

Dismantling Racism in the Arkansas Annual Conference

For some reason I cannot fully explain but am thankful for, we have reached a tipping point in our understanding of the reality of racism - including the racism with which we struggle - and our willingness to address it. We dare not waste this moment.

The Cabinet shared an email earlier this week and indicated that I would unveil our initiatives to address racism. I don't know what you are expecting, so let me begin by telling you what these initiatives are not. They are not yet another Conference program that fails to produce what it promises. They are not something we are rolling out with a lot of fanfare, bells and whistles. And they are especially not just checking boxes so we can say we've done it and lessen our guilt feelings.

Rather, this is a cause to which we are committed for the long term. It is something we will address out of our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, and that means we will use scripture and the language of faith that includes words like sin, conviction, repentance and reconciliation. It is a journey that will have many next steps we have not yet figured out, as well as some missteps we will make along the way. It is work that belongs primarily to those of us who are white - because it's not the work of people of color to fix our stuff. It is a responsibility that belongs to everyone, so we will encourage groups and individuals to innovate and come up with better ideas. Letters such as I have received from a group of younger clergy, the statement published by a diverse group of clergywomen and conversations we have had - and will be having - with African-American pastors and BMCR are essential. And perhaps most critically, it is something that must happen at the grassroots level in local congregations.

So let me lay out some of the initiatives we are taking. The first group of initiatives has to do with our ongoing work of dismantling racism.

1. President Roderick Smothers and I have agreed that the Arkansas Annual Conference will work with the Center for Social Justice at Philander Smith College to develop an annual mandatory event for clergy concerning issues around racism.
2. Resources, as well as training for how to use them, for individual, small group and congregational study will be recommended. Rev Rashim Merriwether already has developed a list that will be published next week.
3. The Conference website will have a page dedicated to providing information and resources concerning anti-racism work. As well, a platform will be developed to provide a place for individuals to share resources and ideas.
4. The Cabinet will participate in the General Commission of Religion and Race study entitled "Implicit Bias".
5. I will invite Black pastors to meet with me in small groups so I can listen, engage in conversation, and explore how I can provide leadership as bishop.
6. District Superintendents will begin small groups in their districts in which participants will explore the nature of racism, their participation in it and how they can overcome it. A

variety of resources, including *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo, will be utilized in these groups.

The second group of initiatives focuses on strengthening Black churches.

1. The Rev. Rashim Merriwether will serve as a member of the Cabinet.
2. The amended spending plan from CFA that was made available Thursday shows a significant increase in financial resources dedicated to ethnic ministry.
3. As a result of a conversation with the leadership of BMCR, I will appoint a working group to develop a comprehensive strategy for Black churches in Little Rock.
4. The proposed legislation concerning the purchase of St. James United Methodist Church, Pine Bluff, along with a grant from the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas to build a kitchen, are the first steps of enabling that congregation to become a “vital hub for transformation” that includes a vital worshipping community, missional outreach initiatives and a center for leadership development.

I feel the need to be very clear about something. My point in sharing these initiatives is not so we can say, “Oh good, the Cabinet has a plan and they have everything covered”. The Cabinet is responsible for leading, but the responsibility for dismantling racism belongs to every one of us.

I am going to take a moment of personal privilege. The murder of George Floyd sickened me and made me angry. But it also did something else. It caused me to look deep inside myself....

I unequivocally believe the Church of Jesus Christ should be taking the lead in dismantling racism. I pray we can walk together - regardless of theological perspective or political views - because dismantling racism is a matter of faith, justice and morality. But it's also one additional matter. I was reminded of it earlier this week by Rev. Deborah Bell in the midst of a conversation we were having. While the words are not exactly what she said, the sentiment is, “Ultimately, we will only be able to address racism as we work on developing deep, authentic and caring relationships.”