

“Beyond Ferguson” Conversation Inspires Commitment to Local Actions

The Rev. Sarah Henkel

“What is one hope and one fear that bring into this conversation tonight?” This is the question that opened our time together at the “Beyond Ferguson” conversation on the evening of November 20, 2014. Twenty-five people representing ten congregations joined together in the White Plains Presbyterian Church sanctuary to practice “creating space in our churches for hard conversations about race, racism, power & privilege.” Many of those gathered expressed hope that conversations like this one would begin to shift systems of injustice in our communities and in country. Some expressed the fear that conversations like this one would be too few and far between to affect real change in a deeply divided nation.

We held these hopes and fears in tension as participants were guided by co-facilitators – Leslie Mardenborough (Ruling Elder, White Plains Presbyterian Church), Erica Restaino (Member, First Presbyterian Church of Marlboro, Student – Fordham University, Sarah Henkel (Cross-Cultural Catalyst, HRP) and Rick Ufford-Chase (Ruling Elder, Stony Point Presbyterian Church, Executive Director, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship)– through an in-depth presentation of the historical, socio-economic, and political context of the tragedy in Ferguson, the killing of Michael Brown by Police Officer Darren Wilson. The presentation, which included frequent pauses for personal sharing within the group, was designed by Rev. Dr. Margaret Aymer Oget and originally presented by her at the October 2014 gathering of the Synod of the Northeast. Rev. Dr. Aymer Oget encouraged Presbyteries and congregations to use her presentation in their local contexts to inspire local commitment to address the systemic injustices woven through context and cause of the tragedy in Ferguson.

When we gathered on November 20th the Grand Jury had not yet announced their decision regarding whether or not Officer Darren Wilson would be indicted. At the time of our gathering, a large community presence in Ferguson, MO remained grounded and committed to a public non-violent response whether or not an indictment was handed down. Their point: even an indictment in this one case would not bring resolution to the deep-seeded structural inequities in our communities.

The conversation on November 20th ended with this question: “What one thing do you commit to do?” Voices raised to share next steps: I commit to raising awareness about the victims of police shootings in my own community; I commit to share this presentation in my home congregation; I commit to speaking up about racism in the context of my majority white community; I commit to grow and multiply conversations like this one.

We now know that no indictment of Officer Darren Wilson was handed down by the Grand Jury. In the wake of that announcement people across the United States raised their voices to demand justice and nonviolent actions continue in Ferguson and beyond. What one thing do you commit to do to bear justice in your community? Through hard conversations and committed action may we in Hudson River Presbytery join with all who seek to be “restorers of the streets to live in” (Isaiah 58:12).

1) Video of Rev. Dr. Margaret Aymer's presentation to the Synod of the Northeast: <http://synodne.org/live-stream-for-margaret-aymer-friday-october-24th-at-730pm/>

2) Prezi Slides for the presentation: https://prezi.com/xufptrwuzw66/ferguson-mo-usa/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy#

3) Rev. Dr. Margaret Aymer's Script to accompany slides: <http://synodne.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/What-leads-to-Ferguson1-copy2.pdf>