



BLACK INTERFAITH PROJECT

FELLOWSHIP PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS 2024-25



SASA AAKIL

FOUNDER, IF ALL THE TREES WERE PENS OPEN MIC; ARTIST; POET

ISLAM - SHIA

Sasa Aakil is a Multimedia Artist, Writer, and the 2021 Montgomery County Youth Poet Laureate. She is a potter, painter, poet, printmaker, and bassist living and working in Wheaton, Maryland. Sasa has been featured in the [Bethesda Magazine](#) for her work as Youth Poet Laureate. She has also been featured in the Washington Post, as well as on WTOP for her work on the A Man Was Lynched Yesterday Project in 2020. She has won numerous awards in writing and performed poetry at the Kennedy What's Going On Festival in 2023. Sasa is the founder of [If All the Trees Were Pens Open Mic](#) and recently published her first chapbook, [the culmination of all my despair and the music that saves me](#). She received her Bachelors of Fine Arts from Howard University in 2024. More information about Sasa's visual and written work can be found on her website sasaaakil.com.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

My project focuses on building out the community and the impact of my open mic If All the Trees Were Pens. Through social media outreach, increased frequency, and holding space for art and conversation I plan to explore the power of the consensus built by gathering like-minded people together on a regular basis.

Headshot Credit: Tavon Taylor

LEARN MORE ABOUT SASA



[United We Build](#)



[Black and Interfaith:
A Family Finds God Through
Love and Intersectionality](#)



[I grew up in a home of
Allahuakbars and Amens.](#)



NAILA ANSARI

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF THEATRE AND
AFRICANA STUDIES, SUNY BUFFALO STATE
COLLEGE; FOUNDER, THE MOVEMENT OF JOY, LLC
ISLAM

A native of Buffalo, New York, Naila Ansari is a Cum Laude graduate of Point Park University's Conservatory of Performing Arts program and is a distinguished MFA from the University at Buffalo. Ansari is a SUNY Buffalo State University Assistant Professor in Theater and Africana Studies. Ansari recently served as the choreographer for "Black Roots Summer," named Best Theater by the New York Times and praised by Broadway World for her Directing and Choreography of her adaptation of Shea's first produced show, "Once on this Island." Ansari merges artistry and scholarship to tell Black stories in America. Her research and performance project "The Movement of Joy" archives stories of Black women's joy nationwide. In addition to the film documentary of these stories, Ansari works with various foundations to build Arts and Culture programming. For more information, follow [@naila_moves_joy](https://www.instagram.com/naila_moves_joy) on Instagram and movementofjoyllc.com.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Movement of Joy stands as a beacon of cultural celebration and interfaith harmony, embarking on a national endeavor to amplify the voices of Black women across the United States. This visionary project intertwines the rich tapestry of faith and joy, weaving together narratives of resilience and triumph.

At its core, The Movement of Joy is a collective committed to honoring the diverse experiences and stories of Black women. Through a series of insightful interviews conducted nationwide, the project meticulously crafts live performances that encapsulate the essence of Black joy.

Having graced prestigious venues such as the African American Museum for History and Culture Smithsonian, Michigan Tech University, University of Buffalo, Salve Regina University, SUNY Brockport, and numerous others, The Movement of Joy has captivated audiences with its stirring presentations.

NAILA ANSARI PROJECT DESCRIPTION CONT.

As the project evolves, it transcends the bounds of live performance to embrace the cinematic realm. Expanding into a transformative film project, *The Movement of Joy* seeks to illuminate the profound connection between faith, joy, and the choreographies that have shaped America, all under the stewardship of Black women.

Through this innovative fusion of storytelling and artistic expression, *The Movement of Joy* endeavors to inspire, uplift, and ignite conversations that resonate far beyond the confines of the stage or screen. It stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of community, solidarity, and the boundless power of joy.

Headshot Credit: Mustafa Hussain

LEARN MORE ABOUT NAILA



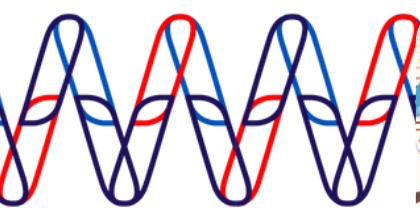
[4 Takeaways from our Faith and Health Convening at Chautauqua](#)



[IN PHOTOS: Celebrating Black Joy and Interfaith Stories](#)



[The Movement of Joy: Archiving Black Joy and Spirituality Through Dance](#)



Sasa Aakil, Naila Ansari, and the Movement of Joy team performed at the Celebrating Black Interfaith event at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History in November 2022.





