

CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN MESSENGER

Speaking Truth to Power: Dawn Blackman

My name is Dawn M. Blackman, Sr., and I am the Outreach Minister at the Champaign Church of the Brethren. If I thought about it, I could tell you the serial number on the back of the Steinway upright piano in the classroom I was in at Holy Cross School. My mother told them she didn't want her kids hit, so they put me behind the piano when I asked questions they didn't want to answer. We get to the part about the Holy Innocents and it was just terrible.

I said that I wished they could go straight to heaven and the nun said they couldn't go to heaven because they weren't baptized. I was crushed. I couldn't believe it. And I said, "Oh, because Herod was trying to kill the Baby Jesus. They would go to heaven." She said, "No, they'd go to Purgatory." Well, Purgatory is where you went when you weren't really good enough to go to heaven and we could pray you out of there, but they hadn't done anything. They were babies. So how could they go to Purgatory? That nun was so angry.

The nuns were all-powerful. But it just felt like, "Oh no! That's wrong!" And they had told us, if something's wrong, you shouldn't go along with it. I said, "But you said, 'If we think something is wrong, we shouldn't go along with it.'" "Not when it's me, you stupid!" Ohhhhh! Don't argue with you! You didn't tell me that part.

I would always speak up every year because you had to take certain special Latin classes to be an altar boy. And I knew the Latin. So I would say, "Hey, I learned the Latin! I know the Latin. Can I be an altar girl? Can we have altar girls?" "We can't have altar girls." I could never keep my mouth shut! But I'm always polite.

When I first moved here, they didn't know me. Because there are other African-American women who are vocal, when they wanted to have a community meeting with the police they invited me, because I was an unknown quantity and they knew the others.

This was just after our own Garner incident. We had a man, they put him in a chokehold, and he died. He was an older African-American man who grew up in Champaign. He remembered when Campustown was off-limits to African-Americans and he wanted to go look in the shops in Campustown. Well they have windows up and down the buildings there, so it's their intention that you look in them.

Somebody saw him looking in windows and was uncomfortable, so they called the police and the police came.

The man was developmentally delayed. He was a grownup, but he was like 14, maybe. So the police show up and he panicked. He said, "I'm sorry, I'll leave, I just wanted to look in the window." And he started backing up. And they said, "Stop!" And he said, "I'll leave. I just wanted to look in the windows." The police officers don't like it when you don't do what they said when they said it. They put him in a chokehold. But there was no crime he committed--except for resisting arrest. But they had no cause to arrest him, other than he was in Campustown, and we can go in Campustown now.

We're sitting around, with community members and police officers at each table. And one community member said while it was unfortunate that the man lost his life, he was glad that the police were on the case. I said, "What was it they took care of?"

"Well he didn't belong there."

I said, "Why was that?"

"Older African-American man, in Campustown?"

I said "I didn't know that Campustown was still restricted to African-Americans. What time is the curfew for Campustown?" (totally seriously)

"Well there's not a curfew."

"Then why doesn't he belong in Campustown?"

They just looked at each other.

And the officer finally said, "I was part of that detail and he refused an order."

I said, "So the penalty is death?"

"Well it wasn't intentional that he died, but if he had just stopped it wouldn't have been a problem."

Okay...."Well why were you there on the call?"

"Well because I was called. They were uncomfortable with people looking through the window."

I said, "It's a business district. They've got windows from the sidewalk to the ceiling.

They want you to look through them."

"But they ruled that it was an acceptable use of force."

Because the police officers - three of them - felt threatened by his refusal to follow orders, backing away from them. Because the use of force ordinance says that if the officer feels threatened - physically or verbally - he is the sole determinant of the amount of force to be used. So that's where it needs to start. That's just giving them carte blanche to do whatever they want.

Sometimes you can't count on people verifying or supporting that truth that you spoke even though they know it is truth. And you're going to be out there on your own. If God wills you to speak it then you've got to speak it. They don't like me! It was not too long before they figured out what I was driving and I started getting stopped a lot.

Power knows truth. You're not telling them anything new; you're just telling them something they don't want to hear.