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**THE RECORD**

**2020**  
YEAR IN REVIEW





Now faith is confidence  
in what we hope for and  
assurance about what  
we do not see.

Hebrews 11:1

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# The Church

An interview with The Rev. Dr. Marcia Ledford, Esq.



***THE REV. DR. MARCIA LEDFORD, ESQ.***  
Civil Rights Attorney, Founder & President of  
Political Theology Matters

**INTERVIEWED BY:**

***ANNA STANIA***  
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# And State

**After a tumultuous election year, the need for our voices as public theologians has never been more critical. So says the Rev. Dr. Marcia Ledford, founder of Political Theology Matters, LLC (PTM). Marcia's mission is to provide writing, teaching, preaching, and public advocacy in support of greater equality through social justice.**

**I spoke with Marcia about this mission that she describes as “building the plane as we fly across.”**

**Anna: Let's start at the beginning. How do you define public theology?**

Marcia: Well, we can think of it as a two-pronged approach. Incidentally, attorneys love “prongs” in their formulas. So, this one is handy.

Prong one is speaking faithfully in public about issues that are important to us. Prong two is addressing as broad or as large an audience as possible to get our message across.

This is a working definition. I find for explaining the concept of political theology, this works well. We speak our faith publicly to as many people as we can reach at one time.

### **How did you become interested in public theology?**

Well, it was a natural segue from being a civil rights attorney. The U.S. Constitution has always been one of my great loves, especially the First Amendment, the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth, or Equal Protection Amendment. The gospel and the constitution drive my quest for justice and equality.

I have been a criminal defense and LGBT civil rights attorney throughout my legal career. When engaged in the Detroit Latinx ministry, I became appalled at what I saw our government doing to Latinx families, especially little children who are U.S. citizens. The government is our agent; we the people are ultimately responsible for the actions and policies it applies or fails to apply.

Although toughened by having represented people accused of despicable crimes, nothing prepared me for the immense spiritual and emotional drain, and I knew that I had to do something about it. I could not look away from what I witnessed.

### **Where's the line between criminal defense work and theological and political work when it comes to immigration reform?**

Generally, in my experience, people accused of crimes are often adults who have made wrong, even egregious, decisions that hurt or kill people. And, to be clear, I do not include the overarching problem of the prison industrial complex for purposes of this discussion. That's a separate issue of institutional racism and an expression of modern-day Jim Crow laws.

However, undocumented immigrants do not hurt anybody. They just want to have a chance to support their families in a free society. Usually, they do jobs that Americans don't like, so I don't buy into the argument that they are stealing jobs from Americans. And this mindset fails to acknowledge

the countless contributions that immigrants make in the U.S. every day, as doctors, lawyers, politicians, and engineers, as well as agricultural and blue-collar workers.

Immigrants are not criminals, but our laws demonize them and treat them like they are criminals. Immigrants often pay taxes whether through an ITIN [individual taxpayer identification number] or not, yet the first stimulus package excluded them. In my view, this is a kind of quasi-racketeering. As poor people of color, they represent a sector of the American population suffering most profoundly due to COVID, without having a safety net, though undocumented workers contribute \$10 billion into the annual American economy.

### **It seems like we all need to consider where and how our ancestors "immigrated" here.**

Exactly. This idea also got me thinking about my American heritage. My father is an amateur genealogist and determined that our earliest ancestor, Matthew Ledford, came here as an indentured servant from the U.K. in 1690. Was Matthew documented? I doubt it. His "acceptable credential" was being Anglo-European, or as we now say, "white." And he arrived on Native American soil. Europeans immigrating here caused massive displacement and genocide of First Nation peoples.

### **So your ministry has evolved from serving as a civil rights attorney and an Episcopal priest in a Latinx context?**

Correct. I think I was born to be an advocate. Working to achieve LGBT marriage equality served as my first long-term primary goal. Linda and I celebrated 38 years together in 2020, having legally married in 2014.

We had a ceremony in 1992 at Old Christ Episcopal Church Detroit when Stew Wood was bishop. Many readers may remember the upheaval over that when the Associated Press ran the story. Opponents made threats of violence and we privately considered moving or canceling our "Ceremony of Life Covenant." We were not allowed to call it a marriage at that time and couldn't have the traditional marital blessing in the name of the Trinity at the end.





