

The church's work of anti-oppression

by Regina Shands Stoltzfus

A significant part of the work of the church is the work that I label the work of anti-oppression. This understanding is directly related to my faith being nurtured by a church, primarily African American, which was intentionally racially integrated from its very beginnings. Being intentional is a significant key to growing a strong, healthy, multiracial congregation—the intent is to be as diverse racially (one might add ethnically, culturally, economically as well) and to be anti-racist (as well as anti-sexist, etc.) In other words, diversity in the church doesn't just happen.

The first Mennonite Church for African Americans began in 1898 in Welsh Mountain, Pa., in response to poor Blacks accepting the gospel after receiving relief from poverty, and desiring to be in Christian community with those who brought it—a congregation of white Mennonites. However, it was a problem when Blacks began to attend the white church. As in other denominations at that time, the solution was to provide Blacks with a church of their own rather than admit them into the white fellowship. In the 1930s, several other Black churches were started, and between 1933 and 1948, twelve more. By 1950, the total number of Black Mennonites was approximately 150. During the years from 1950 to 1980, the membership grew to a little over 1600 members in 49 Black and integrated churches. Today there are approximately 57 African-American or integrated congregations in Mennonite Church USA.

History shows that the early attempts to move beyond the missionary model of relationships with new members from racially diverse backgrounds met with various measures of success. Listening to the voices of people of color began to foster a shift in understanding of fledgling congregations that were struggling to create a Mennonite identity on their own terms. The well-intentioned white folks at first believed that becoming one new community in Christ



Regina Shands Stoltzfus blesses a participant at the MW USA 2002 Women in Conversation national retreat where Regina was a keynote speaker.

Photo by Rhoda Keener

meant that the Blacks would become like them; when this shift in cultural identity was resisted, new understandings and forms of relationship had to be created. At the heart of many individuals was the genuine desire to represent the new reality that is to be found in the coming of God's kingdom. Yet, while it may not have been difficult to see how the problem of racism "out there" needed to be challenged, it seemed it was more difficult to understand how that challenge could be exercised "at home," and in particular, how power and resources would be shared within the structure of the church.

These struggles are by no means completely resolved these many years later. Yet the history of this work has deepened and broadened the understanding of what it means to be a peace church in the 21st century. The goals of the mission projects like the ones that started my church were evangelism—reaching out to the lost. Yet, the reality is that many of the people who came into these churches had a faith tradition already; they were not lost as in "unsaved," but they needed a church home, and a community of faith as a basis from which to confront the realities of living within a racist society. This is the work of the church and an indication of how communities of faith can live into God's vision of shalom—wholeness and health.

My early congregational context—a primarily African American church in a large urban center—prepared me to have an analysis of race and class. During the early years, the neighborhood surrounding our church experienced white flight. As the nation was embroiled in the Black struggle for civil rights, the denomination was itself wrestling with what it meant to be a predominantly white church structure that had been evangelizing in Black and brown communities, with that evangelization project starting to bear fruit. Members of minority communities were asking/demanding that the church respond to the injustices being perpetrated upon these communities, both from the larger society and

within the denomination itself.

Roberta Webb, one of Harrisonburg's first African American Mennonites, surrounded by her daughters, Nancy, Peggy, and Ada in the mid-1940s.

Photo from Crossroads Alumni Magazine, Eastern Mennonite University, Spring 2007.



Those who come from a traditional Black church experience know the experience of the Black church being a center of power within the community. Additionally, Black women's experience is key to understanding the vitality found in the life of the church—a place where one has agency. In the context of a church that holds an identity formulated on the proposition of being radical for the cause of Christ and the gospel, for being radically committed to an idea of community, and to find oneself in church congregations

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planted by pastors and mission workers who didn't mind going against the grain—it is not surprising that these churches would nurture congregants who were not content with a status quo that relegated some members to second class citizenry. This is a part of our heritage that should be celebrated and perpetuated. 📖

Suggested Reading

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