

Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work

EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

TRANSCRIPTION

- Robin J.:** Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to today's *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable* entitled *Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work*. In fall 2021, we had a powerful discussion with five Black women about the intersection of their faith tradition, and community-engaged and justice centered work. During this *Virtual Roundtable*, we will continue this critical discussion with returning and newly-invited panelists.
- Robin J.:** My name is Robin Jackson, Products Lead and Doctoral Research Assistant with the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center. I'm serving as your Host and Technical Director today. I'm joined by my colleague, Ryan Sundeen, who is also a Doctoral Research Assistant at the MAP Center, and will be serving as my Assistant Technical Director. Ryan?
- Ryan S.:** Thank you, Robin. Good afternoon, everybody. As she said, my name is Ryan Sundeen. And so for today, the *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtables* are intended to be interactive. Participants are asked to interact in real time via our teleconferencing format. And to reduce noise, we ask that all participants mute their microphones when not speaking. Lastly, the video camera function has been turned on. Thus, if you have a webcam, and you'd like to join, please feel free to do so by clicking the camera icon at the lower right of your screen. Additionally, please feel free to send me, that's Ryan Sundeen, a chat message directly if you're having connectivity, connectivity difficulties. Again, please don't forget to mute your microphone when not speaking.

Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

Ryan S.:

And as we begin today's *Roundtable*, please ensure that you make yourself comfortable. Move about as needed. Take breaks as needed. And also, to know that alt-text is used on all slide images. And with that, Robin, I'll turn it back over to you.

Robin J.:

Thank you, Ryan. One of our goals at the MAP Center is to engage participants in well-defined, content rich technical assistance, such that knowledge and expertise are shared in a way that results in transformative systemic change, as well as personal reflection and growth. To this end, we aim to make this unique learning available on our website via recording and transcription. Additionally, we will be sharing photos of today's conversation on our social media platforms. If you would like to not be included in the photos, please disable your video at the time of the group shot. We will cue you before pictures are taken. We encourage participants to consider this disclaimer as they share and engage today.

Robin J.:

During today's *Roundtable*, we align to the Four Commitments when discussing the topic. First, stay engaged in the conversation. Next, speak or express your truth. Third, experience discomfort. And finally, expect and accept non closure.

Robin J.:

It is my pleasure to introduce today's facilitator. Dr. Crystal Morton is an Associate Professor of Mathematics Education at Indiana University, Purdue University Indianapolis. Her research is driven by a passion to understand why African-American students, particularly females, are disproportionately underachieving in mathematics. She is also a former high school mathematics teacher. She seeks to uncover the barriers that hinder many African-American female students from being successful in their

Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

mathematics education courses, and from pursuing advanced study in the subject. Focusing on mathematics and science development of African-American students, Dr. Morton has co-designed and implemented several summer programs engaging girls and young women in mathematics, in order to increase their confidence and interests in STEM-related careers. Welcome Dr. Morton.

Crystal M.:

Thank you, and welcome to all of you. I thank you for joining us today. In 2021, I don't remember the exact month in the fall, we did have a conversation, and it was with five wonderful sisters of mine. And today, four those are able to join us again to continue, to continue our discussion about the intersection of faith and justice centered work. So we will continue the conversation today. I want to invite you, as you've already been invited, to put any questions in the chat. We really want this to be a dialogue. At this time, I'm going to have the four wonderful sisters here with me today to give a brief introduction. So Dr. Akosua, I think...

Akosua L.:

Yes, good afternoon. And thank you so much for having us again, Dr. Morton. As you said, you are definitely a sister. And I love to see some of my other sisters here. I am Akosua Lesesne. I am an Educational Design Leader, and I'm also the founder of Sisters in Education Circle. My educational design firm is called Lesesne Legacy Learning Village. And I'm also an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church, and a licensed and ordained pastor, I'm sorry not pastor, preacher. Minister and preacher, licensed and ordained by the late Reverend Dr. Mack King Carter. That's me.

Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

Olisa Yaa T.:

Oh, sorry. This is me. Okay. Hi, I'm Apetebí Omiyale Olisa YaaYaaKongo Osunji Akwele Tolokun-Aijinaku, but you can call me Olisa Yaa. I am an Apetebí, which means I am a devotee of Ọ̀rúnmilà. I'm also initiated in the Ifá/Yorùbá tradition to Ọ̀ṣún. And I'm a devotee of Damballa Wedo in the Haitian Vodun tradition. I teach psychology at Clark Atlanta University, and I do continuing education for therapists. I'm also licensed as a professional counselor in Georgia. So I wear lots of different hats, but I'm just really glad to be here with you all, and to be here with my sisters today. So I'm looking forward to the conversation. Thank you.

Ronda H-A.:

Hello everyone. And as Akosua said, I'm so glad to be invited back by our sister Dr. Crystal Morton. It's always a pleasure. And I'm glad to see some of the ladies who were in the first conversation. It's good to see you all, sisters. I am Associate Professor of English in Africana Studies at IUPUI. I also am the Founding Executive Director of the Olaniyan Scholars Program, which is an Africana Studies undergraduate research program, where we teach undergraduate students how to conduct research that benefits the community. I'm also the Director of the Racial Inclusive Classrooms Program, and the Racial Healing Program, and past Director of Africana Studies. Thanks to you all, and I'm glad to be here.