Ledford at the TCF Center on Nov. 4th, 2020 as Detroit ballots were counted.

We ended up having the ceremony – that’s another story. And, we were and are blessed anyway. After the *Obergefell* SCOTUS decision granted marriage equality in 2013, and we married in 2014, I felt I needed to give back somehow.

As I served through Latinx ministry, I realized quickly how important that my 30+ years of civil rights advocacy was going to be for my new ministry.

### **Is that how you decided to engage in political theology?**

Yes. I decided to study the role of political or public theology in-depth and wrote a doctoral dissertation about the gospel’s application to immigration reform. I believe the Holy Spirit has called me. That call allows me to combine my theological and constitutional training to encourage us as progressive Christians to bring about greater social justice regarding various issues through public advocacy.

This work required a “container,” if you will, for the ministry, so I formed PTM. However, it is a Michigan for-profit company. This is an important point because

the IRS rules limiting my advocacy work and PTM do not apply as they do to 501(c)(3) charities. That allows me to advocate in various ways through teaching, speaking, and public calls for justice. However, when guest preaching, I do not advocate for or against political candidates, or issues in an election cycle, because the host church is a nonprofit entity.

### **What’s most challenging about your mission?**

Four challenges to motivate progressive Christians frame my political theology mission.

First, the phrase “separation of church and state” is NOT written in the U.S. Constitution, although people think it is. So, how did we come to think it is?

Second, Episcopalians and other mainstream denominational members are what I call “too nice.” We don’t like telling people what to do. But, we don’t have to do that. Evangelism takes many forms including advocating for justice in public.

Third, the “I’m only one person and the issues are so complex, so how can little ol’ me make a difference?”

problem. It's true that systemic change takes a long time because of its complexity. But the local, so-called "small" acts must accompany the big acts. Individuals and small groups can make a big difference. Example: Jesus and the 12 and the women changed the world! And, they didn't have the internet.

Fourth, the anxiety over the "I don't know where to start" syndrome vexes many of us. Several organizations can help people find their proper place and mission. We don't have to reinvent the wheel.

### **Why do you assert that the "separation of church and state" is not possible?**

In considering the separation of church and state, we have to look back to James Madison, an architect of the First Amendment. Madison did something extraordinary. Those scant 45 words allowed citizens to openly criticize their government publicly and formally. Nothing like it ever existed as expressly as when it appeared on the world scene in 1791.

The First Amendment's uniqueness caused Madison to refer to this as the "Great American Experiment." Through the guaranteed rights of free exercise of religion, free speech, press, assembly, and petitioning the government, we as Americans entered into uncharted waters buoyed by the never-before guaranteed rights of civic freedom. They are our "constitutional life preservers," if you will.

The only prohibition in the First Amendment pertains to the U.S. Congress. It specifically cannot establish a superior religion. Our founders sought to escape the state-sanctioned religion in England and the turmoil of the interregnum.

### **Do you think the average American resident understands how these rights work in relation to the First Amendment rights?**

Yes and no. Americans understand free speech generally, but not necessarily when religion is part of the message. My dissertation survey also showed that while American Christians

misunderstand the application of "separation of church and state," their aversion to making a scene seems even more of a stumbling block. Unfortunately, Americans have confused what Congress cannot do with what we can do. Consequently, we've entrenched this idea in our minds that our public life must be completely separate from our faith life.

By misunderstanding the limitation on Congress, our societal psyche began to self-censure our beliefs. From speaking with people about this, their responses reveal a belief that they must "check their faith at the door."

We are an overwhelmingly Protestant nation since before the Declaration of Independence. The Second Great Awakening caused a shift from public to private expressions of piety in Protestantism, and this form of Christianity in America focuses on personal salvation. It has an individualistic ethos. Episcopal theology reflects our Roman Catholic roots in the whole Body of Christ.

### **Can you give us an example of why separation of church and state is impossible?**

Yes. So here are two essential questions for us all to ponder.

When sitting in the church pew (back in the good ol' days before COVID), where is our civic self? It's right there with us. A sermon may spur us to consider the gospel in light of a pressing government-related current event.

Or vice versa; we read of a court ruling or a legislative enactment. It may cause us to recall our faith teaching to see if the action passes the "gospel litmus test." In other words, does the event uphold or detract from our faith-based moral code?

