



## Swedenborgians in Action Against Racism: Won't You Be My Ally?

BY JANE SIEBERT



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Some of you will remember watching *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in 1969 and seeing Mister Rogers and Officer Clemmons cooling their feet in a child's wading pool. Or you might have watched his final episode in 1993 with Officer Clemmons re-enacting that day. If you didn't see the original episode, you've probably seen it played over and over since. It was a watershed moment. The visual of Mister Rogers' almost translucent, wet, white feet in the water next to Officer Clemmons' glistening, wet, black feet. *It is beautiful and encouraging.* 1969 was just after the push to finally allow Black people to swim in municipal pools—still, 64% of Black children have no or low swimming ability, compared to 40% of White children.

We have another image embedded in our memories from May 25, 2020, of a White police officer's knee on a tall Black man's neck, snuffing the life out of him. Sometimes I have to shake my head to block that image. *It is painful and discouraging.*

Yes, we have work to do. It is good work and hard work. We don't want to be racist. As Swedenborgians, we pride ourselves in loving and serving our neighbors and not being racist. However, like the world around us, sometimes our blindness about

racism needs to be brought before us, brought into the light. As we know, we have to see it to do anything about it.

The team working to bring these issues into the light is: Terrie Crenshaw, Rebecca Esterson, Lori Gayheart, Robert McCluskey, Page Morahan, Brittany Price, Kent Rogers, Elbert Smith, and Shada Sullivan.

Please join us for the initial *Watch Party*. We will come together on Zoom to watch a few short videos and then break into smaller discussion groups, led by anchors from our Swedenborgian neighborhood. After this event, you can assess if this is something you want to continue with for four more sessions. Find more details, the schedule, weekly themes, and how to register on [page 125](#). 

Let us take a phrase from *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* "Won't you be my neighbor?" and join together in ***Won't You Be My Ally?***

It is time for us to put our feet in the wading pool together.

As our denomination is predominantly White, we need to understand our own inherent racism that can show up when we don't expect it to,

and that may negatively affect the lives of those around us.

We need to look at the systemic racism we have lived with from the day of our birth that has been embedded in us without our realizing it.

We need to look around our churches, our Zoom sessions, and question why they are so White.

In the midst of our vital internal spiritual growth, we need to look outwards for what we can do to be an ally to Black, Indigenous, and people of color within our denomination and in the world around us.

### What's Inside:

Critical Role of Christians in the 2020 Election • Institutional Racism in the Church • I Can't Teach You How Not to Be a Racist • Watch Party

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## Editor's Corner



### Conversations About a Sweatshirt May Change Your Awareness

Right now, we are all living day-to-day, just trying to survive. We are focused on what we need to get by. The days are going by at warp speed—hopefully it's just God's way of getting us through the pandemic faster. So just like that, we have found ourselves already in the midst of Autumn.

I love the Fall weather. One of my

favorite times of year is when I can get up, throw on my jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, a pair of flip-flops and power through my daily to-do list. Sound familiar? Probably. Seems pretty mundane—I never think twice about it. At least, I didn't used to. I had a conversation with my best friend's husband a few years ago. He won't leave the house in a hooded sweatshirt. He doesn't feel safe. And now—with masks being required in our state—my friend worries every time he leaves the house because he is a male, a person of color, and in a mask. Another thing I hadn't thought twice about. Masks are helping to keep us safe, especially with all the uncertainty surrounding the virus and how it spreads, but they have mixed connotations for them—being safe from the virus, but not preconceived judgements.

I feel the comfort of a hooded sweatshirt and the safety of a mask. He doesn't. Seemingly simple things to me—and likely many of us—that make my friend and her husband worry about his life every time he walks out the door. Right now, he can make the choice to leave the house without the hooded sweatshirt, but not the mask. They know that the masks are currently necessary and helping to keep their family safe from the virus—but they still have the underlying awareness that wearing any kind of mask opens him up to judgement... and hopefully not a fatally wrong one. We need to be aware of how others walk through life and retrain our brains to be cognizant that what we experience, even the simplest things, may be causes of great stress to others.

