

Black candidate, white intruder, ancient suffering

by Ken Meyers

There are few people of color within our ranks. As a staff member with the Alliance of Baptists, the staff and the board of directors are engaging a self-reflective examination concerning our individual and corporate racism.

As part of my personal journey I sought an African-American mentor. He is Rev. Reginald Gundy, pastor of the Mt. Sinai Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., my home city. Reggie and I worked together with ICARE (Inter-Church Community for Action, Reconciliation and Empowerment) when I first lived in Jacksonville before returning three years ago.

Recently, Reggie called and invited me to a private meeting of black pastors who were to meet the Democratic candidate for the Florida governorship, Andrew Gillum, a black man. Gillum was attending several political rallies, mostly in African American churches, including Reggie's.

Being present in the pre-rally private room with about 30 black pastors awaiting Gillum's arrival transplanted me into new territory. I was one of about four white people in the room. I met eager pastors greeting and embracing one another with warmth and playfulness.

When Gillum was announced, everybody rose to their feet, cheering and applauding. Every bit of my Baptist upbringing for separation of church and state unsettled me.

Gillum began to speak. His policies and plans were all descriptive and supportive for the common good of all Floridians. This was not about securing the status quo. Rather, it countered the protection of the status quo for power and place.

Gillum commenced the time for questions. The room changed. The questions were about mass incarceration, gerrymandering, failing schools, healthcare, gun safety and more. Focus and serious attention replaced the playfulness.

What world was this? The ethos and energy had shifted to consequential matters of humanity, not political posturing and protection. The matters shifted to surviving not prospering. The matters shifted to deep disdain for being subjugated and marginalized. All this came from ancient suffering.

One could hear if not feel the depth of disdain for a political system that marginalizes people.

I intellectually knew and supported Gillum's positions on the issues. What was happening to me in this room? My heart shifted. I reflected on this: "...white participants should know up front that the hope is not that we as whites be relied upon to resolve racial injustice and inequity, but that we commit to reducing the impact our white privilege has on creating that injustice and inequity" (John Dorhauer, UCC).

I once had thought my whiteness was a valuable asset. If a black person spoke with anger and angst on matters of injustice committed against the black community, I perceived this person to be militant and uncooperative toward addressing the injustices. I felt the common goal for countering racism was better served if we were united.

But we cannot be united on my white-person terms. Again, John Dorhauser: “One of the pernicious and enduring characteristics of privilege is that even whites who long ago became aware of the endemic racism in America, and who challenged themselves to grow beyond their racist pasts, are yet still recipients of privileges that give them enormous advantages for distributing wealth and power” (John Dorhauer, UCC).

The movement within my spirit is causing an extraction of an old lens and unhelpful attitudes and is bringing a particular eyesight and a reformed heart. May it be so.

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