

BISHOP JOSEPH TOLTON

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Imani Countess (IC): I am so delighted that we are talking together about your work and the incredible contributions that you're making towards developing a Pan-Africanist approach to transnational solidarity within the global Queer movement. So before we jump into the heart of the conversation, I'd really love for you to talk a little bit about you, about us, right. My memory is that we met in January of 2019 and you introduced me to this new world of Human Rights activism. Clearly, I'm not talking about newness in terms of the international efforts towards Queer human rights, but your specific niche in terms of building collaborations between Africans and African-Americans, but why don't we start there? What drew you to me? And, then also, your personal journey?

Bishop Tolton (JT): Okay, absolutely. Well, we found each other because of the work that I was doing with TransAfrica. The president of TransAfrica, our mutual friend Nicole Lee, thought, of course, the world of you and the work that you had done during your time at TransAfrica, and she's the one that introduced us.

But, I'm going to go back and start with my journey and then I'm going to come right back to that place where we met because it was a pivotal point in my career. In terms of being a real watershed moment for me.

I am Bishop Joseph Tolton. I am from New York City raised and born in the 1970s. I had a very particular interesting upbringing being raised in the cradle of the Pentecostal Church, feeling the call to Ministry at a very early age, six years old. I would put the Bible on my windowsill.

We lived in a building where two buildings faced each other in an alleyway. My room was at the corner of the alleyway and my neighbors would tell my mother and grandmother, "Do you hear him in there preaching" and they say, "Yes, we do." He comes home particularly on Sundays and just has at it. The window sill is his first Pulpit.

That call to the Ministry, and that love for the Ministry was really deeply embedded in my heart and in my mind at a very early age.

My mom was very committed to making sure that I get the best possible education that I could. So I was transported out of my community and from Harlem to the upper west side and to the Upper East Side actually and went to mostly predominantly Jewish schools and I lift that up because one of the points that really led me to transnational work was being raised among the Jewish Community. They were so clearly focused on their identity from an early age, being educated around the values and ideals of what it meant to be Jewish. And of course, looking to the Jewish State as they did. And that really did help to inform my sensibilities and my thinking about a people who were so very intentional about being a people. I would walk from school with my friends to Hebrew School. Sometimes I'd run upstairs with them and hang out before

class was over, but that experience really, I think, gave me permission to be very intellectually and emotionally curious about my people, and who we were as a people. So that really did play a big role for me.

I'd also say that being raised Pentecostal is also very relevant to my sense of transnational curiosity in that the whole idea of being Pentecostal is that we believe in what happened in the early church where people from every possible background, came together to find the Disciples of Christ after the Christ had died. And they went to this upper room to have this experience of waiting for the Holy Spirit to come in the Bible talks about how they all spoke in tongues. But what doesn't get talked about enough theologically is that the scriptures make it very clear that they were from every place under the sun as they understood the sun back then. They spoke multiple languages and people were able to receive the spirit and then speak in other languages. So the separation that the Tower of Babel created and constructed, Pentecost deconstructed.

And so this idea of being raised, receiving the Holy Spirit at age 8. And speaking in tongues and the language of another language that I didn't necessarily understand the interpretation of, but this idea that I had some connectivity with those that were beyond my culture and beyond my understanding is something that was just very natural and kind of second nature. In part because of how I was raised in terms of being located with the Jewish Community, but also being raised Pentecostal. So interestingly those two factors of my upbringing really did lead to and plant the seeds of my own transnational curiosity.

IC: So those have been constant factors from very early on, but professionally you took different directions. Talk a little bit about that.

JT: Absolutely. No question. My secular background was in marketing and in advertising. I always had a love for business, graduated from college and went right into the advertising business.

I think that what's important for that as it relates to ministry is that I really was trained to understand the psychology of human beings in terms of how you sell them, either a product or an idea or service. When I got older I certainly felt the call to ministry that has always been in my life and I was always involved in ministry, but it was my second life.

There was an exodus out of the black church in the late 1980s and early 1990s because of HIV and AIDS. What HIV and AIDS revealed was the truth of the fact that there were black people in the church. And we weren't sitting in the back, but we were playing the piano and directing the choir and often preaching and often on the Usher board and what AIDS revealed, unfortunately, through sickness was the reality of our presence in the church. The church obviously was embarrassed and frustrated by our presence.

And that broke things wide open where the establishment for HIV/AIDS services was created in the Black community. It was that infrastructure that then led to the growth of other services for Black people who were LGBTIQ. And one of the things that we needed was to be buried during HIV and AIDS, but also we needed spiritual solace and so Archbishop Carl Beam, whose funeral service was just two days ago, in Los Angeles, broke ground and started the first

African-American church for the LGBT community. And Bishop Yvette Plunder, who started off with him as a contemporary in the HIV-AIDs arena then also started her organization.