When we enter the voting booth, where is our faithful self? It is in there with us as we vote our religious and civic conscience together. We cannot separate these two parts of ourselves any more than Solomon himself could cut the baby in half and expect it to live. These parts of our daily life are indelibly entwined.

This reality has interfaith implications as well. None of us can separate ourselves from society and our respective faith traditions. The First Amendment offers

equal access to all faith traditions to participate in public life and its policy-making decisions--not to control the government, but to inform it as one of many voices.

That's especially important in southeast Michigan with a vast religious plurality represented here via Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Many Eastern faiths add to our diversity with Jains, Sikhs, Hindus, and Buddhists. And, we all have as a basic faith tenet that we must care for our neighbors.

### **Do you think we have public theologians in the Bible?**

Jesus constantly challenged the status quo from not only theological positions but also from very decidedly political ones. He challenged the Jewish theocratic institution of government, as well as the Roman Empire. He threw down the gauntlet repeatedly when witnessing a lack of care and compassion.

Moses serves as our public theologian as a role model for public theology even today. Speaking truth to the pharaoh about the unjust nature of slavery had an overtly public message. Its foundation came directly from the theological covenant between God and Abraham. The public cry of the people triggered God's saving action. That's our job: to catalyze God's action in the world through our advocacy and a shared cry alongside the marginalized to inspire mercy and inclusion.

What or who is the current "pharaoh" who hoards wealth and crushes the poor under its feet? Answer that question, and you have a blueprint for faith-based public mission whether at city hall or the halls of Congress.

### **What is lacking in our public messages?**

Fortunately, we've got two marvelous advocates preaching the gospel and using words if necessary: Presiding Bishop Michael B. Curry, Jr. and Bishop Diocesan Bonnie A. Perry. Many more progressive Christians advocate for an inclusive, loving, incarnational gospel message around the country.

However, let's face it, we are often either silent when the conservative corner of Christ's vast vineyard states a noninclusive gospel message. Even when we do respond collectively, we are on the reactive far more than when we are proactive. So, we need to frame our own issues.

Jesus said to Peter, "Feed my sheep?" What does that look like? I propose it encompasses nurturing others with food for sure, but as importantly, providing emotional, and spiritual support, shelter, in other words, practicing compassion.

Compassionate care is essential ministry and requires public discussion. Why don't people have enough to eat? Why do we need a Black Lives Matter movement? We cannot nurture the whole person if we do not address the root causes of hunger and systemic racism, homelessness, etc.

When we speak mostly from a reactive position, we lend credence to the arguments of those with whom we disagree, as if they are truly the sole authority. That. Must. End.

Part of the big problem is that mainline Christians are "too nice." We don't like delivering a bullying message of "Repent or believe or you're going to hell!" That's not our approach to theology, the study of God, nor should it be. Bullying and intimidating people as an evangelistic approach causes us to miss the whole point of the Trinity's relationship with us as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. The Trinity models community for us: inclusive, loving community.

I do not believe that we should be getting into arguments with more traditional sectors of Christianity. I defend their right to interpret scripture, however, we enjoy that same right. Let's direct this debate to the society-at-large in order to arrive at more just policies and laws that govern "we the people."

As Americans, and as Christians, we are uniquely blessed to have this opportunity, even though we have many, complex issues, and at present, many people are in survival mode. We have an opportunity to work for justice and shalom--peace and wholeness.

So if Jesus said, "Feed my lambs," to Peter, the rock of our church, what does that look like for us? It means not only do we talk about caring for and empowering the "least of these," it means we act publicly so that others will know we are Christians by our love. Love is the way through doing. Let's find missions that speak to us and stop worrying about what others think. Jesus didn't worry about that, and we even have the First Amendment to protect us!





Ledford Serving as poll chaplain in Detroit on Election Day, Nov 3, 2020 with Secretary of State, Jocelyn Benson

Let's frame our conversations about loving our neighbor proactively and how that might best be achieved by doing it in our given locality. We can have these conversations and public actions as individuals, congregations, as a diocese, as a province, and as the church universal. Yes, we can do this. Our acts can be small or big. It doesn't matter, as long as we work to usher in the reign of God.