I deeply value the relationship I have with my friend's husband. We have had many conversations about awareness in both our lives. He told me once that it made him mad when younger people on the train didn't get up and offer their seat to an older person. I reminded him that with my health

conditions—even though I look fine most of the time—sometimes I am too exhausted to be the one standing on a train and would not have given up my own seat. He hadn't thought of that.

There are so many things to consider when navigating the world and thinking about the different people in it. Everyone is on their own journey. The conversations we have with one another—even ones *just* about a sweatshirt—could affect how you think of others and bring to the light awareness of another's day-to-day reality—one likely very different from your own.

—Beki Greenwood

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## the Messenger

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## Letter from the President



### *The Year of the Spiritual World: 2020–21*

*Dear Friends,*

Here we sit with two beautiful eggs in front of us. First, the egg that was laid during our virtual convention, *2020 Spiritual Vision: Transcending Time and Space*, that showed the many benefits from spreading our virtual wings and expanding our reach into the world. This is connected with the potential for real-time, virtual, worship services that need to grow out of the effort by our ministers to stay in touch with their *flock* during this seemingly never-ending pandemic. We are asking our churches: What do you need to share your worship services with the larger world?

For this first egg to hatch, we are looking at re-allocating unused, budgeted funds from 2020, now available due to moving face-to-face, essential meetings to Zoom: General Council, the Standing Committee for Financial Accountability, the Council of Ministers, the Center for Swedenborgian Studies, and the Board of Directors of the Wayfarers Chapel. Normally, I would be traveling around to meetings and visiting ministries, but all travel has been disrupted for several months, most of 2020. We are investigating how we can use these funds to help our churches upgrade their virtual presence. More information will be forthcoming in how to hatch this egg together.

The second egg comes from looking at our world, our denomination, and each of us personally. Our

comfortable, *normal* way of looking at our world is being challenged. The virus has caused us to look at our place in this world. Hopefully, our eyes have been opened to the disparity around us and unequal burden some neighbors carry to keep us fed, safe, and healthy. Some of us have been able to hunker down and watch the virus plague many less fortunate while we remain relatively unscathed. Hopefully, whether personally knowing someone that has died due to COVID-19 or feeling the grief of our world with the 1,004,421 people who have died as of September 30, 2020, our hearts have been opened with greater empathy to the pain and needs of others.

This ties into the horrific event this spring—the death of George Floyd—that has opened our eyes and hearts to the blatant racism in our country. Of course, it is not new or isolated, but awareness has been heightened, and we must use this critical time to move to do our own work and support our neighbors who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color. As author Austin Channing Brown states: “*The work of anti-racism is to become a better human to other humans.*”

This is the second egg that we want to hatch. We are planning five sessions to come together and expand our own understanding of racism in our world, our denomination, and ourselves. As Swedenborg reminds us, we must work on our internal self to affect change in our external self and world.

The first session will be a *Watch Party*. We will all come together on Zoom to watch a couple of short videos and then break into smaller Zoom discussion groups, led by anchors from our Swedenborgian neighborhood. It is for anybody! After our first event together, you can assess if this is something you want to commit to for four more sessions with different themes. (For more information on how to register and weekly themes, see [page 125](#)).

Please help us hatch both eggs,  
—Rev. Jane Siebert



# I Can't Teach You How Not to Be a Racist— If I Could, I Wouldn't

BY TERRIE CRENSHAW

At times, people who have the fortune not to have had direct experience of racist attitudes have approached with the desire to have me relate my own personal experiences of racism, and also to discuss and debate various theories and ideas, and maybe be informed about the history of racism in this country.

I would like to explain what this type of request sounds like from my standpoint. Obviously, this is not an objective viewpoint, just my own.

