

Rev. Dr. Ralph Basui Watkins

“The Scholar with a Camera!”

Rev. Dr. Ralph Basui Watkins is a scholar, theologian, photographer, filmmaker, author, and arts-based researcher whose work explores the intersections of **Black faith, visual culture, spirituality, social justice, and the future of the African American church**. Known as “**The Scholar with a Camera**,” Watkins has developed a distinctive scholarly and artistic practice in which photography and documentary film function not simply as illustrations of research, but as ways of doing theology, interpreting culture, documenting communities, and imagining more just futures.

Watkins is the **Peachtree Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth at Columbia Theological Seminary**, where he teaches and writes at the intersection of the future church, Black church studies, sociology, theology, and visual culture. He holds an **MFA in Photography from the Savannah College of Art and Design**, a **PhD in Sociology from the University of Pittsburgh**, a **DMin in African American Church Studies from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary**, an MA in Religion from the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, and a BA in Political Science from Sacramento State University.

His scholarship has consistently engaged the changing realities of Black religious life, popular culture, race, justice, belonging, and community. He is the author and co-author of numerous books, including *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip-Hop Generation*, *Jay Z to Jesus*, *Leading Your African American Church Through Pastoral Transition*, *Hip-Hop Redemption*, *The Future of the African American Church: An Invitation to Dialogue*, and his 2026 book, *Inclusive Love: Seeing the Black Church in the Rainbow*. He has also contributed more than thirty scholarly chapters and articles. His forthcoming book with biblical scholar **William P. Brown**, *The Word Made Image: Scripture, Photography, and the Creativity of Justice*, extends his work at the intersection of biblical interpretation, photography, visual theology, and social justice.

Watkins’ scholarship increasingly takes the form of **transmedia and arts-based research**. His major project, *Seeing the Future of the African American Church in the Rainbow*, combines theological reflection, ethnographic inquiry, documentary film, and photographic portraiture to explore the lives, faith, leadership, and belonging of LGBTQ+ people within the Black church. The project grew from his commitment to a theology of radical inclusion and was supported in part by a **Louisville Institute Sabbatical Research Grant**. The resulting work has included a documentary, a major photographic portrait series, scholarly presentations, public conversations, and the book *Inclusive Love*.

As a photographer, Watkins has exhibited his work in solo and group exhibitions including *Seeing the Future of the African Church in the Rainbow* at **Spelman College** and the **Harrington Gallery**, the **Atlanta Mayor’s Pride Exhibit**, *The Spirit of Jazz: The Music I See* at the **APEX Museum**, and *Faith in Sweet Auburn*, his MFA thesis exhibition. He has also served as an **Artist in Residence with Pride in the Pews at Spelman College** and at **The Velvet Note**, one of Atlanta’s nationally recognized jazz venues.

Watkins is also an accomplished documentary filmmaker and television producer. His films include *She Is the Pastor*, *The 46th Delegation of the Interfaith Peace-Builders in Palestine/Israel*, *Out of Egypt I Have Called My Son: A Son's Journey Black to Africa*, and *Black Faith in the Rainbow*. As producer, director, writer, photographer, and on-camera scholar, he has used documentary storytelling to explore religion, race, gender, global Black identity, social transformation, and the lived experiences of communities often pushed to the margins. His television work has also included *Religion Roundtable* and *Talk It Out with Dr. Ralph Basui Watkins*.

Throughout his career, Watkins has received numerous fellowships, grants, and honors supporting his scholarship, teaching, global study, and artistic practice. These include the **Louisville Institute Sabbatical Research Grant**, **Collegeville Institute Writing Sabbatical Residency**, **Fulbright-Hays Fellowship for study in Ghana**, **Governor's Teaching Fellowship**, **Lilly Teaching Fellowship**, **Wabash Teaching Fellowship**, the **W. E. B. Du Bois Scholar Fellowship**, and designation as a **Distinguished Alumnus for Academic Excellence by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary**. His research and teaching have taken him throughout the United States and internationally to Africa and the Middle East.

Across the classroom, pulpit, gallery, screen, and printed page, Watkins asks a consistent set of questions: **What does justice look like? Who gets seen? Who belongs? How can religious communities learn to see differently?** His work argues that images can be forms of knowledge, that art can be a form of theological inquiry, and that scholarship can help communities imagine worlds not yet fully visible.

At the heart of his vocation is a commitment to bringing **scholarship and art into conversation in the service of justice**. Whether holding a camera, writing a book, making a film, teaching a class, preaching, or facilitating public conversation, Ralph Basui Watkins continues to live into the vocation that has come to define his work: **the scholar with a camera**.