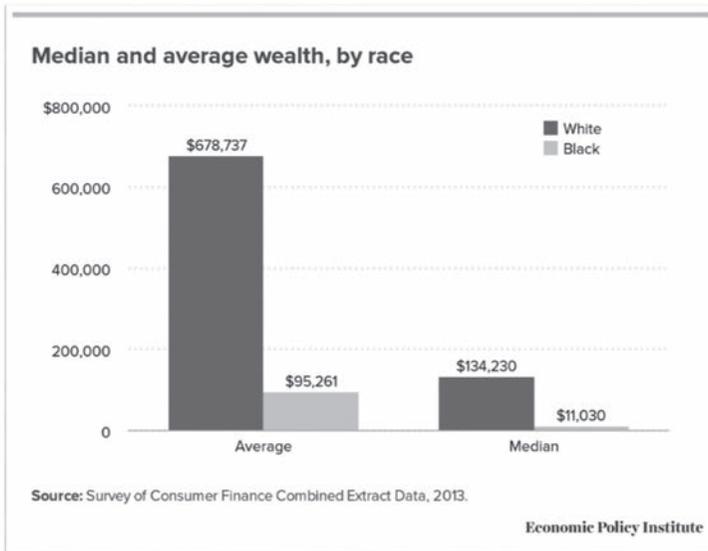
Figure 1



For the purposes of this discussion, the focus is on the Black-White dichotomy. When looking at wealth accumulation, which is less about present income but more about long-term financial security, there is even more of a gap (Jones, 2017). The average wealth of White families is seven times higher than the average Black family (see figure 2).

When looking at median wealth, White families have twelve times median wealth than Black families. More than 25% of Black families have zero or negative net worth, whereas, less than 10% of White families have zero or negative net worth. Even when looking at age, household structure, education level, income, or occupation, these racialized wealth gaps still exist (Tippett, Jones-DeWeever, Rockey Moore, Hamilton, & Darity, 2014). The typical Black family with a head of household working full-time has less wealth than the typical White family whose head of household

Figure 2



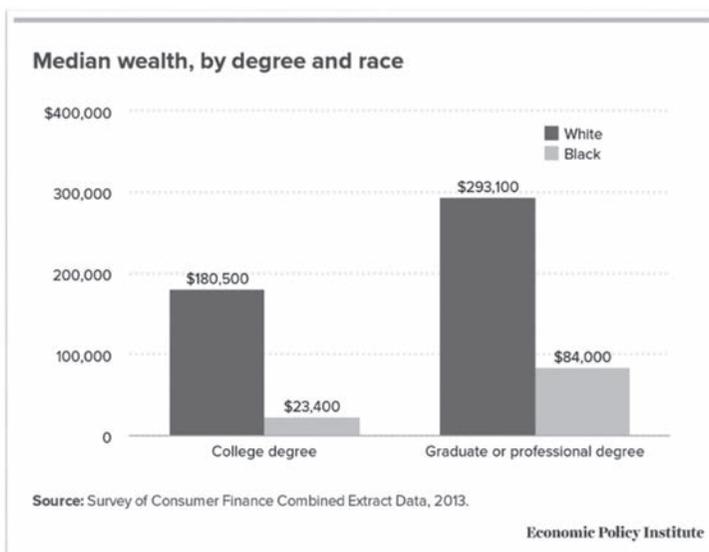
is unemployed. This holds true for families with college and graduate/professional degrees (Jones, 2017). Median wealth for Black families whose head has a college degree has only one-eighth the wealth of the median White family whose head has a college degree (see figure 3).

Even the typical Black family with a graduate or professional degree had more than \$200,000 less wealth than a comparable White family. How could this be? Education is supposed to be the great equalizer. Housing equity makes up about two thirds of all wealth for the typical household. So, this gap is primarily a housing wealth gap (Assante-Muhammad et al, 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Coates, 2014; Jones, 2017; Shapiro et al, 2013; Turner, 2013).

### Legislated Oppression

From the very first moment that Blacks were kidnapped and brought to this country, Blacks have not had full access to the economic system, although Blacks have been the drivers of the economic system. Laws have been put in place to limit Black access (DuBois, 1935; Novak, 1978). After the end of legalized institutionalized chattel slavery in this country, when most enslaved workers received no wages for their labor, there were laws in place to ensure that Blacks provided cheap labor. There is documented discrimination in employment and wage setting that has impacted generations of wealth. There were policies in place that limited the types of employment that Blacks could hold (Roback, 1984; Shaw,

Figure 3



2010). The lasting effects of these policies are still evident to us every day when we walk into our places of employment. Black Codes limited Black employment to laborers and domestic workers. In many states, Blacks had to gain permission from magistrates to seek employment in areas outside of these mandates, or Blacks would move to locations that would allow them to work in their desired fields. This greatly suppressed wage earnings. Even when policies were put in place that could potentially help with wage suppression, such as the minimum wage laws, there were negative consequences for Blacks. For instance, the institution of minimum wage laws resulted in increased unemployment of Blacks, as Whites were not willing to pay Blacks equitable wages (Sowell, 2007; Spero & Harris, 1931).