Hanaa E.:

Hi everyone. My name is Hanaa Elmi, and I just want to say again, I'm going to echo everything everyone already, said that we're so grateful to be back in this space, Crystal, and for inviting us to have this very important conversation. I'm in Ontario, Canada. I'm an Elementary School Teacher. I am really involved in religious spaces that really cater to God-centered self-love, and thinking about how faith impacts how we move in the world. So I'm just grateful to be in the space with all of you.

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

Crystal M.:

Okay, can y'all still hear me? Okay. So I'm having internet problems, so everyone is frozen on my screen, so I can hear you but you're frozen. So what, when we talked last time, there was some, some very powerful themes that came up. And I know we're going to talk about the, where you can access the previous, the first *Virtual Roundtable* at the end of this discussion. I would encourage you to go listen to that. But some of those themes that came out, I want to center our discussion around today, and of course, to the panelists, if you go in a different direction, that is absolutely fine.

Crystal M.:

But one theme that came out when you all were asked about...oh, I'm sorry. I jumped ahead. So our request to you all let me backtrack, because...is that, as I said before, when we're talking, think about how you put your faith in action. Think about the words that the panelists are saying and how they connect to what you're doing and thinking about, and also anything else that comes to mind. In addition to me have an internet trouble, Zoom is splitting my screen. So one part is on one monitor and not flowing well today.

Crystal M.:

So back to what I was saying is the themes that came out, one was this, this concept of love. And so, you can go to the next slide Robin, if you can hear me. Okay, so the panelists were asked these three questions describing your faith tradition. And we talked about the vision of justice and equity, and how your faith impacts your vision, one thing that came out was this notion of love. And I just wanted to share what some of the sisters said. In the conversation, she's not with us today, Sister Arlene mentioned how bell hooks defined love, and she said "it's a belief and a commitment and

Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

nurturing someone. Supporting someone on their journey, and nurturing their full potential.”

Crystal M.:

Ronda talked about agapé love, the type of love that does not...that you have in a relationship that's not about getting something in return, and loving someone unconditionally. Hanaa talked about Valarie Kaur when she talked about revolutionary love. And what she quoted was, “I love you, and I want to serve you, because I see myself in you.” So Robin, you can go to the next slide, please.

Crystal M.:

So the first question that I had for the panelists today is, like I said, that that notion of love came out, and I want you all to talk about, you know, what does it mean to turn that love inward? So within your faith tradition, what does it mean to radically love yourself? We know when you're doing justice work...I was driving today to a space where...just going somewhere to support someone, and just thinking about the afflictions of just life in general, and I was thinking of what words to say today. In this work that we do can cause many afflictions. So what does it mean to turn that love inward to yourself, to provide yourself healing, whatever you may need to continue to do this work. So what does it mean to radically love yourself in the context of your faith tradition? And anyone can start.

Olisa Yaa T.:

I guess I can start. It means for me to honor my Orí, which is what the Yoruba refer to as that essence, that spark, of the Supreme Being he or she, or however you conceive, that's given to every person that manifests itself in that person, right? So for me, radically loving myself, is being clear and honest about what my purpose is, and eliminating distractions, putting myself first in that regard, and executing the plan that's already been laid

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

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out for me. Honoring that the calling that's on my head, regardless of what anybody else thinks they may need from me. So to defer to that, that I have continuity.

Hanaa E.:

I'm going to hop in, too, and I hope everyone's okay. Well, I have my notes kind of written, scribbles, just because I've had a full day of teaching. So my brain is flipping from second grade math, to our conversation. But I haven't always been able to really have this conversation because of my faith spaces. This isn't really something that's talked about. It's not something that's really valued in the same way that it should be. And that's just from my own experience. But I, over recent time, have really come close to a teacher and leader, Angelica Lindsay Ali, who taught me a lot about what God-centered self-love is that I talked about earlier. And she talked about God-centered self-love being this...you're rooted in your connection to God. I don't need validity. I don't need affirmation, although it's good as a human being to have those things. But externally, I don't need anything because I know internally that my value and my worth comes from just being a creation of God.

Hanaa E.:

Knowing that She's fashioned me perfectly. Being worthy just by definition, because every hair follicle, every blood vessel He made. So I know that if He was able to make the Grand Canyon, and He was able to make Niagara Falls, He was able to make every star in the sky, the fact that I'm in existence, the fact that I am here, that I have a purpose, that I have a value, I have a mission, is enough for me to know that I am worthy of love; and not only from others, but for myself and of myself. So, yeah, that's what I think about when I hear that question.

Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

Akosua L.:

The way I...the way I experience love and God-centered love in the faith communities that I participate in, and in the faith circles that I participate in, there is a focus on community, and there's a focus on liberation, and there's a focus specifically on Black liberation. And so, sometimes, or probably more than sometimes, I, you know, it's tempting to lose myself in the group, right? In the group effort, right? So what do I have to do for this group, this group of people? And I'm going to, I'm going to venture to say that that's probably something that's, that's particular to Black women across all faith traditions, right? That the way we internalize it is that we are the sacrifice in that.

