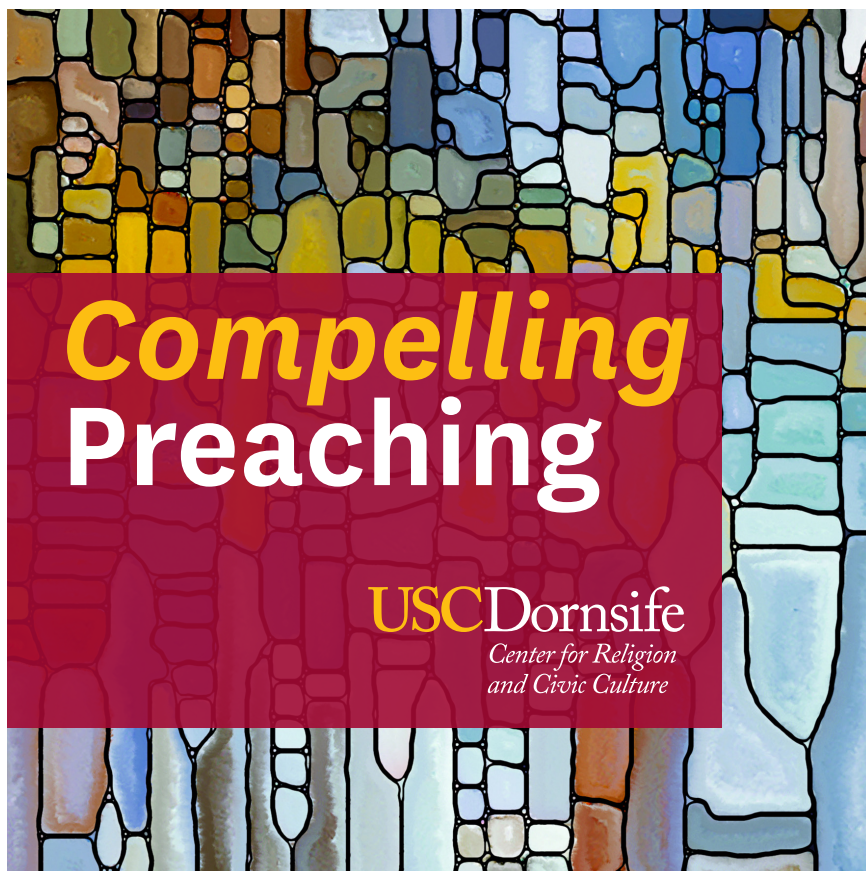


Cohort Members



The **Compelling Preaching Initiative** at the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture seeks to create space for faith leaders to think about their preaching in an ever-changing social and cultural landscape.

In CRCC's conversation with faith leaders, they have voiced concerns about how their sermons fit into a world characterized by declining religious participation and cultural and political polarization. They expressed a desire to figure out how to preach in a way that engages their members and connects with the rest of their ministries. CRCC sees preaching as one way faith leaders can bring their core values to bear on efforts to improve the communities that they serve.

The following pages include bios for members of a diverse cohort of Christian preachers in Southern California. The program for this cohort will focus on the advanced praxis of the art and craft of preaching, as well as training on how preachers can bring their message beyond the four walls of their congregations through media and OpEd writing. Discussions and programs allow participants to link theology to important issues that affect the lives of church members and their communities.

Each cohort member will have the opportunity to establish a working group of preachers interested in supporting one another.

Program information for cohort members can be found at crcc.usc.edu/compelling-preaching-cohort-program

The Compelling Preaching initiative is supported by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment.



Sithy Bin

*Faith-Rooted Organizer
CLUE Justice*

I am Sithy Bin, a former Cambodian refugee who found redemption and purpose through my faith in Jesus Christ. After making poor decisions growing up, I faced the consequences of those choices, one of which was incarceration. I emerged from that experience as a passionate servant-leader devoted to empowering others through ministry and community outreach. As a preacher and pastor, my mission is to creatively and authentically proclaim the Gospel in ways that transform lives. Drawing from my own journey of brokenness and renewal, I aim to communicate God's truth with clarity, compassion and conviction.