TYRONE DAVIS, JR.

DUAL MASTER'S DEGREE STUDENT, UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY (M.DIV) AND THE SILBERMAN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK AT HUNTER COLLEGE (M.S.W.)

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

In the fall of 2024, Tyrone will enter his second year of a dual-degree graduate program, working towards a Master of Divinity at Union Theological Seminary and a Master's in Clinical Social Work at the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College. In addition to being a seminarian, Tyrone is also a certified sex educator, actor, musician, and writer. Prior to entering seminary, Tyrone held a career as a theater actor who performed on Broadway and in theaters across the U.S. As a prospective clinical social worker and mental health practitioner, his particular interests revolve around supporting marginalized people towards mental health which includes both sexual and religious/spiritual wellness. Tyrone is originally from Miami, Florida, and is currently based in New York City, where he belongs to a Unitarian-Universalist congregation.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Though interfaith cooperation has been plentiful throughout the histories of Black communities in the United States, the Black Interfaith Project addresses the unfortunate dearth of academic research and overall visibility on the ways in which Black faith is a significantly diverse web of traditions. As a research fellow for the Black Interfaith Project, my work will focus on researching, investigating, and documenting historical instances of interfaith collaboration among Black communities in the United States. My angle is to examine how racialized injustices have inspired collaboration among differing faith traditions of Black people as they came together in community to cultivate social, economic, and artistic movements. Using various research methods—including academic, archival, interviews, and oral history—my work will culminate in a research paper and bibliography that will strive to be a valuable addition to the existing research on Black interfaith collaboration.



STEPHEN READUS

ST. MARK UMC CHICAGO

SECULAR HUMANISM

Chicagoan Stephen Readus is a social scientist and longtime community advocate. He is currently working in community engagement and grantmaking within the affordable housing space. Academically, he is passionate about Secular Humanism, Black Studies, and urban planning. In his limited free time, Stephen enjoys parks, laughing loud with friends, documentaries, and the occasional responsible cigar.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

"What Do the Lonely Do?": Exploring Faith, Connection, and the Future of Chicago's Black Seniors amidst Isolation

Inspired by the poignant question posed in the Emotions' song "What Do the Lonely Do?", this research project will delve into the experiences of African American religious leaders and seniors within Chicago's faith-based communities. Through surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews, the project explores how these communities navigate three key trends: declining church attendance, the impact of COVID-19, and the rise of Artificial Intelligence.

Rooted in Culturally Responsive Evaluation, the study goes beyond traditional research methods by centering the voices of participants and seeking to understand how religious leaders foster care and connection within their communities, particularly amongst seniors grappling with a changing technological landscape.

With the growing number of religiously unaffiliated individuals in the U.S. and the lingering effects of the pandemic, this project seeks to offer valuable insights into the future of Black religious communities, their capacity for fostering social connections in a digital world, and the critical role they play in supporting their most vulnerable members. Ultimately, this research will not only culminate in a 24-minute mini-documentary but also aims to establish a small, interfaith mutual aid group specifically focused on supporting senior care needs.



ALLEN REYNOLDS

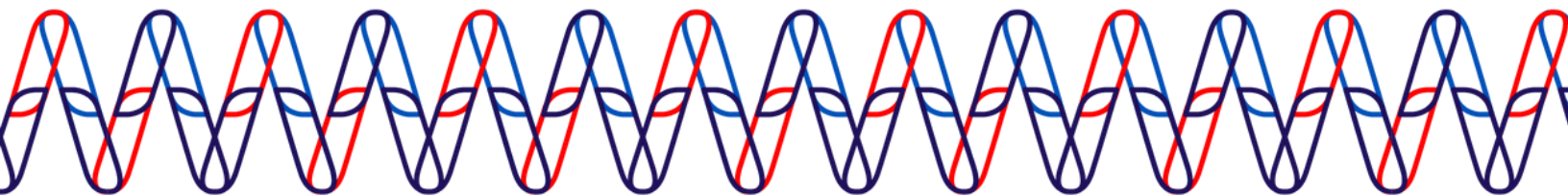
DIRECTOR OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION,
UNIVERSITY CHURCH CHICAGO (UCC/DOC)

CHRISTIAN

Allen Reynolds is a minister, editor, producer, and consultant from the suburbs of Chicago, IL. He is the Minister for Transformation at University Church Chicago (UCC/DOC) and has served in multiple content roles at UMI (Urban Ministries Inc.) which is the largest African American Christian publishing and media company in the nation. He is also an adjunct professor at Aurora University. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Media Production from Howard University, his Master of Divinity from Yale University, and is pursuing his Master of Business Administration from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. He was a fellow of the inaugural Faith & Trust Young Leaders Cohort with the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago and a guest panelist speaking about diversity in congregations at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago 2023. He lives in the south suburbs of Chicago with his wife and three daughters.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Produce a curriculum for congregations to learn and engage with Black Interfaith history and Interfaith work more broadly. The curriculum will help congregations to understand the tradition of interfaith understanding and cooperation in Black communities and engage with different beliefs, practices, and tools to help foster interfaith dialogue and cooperation in their own broader communities. The curriculum will exist digitally.





