



Central  
District  
Conference

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Mennonite Church USA

# focus

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KNOWING CHRIST'S LOVE—ANSWERING GOD'S CALL

## Anti-racism accountability group forms at Assembly

*Karl Shelly, co-pastor, Assembly Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.*

Cornel West, noted philosopher and activist, has said that in the face of white supremacy, which has been present in this country from the start and won't disappear anytime soon, the work of anti-racism involves "trying again, failing again, and next time failing better." For many white people who desire an end to racism, the journey all too often is one of trying something, getting discouraged, and turning our attention elsewhere.

Yet the power and prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement this summer turned the national spotlight back on the moral mandate to seek racial justice. As a result, an anti-racism support and accountability group formed at Assembly Mennonite Church. It is made up of those who want to be more proactive in anti-racism advocacy but who don't always know what to do, as well as those of us who have trouble following through on our best intentions. It recognizes that anti-racism work is long and hard, that white people can quickly feel paralyzed by the scope of racism, and that meeting regularly with others who have similar yearnings can be a useful way to share ideas, provide encouragement, and hold each other accountable.

In the past Assembly has had anti-racism study groups, book groups, and public advocacy groups. While studying, reading, and advocating together continues to be important, this group has a different purpose. Its focus isn't on a group or congregational task, but on furthering individual commitment to stand against white supremacy.

*This group's purpose is "furthering individual commitment to stand against white supremacy."*

For four months now, a group of a dozen folks, all white, have met monthly over Zoom with the purpose of naming our intentions out loud, having the accountability that comes with doing so, having others ask questions and offer ideas on how to proceed, and having all of our imaginations fed in the process. Some of the initial intentions named by individuals included:

- I want to go beyond lament; to go beyond awareness-raising and education to concrete actions;
- I want to help my school alumni group address the racism that has been named as part of our past;
- I want to address the racism that is present at my workplace;
- I want to get beyond being paralyzed by despair, sadness, and outrage;
- I want to explore what anti-racism work looks like here, in our local community;
- I want to address my struggle of not knowing what to do, and fear that my attempts will be insensitive or misguided;
- I want to deepen my understanding of white supremacy and privilege;
- I wonder how to work for change but not fall for the temptation common among white people to fix things.

John Biewen, audio program director at Duke University known for his examinations of whiteness, has spoken on the importance of white people talking to each other about racism. He's said, "The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the

product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives.” In the end, perhaps that is what this group at Assembly is seeking to do—scrutinize our lives as white people in a white-protecting and Black and brown-attacking society, and asking what we’re going to do about this.

## Reflections from accountability group participants

### Rose Stutzman

I was glad to hear that we were forming an anti-racism accountability group at Assembly. It is not the first time we have done similar work, but this offers a place of support. I know critical race theory in my head. I’m hoping that the ongoing work will open my heart. It’s too easy to settle back into unnoticed and unquestioned white privilege even though the recent murders caused me to again grieve deeply. It’s too easy for me, left on my own, to not be aware of my own implicit bias. People within the group have different goals based on their work, age, and social interactions. I’ve gotten ideas from others in the group of what to read or pay attention to. I’m working on three general areas:

- Hearing black voices in what I choose to read, in the news, on podcasts. By allowing “black voices to matter,” I’ve been noticing tremendous resilience, wisdom and courage. I’m hoping that these voices will create in me understanding and open-hearted attitudes.
- Thinking about how to give money or how I buy things. How can my giving or purchasing lean toward more equal opportunity?
- In order to combat implicit bias, I’m making a regular practice of “seeing” people of color that I know and love. This extends beyond people I actually know to authors/activists like Bryan Stevenson. Whether close to me or only an acquaintance, I imagine each person’s face and then reflect on the high regard I have for each one. I think about what makes each one special. I’m hoping that the positive regard and love will spill over when I meet or see people I don’t know.

A number of years ago, I read the book *Pink and Say* by Patricia Polacco to my first graders at an international school in Kenya. Based on a true story, it tells of two friends who fought

for the Union Army, one black and one white. The story shows how racial bias affected how each was treated after the war. It is a painful story to process at any age. A white American boy told me afterward, “This story made me so sad. I wanted my country to have done things right. I thought my country was good and fair.” I’m discovering that none of this work happens without grieving and then working through the pain of giving witness to the grave harm done in the past and the harm that continues today.

### Ruth Ann Gardner

I am deeply dismayed about systemic racism all around us. I am aware of the white privilege I have. I want to do what I can to effect a more just society with equal opportunity for all. It is a difficult task to accomplish and so easy to become complacent in our “easy” lives. I find it helpful to have a group of like-minded folks to help me be accountable in the effort. If I set out to take an action, it helps to actually do it if I know I’ll be reporting to them. I also gather ideas from other group members.

My activities include reading relevant books to gain more awareness and guidance, contacting my senators and representative on relevant issues, supporting petitions by others, and looking for businesses owned by people of color to support. These efforts seem small and progress is slow, but I feel compelled to keep trying. Being part of an accountability group helps!

## Central District Conference Mid-Year Meetings

Two Zoom gatherings are scheduled this year in place of the usual Regional Meetings. Choose one and register in advance:

**March 6, 9:30-11:45 am ET**

**March 27, 9:30-11:45 am ET**

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