For those Blacks who did manage to earn a decent income, they were barred from accessing the most important financial market: the housing market. Housing policies were put in place that prevented Blacks from acquiring land, created redlining and restrictive covenants and encouraged lending discrimination (Coates, 2014; Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro, 2013). Consequently, Blacks were limited to specific geographic locations with reduced services.

### Role of Christian Social Workers

So, what does this have to do with Christian social workers? The prophet Isaiah warns us in chapter 10 verse 1 and 2:

Doom to those who pronounce wicked decrees, and keep writing harmful laws to deprive the needy of their rights and to rob the poor among my people of justice; to make widows their loot; to steal from orphans!

Isaiah warns that the writing of unjust laws that create oppression will not go unnoticed by the Creator. Earlier in the text, the prophet Isaiah warns against ignoring injustice in the name of religion. He laments in Isaiah 1:13-17

Quit your worship charades.  
 I can't stand your trivial religious games:  
 Monthly conferences, weekly Sabbaths, special meetings—  
 meetings, meetings, meetings—I can't stand one more!  
 Meetings for this, meetings for that. I hate them!  
 You've worn me out!  
 I'm sick of your religion, religion, religion,  
 while you go right on sinning.  
 When you put on your next prayer-performance,  
 I'll be looking the other way.  
 No matter how long or loud or often you pray,  
 I'll not be listening.  
 And do you know why? Because you've been tearing  
 people to pieces, and your hands are bloody.  
 Go home and wash up.  
 Clean up your act.  
 Sweep your lives clean of your evildoings  
 so I don't have to look at them any longer.  
 Say no to wrong.  
 Learn to do good.  
 Work for justice.  
 Help the down-and-out.  
 Stand up for the homeless.  
 Go to bat for the defenseless.”

As Christian social workers, we have an obligation to address issues of injustice and oppression. In the American context, this means that we must address issues of race, specifically the Black-White dichotomy. We cannot turn our faces away and state that we will just pray about it. This is not sufficient. We must acknowledge the sin of racism and our role in supporting this sin...in the name of Jesus. In this country, we have a history of using religion to “pronounce wicked decrees” and to write “harmful laws.” As long as the supported lawmaker proclaims to be a Christian, there’s a blind eye to the consequences of the law.

In the name of Jesus, the worst kinds of crimes have been perpetuated against Blacks in this country. Terrorist organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan, proclaim to be Christian organizations (see figure 4) following the teachings of the Bible (Sanchez, 2016; Weinberg & Assoudeh, 2016).

Figure 4

## KNIGHTS of the KU KLUX KLAN

*and*

## WOMEN of the KU KLUX KLAN

### Their Principles and Ideals

1. Tenets of the Christian Religion. 2. Upholding of the Constitution of the United States. 3. Sovereignty of our State Rights. 4. Separation of Church and State.	5. Religious Liberty. 6. Freedom of Speech and Press. 7. Compulsory Education in Free Public Schools. 8. Protection of Our Pure Womanhood.	9. White Supremacy. 10. Exclusion of alien Immigration. 11. Close Relationship Between Capital and American Labor. 12. Just Laws and Liberty.
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*This organization is not anti-Jew, anti-Catholic nor anti-Negro but we do restrict our membership to native born white, Protestant, Gentile, American citizens. In exercising this right we do not become "anti" in any respect. Consider the fact that the Jewish people have their B'nai B'rith, the Catholics their organizations known as the Knights of Columbus and the Daughters of America. Consider also that every organization in the United States places some limitation of one nature or another upon its membership.*

### ARE WE NOT ENTITLED TO THE SAME PRIVILEGE?

We stand for law enforcement by the legally constituted officers of the law. At no time do we take the law into our own hands.	If you are a native born White, Protestant, Gentile, American, Citizen, of good moral character, world reputation, believe in the tenets of the Christian Religion, wish to hold one chapter, local and only, in the government of the United States of America, and desire to become a member, you are invited to join. <b>FEAR NEITHER MAN NOR DEMON.</b> P. O. BOX 17 I am a real American and in speaking with the gentleman for which this letter above stands, I would like to hear how to become a member. Name _____ Home Address _____ Postal _____ City _____ All Correspondence Strictly Confidential.	We stand for Religious Liberty and recognize the constitutional right of every man to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience, be he Jew, Roman Catholic or Protestant, regardless of any reports you may have heard to the contrary.
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Directly after the emancipation of the formerly enslaved, and with the help of the Reconstruction era (1865-77), Blacks enjoyed great economic successes. This is one of the times when the wealth gap was closed. There were thriving Black towns throughout the country (DuBois, 1935; Silver & Moeser, 2015). They were in Atlanta; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Chicago; Rosewood, FL; Washington, DC; Knoxville, TN; New York City; and, East St. Louis. Each of these communities was destroyed by White terrorists who bombed, burned and massacred in response to Black economic success that often surpassed the successes of many Whites. There were numerous other prosperous Black communities throughout the South and eastern

seaboard, such as in Durham, NC and Little Rock, AR, that were destroyed by eminent domain policies that allowed the government to take their land and build interstates through the middle of them. When examining the historical accounts of these and similar events, the White church played a major role in supporting these terroristic behaviors.