YOLANDA SAVAGE-NARVA

VICE PRESIDENT OF RACIAL EQUITY, DIVERSITY,
INCLUSION AND COMMUNITIES OF BELONGING,
UNION FOR REFORM JUDAISM

REFORM JUDAISM

Yolanda Savage-Narva (she/her) has twenty years of experience working with public agencies and non-profit organizations to promote equity and inclusion. She is a Centers for Disease Control (CDC)-trained public health specialist who has led community-based efforts in community health assessments for Indian Health Service. Yolanda was also the Executive Director of Operation Understanding DC, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting understanding, cooperation, and respect while fighting to eradicate racism, anti-Semitism and all forms of discrimination.

Yolanda Savage-Narva is currently the Vice President of Racial Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and Communities of Belonging for the Union for Reform Judaism and the Religious Action Center. She is currently a member of the Board of Directors for the Federation of Greater Washington, Capital Jewish Museum, Leading Edge, American Jewish World Services and the Historic Sixth and I Synagogue in Washington, D.C., and a member of the Aspen Institute's Racial Justice & Religion Collective. Yolanda is a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority; an international Black sorority dedicated to community service and education.

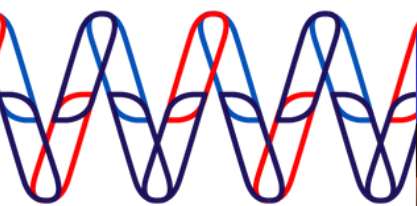
Yolanda has made appearances on NBC's Soul of a Nation and ABC's IMPACT x Nightline and recently spoke at the March on Washington 60. Yolanda is a graduate of Tougaloo College, where she received a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Jackson State University, where she received a Master of Science degree in Education; both historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

In her spare time, Yolanda loves being outdoors, reading, birdwatching, playing sports and traveling with her son Miles and husband Andrew.

YOLANDA SAVAGE-NARVA PROJECT DESCRIPTION

As a Black Jewish woman, I rely heavily on the opportunity to be in dialogue (faith and spirituality), both with people who think, and believe what I do and others who don't. Right now, especially during this very challenging time in the history of the world, we are relying on symbols and short-one-sided monologues to frame who we are, how we feel, and what we believe. Based on work that I'm doing professionally called Talk for a Change, I am expanding on the topic by creating an opportunity around a Jewish ritual called Havdalah, which would allow opportunities for people to get to know one another and be in dialogue and relationship with people we might not be connected to.

My project will bring people from all faith backgrounds together to lovingly wrestle with what it means to be flawed and human in America. I've pictured a project that would bring people from diverse religious backgrounds together to: 1) build relationships (through storytelling and sharing stories), 2) understand the human project, and 3) wrestle with the challenges of the world around them, through a faith-based lens, would begin the healing process needed for us to begin to fulfill the promise of Dr. MLK's Beloved Community. Havdalah means separation. It is a ritual that Jews practice on Saturday night that is the official end/close of the Sabbath. Havdalah starts at sundown on Saturday night and officially ends on Tuesday night.



Fellows and speakers gather at the Celebrating Black Interfaith event at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History in November 2022.





SHARON STROYE

DIRECTOR OF TRUTH, RACIAL HEALING, AND
TRANSFORMATION INITIATIVE, EMORY UNIVERSITY
SPIRITUAL

Sharon Stroye is the inaugural Director of the Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT) Center at Emory University. Emory University is one of seventy-two (72) post-secondary institutions hosting a TRHT Campus Center. Established by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) in 2017 with initial funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the TRHT Campus Centers aim to dispel the belief in a racial hierarchy of human values. Each center is responsible for implementing innovative and actionable programming to develop the next generation of strategic leaders committed to dismantling institutional and structural racism through a shared humanity perspective.