Beyond the pulpit, I co-founded the Made New Foundation to provide support and second chances for the reentry community. I also mentor at-risk youth and advocate for the rights of immigration detainees. My story is a testament to the power of God's restorative love. By His grace, I've gone from being an outcast to becoming a voice of hope, using my life to inspire positive change in this world.



Michael Christensen

*Academic Dean and Professor of Theology
Northwind Seminary*

Michael J. Christensen (M.A., Yale, Ph.D., Drew) is an historical theologian by training and a practical theologian by experience. For 22 years he was an academic administrator and professor in the practice of spirituality and ministry at Drew University (Madison, NJ). Currently, he is Visiting Professor of Spiritual Formation at Nazarene Theological Seminary (Kansas City) and Professor of Theology at Northwind Seminary (Sarasota, Florida). He has published 11 books, including: *C. S. Lewis on Scripture*, *City Streets*, *City People*, *The Samaritan's Imperative*, *Equipping the Saints*, *Partakers of the Divine Nature*; *The Heart of Henri Nouwen*, and the *Nouwen Trilogy*: *Spiritual Direction*, *Spiritual Formation*, and *Discernment* by Henri J. M. Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird.

Dr. Christensen has led local congregations in New York, San Francisco, Berkeley and San Diego. He has trained hundreds of local pastors and community leaders in Africa and the USA in Asset Based Community Development as a compelling form of faith-based community ministry.



Maureen Day

*Research Affiliate
University of Southern California*

Maureen Day (Ph.D., Graduate Theological Union) is a Research Affiliate at the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture as well as the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at USC. She is an award-winning author and her books and articles can be found in both Catholic and academic publications, including *Catholicism at a Crossroads* (NYU Press 2025), *Cultural Catholics* (Liturgical Press 2024), *Catholic Activism Today* (NYU Press 2020) and *Young Adult American Catholics* (Paulist Press 2018). She has taught in a variety of contexts, including most recently as tenured faculty at a seminary and theologate. As a sociologist with training in theology, her teaching and research have included areas such as religion in American civic life, Catholic campus ministry, young adults, family, stewardship, and clergy well-being and support.



Lee Finnie

*Lead Pastor
The Junction*

I'm am a conduit of the future church that's called to cultivate that future now... with an apostolic mandate to develop the fivefold gifts into full manifestation of the charismatic creative!!!



Franklin Garcia

*Adjunct Professor – Pastor
Talbot School of Theology*

Franklin Garcia is Professor of Hermeneutics and Homiletics at the Talbot School of Theology, Talbot Spanish Department, Biola University. Professor Garcia is also a bilingual pastor in Fullerton, California. He was born in Lima, Peru, and was brought at an early age to California, U.S.A. After high school, he completed a diploma in pastoral ministry and a master's in biblical studies and languages. His desire to continue learning led him to obtain another master's in biblical studies from the Central American Theological Seminary. He is currently completing his Doctor of Ministry thesis and is in his second year of his Ph.D. in Educational Studies at Biola University's Talbot School of Theology. Franklin Garcia is an active member of the community and has extensive work in the Fullerton school district and schools, where he advocates and works with underprivileged families.



Jonathan Hall

*Senior Pastor
First Christian Church of North Hollywood*

Jonathan Hall is the Senior Pastor at First Christian Church of North Hollywood. He is married with two boys. He recently wrote a book on fatherhood entitled *Dear Son*. In his free time, Jonathan enjoys camping with his family, racing in Ironman triathlons, cheering for his Auburn Tigers, and any sport that involves a racket, especially racquetball and pickleball.



Uleses Henderson

*Bishop
Emmanuel Church of God in Christ*

Bishop Uleses C. Henderson, Jr. is the Senior Pastor of Emmanuel Church of God in Christ, in Los Angeles, California. Bishop Henderson is an intellectual property attorney and partner at One LLP, a law firm that specializes in intellectual property, entertainment, and sports. In addition to his law practice, he serves as Chairman of the Church of God In Christ Publishing Board, Team Chaplain for the Los Angeles Lakers, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Union Rescue Mission.

