

That's why DEI – diversity, equity, and inclusion – has become a conservative boogeyman. Charlie Kirk recently said: “What DEI means in practice is the vehement hostile treatment of white straight men.” But DEI isn't hostile to white men – only to the assumption that white men should always be in charge. Kirk's logic only works if you believe straight white men are inherently superior.

Just look at the distribution of power: nearly three-quarters of Congress are white men. Every US President but one has been a white man. About 85% of Fortune 500 CEOs and 90% of billionaires are white men. Are we really a meritocracy where the best and brightest just happen to all be white men? Or is white supremacy and patriarchy so deeply baked into our collective DNA that it still shapes every facet of our world?

This system evolves. The version I grew up with was called “complementarian Christianity”. This rebrand of Christian misogyny claims men and women have distinct roles but are “equal in value”. The problem is those roles always place men in control – over women, over capital, over bodies. Abstract philosophical claims about “equal ontological worth” don't matter when one group holds all meaningful power.

Dr. Christina Cleveland argues that this system also distorts how we see God. She calls our inherited deity “whitemalegod”. The images we were handed – white Jesus and the bearded sky-daddy – function as idols that bless patriarchy and equate masculinity with divine authority. In that world, it never occurred to me to question why women couldn't be pastors. Whitemalegod made it feel spiritually obvious.

Maybe that's why some conservatives react to critiques of this system as if they're defending God. When your image of God is built on hierarchy and control, any challenge to that order feels like heresy.

That's also why trans and gender-nonconforming people often face such disproportionate vitriol – their very existence disrupts the sacred binary that holds the system (and its god) together. If men are divinely ordained to rule, you can't just switch teams. If someone born female becomes male – or lives beyond their binary altogether – the illusion collapses. The emperor has no clothes. It was never divine order. It was always control.

What I wish more white men knew is that this system is destroying us.

The white male system promises dominance but delivers loneliness. It demands emotional suppression, and the rejection of intimacy.

Patriarchal men label relational skills “feminine,” and then wonder why men are caught in a “male loneliness epidemic”. We've been robbed. Men die by suicide four

times more than women. We're disconnected, aching, and cut off from the very things that make us human.

That's the truth: the traits we were taught to reject – vulnerability, tenderness, empathy – aren't “feminine”. They're human. And they're essential to healthy masculinity.

Richard Rohr puts it this way: men “are deprived of that healthy wholeness – and, I would say, holiness – which comes from integrating both the masculine and the feminine in our lives as men or women.”

If integration is essential to spiritual health, then a man who's learned to hate femininity is the biggest loser – because HE'S HATING PART OF HIS OWN SOUL. He's at war with himself. None of us fit a rigid binary.

All of us embody traits that defy strict gender categorisation. Gender diversity is part of God's design. To reject that is to reject ourselves – and dishonour creation. What God has joined together, let no-one separate.

From a Christian perspective, Jesus is the perfect image of holy and whole humanity. Although the white male system is propped up in Jesus' name, his ministry subverted it constantly. He felt deeply and wept openly (John 11:35). He built close friendships – with men and women (Luke 10:38–42; John 11:5;

John 13:23). His behaviour with women consistently broke social norms and confused his disciples (John 4:27).

Even when Jesus called God “Father”, he painted that God with maternal traits – nurturing, forgiving, attentive. This is not whitemalegod. Jesus's view of God heals the wounds of patriarchy by offering us a vision of manhood rooted in compassion and connection. While the manosphere divides men into alphas and betas, Jesus refused to jockey for control. And he warns us: those clinging to dominance are the most to be pitied. “The first will be last, and the last, first.”