Akosua L.:

And that sometimes means that we are encouraged, either through our interpretation of faith, through our position within the faith communities, through our upbringing and socialization, that it's okay to sacrifice ourselves for the greater good. And so, and so for me, one expression of how, how love expresses itself in, in my faith, as far as radical self-love, is remembering that I'm a part of the group. And so if, if, if my faith says that, that liberation of a people is central, I'm one of those people. And so, if there's something that I'm experiencing that's not liberating for me mentally, emotionally, spiritually, financially, it is okay to take care of myself first. It's not antithetical to this whole, this whole group, this group identity, right?

Akosua L.:

And if I, if I can share actually a pretty personal story, I remember that I had experienced violence at the hands of a pretty prominent Black leader right? In, in, in our circle. And I remember talking to a friend of mine. And I said, "well, no, I can't press charges, I can't do this and that because of the group." And he was actually the one who said to me, "you are a part of this group," right? It's not okay to fight for liberation as an expression of who

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

God is trying to be in this world, and not stand up for yourself. And so, I think that as, as, as Black women in particular, that radical self-love comes with understanding that my peace, my protection, my safety, as Olísa Yaa said, like my ability to live into and according to my Orí, are also part of that group effort.

Crystal M.: Yes...I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Ronda H-A.: Go ahead, Crystal.

Crystal M.: No, you can go ahead. I'll wait till you finish.

Ronda H-A.: Okay. All right. I was just going to pick up on strands from Hanaa and Akosua, in terms of thinking through what it means to center God, but also thinking through what it means to be a Black woman and have that intersectional identity in this world. And so I guess for me, radical spiritual self-care becomes really important. Because a lot of times, I feel like as a Black woman, we are so attacked in whatever space we are in. And for example, I just came from one of my classes, *Race, Beauty and Culture*, where we think about what it means to be a Black woman, or to be a woman who does not look like Barbie, and who has no chance of sort of fitting those ideals that our culture says are important for women to be, right?

Ronda H-A.: And so constantly being assailed by these messages that we are never enough, we must always be strong and receive and accept whatever is given to us, whether by Caucasian, Western cultures, or from our own communities, which can be other Black women, and Black men as well,

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

who have these expectations of who they think or want us to be. And that can be in your personal space, that can be in your professional space, that can be wherever you are standing in the grocery store, right? With people thinking you're invisible, or treating you like you're invisible or you're less than, or you don't look the way you supposed to look, so you can't get no attention, and no service, and no nothing else, right?

Ronda H-A.:

So many times, over the course of my career, and when I was at various points in my spiritual journey, I didn't really understand what it meant and how important it was to come back to my own sort of space where I feel comfortable, and where I can bring my whole self, right? Whether that space is my home, or the space of, of our spiritual sister circle, or wherever that space is—family, whatever—come back to that space and understand that, as Sister Hanaa was talking about, I am enough. God made me perfectly in terms of what He wanted me to be. And as Sister Hanaa said every follicle, every texture of my hair. The complexion of my skin, the width of my lips, the length of my ear, how tall or short I am, how much my hips go out or don't go out. How, how my breasts are on my body, right? I can come back to that space, with my Lord and Savior, and understand fully that I am enough and I am okay.

Ronda H-A.:

As long as I'm walking in Him, and understand Him fully, what He made me to be, what my purpose is, what my calling is, and who I am to myself, not only to the people around me. And so one thing, one way that are really engage in radical self-love for myself these days, and I know when I miss this time, is understanding that my Lord and Savior, Jesus, who died for me, are that space in which I can come in and know that I will be loved no matter what. No matter what I need to be forgiven for, no matter what I did

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

or thought that day. I can ask for forgiveness and gain His peace, His wisdom, His love, His goodness, His light, right? As my source of what it means to have true love. And, and as one of the other sisters said, I'm complete there, I don't need anybody else to tell me who I need to be, and I am replenished in that space by spending time with God, and fully understanding who He made me to be, what His truths are, and what my calling and my purposes are.

Crystal M.:

Yes. What I was about to say, I was just thinking, I won't say a whole lot. It's just what's coming out from what you all are saying. That notion of understanding that we are created by God, that we remain rooted in that. I know Olisa Yaa, she talked about understanding the priorities and not, not, not setting that aside. Like, you all are talking about knowing what we're placed here to do, and continuing to do that. Knowing who we're created by, and knowing that we are, we are enough, and not setting ourselves aside. Sister Akosua mentioned, Dr. Lesesne mentioned this: we do things for community and oftentimes we, and I already talked about this, we as Black woman will become that sacrifice.

Crystal M.:

But we can't sacrifice or, you know, we, we have to make sure that we ourselves are well, I'll say that. And that's why I wanted to put this question in about turning that love inward, because in order for us to serve others, we ourselves have to be well. We ourselves have to be that best self. And so it's important that we do remember who we are, and remember that we are part of this collective, but we have to be well. I mean, we...I guess they always say you have that song, that show *The Weakest Link*. You're really as strong as your weakest link. So we have to make sure that the love that we're giving out, we're also allowing that love to be poured inward.

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

Crystal M.: And one connection I was making back to our last conversation is that notion of agapé love, where it expects nothing in return. You can just love yourself, and not have to expect that something else has to happen. You know I can...I'm enough to love myself. And so I'll stop there to see if anyone else has anything else they want to share along those lines.

