INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Amid racism and protests, is there hope?

Douglas Kindschi *Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

Racial justice is certainly the critical issue we face today. The pandemic of racial injustice has even pushed aside the coronavirus pandemic. The murder of George Floyd and the worldwide response has brought this issue again to our consciousness.

It also begs the question of how faith communities will respond.

The response has been strong and widely diverse, from the Parliament of World Religions to the evangelical journal "Christianity Today." The Parliament joined with other organizations, like Religions for Peace, to issue a joint statement titled "This Perilous Moment." It reads, in part:

"Our words come in an hour of peril informed by a sense of crisis. Racial injustice, deep inequities, hate speech, brutality, and authoritarian power converge in a vulnerable moment when millions are infected and affected by a global virus that we have yet to find either a vaccine for or any medication to deliver us from. This endangers the fabric of our society.

"Our wicked scourge of discrimination and racism is structural, systemic, systematic, and institutional. ... We soberly own up to the fact that our religious communities have been complicit for far too long. We have upheld in far too many ways the false tenets that enable racism to continue in our society.

"We confess that we have a sickness in America that is spiritual and moral in nature even in as much as it is cultural, economic, political, and social. Our sacred texts and traditions have been used, wrongly so, to further racial injustice. Yet, they are also a deep well that informs our understanding of justice, and which can now call us all towards our better angels to overcome this crisis. People of faith must stand for love and stand up for equity, equality, and justice."

Christianity Today also addressed this issue in a May 28 article, "George Floyd Left a Gospel Legacy in Houston." It points out that Floyd, before moving to Minneapolis two years ago, lived in Houston for decades, where he mentored young men to break the cycle of violence. He was known as "Big Floyd" at a housing project where he "used his influence to bring outside ministries to the area to do discipleship and outreach." Pastor Patrick Ngwolo of the Resurrection Houston church said, "George Floyd was a person of peace sent from the Lord that helped the gospel go forward in a place that I never lived in."

One of Floyd's friends there said, "I think he wanted to see young men put guns down and have Jesus instead of the streets. ... The people who knew him personally will remember him as a positive light. Guys from the streets look to him like, 'Man, if he can change his life, I can change mine.'"

The response to Floyd's murder swept the nation and even countries around the world. A longtime advocate of racial justice and founder of the progressive evangelical journal "Sojourners," Jim Wallis, wrote, "In my lifetime, I have never seen more white people involved in the deep and growing movement to address systemic racism, structural injustice on many fronts, and, specifically, the violent policing and killing of black people. ... Thousands of mostly young people — diverse across faiths and ethnicities — were exercising their power to protest. I have never ... seen so many white people who care so deeply about America's Original Sin, structural racial injustice, and the 400 years of violence against black lives, following the lead of their black brothers and sisters to voice that concern to the police and military, and all the political leaders behind them."

Grand Rapids Police Chief Eric Payne joins a protest against the death of George Floyd on June 3 in Grand Rapids.
Cory Morse, MLive.com

Another posting from Christianity Today reported how the evangelical churches of Minneapolis have joined together in protesting racism and police violence, as well as participating in citywide efforts to donate food and supplies and recruit volunteers for cleanup efforts. An organization of evangelicals called "Transform Minnesota" has led efforts to address social issues in the community. A black Baptist pastor told the group, "Yes, we need your help right now. Yes, we need your help cleaning up. Yes, we need your resources. But we also need long-term partners who are going to help us stand up for God and tear down the systems that hold people down."

Greg Boyd, senior pastor at the evangelical megachurch Woodland Hills in the Minneapolis area, was also reported to have told a group of pastors on a Zoom call that he was "convicted that racism is the responsibility of the white church. If white Christians had loved like Jesus loved," he said, "they could have stopped slavery before it began, squelched the Ku Klux Klan, and prevented the laws that instituted racial segregation in America."

Jewish and Muslim groups have also mobilized and raised money for racial justice efforts and recognize the affront that racism has been to these religious communities as well. Leaders gathered together Sunday afternoon for an online interfaith forum on "Police, Prejudice, and Prophetic Paradigm" sponsored by the Islamic Society of North America.

When asked "What is your best cause for hope today?," Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms called for a "monumental shift" in order to "signal to our country that it is time to heal." She added, "I am so inspired when I see protesters across this country and see police kneeling with protesters across the country because they are saying to each other, 'I hear you, I feel you, and I want something better for our country, too.'"

Is this a turning point for our nation? Can we find hope in the developments that have occurred?

I do find hope in the number of police leaders from Flint and Houston, and now in Grand Rapids, who have met with the protesters, shared their concern, marched with them, and even "taken the knee." I take hope in the protests that have not only swept the entire country but have gone worldwide to places like England, Germany and New Zealand. I find hope in pastors from all religious affiliations who are in words and actions addressing this 400-year blight on our society. I find hope in the many faith traditions that have initiated cooperative commitments bringing their scriptures and beliefs to work together for needed action.

We cannot hide from the truth taught by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible." We may not be guilty of George Floyd's murder, but we are all responsible for systems that perpetuate racism and tolerate abuse of authority, and for our failure to act on our religious and ethical imperatives to love justice and mercy for all.

interfaith@gvsu.edu

"I have never ... seen so many white people who care so deeply about America's Original Sin, structural racial injustice, and the 400 years of violence against black lives."

Jim Wallis, founder of "Sojourners" magazine

Copyright ⓒ 2020 The Grand Rapids Press 06/11/2020
June 11, 2020 2:57 pm (GMT -4:00)
Powered by TECNAVIA