

Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church
2020 Annual Conference
Northeast Jurisdiction Call To Action Report

I am Rev. Olivet Brown and I am Rev. Hun Ju Lee. We will be speaking to you about our conference's progress since last year on the Northeastern Jurisdiction's Call to Action goals. As members of the Conference Commission on Religion and Race we are here to give an update on the 2016 NEJ Call To Action.

A lot has happened since we last spoke with you. Before we get into the particulars I want to share with you a little of our history and the relevance of this work in light of our nations reckoning with racism with urgency and on a massive scale. Some may remember at the formation of the United Methodist church in 1968 the Evangelical United Brethren members expected racial justice would be a part of our union. As a result the Central Conference was dismantled and the General Commission on Religion and Race was formed. The mission of the GCORR was to assist the newly formed UMC's work toward racial equity and justice within our agencies, conferences, local churches and the communities they serve. And there has been much progress made although, there still remains a great deal of work to do. The novel coronavirus pandemic has highlighted significant inequities for our brothers and sisters of color. The current racial unrest on display across our nation in response to police brutality compounded by the long standing marginalization of black and brown communities, has served to awaken many of our European American United Methodists to matters previously denied, ignored, or misunderstood. Since 1968 there have pockets people of all ethnicities who have embraced the challenge of racial justice in a variety of ways from the adoption of United Methodist Women's Charter for Racial Justice to our conference's implementation of the Healing the Wounds of Racism initiative established in 1996 and which continues to today. And yet systemic racism and white domination remained a barrier for many in the church and in our communities.

As you may be aware the NEJ Call to Action Resolution of 2016 challenged bishops, jurisdictional leaders and conferences to become more pro-active and move "from rhetoric to action" to remedy "the wounds caused by unchecked racism, white privilege and internalized oppression."

The approved resolution called on the NEJ to evaluate and address the impact of structural and institutional racism on people of color, specifically our African American brothers and sisters. Goals include increasing representative black leadership, strengthening the viability of black churches, and starting a new faith community with black youth and young adults in every episcopal area with a significant black population.

In the most recent Call to Action report submitted to the Northeastern Jurisdiction Vision Table and Episcopacy Committee, the Eastern PA Conference reported strides and next steps that suggest real movement against racial ignorance and inequity that have too long seemed rooted in place.

Indeed, the Conference's "Racial Justice Transformation Process" potentially made 2018 a turning point for the racial progress that the Call to Action initiative seeks; but that will only happen if the candid dialogues and revealing analyses that emerged can lead to deep learning and real change. This approach assumes that transformation begins by changing minds, changing hearts and changing behaviors. The purposeful integration of these aspects creates opportunity for changing systems.

Progress will be measured by:

1. A demonstrated capacity to engage productively in difficult conversations about race, with progressive understanding;
2. Evidence of shared decision-making and shared power, where people of color have more opportunities to serve, where their voices are heard and their opinions are valued; and
3. Greater financial equity in employment opportunities, appointment-making and equal pay for equal work across the board.

The NEJ Call to Action Resolution charges all levels of the church to be accountable in this vital work of transformation, justice and equity. Bishop Johnson continues her efforts to foster personal insight through relationship building and increased understanding of the dreams, desires, and obstacles confronting the racial ethnic clergy in her charge through multiple listening sessions with the various ethnic caucuses and groups; continued work with a cross cultural coach; addressing topics of racial justice in her blogs; and leading monthly bible study with incarcerated individuals at a State Correctional Institution. Although some planned activities have postponed by the pandemic, engaging with various constituencies via Zoom continues to be pursued.

Additionally, she participated in the development and implementation of a process to garner greater support and direction for Cross Racial/Cross Cultural Appointments and Ministries in conjunction with the General Commission on Religion and Race, the Cabinet and the EPA Commission on Religion and Race. This included a delineated guide for discerning readiness for both clergy and congregations to embrace CR/CC appointments, a means of continued support for such appointments, resources and training in intercultural competency for all in the conference.