Hanaa E.: Yeah. I wanted to just add about the purpose. I think the question, too, about...we have to know our purpose at all times. I think that's really important, but sometimes we're also investigating what our purpose is. And when you're talking about that, you know that God-centered self-love, I think it's also knowing that even if I don't know at this given moment what my exact purpose might be, I'm still an investigator, I'm still questioning. God knows, and He's leading me somewhere. So I also need to kind of surrender to that, and know that wherever He's taking me, it's what's been in plan for me, and what's been in motion this entire time.

Crystal M.: Well, I will shift to our next question.

Robin J.: You all are gonna make me throw a shoe at my computer screen. And we haven't even gone all the way through this. Ok. Alright. Next question.

Crystal M.: So we, we know, we read, we talk about the importance of spirituality. And in education, it's important for everyone's well-being. It's important just for who we are as human beings, but it's something that's not centered in education. And before I open up this question, I am going to read, and I hope, Olísa Yaa, you're okay, I'm going to read a quote. I'm going to read your response when we were talking about...this came up in the last conversation. We didn't go in a lot of details with it. We were talking about

Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

what does this mean for k-12 spaces? And one thing that Olisa Yaa talked about was, for her children, her kids, she said, as much as possible she puts them in independent African-centered institutions of higher learning, period. She said, “because that’s the only way they can maintain the integrity of who they are. If their spiritual traditions can be truly honored.” She went on to say that “I think it’ll be wonderful if spirituality can be in the schools in a way where everyone can be honored, their perspectives and backgrounds can be honored, the way they see the Supreme Being, the Most High, whatever you want to call it, could be honored.” So that’s part of what she was talking about.

Crystal M.:

She did she went on to say, “but it’s highly unlikely that that can happen. That that would ever happen with the current leaderships in the school system. So I wonder, and will be just as concerned about any attempts from those oppressors who participate in our liberation on a pedagogical level, when clearly they don’t have the capacity to even begin to understand who we are, or what spirituality really looks like for us.” And then she ended with, “I’m done.” And as I was going back to this transcript, that really stood out to me, and I wanted to share that with you all today as I go on to this next line of question to say, “what are the considerations for incorporating spirituality in schooling spaces?”

Crystal M.:

And, and along with that, what, like, if we had time to imagine, like if we can, if we can really imagine, maybe we are in this utopia world, if we can imagine what would that look like? What would that mean for kids, for who they ought to be honored, how they view a Supreme Being? And so, whatever their background, their perspective, but the whole person to be honored, what would that mean? Not just for the students, but for the staff,

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

for the community, for the caregivers, for the whole, for the collective. What would that mean? So it's a two-part question. You can take time to imagine. And I don't know, Olísa Yaa, if you wanted to start because I shared from your conversation, but whoever wants to hop into that discussion, I welcome it now.

Olísa Yaa T.:

So when I read this question, so much came up for me. Of course, I teach at the university level at Clark Atlanta University, and I also have children that I'm raising. But a couple of weeks ago, it had to be about three weeks ago now, we were in my general psychology class. And, you know, you mentioned in the question how in the context of education, people don't really talk about spirituality. And even in psychology, there is a difference to this lesser notion of the mind, and the totality of human spirit and the mind being a part of that. So I tried to do, as I've done many semesters before, an exercise, sort of a guided meditation. We're talking about altered states of consciousness, and dreams, and all the different ways that you can achieve an altered state of consciousness, or that people experience an altered state of consciousness.

Olísa Yaa T.:

So I decided to do a 10 minute meditation. And I prefaced it by talking about the benefits of meditation, and how it can reduce blood pressure, and how it can reduce anxiety, and all these things. I didn't talk about the spiritual part. I didn't mention it, I don't think. I may have maybe. I don't think I did. I don't think I mentioned it at all. But then I started to do this meditation. I put some music on, turned the lights down, asked everybody to breathe with me, and to go to a safe space. And we went to this safe space, and then journeyed to the beach, and I told them to feel the water, and feel the sun against their

Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

skin, and all that. And when we came out of the meditation, I said, “how was that for you?”

Olisa Yaa T.:

There was about 30 students in the class, and immediately about five hands went up high. And the energy in the room was palpable, and I was like ok, what's happening? And one of my students started crying. And she said that she had...her grandmother who recently passed, had told her through a divination that she's going to meet a professor that would transform her life, right? And to stay close to this professor. So she went on and talked about all of that—in class. And then another student raised his hand, and he said he was feeling afraid. Because in this meditation, his baby sister came and spoke to him, and she actually had passed when she was two years old, and passed in his arms, and he had not had a conversation with her since that time. He didn't know what to do with that, or where to put that.

Olisa Yaa T.:

Okay. And so this is now two students. And then another student raised her hand and she said that her brother had been shot last year, and he came during this meditation. So this is a class of 25 students, in a 10 minute exercise that wasn't deliberately about spirituality, but immediately there was an awareness. First of all, that we're all connected to the Supreme Being, that we're all connected to each other. Because it happened for all of us at the same time. That we're all connected to the ancestors who came before us, and family members living or passed that are, that are part of us. So I had to deal with it, right? Try to explain because some people were feeling confused. Like, ok 'I've never...I don't know what to do with this. My baby sister passed...' and it really was traumatic for them.

Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

Olisa Yaa T.:

It just really let me know that the way that we deal with psychology specifically, in an academic sense, is so inadequate. That who we are as spiritual beings has to be a part of how we teach, and however we conceive that because it is going...it's happening. We are living life as spiritual beings, whether we outwardly talk about it or not. And so, it just really...after the exercise, after we left class, there were several students, there was a line of students, waiting to talk to me personally after class. They were like, “okay, I need to talk to you. And it's personal.” I was like ok, so I'm putting students in one room, and taking them one by one.