So, I ultimately became a part of that movement of Black Pentecostals, Baptists, Methodists, for that matter, who realized that we actually could start a new Reformation that married the chemistry of that worship that we experienced in the Black community with the theology that was much more open and inquisitive and a theology that would really help us to interpret the scriptures in a way where we were able to find God's love for us. And I started a church in Harlem, in 2006 called Rehoboth Temple and it was for everyone but definitely targeted to the LGBTQ community. As one of my dear members said it was a straight friendly church, which I absolutely love.

And my church became a part of a national network of 30 churches in 2006. In 2009 when the anti-gay bill was tabled in Uganda; we all learned about it watching Rachel Maddow. Bishop Plunder said to me, you should keep your eye on this situation for us as a part of the fellowship because perhaps we can be connected to whatever the LGBT response is going to be. It seems like such a random thing that in of all places Uganda which is a country that was colonized by the British so that they have anti-sodomy laws that on top of the fact that homosexuality and same-sex conduct is criminalized they want to add these extra penalties for being Queer. It just seemed like something bizarre was happening.

In time what I learned through investigation was that there was this deep relationship between the white conservative evangelical community in America and their global outposts throughout the world. and they had invested a lot of money in Uganda. And so, it wasn't just Uganda who had kind of manufactured this law, but there was this global network of conservative faith players who were trying to create a particular reality around the world. Having lost the culture wars, here in America, basically conservative evangelicals created a global terrain. And reconstituted the culture wars that were domestic in America and made them now an international play. Where from a global perspective they were going to try to create real pockets of deep social conservatism informed by a very religious conservatism. And so that's what really pulled me into the international work and I began to connect with LGBT activists on the ground in Uganda and begin to hear their hearts and their stories.

I then began to do a lot more research and was just amazed by the fact that I had no understanding that my personal reality was not just the result of domestic factors, but that my personal reality, as a gay, Black man in New York was very much the result of what was happening on a global scale and that to really understand my experience and my oppression I had to look at it through the lens of black internationalism. That's what brought me into this world.

IC: Can you tease it out a little bit? So when you talk about your experience as a Black, gay men in New York, but then as a result of fellowship with Uganda in the gay, lesbian or Queer community, that you develop a different type of realization. Can you tease that out a little bit more?

JT: Absolutely, you know, growing up, you understand racism in your own country. You understand homophobia in your own country. And of course, I had every reason to believe that it

was to be seen and assessed and understood historically within the context of American history and to some degree that is true. However, conservative evangelicals have always been clear about the kind of world that they want to create. A world where Christian law on many levels really is realized as the driver of the law of the land in a particular country.

It sounds like something that we understand our Islamic brothers and sisters are often accused of. But that is the agenda of far-right conservative, Christians, and the work of the moral majority and Jerry Falwell who's number one agenda was to get as many people registered to vote as possible. That was when it became public and clear. And when they moved into the daylight with regard to their highly political agenda, that had very, very, very economic implications as well as social implications, as well. It was when Roe v Wade, interestingly, which is now such an important topic, was passed that the Conservative Christian right knew that they had lost the culture war.

So the Civil Rights Movement certainly broke the back of racism that was so entrenched in the Christian church. Those that believed in segregation, those that believed that Christianity, on many levels, demanded and required segregation after the Civil Rights Movement; they were utterly disorganized and hobbled. It was the Roe v Wade decision that galvanized them and mobilized them and actually gave them an anchor to focus on. They now had a new issue and a new cause, and a new purpose.

In the early 70s, there were some other things that were happening. We have the first man on the moon and then we had Nixon's famous trip to China. And what that signaled was that markets were now global, and that we were pivoting to an economy that was going to become interconnected from a global perspective and that those interconnections also had very, very deep and abiding social implications. What this meant for the conservative religious right was that as markets were now global, the culture war and their social aspirations, their vision for what America could look like should not be a vision for only America, but now should actually be a vision for what the world looked like.

They understood that this global village that we now live in so comfortably was calling. And they could see that happening as early as the 1970s. At that point, they developed relationships in particular in Africa with some of those who we understood to be freedom fighters like Museveni and some of the other leaders who were Freedom Fighters coming out of the 60s. They understood that these Freedom Fighters needed access to power and access to resources.

So, conservative Christians went into these countries under the idea that they were going to help plant churches. They were going to dig wells. They were going to create orphanages. They were going to be there to help to build the country from a social perspective. But that was not their real agenda. Their real agenda was to be in cahoots with the ecclesiastical elite of these different nations that they then had a pipe way and an access to the dictators and to the autocrats, as well as to the business community.

