

# **Faith in Action in Rockingham County**

*By Russell Presnell, a member of Muhlenberg, Harrisonburg, works in transportation and housing.*

A few years back, I met with my pastor (now bishop) Bob Humphrey from Muhlenberg Lutheran Church, Harrisonburg, at a local restaurant to have a beer and catch up on life. I explained to him that the space the church had given to me, to not be involved, had been what I had needed, but I was ready to get more involved and hopefully get to know others in the congregation.

His suggestion was to volunteer to be one of two representatives for a new interfaith social justice group that was forming, called Faith in Action. I accepted the suggestion and was appointed by the church council, along with another member, and an alternate to represent Muhlenberg in this new endeavor.

Faith in Action is a group of 25 different congregations committed to effecting systemic change in Harrisonburg and surrounding Rockingham County. The group is diverse. Included are lots of Mennonites, Presbyterians, Methodists, Catholics, Jews, Brethren, Episcopalian, Muslims, Quakers, Unitarian Universalist and two Lutheran congregations---Muhlenberg and Trinity, Keezletown.

Faith in Action has six core values that we use to guide our organization, outreach, and decision-making. They are: to reflect and respect diversity, learn and lead in joyful partnership, communicate clear

vision and plans, strengthen congregational and community networks, connect our faith with local justice concerns and act together for justice. Faith in Action has no common theological, political or ideological agenda. We work together on a pragmatic, workable, local issue that is selected by its members.

Our first goal was to conduct interviews within our congregations and find out what local social justice issues they most cared about. Our team got to work and we were able to conduct nearly a hundred in-person (typically half-hour) listening sessions. At the end of this process, we narrowed our issues down to a top three and brought them with us to the covenant assembly and all together we would pick one actionable issue that Faith in Action would focus our efforts on for the next year.

Our first campaign focused on immigrants. Through petitioning city council and the county board of supervisors, Harrisonburg became a “welcoming city,” part of a national network of cities that “inspire people to build a different kind of community—one that embraces immigrants and fosters opportunity for all!”

Our present campaign is focused on criminal justice issues. We have three “asks.” To eliminate the dollar-a-day fee charged to inmates in our local jail; to create and fund a justice planner position and establish a process for all juvenile offenders to be screened for restorative justice measures.

I am thankful for the opportunities being a Faith in Action representative for Muhlenberg has offered me. My involvement has allowed me to meet and get to know many at Muhlenberg that I had not ever met as a back pew sitter. The reward for me was realizing a greater connection and sense of belonging to the church I had been a member of for over a decade, all the while positively impacting the community around me. Faith in Action has given me an avenue to put into practice that old Shaker adage, "heart to God, hand to man."