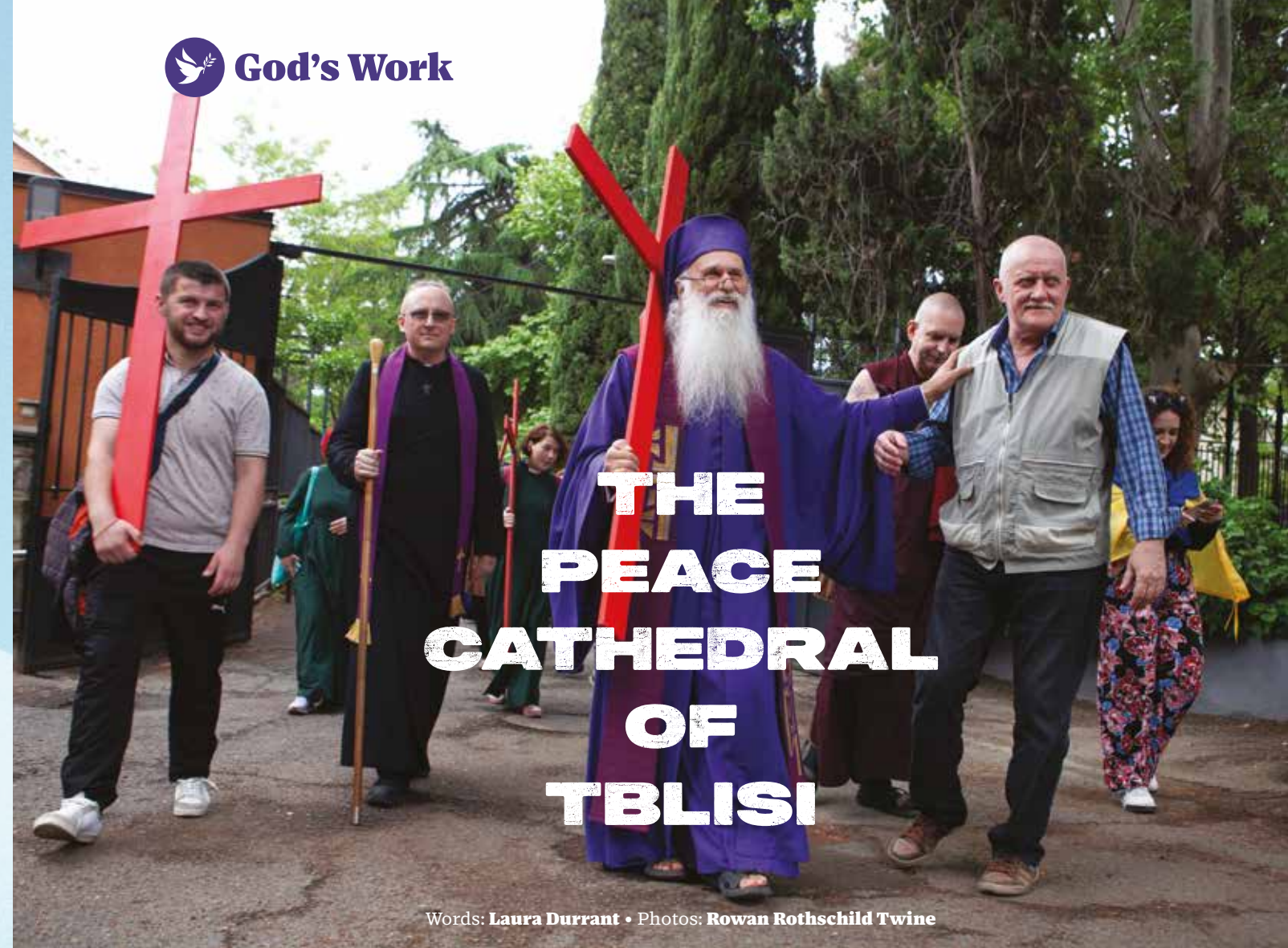
I joined the Marines to align myself with a template of masculinity that promised power – but in doing so, I was also denying parts of myself. I've come a long way since then, thanks in large part to women, queer people, and other men who modelled a different way of being – one rooted in connection, not dominance. Where the goal isn't to be a ‘real man’ but a whole, free, and equal human being.

What if that's the work ahead of us – not to reclaim some idealised masculinity, but to reclaim our shared humanity?

The good news is, everything we need is already inside us. We just have to stop burying the parts we were told to kill. ➡

Brian Recker's *Hell Bent* comes out on 30 September on TarcherPerigee

“The white male system promises dominance but delivers loneliness.”



Words: **Laura Durrant** • Photos: **Rowan Rothschild Twine**

A Bishop, an Imam and a Rabbi walk into a church.
Not the setup for an out of touch joke – but the radical reality of the interfaith community at The Peace Cathedral in Tblisi, Georgia. Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili tells us how – and why – these congregations can occupy sacred space together.

“I joke that I am the result of a direct order from Comrade Stalin,” Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili laughs when I ask him about his faith journey. His parents met when Stalin ordered all protestant denominations in the Soviet Union to merge, and it's clear that living as a Christian during Soviet rule and leading the Baptist Church of Georgia after it became independent laid the foundations for the radical community Songulashvili now leads. He was initially surprised when he was asked to put his name

forward to lead the Baptist Church – having up to that point only worked teaching history and archaeology at the university in Tblisi, Georgia's capital. “I did not think I would be elected,” Songulashvili recalls. “I told people that if they elected me, I would bring changes to the life of the Church. Perhaps they did not realise the changes I had in mind.”

