

Celebrating **10 Years** of our Global Network of Leaders Formed for Reconciliation With 10 Reconcilers' Stories





Over a thousand reconcilers
are living differently and
transforming conflict in their
everyday spaces around the
world

Here are ten of their stories

Marta

“When you receive so many good things, it’s impossible to keep them to yourself.”



I grew up as a Catholic believing that the presence of God can be felt in various ways, but mainly through a deeply transformative experience that brings a feeling of peace and love, of encounter, belonging, and a desire to serve.

Throughout my life, I have had some of these heavenly experiences. For me, EPF brought me exactly that: a transformative experience of peace and love, of encounter, belonging, and a desire to serve.

On the one hand, the hospitality, attention, and teachings of each of the organizations - the Rose Castle Foundation, Muslim Council of Elders, and World Council of Churches - made me feel at home from the very beginning. When someone feels at home, they let their guard down and allow themselves to be their true selves. By making Chateau de Bossey a home, they allowed everyone, without exception, to be their true selves, to have open dialogues, to build relationships of trust, and to be willing to learn. We all belonged, we were highlighted in our individuality, respected in our differences, and admired for our characteristics.

The diversity of the chosen group and the intentional moments of sharing, such as Scriptural Reasoning, pair or group conversations and Home Groups, brought me a great experience of encounter in various dimensions:

- Encounter with myself, with my vocation, with what I want to have as a mission and legacy in the world. Encounter with my weaknesses and characteristics, with my desires and dreams.
- Encounter with others who think differently, who have different dreams, backgrounds, and cultures. Encounter with their weaknesses and characteristics, with their desires and dreams. I met wonderful people openly and freely, whom I genuinely admire and whom I carry with me every day.
- Encounter with God - in as many ways as there were people in the group. Encounter with God in Jummah, in Shabbat, in ecumenical prayer, in Scriptural Reasoning, in conversations. Encounter with a God who is always Love, always Peace, always unity.

When you receive so many good things, it is impossible to keep them to yourself.

On the one hand, it helped me to look at the skills I already have, at my vocation as a psychologist, and to seek where and how I can emerge within my context. I thought deeply about solutions and projects that, God willing, will move forward soon and that arose from EPF.

In addition, it changed my way of looking at the issue of sustainability, of thinking about how I can live and share a more sustainable life at a holistic and complete level. It changed my sensitivity to issues such as Palestine, women's rights in other countries, knowledge about the Srebrenica Massacre and the impact it still has today, among many other issues. Today, I know stories, I have friends who daily face difficulties that I had never thought of before. Today, I am not indifferent to any of this.

I also came out of EPF with a mission: not to let transformation end in me. If I was lucky enough to be the only Portuguese selected, then I have an obligation to share the moments and stories that transformed me with my network. To use social media for good, to show that there are paths to peace, that there are many people focused on it, and that there are many young people with absolutely incredible and transformative stories.

For me, EPF was - and continues to be every day - a transformative experience. Now, I have more than 50 homes spread across the world, ready to receive me. I have a home ready to receive any of these more than 50. I am immensely grateful to all those who provided us with this experience, who touched me deeply, from all the organizations.

I owe a lot to RCF, to Sarah, who (perhaps unknowingly) shared with me a conversation that concretely changed my future; to Phoebe for her close accompaniment and friendship, as well as to Joe, Hannah, and Robbie, that are very special people.

Anyone should go through this encounter experience. I feel absolutely honored to have been able to participate. EPF took what I already had in terms of abilities, context, culture, and organized, realized, and gave me tools to be much better. It is an experience that I will carry with me for the rest of my life, and I hope it will have an impact not only on me, but on many other lives.

Sofia (Age 16)

“There is no need for war here; I can have multiple facets of my identity, and they do not have to fight to the death.”

Every time I sit down to fill out a form or a survey, I am overcome with a looming sense of dread. My pencil shakes over the clipboard at the doctor's office, or my hand hovers over two different check boxes in the online form. The seemingly straightforward question is familiar – I've probably answered it 500 times – and yet, it never fails to strike me: What is your race?