Olisa Yaa T.:

And when I came back to my department, I told my chair, the chair of my department, who I'm so grateful for, and I said “I need to tell you what happened in class today, because I don't know where all of this energy came from.” He said, “Okay. Did you know that there was a full...there's a full moon in Leo, and that full moon in Leo is about releasing the things that are hold you back?” So I was grateful to be working in a department, first of all, where I can do that exercise—and do it with a level of authenticity. And then to be able to discuss it with the chair of my department, who was supportive of me doing it, and then also supportive of the way that the conversation needed to continue. I feel like I'm talking circle, but it just triggered me, you know, about how we teach, and it has to be more inclusive of who we are. Because it's coming. It is already there. That's all.

Akosua L.:

So much of what Olisa Yaa said really resonates with me. And one of the things that I think about, as far as what that would look like, is I'm just thinking, thinking, thinking back to how my understanding of God, and who we are as spiritual beings, began in Black Christian faith spaces. And in those Black Christian spaces, the religious leaders were very clear about

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

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the connection of, of who we are as African people, right? And as Black people. And so, you know, even prior to going to seminary, prior to going to Divinity School, you know, folks preached about, were taught about God's specificity in making us Black, and making us African. And, and, and in those, in those spaces and in African spirituality which Christian, Christianity is part of, we don't separate. There is no separation between what they would call the secular and sacred, right? So that is Eurocentric, right?

Akosua L.:

That, that, that, that, you know, and so education in and of itself, as a Olísa Yaa is pointing out, we are touching the spirit. You know children don't leave...children and teachers don't leave their spirit at home when, when we come into these educational spaces. And so, in some ways we are fooling ourselves, and in other ways we are cheating ourselves, you know, when we don't include that intentionally, because it is there. It is there. And so, I would say, you know, imagine...so I'm grateful for those spaces that I had so...most people don't encounter them until they enter, until and if they enter Seminary or Divinity School. But I'm grateful for preachers and Sunday School teachers who brought liberation theology like from the pulpit, right? Who brought the understanding of African Cosmology from Christian pulpits. Who brought a womanist theology, right?

Akosua L.:

The same friend who I talked about in the last segment: I remember when I was exegeting a text, which means, you know, as a, as a preacher, really looking at the text, looking at the historical element of the texts, sometimes reading it in its original language so that we don't just take what people have said it means, but we take what it means in this context? And I remember, you know, really reading this text that was pretty sexist, right?

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

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And so the same friend, I remember when I was telling him my interpretation, he said, “never read against yourself. You know, you're a woman. And you came up with a very sexist read of this text. Never read against yourself. Don't ever do that, right? Because God created you as who you are. And so, God would never say that there's a particular being who's lesser than and then another being.”

Akosua L.:

And so for some reason--again, I feel like I'm talking in circles as well, but I feel like for some reason, that came that came up, right? Don't ever, don't ever read, or interpret, or understand spirituality against yourself because God created you as you. Right? And going back to my original comments, not as some blob that's a part of this group. As you in your body, your gender, your heritage, right? We are African. We came from, we came from the Continent where every religion originated. You know, we, you know, it...so anyway, I'll stop talking there, but I would say, you know, it would be to go back to our roots. We're not separating the secular from the spirit, because it's really not a thing, it's a European thing. And everything that Europeans create, or most etiologies, are in order to, so that to make us prime for subjugation, right? And so we shouldn't, we shouldn't buy into that, that separation.

Akosua L.:

And so also in that, in my answer, two resources come to mind. One is this idea of Touching the Spirit. Wade Nobles is a scholar who talks about touch...you know, that teaching is touching the spirit, right? And then also with Katie Geneva Cannon, one of the creators of Womanist Theology, like she always used to say, “do the work that your soul must have.” Because that is God's will. God gave you that desire, God gave you that purpose, and part of that work, part of our work in schools, is to eliminate the

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obstacles that the world has created in...for, for some of us, and doing the work that our soul would have. So I'll stop there.

Ronda H-A.:

I just want to follow up on what Dr. Akosua is saying, because I took this question a little different avenue as well. Because I teach at a predominantly white institution where they don't really allow us to, not unless we we're in the religion department, right, to even speak on God—let alone honoring the spirituality of our students in any obvious way. The way in which I've always done that, and to go back to what Dr. Akosua said, honor the work that my soul calls for me to do in the classroom, is by honoring my students, respecting them, receiving them just where they are and share in truth. And so, I feel like always, especially as I teach, as again, a woman who stands at that intersection between Black and woman, it has always been something that, that, that speaks to me that I must go into the classroom and tell the truth.

Ronda H-A.:

And for me, that's the truth about Black populations. Black women, and the struggles that they've had. The history of Black folks in the US and previous to that time, right? Because there is so much false information. Ignoring and hiding or a lighting of history, and the truth of what it means to be a Black person in this country. And I feel that not only can I...Black folks center and position themselves in their rightful position, but white folk can't position and situate themselves in their rightful position until they understand the truths of these people who have been subjugated by their ancestors, right? In this space. And so one of the things that I feel is important, and I think is why Critical Race Theory and HB 1134 are so important to certain folks on the right, is because that truth must continue to be hidden for them to be able to deceive, right? And divide.

