

Interfaith Panel on Faith in Action for Racial Equity
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Summary of Comments by Rev. Anne E. Derse, Deacon
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6701 Wisconsin Avenue,
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About St. John's Norwood

St. John's Norwood Episcopal Church is a majority white church in an affluent neighborhood, on the boundary between Bethesda and Chevy Chase, Maryland. It is about 150 years old, and is one of 88 parishes in the Episcopal Diocese of Washington (EDOW).

If you drive by the church on the corner of Wisconsin and Bradley, you will notice a new sign outside the church. The sign declares that Black Lives Matter. This new sign isn't just performative allyship. It is our pledge as a faith community, a public pledge, that we will do the hard work to understand our entanglement, individually and institutionally, in racism, white supremacist systems and white privilege. We will do this in conversation with our Black brothers and sisters, seeking to understand the lived experience of being Black in America, taking our cues from the Black community and aligning ourselves with their view of what constitutes racial justice. And it is a pledge that armed with that knowledge, we will act - not just to alleviate the symptoms of racism while perpetuating an unjust status quo, but to partner to change the systems that harm our Black and Brown neighbors, understanding that we are implicated in and benefit from them, and that we are part of the problem and the oppression.

As people of faith we cannot ignore this situation nor allow it to continue. We should never have participated in perpetuating it. The Episcopal Church, sadly, was implicated in justifying and perpetuating slavery and discrimination from its earliest days. We have much to repent for. We've been working to correct it and we need to redouble our efforts now.

What is Racial Equity for Us? Shalom, Racial Justice and Racial Equity

Our understanding of racial equity is firmly rooted in our biblical understanding of **shalom**. Shalom is a Hebrew word that translates as peace - but it is so much more than that. Shalom means abundant life, wholeness, completeness, harmony and peace, a state in which all can thrive and flourish. Shalom is God's intention for the world, for every person, for we are all made in God's image. This is not the situation in our country today, nor has it been for our Black neighbors for over 400 years. There are many barriers to shalom for the Black community, and this is not acceptable to us as people of faith.

Justice is the process, the means, by which we achieve the end of shalom. Doing justice is the steps we take to dismantle and remove the barriers that prevent shalom, the steps that fix what is broken and restore wholeness.

Racial equity is evidential - concrete evidence that barriers are gone, the playing field has been leveled. Tangible, measurable, quantifiable evidence that everyone has abundant life and can thrive and flourish. When all communities enjoy equal access to healthcare, healthy food, good quality education, affordable housing, employment, a living wage, everything that creates shalom.

Covid-19 has brutally highlighted disparities that have long existed in all these areas. Ibram Kendi's Center for Anti-Racist Research at Boston University and the Covid Tracking Project document many of them. Black and Latinx people are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, suffering rates of infection and death much higher than their percentage of the population. The mortality rate for Latinx children dying from Covid outpaces the rate of White children dying. Higher percentages of these populations do not have the option to work safely from home. They experience higher levels of food insecurity, less access to technology and study help. They often live in crowded conditions. When measurable indicators such as these turn around, and when race can no longer be used to predict life outcomes, there will be greater racial equity.

What We Are Doing - Education and Action to Promote Racial Justice and Equity

Education is essential because we are often unconscious or ignorant of our own history and the history of racism, of our participation in white supremacist systems, of our own implicit bias and how we benefit from privilege. We need to understand why certain systems are in place and how we are implicated in and benefit from them. We are also ignorant of the lived experience of being Black in America. We need to learn. We need to understand. So education is essential.

But it is not enough. As Tre Johnson trenchantly wrote on June 11 in the Washington Post article "When Black People Are in Pain, White People Just Join Book Clubs," without action, education just amounts to the "usual pieties."

So What Are We Doing?

In Our Diocese, the Episcopal Diocese of Washington:

Our Diocese, under the guidance of Bishop Mariann Budde, will work intentionally to become anti-racist, employing the lens of racial justice and equity to everything - staffing, operations, programs, ministries, hospitality, teaching and preaching.

We will offer a variety of "on ramps" for people to join this work, wherever they may be personally in their spiritual evolution on anti-racism.

We will create a Covenant committing us to be anti-racist and invite individuals, parishes, and institutions of the church to sign.

Our Diocese is devising an anti-racism program for all 88 of its parishes, many of which are in Montgomery County.

We are hiring a Missioner for Equity and Justice to establish our comprehensive new anti-racism program for the Diocese, working with our existing Race and Social Justice Committee and Taskforce, Sanctuary Committee and Reparations Task Force.

We will approach the fight against racism multiculturally.

At St. John's Norwood:

We are striving to become aware of our implicit bias and privilege, and to understand and align ourselves with our black neighbors and their perspective on racial justice.

We are conducting book studies, courageous conversations and anti-racism training.

Our recent Adult Education Forums have explored the concept of social justice, where it is absent in our community and how and why we are called to do justice. This fall, our Forums will focus on how our understanding of biblical justice applies to race and what we, as people of faith, must do to advance racial justice and equity.

We are also exploring the history of racism in our parish and in our neighborhood. We have discovered some troubling information, including the racist views of our early rectors and apparent history of slave ownership among our founders. One of our parishioners is working on a documentary on three lynchings that took place in Poolesville and Rockville in Montgomery County, informed by the work of the Montgomery County Historical Society and the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project. The documentary will be out in December.

We are active in building ecumenical and interfaith relationships with other faith communities. We will do the same with black faith communities, seeking to build relationships around the pursuit of common ministries. We spoke recently with Kingdom Fellowship A.M.E. in Silver Spring because we are interested in working to reduce food insecurity in the County and had heard of their great work in this field. We were inspired by the depth of their engagement and learned a lot that is spurring our own efforts. We hope to continue that discussion.

We will intentionally use our power to advance change for equity and justice through advocacy and civic engagement, in the belief that good government is a key tool to achieve shalom and advocacy is a deeply spiritual discipline. Our new Social Justice Advocacy program is guiding our advocacy to support law and policy that reflects our values of justice, equity and compassion and to press to change systems that harm Black neighbors. We write letters, meet with officials and look forward to participating in testimony, hearings and advisory bodies. We will work as a community to hold public officials accountable. We are supporting voter registration and fighting voter suppression through our Souls to the Polls/Reclaim Our Vote campaign and encouraging a complete and comprehensive 2020 Census, based on our belief that all are created in the image of God and we respect the dignity of every human being.

This is work that is overdue, work that we must do urgently, work that must continue until we achieve shalom for all. The challenge is to sustain and transform the unprecedented scope and energy of protests after the tragic murder of George Floyd and many others to bring concrete change. Faith communities have the power to mobilize people to demand change. We are committed to do it.