

James Anderson Ross

My name is James Anderson Ross. I live in Palm Desert, California. I've been living here for almost three years. I grew up in South Central, Los Angeles for most of my life. I lived for a year in Jackson, Mississippi. Went to junior high, graduated high school, community college in Los Angeles, as well LA Southwest College, Bible college and seminary. It wasn't until 2001 that I moved away. By then I was married and had five children. We lived in Moreno Valley for several years, then Atlanta, Georgia for three years while I was doing my doctoral studies. I was called back to pastor a church in 2012 and have been back in Los Angeles area since then.

My first encounter with the N-word in a racial context happened when I was around six, because I was bused to a different school in Santa Monica. There were a lot of African-American kids being bused back then as part of the magnet program. I was called an N-word by fellow students. My first encounter with violence, especially in a racial context, was maybe seven years old. We lived on Van Ness and 54th street, then part of the Crenshaw district. My grandmother still lives on 48th and Van Ness, for almost fifty years now. I don't know if you remember the Green Machine Big Wheel. We had those and were riding around the neighborhood. There was an alley on the backside of our apartment building, and two police officers pulled up in their cruiser and made us put our hands on the hood while their guns were drawn.

At that time, my parents gave me strict instructions on how to engage with law enforcement should it ever happen again. They taught me was to always say, "Yes, sir. Yes, officer," and comply with everything they tell you to do, make no sudden moves, and if possible, always carry identification, especially as I got older. My dad used to drill that in us: *Never, ever, ever, ever leave home without identification.* As I grew up in Los Angeles, I began to see aggressive behavior, particularly directed toward people in my community, people of color that I knew, by law enforcement.

I've had the talk with all of my children. They're young adults from 27 to 19. I've had to talk with children in the churches that I pastor. It's a necessary conversation for survival for people of color in America. That's a sad commentary, but it's the truth. And we continue to have such talks.

Before I continue, let me say that I have a very, very close relative that is law enforcement. It's important for people to know that I'm not anti-law enforcement; I believe that law enforcement is necessary. However, with the systemic forms of racism in America, we need certain kinds of law enforcement officers. We don't want the protectors to be confused with the killers, or the abusers.

My first real encounter with racial violence coming from authority figures was when I was about 13. Some of my cousins were going to the Huntington Park area on the east side of Los Angeles. It's where we would go to buy school clothes. We'd shop either downtown Huntington Park or go to Fox Hills mall. We

got off the bus and were making our way to a clothing shop. The LAPD pulled us over, right on the border between the city of Vernon and Los Angeles. Not only did they call us the N-word, they made us sit on the curb, slapped us upside the head, asked us what gang we were from, and attempted to take the money that we had. I believe that we were going to be abused even more, but they got another call and scurried away. Instead of buying clothes that day, we walked back home, dejected, and didn't know what to do with that experience.

I've had countless experiences with law enforcement in that same context. One time I was on my way home from basketball practice. I went to Thomas Jefferson High School, but lived near Watts and had a car. I literally got stopped by law enforcement *five times* before I reached home. That's like a 10-minute drive, straight down Hooper. Simply because I was being profiled. Sad to say, that kind of experience became normal. To this day, there's a bit of anxiety being pulled over by law enforcement because of the over-racialized experience, the unnecessary hostility, simply because of the way I look. Of course, I don't get pulled over as much as I did when I was a younger man.

There was an older man that challenged me when I was growing up and said, "Hey, yes, they're going to pull you over. You may have to change some things about how you present yourself to try to minimize it. Don't wear certain things, don't go certain places, don't drive certain kinds of vehicles..." As a human being and American citizen, I should be able to wear what I want to wear and drive what I want to drive. But because they are dangerous encounters that could end your life, you to make some adjustments.

Most the racial violence in my personal experience came from law enforcement, unfortunately. I knew some great law enforcement officers as well. There were some who participated in the rec basketball league who were great officers, great human beings. I know in the eyes of especially young, innocent children, they look at law enforcement as heroic, and they should. But if anybody wants to look at how racial violence and abuse operates, how overstepping of authority should be addressed, just talk to the average Black or Brown person in America. They could tell you their experiences. I've seen a lot of things worse than mine. As a pastor for over 20 years, I've heard countless stories.