A former NASA rocket scientist and National Science Foundation Fellow, Bishop Henderson received his Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering from Purdue University and his Master of Science in Aerospace Engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology. He worked for the Aerospace Corporation and TRW Space & Technology as a spacecraft propulsion and design engineer. While working at TRW, Bishop Henderson furthered his education at Loyola Law School (Los Angeles), where he served as Executive Editor of the Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review.



Wayne Hopkins

*Pastor
First Timothy Missionary Baptist Church*

Dr. Wayne C. Hopkins is an innovative open-minded leader with a heart for service and a gift for inspiring others. Known as a "multi-platform professional," he blends his pastoral calling with professional expertise gained from 20+ years in the corporate, entertainment, higher education and non-profit industries. Wayne, aka "DocHop," is passionate about bringing people together, forging partnerships and achieving higher understanding for the greater good.



David Kim
Senior Pastor
The Garden Church

David Kim is the lead pastor of the Garden Church in Chatsworth, CA. He planted the church with his wife Sharon in 1995. He is a poet and author of the books *Poems in the Night* and *Greater Things*.



Mike Kinman
Rector
All Saints Church

Mike Kinman (he/him) is a follower of Jesus, spouse, parent, Episcopal priest, and the Tenth Rector of All Saints Church, Pasadena. He was previously the dean of Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis (2009-2016), where he was active in the new civil rights movement that was ignited in 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri. He has a Bachelor of Journalism degree from the University of Missouri-Columbia and a Master's of Divinity from Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. He served as the founding Executive Director of Episcopalians for Global Reconciliation, a nonprofit that worked to eradicate global poverty, and was the founding campus missionary of Rockwell House, the Episcopal Campus Ministry at Washington University in St. Louis. He also serves on the Global Advisory Council of Thistle Farms. Mike had a previous brief career as a sportswriter and loves major league baseball and college basketball. He loves listening to U2 and the blues, is a voracious reader and loves everything Aaron Sorkin has ever written. Mike's family includes his wife, Robin, and their two sons, Schroedter and Hayden, who together are the loves of his life.



Rebecca Laird
Interim Dean and Professor
Point Loma Nazarene University

Rebecca Laird is the Interim Dean and Professor of Christian Ministry and Practice at Point Loma Nazarene University. She earned a DMin in Worship, Spirituality & Preaching from The Theological School, Drew University where also served as Director of Pastoral Formation. She is the author of *Ordained Women in the Church of the Nazarene: The First Generation*, and *No Hiding Place: Empowerment and Recovery for our Troubled Communities* with Cecil Williams and a trilogy of books on the works of Henri Nouwen.



Mandy McDow
Senior Minister
Los Angeles First United Methodist Church

Mandy is the Pastor of Los Angeles First United Methodist Church, which has a long, rich and wonderful history. They do not, however, currently have a building, but they do have land — a surface parking lot in the middle of downtown LA. Mandy preaches under tents in this lot each week, and has learned an awful lot about proclaiming the Good News as loudly as possible. Mandy holds a black belt in Taekwondo, makes music whenever possible, enjoys cooking (but loathes making dinner) and knits to sit still. Mandy is the deeply proud mother of Jackson, Cooper and Sloan, and three impossibly small dogs named Posey, Daisy and Duke. Together, they watch a lot of baseball.



Clarissa Joan Middleton

*Founder, Chief Creative Officer and Teaching Pastor
The Being Academy*

Clarissa Joan Middleton is an interactive media designer and the Founder and Chief Creative Officer of The Being Academy, a faith-based media technology company extending the impact of faith into the everyday life experiences of the believer. As a follower of Jesus Christ, an artist and a business woman, Clarissa's mission is to build a better future at the intersections of spirituality, media technology and social enterprise. She envisions a church that expands the capacity of the faithful to commune with God daily and experience life on Earth as it is in Heaven.



Le'Tasha Morrison

*Associate Minister
New Mt. Calvary Baptist Church*

Rev. Le'Tasha Morrison lives by the lyrics, "If I can help somebody as I pass along then my living will not be in vain."