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

Ronda H-A.:

So again, for me, bringing spirituality into the classroom means honoring the whole person: who they are, who they wish to be, who they are not even yet, who they have been in their past, right? And allowing that person to come fully into the classroom with me, and speak on whatever it is that they feel. And I mean, respectfully and, and caring about all those in that space, right? Because we're not about attacking. I don't attack. They don't attack, you know. We don't do that. But allowing them to bring their whole self into the classroom as they think about the texts that I bring for us to discuss.

Ronda H-A.:

For instance, in my class today, I'll go back to that: we were talking about Black hair. We read *Hair Story*. And the other one is *Hair-Raising*, by Natalie Rooks, right? And again it talks about Black hair and the history of Black hair, starting in Africa but coming into the US, and how that space has been devalued for African-Americans, and is still devalued, right? One of the students mentioned the Crown Act and all of that. And I know, again, this isn't that traditional sort of thinking about spirituality. But receiving the whole, entire student no matter their complexion, no matter their background, no matter what ideas they may bring into that classroom, is the way I practice my spirituality.

Ronda H-A.:

Because God receives me where I am. He treats me where I am. He asked me to love myself and others where I am, right, and to receive His truth and His wisdom, where I am. And that's how the Holy Spirit deals. So who am I to not give that gift to as many people as I possibly can? And that includes my students and the people around me: my staff, my colleagues, whomever it might be. But in particular my students, because that space in the classroom is ours to define, no matter what level we are at. And we can

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

bring, as I mentioned again, that agapé love, vision, and insight into classrooms so that everyone feels honored, and therefore free to pursue a spiritual self that is higher than the world might call for us to enact.

Hanaa E.:

How do I even...what do I even say to that? Dr. I... like that was just amazing. I was sitting here just soaking everything that you're saying. And I, every, all three of my Sisters have shared like just so much, so much knowledge and depth, and so many gems. I can speak to my experience. And I was thinking as you were all speaking, about this idea of teaching to a fragmented person. Where you're coming into a school and you're assuming that these children, I teach elementary school students so, that they're fragmented, that they're coming into school, that they're leaving their spiritual being at home. And I'm teaching this child without this idea of them having a spiritual sense of themselves, even as young as second grade.

Hanaa E.:

And it just makes me think about that intersection that you're all talking about. And as a Black, a Black woman and also as a Muslim, I think it's a trust, we call an Amana, it's a trust. I go into that classroom and, it's a trust from God that I'm doing what I meant to do to support these children and to see them as they are. And it really is just an amazing thing to think about. When you were talking about hair, Dr. Ronda, we had the exact same conversation in second grade about hair. And to see the students say, "my grandma braids my hair like that," showing them pictures from texts and people who look like them. And just to see how affirmed they were to say "that person looks like me. Their experience is similar to mine. They have hair like mine. Their braids are like mine. Their skin is like mine. Their nose is like mine." It does something. And I think when you are going into spaces where you're teaching people, adults or children, and you're believing that

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

there's a misalignment here, that you know what, who they are outside of this building or these spaces is different than who they are inside. It's...it is a spirit murdering, right? It is.

Hanaa E.:

And I think of myself as a Muslim child in school. I never felt a sense of pride in who I was as an individual spiritually, because I never had that affirmation from the adults around me. I never saw texts with people who look like me. The first time I saw a picture of a person who looked like me, I was already teaching third grade. And a student and I, who looks like me, we cried over this text because it was the first time I had seen something at my age. It was the first time she at eight years old had seen something like that.

Hanaa E.:

So yes, I think when we're looking at imagining spaces where spirituality can have space in schools, I think it's easier than we are led to believe it is. It's providing space for kids to pray. It's acknowledging...we're talking even about...Olisa Yaa was talking about that meditation time for, for, in my faith prayer, we pray five times a day. We have designated times cut out where we pause, and we reflect, and we think. And when you go into that mindset, and you're kind of having that conversation with God, and you come back, you're almost like anchored. You're recentered. You come back as a whole person, and now you can re-enter whatever space you were in, and to do that difficult work. But without acknowledging that that's necessary for many people, and just to say we need to continue on and just kinda pretend like Spirit, that fragmentation. Yeah, education will never be, I think, of anything other than Spirit murdering for a lot of children.

Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

Crystal M.:

So I...every time...I mean, last time we had this panel, there was so much that just left me speechless. And there was, there's so much I want to share, but I know I'm gonna get emotional, and we have ten minutes left. But so I'm gonna ask some of the questions in the chat, and go to our last question. But just hearing you all, and you all talking about just really honoring the whole being, and doing our soul work, but then just how much does the Spirit just anchors us? And for me personally, it is my spirit that keeps me going to do the work, you know.

Crystal M.:

The past few days have just been very difficult. But it's my spirit that gives me the strength. You know, my connection to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that's giving me the strength to sit here today. And I'm thinking of: what if that had all been ignored? Like how would I respond to life, not being able to tap into that part of myself? And we have so many kids that, I think you're right Hanaa, that Olisa Yaa talked about, a meditation, time to meditate, time to pray, just giving them time, realizing their whole being. Like how much we are short-changing ourselves in the spaces, in the educational spaces.

