



UNITED METHODISTS

OF GREATER NEW JERSEY

Small Group Resource on Desegregation of Schools

205 Jumping Brook Road, Neptune, NJ 07753

Introduction

While New Jersey is an extremely diverse State, segregation by race, ethnicity and class in New Jersey's public schools is among the worst in the United States of America.

Educational opportunity is, as a result, undermined for public school students in schools that are often characterized by intense poverty and social isolation in numerous, well documented ways that deny an alarming number of Black and Latino students, the benefits of a thorough and efficient education and the possibility to develop to their full God-given potential.

School segregation also harms all students, including white students, by creating homogeneous learning and social environments that narrows their social experiences, which puts students in segregated schools at a greater risk of adopting prejudicial views since rejection of stereotypes, and comfort in interactions across racial lines, are predicated on cross racial contact.

United Methodists of Greater New Jersey vehemently oppose policies and practices instituted and practiced by the State of New Jersey that result in the segregation of public school students, thus depriving them of the thorough and efficient education to which they are entitled under New Jersey Constitution.

How to Use this Resource

This 3-week small group resource is offered encourage conversations in your local church and community about the issue of segregation in NJ schools and ways your congregation can become better informed about and engage the needs of the public schools in their communities so that all NJ students have equitable access to educational opportunities.

This Small Group gathering provides a unique opportunity to delve into this important yet complex topic. It is important to set up an atmosphere that is respectful, open and honest. People need to feel safe to ask questions and offer their views in a sacred conversation. Someone should facilitate the conversation, but not teach.

Ideally the group would meet for 90 minutes to have the best conversations. Meet in a location that offers the privacy that people can share their stories freely. When possible meet around a comfortable table or in a circle.

Begin with prayer and remind the group of any important guidelines such as confidentiality. Another useful practice might be that people can share their own ideas and questions without others criticizing or commenting. Begin with prayer and if possible light a candle to signal Christ presence in your conversations. Use good small group practices to assure that the conversation flows.

In closing affirm the work that the group has done and offer the challenge and a short closing prayer.

Week 1: Memory

Sharing:

As a child in school, when did you feel like you belonged?

Scripture: Acts 8:26-40

Discussion: [Read Becoming One: David Mosser's commentary from Ministry Matters:](#)

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian is full of surprises. We are dazzled by the speed and action of the account. The story functions mainly as a reminder that in God's new community—the church—old boundaries are not only smudged, they are being erased. The Ethiopian's conversion is one in a series of three conversions (the Ethiopian, Saul, and Cornelius), which redefine for Jewish-Christians the dimensions of the people of God.

*All people have a built-in sense that observes life and makes judgments about life from each person's unique perspective. Quoting Thoreau, Eugene Peterson affirms this in his book *Working the Angles*: "I should not talk so much about myself if there is anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience." People can only assume truth from their angle of vision. Acts, however, changes all of that. God's gracious perceptions of persons make them fit and, therefore, God's realm keeps expanding.*

One of many surprises in this story is that anyone would be traveling in the middle of the day in the Near Eastern heat. A friend who lived in Iraq said that often the daily temperature reached 135 degrees F. Thus, the question of why one would travel in the heat would naturally arise. We might also ask how Philip was transported to and from the Ethiopian, but the text is interested mainly in telling us something else. The text wants us to see God's grace in action.

This new community of the Spirit, seen in its ideal vestment at Pentecost in Acts 2, opens up the community of faith to even those who live at its very edges. Ethiopians in biblical times were generally thought of as persons of color, as well as foreigners who lived beyond the reaches of the African desert. Therefore, Ethiopians were viewed as marginal in a negative sense, but also in a positive sense as persons who engendered curiosity. They were often held in esteem and amazement. Since the Ethiopian was a minister for Queen Candace, we can only assume he was a person of high status. Whether he was a Jew or Gentile is still open for debate.

God, of course, created all people and created them to be in fellowship with one another. Sometimes, though, humans put limits on who is welcome and who is not in particular communities. As pastor in my first church, I was curious why the members seemed to be so open and warm toward me. I was young, inexperienced, single, a recent progressive seminary graduate, just returned from Africa and, on top of all that, I was from California. These, after all, were not particularly stellar pastoral credentials to bring to a small United Methodist church in rural central Texas! But the people seemed to respond to my ministry, making me all the more curious.

One morning before Sunday school I cornered two of my older members in the kitchen and asked them: "Why did you accept me so completely, since I am about as different from anyone here as we could imagine?" They merely replied, as if waiting months for the question, "You are one of

us, now!"

When the church welcomes all persons as those for whom Christ has died, then we will be near the kingdom of God.

Questions:

Who are the outsiders in our communities?

How have you embraced the other?