So, they were building an economic pipeline, a political pipeline, and a social pipeline, but keeping the autocrats in place with key because you do not want the will of the people to emerge. You want the dictate of the autocrat, which is in line with your particular agenda to actually rule

the day. So, conservative Christians, have deep relationships with, with many of the autocrats of Museveni's generation and they were intentionally working to build African societies, which would be deeply, deeply, religiously conservative. So from a global perspective, although America was moving to a much more liberal place there were going to be pockets throughout the world where they were going to be able to own the social trajectory of those nations and of those regions creating blocks of highly conservative social societies, informed by a religious conservatism.

So the chessboard was not the 50 states. The chessboard was now the globe and so their aspirations for what was happening in Africa were also deeply tied to the social policies that they had targeting African-Americans and people of African descent. Because they also thought that they could leverage our tendency to be very family-oriented and a bit conservative in our own practices and also create pockets that were deeply homophobic among people of color here in the United States, as well as on the continent of Africa. It was by all means the racialization of homophobia, which was designed by the religious right of this country.

And when I began to see that and understand it and assess it, and pick it apart and was able to connect the dots between the financial pipelines, as well as the educational pipelines in terms of going to Africa and bringing some of the young emerging religious superstars and really hot preachers to America and really entrenching them in highly conservative seminaries and universities financing them, setting them off with lots of money to go back to Africa to take on the conservative mission of the Evangelical right. When I began to learn about how institutionalized that was, how well financed and well-crafted and well thought out and how sinister and strategic that entire mission was, it was very clear to me that the, the life and the events and happenings that were impacting, my brothers and sisters, who were Queer on the ground in Africa were intimately, tied to my personal realities as well.

IC: So, you've talked about conservative mission, a global Mission. You talk about the racialization of homophobia. I'm really curious to hear a bit about the response. What's been the response to these things from the Queer community, but before I get to that before I allow you to answer that question. I really want to ask a question about definitions, because within some sectors, Queer is a frequently used word to describe non-heteronormative sexualities, right? I'm not really clear to what extent Queer is sort an overarching term in Africa or even to what extent here in the US. Is it viewed as an inclusive term? You've given me permission to use the term, right, in previous conversations. I really would like for everyone else, to sort of be able to hear your thoughts on this as well.

JT: It's such an interesting term, it can be explosive and very incendiary. And it's generational. If you were to ask somebody 53 or possibly 10 years older or more, you know, there's a lot of, "No no, no, I am not Queer" because certainly in the 60s and 70s Queer was a derogatory term. It was almost like calling somebody, a bull dagger or a faggot and the [LGBTIQQ](#) community fought very hard for nomenclature that we felt was sanctified and empowering. We wanted to be gay and lesbian, you know, bisexual or person of trans experience.

It is really the generation that comes under me. The older millennials who are in their late 30s now who really began to embrace, and I think many of the intellectuals, began to push back and embrace this term of Queer. Interestingly, I think that embracing the term Queer as kind of an umbrella term that covers as you said, all that is not a hetero-normative. I think that on many levels that was a bit in rebuke to the marriage equality movement, because of course, the marriage equality movement suggested that we as gay people were on many levels nothing more than a reflection of straight people. The difference, of course, is that our call for love was to the same sex as opposed to someone of the opposite sex. And that is what distinguished us.

And that kind of created the road to marriage equality. We are acceptable. We are normalized. We pick up our children, just like you do. We take care of our aging parents just like you do. We fuss and fight about, you know, you left the cap off the toothpaste, just like you do. And such a drive and push to be accepted, kind of like the politics of respectability for Black people.

In response to that and I think in rebuke to that, younger Queer activists really pushed to have this term, Queer mean, no, we are different. We are not just the reflection of straight people who are called to same-sex love but that we are a great variety. There are some that are going to have the 2.5 kids and the white picket fence, but then there are others who are going to be polyamorous and some are going to have all sorts of other situations, whereby which they express their love and their affection.

So I think now we've come full circle. Queer does cover the full spectrum of our garden of those of us that are not hetero-normative and then you'll have some who will default and use LGBTIQ or prefer gay or lesbian, because they think it just imposes a bit more dignity on the community.

IC: So, thank you for that. So kind of given the earlier historical political theological and economic overview that you provided, what was the response? What has been the response of the Queer community to this conservative global mission and racialization of homophobia.

BT: After the bill from Uganda was tabled we became aware of what was happening in America. There were several people who have for many years been aware of human rights abuses against LGBTIQ people throughout the world and who have been working on those issues. People like the [Council for Global Equality](#), Mark Bromley and Julie Dorf, I have to call them out because they've been working on these issues for years.

The Metropolitan Community Churches have been aware that we needed to be in communion with our brothers and sisters around the world. They've certainly been doing that work for years as well. Sister Anne Craig who was over at GLAAD at the time as the first director of Faith and Religious Life there was also very aware.