Crystal M.:

I do want to...there were some questions that came up, and I want to give us some time. I don't know, Ryan, should I read these, or...? Am I out of my lane?

Ryan S.:

Yeah, yeah. Feel free, go right ahead. Whatever's easiest for you.

Crystal M.:

So that was a question that came in from Etta. She said, "How do you help students reconcile the multiplicities of spirituality where some see other spiritual practices as specifically counter to how they were taught to tap into

Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

the spiritual being, and practice spirituality? This causes a backlash of any such practices in educational settings.” Does anyone want to speak to that? Like, how do we reconcile those differences were some, I see spirituality this way, you see it this way it, and there are some differences. And then backlash will come from, comes from that.

Olísa Yaa T.:

For me, first of all, there's, there's tremendous growth in African-American traditions over the last 20 years for sure. But so, it used to be that when I would go into the classroom, people didn't necessarily know what my faith tradition was, or what my spiritual practice was. Now immediately, you know, they'll, I'll come in, they'll raise their hand, and be like “I noticed the chain around your ankle. I noticed the beads around your neck. Are you practiced Ifá? Are you initiated?” All of these questions. So it's not as odd as it used to be, or it's not as unusual as it used to be. But for me, the bridge, and even when we did the meditation, was the experiences that they already have or acknowledge on some level, with their own ancestors.

Olísa Yaa T.:

You know, you, your, your grandmother could practice, you could practice whatever faith tradition you want, your grandmother can practice whatever faith tradition she practices, but that's still your grandmother. Whether she is on this plane, or the other side. And that heart of the commonality of that, I think helps people get past what they may see as odd or unusual. It is a challenge, though, because part of our oppression is rooted in, and has always been rooted in, trying to make our ancestral tradition seem demonic, seem anti-spiritual, seem just counter to what is important, or counter to what it, what it truly exists, right? But when we did the meditation, and even though I didn't really talk about it, preface it in a spiritual context initially, the ancestors spoke.

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

Olisa Yaa T.:

My student's grandmother came into the space, right? So, and everybody felt it, or at least felt her energy around. So, it became a much more easy conversation, because grandmama came in the room, right. And then she came and asked me, she said "can I please sit next to you." And I was like, "Okay." And I was a little hesitant, because her grandmother was literally speaking to me, "and tell her this, and tell her that." She started going off about this young man that she was involved with that the grandmother did not approve of. And the grandmother was giving me a message to give to the student about this young man. But the point was that everybody was able to experience that together. The student that lost her brother. It just, it just is. People are still who they are, regardless of what faith tradition they practice. That's the point I guess I was trying to make.

Ronda H-A.:

I would say part of it is, Olisa Yaa, that you allow that space in the classroom. So, the attitude that you have towards the spiritual space, and receiving the ancestors into that space in whatever way that you, you do it, you have then made space for that to happen. You have made it acceptable. You are teaching the students, you are showing the students, how to receive this spirituality that may contradict, or be different, from the way that they've received it in the past. And I think that's one of the answers to the question. We show our students, we model for our students how to handle these differences, right? And if we honor and respect them, it goes a long way toward helping the students understand.

Ronda H-A.:

We don't receive disrespect. We don't receive divisiveness. We don't receive critical attitudes toward other people. We don't know them. So therefore, we can't really stand in judgment of them, whatever their spiritual practice is, right? Have an open mind about it. Nobody asked you to go

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

worship at they church, or at their spiritual space or worship center, however it goes. But you can have an open mind in listening to it, and receiving whatever it is that you can receive from that space, because you're there for a reason, right? Nothing happens to you by accident, at least that's what I believe, right? You are there to learn. So, even if you're learning something and it's not your cup of tea per se, you can still be open to hearing it and understanding it in ways that allow them to feel comfortable enough to continue to bring their whole self into the space.

Olisa Yaa T.: Thank you.

Akosua L.: And I would say two things. One is, for me, it's a work in progress, like Dr. Morton and ask the question, I was like, "girl, I don't know." But you know, and that's just, that's honest, right. I'm, I'm, I'm working it through. Especially, I saw one of our SIEC Sisters, Pam, in the chat. And she talks about how I, how I created, along with the elders and ancestors, how I created that space in the SIEC Retreats, right? As you know, people have made, have talked about that. But it's really a work in progress. It really is a work in progress. You know, it's about, I know for myself, it's about me leaning into my own spirituality, right? So you can't teach what you don't know, and you can't lead where you won't go, right?

Akosua L.: And so, you know whether people know what my spiritual practices are or not, spiritual people, when they experience me, understand me to be tapped into God, right? Understand, you know, they, they feel it, and that kind of a thing. And so that's a way of, you know, as Dr. Ronda is saying, modelling it, right? And as the leader of that space, recognizing, "no, we're all going to come into this space, and we're going to break our full spiritual

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

selves into this space.” And then I would say also so, but it's a work in progress. I mean, my organization has only started in 2018, right? So, I'm always thinking about those things. And then also the second thing that I think about as I'm working it through is, you know, as Malcolm X said, you know one of his, my favorite quotes, he was like, “when we as Black people get together, and if your faith tradition is helping you understand that one of our major tasks on this earth is liberation, then leave your religion at home,” right? You know, and not, I don't even think he said ‘leave it at home,’ but basically, I want to know how does your religion, how does your spirituality, how did your spiritual practices help us understand this moment? And that's the important thing, right?

