Reflections on race

Nancy Newman

Much of what we know about our world comes from TV, radio, newspapers, the Internet, or some form of social media. What's delivered cannot possibly include every angle. Parts are missing; voices go unheard. Given that the predominant demographic in the Church of the Brethren is white and middle-class, we at MESSENGER *realize we are missing important parts of the story when it comes to race, which has dominated our headlines recently. With this in mind, we invited some of our black and mixed-race Brethren—and a student at a Brethren-related university—to talk about what's been going on from their perspective. It took courage for them to share their stories, and for that we are deeply grateful. —Ed.*

Encountering race in the church

by Melisa Grandison

I was 5 years old the first time I encountered race. A young white girl in daycare came to where my brother Michael and I were sitting and said, "Michael, you're stupid because you're black."

Fast-forward five years. I just begun attending a new school and was telling the class all the aspects I deemed important in my decade of life: my family, cats, and the Church of the Brethren. One of my classmates blurted out, "Why do you go to the Church of the Brethren?" Having been "born" into it, my answer came naturally. "They help people," I told him, and added, "and who doesn't want to live peacefully, simply, and together?" Even

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then my identity in the church seemed so clear, I thought, until he protested, “*That* isn’t a church for *blacks*.”

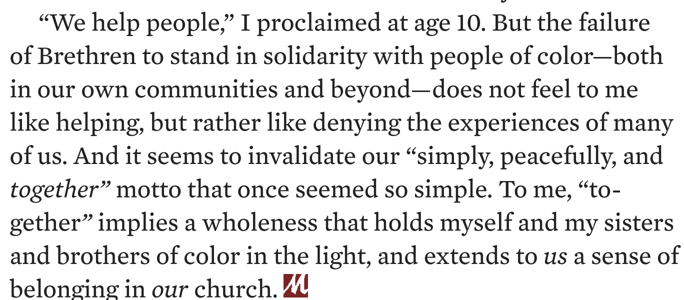
These experiences eventually prompted me to be honest with myself about the racial realities of my faith community. My classmate was right. Even though I was a part of the Church of the Brethren, I realized I felt no genuine belonging. I still struggle to feel this. I am, and always have been, a wave of color in a sea of white.

As I grew older, these encounters with racism in the Church of the Brethren intensified and became more frequent. My sense of belonging continued to waiver.

- During National Youth Conference I was called “nigger.”
- At a church camp I was singled out for “ruining” group photos because the combination of the sun and camera flash distorted my face.
- Prior to boarding flights to On Earth Peace board meetings, I have been pulled aside in security lines and had my hair probed for weapons.
- While studying at a Church of the Brethren college, I was pulled over, asked to step out of my vehicle, and questioned by police 12 times during my first semester. I was never issued a warning or a ticket.
- At Annual Conference, Brethren often share family histories and ask, “Who are you related to?” But I am asked instead, “How did you find the church?” They assume that because I am a person of color, it is unlikely that I could share their Church of the Brethren heritage.

Melisa Grandison

Throughout these experiences—those that I’ve shared and those that I continue to hold private—I’ve tried to place a familiar, Brethren face on the emotional and spiritual consequences of racial injustice. While I understand that no part of US society is exempt from racial inequality, perhaps one of my hardest struggles in my relationship with the Church of the Brethren is not only with racism, but rather our inaction in the face of racial injustice.



“We help people,” I proclaimed at age 10. But the failure of Brethren to stand in solidarity with people of color—both in our own communities and beyond—does not feel to me like helping, but rather like denying the experiences of many of us. And it seems to invalidate our “simply, peacefully, and *together*” motto that once seemed so simple. To me, “together” implies a wholeness that holds myself and my sisters and brothers of color in the light, and extends to *us* a sense of belonging in *our* church.

Melisa Grandison lives in Amherst, Mass., where she is service coordinator for the Massachusetts Migrant Education Program. She is a member of the McPherson (Kan.) Church of the Brethren, and serves on the On Earth Peace board of directors. She currently attends Mount Toby Friends Meeting in Leverette, Mass.