When people say that they have, until now, not really thought much about racism, and had no idea it was still such a problem, feel unequipped to understand or do anything about it, I hear this: even though we have been living in the same country for decades—teeming with racial discord and obvious inequality—people have managed to curate their exposure to the point where they are, at least on a surface level, practically unaware. I hear that only now, when it is all but impossible to ignore, have they reluctantly resigned themselves to addressing or even considering in any serious fashion this issue which shapes and takes the lives of many, dating back decades and centuries.

When people say that they aren't doing anything about racism because they don't know what to do and don't want to do or say the wrong thing, or possibly alienate friends and family, I hear that foremost in their mind is fear. This might be fear of change, of looking bad, fear of loss, or of conflict. I hear that the importance they attach to those feelings of fear is much more prominent to them than the issues faced by the targets of a spectrum of forms of racism, ranging from drastic

limitations on opportunity, to permanent loss of freedom, disability, or to death. My fears are different.

**I'm hoping that we can all acknowledge that rooting out the many ways in which our society devalues so many of its members, resulting in others developing and living according to a false sense of superiority, is important spiritual work which must take place on the natural plane as well.**

I pray every day that my sons will not cross paths with one of the hateful and sadistic citizens or officers of the law; I hope that my sons will not experience a life or level of accomplishment and happiness unduly truncated or attenuated without regard to their abilities or dedication; that their souls will not be blemished by the repetitive trauma involved in being a person of color in America; that one of us won't have to go to a hospital and be ignored or mistreated by a practitioner who cannot see us as worthy of their best care; and so on, and so on. Fear of facing my own secret thoughts, or past acts, or speaking up to someone in my extended family and making holiday dinners awkward, or damaging a relationship with a confederate-loving high school classmate, are not really on my radar.

When someone asks me to explain racism to them, or design and implement their journey out of racism or obliviousness, what I'm hearing is that this task, in their opinion, is of so little

importance to them that they will only embark upon it if I take responsibility for the motivation and the work (and possibly the outcome). I'm hearing that, even though information and analysis on the reality, the causes, the history, and solutions are widely and readily available, they prefer to press me into service as their personal guide. Maybe it means that they can only believe that the problems of racism are compelling if someone they personally know can convince them, based on their (my) individual history. It goes without saying that the impact on me of this arrangement has not crossed their mind. I know that if they had a close friend come down with a rare disease, they would probably do everything they could to be informed about that disease and what they might do to help. I am pretty sure they wouldn't expect their friend, burdened with the impact of the disease, to take on the responsibility of educating them, walking them through their role, and soothing their feelings, as they remained unaware of what their ill friend is going through.

When a person says, either through words, actions, or silence and inaction that they are reluctant to do anything to address racism, I hear that, despite what they may be professing, their belief is that first, the issue is not critical. It can be left to others or put on the back burner. Secondly, it shows that they do not believe that they themselves would benefit from living in a society without the racism of its many institutions and practices, that this change might even be detrimental to them, and beneficial to people like me. It tells me that they do not see any moral or spiritual incongruity resulting

*Continues on page 132*

# Watch Party: What Is Anti-Racism?

## Why We Need to Do More than Just Not Be Racist.

*Monday, October 12 at 7:00 PM EDT / 4:00 PM PDT*



Photo credit © John Beale

*Officer François Clemmons and Mister Fred Rogers in the final episode of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, in 1993, re-enact the first time they shared a wading pool in 1969, which in the midst of the civil rights movement broke long standing color barriers*

A team of volunteers have put together five learning and discussion sessions based on issues of racism, our theology, and the path of anti-racist regeneration. Join us **Monday, October 12** for the first Zoom presentation and discussion using a guiding theological principle based off of *Life 1*: the life of religion is not just to be good but to do good. We will watch the beginning of Ibrah X Kendi's (Author of *How to Be an Antiracist*) TED talk from June 2020: "The Difference Between Being 'Not Racist' and Antiracist." and Nita Mosby Tyler's TED talk from July 2020: "Want a More Just World? Be an Unlikely Ally," and then we will break into smaller Zoom discussion groups, led by anchors from our Swedenborgian neighborhood.

