



PHOTOS BY CHRIS VLEISIDES

## A Conversation with Tex Sample and Emilie Townes

*Tex Sample and Emilie Townes are colleagues and friends. Alive Now interviewed them at Saint Paul School of Theology, Kansas City, Missouri, where they both serve on the faculty. Tex Sample is a United Methodist clergy person, a storyteller, lecturer, and teacher of church and society. He is a specialist in the area of blue-collar and poor people. Emilie Townes, an American Baptist clergy person, teaches Christian ethics and is a powerful speaker and writer. Her latest writings are in the area of womanist spirituality and its grounding in African-American faith and life.*

*Why should we interact with people who are different from us?*

**TEX SAMPLE:** The church was born at Pentecost. Pentecost is not only testimony about the character of the church and its birth. It is a foretaste of the nature of the commonwealth of God. To opt out of diversity is to be unfaithful to Pentecost and insensitive to the destiny of the church in the world.

**EMILIE TOWNES:** When you look at Jesus' life, he didn't go out and call a bunch of carpenters. He called people who were very different than he was. He was continually meeting with folks who weren't like him and introducing them to others. We ought to do the same if we are truly living out our discipleship.

*Does the recent rise in hate crimes point to a loss of ability to deal with diversity?*

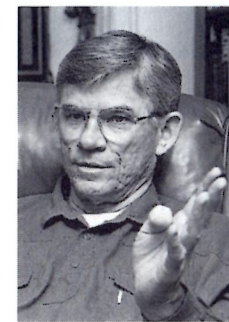
**TOWNES:** I think the rise in hate crimes speaks a lot more to people's fear about changes in soci-

ety. When we get scared, we try to control things, which immediately makes us look to see who has more power. When you've got those dynamics going, people look for scapegoats.

*At the same time as the rise in hate crimes, people are talking a lot more about diversity. Do you see that having an effect on society?*

**SAMPLE:** We need to be careful about a kind of hip multiculturalism in which it is very easy for people like me, who went to university, to find friends that are really an enclave, although of different racial-ethnic groups. I was in northeastern Alabama recently and for the first time went to a serpent-handling church. The pastor grabbed a four-foot rattlesnake out of a box and shook him, but the

snake never struck him. I sat there asking myself if it was even possible for me to get into that world. It's crucial that differ-



**T**O OPT OUT OF DIVERSITY IS TO BE UNFAITHFUL TO PENTECOST.



ence does not become opposite. If I see someone who's different as really the opposite of me, then my categories are still in control and I'm not paying attention to the question of difference. The only hope I have of really meeting those people is if I stop trying to put them in a framework that is not theirs. I think that's really difficult.

**TOWNES:** There's a lot of talk about diversity, but I don't think we have ever really prepared ourselves for dealing with how diverse diversity is. Diversity may be a catch word for wanting to get everybody in, but my question is, "What will you do

with us once you get us in?" When diversity starts to get lived out, however well or poorly, folk in the church begin to see how demanding it is. Diversity costs. It costs spiritually, it costs

emotionally, it costs economically. And everyone has to deal with it. Not just a few. I don't see us there. Many of us want to be, but I don't see the groundswell.



*Are there ways to get us there?*

**TOWNES:** I would argue for every one of us to live into our ministry. People are called in such a vast variety of ways, but it might be good to start with prayer and fasting and a time of discernment for the church. I strongly believe in the power of prayer, and I don't see many churches as praying churches.

**D**IVERSITY COSTS. IT COSTS SPIRITUALLY, IT COSTS EMOTIONALLY, IT COSTS ECONOMICALLY. AND EVERYONE HAS TO DEAL WITH IT.

*It's been said that 11 o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. Are there ways to overcome that? What would be gained? Would anything be lost?*

**SAMPLE:** No question that segregation is just wrong. The issue is how to celebrate the traditions of different groups. How it can happen is another matter. White folks have got to quit expecting that people need to do it like us. We liberals want everyone to join a kind of liberal white banquet. I don't know how we'd do with folks who wanted to come in and lift up serpents.

We must claim the unity of Pentecost, develop intrinsic relationships on the one hand, and then be respectful of diverse traditions on the other. I think that's the crunch: to appreciate diverse traditions, to be one people in Christ, and to make sure segregation is out.

**TOWNES:** I spent fifteen years in white churches, and I had to get back to the black church because I was dying spiritually. What was missing for me was a conscious and tangible participation of a congregation with the pastor and the choir. I don't think that's peculiar only to black churches, but that's where I find it most often.

It's up to us to be clear how

we go into the diversity of worship. Are we going as pilgrims in search of another community to pitch tents with? Or are we going as tourists where we can catch the next jet out and do a lot of damage while we're there 'messing up the local community? I'm not arguing for segregation. I think I'm arguing for what Tex said, respecting other worship traditions in the life of the church and creating churches that welcome folks into that variety. To think there's only one way to worship God is the height of human arrogance. It's like trying to create the worship of God in my image. I think God comes to us in a variety of ways.

*What role does worship play in dealing with diversity?*

**TOWNES:** A way to greater faithfulness. That's what worship is all about. It's to help us be more faithful than we were before we got to that worship moment. It doesn't have to be a big, cataclysmic change, but just help us be a little more faithful, a little more caring and



loving and willing to do justice.

