



Atlanta congregations witness for racial justice

by James Rissler, Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship with contributions from Anton Flores-Maisonet

George Floyd was murdered just as I was about to start my sabbatical. As people throughout the world demanded a justice that has eluded our country for far too long, I wondered how Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship and Berea Mennonite Church would respond. I was confident that some would join protests in Atlanta. I was hopeful that this would be an inflection point in our nation's history, its arc bending a little more towards justice. And I wondered how our congregations, meeting together via Zoom since the pandemic began and moving toward merging to become a new congregation, might grow in our understanding of and commitment to antiracism.

When I returned from sabbatical three months later, I found that our congregations had begun holding Black Lives Matter vigils in front of Berea Mennonite Church within a couple weeks of George Floyd's murder, and had continued to do so most Mondays throughout the summer. Anton Flores, who organized our vigils, invited us with the vision of "a group of Mennonites gathering at Berea Mennonite and lining Bouldercrest Drive with signs of solidarity, lament, and hope that one day black lives will matter." He added perhaps longingly, "We could even sing together!"

At least while I was there, we didn't do much singing. Masked and physically distanced, about ten of us (of 25-30 semi-regular worship attenders) showed up most Mondays from 4:30-5:30 p.m. Some made our own signs. Some brought signs from their front yards. As we neared the election, we shifted our focus to the intersectionality of racial justice and the upcoming elections. We held signs that read, "Honk

if you've voted!" and "Black Votes Matter."

We continued our vigils for almost six months, pausing around Thanksgiving. Marilyn McGinnis shared: "One of the things that was most meaningful to me about the vigils was that we continued with them for weeks past the height of the big, public demonstrations and media coverage and that still we got so much response from people driving by, honking and waving. It was a welcome affirmation that our messages of racial justice resonated with many, many people and that the outrage many folks felt in the early months had a chance of lasting for the long haul and bringing about sustained change."

For some, this was the first time we had participated in protests. It felt good to publicly bear witness alongside our faith community members. Brenda Shelby brought her biracial grandchildren one Monday, because she wanted them to see "that action is just as important as words." *(continued on next page)*



Anton Flores-Maisonet and Bill Carr at a weekly vigil.

From Atlanta Mennonite Church Facebook page. Used with permission.

It felt good to be waved to and honked at by passersby. Occasionally people would stop to take pictures of us and express their gratitude for our small witness. Rarely would someone express disagreement with our vigil. One African American woman stopped her car, rolled down her window, and lectured us saying, "All lives matter." This interaction was unsettling but led to good debriefing, reminding us the work of Gospel solidarity is much deeper than even a symbolic public act. The vigils also deepened our sense of community with one another. Week after week, this cause-driven community would catch up with one another and find joy and purpose during a time of COVID and controversy.

As a faith community participating in a movement, we could sense our faithful acts and prayers joining that of others seeking God's shalom. As we drove home, many of us passed other small groups engaged in similar demonstrations. Upon seeing our socially-

distanced colleagues, we'd honk our horns and wave in support.

During virtual Sunday School we also reflected together on what it means to be antiracist, using the Widerstand curriculum that Mennonite Church USA and CDC have recommended. As a result of both the action and theological reflection, more of our congregants are seeing with new eyes how systemic racism affects so much of everyday life, and now more freely share these observations with each other.

Our congregations are predominantly privileged white people. We want to unmask our white privilege, and wonder how we can better stand in solidarity with BIPOC* communities. We confess that anything we do will not be enough, but we will keep looking for the next most faithful step toward justice and the beloved community, until God's kingdom and kin-dom are as present on earth as in heaven.

**Black, Indigenous and People of Color*

Reflections from participants

"I think BLM was important to do to let the community of our church know that we are supporting the movement. I took my biracial grandkids with me one time because I felt it was important for them to see what a protest could look like and for them to see that action is just as important as words." — Brenda

We were heartened by the number of African-American people driving or walking past who honked, waved, etc. We hoped that they likewise would feel encouraged, would feel that they are not alone in the struggle but are genuinely supported. Obviously, that support has to be sustained and put into action in the time to come. — David & Sharon Rensberger

It was good to put legs to our belief that Black lives matter and to stand together with signs to represent that. It is a step in a long process of reconciliation. — Marilyn Schertz

Being out there every week with signs saying Black lives matter made me conscious of my lack of action to affirm the value of so many Black lives that I have been seeing in the growing numbers of people without shelter in the city. Although I know that no one person can do everything, it sometimes felt a little hollow

and hypocritical to me to be out there with signs while I so often drove by people on the street who must feel like their lives don't matter much at all to me. — Marilyn McGinnis (See more of her quote on page 1.)

Our vigils have been my first introduction to engaging in "protest" but our times have felt more like a "support system" to those who pass on foot or by vehicle at 1988 Bouldercrest Drive SE since we would see familiar vehicles each week. The response of honking and waving gave a feeling of solidarity—them to me and me to them. For me, it has been a baby step for expressing my thoughts in a public way ... very small, public way, I know. Even just writing the sign—BLACK LIVES MATTER—gave me a feeling of being involved in something much bigger than me. It was small step in being able to interact with those who live in the church community. With the comments about the pumpkins, it showed that we were a vital part of the community each October anyway. — Kathleen

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