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## Dori Baker: Worried about the church? Meet these young Christian leaders

*A pilgrimage in downtown Atlanta showcases young Christian leaders who are passionate about the gospel when it's wrapped up with the language, customs and concerns of their lives.*

by [Dori Baker](#)



Photo by Allison Shirreffs/FTE

Young Christian leaders went on a pilgrimage in Atlanta on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington.

August 27, 2013

If you are concerned about the lack of young leaders in the mainline church, walk with me for a few minutes.

I spent a day earlier this month on the streets of Atlanta with more than 60 young adult Christians. We covered 3 miles in the blazing sun, learning about undocumented immigrants -- more than 33,000 of them -- who are currently detained in the United States. As we walked, we talked and sang and prayed.

A thick, rich, modern version of "The Canterbury Tales" unfolded. In Chaucer's literary classic, travelers entertain one another with their life stories as they make pilgrimage toward the shrine of the martyr St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury, England.

Led by immigrant-activist [Anton Flores-Maisonet](#), we too enacted the ancient practice of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is a way of seeking God on a path to a holy place, and it creates community out of strangers

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as they journey together -- either to *the* Holy Land or to one of many holy places made sacred by the lives of saints, apostles, martyrs or prophets.

My colleagues and I at [The Fund for Theological Education](#) gathered these [young people](#) together, seeking nominations from networks of congregations, volunteer service organizations, campus ministries and intentional communities from across the U.S.

Our goal was simple: to create space for young Christian leaders to find each other, support each other and receive strength for the journey.

Our destination on this pilgrimage was the resting place of the 20th-century prophet the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose “I Have a Dream” speech celebrates its 50th anniversary this week. But as is often the case, the journey itself was holy.

The vision to which King gave voice on Aug. 28, 1963, inspired us as we traversed the sidewalks. We began at the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, where we learned that immigrants without documentation often appear in court without legal representation.

Between stops on the route -- as if built to do this -- a 20-something would sidle up to someone and say, “So tell me your story.”

The young leaders I journeyed with don’t see the borders, the divisions, the walls, the pews or the collection plates. In fact, they are drawn to the edges between race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, worship style, denomination, cherished biblical passages, paid work and volunteerism.

They dream of establishing nonprofit agencies and entrepreneurial ministries that gather communities and reunite neighborhoods around shared meals, celebrations and lament. They are hybrids.

I met [Joe Davis](#), a spoken-word poet wearing an “I have a dream” T-shirt. He lives in an artists’ residence hosted by Redeemer Lutheran Church in North Minneapolis. There, Davis wants to create “a thriving community of empowered individuals who have moved from silence to expression.”

[Charlene Brown](#), a former atheist turned evangelical progressive, also walked with us. She is seeking ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and leads a community of Christians on the campus of an elite public university. First 30 and now 300 people gather to study the Bible with her and call into question the university’s dramatically declining ability to retain racial/ethnic minority students.

I also met a young man who purposely got arrested as part of a movement to challenge immigration laws. A graduate of Kenyon College, [Marco Saavedra](#) is an adept interpreter of Scripture. He is helping create an “immigrant theology” based on Exodus and the Jesus story while he organizes for immigrants’ rights. He’s a prophetic leader wearing shorts, flip-flops and a T-shirt that reads “I am undocumented.”

The T-shirts and tattoos of my fellow pilgrims tell a story of 21st-century Christian revival: “I heart LOVE,” “Revolution,” “I am with the nuns on the bus,” “All shall be well” and “Ubuntu” (a South African Bantu term translated as “human kindness”).

At one point in our pilgrimage, we paused in front of Grady Memorial Hospital. We learned that this formerly public hospital dropped kidney dialysis when it became for-profit, leaving undocumented immigrants without a ready source of critical life support.

Outside the hospital, an elderly woman approached Demarius Walker, one of our group. She asked him why he cared about immigrants -- an issue she saw as being about “outsiders” and clearly not his own people.

Walker, an undergraduate at Boston University, suggested that there might be a connection between the pilgrimage we were walking and the civil rights marches of her era.

Perhaps, he said, the rhetoric that separates “us” from “them” falls flat in the face of a universal longing for freedom to cross borders, get an education, work hard and pursue a dream of self-sufficiency. She got it, Demarius told us later. And she thanked him for his time.

A little farther down the road, another young man was questioned by an elder at the front door of the

Ebenezer Baptist Church, which is near King's grave site. Again, a rising Christian leader explained with loving tenderness a real-time awareness of King's words that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Later, as we reflected on the experience, one pilgrim exclaimed, "The people on the streets were confused by the fact that we were black, Latino and white people marching together." A moment later, he added, "We are world changers. We were so intertwined: we reflected the kingdom of God yesterday." A fellow pilgrim reminded us, "Courage does not skip generations."

A movement of young Christian leaders is afoot, and -- like it or not -- they are taking church "into the wild." This is a concept that pastor and hip-hop scholar [Michael W. Waters](#) uses to describe the places occupied by a generation of young people completely unaffiliated with organized religion but achingly hungry and surprisingly responsive to the gospel when it's wrapped up with the language, customs and concerns of their lives.

Perhaps they are prophets of what social entrepreneur [Linda Kay Klein](#) predicts will replace the "service economy" with a "purpose economy" -- one made up of young people who build lives based on personal meaningfulness, doing good for the world and choosing community over isolation.

These social activists may be a minority among young Christians, but they are gaining strength and voice, using social media with savvy and dreaming up new markers of success on an economic horizon in which they've been promised little.

Young Christian leaders are rising up. Churches, pastors and laypeople from across the theological spectrum have given them birth. Causes worth fighting for call forth their purpose.

Now, stand by -- or better yet, join in -- as they build their own dreams.