At the conference leadership level, District Superintendents and Annual Conference staff are being exposed to both historical and current resources to help raise awareness of the facts and the impact of racist beliefs and practices whether they be overt, covert, conscious or implicit, institutionalized and systemic.

Across the conference, in districts and local churches efforts and progress is being made to address systemic barriers to full inclusion of all ethnicities and languages in our midst through educational resources, dialogues in small groups, promotion and reporting on racial-ethnic group events and ministries and encouraging all connectional ministries to address these issues in their specific contexts. Today, we are witness to increased language translation for our Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters in many communication platforms and various educational workshops and trainings. Eliminating language barriers are a commitment being made with earnest at the conference and district levels.

As related to the goal of increasing representative ethnically diverse leadership, our Conference Leadership Committee worked diligently to present to us a roster of leadership nominations that most closely captures all the diverse voices in our conference. This diversity not only includes ethnicity, gender, clergy and lay status, but also age differences whenever possible. Further, the racial-ethnic diversity of the Conference Staff includes 5 full-time and 1 part-time African Americans; 1 Full-Time Latino, and 1 Part-Time Latino.

Our Conference recognizes the value of diversity and seeks to become more inclusive in how we live and how we serve; as well as how clergy appointments and lay assignments are made and supported in Cross Racial/Cross Cultural ministry. Many opportunities are offered for clergy and laity to broaden knowledge, deepen understanding, and gain language skills designed to strengthen interpersonal and intercultural relationships. Workshops, retreats, dialogues, task forces, surveys and luncheons have been forums for addressing the proficiency of individuals, intricacies of groups, and complexities of systems.

The Cross Racial/Cross Cultural Ministry Team, completed training by the General Commission on Religion and Race, and is currently implementing a detailed process for insuring effective and successful CR/CC Ministries in our conference. The process designed to fulfill this goal is led by our District Superintendents and includes:

1. Assessments of readiness for a CR/CC Ministry appointment for both congregations and clergy;
2. Encouragement for personal and collective cultural proficiency and humility through trainings and workshops;
3. Engagement with suggested resources and participation with specially trained CR/CC Mentors during the first two years of a new CR/CC Appointment.

To address the goal of unchecked racism and white privilege, a cohort of 18 Euro-American clergy leaders undertook a Whites Confronting Racism journey facilitated by an experienced trainer. This intensive, year-long undertaking was designed as a response to the need for a safe place for white people to do the work specific to them around racism and take on greater responsibility for their own learning. These participants were open to confronting and working on their own inner dynamics of racism, white privilege, as well as the societal and institutional forms of racism. They are now committed to activating their anti-racist influence within the church and in society as a result.

At our 2018 Annual Conference we approved Resolution 2018-25: Relating to an Act of Justice Cancelling All Allowable Apportionments and Other Billings. In response to the action of the Annual Conference:

- EPA Conference released all Black Churches of the former Delaware Conference, Philadelphia Conference, and Eastern PA Conference, and/or their successor entities, from any further responsibility for any and all prior years' balances accumulated prior to December 31, 2017, except in the those instances disallowed by The Book of Discipline. Twenty-nine Black Churches were released from historical balances, amounting to \$1,394,700.
- At that time, Bishop Johnson publicly apologized for the acts of racism and the residual impact perpetrated against congregations of color.
- She also acknowledged that the act of cancelling the historic debt was a symbolic gesture that did not impact the on-going reality of the African American churches.
- In an effort to identify and understand the realities & needs of African American churches, interviews are being conducted which solicit answers to the question, "What

would be good news financially and programmatically?” There were 5 recurring responses:

1. Apportionment reduction
2. Interns to assist clergy with administrative tasks
3. Assistance with the infrastructure of the buildings
4. Plans for repurposing the buildings
5. Establishment of community partners for building usage

There has been some progress in addressing these matters in the past year.