*Were there people in your life who influenced your ability to relate to others who were different from you?*

**TOWNES:** My grandmother was a domestic in white people's homes. She didn't get past the eighth grade and raised five children single-handedly. I marveled at my grandmother: If anybody had a right to be ticked off at white folks, it was she. She consistently said that you have to love everybody; that God is not a God of hate; and when people do wrong to you, you try to figure out what is wrong with them. You move on, but you can't hold malice in your heart. She was clear that she got this from her faith in God. From this I learned that faith is not an easy thing. It's hard work. It is something you practice on a daily basis.

My parents were aware of injustices. They both were testaments to perseverance. My dad was a staunch United Methodist all his life. I watched him get beat up by the church from time to time around being a layperson

and being black, but he just could not give up on the church. He absolutely refused to believe that that was the best that could be done in the life of the church.

*Tex, did anybody influence you in relating to others different from you?*

**SAMPLE:** I don't mind talking about that as long as it's established that I don't consider myself good at that [relating to others who are different]. For a period of seven or eight years, there was a black woman who was a domestic at our house who helped raise me. Her name was Fannie Rogers, which is the same name as my grandmother's. I really believed that Fannie Rogers loved me, but I was always aware that she could never be altogether open. She could not afford to say some things. When I was 10, I would ride my bicycle home for lunch. When I was there by myself, I would ask her to come to eat with me. At the time I didn't realize the gravity of it. Eventually I figured out why she didn't want to.

At the First Methodist Church in Brookhaven, Mississippi, there was a woman named Miss Hattie Buie. She had been a missionary in Korea for 30 years and retired in Mississippi in the late 1940s. She taught Sunday school. We also had a Sunday school teacher who was actively racist. He took the scripture and used it to argue for the supremacy of white folks. Miss Hattie Buie didn't believe in high, visible confrontation. She just taught us a lot of truth. She taught us songs in Korean and would take us to her house to show us craft-work from Korea.

*Let's turn now to your friendship. How did you two get to know each other?*

**TOWNES:** We met as speakers at a conference of the Reconciling Congregation Program.

**SAMPLE:** She wouldn't even smile at me. At that point, I didn't know she was shy. I just thought she couldn't stand me. I taught a summer intensive at

Garrett when Emilie was there, and then when we were looking for a Christian ethicist, we brought Emilie down here, and I was so compelling she just couldn't resist.

We've team taught together. We hang out a little. We play golf together.

The truth of the matter is, I just happen to like her. I didn't go out to like her because she was different. Is that true, Emilie?

**TOWNES:** Yeah, I think we genuinely like each other.

*Are there similarities between you that surprised you? Or differences?*

**TOWNES:** If I'm in a situation



**I**F I SEE SOMEONE WHO'S DIFFERENT AS REALLY THE OPPOSITE OF ME, THEN MY CATEGORIES ARE STILL IN CONTROL.



where someone is blowing a lot of hot air, I'm more likely to call him or her on it. There are sometimes when I get to a point where I just disagree and will not back down. Tex tends to be more tempered.

**SAMPLE:** But when I get on my last nerve, I get really loud. I try not to get that far in public.

We have a lot to talk about. Our disciplines overlap. Emilie is very interested in social thought, which is my discipline. And I'm very interested in ethics, which is her discipline. She's an ex-athlete, and I'm an ex-ex-athlete. She played basketball. I played baseball.

*Are there ways that your relationship has clarified your thinking about diversity?*

**SAMPLE:** I think Emilie has helped me because of her interest in

womanist thought. That's probably pushed me to read more in that area than otherwise. And I would have missed something because that literature is very rich. But I wouldn't want to

reduce it only to that.

**TOWNES:** When I first began teaching here, Tex gave me an example of what I wanted to look like in the classroom as a teacher — someone who knew his discipline and who was so comfortable with it that rather than having to stick to a script, he could turn stuff loose and encourage students to get excited about it. His willingness to share and to be a

real colleague have been real gifts for me. I know more about white working people than I ever would have known otherwise, and I am able to see the similarities with black working folk.



TO THINK THERE'S  
ONLY ONE WAY  
TO WORSHIP GOD  
IS THE HEIGHT  
OF HUMAN  
ARROGANCE.

There's a crucial bridge that needs to be built between them, because they have a lot more in common than they've been led to believe.

*Both of you have spoken out about issues of justice, equality, and diversity. What are key elements of trying to work to get along as a global people?*

**TOWNES:** Well, if you're a Christian and you say you follow Jesus, then you better act like it.

**SAMPLE:** Related to that is liking a concrete person. I get suspicious of loving groups, like Native Americans, in general but not loving anybody in particular. Concrete, living folks are so much more interesting than our categories.

I don't want Emilie as my friend because I need a black woman friend.

**TOWNES:** But you better have a black woman friend.

**SAMPLE:** That's true. I agree. I think folks need to be related to people who are different than them, but they need to like them too. Am I saying that plain?

**TOWNES:** Pretty much so. <=>

*Read the story of Pentecost in Acts 2. Reflect on what the story has to say about these questions:*

- <=> *What are the blessings of differences?*
- <=> *What are the costs?*
- <=> *Can we allow people to be different without expecting them to be like us?*
- <=> *Can people be different without being opposite?*

*After exploring how Acts 2 addresses these questions, you may want to reflect on these questions based on your own experiences.*

**SUGGESTED  
SCRIPTURE  
READINGS:**

- Psalms 150
- Matthew 25:31-40
- Luke 5:1-11
- Acts 2