These four words are like a gunfire, signaling the beginning of an incessant, vicious battle between two opposing sides. For me, it marks the emergence of a recurring internal conflict in which two aspects of my identity appear to be at odds with one another. My mom was born and raised in Honduras, and my dad is white. I am Latina, and I am also white. Unfortunately, this specific combination is not usually an option on forms, making me feel as if my dual identities must battle with one another until one side comes out victorious.

Over the summer, especially during my time in the Lakes District with the Rose Castle Foundation, I spent a lot of time reflecting on this metaphorical battle and working through how to reconcile these two integral aspects of my identity. While a lot of our reconciliation work in England centered around resolving conflicts between two external groups, I was able to take a lot of the tactics we practiced and translate them to my own inner strife. I knew that in order to resolve my conflict, I would have to pinpoint the exact source of the tension first.

I have struggled with my identity for my whole life, but it never bothered me much until I got older, when questions of race and ethnicity became a more prevalent element of my life and my education.

Not only was I unable to fill out forms, but I also had trouble bringing myself to openly share about either part of my identity, out of fear that I was somehow betraying the other part. At Rose Castle, my peers and chaperones cultivated an environment completely free of judgement and preconceptions. And I was also able to lose myself in the landscape, letting the lush greenery and brisk air of the English countryside shield me from the rest of the world. It was there, isolated from a society that tries so hard to put people into boxes, that I identified the root of my internal conflict, which, as it turns out, is not so internal after all.

I realized that the reason why I have gone my whole life feeling as though I have a constant identity war going on within me is because that's exactly the sort of message the world pushes onto people: that there are certain groups and identities that have never been able to get along and never will. But, just like how reconciliation can build peace between two external groups, it can also help me understand that these two core parts of me can coexist, no matter how hard society tries to suggest otherwise.

The next time I am filling out a form and I encounter the phrase 'What is your race?' I am going to attempt to change my perspective. Instead of letting this "gunfire" mark the start of a contentious battle, I will simply listen to the pop, and retreat. There is no need for war here; I can have multiple facets of my identity, and they do not have to fight to the death. While a lot of the global conflict we see today is nuanced, often with historical and cultural layers that require the attention of entire communities in order to resolve, I firmly believe that if we each take some time to reflect and, at the very least, attempt to tackle our own, individual battles, we will be able to more compassionately and collaboratively navigate our tension-filled world. My hope is that one day, we will all play a part in starting to reconcile it.



Cameron

“We didn’t leave with our minds changed, but with our eyes opened.”



An unscientific but nevertheless attractive insight, often apocryphally attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte, is that if you really want to understand a person and what motivates them, look at what was happening when they were 21. For me, a student based in London and halfway through a political science and history degree, the abstracted ideas burst out of the neat confines of my textbooks and shaped a new reality around me.

I turned 21 in November 2016. In the six months prior to my birthday I witnessed two political earthquakes: Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. All the experts, that we had apparently had enough of, didn't see either coming. Wilful blindness and structural deafness left a system exposed to the justifiable wrath of the marginalised. Pouring this sentiment into a binary pot was a recipe for a poisonous process that regardless of the outcome, left society fractured and broken.

In the six months after my 21st birthday a series of violent extremist attacks took place in London and Manchester in the pursuit of an apocalyptic caliphate and neo-nazi white supremacy, each adding fuel to each other's fire; while the flames that consumed Grenfell tower and the ensuing fatal tragedy exposed an ugly truth about corporate-state negligence and the relegation of human life below opportunities for profit margins.

Throughout all of these events, the relationship between voice and power was placed into sharp focus. For many, who we listen to and how we listen had morphed from open questions to closed articles of faith.

In the midst of it all, I wanted to know: how do we faithfully respond to a legacy of failing to listen? How do we build a society that listens generously and authentically?

It was with those questions circulating in my mind that I participated in the Emerging Peacemakers Forum in the Summer of 2018. It was there that I met an unlikely group of exceptional young people, distinctive through their individual stories and identities but united by diverse faith commitments that demanded, and came to receive, deeper mutual recognition.