Other efforts to respond to the NEJ Call to Action have included using proceeds from the sale of churches to fund an associate pastor in an African American congregation as a way of supporting a smooth transition of the long-term senior pastor; and to establish a new mission Center in the city of Chester. Funding was granted for 7 Urban Alliances and 11 initiatives for urban communities, many of which are communities of color addressing historic and current inequities. Two African-American congregations have initiated a new ministry creating new spaces for new people in the African-American community of Chester, PA - an Empowerment/Education Center and Assisted Living facility with funding from sale of closed UMC church property.

As mentioned earlier, all Connectional Ministries have been encouraged and charged to address racial equity and justice within their leadership and programming. This has resulted in many creative efforts, trainings, gatherings and events, geared to challenge and also engage participants. Each ministry is asked to not only offer opportunities that educate, but to engage in relationship-building across ethnic divides and cultural differences. As we continue to inform minds, build relationships with the potential of warming and changing hearts, we will then begin advocating and experiencing changed behaviors. As we collectively desire and expresses a change of behaviors, we will be able to effectively dismantling the racist systems in which we all participate. To this end, many ministry groups are actively engaged in education and relationship building efforts with accountability.

To highlight a few examples, let me mention:

1. The Board of Ordained Ministry’s efforts to increase cultural sensitivity and humility. They have worked with the experienced facilitators of the conference Changing Racism workshop to accomplish this task. Last year we adopted a resolution requiring each clergy person and leader in the conference to engage in at least 1 continuing education training on racism each

quadrenium, very much aligned with the requirement for Advanced Sexual Ethics refresher courses for all clergy.

2. Several district included workshops related to how to have conversations on race in the local church and implicit bias in their *Tools For Ministry* offerings.
3. The Children's Ministry is identifying a Christian Education curricular focusing on race relations, racial justice, and cultural humility for use in our local churches.
4. The Conference Commission on Youth Ministry engages in diversity training and cultural competency activities in each of its gatherings. It is the desire of this ministry's leadership to expose more of our UMC youth to such valuable experiences in the future. Additionally, the CCYM and Young Adult Ministries intentionally engage a culturally and ethnically diverse leadership team.
5. The Commission on Religion and Race hosted the first annual Celebrating Our Cultures Bar-B-Que at Camp Innabah where music, ethnic foods and fellowship was enjoyed by a vary diverse and engaged group of families.
6. The Board of Higher Education and West District held multi-racial clergy and laity gatherings to educate, promote and advocate for Educational Equity funding for PA public education. In partnership with POWER they have written petitions, written suggested legislation, and attended rallies at the state capital. Currently 200-300 people are engaged in the work in one way or another.
7. The Prison Ministry and Restorative Justice Team in partnership the with Commission on Religion and Race held a film viewing of "True Justice" followed by a panel discussion addressing mass incarceration and criminal justice reform drawing over 100 participants.
8. In response to the recent call for racial justice and police reform the Urban Ministry is currently facilitating the racial justice initiative "Fight For Floyd" addressing police brutality with communities of color through advocacy efforts around education, community development and policy development.

We pray these efforts continue to grow and expand as all members of the Eastern PA Conference - leadership, clergy, ministries, and local church members - all strive to open and change minds,

hearts, and behaviors. Let us stay the course, keep the current momentum and emphasis going as we let go of old, tired and ultimately destructive ways of being and doing the work of the church. The general church has committed to this work through the Dismantling Racism initiative offering resources and a town hall speaker series on a variety of justice issues with differing perspectives and voices. Our goal in EPA is to model to all our communities what the Beloved Community can look like and be where all God's people are valued and honored. Authentic relationships forged beyond traditional cultural divisions promise riches and blessings in ways we have yet to discover or experience. Let us follow our Lord's commandment to love one another as He has loved us. May we all truly be one in Christ where there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female. May our work to dismantle the vestiges of racism shine forth, with the help of the Holy Spirit.