

March 3, 2016

UMC, AME, and Baptist Churches Stand Together in Oxnard



When Bishop Broderick Huggins of St. Paul's Baptist Church of Oxnard received an anonymous death threat scrawled over a photo of him in a local newspaper, nearby Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and North Oxnard United Methodist Church joined St. Paul's Baptist for Ash Wednesday of 2016.

This momentous occasion was the personification of the Christian commitment to social justice and ecumenism on the part of each congregation.

It was also months in the making.

After the tragic shooting that took place at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in June of 2015, the California-Pacific Conference of The United Methodist Church was led into deeper reflection about the racism which was present in the Methodist Episcopal Church that ultimately led to the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Bishop Minerva G. Carcaño, preaching on the final night of the 31st Annual Session of the California-Pacific Conference and in a letter addressed to Emanuel AME Church, confessed of the possibility of our church and society being different today were it not for such racism in the church that us held as the root of both denominations.

With this thought in mind, Rev. Rick Pearson of North Oxnard United Methodist Church returned to his community in the summer of 2015 and reached out to the pastor of nearby Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church of Oxnard to convey his condolences over the Charleston shooting and to build a stronger relationship between the two congregations. The two pastors met

throughout the summer making a way for the two congregations to hold a joint worship service in the Fall of 2015 at Bethel AME.

The service also included a fellowship luncheon where six posters on which quotes from prominent leaders and thinkers such as, President Barack Obama, Nelson Mandela, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were printed. Members of both congregations were invited to write their reflections on these posters. The posters were then framed and given evenly (three) to each congregation. The commitment was to exchange one poster every six months as a symbol of Christian fellowship.

Also nearby was St. Paul's Baptist Church of Oxnard of which Bishop Broderick Huggins was the clergyperson. In January of 2016, a local newspaper ran a Martin Luther King, Jr. day story on African-Americans in Ventura which prominently featured Bishop Huggins. Several days after, Bishop Huggins received a copy of the printed story in the mail with an anonymous death threat scrawled over the photos of him.

By then, a new pastor was assigned to Bethel AME, Rev. Dr. Clyde Oden, Jr., with whom Bishop Huggins planned a joint Ash Wednesday Service as an act of solidarity in response to the racist threat of violence. When Rev. Pearson and North Oxnard UMC heard of the death threat and the joint Ash Wednesday Service, they cancelled their own service to be present in support of the planned joint service. Both Rev. Dr. Oden, Jr. and Bishop Huggins were appreciative of the support and asked Rev. Pearson to participate in the leading of that worship service.

Today, Bethel AME and North Oxnard UMC are enjoying personal relationships now established and nurtured in the fellowship of the two congregations. Moreover, a joint Good Friday Service of 2016 is planned. And, plans are beginning to be made for a joint "garden party" at the Community Roots Garden, a one-acre garden on the campus of North Oxnard UMC.

"We have been warmly embraced by our brothers and sisters at Bethel AME. We intended to be a blessing and we have been richly blessed," says Rev. Pearson. "We cannot undo history and the sin of racism. But, we can refuse to be bound by it. We must continue to reach out to our brothers and sisters in the African Methodist Episcopal Church."