Asbury-Broadneck / St. Margaret's Partnership

In a recent Sunday morning service, Crystal Johnson, youth director at Asbury-Broadneck United Methodist Church on the Broadneck peninsula, welcomed guests from nearby St. Margaret's Church and asked them to stand.

Dozens of people who might have never walked through the doors stood up. They were members of St. Margaret's Church, located right across Route 50.

Johnson was brought to tears by the sight of so many white men and women of all ages standing up in the sanctuary of her predominantly black congregation. "If it wasn’t for the mixture that is in this place, we would not be where we are right now. We need to look to our left and right and the front and back of us, and we need to say thank you. It was the grace of God that brought us all here this morning,” she said.

The service that morning focused on a civil rights program that was written by an Asbury youth member focused on the idea that it takes all kinds of people -- white, black, Christians, Jews, men, and women -- to help secure the civil rights of all.  From the work of James Reeb to Viola Liuzzo, all the way to President Obama's speech at a national prayer breakfast, children and youth took on the roles of famous, and not-so-famous, national civil rights icons during the program.

St. Margaret's historian Mike Winn, who was present, said, "We pray that in order to find God in the present and in the future we will be able to live with what is different. We will have to step out of our comfortable and familiar space. On Sunday our children showed us the future -- into new spaces and places. And God was already there."

The two pastors, the Rev. Stephen Tillett of Asbury-Broadneck and the Rev. Peter Mayer of St. Margaret's, agree. They both had participated in a clergy group in the Annapolis area that had been creating a dialogue about their segregated congregations and the importance of churches working together. The Rev. Tillett, also head of the county chapter of the NAACP, was invited by the Rev. Mayer to visit St. Margaret's on a Sunday in November and gave two rousing sermons that resulted in standing ovations.

"We who call ourselves the church of Jesus Christ have to love on each other, tell the truth, and shame the devil," he said. "We are all children of the King."

After his visit, St. Margaret's Director of Family Ministries Jenelle Mejia then reached out to youth director Johnson, trying to come up with ways their children and youth could connect. To celebrate Black History Month at Asbury, a youth member had written the play on civil rights, and St. Margaret's youth were asked to perform multiple roles.

Throughout the months of January and February, both youth groups traveled to each other's campuses to practice, as well as to openly discuss race relations, finding common ground among diverse experiences.

"Our new friends have shown us new ways of loving and forgiving," observed Mejia. "They have enriched our world and our lives. They have taught us that it is okay to celebrate both pain and progress at the same time."

"I can't quite put into words how amazing our morning across the highway at ABUMC was," said St. Margaret's parishioner Alice Conover. "The Holy Spirit was blowing like a hurricane of joy. We are so lucky to have such great and talented neighbors."