It's impossible to truthfully distil those ten days that we shared into a comprehensive reflection. But what I experienced and witnessed first-hand, was that deep listening is possible even with the most unlikely dialogue partners.

The clearest example of this for me was within a scriptural reasoning session, a form of dialogue that puts scripture at the heart of the conversation. In perhaps our third or fourth session as a group, one of the Muslim participants changed the entire course of the conversation with a simple question "why do Christians insist prophet Isa (Jesus) is God, rather than His messenger?". What followed was a memorable exchange that was tense, life-giving, awkward, generative, clumsy and attentive all at once. It wasn't a debate. Persuasive accounts were made, but not with the intention of persuading.

We didn't leave with our minds changed, but with our eyes opened to how our brothers and sisters related differently and deeply to a shared figure. Denial and validation metered out in equal measure in a complex, messy but joyous exploration.

Deep listening requires a well cultivated environment, a lot of hard work, and social tools that take a lifetime to hone - but it is not beyond us. I didn't find answers to my questions, but I did see habits and behaviours modelled that captured my imagination and pointed towards a restoration of brokenness.

I have spent the last four years of my early professional life continuing to follow the threads that these questions from 2016 and the Emerging Peacemakers Forum have posed, working with others to think about new and creative ways of responding to them. In my work at the LSE Faith Centre, I have been able to pursue this from a theoretical and practical perspective, combining research insights with workshop facilitation, encountering a wide range of challenging perspectives and continuously re-evaluating where I stand. Sometimes this is unsettling, and sometimes I encounter differences that feel unbridgeable. But having experienced the Emerging Peacemakers Forum I frequently place hope in the fact that we can patiently build appropriate places of encounter and I have faith that we will be drawn to meet one another there.

Dani



“We have genuine power to go back to our usual social groups and challenge our peers’ misconceptions, intolerances, and fears.”

In February 2023, four student members of Princeton University's Rose Castle Society (RCS) were invited to a panel interview with the President's Advisory Council (the University steering committee) to share how The Rose Way has had an impact on campus life. Danielle Samake – a third year sociology major – gives us an insight into the discussion.

“I really enjoyed being invited to share our story and celebrate RCS' work with the Advisory Council. It felt empowering that the leaders of the University wanted to hear from young people about our experiences of polarization and conflict on campus, and how we are trying to help our peers navigate it.

I think the council was most inspired by the sheer diversity of RCS' members. Perhaps it is surprising that this unlikely group of people could come together given that we are from all walks of life and have very different ethnicities, religions, political views and cultures. Sometimes it is hard not to judge others based on our own prejudices, biases and misconceptions – and this can bubble up and cause conflict and pain on campus.

We shared how gathering together at Rose Castle last Summer for the Encounter Programme gave us a space outside the often insular, pressurized contexts on campus to come together and build trust. I really felt RCF created a safe space in which I could bring my entire self, sharing my views authentically and trusting that others were going to engage respectfully.

The small group discussions around difficult topics were particularly powerful – we were able to be honest, to learn from one another in humility, and to grow. Many of us found we were able to work together to reach new levels of common understanding, without feeling the need to achieve consensus or to convince others who think and live differently.

And then the Advisory Council asked us a challenging question: improving relationships on a small scale is great, but could we realistically have an impact more widely across campus life?

We answered the question by asking the Council to think of the ripple effect of our work. Given the sheer diversity of RCS' membership, we have genuine power to go back to our usual social groups and challenge our peers' misconceptions, intolerances, and fears. We have an amazing opportunity to model the habits of reconciliation; to show our friends how to dialogue respectfully, disagree well, and remove preconceptions from interactions. Ultimately, it's about helping to humanize those we often 'other'.

We genuinely believe that we are helping our peers to embrace the dignity of difference and become resilient against division and hostility.

There's no quick fix for tackling social division and conflict. But there is a real sense of optimism about the contribution the Rose Castle Society can make to life at Princeton in the years to come, and the President's Advisory Council are excited to see where that might lead."



Kevin



“My Faith has been strengthened and expanded in ways that I could not have conceived years ago.”

