

Race, education, and the church

by Alyssa Parker

During 2020, a number of incidents of racial violence plagued our country, including the murder of George Floyd. As the movement for Black lives ramped up once again last March, First Church of the Brethren in Harrisburg, Pa., decided to make a statement, vowing to educate the congregation on racial injustice. The statement encouraged our congregation to become active listeners to our brothers and sisters of color, and to continue the work after the “moment” may have passed.

The season that followed was filled with much learning, and our congregation felt a particular pull toward the issue of education inequity in the Harrisburg school system and beyond. The implications of education inequity remain evident and prevalent in our community and this inequity is plaguing the children of our congregation.

In Harrisburg, schools are severely underfunded, and though there is a formula built to decrease the gap, our state has largely chosen not to use it. Based on research done by POWER Interfaith, the whiter the district, the more funding it receives. In fact, researchers found that on average, the least white districts get around \$1,900 less per student than their fair share, while predominantly white districts get around \$1,900 more than their fair share.


Our congregation is home to young disciples from preschool to college age, all of whom are from different backgrounds, racially and otherwise. To be the best that we can be for our young people, we must begin the work of fixing systems that do not allow them to succeed.

So far, we have begun educating ourselves on the widening

gap in education funding and have brought in a number of speakers who have worked in this area or are knowledgeable on this topic. We were blessed to hear from Michaela Alphonse and her experience working with schools in Miami, Fla., by connecting with the school board and the PTA, and by offering direct services to the schools such as after-school programs. We also heard from Gimbiya Kettering and her presentation on implicit bias in schools and the church’s role in a racist system. The church played an active role in creating the unjust system, and therefore we can be part of dismantling it.

These discussions expanded our focus and encouraged us to take other factors into consideration. Some of these included family structures and how mothers are being supported. We are now excited to welcome Sunada Roberts and Chloe Oustrich, who are active in the Harrisburg area working to bring awareness and pursue action in our own backyard.

Throughout these sessions, we have kept this question in front of us: How can we take action? The outreach arm of our church, bcmPEACE, has been a vital part of collaborating with another church to offer a full day of supervision to students in the community while they are completing online school in a program called Community Classrooms. This past year of virtual instruction has adversely affected the most vulnerable in our communities, as access to reliable Internet and adult supervision is quite a luxury. The Community Classroom program allows students to have access to breakfast, lunch, snacks, wifi, social interaction (at a distance), and help with school work if they need it.

Although we have been taking some actions, we know we need to do more. We are working toward being further involved in other education advocacy groups and even discussing “adopting” a school in the community. As with many other pursuits, we are on a journey and have not yet arrived, but are excited for what God is doing and how we may teach others what we are learning, as well. 

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Healing Racism

We are thankful to the Church of the Brethren Intercultural Ministry for the Healing Racism mini grant that made much of this possible. To see some of our work, find presentations at the Harrisburg First YouTube channel. We encourage other congregations to get involved in this ministry as God leads. Apply for a mini grant by June 30 at www.brethren.org/intercultural.

“From Slavery Through Reconstruction,” by Harlem Renaissance muralist Aaron Douglas, 1934.