After accepting the call to the preaching ministry, Rev. Morrison, adhering to the wisdom of Pastor Sonja R. Dawson, began her formal education for ministry preparation. In 2019, Rev. Morrison graduated from Azusa Pacific Seminary with a Master of Divinity and is currently pursuing a Doctor of Ministry from Fuller Theological Seminary. Throughout this process, Rev. Morrison has continued to faithfully serve at New Mt. Calvary Baptist Church on the ministerial staff, on the Intercessory Prayer Team and in the Sunday School Department. Rev. Morrison attributes much of her growth in ministry to the support, encouragement and push of Pastor Dawson.

When it is all said and done, Rev. Morrison's desire and goal is to hear God say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."



Cedric Nelms

*Pastor
Chosen Generation Fellowship Church*

Cedric Nelms was born and raised in Los Angeles, CA. He attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, GA. He has an MA in Justice and Advocacy from Fuller Theological Seminary. He is an alumni of the Devos Urban Leadership Institute (DVULI). He is currently working on his Doctorate of Ministry at Fuller as well.

Cedric has been in the ministry for 20+ years and has been working in different areas of ministry, from youth ministry, men's ministry, teaching, community development, leadership principles, social justice and civic engagement. He is the Senior Pastor of Chosen Generation Fellowship Church, in Long Beach. He is also the author of *Get Me Through...The Make-over of My Life*. In addition to that, he works in the area of organizing and advocacy in the nonprofit arena, where he is actively working on being a bridge builder between Los Angeles county communities, community based organizations and the faith based community.

Cedric has been married to Karen for 25+ years. They have 5 beautiful children.



Oscar Owens, Jr.

*Dr. / Director of Christian Education
West Angeles Church of God in Christ*

The Reverend (Elder) Doctor Oscar O. Owens, Jr. has served since 1992 as the Director of Christian Education and the President of the West Angeles Bible College, for the West Angeles Church of God in Christ. Previously, he worked concurrently as an Elementary School Teacher for LAUSD and the Youth Pastor for the Second Baptist Church. Dr. Owens is an adjunct professor for both the Azusa Pacific University Seminary and the Vanguard University Seminary. He earned a B.A. in English Literature at UCLA, a Master of Divinity degree from the Union Theological Seminary, of New York City; a Multiple Subject Teaching Credential from Cal State Los Angeles; and a Doctor of Ministry degree from the Azusa Pacific University. Dr. Owens deeply loves his gifted wife, Mrs. Lita Gaithers Owens. She is one of the authors of a 1999 Tony Award-nominated Broadway musical. One of the favorite goals of the Rev. Dr. Owens is to help God's people grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ!



Rev. Dr. Grace Park

*Associate Pastor
PCUSA*

The Reverend Dr. Grace Park was ordained in the PCUSA in 1996, and has served as a children's pastor, youth pastor and associate pastor. She works as a hospice chaplain with Apguard Hospice, serving those who are making their transition from life to death. She also serves at Cedars Sinai Medical Center each week as a chaplain intern in their Clinical Pastoral Education program. Recently, she sat on the Board of New Theological Seminary of the West and served on the Leadership Council of Angel Interfaith Network. She is also a member of the National Charity League. She graduated from the University of California, Berkeley with a degree in Political Economics, and from Fuller Theological Seminary with a Masters of Divinity. She holds a doctorate of ministry from New York Theological Seminary. Grace enjoys water sports, travel, yoga, is an avid reader, a fond patron of the arts and a devout foodie. She has been married for 30 years to Charles, a physician, and they are the proud parents of four adult children: Elijah, Hannah, Joshua and Jubilee, as well as three rambunctious dogs.



