

From: Sophia Weidner <sophiaweidner@outlook.com>
Sent: Friday, June 19, 2020 1:49 PM
To: leadershipteam@universitymennonite.org
Subject: A Letter to Leadership

Dear University Mennonite Church,

We are writing church leaders and the congregation in response to UMC's action taken last week in writing a statement to the local police department and officials.

First, we want to acknowledge your efforts to engage in this modern racial justice movement, and to challenge ourselves to do more—specifically, taking a stronger stance on our role in this movement.

As children of UMC, many of us are not regular attenders, but we hold UMC close to our hearts and attribute our values and belief system of peace and social justice to our Mennonite upbringing. We are grateful to be raised in this community that upholds these values not just in our words, but in our actions. UMC has always valued the voices and opinions of young people, and so as young people leading the current movement across the nation, we feel compelled to voice our perspective. We hope you will consider and reflect on our perspective on living out our values of peace and social justice, and what it means to fight for true, systematic change in our world.

Words are a powerful tool, and we understand creating this statement was not an easy process. We also recognize that as a primarily white congregation, with an all-white leadership, it is imperative to be critical of our actions, holding ourselves accountable not just by our intent, but by our impact.

We think it is important to highlight a brief history of law enforcement in this country to bring context to this statement. Contrary to history lessons telling us the first system of law enforcement began in Boston in 1838, this history neglects to mention the slave patrols or “slave catcher” groups formed as early as the 17th century. When the 300 years of slavery began in 1619, white citizens were encouraged to participate in the catching and lynching of run-away slaves to keep “social order.” When fighting in this movement for racial justice, we need to understand that the system of law and order created in this country, founded on the genocide of Indigenous people and built on the backs of the Black community, is inherently violent and racist.

So when we politely ask local law enforcement to make reforms and take accountability for violent acts, are we, as a group of primarily white people, really engaging in the fight for social justice work? Or is our allyship merely performative? Are we showing up in this fight out of guilt and shame for not acting sooner, or are we putting those feelings behind us, to be able to truly listen and engage fully in what the Black community has been fighting for, for centuries?

We reflect on what nonviolence and peace truly mean. We ask you to reflect with us on how peace does not equate with nice. Peace does not equate with polite. Peace does not equate with gracious. Instead, peace equates with doing everything in our power to promote social justice and freedom for all, especially as a group of people whose privileges exist because of the oppression of others. Jesus walking into the temple and turning tables was not a violent act, but an act of peace and solidarity, directly challenging systems of violence. So as we continue to have discussions in the Mennonite community about how we show up in solidarity with the Black community, we must resist centering ourselves, our feelings, our shortcomings in the past, because this does nothing to address the current violence inflicted on the Black community. Instead, we urge you to consult with and uplift the voices of Black churches and activist groups, like the 320 Coalition, in their demands for justice.

We ask you to also consider – instead of advocating for reform of a violent system rooted in white supremacy, instead of cooperating with this system that we as white people have benefitted from for centuries, instead of thanking this system for doing the bare minimum to appease the public, yet refuses to release the names and hold accountable the officers who killed Osaze Osagie – that you join us in our call to abolish this system completely. To truly live out our values of non-violence and social justice without fear. Because you are right in your closing statement, the time for change is now.

Therefore, we are advocating for UMC to take a stand on the side of social justice and

1. TRULY listen to the Black community that has been fighting for police reforms for centuries. We urge you to consult with and uplift the voices of Black churches and activist groups, like the 320 Coalition, in their demands for justice.
2. Demand the release of the names of the police officers who killed Osaze Osagie and hold them accountable. Charity begins at home!
3. Take a bolder stance for Black Lives Matter. Jesus turned tables in the temple in opposition to an unrighteous system. In the image of Christ, we shouldn't be polite in asking for radical changes.
4. Advocate for defunding and abolishing the police. We shouldn't ask for the bare minimum of reforms. Why fight for a violent system rooted in white supremacy?

Preserved in the historic 1770 Germantown Mennonite Meetinghouse is the table upon which the 1688 Petition (the first written petition against slavery in the “new world”) was signed. The abolition of slavery was seen by most at that time as radical and unrealistic. We invite you to imagine and demand a new, more just world, as some of our ancestors did.

With solidarity,

Daphne Weidner
Jesse Weidner
Sophia Weidner
Mike Osiemo
Caleb Yoder

Marcy Smucker
Jonas Smucker
Maeve Smucker
Brian Charles
Caroline Hall

Here are links to the 320 Coalition's demands, as well as the 8 to Abolish demands:

<http://www.statecollege.com/news/local-news/320-coalition-seeks-response-to-demands,1483433/>

<https://www.8toabolition.com/>