So, what does this have to do with Christian social workers today? Well, in our quest to engage more diversity in NACSW, in our work settings and in our churches, there is frustration in the process. Whites often tire of “always having to talk about race”...”why is everything about race” (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Harries, 2014; Howard, 2016). There is a notion that since we all love Jesus, why can’t we see past race? Many Whites don’t even see the irony of looking at a picture of a White Jesus and suggesting that we look past race! I am a bit suspicious of White Christians given that the record shows that White Christianity tends to support the oppression of my people. So, when it comes to talking about reconciliation, there has to be a sincere understanding of the harm inflicted on Blacks by White Christians. It is not about sitting in the same space breathing the same air. It is about truly being in relationship. So, when I say that I hurt, you don’t tell me that I don’t hurt because you don’t feel pain. Once there is an acknowledgement of the inflicted harm, there must be true repentance, which is a turning away of sinful ways. This means that you can no longer continue to enjoy the spoils of privilege. This harm must be repaired before we can truly be reconciled.

### **Reparational Reconciliation**

I heard a story about a month ago when I was at Abilene Christian University. The speaker, Dr. Thema Bryant-Davis, gave a wonderful explanation of what this reparational reconciliation looks like.

There was a young boy who had a magnificent bike. One day, his neighbor stole his bike. The neighbor rode that bike up and down the street in front of the little boy. The little boy told everyone who would listen that the neighbor has stolen his bike and is riding it up and down the street, to no avail. The little boy saw no justice. Sometime later, the neighbor comes to the little boy’s house and asks the little boy if they could be friends. The little boy looks past the neighbor and sees the bike out there. The little boy said, “If you give me back my bike, then we can be friends.” The neighbor said, “What does the bike have to do with us being friends? You need to get over that. I am here because I want to be friends. I didn’t come here to talk about a bike!” The little boy insisted that he wanted his bike back. The neighbor continued to protest the little boy talking about a bike when he is wanting to talk about being friends.

This story illustrates the importance of reconciliation. We can't talk about reconciliation until there is an acknowledgement that I don't have my bike. There has been no justice for my stolen bike.

### **Conclusion**

When I am told by White Christian social work colleagues that the issue is not about race but about abortion, homosexuality, and gun ownership, I am a bit suspicious. Alan Keith-Lucas calls that a "religion of morality." How can you be pro-life, which is in support of life at all stages, but be against access to high quality health care, a living wage, access to high quality education, access to clean water and safe communities? How can you be pro-life and in support of a criminal justice system that disproportionately locks up Black people? How can you be pro-life and support the death penalty, that, by the way, disproportionately impacts Black people? How can you be pro-life and support unjustified wars? How can you be pro-life and support massive stockpiling of weapons and the relaxing of gun access laws? How can you be pro-life and then expect for me to explain to you why my life matters? I cannot be reconciled with anyone who does not acknowledge the harm inflicted on my people, and who seeks to continue to inflict harm through wicked legislation. As Keith-Lucas stated, Christian social workers should do less talking about their faith and more demonstrating the love of the Creator. The prophet Isaiah admonishes us in Isaiah 58:6-12,

This is the kind of fast day I'm after:

to break the chains of injustice,  
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,  
free the oppressed,  
cancel debts.

What I'm interested in seeing you do is:

sharing your food with the hungry,  
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,  
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,  
being available to your own families.

Do this and the lights will turn on,

and your lives will turn around at once.

Your righteousness will pave your way.  
 The God of glory will secure your passage.  
 Then when you pray, God will answer.  
 You'll call out for help and I'll say, 'Here I am.'  
 If you get rid of unfair practices,  
     quit blaming victims,  
     quit gossiping about other people's sins,  
 If you are generous with the hungry  
     and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,  
 Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,  
     your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.  
 I will always show you where to go.  
     I'll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—  
     firm muscles, strong bones.  
 You'll be like a well-watered garden,  
     a gurgling spring that never runs dry.  
 You'll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,  
     rebuild the foundations from out of your past.  
 You'll be known as those who can fix anything,  
     restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate,  
     make the community livable again.

We have chosen this profession of social work to support high quality well-being among individuals, families, communities and organizations. We want the best living for our client systems. We are girded by the word of God that provides guidance in our quest to make our world a better place to live. As Christians, we are to model the love of the Creator. To be the hands and feet of Jesus. We must be mindful of this when we speak on social issues. We can't be oppressors and then profess to be Christian and social workers. We can't hide behind our keyboards spewing forth hate and then profess to do so in the name of Jesus. In closing, let me leave you with the words of Paul (Phil 4:8,9):

Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies. ❖

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