

Stand Against Racism Statement
Community UMC Crofton
July 2020

From Pastor Stan Cardwell:

In some ways, it already seems like ages ago.

On May 25 George Floyd was murdered as a police officer kept his knee on George's neck for over eight excruciating minutes - all captured on video as onlookers begged for his relief.. Coupled with that is the video or self-deputized citizens who chased down then shot and killed Ahmaud Arbery while he was jogging in an Atlanta suburb. Add in the story of Breonna Taylor who was shot multiple times in her home after Louisville police executed a knock-less warrant. And Elijah McClain and . . . and . . .and.

These are just the most recent names in a cycle of violence that calls for the Church to step into the breach - to call for justice, to call for de-escalation, to call for systemic, economic, judicial and political change . . . to call for peace.

On June 7, your Church Council met to discuss race and to begin the process of discerning what our response should be in the face of clear inequality for people of color. We were being called from being "non-racists" to "anti-racists."

What's the difference? These are the opening words of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr as he wrote a letter from a cell in a Birmingham jail . . .

"First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;" who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season."

It's clear - we can't wait for a "more convenient season."

At that Council meeting, we invited Candis Milbourn, our faithful and patient black sister in Christ, to share her heart with us on what our church can and must do to break the cycle of racial injustice.

Out of the very long, but deeply needed meeting, your leadership took the first step in our long journey by calling for two banners to be purchased and erected on either side of our permanent brick church sign.

One would take our denomination's "United Methodists Stand Against Racism" and make it personal - "WE Stand Against Racism."

The other would take up the mantle of this movement - "Black Lives Matter."

This is, for us, NOT a political statement, nor an anti-police statement, but a theological one - the most basic one - that we are ALL created in the image God and God stands with the most vulnerable in any society and therefore - so should we.

While 1964 brought legal equality, it did not level the playing field for people of color economically, judicially, educationally or politically. Recent events have shown us, we have a long way to go.

Most of all, laws cannot change hearts. That's where we, as God's people, must step into the breach - that God would change our hearts and that we would witness to His love for all people, but specifically for people of color, and even more specifically for African Americans who have been oppressed on this land for 400 years.

Our God compels our church to be a witness to our community - that people of color will find a safe place in our community, and in our church and with us.

And, as majority culture, we will need to be a safe place to learn uncomfortable truths and hear bold calls for action.

Placing banners is a simple first step.

There is harder work to be done - our witness must move from affirmation to action.

As we talk about changing hearts, I'm going to hand this video witness over to Dave Lanzer, our Council Chair who has a testimony worth hearing.

From Church Council Chair, Dave Lanzer:

Thank you, Pastor Stan, for setting the stage for this call to action.

Recent events have led me to spend a lot of time reflecting on my life. I am only beginning to realize and understand what is meant by white privilege and the unconscious role it has played in my life. Like so many of our black brothers and sisters I have worked very hard in life to achieve my personal and professional goals, but I admit that I did not used to see how I had such a head start just because of the color of my skin.

Growing up, I didn't have to worry about the stability of my family and home. I didn't have to worry about whether there would be enough money to put food on the table or keep a roof over my head, and I didn't have to work to help my parents pay bills. I always had access to a great education, tutors, and technology. Through family connections I got an internship that turned into an 18-year career. I only had two job interviews and received offers from both. I've never had people look at me in fear as I walked down the street just because of how I look. I've been pulled over by a police officer twice in my entire life because I actually did something wrong, unlike some who get pulled over multiple times a month just because they supposedly look suspicious.

"All Lives Matter" is a phrase we often hear in response to "Black Lives Matter." I confess that I used to be an "All Lives Matter" individual. Don't get me wrong – I firmly believe that, to God, all lives matter. We are all God's children created in God's image to be who we are. And as Christian people we should value all life. But we live in a fallen world. When Jesus came to this earth, he sat with sinners, he broke bread with the outcast and oppressed of society, he proclaimed good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and liberty for the oppressed. Jesus used countless parables to teach us the importance of seeking after the one sheep. It is not that he didn't care about the other 99, but his focus was to bring that one home safely. Same with the prodigal son. It's not that the father didn't care about the older son or wasn't happy that he stayed, but the father was overjoyed that his son who was lost had been found.

