



NORTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA SYNOD MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

Learning to Stay in the Conversation

Written by: The Rev. Samantha Drennan, Co-Convener, Synod Racial Justice Team

I have been doing racial justice work with my colleagues in the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod since late 2020. I have long known about widespread racial injustice in the United States, and the fact that systemic racism is deeply rooted in our long-established institutions, including the church. However, like many white people, for a long time I tended to avoid frank conversations about the injustice faced by people of color in the US. It was – and still is – a topic that makes people uncomfortable. And I felt helpless to change anything.

A shift came for me upon seeing the events of what is sometimes called “The Summer of George Floyd.” Thanks to outspoken leaders like The Rev. William Barber, the late civil rights leader Congressman John Lewis, and the local group POWER Interfaith, I became aware how widespread these injustices are. I came to realize that these incidents, including but



not limited to racial profiling by law enforcement, would never be addressed until white people began talking about them. As a result, in late 2020 I joined a group of Synod laypeople and clergy who had come to the same realization and wanted to do something. After many conversations, we began to plan an event where those who felt called would start having these difficult conversations.



On May 22, 2021, the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod hosted a virtual conference called “Trouble the Water,” a day comprising worship, a keynote speaker, and workshops. The participants were invited to join together in that “troubled water” – to come willing to experience the discomfort caused by openly confronting racism, then hopefully joining us in generating the waves of change and progress we hoped to make. Following worship, the Reverend CeCee Mills (then Director of Evangelical Mission of the North Carolina Synod) delivered a powerful keynote address, after which two sets of concurrent workshops were offered on a range of topics. It was a first attempt at providing space for honest, difficult conversations.

Following this event, the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod Racial Justice Team was formed. In the past four years, the team has submitted two resolutions (which both passed at their respective Synod Assemblies): one requiring anti-racism training for rostered ministers in the Synod; and another adopting a Land Acknowledgement statement. The team has also facilitated an online book study and has held six in-person anti-racism training sessions.



Last Fall (October 30 – November 1, 2025) I had the privilege of attending the first ever Synod Racial Justice Leader Gathering at the ELCA in Chicago. This gathering brought together approximately 50 individuals, both clergy and laypeople, who organize racial justice work in their respective Synods. Planned and overseen by Jennifer De Leon (ELCA director for Racial Justice) and Rev. Christina M. Montgomery, ELCA Racial Justice Manager, it was a deeply impactful and inspirational experience for me. The schedule included devotions, reflections, workshops, and small group time with other leaders from our regions.

The most impactful presentation was done by Kyle Williams, who represented an organization called “A Long Talk about the Uncomfortable Truth” – “A Long Talk” for short. His official job title is “Chief Empowerment Officer.” He began by telling us a deeply moving story of how this 21-day anti-racism activation experience came to be.

Kyle then shared their mission: to energize and empower allies in the pursuit of this shared purpose; and their process – to engage in an ongoing conversation focused on truth, understanding, and problem solving. He explained that many people will say they are not racist, and that’s fine. However, for many people being not racist or non-racist is not enough. What some people need is a way to become actively anti-racist.

Since I have begun doing this work, time and time again people have said to me “look, I know racism and white supremacy are wrong, I get it. But when someone says something like that around me, I get nervous/frustrated/angry and I don’t know what to say.” I understand this frustration; I too have found myself angry and at a loss for words. What was so impactful about Kyle’s presentation was that I now finally have a workable and direct response.

Kyle led us through a process called CPR, which stands for Clarify, Probe, Redirect. He said our goal should be to “get curious, not furious”; to engage the speaker’s critical thinking ability by asking questions following a racist statement. Briefly, it looks like this:

Clarify:	(example) “What do you mean when you say ___”
Probe:	(example) “How do you think it makes ___ feel when you say that?”
Redirect:	(example) “What would happen if you supported ___?”

“A Long Talk” gathers an online cohort to explore this process. Participants first watch a video on the history of race in America, then take part in a two-hour Zoom session discussing connections between American history and current realities. A follow-up session, held either in person or on Zoom, focuses on using the CPR protocol to challenge racist comments and beliefs. Ongoing support encourages continued growth and engagement in anti-racism efforts. More details about the upcoming “A Long Talk” coming soon at godslope.org/racial-justice-team.



“A Long Talk” cohort (Zoom sessions)

Saturday February 28 at 10:00am (1 of 2)

Saturday March 7 at 1:00pm (2 of 2)

A LONG TALK

ABOUT THE UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH

alongtalk.com

REGISTRATION COMING SOON

This event is organized by the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod Racial Justice Team