
From the Pastor's Desk

Pastor Gerald (Jerry) Morris

APRIL 2016

On Race

It's tricky trying to write about race relations, inasmuch as none of us have experienced being any race other than our own. I really can't speak for anyone else, so let me speak on behalf of my own people: well-meaning, educated, middle-class, and slightly clueless Caucasians. Speaking on behalf of this people, it's been a rough year. We thought we had this racial thing solved, and we felt very good about it. There were more faces of color on television and in the print media, for instance. And it wasn't just athletes and entertainers, but also executives and academics and prominent professionals. When we elected a Black president in 2008, we felt that we had arrived. Some of us even began using the phrase "post-racial society." We were very proud of ourselves.

And then there was Ferguson. And New York and Baltimore and Greenville and Chicago and Cleveland. It turns out that before we began talking about a "post-racial society," it might have been a good idea to talk to some Black people. Whatever you think about the individual cases of police brutality in each of those cities, the overflowing frustration and anger that they prompted indicate that African Americans are not experiencing society as equal. While we have made great strides since the 1950s, racial injustice is still deeply embedded in our culture. In fact, although I had never really noticed it before, I have this year discovered that I live in a society that grants inestimable privileges to me simply because of my race. For instance:

- I can go shopping alone and be confident that I will not be followed or harassed.
- If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of finding a place to buy or rent within my price range, where I would want to live.
- Once I move, I don't have to worry that my new neighbors will resent my moving in just because of my color.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being told that I'm a credit to my race.
- I can go to the grocery store on Saturday unshowered and in old sweatpants without my grubbiness being taken as a reflection on my race.
- I can travel anywhere with Rebecca without expecting to encounter hostility or rejection.

-
- I can easily buy “flesh-colored” band-aids that look like my skin.
 - I can wear a hoodie without anyone considering me a threat.
 - I can be confident that a woman walking ahead of me after dark will not look back at me and be afraid simply because of my skin color.
 - If I am pulled over by the police, I don’t have to wonder if it is because of my color.
 - I have never felt the need to sit down with my sons and have the “talk” about being extra, extra respectful to police if they are pulled over, because sometime it might be necessary for their own safety.

I take all these things for granted. But it turns out that if I were African American, I could not. It’s not that (most) white people are openly or even consciously racist. It’s just that the deck is still stacked in our favor in a thousand ways. Some of these ways are major. Others, taken alone, would be insignificant. But taken all together, they constitute a flood of daily reminders to Black Americans that some races are privileged. Not theirs.

At the very least, we who have benefited from all these unconscious privileges should be aware of them, recognize the challenges that others face that we’ve never had to, and work to end that inequity. But exactly how is not always clear. I was invited recently to join a clergy colleague at a press conference charging the Wausau Police Department with racial profiling and police brutality in a case involving an African American who had been arrested. I chose not to go. Could such allegations be true? Yes. This has happened all over the country; we are not immune in Wausau. But the fact that it could happen here does not automatically mean that it did happen this time. I was not going to join someone in charging the police with a crime without being absolutely sure myself that the charges were justified. I was also concerned that my colleague was evidently going straight to the press conference without having first made an official complaint to the police or appealed to the citizen’s Police Commission for investigation. The case is in their hands now, though, so we will see what happens. For what it’s worth, when Chief Hardel says that racial profiling will not be tolerated in the WPD, I believe him.

There is a chance that this particular drama taking place in Wausau will do more harm than good, that it will aggravate our already-polarized political environment and lead to more yelling and posturing and less listening and learning from each other. That would be a shame. Because we do need to talk about race and racism. Seriously. As we have learned over the past year, we aren’t there yet.

What is NAOMI? - Pastor Jerry

In the case mentioned above, when Rev. Bushbaum made the charges of racial profiling, the coverage referenced an organization called NAOMI. Although NAOMI itself was not involved in the decision to hold that press conference, a few NAOMI members joined Rev. Bushbaum that day, which has led some to ask who this group is. NAOMI stands for North Central Area Congregations Organized to Make an Impact. (I know: it's stretching. But the thing is that NAOMI is part of a statewide collection of interfaith groups, all of which have biblical acronyms, and the easy ones like RUTH were taken.) The umbrella organization for all of them is called WISDOM.

Basically, WISDOM's purpose is advocacy for justice. For instance, whereas individual churches and ministries might help people with the effects of poverty, WISDOM would advocate for policies that could prevent poverty. In the past couple of years, WISDOM has advocated reform in Wisconsin's prison and sentencing system, which has a shocking rate of incarceration compared to other states, weighted against Black prisoners. WISDOM helped prompt recent changes in the use of solitary confinement. In our own area, NAOMI was involved in the efforts to keep bus service to Schofield and Weston. Led in this case by Father Steve Brice, of St. Anne's, NAOMI influenced the decision to keep at least some bus service active, keeping transportation for the poor and handicapped.

Our church is not an official member of NAOMI. This is partly because there is some cost involved, and partly because many of the positions taken by WISDOM are seen as being part of the liberal/Democratic platform, and we have chosen to avoid the appearance of supporting one political brand. As a church, our support has consisted primarily of waiving the building use fee so that NAOMI could hold its annual Martin Luther King, Jr., Day dinner in our Fellowship Hall. There is, however, a NAOMI "clergy caucus" that meets monthly and is open even to pastors of non-member churches. I attend when I am able, and our discussions recently have centered on efforts to establish Warming Centers for the homeless in Tomahawk and Stevens Point and policy affecting poverty.

Advocacy is tricky, because it always involves politics, and politics are contentious. I have not always agreed with the positions WISDOM has taken. On balance, though, I am glad that they are there. If the Chamber of Commerce can lobby legislatures, then I'm glad to hear someone is at least trying to do so for the sake of justice.