And so when, when the issue broke out in Uganda, there was an Episcopal priest and his name was Bishop Dr. Christopher Senyonjo. He had been educated here in the US at Union

Theological. And interestingly in the 70s he felt compelled to write his dissertation at Union on matters of human sexuality. He moved back to Uganda, raised a beautiful family, was very successful in the Anglican Church and the Bishop of the Western Diocese in Uganda. He retired and started the St. Paul's Reconciliation Center, a center for the outcast. It was a center for people who were having specific kinds of problems. Be it divorced or homelessness, or whatever the issue was.

He began to meet young Queer people who were coming to him because they were homeless. And he had to go back to his writings and his work around human sexuality from many years ago. He really began to revisit the issue and his Center became a place where young LGBTIQ or Queer people in Uganda knew they could go for counseling. Once the bill was passed he was the only priest, the only person of faith, and he was 80 at the time, who stood up and said, "No, this is wrong. No, I cannot accept this and I will stand with this community." He was stripped of the ability to wear his robes in public. As the church authorized, he certainly could do it, but it was again, the church would not authorize it. His pension was taken away from him and his ability to be buried in the sacred grounds where the other Bishops was taken away.

The LGBTIQ group Integrity, that is a part of the Episcopal Church is, of course, a part of the Anglican Communion began to reach out to him, to support him. That was the beginning of the response of the LGBTIQ community from America. Eventually, he was brought to the United States and you have Metropolitan Community churches, the Unitarian Universalist Office at the United Nations, GLAAD, and a couple of foundations including Astraea who began to rally around him.

And on June the 20th, 2010 at the Church Center for the United Nations, we had the first mass meeting of LGBTIQ leaders who convened with Bishop Senyonjo, and David Correia, from Kenya, who was an intern working at the UN and several others. In my mind, that was the kickoff meeting where we as a community came together to really begin to ideate and strategize on "how are we going to stand from a business perspective of transnational solidarity as the U.S. LGBT movement now, connecting with global movements, but the movement in Uganda, in particular.

I happen to have the pleasure of being at that meeting. I was there as an observer because GLAAD had asked me to host Bishop Dr. Christopher Senyonjo, who was now here for two weeks at my church because I was a local pastor of a church up in Harlem that I mentioned before. And they thought that it was important to get him in front of some African-American LGBTIQ people. And I want to thank Sister Anne Craig for having that sensibility, that foresight and that vision that as Africans, it was important that there be some connection to the African-American community and not just the LGBTIQ community at large. And that was the beginning of my journey.

IC: So you were at that meeting as an observer? Can you talk a bit about the strategies, networking and campaigning plans that evolved from that initial meeting? And then, I would love to hear you talk more about what emerged out of the conscious intention to connect, specifically, African and African-American communities.

JT: Absolutely. So certainly coming out of that strategy there was a real attempt from a faith perspective to begin to mobilize what were then called the welcoming communities. This is the affinity groups within the Methodist Church, within the ECLA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, within the Presbyterian Church, even within the United Church of Christ. They all had Affinity groups that were working to change their denominations from the inside out as they wanted these denominations to now advocate for LGBTIQ rights, so, the face strategy was to mobilize the welcoming community to then speak to the hierarchies of all of these denominations. Most of which were American based to leverage their faith relationships with members of Uganda's ecclesiastical elite. Because although the Presbyterian Church in America is not the Presbyterian Church globally it has relationships with Presbyterians globally. The same for the congregationalists coming out of the United Church of Christ and the Lutheran

But the one church that still is a global church that's not Catholic is the United Methodist Church. So there was tremendous pressure on the Methodist because they could speak directly to their counterparts because they were part of the same communion. They weren't just strategic allies. So that was the face strategy.

Then, of course, there was thinking around from a political perspective, putting tremendous pressure on the Obama Administration to really use the State Department to be able to drive this message of lifting up, human rights work with Queer people and making the transgression of human rights for LGBTIQ people a part of the Human Rights Report that comes out of the State Department on every country every few years [produced annually]. Getting the United Nations to become far more sensitive to human rights abuses because we had the [Yogyakarta Principles of 2007](#), that applied previous human rights to these issues.

So we had the progressive faith community. We had thoughts around leveraging the State Department for advocacy. Certainly trying to push the Obama Administration also to leverage the bully pulpit. There was lots of talk although they were contested around pushing back against aid to places like Uganda and imposing sanctions. That was definitely one of the conversations as well. So these were the strategies that were lifted up.

Now, something interesting happened on September 20th to this person who was just an observer at the meeting. I met Bishop Dr. Christopher Senyonjo, as everybody else did. But he said to me, I'm intrigued by your understanding of both faith and business. So, you know my call to preach at age six and my work on Madison Avenue at Young & Rubicam, and all marketing and business experience, really started to come together. And what he said to me was, "We have to not only have a message that is transformative, but we have to build the infrastructure for institutions that can hold that transformation." And I thought that was so insightful of him and he said, "I find it interesting that you're a preacher who has an MBA and that's the way your head thinks. I think you would do well in Uganda. I think you should come to Uganda."

