

A New Vision

By Catherine Meeks, Ph.D.

Beloved Community: Commission for Dismantling Racism is the name that we chose when we renamed our anti-racism commission. When our new bishop, Robert Wright, met with us he asked that we consider a name change because there was so much negative reaction to the name that we had. After much conversation and reflection we agreed upon the current name. This name actually embodies our vision. We are trying to help construct the beloved community and in order to do that, racism has to be dismantled. This change has generated much positive energy.

Along with this change we made another very significant change regarding our trainings. We added the celebration of Holy Communion to each training session. Though the celebration at the table is never a small matter, this change has had a phenomenal impact upon the quality of response to the training. Even the reluctant participants who attend the required training seem to find themselves more able to engage the day's hard work than was true before we began starting the sessions in this way.

Further evidence of this new energy is reflected by the fact that we now have parishes inviting the training teams to their individual campuses for the sessions instead of trying to see if they can find ways to avoid the training altogether.. There have been a few convocations who have organized a training session for all of the churches in their convocation. This is especially exciting to us because ultimately this work has to become an ongoing part of the work of the church and this is a small step in that direction.

Our commission has worked very diligently to form a broader vision of its work and while the work of dismantling racism is a long and arduous journey, we are seeing the fruit of our efforts though the harvest continues to be small. We have expanded the work to include facilitating our participation in the Jonathan Daniels and other Alabama Martyrs Pilgrimage in Alabama, discussions of books, film screenings and discussions, a repentance and reconciliation service,

a new conversation on race discussion group and a conference on the theologian and spiritual activist Howard Thurman.

It is the intention of this commission to make it clear through all of its work that dismantling racism is a part of one's ongoing spiritual formation. The work is not finished when one leaves a training session or a particular event. It is the work of a lifetime just as all other spiritual formation work happens to be. This is a notion that is beginning to gain a bit of energy and it is heartening to our members to see that spark.

Though we are clear that we cannot do all that needs to be done, it is also clear that we can achieve far more than we have done in the past by pursuing collaborative partnerships with local parishes and convocations, reaching out to the national missionaries for social justice and racial reconciliation, and clearly articulating our vision and needs to the bishop.

The support that has come from Bishop Wright is also quite heartening to us. He issued his first pastoral letter on the subject of racism and the need to dismantle it in support of the repentance and reconciliation service organized by the commission. This letter was either read or distributed by mail to all of the communicants in the Diocese of Atlanta. Some congregations are beginning to address this issue parishwide instead of just sending a few people to a required dismantling racism training session.

The recent events across our country make it clear that a new conversation on race is much needed and they should be enough to silence anyone who wants to argue that such conversation is no longer needed. While most of us wish that we could move on to some of the other many social challenges facing us, race continues to be the text and the subtext of almost every other social challenge before us and will not allow us to put it aside.

Racism is an issue that has to be faced in a straight forward and courageous manner and what better place for this work to occur than in the church where we all have a commitment to someone larger than ourselves who can help us find the courage to travel on the road to racial healing and reconciliation.