

The 21st Century Academy: A Place Where There Are No Strangers

Rev. Bebe Baldwin

“Where am I going to eat?” A young boy asked this question recently at Liberty Church. His concern was real. He was thinking of the school lunches he misses when school dismisses for the summer.

Hungry children have difficulty learning. Will this young boy be one of the approximately one-third of Black students who do not graduate from high school? The most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education reveals that Minnesota ranks at the bottom of the fifty states in the percentage of African-American students who do not graduate from high school.

The 21st Century Academy at Liberty Church provides nutritious lunches and much more for the 120 girls and boys who will attend the summer session from June 24 through August 1. At the Academy, children and youth form healing relationships, enjoy healthy recreation, and work on academic skills with a focus on reading. The Academy offers a safe and welcoming space. It is a place where children and youth who live with trauma can begin to heal.

A knowledgeable educator names trauma and the feeling of not being welcome as the primary reasons for underachievement by the Black students. At the 21st Century Academy, trained leaders who understand children’s trauma provide a healing presence for boys and girls who suffer from racial discrimination, who live in poverty, or who have experienced or witnessed violence.

Let’s think again about the boy who worries about food. Is he also wondering where he will sleep? At a recent meeting in north Minneapolis, Dr. Brittany Lewis summarized the findings of an extensive study by the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) of the University of Minnesota. “North Minneapolis is a community manufactured to contain undesirable populations through housing discrimination, decades of urban disinvestment, unfair lending practices, and disproportionate evictions.” Dr. Lewis calls the people, the “walking wounded.” Is our young boy one of the “walking wounded”? For many participants in the Academy, the program becomes a safe daytime “home.”

Trauma is generational. African Americans still live with the legacy of slavery. The 21st Century Academy is part of the Northside Healing Space, a ministry of Liberty Church that offers culturally specific healing strategies for the wounded of all ages. This is an expansion of the Northside Women’s Space. One participant in the women’s program asked, “What good is it for us to be healed if we go home to families and a community in need of healing?”

The 21st Century Academy, as part of the Northside Healing Space, is our church’s mission at work. This is the fulfillment of Jesus’ words, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Mathew 25:35) The children and youth at the 21st Century Academy may be strangers to many of us, but they are not strangers to God. Thanks be to God!