

March 2021

Exploring influence of biblical interpretation on white privilege

by Suzanne Lind, Florence Church of the Brethren-Mennonite

During the spring of 2020, as Covid-19 and political tensions became primary concerns in the United States, the worship committee of Florence Church of the Brethren-Mennonite (Constantine, Mich.) met to plan continued virtual worship services for the summer months.

The Florence congregation is made up almost entirely of white people who try to live justly and humbly, but who are increasingly aware of the innate privilege which most members enjoy. Worship planners decided the time was right to delve more deeply into the difficult issue of white privilege on a very personal level.

Pastor Devon Miller, who is also an anthro-

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pologist, and Naomi Wenger, contemplative and theologian, prepared a series of meditations focused on issues of racism and white privilege.

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The Zoom medium was a challenge for intimate teaching and sharing. Allowing time for break-out rooms and personal reactions increased the sense that all members were close enough to react, discuss and struggle

together with the interpretations presented.

A meditation titled "We Did Not Know It," based on the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis, pointed out the different ways in which the character Jacob can be interpreted. "In this story, we find in Jacob a model for how not to behave: stealing the family honor by playing fast and loose with what is sacred, deceiving a blind man for his blessing ... a scoundrel with a silver spoon problem," said Naomi Wenger. Comparing Jacob to many of us, when we cannot see beneath our good intentions to our deep involvement in a determinedly white culture, Wenger concludes, "What Jacob constantly looks out for is his own interest, unaware of the pain he causes others, and always, himself. He could be the father of 'whiteness.'"

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Central District Conference leaders have made a commitment to undoing racism and building intercultural competence, encouraging congregations and members throughout the conference to do this in their own contexts. We are sharing stories of these efforts in the newsletters, *Reporter* and *focus*. Please send stories of what your congregation is doing to cdceditor@gmail.com.

Note resources on racism for your congregation, available from Central District Conference, linked on page 2.

— Mary E, Klassen, CDC editor

Exploring link between biblical interpretation and white privilege (continued)

Later in the summer, Devon Miller spoke about “The Economics of Race: Cotton, Land and Labor.” The introduction to this meditation leads directly to one of the core questions about white privilege in our history:

“The Psalmist praises God for the miraculous deeds performed on behalf of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in securing the land as part of an everlasting covenant with the Jewish nation. The land of Canaan was to be their ‘inheritance.’ Yet ... the voice of God is largely absent during these formative years in the fledgling people of Hebrew origin.

“These Hebrew-speaking people enter the land of Canaan as nomads, and establish an economy built on livestock. For it to flourish, they need land and they need labor, and

they were no fools in how to gain the upper hand. They used all the devices mentioned [previously]—lies, theft, violence, slavery—and then turned around and called their accumulated wealth an inheritance from God. Is it any wonder we as Americans see our own wealth as God’s blessing? But where did it come from?”

Building on these and similar texts and discussions, the Florence congregation struggled with questions of their own personal, regional and national histories, using the discipline of the lectionary to study the Bible with openness to new ideas and interpretations. The resulting over-arching question, “What is mine/ours to do?” was imprinted firmly in personal and congregational hearts. 10

Edith Espinal moves home

Edith Espinal, who lived in sanctuary at Columbus (Ohio) Mennonite Church for more than three years, moved to her own home recently. With changes in the approach to undocumented immigrants since January, she has received assurances that she is not an immediate target for deportation.

Reporting this to the congregation, pastor Joel Miller wrote, “Remember today, February 18. Today Edith is able to leave the sanctuary of the church to live her life with her family. This is an answer to months and years of prayer. It’s a result of Edith’s patience and persistence, and the support of this congregation and wider community.”

Read the story from *Anabaptist World*:
<https://anabaptistworld.org/immigrant-leaves-3-year-stint-in-sanctuary-as-president-unveils-plan/>

The story also notes that Chapel Hill (North Carolina) Mennonite Fellowship provided sanctuary for and supported other immigrants in their community.

The *Columbus Dispatch* also published a story about Edith’s return home:
<https://bit.ly/3kVuYIU> 10

Resources on white privilege and racism

Visit the CDC website for a wide array of resources, organized for **Learning, Worship, Acting Together, and Families and Children.**

mcusacdc.org/white-privilege-racism

The conference’s Missional Church Committee is offering a grant to CDC member congregations whose congregants are committed to engaging in anti-racist work together. For more information about the grant and to apply, visit:

mcusacdc.org/resources/anti-racism-grant/

Mennonite Church USA has posted a timeline of Black history in the Mennonite Church. View it here:

<https://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-portal/resource/african-american-mennonite-history-timeline/>

An artist reflects on creating a portrait of George Floyd

by Dave Kendall, member of Southside Fellowship, Elkhart, Ind.