The ongoing debate

by Eric Bishop

In recent months, we’ve been deluged with images of protests and demonstrations around the country. We’ve seen signs reading: “Black Lives Matter,” “I Can’t Breathe,” and “Justice For All.”

Many may find it difficult to understand the purpose of these protests. In their view, Eric Gardner and Michael Brown were behaving criminally, and so police action was necessary. But this justification insinuates that all cases involving black men equal a threat to life and limb, and therefore extreme force must always be administered.

Eric Bishop

The protests, anger, and frustration go beyond Eric Gardner and Michael Brown. They are about Trayvon Martin and Rodney King as well. But, to some degree, they also are about Emmett Till and James Chaney. The feelings of fear and frustration are so deep that they transcend a single generation.

At the root of our problem is that our society does not

Randy Miller

University of La Verne chaplain Zandra Wagoner plays a djembe during an anti-racism demonstration at the campus in December.

consider black men to be educated, upstanding human beings. Our society has gone from once viewing black men as property, to today seeing them as thugs and criminals. And so black men in America know that, regarding Gardner and Brown, "There but by the grace of God go I."

Good, law-abiding black men live with this constantly. Day in and day out, we must choose whether to stay safe or to stand up for our rights and demand to be treated as equal human beings—as men. The latter may get us detained, arrested, beaten, or even killed. But the former doesn't guarantee safety, either.

Parents of black children, particularly boys, must educate them early on how to survive their interactions with police officers. You don't question why they stopped you. You don't ask what they think you did wrong. Asking those questions makes you seem aggressive. And once a black man is perceived as being aggressive, the use of force immediately becomes justified.

When did death become the punishment for shoplifting (Brown) or peddling cigarettes (Gardner)? When did walking down the street become something that could lead to a death sentence (Martin), or speeding earn a beating (King)? But in our not-so-distant past, even looking at a white woman (Till) or encouraging people to exercise their rights as members of society (Chaney) were also instant death sentences.

White friends and family may want to understand, to empathize, to feel the pain. But most of them will never get the lump in their throats when a police car pulls behind them. They won't have to wonder if they will make it home, or instead be detained or arrested for "speeding."

At the end of the protests, most people in the church get to walk away and go about their lives. But people of color live with the same fears and questions tomorrow that we had today. It's a painful reminder of the ongoing debate about our value—or lack thereof—in this society, and how fragile life is. M

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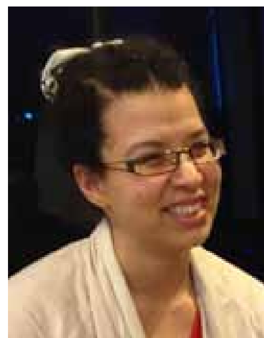
Students, rabbis, professors, and others speak out for justice during a rally at the University of La Verne.

Nancy Newman

Too personal to share

by Gimbiya Kettering

When the 24-hour news cycle is rife with stories about race and racism, people look to me expectantly. By people, I mean white people. Some of them want to know if it's true, if my life is really different because I'm not white. Others want me to reassure them that it isn't as bad as what the headlines portray. A few who have long suspected it's much worse want to hear my proof.



Gimbiya Kettering

Almost always, as soon as I start to talk, I'm interrupted by someone—a white person—who wants to redefine race and racism and ethnicity and prejudice and bias and a thousand other terms. Which means they want my experiences to fit into their definitions.

So, I'm not going to tell you my story. At least not today.

The first time I said this, the white people in the room were surprised. Then they said they were disappointed. I *had* to tell my story. My refusal to tell my story made some of them angry. Why not? they demand.

It's my story, I told them. Why do I need a reason to tell it or not tell it?

