

Renewed Inspiration

Recently, I had the absolute fortune of visiting the National Museum of African American Culture and Heritage in Washington, DC. The trip was deeply centering and propelled me to take yet another long, introspective look at my own journey. I was able to see myself through the sociological and historical lenses of my African American heritage, my female gender, and my Christian culture. As I traversed through the museum's exhibits which displayed provocative images and remnants of a dignified yet grotesquely oppressed people, I was increasingly captivated by the relics that represented spirituality and religiosity. The captivating stories, compelling words, precisely placed Bibles and mesmerizing pictures stirred up a bevy of mixed emotions for me.



Kesslyn Brade Stennis

On the one hand, I was able to understand how Christianity was historically introduced to people of African descent by those who, perhaps, did not recognize and honor the strengths of the African cultures and spiritual beliefs that existed prior to their arrival. I was intrigued by how Christianity became a staple religion for a people who were innately strong, cultured and spiritual. On the other hand, I was mortified that this new religion was somehow transformed into an instrument of torture and oppression for so many millions over

the course of at least two hundred and forty-five years. Instead of conveying a message of freedom, Christianity was used to justify and proliferate forced servitude which garnered economic gain for the Christian oppressor.

As I snapped photo after photo of relics that connected with me at the deepest level, I began to wrestle with what Christianity really means for me and others in these contemporary times. I recognized that Christianity is still perceived by some as a religion that is controlling, self-righteous, oppressive, restrictive and disrespectful of individual cultural strengths and diversity of thought. For others, Christianity is viewed as a religion that seeks to foster peace, love, joy, humility, respect, liberation and service to the larger world.

My process of reconciling a complex past to articulate a personal and contemporary "working definition" of Christianity continues today, as it should for all of us. It is my daily challenge to recognize and honor the strengths of individuals and their proud heritages while introducing a faith that emphasizes a call to servitude, humility and unity - perhaps with minimal regard for individual ethnic and racial cultures that are outweighed by the call for a single Christian identity. It is my daily challenge to accept people for who and what they are while empowering them to be more, as I understand "more" to be. It is my daily challenge to embrace rather than oppress people from all walks of life (regardless of whether I agree with their varied lifestyles or personal choices) while simultaneously maintaining a mission to bring salvation and freedom that has rules, roles and expectations. And it is my daily challenge to engage in a personal reflection of my purpose in this

world that connects me with my call, my history, and my daily realities.

I submit that perhaps we should all struggle with some of these same nuances, as individuals, as Christians, and as members of NACSW. Those of us who are in leadership within NACSW are often challenged to consider issues that impact the perceptions and meanings of Christianity and social work within an organization that professes to be a safe place for Christians with sometimes vastly different Christian beliefs and practices. Our challenge is to reconcile these differences in a manner that shows respect and regard for all Christians, especially as understood and experienced by those who have been marginalized, oppressed and segmented to the edges of society.

While this challenge, brought to mind by a visit to a museum, is one that will require personal and collaborative reflection, I find joy in the journey. I am thankful that NACSW, as an organization, welcomes the opportunity to respectfully discuss our differing positions within a sphere of love and respect. I have gratitude that we continue to support diversity through several initiatives under one umbrella of shalom. I feel obliged that we continue our mission of service to those who may look and experience life differently than we do. And I am renewed and inspired to serve in a professional social work organization that seeks to integrate faith and practice for people from all walks of life who represent various understandings of the Christian faith and yet who are all deeply committed to following Christ. Yes, I am renewed and inspired to continue this work, and I hope that you are as well. Amen and ashe.

In the spirit of sankofa and harambee,
Kesslyn

NACSW Board Election Results

NACSW is pleased to announce the final results of its Fall, 2016 Board election. The six candidates who were elected by the membership to serve on NACSW's Board with terms running from 2017 - 2019 are:

- Kevin Brown; New Orleans, Louisiana
- Jana Donahoe; Cleveland, Mississippi
- Hugh Drouin; Mississauga, Ontario (Canada)
- Allison Tan; Palos Heights, Illinois

- Kimberly Hardy; Fayetteville, North Carolina
- Joe Kuilema; Grand Rapids, Michigan

Please keep these newly elected Board members in your prayers for wisdom and guidance.

Allison Tan
Vice President