I'd been working on a series of collage-based mixed media portraits for over a month in spring 2020 when the news of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis came. Words failed me. Like for so many others, anger was a big part of my own response.

How could a person who swore to serve and protect do exactly the opposite? George Floyd pleaded for his breath. Those on the street recording the scene with their phones implored the policeman to let up. Officer Chauvin showed no mercy. Floyd called out to his deceased mother for help and the officer and his fellow police did nothing. We now hear stories about how the other cops on the scene say that they would have been ridiculed by their fellow officers had they tried to help. In those eight minutes and forty-six seconds, they chose to be implicated, rather than help Mr. Floyd.

I have friends and family members who serve as police officers. All of them are fine examples of what it means to serve and protect. In my opinion, it is absolutely possible to support Black Lives Matter and our police force units. I believe that we have to bring cops who act as judge, jury and executioner to justice. When

officers are clearly guilty of abuse of power or murder, they have to be convicted.

On May 26 (the day after George Floyd's death), Carrie Lee asked me if I'd be interested in making a George Floyd portrait done in the mixed media style I'd been working in. Initially, I wasn't sure it was my space as a white artist to speak into the moment. However, I finally understood what she was saying. She was reminding me of how important it was for us to help amplify the voices of those who have been unheard for far too long. She was asking me to say (through artwork) what Dr. Martin Luther

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David Kendall's portrait of George Floyd is layered with scraps from news media and the background bricks contain names of other Black people killed by police in the last few years.

An artist reflects (continued)

King Jr. said more than 50 years ago: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Dr. King spoke so many powerful words, but this is the quote that resonates with me most often. I suppose that’s because it’s very simple. If we hope for a peaceful place to live, then we need to name and fight against the injustices we see.

There was an additional layer to this for us, and one that struck at the heart of our own life together. This was the reminder and realization that our marriage would have been considered a crime in many states in this country not even sixty years ago. An Asian woman and white man would not have been able to marry in all of the southern states and Missouri before 1967 when the Supreme Court struck down that prohibition in the case Loving vs. Virginia. That’s not that long ago! Like many, Mildred and Richard Loving stood as symbols in the struggle against racism. Floyd now stands as yet another symbol in the ongoing struggle against racism. His selfie in front of the brick wall has become iconographic.

This portrait of George Floyd is made of layers, both materially and symbolically. I chose to render the main composition with tiny scraps of print media (magazine, newspaper, legal pad paper, etc.). This achieved the texture and general aesthetic I was wanting. I also wanted the layers of media to act as a way to both hide and reveal meaning in the piece. We’re bombarded by so much media these days that stories seem to come and go so quickly that we seldom have the time to fully digest them. If you look at the work closely, you’ll see words and phrases. Some of them speak directly to the ideas and work of Black Lives Matter, but much of it is more random—like the way so much of the news in our world comes to us only to be covered up by a barrage of other stories. George Floyd stands out among it all to say, “No more.”

I found the brick wall behind George to be emblematic. Here is where you can find the names of just some of the black people who were killed by police over the last few years. I wrote their names on legal paper and blended them into the background.

There are fifteen names including that
Reporter Central District Conference

of George Floyd; however, all of the bricks represent injustices. The ones with names are merely the ones we know about.

George Floyd took this photo of himself and now artists like myself are using it to help tell a bigger story. In the photo, his expression is neutral. His emotion is unclear. I interpreted this as a blank slate. A new place to start. A reset button on how we might begin to move forward as a nation in squashing the ugly stain of slavery and racism in our country. Now that it’s out there, I hope its message is clear and helps at least a little in the hard work ahead. 10

Financial report
February 28, 2021

Year-to-date contributed support	\$151,723
Year-to-date plan	\$153,609
Difference between giving and plan . .	-\$1,886
Year-to-date expenses	\$132,355
Year-to-date plan	\$158,592
Difference between expenses and plan	-\$26,237

At the end of the second trimester of the budget year, Central District Conference’s financial situation continues to be very strong, with income higher than usual for this time of year, and expenses significantly lower. Currently we are running a surplus of more than \$22,000 income over expenses. Both congregational giving and overall income are very close to spending plan projections. Predictably, every budget category is underspent except for telecommunications and postage, reflecting a higher-than-normal dependence on virtual and print communication and contact due to the COVID epidemic.

As always we can be grateful for the faithful support of member congregations and for careful administrative direction from staff.

Report provided by Timothy Lind, conference treasurer

Doug's Mug: Loose change

by Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister

I have often had a mug, bowl or other container in my bedroom in which to empty my loose change at the end of the day. Sometimes it was the penny or nickel I found on the sidewalk. Usually, it was what was left over after a purchase at the hardware or grocery store.