In my studies at CTS over the past few years, I have been fortunate to have classmates who represented diverse faiths beyond my Western Christian tradition.

Even though I am still currently in the fellowship, as I reflect upon the interreligious nature of the work that I am currently involved in I would have to say that it has been not only life-altering, but faith-altering.

My Faith has been strengthened and expanded in ways that I could not have conceived years ago, and it has been mainly through interactions with my Muslim and Jewish fellowship members.

During our retreat at Rose Castle in Cumbria, England we participated in an activity called “Scriptural Reasoning.” In this activity we were all given a set of three passages to correlate and discuss, with each passage coming from the Bible, Torah, and Quran. What made this especially powerful was that the passages were both in English and either Arabic or Hebrew, so the participants of various faiths read the passages in their original language.

By doing this those of us who are Christians came to appreciate the cross-cultural aspect of interreligious interaction, as we learned that there is a melodic, poetic, and even rhythmic aspect of the scriptures. It was especially powerful to hear Biblical scriptures that some of us have become familiar with over the years read in Hebrew.

An important interreligious interaction that I had at Rose Castle was with an Islamic seminary student who was from London. He posed a question to our group around a discussion we were having on forgiveness. He asked, “Is it possible to have true forgiveness without justice?” After several mixed responses, he and I had one of the most meaningful conversations during my time there about how some power structures have manipulated the Message of Christ to only focus on the afterlife as a source of justice, but we have had Christian leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. who taught that you can have both forgiveness and justice.

He explained to me how this was defined in the Quran, and we quickly became friends. Another new friend I made was a Jewish rabbi who taught me about the tremendous significance of knowing the Hebrew translations of words. We were discussing repentance, and he explained to me that there are two separate terms for repentance in Hebrew. Teshuvah miyarah, which means repentance out of fear of Divine Punishment, and teshuvah me'ahavah, which means repentance out of love for God and a desire to become attached to The Divine.

We had such a profound discussion concerning not only how I never knew that there were two terms for repentance, but also how I grew up under a strict Pentecostal doctrine that practiced teshuvah miyarah exclusively and the impact that it causes within Christian circles today. I reflect on my experience in England often, and I am grateful and blessed to now have a true interreligious perspective.



Abi



“We laughed across our divides. Years of stereotypes broken by minutes of shared laughter.”

I have always known 'home' to be a moving type of thing. As a child, I grew up abroad, in warm and transitory environments. As an expatriate family living in Rome, cross-cultural difference was our bread and butter (or our focaccia and olive oil). I was used to navigating in overlapping circles in my international school and church, with friends who were Sudanese, Seychellois, Albanian or Chinese - very rarely plain English like me. This multi-cultural environment was a petri-dish fermenting deep beliefs in me: a passion for harmony amidst cultural differences, and a strong conviction that there was always more to learn, especially from people who were unlike me.

In my life and in my studies, I have always sought to embrace diversity, and build bridges with cultures different to my own. At University, I decided to pursue Modern Languages and Cultures, because I reasoned that learning about a people through their language, seemed a fine way to do just that. I chose to study Italian - the country I had lived in for 11 years as a child, Spanish - where I had spent my Latin American gap year, and Arabic - a language and culture which had intrigued me ever since I met my close schoolfriend Hajar and her family.

Growing up in an ex-pat community, inter-cultural relationships were second-nature, and I had known their profound worth. However, when I moved to England for the first time, to go to Durham University, I struggled to find my place in a city that seemed, at surface-level, about as culturally homogenous as British cities come.

In the summer of 2018, I saw the power of interfaith friendships at work again. I had the utter privilege of being part of the inaugural Emerging Peacemakers' Forum, with Rose Castle Foundation, Al-Azhar and Cambridge University. I sat around the dinner table with British Muslims and Coptic Christians, and we laughed across our divides; years of stereotypes broken by minutes of shared laughter. After 10 days of getting to know each other deeply through sharing conversations, lectures, and meals, we formed unlikely friendships which could be life-long. Three years since the forum, I have kept up with many of the peacemakers and each joyful reunion feels like the reconvening of a special, scattered family.

