



*The 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Robert L. Polk  
Lecture on Race & Social Justice*

***Walking Into Discomfort:  
Why Easy Conversations  
Don't Create Change***

**Myeisha Essex *and*  
Jacob A. Mason**

April 13, 2026 @ 7 p.m.

---

# Program

<b>Recorded Video Introduction</b> .....	<b>Aspen Green '18</b> Creative Director, SK Studio Owner, aspenxgreen
<b>Video</b> .....	<b>Dr. Polk's Story</b>
<b>Welcome</b> .....	<b>Myridean Lehman</b> Junior Business Administration major, Art and Leadership Studies minors
<b>Introduction of First Lecturer</b> .....	<b>Kya Caddy</b> Junior Exercise Science major, Finance and Leadership Studies minors
<b>Guest Lecture</b> .....	<b>Myeisha Essex</b> Chief Operating Officer, YWCA Lincoln Co-Host, "The W" Podcast
<b>Introduction of Second Lecturer</b> .....	<b>Myridean Lehman</b>
<b>Guest Lecture</b> .....	<b>Jacob A. Mason</b> Grad Assistant, The Carter Center's Conflict Resolution Program M.Div student, Emory University Candler School of Theology
<b>Conversation with Lecturers</b> .....	<b>Myridean Lehman &amp; Kya Caddy</b>
<b>Closing</b> .....	<b>Myridean Lehman</b>

---

## *Guest Lecturer*



### **Myeisha Essex**

Myeisha Essex serves as the Chief Operating Officer for YWCA Lincoln, a role she has held since 2020. In this capacity, she is dedicated to advancing YWCA's mission by overseeing program development and refining the organization's structure, ensuring its guiding principles are reflected in every initiative. Her leadership is characterized by a steadfast commitment to equity, inclusion, and meaningful community engagement.

Myeisha's journey began at Howard University, where she earned her Bachelor of Arts in Political Science in 2013. During her years at Howard, she immersed herself in an environment that emphasized the power of community collaboration and the value of servant leadership. These formative experiences laid the groundwork for her approach to nonprofit work, instilling in her the conviction that every voice should be heard and every resource distributed fairly.

After graduating, Myeisha launched her career in the nonprofit sector in 2013 by piloting innovative community-based programs with Civic Nebraska and Lincoln Public Schools to build bridges between families, educators, and community partners to expand educational opportunities. By 2018, Myeisha had joined Girls Inc. of Lincoln, where she led empowerment initiatives for young women and girls, further solidifying her reputation as a catalyst for positive change.

Myeisha's dedication and impact have not gone unnoticed. In 2025, she was honored with the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce Young Nonprofit Professional of the Year award, recognizing her innovative leadership and unwavering commitment to the Lincoln community. Throughout her career, she has also trained over 300 community members on the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion—a testament to her role as an advocate and educator within the sector.

Myeisha is the Co-Host of "The W" Podcast, where she promotes underrepresented voices and social change. Since 2020, she has acted in local theater and film, finding inspiration and resilience through performance. Her stage experience enhances her nonprofit leadership by improving her empathy, discipline, and communication.

Through every chapter of her career, Myeisha Essex has demonstrated that leadership is about service, and that passion—whether for community impact or the performing arts—can inspire meaningful progress.

---

## *Guest Lecturer*



### **Jacob A. Mason**

Jacob A. Mason is a Robert W. Woodruff Fellow and Master of Divinity student at Emory University's Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia. With deep family roots both at Doane and in the university's denomination, the United Church of Christ (UCC), Jacob is a passionate spiritual leader focused on affecting positive social change through moral collaboration, community building and individual empowerment.

Originally from Firth, Nebraska, Jacob is a proud graduate of Norris High School. He completed his undergraduate studies at Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln, earning a Bachelor of Arts with a double major in political science and history and a minor in religion and philosophy.

While at Wesleyan, Jacob lettered four years on the men's swim team, served as student body president and was a voting member of the Board of Governors. Under his leadership, the student government funded the renovation of the student lounge and the replacement of the outdoor basketball courts.

More recently, Jacob served as social justice intern at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, the home church of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., where he helped lead the Social Justice Ministry into an exciting post-pandemic era of wider community engagement.

This past year, Jacob completed a John R. Lewis Fellowship with the Faith & Politics Institute in Washington, D.C., where he learned how to affect positive social change through Kingian nonviolence and accompanied a U.S. congressional delegation on a trip to Selma, Alabama, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Bloody Sunday.

Through the fellowship, Jacob interviewed Doane's first Black graduate, the Rev. Dr. Robert L. Polk, for an oral history project titled "Justice Work in Homogenous Communities."

This past summer, under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Jim Keck, Jacob served as pastoral intern at First-Plymouth Congregational Church, UCC, in Lincoln.

Today, Jacob is a graduate assistant for The Carter Center's Conflict Resolution Program in Atlanta, conducting research on multifaith youth depolarization efforts across the US.

