

Action Update- June 30

On March 3, 2020, a tornado devastated the Nashville metro area. New Covenant Christian Church immediately went to work serving their neighbors, and then quickly had to modify their response in light of COVID-19 restrictions. We recently spoke with their Pastor, Rev. Dr. Judy Cummings, for an update. At Week of Compassion, we frequently share that disaster relief is complex and often draws attention to existing inequalities in a community. The convergence of a tornado with a pandemic amplifies just how glaring those inequalities are; how they affect recovery; and how they create even more challenges in a time of crisis.

Inequality Intensifies Crises: Racism, Tornadoes, and COVID-19 Collide



“The people in my community were already in crisis before the tornado hit this neighborhood,” says Rev. Dr. Judy Cummings of **New Covenant Christian Church (NCCC), Nashville.**

This community--37208-- is “the most incarcerated zip code in the nation.” During segregation, redlining pushed many Black families to settle in north Nashville. For a time after

WWII, it was a thriving place for the African American community. But in the 60s, urban renewal brought the interstate straight through and split the neighborhood, destroying economic development. That part of town never recovered and is now the most neglected part of the city.

Unsurprisingly, the community received almost no news coverage in the aftermath of the storm, even though they were one of the most heavily impacted parts of the city. This is often the case when disasters strike in poor communities largely populated by people of color. That lack of attention doesn't end with the news cycle. Among other things, Federal aid for disaster relief isn't allocated to those who need it most; it's allocated **according to cost-benefit calculations** meant to minimize taxpayer risk. This means, on the whole, that white Americans in more affluent communities **receive more aid after a disaster** than minorities and **lower income neighborhoods**.

Week of Compassion recently shared the ways in which NCCC went to work serving their neighbors to bridge the gap after the tornado, from feeding people and providing necessities to advocating for fair housing policies as opportunistic landlords displaced some of the most vulnerable residents. The congregation then quickly adapted to continue their ministry in light of COVID-19 restrictions.

New Covenant is one of many congregations across the United States dealing with compounded disasters. And like the March storm, the new crisis of a pandemic only served to shed light on systemic inequalities created by the pre-existing condition of racism. As Week of Compassion and our partners work to meet the needs of this pandemic, one thing is clear: we must also address the underlying conditions of inequality and racial injustice at work in our systems and institutions that make this crisis even more challenging for many of our neighbors.

Statistics show that the effects of COVID-19 disproportionately impact communities of color. In the U.S., **30 percent** of COVID-19 patients are Black, even though they make up just **13 percent** of the U.S. population. These markers indicate **systemic inequities within our healthcare system**.

New Covenant sees the broad effects of inequality on church members and neighbors in this pandemic. With children home from school, a large “digital divide” now contributes to growing educational and opportunity gaps among those who do not have internet access or computers at home. Many of the adults in the community are essential workers, meaning they must go to work, putting themselves and their families at risk. From healthcare and housing to employment and education, the pandemic is exposing the pervasive impacts of systemic racism.

Too often throughout our history, the Church has contributed to these unjust systems in our culture and communities. Which means the Church has a critical role to play in making meaningful change now.

Dr. Cummings says “When you see injustices, we are all called to speak up-- particularly those of us who are called Christians... Black people have been speaking up. Our voices are not heard. Our white allies, this is a time for you all to speak up; to stand in the gap of justice and say ‘this is wrong.’ Use your influence, your privilege. Denounce these structures and systems that continue to oppress people, that continue to hold people of color back. What we need now are not just allies--we need co-conspirators.”

In spite of the Church’s historic silence and complicity, there is hope in the opportunity of this moment. Dr. Cummings says “This could be the Church’s finest hour, if the Church would stand and speak. We are at a critical point. The Church needs to move forward with boldness and courage to have this conversation. A lot of people don’t like talking about race. It makes them uncomfortable. But we say we are a Pro-Reconciling Anti-Racist church. There has to be repentance before there is reconciliation.”

The effects of COVID-19 amplify the systemic racism that has been embedded in the United States for generations. Through Week of Compassion and other ministries of our wider Church, Disciples have taken bold steps working together to respond to the needs of this pandemic. To truly meet the needs of this time, we are also called to address the underlying crisis of racism that causes so many of our human family to suffer. We have an opportunity now-- and an invitation--to listen to

leaders in the Black and brown community, to our siblings in African American congregations, and to others engaged in racial justice work. We have an opportunity to learn what it means to repent and be “co-conspirators” with those who are showing the way, meeting the critical needs of this time while also seeking justice and reconciliation for the future.

Week of Compassion remains committed to our mission to alleviate suffering in the world. We recognize that systemic racial injustice is the root cause of much suffering, and join our voice with other Disciples speaking up for change. For resources and information about how to take part in important conversations happening within our wider church, visit the [Disciples Reconciliation Ministry website](#).

Photo: New Covenant Christian Church

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-  Kentucky, COVID-19 Relief
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-  Arizona, COVID-19 Relief
-  Maryland, COVID-19 Relief
-  North Carolina, COVID-19 Relief
-  Illinois, COVID-19 Relief
-  Indiana, COVID-19 Relief
-  Arkansas, Emergency Relief
-  California, COVID-19 Relief
-  Texas, COVID-19 Relief
-  Puerto Rico, Hurricanes Irma & Maria Long-term Recovery
-  Arizona, Emergency Relief
-  Georgia, COVID-19 Relief

For an interactive map of all 2020 responses, [visit our website](#).

Week of Compassion is the relief, refugee and development mission fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada.

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