The Emerging Peacemakers Forum kindled my interests in reconciliation and peacebuilding, and then set them on fire. In the days after the forum, I could think of nothing more crucial for today's world than peace: just, sustainable, positive peace in our time. It felt time to delve deeper, so I dedicated a year to a master's degree in the subject of Reconciliation and Peacebuilding at the University of Winchester, one of the only schools which incorporates faith-based elements into the curriculum.

As believers and reconcilers, we are not called to isolated lives. We are called to be peacemakers and bridge-builders. To love our neighbours as ourselves, whatever that looks like. We must practice these truths wholeheartedly, in word, deed, and prayer. Peacebuilding may feel naive and fickle with the conflicts still ablaze in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, and many other parts of the world - but the purpose of peacebuilding is as vital during conflict as it is before and after. Peacebuilding and reconciliation are processes which are not just for post-conflict societies when the airstrikes have ceased, and the wounds have begun to heal. Peacebuilding is necessary at all stages in a war: before, during, and after violence and conflict. Peacebuilding and reconciliation take many forms, but they must start with truth, and acknowledgement of harm. It may take years for Russian citizens to learn the truth of this war, and for Putin to acknowledge the war crimes he has committed.

But as peacemakers, let us not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Let us not give up hope that ordinary people like us, can overthrow despots and empires in our pursuit of justice and freedom. And should you need more proof, consider this: 'one well-known study on civil resistance concluded that it only takes 3.5% of the population to topple a dictator' (Dylan Matthews, Bond, 2022). After all, 'never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.'

Judy

“RCF helped us get out of our comfort zone, and that’s why we got close.”



In July 2022, Rose Castle Foundation welcomed 24 young people, aged 13-17, onto our annual global Emerging Peacemakers Programme (EPP). The programme, hosted at the idyllic Patterdale Hall in Cumbria, is designed to equip young people of faith from around the world with the skills, tools and habits to cross societal divides and grow in wisdom.

Judy (aged 17 from New York), one of our star alumni, shared how EPP helped her to go deeper into her faith by encountering young people of other faiths for the first time.

“The Emerging Peacemakers Program was a trip I will never forget. It changed the way I perceive the world and opened my mind to new ways of holding conversations with others and understanding other peoples’ point of views. During the trip they taught us about the 12 Habits such as vulnerability, curiosity, hospitality, etc. The main one that stuck with me was vulnerability. Before the trip I have never been able to open up and have deep conversations about religion - I was always afraid of it because I never knew what to expect. However, during the trip we had these conversations every single day. I always looked forward to Scriptural Reasoning which was a great way to find out a bit about other people’s faith and a lot about my own. Now I look forward to having conversations about faith: I enjoy them, and I realize that learning about other people’s religions makes my own faith stronger.

The people on the trip were some of the kindest people I have ever met and are the main reason I would love to go again. The way they tried their hardest to implement lessons from The Rose Way during the trip was really smart. Without realizing it, I have started to implement them in my everyday life! I came back from this trip feeling more confident in myself and my new social skills. RCF helped us get out of our comfort zone and talk about things we wouldn’t normally talk about, and I think that’s one of the main reasons we all got really close to one another. The friends I made on this are friends I hope to keep for the rest of my life.

In order to bring these practices back to my community and keep developing the habits of a reconciler, I would love to start an all girls halaqa in my school to talk about religion and topics that are normally taboo. I feel like this would be a great way to make people fall in love with their religion instead of going through the motions without and not practising it out of love.

After this trip I began to love my religion even more and that is the reason I began to practice more deeply; I would love to help other girls do the same. I hope one day I can attend another RCF programme, because it made me a better person and I will be forever thankful for the memories I made."



Emmanuel

“Forgiveness will pave the way for me to know the path ahead.”



My faith was strengthened by the lessons I learned from the workshops, especially following Lakshmi's presentation of the 12 habits of a reconciler.

I had the chance to converse and interact with people from various religious backgrounds during those workshops and get-togethers, which was very enlightening and eye opening. We discussed topics like lament, forgiveness, hope, stewardship, creativity, gratitude, hospitality, curiosity, generosity, empathy, humility, and vulnerability. Additionally, Sarah provided intuitive and illuminating lessons, which greatly improved my abilities.