Tyrone Phillips

*Pastor
Because We Believe Ministries*

My name is Pastor Tyrone Phillips and I was raised in Los Angeles, California and grew up in the South Central Los Angeles area. I attended Whittier College in the City of Whittier, California where I earned a Bachelors of Arts degree in Business Administration. Later I received a diploma in Discipleship Training from the Church Leadership Training Institute in Gardena, Ca. The Bible says that Jesus is the head of the Church (Colossians 1:18), and it is He Himself who chooses who should enter full-time ministry (Ephesians 4:10-11). My called to ministry is manifested through the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) that are visible to others and I am willing to sacrifice myself to carry out God's will and purpose. I believe not only am I transparent, but also authentic, passionate and purposeful in my approach to sharing the transforming Gospel of Jesus Christ. Pastor Ty has been married to Sis. Lotresa Phillips since September 18, 1999.



Seth Pickens

*Spiritual Director/Senior Minister
Guidance Church*

Rev. Seth Pickens, EdD, MDiv is the Spiritual Director and Senior Minister at Guidance Church of Los Angeles. An engaging and enlightening preacher/teacher, he has also served as a researcher with the Economic Roundtable, the Rand Corporation and Genentech. As a Project Director with the Economic Roundtable, he launched, led and landed a homelessness prevention pilot dubbed The Realization Project, and is principal author of the report, "The Work Behind Work: Combatting Homelessness with Jobs."



Tommy Pickens

*Pastor
Antelope valley Christian Center*

I love people and have patience in my love for people. I am very ambitious and don't like mediocrity. I love to inspire people to accomplish more than they may believe they can before meeting them. I have learned to be real with myself and others opposed to faking for putting on a mask to hide my hurts, pains and fears. I don't know what quit means and look to find a way to win in what I am doing. I love comfortable environments and want to foster harmony among every human being. I love traveling and entering new environments and I sometimes have a tough time letting go of seasons in life and things within them. I love my kids and make the mistake of thinking that everyone has solid motives like myself so I have been easily manipulated. I enjoy working hard to be the best or one of the best in life at whatever I am doing.



Kelvin Sauls
Chief Catalyst
Sauls Strategic Solutions

Kelvin Sauls is a faith-rooted community organizer in the areas of racial justice and racial equity in South Los Angeles and South Africa. He served in pastoral and executive leadership positions in the United Methodist for more than 30 years, including as senior pastor of Holman United Methodist Church from 2012-2018.

Born and raised in the townships south of Johannesburg, South Africa, he was a youth leader in the anti-apartheid movement through his local Methodist Youth Fellowship. He received the Bishop's Leadership Scholarship to study in the United States, where he served African American and Black immigrant congregations in Virginia, Ohio and California. He also has co-founded or served as a member/director of several organizations, including Clergy for Black Lives, the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, Sanctuary of Hope, Priority Africa Network, Interfaith Foundation for Community Organizing/Pastors for Peace.



Barry Settle
Senior Pastor
Ward AME Church

Rev. Barry Settle, D.Min., currently serves as Pastor of Ward African Methodist Episcopal Church, Los Angeles; appointed in 2022 by Bishop Clement W. Fugh. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Economics from California State University Los Angeles, a Master of Divinity from Central Baptist Theological Seminary, and a Doctor of Ministry from United Theological Seminary. He is the husband of Rev. Rochelle Settle and father of Jeremiah, Zachary and Madison.



Michelle Shoemaker
Staff Chaplain
Sharp Grossmont Hospital

Michelle Shoemaker is currently a staff Chaplain for Sharp Hospitals in San Diego. In 2013, after working for 30 years as a graphic designer and design professor, she joined Point Loma Nazarene University's Center for Justice & Reconciliation as Director of San Diego Churches Against Trafficking. Alongside this work, she also volunteered with Generate Hope San Diego in mentoring survivors of human trafficking, becoming familiar with trauma-informed, one-on-one ministry. This set off a life-changing journey of entering Seminary and going through the 4-unit Clinical Pastoral Educational process needed to become a Chaplain. She completed her M.Div. at Fuller Theological Seminary in the Winter of 2024, and is a guest preacher in San Diego.