Those changes started as soon as Songulashvili became Archbishop of his country's Baptist Church (yes, they have Baptist Archbishops in Georgia). “Previously, the Church



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was extremely conservative, narrow-minded, tribal, and exclusivist,” explains Songulashvili. “And step by step I started dismantling this understanding and ushered the Church into wider societal life.” With Songulashvili’s help, the Church made such strides that it began drawing opposition from other Baptist communities worldwide. Other churches called for them to “return from apostasy” after they began accepting women as leaders.

Songulashvili’s inclusive and affirming beliefs eventually resulted in him being asked to step down as head of the Baptist Church, and, he believes, in his own local church’s expulsion from larger Baptist bodies. But he wasn’t to be deterred from the ‘theology of beauty’ he

had developed during his time in leadership. “Whenever we come across ugliness, we respond to the ugliness with a project of beauty,” he explains. “We saw the rise of antisemitism and Islamophobia... and we saw that we had to respond to it with a project of beauty, and this is how the Peace Project came into being.”

Rather than turning away from the struggles of differing religious communities around them, Bishop Songulashvili’s congregation decided to explore how they could stand in solidarity and understanding with their neighbours. They decided that the best way to hold space for those relationships was to do it literally: starting the Peace Cathedral, creating a mosque, a synagogue and a

church, all under the same roof.

Even in the building of the spaces – the Peace Mosque and Peace Synagogue are built onto the church building of the First Baptist Church of Tbilisi – there was a challenge for people to cross those barriers. “We decided to turn the fundraising process into an education adventure by introducing a principle: if you’re Jewish, you can’t contribute to the synagogue but you can contribute to the mosque. If you’re Muslim, you can’t contribute to the mosque but you can contribute to the synagogue,” says Songulashvili. This might have slowed the fundraising process, but it led to some unexpected displays of goodwill.


Songulashvili tells me about a visit they had from the Israeli ambassador back in 2019, when the buildings were still under construction. “He was keen to make a contribution, and we had to say no – he could contribute to the mosque, but not the synagogue,” says Songulashvili. “He was deeply disappointed, but six months later, I received a letter saying the government had approved a contribution to the mosque. It was sizable and helped complete the mosque’s construction.”

The joint witness of the Peace Cathedral is one of mutual respect for one another, of creating a beautiful space together. Songulashvili recalls moments of children from different religious backgrounds playing with each other across all the spaces, across religious and cultural barriers. “Watching them, I thought: if children are raised in such a setting, it’s very hard for them to develop prejudice,” he says. And beyond these natural relationships, the Peace Cathedral is making more strides to facilitate meaningful connection between communities in conflict.

The first Sunday after the violence of 7 October, 2023, Muslims and Jews were invited to a joint service at the Peace Cathedral. “We thought that it would be too early to ask people to come and pray for peace,” says Songulashvili. “So we said, let’s have a vigil of lamentation. And for a

year, every Sunday we would have lamentation services.” The community at the Peace Cathedral even has a long-term plan to host Israeli and Palestinian young people at the church for a period of reconciliation, dialogue and relationship building.

Naturally, the work of the Peace Cathedral has not come without pushback from people who disagree with its ministry. Many find the mixing of different religious groups under a Christian roof heretical, and the cathedral was even expelled from the European Baptist Federation – Songulashvili says they were never told why, but he believes it was because of their interfaith relations and affirming views of LGBTQ+ people. And yet there is no turning back from that radical inclusivity. As the only affirming church in the area, many members of the queer community go there to get married or hold funerals. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, when many people lost their jobs and couldn’t pay rent, the church opened its doors for anyone who needed – but particularly transgender women – who needed a place to stay, food, or warmth during the winter. It has been a learning process for the Christians in his congregation as well, but Songulashvili says: “We are evangelising ourselves into accepting diversity and learning from their experience.”

With fascism and right-wing extremism on the rise, Bishop Songulashvili and the team at the Peace Cathedral recognise that the work they’re doing is growing more important by the day. “50 years ago, what we’re doing now would be luxury,” he says. “It’s not luxury any longer. It’s a necessity to work together. In order to save lives, literally.” In the face of such a threat, Songulashvili encourages us to build friendships with the other communities that surround us, so that we can work together in unity to turn ugliness into beauty. 

You can find out more about the Peace Cathedral at peacecathedraltbilisi.org