

Dateline: Bethel Lutheran Church, October, 2022

It's the fall of 2022. A reporter from a local news organization has called Bethel asking for information about Bethel's work for racial justice. There's a buzz in Madison about real change happening since the George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery moment two years earlier. People are feeling it. Bethel is one of several churches and organizations working together to take on racism and the hurt and harm it's causing. The buzz is that what we're doing is working. The reporter is talking with each partner and it was now Bethel's turn. Here's what we told her.

It started in the fall of 2020 amid the coronavirus pandemic. Bethel Lutheran Church wanted to do something big – as a congregation -- about racial injustice. We called it *A Call to Justice and Mercy* because it felt different – more like a call than a program or a project. The announcement was greeted by a chorus of cheers, nods, a few shrugs and some skepticism...not altogether different from the reaction of the Black organizations we approached as partners. What was our motivation? Assuage white guilt? (We were then and still are a primarily white congregation.) Look the part of a big downtown church? Follow Jesus? Time would tell.

And time did. It soon became clear that this call was a journey. It wasn't only a call from God to do justice and love mercy but also a heartfelt call from our Black neighbors. It was a call into relationship, a call into a new way of being church. Many of us found ourselves walking down a road in the gospel we hadn't been on before, a road that took us to people in the community we'd never seen, toward voices we'd never heard or listened to.

Not everything the congregation did was a success. The curmudgeons continued to curmudgeon for a while. There were a few awkward moments with our Black partners. But for all that, from the beginning it felt like the spirit was at work among us.

For one thing, what started as an audacious 'what if' idea from the social justice team was quickly endorsed by many people including the lead pastor and Ministry Council. For another, as word got out, group after group jumped in. Voluntarily!

A Call to Justice and Mercy is part education and part action, wrapped in fellowship and worship. We were told by Black leaders that our education as a church of primarily white people had to come first. We had to learn about racial injustice and white privilege because we couldn't do anything about either until we understood their roots and effects. Our actions would be misdirected and ineffective unless we knew why we were doing them.

When we announced *A Call to Justice & Mercy* a lot of us wondered if our goal wasn't too lofty, too long-term. Can we really aim at changing outcomes like Black infant mortality, Black home ownership, reading levels for Black children, or recidivism rates for Black men? How will we know when we're done? From time to time we had to remind ourselves that *A Call to Justice*

and Mercy was a *call*, not a project, and that calls are journeys. Someone who is called is always becoming who they are called to be.

Almost everyone found it uncomfortable to face racial injustice as a white person in a predominantly white congregation. Yet the call was to step out of the comfort zone that perpetuates the status quo. The promised comfort was that we would be in this discomfort together. We would be stepping out together.

Together we would educate ourselves - read books and watch movies that challenged us. Together we would talk about how the United States got to this point, the dominant culture, our biases and beliefs about race, and pray for wisdom and grace. Together we would sing songs and – when the pandemic ended - cook and eat and worship with our Black partners. Together we would listen to the stories of our Black neighbors, advocate for them, roll up our sleeves and work *with* them. This then was the general plan: education, partnership, action. Or, in more Jesus-y words: see and listen, pray, go and do.

Each month during that first year there was a Big Read, a Movie Night, a Big Sing, a Discussion Forum, a Story Time – a congregation-wide activity that brought us together in person or virtually. These activities were followed by conversations in pairs, families and small groups – women’s circles, men’s groups, youth groups, and study groups. Some individuals or groups chose to dig deeper - read another book or two, for example. Everyone was invited to participate including children and youth. In fact, our first Big Read was a young adult book! With every ‘Big’ there were discussion questions for families and small groups. There were also related activities for Sunday School and youth, bible studies for adults, and retreats at Bethel Horizons, our camp near Dodgeville. In addition to opening our eyes to racism, we came to a new understanding of God’s restorative justice, reconciliation, and what it really means to be a faith community.

When we were ready to move from education to action, we consulted our partners.

Our partners were Black churches and organizations, mostly in Madison and Dane County, who wanted to work with us. The operative word being *with*. Our role wasn’t to *do for* but to *work with* our partners on projects we agreed were priorities. Our partners knew what really worked because they had programs that were already working. We didn’t have to reinvent the wheel. By joining with our partners, we would increase the impact of these programs to the point where together we could actually move the needle. In addition to the partnerships with Black organizations, Bethel also partnered with downtown churches and other ELCA churches in town.

It was a natural transition from our education focus to working with partners on these projects. Bethel’s 50+ groups found creative ways to participate. Members of women’s groups in particular were appalled to learn that Wisconsin’s Black infant mortality rate is the worst in the nation. They’re working with several partners on this issue. Bethel’s Fine Arts Committee jumped in along with the Blanket Workshop quilters to look at the tradition of Black quilts as

stories and explore the idea of a quilt show. The Youth Group, along with Bethel's Media Ministry and Camera Club, hatched a plan to tell first-person stories of racism. Several men's groups have taken on projects to break the cycle of recidivism like assembling and distributing backpacks for men released from prison with nothing, and forming 'circles of support.' Together we've built ten homes through Habitat for Humanity. And we've just started talking about creating community garden that would employ youth and provide food for our food pantries.

Once the pandemic subsided and we didn't have to socially distance, *everyone* had a desire for fellowship. These occasions have become a highlight of *A Call to Justice and Mercy*. For the past two years, Bethel has hosted community picnics at Bethel Horizons. Black church partners have invited us to potlucks, hymn sings and other music-making.

It's now been two years. We see how far we've come and how far we have to go -- that this call is indeed a journey. We see more clearly that being the hands and feet of God's justice and mercy is never done. We see what we're capable of as a community of faith which is more than anyone ever thought possible.

Last month we had a show of quilts by Black artists that started as an idea two years ago from the Fine Arts Committee. Some of the quilts were very old, others new but the portrayal of struggle was the same from slavery to Jim Crow to mass incarceration. Like most things we've done as part of this call, the handful of people on the Fine Arts Committee had no idea what they were getting into. They ended up partnering with the Wisconsin Historical Society and the Chazen Museum of Art. But of all the things we've done as a congregation these past two years, that show drew us together as a faith community and as a Madison community more than anything else. Who knew?

It wasn't just a quilt show. There were docent tours led by women from Bethel and partner churches, food (of course!) from all of the partners, choir-led sing-alongs in the evenings of songs that echoed the stories in the quilts, and hands on quilting activities for children. The youth had interviewed the artisan quilters and their video stories were playing on monitors.

But the highlight was a parallel show of quilts in the next room. It was a show of baby quilts - the latest batch ready for the baby kits - made by women from Bethel and partner organizations who had come together to make them. The quilters were there too to tell their stories. It was a room filled with hope, with voices describing the signs that Black infant mortality in Dane County had started to turn around and the work that had yet to be done.