Patricia Strong-Fargas
Senior Pastor
Mt. Salem-New Wave Christian Church

Rev. Patricia Strong-Fargas graduated from California State University, Dominguez Hills with a bachelor's degree in psychology. She earned a Master of Divinity degree from Bible Believers Seminary. She is the mother of two beautiful daughters (Nikki and Kristin) and four energetic grandchildren (Amber, Nikholas, Skyler and Brooklyn). She was the First Lady of the late Dr. J. P. Strong at New Providence Baptist Church. After being ordained at Holy Chapel MBC, Rev. Strong-Fargas founded New Wave Christian Fellowship Church, which later merged with Mt. Salem Baptist Church. Her community efforts include serving as an LAPD and sheriff clergy, vice president of Baptist Minister Conference of Southern California, co-chair of Faith for Safer Streets, and a member of numerous other groups. After the tragic death of her daughter Kristin in 2002, she organized a non-profit organization called Mothers Against Hazing and has called for an end to hazing on national and local television programs, in documentaries and on campuses. But most of all, Pastor Patricia Strong-Fargas loves to share and spread the word of God to everyone that she meets.



Ronald Thomas

*Pastor
Road 2 Damascus Church*

I was born and raised in the city of Los Angeles. I am a graduate of the USC Marshall School of Business and a former attendee of Fuller Theological Seminary. I am married with 3 adult children and 4 grandchildren. I believe that the gospel should be preached to all people and the LOVE of Christ means that we should follow His Word in its entirety, not just the items that support our points of view.



Precious Williams

*Minister
Center of Hope Church*

Precious Shalom Williams is a preacher and theologian. She earned her Bachelor degree at Howard University. Understanding her call to preach, she attended Duke University and received a Master of Divinity. While doing full-time ministry at West Angeles COGIC, Precious received inaugural online certificate in "Theology and Ministry" from Princeton Theological Seminary. After preaching and ministering for 17 years, Precious accepted a call to higher education. She is currently a Homiletics PhD student at Anderson University, where she is expanding her knowledge of preaching.

She is a full-time accountant, Spiritual Formation group leader at Fuller Theological Seminary, and a digital preacher. While her gift and calling has allowed her to minister to many denominations, organizations and institutions across America, she most enjoys ministry in social and multi-media spaces. The joys of her life is being wife to her loving husband, Jairus and mother to their two children, Essence and Jair.



Eric (E. M.) Williams

*Pastor
St. Luke Holy Baptist Church*

My ministry preparation includes an unusually focused Christian upbringing. My father and pastor of over forty years, Dr. R. C. Williams Sr., and nurturing Christian mother, Alma Williams, provided an ideal environment for honoring God with and for the gift of children. He shares his calling into the ministry along with seven of eight other siblings.

I announced my calling into the ministry in the local newspaper at age seven; however, it was not until age twenty-seven that I finally accepted the call. At that time, I fully submitted myself to the hands of God in preparing me for ministry. My formal preparations include attending San Diego State University, earning and receiving two undergraduate degrees from the former Linda Vista Bible College & Seminary (Southern California Seminary) and Christian Heritage College, Masters of Divinity degree from Bethel Theological Seminary, entering my Doctoral Ministry at Bethel University and completion of Doctoral Ministry at degree from Faith Seminary.



Jermaine Willis

*Elder Elect
Antioch Missionary Baptist Church*

I am a divorcee that is a father to two beautiful young ladies. I am the youngest of 14 and I have 40 nieces and nephews. Also, I am a great uncle to 50 great nieces and nephew.



Aizaiah Yong

Rev. Dr. Professor

*Claremont School of Theology + Pacific
Southwest Region CC(DOC)*

Aizaiah G. Yong (he/him) is an ordained Pentecostal Christian minister, public theologian and healing companion who has served in religious and higher education leadership for over 15 years devoting his energy to change work in solidarity with QTBIPOC communities. He can be found engaging and embracing intercultural and interreligious communities, facilitating spiritual retreats, and working collaboratively with others at the intersections of spiritual, cultural and relational transformation.

**Center for Religion
and Civic Culture**

The USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture advances the understanding of religion and society, and supports faith and community leaders in becoming full partners in the work of positive social change.

Our core work is in two related areas: We conduct empirical research on religious, cultural and social change in the US and globally; and we make this knowledge applicable and available through media, reports, public events, and training and mentoring programs.

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