So, here I was there to get to know him simply so that I could be educated enough to host him at a town hall meeting because again, I enjoy media. And we would have, we were going to do a whole media thing around the town hall meeting and that was supposed to be the beginning and the end of that experience. He then said to me, you need to spend as much time with me as you

can this week and at the end of the week, we were in conversations about me coming to Uganda. That was in January.

I went to Uganda, in September of 2010 and my entire life has completely changed ever since that trip. And I have now been focused as a professional man of faith on transnational solidarity. I became the minister of global justice for our organization and eventually that led to me becoming the Bishop. It also led to the great change in my life where I took my congregation and merged it with another congregation in the Bronx.

As the congregation that I built blood, tears and sweat and thought that I would pass to this church for the rest of my life. And here, I was completely reconstructing my life to be able to do this work. Now, of being a missionary, a conduit and a liaison from the faith community in America to the LGBTIQ community in Uganda. What was also very clear to me when my feet touched ground in Uganda, was that this was bigger than a Queer reconciliation. I was a son of the soil who had come home as a Black man meeting my people for the first time.

The first thing, of course, they say is, have you been to Africa? And I said, "Well, I've been to Cape Town" and then everybody laughs, and, and says, "Welcome to Africa Joseph, and welcome to Africa Pastor Tolton." I was very much so Pastor Tolton then. That was the beginning of my journey. I met Frank Mugisha who headed up the LGBTIQ community. We had worship services under a tent in Bishop Senyonjo's garden. I met Sylvia Tamale and other intellectuals and thinkers who were out there writing wonderful work trying to challenge what the Uganda bill suggested, the anti-gay bill. I met all of Bishop Senyonjo's secret and open allies. People in government, people in the army, people in civil society, seeing what could we do to put together some kind of a faction, some kind of an alliance that we can then connect with those of us in the US that were doing this work.

And again, it was clear to me there was an LGBTIQ agenda, but there was an agenda of racial justice and racial reconciliation. Because as I met my Queer brothers and sisters in Uganda. I was not only connecting with them around our Queer reality but very much so connecting with them as people of African descent who had been separated. Who now, were having an incredible conversation about not just the future for Queer people, but the ways in which this relationship between the religious right and ecclesiastical leaders on the continent, particularly Uganda relationships between Museveni and leaders in the west, relationships between America's aid and the ways in which that propped up autocratic regimes, all of this began to surface.

We began to talk about all of this. Talk about the fact that most of the white, Evangelical leaders who came to Uganda had no relationship with Black people in their backyard. They did not come to Harlem, or South East or Watts or Crenshaw. They were interested in Africa. They were not the progressive evangelicals, who were trying to do some kind of work in the South Bronx, around racial reconciliation and economic justice. These were pastors and leaders for whom the only Black people you would see in their church were somebody singing or directing the choir or playing the organ because that is not the social or economic agenda they had.

In fact, these were conservative Christians who were supporting tax policies that undermine the health and well-being of African-Americans, the heavy and brutal policing of black bodies. They

were supporting other kinds of policies from a taxation perspective that meant that our schools didn't have the tax base or the funding to develop programs that would lift the African American student and children. There was a deep relationship between those that were targeting me at home and those that were targeting my brothers and sisters on the continent. And when we began to have those conversations and we began to unpack that it was like, oh my God, not only do we have a common heritage. And not only do we have a common destiny, but we have a common issue today. We have a common enemy. We have common realities. We have needs that are the same. We have got to come together and we've got to unify and have transnational solidarity.

IC: And so what has that looked like over the past ten years or so? Those attempts to build transnational solidarity. What does it look like organizationally? What does it look like in terms of nurturing and facilitating those people-to-people relationships? What's working?

JT: June 20th was the meeting. I went to Uganda in September. I invited [Frank Mugisha](#) to the United States. He was the person who was the Executive Director of Sexual Minorities Uganda. He arrived in the US I believe on December the 6th of 2010. It was on that Human Rights Defenders Day that secretary Hillary Clinton stood in Geneva and declared the Obama Administration policy going forward would be to advance the human rights of LGBTIQ people globally.

To advance globally LGBTIQ rights as human rights. And that was now our policy, that was our position. Frank stayed with me for three months. We went on a tour, all throughout the United States, building the case, introducing Frank to politicians to political leaders. We introduced him to this organization, called TransAfrica because Nicole Lee was very interested in the issue because it had surfaced.

And what also happened when Frank was with me in January of 2011, his Deputy who had also been his mentor David Kato was killed and that really changed everything. The Obama Administration immediately released a statement. Obama had also condemned what was happening in Uganda at the prayer breakfast and that January that was a big signal to the religious right that it was now on his radar.