Eventually the coins make their way to the bank and get transformed into bills. Often these bills provide a little extra cash for a trip or vacation. For various reasons, among them privilege and fate, I've never had to scrape the bottom of the coin

container to purchase my next meal, or make rent or pay the electric bill.

Jesus and the Gospel writers seem to be interested in coins. Along Jesus' journey to the cross, he overturns the tables of the money changers in the temple, sending coins flying. Later, Jesus is confronted with a question of taxes and conscience. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" "Bring me a coin," he responds, as he makes his point. Then there is the widow, offering "everything she has" in the two small coins. What about the thirty pieces of silver that Judas receives for his betrayal of Jesus and then his repentant tossing of the coins back to the priests? Oh, and on their way to Jerusalem, Jesus tells Peter to find a coin in the mouth of a fish so they could pay the temple tax. What are we to learn from the coins?

During my sabbatical (Nov. 1-Jan. 31) I was reminded again and again of the importance of coins and the consequences of not having enough of them. Two books that I read were powerful reminders of this.

I, Rigoberta Menchú is an account of the first 25 years (1969-1984) of Rigoberta's life. She is an indigenous woman from the central highlands of Guatemala. In stark, vivid and horrific detail, she described the harsh subsistence life her family and community experienced as the result of abject poverty and systemic economic

injustice. Often the few coins the family was able to save from working in the *fincas* (huge corporate farms) were spent purchasing medicine and food at the "company store." Rigoberta was the recipient of the **1992 Nobel Peace Prize*** "for her struggle for social justice and ethno-cultural reconciliation based on respect for the rights of indigenous peoples."

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck (1939) is the fictional account of the Joad family as they make their way out of dustbowl poverty in Oklahoma to the "promised land" in California. Manipulated, used and taken advantage of, their hopes of emerging out of poverty never materialize. Again, powerful economic forces prove too much for them. (Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize in 1962.)

This season of Pandemic has exposed the reality of poverty and economic injustice in its many forms as people scrape the bottoms of their coin containers just to eat a meal. When Jesus experienced economic injustice, he drew attention to coins and all they represented. Perhaps "loose change" is drawing our attention to what makes for a just economy, the beloved community and a greater understanding of God's peace. ☸

* <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1992/tum/biographical/>

Recommended resources

At the first CDC Mid-year Gathering on March 6, the following resources were recommended by Doug Luginbill, conference minister, and other participants:

Widerstand Anti-racism training:
<https://www.widerstandconsulting.org/>

Clergy Debt Reduction Grant from Everence:
<https://www.everence.com/financial-services/for-churches/pastoral-financial-wellness-program>

Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery, soon to release a document on reparations:
<https://dofdmendo.org/>

2021 CDC gatherings

A **second Mid-year Gathering** will be held by Zoom on Saturday, March 27, 9:30 to 11:45 am

To register and get the link to join, visit:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/join/join?pwd=Zm9udjJGj1SQNNDUQ1z%2%AO>

The Annual Meeting will be held by Zoom on Saturday, June 26, from 9 am to 4:30 pm. Eastern time. Mennonite Women will meet at 4:45 pm via Zoom. More information will be shared when it is available.

Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship featured

Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship, a new congregation requesting membership in Central District Conference, was featured recently in *Anabaptist World*.

The congregation was introduced in the July 2020 issue of *Reporter*, beginning the year of discernment before delegates vote on bringing the church into the conference. The recent story gives additional information about who the congregation is and how they discerned that they wish to join CDC. Follow this link:

<https://anabaptistworld.org/a-church-shows-up-unannounced/>

Voices Together resources

Streaming license database

MennoMedia has prepared a spreadsheet with information about what license is needed for each song in the new *Voices Together* song collection. This is valuable information for congregations that live-stream worship services or upload recordings of services to the internet. The database tells users if CCLI, OneLicense or other service manages the license for the use or if the hymn is in the public domain.

Follow this link to the spreadsheet:

<http://tiny.cc/n58utz>

Or you may visit the *Voices Together* website:

<http://VoicesTogetherHymnal.org/resources/>



MennoMedia also offers curriculum to introduce *Voices Together* to a congregation. It includes what is in the new collection and how decisions were made. In addition, a four-session faith-formation study is available for adults, based on the new Worship Leader edition of *Voices Together*. Visit VoicesTogetherHymnal.org/resources to find these materials.

Camp Friedenswald summer plans

With necessary adaptations due to COVID-19, Camp Friedenswald is looking forward to welcoming campers back to the peaceful woods in summer 2021. Watch for information to come about registration and what is planned.

High School Camp:
June 13-17

Junior High Camp:
June 20-24

Junior Camp: July 4-8

Pre-Junior Camp: June 27-July 1

Family Camps: July 12-16 and July 19-23



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