Sharon is a Strategic and Transformative leader with the expertise to create empowering and welcoming spaces for diverse individuals. As a trained national Racial Healing Circle Practitioner, she has facilitated over 300 racial healing circles, workshops, and trainings, engaging more than 2,500 participants since 2018. Her efforts span multiple sectors, incorporating the TRHT framework into their environments, cultures, and climates. Sharon has also served as a faculty mentor for the Annual TRHT Institute hosted by AAC&U, preparing other colleges and universities to establish TRHT Campus Centers. She is highly sought after by existing centers for her expertise in training and strategic visioning.

In addition to her role at Emory, Sharon is the Associate Pastor of God's Kingdom Heavenly Church, an online non-denominational ministry established during the pandemic with the mission of teaching the word of God and applying it to daily life. Sharon's values and beliefs as a servant for humanity are reflected in her actions and behavior. With over 30 years of experience in higher education, Sharon holds two master's degrees in business and public administration (MBA and MPA) and an undergraduate degree in accounting. She has mentored hundreds of students, helping them recognize their God-ordained passions and purposes to "create the next generation of leaders to change the world, one child at a time."

SHARON STROYE PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Interfaith Racial Healing Circle Initiative aims to bring together Black interfaith leaders and their congregants from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish backgrounds to participate in a videotaped Interfaith Racial Healing Circle. The overarching premise of a Racial Healing Circle is to unite individuals from diverse backgrounds to share their lived experiences through a facilitated, human-centered process. This sharing fosters bonds and connections that highlight our similarities more than our differences.

The Rx Racial Healing Circle framework, designed by Dr. Gail Christopher, Executive Director of the National Collaborative for Health Equity, serves as the foundation for this initiative. It involves an interactive experience where participants from diverse backgrounds engage in authentic storytelling within a safe, brave, and responsible space. This process allows individuals to recognize and connect through their shared humanity.

Faith-based houses of worship are among the most segregated areas in society. This project seeks to challenge that segregation by creating and documenting an environment where Black religious leaders from different faiths can be vulnerable and authentic. By doing so, it aims to serve as a powerful example of unity within the Black diaspora, demonstrating that such unity can be achieved and replicated in other areas of society.

Historically, Racial Healing Circles are not videotaped to protect the identity, authenticity, and psychological safety of the participants. However, this project will elevate the voices of three distinct religious communities, showcasing their commitment to true healing and humanity. The resulting documentation will provide a valuable resource that can inspire similar efforts elsewhere, promoting interfaith understanding and racial healing on a broader scale.

Headshot Credit: [Geoffrey Marshall](#)

LEARN MORE ABOUT SHARON

[United We Build: Sharon Stoye's Pursuit of Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation](#)





PAMELA AYO YETUNDE

FOUNDER, MARABELLA STORYCRAFT

MULTIFAITH

Interfaith pan-Buddhist universalist practitioner Pamela Ayo Yetunde, J.D., M.A., Th.D. (pamelaayoyetunde.com) is a pastoral counselor in private practice, an author, editor, advocate, instructor, and Buddhist lay leader. Ayo is the author of several books, essays and articles including interfaith books [Songbird Birdsong: The Story](#), and [Casting Indra's Net: Fostering Spiritual Kinship and Community](#). She co-edited [Black and Buddhist](#) with Cheryl A. Giles. Her essays on being Black and Buddhist and her podcast interviews with Black Buddhists can be found on [Lion's Roar](#). In response to the police torture and killing of George Floyd, Ayo became the principal co-founder of [Buddhist Justice Reporter](#).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

"Songbird Birdsong" is a fictional story and film project inspired by the ancient Buddhist story of Kisa Gotami and the Mustard Seed. For this project, inspired by Ayo's work with Fetzer Institute's Shared Sacred Story project, the ancient Kisa Gotami story is placed in a deconstructed U.S., in the near future, in the life of a Black female jazz singer, Keisha. The protagonists from each story share similar economic locations, aspirations, and losses. Kisa's path to healing is largely through Buddhist faith and an ancient form of "exposure to reality therapy" offered by the Buddha. Keisha, who is a conservative Christian, heals through her Christian faith struggles and interfaith encounters with Buddhists skilled in spiritual friendship, Buddhist practices, and psychotherapy. "Songbird Birdsong" is an invitation and a roadmap for healing through fiction. The story has been written to be easily adapted for the screen and other performing arts. "Songbird Birdsong – The Story" -- will be published and the screenplay will be offered for production. The story will also be shared with artists in other genres, including opera and stage plays. "Songbird Birdsong" has the potential to support bridge crossings between Christians and Buddhists, Black people and people who aren't Black, jazz and opera lovers, and lovers of classical and contemporary art forms.

Headshot Credit: Miriam Phields