And a lot of this was the work that Frank and I were doing with others. With now ILGHRC, which was then the National or International Day of Lesbian Human Rights Commission. Now ILGHRC, GLAAD, ASTRAEA, and the other organizations that were beginning to coalesce around this issue.

When David Kato was killed Frank and I were together. We then began to lobby the Black Church to respond. We began to connect the dots around this is not just about an attack on gay people. This is an attack on African LGBTIQ people and it has major political and economic implications. We went to the Reverend Dr. Calvin Butts, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, sat with him, briefed him on the issues. Obviously, we did not have the same theological perspective, but he understood how important of a moment this was. He invited us into his church, the LGBTIQ community, when almost 700 people filled his church for a great celebration of the life of David Kato.

And we were really on our way at that point to beginning to build this transnational movement. It meant that I would then go back.

IC: I was just going to ask you, could you just take a minute and explain what happened to David Kato? Because I think it's important for those of us that might not know.

JT: Absolutely, absolutely. As I had noted, the anti-gay bill, was starting to get a lot of play globally. There was a lot of conversation about how we were going to respond and react to it.

Things were very hot on the ground in Uganda and so SMUG, or Sexual Minorities Uganda which kind of became the group that became known as the group holding together the LGBTIQ community in Uganda began to get a lot more notice. David Kato had been one of the founders of the Sexual Minorities Uganda and the Queer movement, not only in Uganda, but also in East Africa, he had mentored a young man, and he was really young, 28 years old at the time, Frank Mugisha, because he saw that Frank had the intellect and the juice and the character to lead the movement. So although David Kato was a pioneer, he set Frank up to be the executive director. He served as the deputy. So he was both assisting Frank and mentoring him at the same time.

What David understood was that somebody in Uganda was going to die. He understood that the pressure that they were under that, that the climate of vitriol that the ways in which theological anti-gay rhetoric was turning very violent. Very, very, very, very, very violent. That this was having a real impact from a social perspective. In that here you have Ugandans who in many cases, many levels are economically disenfranchised, spiritually they're having to deal with the West, politically they don't have a lot of power. This creates a sense of moral panic and a sense of being diminished.

Out of that sense of diminishment, David knew somebody is going to rise up and there will be violence. And so I think David understood that because that was going to happen he wanted to prepare the community. Unfortunately, he was the person who became the victim of that violence. He sacrificed his life. He was killed by an anti-gay person in his community who came to learn of him and what he was doing. And he sacrificed his life and that really was the beginning of a mark shift, not just in the realities of Queer organizing in Uganda, but it really changed Queer organizing for all of Africa.

That was a Kairos moment for Queer organizing throughout the continent. I'm grateful that I was with Frank here in America and that together, we were able to mobilize African-American clergy, the African-American civil rights community, as well, to really begin to focus on this issue. And as I said, TransAfrica became one of our partners. It was historic that Reverend Dr. Calvin Butts at the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church invited us in to have this memorial service for Frank. It really put the issues on the radar screen of the black LGBTIQ community here in America.

IC: So Reverend Butts is part of a very Progressive wing of the Black church here in the United States. How were you received? How was this message rather received throughout the black church, which has a great deal of diversity? And following that moment, right, with the death of David Kato what do things look like now? I mean there's a lot that's happened since then. You've

got the rise of authoritarian tendencies here in the United States. You've got a much more open racialized and anti-black agenda that's emerged over the past several years. And then now we've got a pandemic and huge economic dislocation and over the past couple of years, a dramatic response in terms of pushback, you know led by young people, Black Lives Matters and allies, who really helped put racial and social justice on the agenda here

JT: That's a great question. So, again, this is 2011 that David is killed, which means that we're moving into an election year. And what we see is that there is this interesting momentum starting to happen in the Black church. You've got people like Reverend Al Sharpton who are coming out, you have the NAACP that are beginning to come out in support of marriage equality. Now, this is of course, after Obama courageously came out for marriage equality before the election. So that was a very, very strategic move.

You had many of the state ballot initiatives, where LGBTIQ rights and marriage equality were on the ballot and we had lost state by state by state. It was after Obama came out for marriage equality and he gave permission to Black progressives and Blacks were much more open to then their positions. And that's from Hollywood people like Jay-Z all the way to the progressive faith community when you're talking about people, like, Reverend Dr. Calvin Butts.

But something happened in Maryland where we invested as a Queer community, a lot of money and attention and focus because we knew that the Maryland ballot initiative for marriage equality could win and be the first state to win if African Americans supported it at a rate of 45% and above. Now. We only had about 29 to 30 percent of African-Americans in support of marriage equality so we had a 15 to 17 to 18 point gap that we had to make up. We made it up because many young black preachers, particularly, that generation after Calvin Butts. People like the now Senator Raphael Warnock and others, our dear brother whose name is escaping me, of course, who ran for lieutenant governor of Maryland [Anthony G. Brown], I'll come back to his name, became very open to the idea of LGBTIQ equality.

