Toward Racial Reconciliation: Where Is the Church in This?

Following the August 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the violent backlash that occurred afterward, Chuck Harrison was troubled by the thought: How will we respond when something like this happens in our area?

Harrison, the director of missions for the Peninsula Baptist Association (PBA), began to challenge himself with other questions, like, Where is the church in this? Do we have a voice? Do we even know each other well enough to have a conversation about it?

“I realized a lot of the churches—the pastors and the people—don’t even know each other, and they don’t even speak, particularly across racial lines,” he remembered. Calling upon other ministers in the Newport News/Hampton area, he initiated a dialogue over lunch and invited pastors to get to know each other, to share ministries with each other, and to start to talk about important things like racism, poverty, and crime—things that affected their cities.

“One thing led to another, and now we have a group of 50 or more people who gather once a month,” Harrison explained. The group includes pastors, police officers, city officials, and representatives from the Commonwealth Attorney’s office. “They’re people who care about the city the way we care about our city.”

“When we started the dialogue, we had a homework assignment the first day: to make a lunch appointment with someone who doesn’t look like you,” Harrison recalled. He said that after they did that two or three times, they started coming back and telling similar stories about how they share similar problems in their different churches.
While the local response to this initiative has been mostly positive, the efforts have not occurred without cost. “There is always resistance to change,” Harrison commented, “especially in the church world. With our shift of focus to include racial reconciliation as one element in growing God’s kingdom in our area, some individuals and churches have reacted negatively. This has been a very small percentage of the feedback we’ve received. Unfortunately, in a few cases, this has led churches to withdraw financial support.”

Harrison went on to clarify, “Nothing worth doing is without cost. We expected some of this would take place. But the majority of our churches have been very positive about what we are doing, and the reputation of the PBA with local cities, agencies, and communities has grown exponentially through our efforts.”

As relationships and partnerships grow, community members are learning to celebrate the beauty they are finding in their diversity, and Harrison expressed optimism about their future. “I believe God blesses in a unique way when we come together across barriers.”

For more information about ways to reach your community, contact:

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