Group Discussion:

Although New Jersey is an extremely diverse state, segregation by race, ethnicity and class in New Jersey's public schools is among the worst in the United States. Current regulations regarding schooling by municipality keep all children from having equal access to a quality public education.

Our United Methodist Book of Resolutions states: *"We must address with prayerful determination the issues of race and class that threaten both public education and democracy in America.... Local churches and all communities of faith must become better informed about the needs of the public schools in their communities and in the country."* #3165

How was your life affected from the start because your school system?

How did you, your peers or your school respond to difference?

How might we show the same sense of welcome into our schools to all children?

Challenge: How in the next week will you intentionally welcome the other?

Week 2: Access

Sharing:

Life is full of many moments that are seemingly ordinary. When was a time you were surprised that someone experienced the ordinary different than you?

Scripture: Luke 5:17-39

Discussion:

The entrance was blocked. Possibly it didn't start out as an act of denial, none the less that was the reality. This man was unable to get into the house to see Jesus. The crowds had come to hear Jesus teaching, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were there to keep watch on all that was happening. Those who had the means to get there early got the best seats. Although this man is their neighbor they do not make a way for him to see Jesus too.

Often we are so engaged in our own situation that we fail to recognize that others are not offered the same experience. Recently an Internet audio clip went viral. Over 14 million people listened to the same audio clip that seems to be saying one word – but whether that word is "Yanny" or "Laurel" has created a sharp divide. The reason behind why people can listen to the same clip and hear different words is

frequency. The acoustic information that makes us hear “Yanny” is higher frequency than the acoustic information that makes us hear “Laurel”. Those who hear on one frequency cannot necessarily easily hear a different frequency. My experience may not be the same as yours but our Christian love connects us and leads us to take action.

New Jersey’s schools can adopt a number of reforms that expand opportunities for children of different economic status and races to learn together. Just as the man’s friends creatively solved the problem of their friend’s lack of access, we together are looking to find ways to that tackles the problem of school segregation.

Relate a personal experience in which you were denied an opportunity or treated unfairly.

How passionate are you to create opportunities for everyone?

When in Jesus’ ministry did He create access for individuals?

Challenge: How in the next week might you create access to someone whose right of entry has been denied or support someone who has been treated unfairly? (Don’t worry: this can be really simple!)

Week 3: Call to Justice

Sharing: [Watch video](#) of Rev. Vanessa Wilson, chair of GNJ Commission on Race and Religion share her story.

Scripture: 1 John 3:16-18

Discussion:

Throughout the Biblical narrative there is a mandate for justice. Justice in the Bible means to “make right”: right with God, right with one another, right with all creation. In the Old Testament the prophets spoke out about the injustices in society, Jesus often stood up for those that were being mistreated in society. We live and serve in a broken world, speaking out for social justice is a powerful way to come alongside those who are suffering.

To unpack more about faith and social justice read this Ministry Matters article: [A Passion For Justice by Jeanne Torrence Finley](#).

Children in New Jersey are suffering due to the lack of justice in our public educational system. The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, spoke often about the crucial importance of education. The United Methodist Church recognizes that “education is a right of all children and is affirmed by Scripture which calls us to ‘train children in the way they should go.’” All people, regardless of color, religion or economic status, deserve access to a high-quality education,” said Bishop John Schol. Participating in this movement towards desegregation in New Jersey public school is not merely a legal matter, or a political action; instead it is taking up our responsibility as a Jesus follower as well as a United Methodist.

In England, during the time when Wesley served, children in poverty were deprived of an education. Wesley saw a proper education as a means of upward mobility. Historians lift up his efforts to educate

poor families as a factor that saved England from falling victim to the revolutions that took place throughout Europe at that time. It was not just the effort to educate the poor, but the change of heart of the people to care for those who were suffering.

You're not alone if you sometimes feel a little uncomfortable taking part in social justice movements. It takes some careful study and discernment. The twentieth century theologian Karl Barth is often quoted as saying "preach with a newspaper in one hand and a bible in the other!"

Read: 1 John 3:16-18 again, and discuss;

How do you see the call to desegregate New Jersey Public Schools considering John's instructions? Do they line up?

What are the barriers to all children having equal access to quality education in your community?

How has your local community included or excluded students based on socio economics and/or residential segregation?

Challenge: How are you being called to take action to assure an integrated well-rounded education for all children? What will be your first step?