As I evaluated myself, I came to one conclusion: It's not about you! Saying "Black Lives Matter" doesn't mean that my life doesn't matter. It acknowledges that our black brothers and sisters who have been oppressed for hundreds of years in this land alone – that their lives matter. Black lives are in danger in our society; black lives are being stolen; black lives are being imprisoned just for being black. Just as Jesus called on his followers to see liberty for the oppressed, so too do we need to respond to His call to action for our time.

After the murder of George Floyd, our Bishop, Bishop LaTrelle Easterling, wrote these words: "It is time for this nation to be both cognizant and conscious. It is possible to be cognizant of an issue, challenge or problem without being conscious of one's role or complicity therein. The architecture of whiteness and white supremacy is only maintained by the silence, complicity and support of persons of privilege in this country. It is not enough to say I am not a racist. If you have not committed to the practice of being an anti-racist, then you are complicit in racism."

These words hit me hard. I have never been racist, but I have not been actively anti-racist. Bishop Easterling's words reflected a weight that has been upon my heart over the last few months, but it was a feeling for which I had no words. So, as Pastor Stan mentioned, I brought this to the Church Council.

I shared my heart with them – an uncomfortably vulnerable position for me – and I prayed that the Council would hear me with grace and compassion. Our sister Candis – a wonderful, amazing, and incredibly faithful member of our church family – shared her heart and experiences with us. She shared about the judgement of black communities, the things she heard when she moved to Crofton, and the fear she has even now about whether her children would come home safe at night. She also shared some great insights about why Sunday is still the most segregated day in our nation.

We knew that with the Council being the main body of lay leadership in the church we could not sit idly by. We also acknowledged that words alone in the form of a statement by the church would not be enough. Words are cheap. We needed to take some action. Our church campus sits at a very busy intersection in Crofton and we decided to take a stand at the corner with two banners that proclaim our stance on racial justice. As you saw with Pastor Stan, the first says that WE stand against racism. This is the cry of our denomination at this time. The other, seen here, simply says Black Lives Matter. It is a statement of our theology, of the established social principles of the United Methodist Church, that racism is sin and that we must stand up for the oppressed. We believe that Black Lives Matter. These banners will be placed by our church sign shortly after this video is released, and will remain on our church campus for the foreseeable future.

As the Council meeting ended, Candis implored us to not keep this conversation to ourselves, but to share with our black friends about where we stand and our call to action. She also ended with some very wise words – If you don't have any black friends, you need to evaluate yourself and change that. In the days that followed, I shared my story and our church's pending actions with a few of my black friends. I didn't know all of the right words to say, but the responses I received let me know that my efforts to educate myself, recognize the role that white privilege has played in my life, and take action to become anti-racist meant more to them than words could express.

In the coming weeks we will start the difficult work of becoming anti-racist together as a church. It will not be easy – and in fact at times it will be very difficult, but this cause is just. As our Bishop recently said, “The work of dismantling racism is hard. Very hard. It evokes resentment, denial, anger, fear, and pain. And yet, we must do it... It is always easy to talk about racism and oppression in general, but it is exceedingly harder to create real, tangible change.”

Especially in this time – when we are facing huge changes due to COVID-19, reopening our child development center, and trying to figure out how and when it will be safe to worship together in person again – it could be easy to say that we should wait for a less hectic time to take this on. But as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr said in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, “‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied.’” We cannot put this off until tomorrow. While those of us in the majority culture may have the privilege of time, our oppressed black brothers and sisters do not. The time is now.

As we begin this righteous journey together to free all people of oppression, I challenge us, as Community Church, to boldly proclaim that We Stand Against Racism and to be unafraid to say Black Lives Matter. I challenge our church to stand up for and seek to build genuine relationships with our black brothers and sisters, to evaluate the role that privilege has played in our own lives, to acknowledge the places where we have been blind, to repent of our inaction and complicity, to listen, and to reach out a loving hand to build new bridges between people of different races and cultures. Together may we see the church truly become the Body of Christ and be a light for the world.