Akosua L.:

So, I don't necessarily have to tell people what my spiritual practices are. I need to know how those spiritual practices inform how I show up in community. And that's what I'm more concerned with. How does that show up at my pedagogy, right? How does that show up in my political action? How does that show up in who I am as a sister, and colleague, and a friend? And so, I would say that that is, as I'm working it through, building this space for educators where they can bring their full spiritual selves, those are the two major things I consider, that I can't lead...unless I'm tapped in, and always evolving spiritually, I can't lead that space. I can't be open to it. And then also, at the end of the day, how does our spirituality, how does our religion, impact the goal of that organization, which is educational liberation?

Crystal M.:

Thank you, and thank you all for all of your responses. I know that we are running a little short on time. Ryan, I didn't know if we had any other questions in the chat. I think we won't get to question three, but I do believe

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

a lot has come out of our conversation that could, would have, could address this question. So is there anything else, Ryan, that you saw on the chat?

Ryan S.: I'm scrolling through right now? I didn't see anything else. Feel free. Oh, yes, we did that. Thank you for dropping that in there. So how do we balance self-love with self-denial in the Christian faith, that is demanded throughout the New Testament? And then a series of verses are, are posted there. So that was the only other question I saw.

Ronda H-A.: For Mr....for Basal. Thank you, Mr. Ryan, for bring that question to the fore because I looked at that question, and I will say that the two are not in opposition. You know, in the Christian faith, God is calling us to get rid of our flesh. Flesh is always against love, and always against what is the highest purpose for our spiritual selves, right? And so, when we are in a space of self-denial, it's not self-denial in the sense of, of those pieces that God gave us, that transcend a fleshly or, or carnal plane, right? It is all about moving beyond those, being able to exist and be beyond the calls strictly of our flesh, of our stomach, of our want, of our desire to think more highly.

Ronda H-A.: That's the only way we can think about the interests of other people. That's the only way we can truly love other people. And that's the only way we can truly see God's love, and receive it into ourselves in the way that He intends. Not as self-aggrandizement, but as Sister Akosua was just talking about, aggrandizement of the others around us, as well as those higher pieces of ourselves that need to be there to help us better understand how to fill the needs of those around us in ways that are not only valuable to

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Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

them, but valuable to us. And then send that love, boomerang that love right back to us. And so again, I don't see those as a, as a versus. If you truly believe that God has your best interests at heart, you truly love Him, you truly trust Him, you truly spending time with Him to gain that higher understanding and knowledge that move beyond your own consciousness, and your own flesh, then you understand that self-denial is indeed self-love.

Crystal M.:

Thank you for that response. And I know that we are officially out of time. The time is never enough. But I do want to thank you all for joining us today. I know I'm going to turn it back over to Robin and Ryan, but I do want to appreciate you all joining us, and so now it's time for our photo.

Ryan S.:

We want to thank each of you for participating in today's *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable* entitled *Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith and Equity in Justice Centered Work*. Just want to say a special thanks to Dr. Morton, and all of our panel of guests, for taking the time to be with us to share their wisdom and expertise. If you can, just give us a couple more minutes here, we want to share some additional resources with you all and I'll try to simultaneously drop them in the chat as I discuss these.

Ryan S.:

But first of all, we want to highlight one of our resources led by Dr. Morton. So the first is the first part of the conversation we had today, back in the fall, *Faith without Works is Dead: Exploring the Role of Faith and Equity in Justice Centered Work*. So please check out this *Virtual Roundtable*, which is also full of many pearls of wisdom. So I'll put that in the chat for everybody. There's the link.

Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work *EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable*

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana

Ryan S.:

The second one is a brief entitled *Supporting Student Success Through Authentic Partnerships: Reflection from Parents and Caregivers*. Parents and caregivers are often underused resources as partners in supporting the learning of their children. And this tool can help educators determine the ways in which their practices are helping to create and sustain or hinder authentic partnerships with parents and caregivers. So this tool will also provide resources to help parents become more effective educational advocates for their children. So I'll put that in chat so well.

Ryan S.:

And finally, we want to encourage you to visit our website for more tools and resources in our Equity Resource Library, and subscribe to our publications. So there is the link to both of those. And then just finally, I don't know if you all saw my chat on this, but I'm going to put the PSQ, or the Post-session Questionnaire link in the chat again. We, we value your feedback and would love it if you were to take a few minutes to fill that out. So I'll turn it back over to Robin.

Robin J.:

If you all are not...thank you, Ryan...if you all are not following us on social media, please follow us both on Facebook and on Twitter. If you would like to engage with us, you can answer the question, “how are you going to apply what you learned today,” with the hashtags #MAPEquity and @GreatLakesEAC. Thank you all so, so much for being here today. We really appreciate you engaging in the chat. And once again, thank you, Dr. Morton, and thank you to the esteemed panel of guests for being vulnerable with us today.

Crystal M.:

Yes. Thank you.



Faith Without Works is Dead Part II: Exploring the Role of Faith in Equity and Justice Centered Work

EquiLearn Virtual Roundtable

Dr. Crystal Hill Morton, Equity Fellow – Indiana



Olisa Yaa T.:

Thank you, Crystal. Thank you all.

[End of Audio]

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