### **Do you think there is “safety in numbers” by doing political theology with a group?**

Yes, I certainly do. For example, on November 17, 2020, I was scheduled to speak at the Wayne County Board of Canvassers (WCBOC) as it met to certify the election results prior to being forwarded to the Michigan State Board of Canvassers for certification on November 23, 2020.

As many of you know, the two Republicans on the bipartisan WCBOC voted initially not to certify the election by citing some out-of-balance precinct books in supermajority Black Detroit. Minor discrepancies are normal in poll books.

Plus, the Republican canvassers sought only to invalidate the Detroit vote despite the fact that Livonia, a predominantly white city, had similar discrepancies.

I won't expound on the machinations going on behind the scenes, but the first vote was clearly partisan as a means of negating Detroit's vote to move Michigan to the Republican party's “win” column. It was as brazen an act of racism as I have witnessed in a governmental proceeding during my entire legal career.

I'll never forget that night. Initially, I had that nauseous feeling in the pit of my stomach due to the sourness of same-old-same-old racism. Then we experienced boundless joy when justice prevailed in the voices of the people.

As people testified – attorneys and law students, people who had worked the polls for hours on end, clergy, and Wayne County voters – I saw democracy rise up. And there were no guns, no threats, no violence, only well-thought-out, impassioned oratory from citizens determined to protect every voter. Intelligent, air-tight arguments won the day by people who also believe in Madison's “Great American Experiment,” the belief that we the people have the right to self-govern.

In my mind's eye, the allegory of justice took to her feet, and while blindfolded, she became larger than life. Justice called for all voices to be counted, as she held out the balanced scales of justice and liberty. I couldn't help but think of Christ's mandate to love one another by recognizing all as having a voice, by acknowledging each as a child of God – and as such, we all count. It gives a striking new insight into Jesus's feeding of the 5,000. Each and every person counts in the reign of God.

### **So, how do people get involved as public advocates?**

Great question. Here are three things you can do to help make a difference.

Do an inventory of your strengths and things you care most about, and share this info with people whom you trust and with whom you can work. Identify an issue together and act on it publicly with faith.

Or, take this inventory to a larger group, like your congregation or other association. Your faith-based motivation can still be expressed via a non-faith-based entity. Watch the power of the people build with increasing voices.

### **What about community organizing? Are you a fan of this kind of public advocacy?**

Yes, and it has changed my life!

Join a community organizing group. I work with Michigan United in support of immigration reform; they work on numerous issues. Get trained on what community organizing is. We've had this kind of training in the diocese already and another one starts soon. learn more at **[www.edomi.org/CommunityOrganizing](http://www.edomi.org/CommunityOrganizing)**

Learn about how to harness public power via many voices for social change. For instance, hundreds of people attended the Wayne County (300+) and State Board of Canvassers meetings (800+) because Michigan United volunteers contacted us to attend and speak.

### **What's an action that people can take right away?**

You can start learning from the comfort of your own sofa, complete with dog, cat, beverage, or snack. We are developing new learning opportunities to help you find your role.

Call your congressional representatives and senators about passing a COVID stimulus package. Phone calls are the most effective, but emails and even texts are important.

Watch Phase I of Province V's "Basics of Faith-based Public Advocacy" mini-series from October. Learn about the numerous resources available through our own church's Office of Government Relations and Province V-Public Theology Network (PV-PTN).

Watch the recording from PV-PTN's "Advocate at Home for COVID Stimulus Relief Nuts and Bolts In-service" from December 8, 2020. Learn about how to contact elected reps and how to maximize the effectiveness of your correspondence. We'll cover phone banking too!

Register for training on how to meet with your legislator. You have the right to request a meeting even if you do not support the politician. "Power Meetings for Episcopalians" is scheduled for Thursday, January 7, 2021, 6-7:30pm.

Stay tuned for PV-PTN's Phase II in early 2021 by signing up for the Province V newsletter. We will delve more deeply into specific issues involving topics like eradicating gun violence, community-police relationship building, immigration reform, etc.

Sign up for my newsletter for more specific Michigan-related public theology work at Political Theology Matters, LLC.

Our efforts at political theology will make our common life better. So find ways to speak your faith publicly to all who would listen!

Walk in love as Christ loved us. Blessings on your journey.

**Thank you, Marcia!**

Learn more and get involved with The Rev. Dr. Marcia Ledford's work at **[www.politicaltheologymatters.com](http://www.politicaltheologymatters.com)**



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