We certainly had Pastor Mike here of First Corinthian Baptist Church right here in New York City. I call them this interesting set of mostly Morehouse men, you know who are about 48 years old now who really were able to transform the Black Church from within, particularly the Black Baptist Church. They became real advocates for LGBTIQ dignity and for marriage equality. We won, Maryland.

Everything changed. Forty seven point five percent of Blacks in Maryland voted for marriage equality. It now meant that the religious right had lost its stranglehold on the Black Church and could no longer manipulate the Black Church to cause a fracture of the progressive base. Pitting, the gay community against the African-American community. That wedge issue was no longer there. It changed the political terrain for the Democratic party and it really united us in very, very, very new ways.

Coming out of that, of course, we celebrated our growth, we celebrated the fact that we were winning. We were in Obama's second administration. And then, of course, things turned, because we did not see what was embedded within the tea party, which was, you know, very, very far, right sensibilities. Not just around race, but certainly, around matters of human sexuality, around

matters of just what it meant to be an American, matters of immigration. The fright that many white people have around the browning of America. The fact that America's culture is changing, that two-thirds of Americans support marriage equality, the resistance to all of this was not fractured or balkanized but highly centralized. And so the resistance movement to it exploded, and unfortunately found a great spokesperson. And I only use great, in terms of his literal performance as a spokesperson, in the former President Donald Trump.

They now had somebody who would just, you know, as of with, with barbarian inclinations, just kind of speak to these issues and, and say anything. And for the first time, the conservatives had a mouthpiece that they thought really spoke truth to power regarding their issues. And how they felt. And so the world saw this shift. Africa saw this shift around the acceptance of LGBT equality. There was pressure from the U.S. government on African governments and then things began to shift, of course, when we moved into the Trump era. And America's other voice began to stand up and obviously push back in very, very real ways, which was frightening for LGBTIQ people on the ground because they had kind of lost their big brother. They had lost their air power from a military perspective, as they were boots on the ground.

And things have greatly shifted in the last four years, but the communities remain resilient and they remain strong. And they've also had to move together with a measure of independence because we have had to be so focused on domestic issues as well as focused on international issues and that has manifested itself financially. Even in terms of the ways in which the movements in Africa have been less funded over the last four years because so much money that we spent on them from 2012 to 2016, was then diverted to deal with the domestic issues that we were pushing back on.

But part of the beauty is that between 2012 and 2016 we were able to build five churches in East Africa that are for LGBTIQ people that are a part of the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries. So you have this Pan-African transnational faith built by Queer people of African descent where we are united in our work together. So that remains strong, certainly, the political connections that we were able to build the connections between civil society that we were able to build. And between businesses, all of that work done between 2010 and 2016 is the reason that we have been able to hold strong and stay the course over these years since then.

IC: So, looking forward, looking at this rich history, complicated history of relationship building specifically within African-American and African communities, what would you lift up as the the key and critical elements of those relationships? What could have been the glue that has held them together and then looking forward, of those elements what's essential to build upon?

JT: Absolutely. The thing that has held us together and that has been the glue has been our realization that I am you and you are me. That is the glue. That is the substance that binds us together. One of the things that I have not discussed is the level of resistance that I received as a gay, Black man, doing this work of transnational, solidarity. Those that had done a lot of the work regarding the American LGBTIQ movement connecting with global movements were not people of color. When I was doing this work, as I do the work in Africa.

One of the things that became incredibly apparent to my white counterparts is that they could not do what I do. And so this idea of kind of being the white savior, which gay people who are white have as much as anybody else's white, just really began to trouble them and really create a sense of panic. Because on many levels a huge part of my success on the ground in Africa is because I am a person of African descent. I dance like they do, I have the same sweet tooth that they do, I have the same tendency to go on and on rhetorically in church like they do because I am them and they are me. And that understanding and that realization, and the beauty of that discovery, of course, there are distinctions, of course, there are differences, of course, there are times when Joseph is more American, that I am African on a given day.

But at our core. I am them and they are me. And I think that that's an incredible gift. That we as Black Queer people, out of this niche movement of Black Queer Pan-Africanism. That's a gift that we have to offer to the broader more mainstream Pan-African movement. Moving forward, what we need in order to sustain this movement for generations are to develop new economic models of mobilizing resources. We can't build, we can't tear down the master's house with the master's tools and ultimately with his money, as much as we need resources from whomever we can get resources from. We have got to develop modes of sustainability economically, where we create all sorts of entrepreneurial ventures, the purpose of whom is to really reinvest into the movement.