He is the twin brother of Emily Mason '23, the son of Todd and Betty Nienkamp '86 Mason, nephew of Judy Nienkamp '84 and Meredith Nienkamp '90, and the grandson of the late Rev. Gary '57 and Ann Schuknecht '59 Nienkamp.

---

## *A message from Luis Sotelo, Vice President for Community & Government Relations*



This evening we gather for the 11th Annual Robert L. Polk Lecture on Race and Social Justice to continue a tradition rooted in the enduring vision of Rev. Dr. Robert L. Polk—a leader who inspires us to actively seek justice by pursuing intentional relationships, honest conversation, and collective action.

This year's lecture, "Walking Into Discomfort: Why Easy Conversations Don't Create Change," invites us to live more fully into that calling. We are honored to welcome two speakers, Myeisha and Jacob, whose lives and work reflect the very principles Dr. Polk champions—leadership grounded in service, and a commitment to social justice that promotes human flourishing for all.

Through their voices, we are called to embrace the discomfort that accompanies growth and to recognize it as a pathway toward deeper understanding and enduring change. May this lecture move us to listen more intently, act more boldly, and continue the work that Dr. Polk so powerfully embodies.

---

[!\[\]\(74d4806277d7e73349d8e8c0897931e9\_img.jpg\) Read more about previous Polk Lecturers !\[\]\(5f42d2cd7ad901bc24e5d35a38c777fd\_img.jpg\)](#)

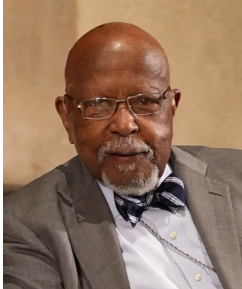
---

### *The Robert L. Polk Lecture on Race and Social Justice*

**The Robert L. Polk Lecture on Race and Social Justice** was established to bring high quality, high-impact speakers to Doane in the fields of diversity, equity, and social justice. The goal of the lecture is to provide an avenue by which important discussions surrounding race – racial healing and racial equity – can be established and sustained.

---

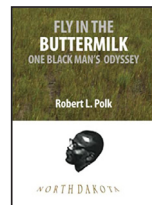
## *About Rev. Dr. Robert L. Polk '52*



Throughout his life, Rev. Dr. Polk has broken ground as “the first” Black person in work and other venues of his life. Bob persevered at Doane, even after being rejected for admission in 1949 initially and solely due to race, and he became the first African American to graduate from Doane. Even though Rev. Dr. Polk has witnessed and experienced blatant, harsh racial prejudice and bigotry throughout his lifetime, he has worked to build a more inclusive society no matter the circumstances. Rev. Dr. Polk says his Doane experience gave him the exposure, courage, wit, and wisdom to build bridges between race and culture. This has been the lifelong cornerstone of his ministry.

Can past circumstances about social justice and racism continue to be relevant in this era? That is the core question addressed, and answered, in “Fly in the Buttermilk,” a poignant memoir by Rev. Dr. Robert L. Polk about his time, 1955-1960, as the 48th official Black resident (as he was told) in the state of North Dakota. The book reveals the amazing story of a freshly minted, young, Black, urban, seminary graduate who dared to accept his first call as a pastor in the nearly all-white state of North Dakota. This candid memoir explores the highs, lows, joys and sorrows, daily routine and the dynamics of racial isolation and race relations.

In May 2024, Doane University honored Rev. Dr. Polk by naming the new amphitheater outside of C. Donald Brodie Hall the Robert L. Polk Open Air Theatre. Doane students will utilize this space to share their voices and engage with peers from all different backgrounds while building the connections that are a hallmark of the Doane



*“Fly in the Buttermilk” is published by Combray House Books and can be purchased from several online booksellers.*

---

*“Racism continues to be the scourge that scars our humanity and the landscape of our society. What we need in every sector of our society is a more meaningful conversation and an in-depth dialogue on race before we can truly become a whole people. It is the hope that this series of lectures can perhaps help move participants towards greater racial harmony and racial equity.”*

*–Reverend Dr. Robert L. Polk*

The Robert L. Polk Lecture on Race and Social Justice is supported an endowment and private donations. The original endowment was made possible by individual donations from Doane alumni and friends of Rev. Dr. Polk and a generous gift from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The funds available annually from the endowment contribute to speaker fees, travel, and other lecture costs, but rarely cover the entire cost of the annual lecture. Therefore, we are now seeking donations to support future Polk Lectureships.

***To contribute, please contact:***

*Jessica Pulte '00*

*Annual Fund Director*

*402.826.8290*

*[jess.pulte@doane.edu](mailto:jess.pulte@doane.edu)*

*Or donate online at [doane.edu/givedoane](http://doane.edu/givedoane)  
and designate the Polk Lectureship after selecting “Other.”*