We have to bring our experience to our children and the people of color that we're connected to, to make sure that they look at law enforcement with sober eyes, because the racial tension that's so prevalent in America tends to find its place in those encounters with law enforcement. It tends to erupt there.

The other times that I've experienced racial violence (is) at the hands of other young people, when it was a violent confrontation. But the bulk of my experiences of racism have been at the hands of law enforcement, in California and anywhere else I've lived. I've always had a negative racial experience in that context.

One of the things I'd like to encourage anybody, especially young people of color, is to know the law. Find out what the law says about being stopped by law enforcement, what they can and cannot do. Let them know that your intention is not to be a threat, but to be a law-abiding citizen. But always know, there's a little caveat as a person of color, and particularly, Black males. If I was a white guy, and I begin to interrogate an officer, nine times out of 10, he's going to answer my questions. But if I interrogate an officer as a Black man, it might escalate the situation. Also be aware, attentive...look at their badge, memorize their name, try to memorize numbers on their badge. If an incident occurs to where you're abused, find out how to go about documenting it and reporting it so that there can be some type of punitive action, so that we can at least minimize these kinds of things. Because too many people are losing their lives for what they call traffic stops.

Make sure you comply, even if they're breaking the law themselves, you comply. Because my mom used to say, *two wrongs, don't make a right*. I know that's a hard pill for us to swallow because the question is, *who's going to enforce the law when they break the law?* That is a question for policy makers.

Sometimes it's difficult because, in that context, fear will take over. I have been in that context so many times. Although I was afraid, again, it became a normal situation—abnormal, but normal.

I would say, if it's within your reach, be involved in your community and the politics of your community. Go to the city council meeting, get to know the police captain at the station, make yourself embedded in your community so that you can be a part of the solution and not the problem. Politics is about the people, not just about the leaders that we vote to represent us. We should be involved and hold our policymakers and lawmakers and those in leadership accountable. We can't if we're just standing on the sidelines. My advice would be get involved at whatever level life allows you to be. And also, celebrate those people who are representing law enforcement like they should be, because we got enough bad apples in the barrel. When you find some good ones, celebrate them and build a relationship.

One of the things policy makers can do is to make sure that the policies that govern law enforcement officers allow retribution that fits the abuse, instead of just a slap on the hand, or sending them to another department or state and allowing them to go on being bad law enforcement officers. Put in a policy that capable of retributive action when they're found guilty. Don't allow the policy to get bogged down with bureaucracy; allow it to be streamlined. I'm a clergy man, so I know how a bureaucracy can stop things from being corrected.

Under my leadership, if there are some accusations of abuse, we have a system set up where we can investigate, interrogate, and then take retributive action immediately without a whole lot of bureaucracy. If the church can do it, the police department can do it, the state can do it. There need to be men and women of integrity that will enforce those policies.

Another thing is to change the way that police officers are trained in terms of engaging people. Oftentimes, they don't deescalate. But they're the professionals; if anyone should be able to deescalate a situation, it should be them. There also need to be safeguards or assessment in the recruitment process, to recruit the kind of people who are going to treat everybody as the law demands that they be treated. Changes in those areas will be a step in the right direction.

The best thing we can do to get a started is to change what's on paper, what's black and white, and then we can begin to change our mindsets and the culture. When it's a part of the system, it's not only in black and white in ink (policies), it's part of a mentality, it's part of a culture. If we start with bad policy, if they're supposed to be the enforcers but yet they're the law breakers, there's no policy to expedite justice in that context...we're in a bad place. I've seen that for years. It's become a norm. Now, when we hear or we see it on social media, it's like, *wow, it's just another innocent person or another person of color loses their life, or near about loses their life, unnecessarily.*

I just want to say that I'm glad that people in the communities are not only starting to take note of what's going on, but are looking for solutions. When they asked me to participate (in this project), I jumped at the chance. Not just to tell my story, but to try to be a part of the solution. We need more projects like this to say, *hey, tell me your experience. What do you think policy makers should do to make changes?* This is getting at the grass roots of the problem. It's not creating an us against them narrative. It's just saying, *I believe that your experience is valid. I believe that you can add value to the solution as well.*" That is where we need to be.

Recorded at:
Los Angeles County, CA
2/11/2021
5:59 pm