For my own development and improvement as an academic, I think that knowledge should be shared and put to use, Rose Castle Foundation was really helpful in that regard. The people who attended the programs all had different experiences, and because their encounters served as models for my own experiences, I gained a lot from them.

I recall the time we were all seated in a circle on the floor with some cards laid out in front of us in the center. Everyone was asked to choose a card and share their understanding of the information on it. Written on each card was a word, which have several meanings related to the steps toward reconciliation. Throughout the discussions, reconciliation was recognized as one of the most difficult issues and the most pressing human need.

In the contentious, violent, and uncaring society we live in, the Church has a significant role to play as a community of reconcilers. Reconciliation essentially entails reviving relationships that have been destroyed or harmed. To let go of the damaging effects of the past and painful memories is a difficult effort. Therefore, reconciliation requires patience, humility, and time.

After giving these ideas gained from the RCF workshops on reconciliation some thought upon my return to Vienna, I came to the conclusion that since life is too short to dwell on misunderstandings, making amends is the wisest course of action.

Living in the present, despite how painful the past is, is what forgiveness is all about. It is a sign of my spiritual fortitude and self-assurance that I am able to forgive people who have wronged me in the past. I was not weak in forgiving people in the past. Now, I have a strong desire to maintain my capacity for forgiving, no matter what. Also, I had the idea that while anger simply leads to spiritual sickness, forgiveness will pave the way for me to know the path ahead.

All in all, the World Christianity Summer Institute 2022 hosted by Cambridge Centre for Christianity Worldwide in partnership with the Theological Education in the Anglican Communion and Rose Castle Foundation served as a venue for Christians to come together, support one another in their faith, and gain knowledge of and teaching about God's Word. Additionally, it gave me a chance and space to learn more intellectually about the Christian world.



Yasmeen

“I was able to apply what I learnt in my personal life; I fixed my relationship with many members of my family through reconciliation (especially my dad).”



Before participating in the EPF, I was a reporter for Egyptian Television. And I have always been interested in communicating with other cultures and getting to know others from different backgrounds. So, it was a miracle from Allah for me to join EPF.

The stories behind the participation of my colleagues in EPF is different; mine was a miracle as I mentioned before in many ways! I was recommended by a media organization after I participated in a national event with Al-Azhar and I was rewarded as one of the best 10 speakers during the event. How amazing it was - I went to that event as a guest not a speaker! But one of the speakers apologised and I had to fill her space. It's fate! And I am still thanking Allah for this miracle until now.

When I started the adventure of EPF, I didn't have time to build expectations about the program, because we were worried about the process of getting the visa and other obstacles of the trip sorted, but the preparation training we had in Al-Azhar was very useful for me to initially understand what I was about to witness. I still remember the inspiring words of The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Al-Sharif, Dr. Ahmed Eltayeb; He told us that we were going to build great relationships with people from different religions, cultures and nationalities based on respect and acceptance such that if the two generations had future disagreements, they would be able to solve all the problems because they will already be friends who understand and respect each other's differences. But to be honest, the words inspired me, but I thought they would remain as just words! I didn't imagine his vision would be achieved literally!

The topics we studied during the sessions about reconciliation, peacebuilding, forgiveness, leadership skills and many other topics were very fruitful. Every session added to my knowledge and skills. And the way every topic was presented in an interactive and creative way was amazing! Scriptural Reasoning groups and safe space circles were my favorite part of the program. In the safe space circles, we could share our experiences together speaking about the common values, challenges and fears. In Scriptural Reasoning, we discussed scripts from the Holy Quran and the Bible speaking about the same values. It was amazing to know that people from different religions have the exact same values from my religion.

After EPF, I was able to apply what I learnt in my personal life; I fixed my relationship with many members of my family through reconciliation (especially my dad), succeeded in handling many difficult issues and I put a plan for myself to learn more about my religion.