But if it helps to have a reason, consider this:

- It hurts. The stories you are asking about are painful experiences, and retelling them brings that pain back to the surface.
- When I tell my story and you question it, ask me to prove it, or try to change my interpretation of it, it adds another layer of hurt.
- These are my real-life experiences, not parables for the enlightenment of others.

Most importantly, like you, I choose to share my personal stories with people I'm close to—family and friends. You and I may be coworkers, acquaintances, or colleagues, but we are not yet friends. Friends would not ask me to share a personal story just for their enlightenment. Friends do not ask me to change how I interpret my experience just to fit their framework. When friends hear my stories, their compassion helps heal.

Gimbiya Kettering lives in Washington, D.C., and is coordinator of Intercultural Ministries for the Church of the Brethren.

Nancy Newman

Miykael Hatter

Acts of random kindness

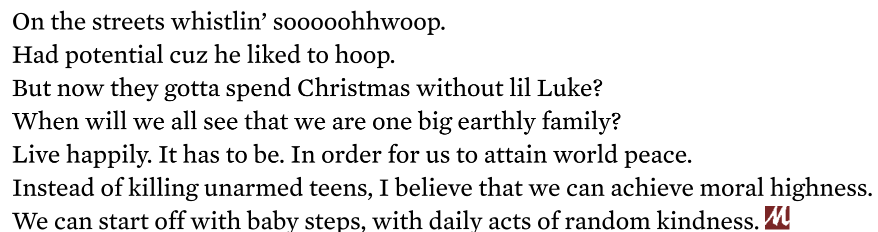
by Miykael Hatter

Day in and day out this natural phenomenon occurs.
It's an unspoken, unwritten rule, to describe it using words.
From observing people to this fact that I have learned.
It's like to others the thoughts of our internal souls are being heard.
It's the way that we respond that makes me a bit concerned.

See, every day we live, at some point, we have a chance to help somebody out.
Without a doubt. You know what I'm talkin' about.
Like that one time I saw an old white lady crossin' the street.
I chose not to help her 'cuz i wanted somethin' to eat.
So, like Kermit the Frog, I rolled up the window as I sipped tea.
I sat there and waited patiently
while this old white lady, un-hastily, walked across the street.
My internal soul is screamin': "Why don't you help her, Meek?"
But to her she's thinkin': "A large black man helpin' me across the street?
That cannot be. He gonna rob me! Let me call the police. . . ."

Crazy, right? Livin' our lives based on these insane stereotypes.
Making poor choices, letting the devil entice.
There is no end in sight. This is real life.
We could always help each other.
If you think about it, we all are sisters and brothers.
Why is it that we always get so caught up in the color?
I can't help but wonder how kids are taught to discriminate.
You can't be born a racist, you must be raised that way,
taught that black people are beneath you, they are slaves.
The thought is insane—raising that child to be deranged.
Now he has the photo of the burning cross at the front of his brain.

So now this sick, twisted mind feels all mighty and bold,
and feels that his darker brotha is somehow below.
And behold, he shoots the young man in the middle of the road.
Or even worse, puts him in the ever-forbidden chokehold.
RIP Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, and Eric Garner.
But don't get me wrong—black people are somewhat guilty.
Rollin' down the street blastin' music that is filthy,
hangin' out on the corner spot, just lookin' for some trouble to get into.
Gang members rollin' by, holdin' up hand signs that offend you.
Then you chase after them and shoot.
They end up on the 10 o'clock news.
The victim's family singin' the blues 'cuz the victim bled blue.



On the streets whistlin' sooooohhwoop.
Had potential cuz he liked to hoop.
But now they gotta spend Christmas without lil Luke?
When will we all see that we are one big earthly family?
Live happily. It has to be. In order for us to attain world peace.
Instead of killing unarmed teens, I believe that we can achieve moral highness.
We can start off with baby steps, with daily acts of random kindness.

Miykael Hatter, of Compton, Calif., is a sophomore at the University of La Verne majoring in legal studies. He recited this poem, which he wrote, at a rally for justice at the La Verne campus in December.