Segregation in New Jersey Schools – Talking Points

The Biblical Imperative to Address Issues of Justice

- "...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Micah 6:8
- "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke 4:18-19

As United Methodist, we believe that;

- "...every person has the right to education" and "... that the responsibility for education of the young rests with the family, faith communities and the government" and that "in society this function can best be fulfilled through public policies that ensure access for all persons to free public elementary and secondary schools and to post-secondary schools of their choice"¹.
- We are called to address with prayerful determination the issues of race and class that threaten public education in America²

Segregation in New Jersey School

¹ Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church ¶164.E

² 2016 Book of Resolutions, #3165, "United States Public Education and the Church"

- Although New Jersey is an extremely diverse State, segregation by race, ethnicity and class in New Jersey's public schools is among the worst in the United States of America. Segregation by race, ethnicity and class in New Jersey's public schools harms our State's students.
- The State of New Jersey has created and followed laws, policies, and practices that require, with very limited exceptions, students to attend public schools in the municipalities where they live, and other longstanding State practices that knowingly have fostered and enabled residential segregation that deny an alarming number of Black and Latino students, the benefits of a thorough and efficient education and the possibility to develop to their full God-given potential.
- This type of segregation of students was ruled unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court 64 years ago in *Brown v. Board of Ed. of Topeka*, which held that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" in that they "deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities."
- Evidence-based research shows that all students derive significant educational benefits not only from being educated in a racially and ethnically diverse setting but also from exposure to a multiplicity of viewpoints, and correspondingly, experience more limited growth when exposed to comparatively homogenous views.

Causes of Segregation in New Jersey

- Segregation in New Jersey's public schools is the inevitable consequence of two mutually compounding factors: residential segregation, and State law assigning students to public schools by residency.
- The *segregative* impact of these intersecting factors and State laws, policies, and practices is evident from analysis of the racial and socioeconomic demographics of eight of New Jersey's twenty-one counties--Essex, Hudson, Union, Passaic, Middlesex, Camden, Mercer and Monmouth--all or substantially all of which have districts in which the public schools were intensely segregated (over 90% non-white) by race, and which overwhelmingly enroll students living in poverty.

Numbers that Matter

- Approximately 58,900 black students in New Jersey attend public schools that are over 99% non-white. This constitutes about 27% of the approximately 215,000 Black public school students statewide.
- A further 46,768 Black students, or 21.7% of the total, attend public schools in which the percentage of Black and Latino students exceeds 90%.
- And in the aggregate, 131,378 Black students, or about 61%, attend schools that are 80% or more non-white, while the number of Black students attending schools that are more than 75% non-white is 140,882 or about 65.5%.
- Of the approximately 360,000 Latino students in the New Jersey public school system, 52,639 (about 14.5%) attend schools that are at least 99% non-white, while 98,906 (about 27.5%) attend schools where the non-white enrollment is 90% or higher.

- In the aggregate, 209,557 Latino students (about 58%) attend schools that are more than 80% nonwhite, and 221,698 Latino students (about 61%) attend schools that are more than 75% nonwhite.
- This pattern is worsening: the number of New Jersey public school students who attend schools that are at least 99% non-white has increased from 93,614 in the 2010-11 schoolyear to 113,169 in 2015-16.

Feasible Solutions to Segregation in Schools

- Analysis of the experience of other communities throughout the nation shows that three primary remediation methodologies are feasible in New Jersey and likely to successfully result in a more racially and socioeconomically diverse public-school system:
 - 1) Inter-district desegregation transfer plans;
 - 2) Inter-district enrollment in themed magnet schools; and
 - 3) Regional Controlled Choice.

Who is NJCDIS?

The New Jersey Coalition for Diverse and Inclusive Schools, Inc. (NJCDIS) is a non-profit corporation organized under New Jersey law whose members are dedicated to redressing the intense racial and economic segregation in New Jersey public schools. Bishop John Schol as a Board Member. The Trustees of the Coalition are guided by the following principles:

- Children have better educational experiences when they learn in an inclusive environment alongside students from different racial, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds.
- New Jersey’s highly segregated schools violate the New Jersey Constitution, which prohibits racial segregation in education, regardless of the reasons for or the causes of that segregation.
- We seek to achieve integrated education in New Jersey by adopting an evidence-based plan that emphasizes the creation of high-performing magnet schools, expands public school options, and strengthens our existing public schools.
- We are building on New Jersey’s proud legacy as a civil rights leader. Integrating our public schools will strengthen our democracy and our economy and will help us build a workforce that competes in the global economy.
- Our integration plan is supported by a broad-based group of community, civil rights, political, education and faith leaders who are all committed to making New Jersey a stronger state that provides educational opportunities for all children.

Additional Resources:

On the [small groups pages of the GNJ website](#)

GNJ news articles

Uncovered Dish podcast

Bishop Schol’s statement on School Segregation

Text of Complaint filed against State of New Jersey on May 17, 2018

Information on New Jersey Coalition for Diverse and Inclusive Schools

Links to the Global Board of Church and Society’s related pages on the issues