Out of my personal life, we – some peacemakers from the East- had the chance to be a part of the organising team of many international events in and outside Egypt, such as: "Islam and The West, Diversity and Integration" in Cairo; "The Human Fraternity Conference" where we witnessed the historical moment of signing the Human Fraternity Document by The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Dr. Ahmed Eltayeb and Pope Francis, the head of the Catholic Church, during the first papal visit to the Arabic Gulf; and "The Arab Media Convention for Human Fraternity" in Abu Dhabi. We also participated in 4 editions of the Cairo International Book Fair, the suite of both Al-Azhar and Muslim Council of Elders.



Jonese



“The divide I am reaching across is a theological one, and the work of reconciliation is that of being reconciled to oneself, to God, and to one another.”

If I could define my time and experience at the Rose Castle Foundation and Odyssey Impact retreat that was supported by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter foundation with one phrase, it would be reaching across the divide. That was the topic that one of the leaders, Michael Gibbs, who works with Different Tracks Global, had us reflect on during a Quaker circle toward the end of our time there. When we weren't exploring the Castle, the land beyond the Castle, and the Lake District, we spent our time learning about conflict, specifically as it relates to the Iceberg model, learning how to do trauma-informed work in our contexts, developing and strengthening our skills for facilitating and mediating across lines of difference, and discussing and reflecting on the ways in which the 12 Habits of a Reconciler can be applied to our work.

When I first heard about the opportunity to attend the retreat, I was unsure of what I'd hope to get out of it. I don't think of my work as that concerning reconciliation but as that more focused on healing, justice, wholeness, and liberation. Reflecting now, I think much of it has to do with how reconciliation work has come to be interpreted by Christians in the United States context. Often the discourse of reconciliation centers racial reconciliation or reconciliation across political divides. As a Black woman, I recognize the importance of reconciliation work around race and politics, but that is not my calling. Thus, the question I continued to reflect on throughout the retreat was: How can this be applied to my work and context?

I believe now that I've found the answer. I am currently completing my Master of Divinity program at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, GA with certificates in Black Church Studies and Baptist Studies. Soon, I will be pursuing ordination in American Baptist Churches USA. In the fall of 2022, I will begin a PhD program in either religion or anthropology with the goal of exploring how Black Christian women come to understand their bodies and sexuality through dance in sacred and secular contexts through a womanist lens. The divide I am reaching across is a theological one, and the work of reconciliation is that of being reconciled to oneself, to God, and to one another.

It is being reconciled to a God who loves all of us and wants us to experience freedom and liberation as well as pleasure and joy. I intend to do this work in both religious spaces, academic contexts, and in the broader community through work with nonprofits.

Considering my context and the work that I desire to do, I can reflect on the ways in which conflict might arise as we work to unlearn a theology of shame and even as we work to develop our own unique theologies that affirm our bodies and sexuality as it relates to our relationship with God. Given that not all will come to the same understanding and recognizing the Baptist values of freedom of conscience and the priesthood of believers, I will need facilitation and mediation skills to help us come to understand each other and be reconciled to one another. Furthermore, I can reflect on the role of religious trauma in interactions and conversations as we work toward healing and wholeness. Lastly, I can turn to the 12 Habits of a Reconciler. My work begins with a lament for the ways in which the Church's teachings on bodies and sexuality have caused harm and at times alienated people from their bodies. I invite people into a process of forgiving ourselves and forgiving those who have harmed us. I will strive to work in a spirit of hospitality, welcoming and inviting all into conversation and into a process of change.

My work is rooted in creativity and coming to know and understand ourselves through dance. We show empathy in the sharing of stories and vulnerability in being willing and able to share. I will work to remain humble in the work, recognizing the role of my training and education in getting me to where I am and remembering where I began this work. I will be generous, sharing knowledge as I learn with those I'm in community with. We sit in gratitude of the goodness that can be found in our bodies. I will remain curious and continue to ask questions that lead us toward transformation and a better future for all. In doing the work, I will need to be a good steward of my time, resources, and passions, pursuing "the work [my] soul must have." Lastly, I lean into a vision of hope and a future where people can embrace theologies that are freeing and can come to love, affirm, and appreciate all of who we are.





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