We have to find those angel investors who want to take on this movement for generations to come. Because the truth is there are about 10 billionaires who have been financing the religious right and their movement and all that is happening. And we have to find some of our own, but we've also got to become a lot more creative about how we finance the movement. Being able to own the movement to own our story to own our own media platforms and vehicles is going to be absolutely essential moving forward.

IC: Until we get there, until we get those angel investors, what do we do?

JT: We have to go the route of foundations. We have to speak to grassroots possibilities for investments. The Human Rights Campaign model. We certainly also have to develop media properties from songs to entertainment properties that can yield a profit. We've got to figure out ways to do local, more small-scale entrepreneurship that can sustain the entrepreneur and also be an avenue of revenue spending.

And I think we also have a major opportunity to speak to progressives in this country of every fold, particularly progressive people of faith, who understand these issues, who want to do the right thing. And in speaking to your question with regard to Black Lives Matter and how that has emerged. That's another opportunity for us to really speak to Black Lives Matter. From an internationalism perspective, the Black lens, the Black international lens of Black Lives Matter has got to be exploited, and leveraged as well. And I think that there are possible revenue streams that can come from that also.

IC: Have you had any opportunity to speak with the leadership of Black Lives Matter? Part of the reason I ask is because I am looking over their 2020 report. I think the global network, the Black Lives Matter global network. I think it was almost, don't quote me on this, but perhaps

more than 80% of the grants that they gave to individual organizations were to trans or related organizations. So I'm just wondering if you've had any conversations with folks there.

JT: I've had some conversation, not the exact level of conversation that I'm seeking or will continue to seek. But you're absolutely right, two of the three women who started the Black Lives Matter movement or certainly framed it are openly Queer individuals. The momentum around organizing that we see in the Black Lives Matter movement, very interestingly, much of that momentum comes out of the marriage equality movement, and the Queer, the gay rights movement that we saw kind of precede Black Lives Matter, but this is history repeating itself.

Stonewall had a disproportionate number of Black participants. Why was that the case? Because black people at that point in time were coming out of both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. They understood what it was to use raw power and to fight that's what the Black Power movement and the Black Panthers taught them. And so many gay people, many people who were part of Stonewall were there bringing the energy, the momentum, the tactics, the strategy, and the learnings from the Black Panther Movement, the Black Power movement and the Civil Rights Movement. History has repeated itself that same energy, that same enthusiasm, strategy, tactics, infrastructure, organizational relationships that were driving the LGBTIQ movement, the Gay Rights Movement, the Marriage Equality Movement, then got transferred to Black Lives Matter. So it makes absolute sense to me that 80% of those dollars went where they should have.

IC: Fantastic, so of all the questions that I've asked, what have I missed? What's really important for you to say that you haven't yet had an opportunity to share?

JT: Oh, thank you so much for that. So we met in part because as I've done this work around LGBTIQ justice from a global perspective, the Pan-African work as a Queer black person. It was the s-hole comment made by our former president that really deeply impacted me. And I realized that at that moment, I had a call and a responsibility, not just to the Queer niche and segments of Pan-Africanism, but really an opportunity to leverage the work that I had done to build out a broader proposition of work and connectivity.

And so that's when I began to talk with people like yourself who have been as they say “in the business” for some time before I, about this work of transnational solidarity and Pan-Africanism. And so my first conversation with you was really about whether there was room in the market for an organization, like Interconnected Justice, which has now morphed to become a collective of Africans and afro-descendants. A youth, powered collective of African and afro-descendants bringing together our people from the continent and the diaspora for collective, tactical engagement on particular campaigns that deal with very particular and discrete issues.

I am so excited to be doing that work of interconnected justice as I still do, the work of the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries and our LGBTIQ Pan-Africanist reconciliation work. But my primary work today is the work of interconnected justice, which really speaks to the broader concerns and possibilities of a next-generation Pan-African movement.

Africa is experiencing, as you know better than I, a tremendous youth bulge and surge. I think by 2100 one out of every four people on the planet may be of African descent because of the demographic shifts that are happening. We have got to mobilize these young people on the continent to change their lived reality. I believe that that path is the unpaved road of Pan-Africanism. And that we must connect the movements that young people are building on the ground in Africa, with the movement that they're building on the ground, in Brazil, Colombia throughout the Caribbean and certainly here in the United States. And that is the work of interconnected justice, bringing together and building a unified web between nationally based Pan-African movements powered by young people.

And I'm incredibly excited to be venturing out in this way. And I hope that what I get to do in the next 15 years is just add a few bricks to the house that's already being built and really hope for our young people to have a sustained Pan-Africanism moving forward.

IC: Thank you so much. Thank you. This is really appreciated.

JT: Oh my goodness. What a pleasure to be with you. I thank you Imani for your work and your presence in the world.