To register, please email [manager@swedenborg.org](mailto:manager@swedenborg.org) or call weekdays 617.969.4240 between 12:00 PM – 4:00 PM EDT, **by Friday, October 9**. Once you register, a Zoom link with instructions will be sent to you for the Monday, October 12 session.

After our first event together, you can assess if this is something you want to commit to for four more sessions. Future meetings will be every other Monday, at two times: 7:00 PM EDT and 7:00 PM PDT.

- **October 26:** What is unearned privilege and how can it be put to good use?
- **November 9:** What is systemic racism? How did we get here and what can we do about it?
- **November 23:** What does this have to do with us? Racism and the Church.
- **December 7:** Dismantling racism: in ourselves, in our communities, in our church, and in our world. ☩

*Because all evil targets someone near-by or far away, including the wider community and the country, it follows that hereditary evil is evil against our neighbor on every scale. On the basis of reason itself we can all see that the less we remove the evil that dwells in our will, the more the good we do is pregnant with that evil, because then evil exists inside the goodness like a kernel in a shell or the marrow in a bone (True Christianity §435).*

"Are they racist?" I have found myself answering this pointed question from my children many times over the last few years. They hear things about a certain political party, or certain public figures and want to know if that person or party fits into this terrible category. They are sorting out a lot of things in their world as they come of age in a time when our public discourse is dominated by confusion and mistrust. They want to know, like the rest of us, who the bad guys are. I am getting better at answering this question, and my latest version goes something like this: "We are all part of racism in this country. It's a problem we all have to deal with in ourselves and in our own communities. It's not just a problem for those guys." I tell them that it was not until I was able to see the racism in myself that I really understood how urgent a problem it is.

In our religious tradition we have this concept of inherited evil, or particular obstacles to our spiritual development that we are each born into. Racism is one of our most pervasive inherited evils today. It comes to us from the very same beloved ancestors who built our country, endowed our churches, and provided for our families. They gave this also to us, and it lives in the marrow of our bones. Exposing and rejecting this evil, undoing systems of oppression, is the work of regeneration. We do it out of love for our neighbors and siblings of color, we do it out of love for our ancestors, we do it for our children that they will not themselves pass this burden on, and we do it for our own spiritual liberation. It is good work and true work. I invite you to join us this fall in the spiritual practice of anti-racism through a series of events and small group workshops.

—Rebecca Esterson

# Addressing Matters of Race at the Garden Church

BY JONATHAN MITCHELL

**A**t the Garden Church, we pride ourselves on being a place where all are welcome at God's table to feed and be fed. But in the course of living out that ideal in a diverse urban neighborhood, there is no ignoring the vast socio-economic disparities, and within those disparities the role played by racial inequities. At the Garden Church we have been addressing matters of race in several ways.

In 2019, and again in 2020, we observed Martin Luther King Jr. Day with teach-ins that highlighted the multi-faceted legacy of him. Rev. Dr. King understood the interconnectedness of racial inequities, unfair labor practices, and the war economy. In our teach-ins we sought to address the need to unite around diverse social justice campaigns. As part of those discussions we addressed White privilege and systemic racism. We made a point of seeking out and inviting persons of color as discussion leaders. We intend to make this an annual tradition.

In our monthly discussion group, Theological Thursday, we dedicated a session to what the Bible says about race—namely nothing, since the notions of race which justified enslavement and genocide as found in American history did not arise until the fifteenth century. We also discussed the ways the Bible has been misused to justify racism and slavery. And we found in the Bible an embrace of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, most notably in the prophets and in the vision of the New Jerusalem.

In our social justice witness, we have been addressing the socio-economic disparities that disproportionately affect people of color. We have spoken up for the unhoused, actively advocating for temporary shelters, bridge housing, and supportive housing to be built in Los Angeles. We have followed the redevelopment plans for an affordable housing project just walking distance from the Garden Church—with a view of seeing that the rights of current residents are protected throughout the process.

In the aftermath of the police kill-

present. Or at least that has been the experience of those of us coming from a place of White privilege. We plan to have six sessions, after which we will decide on next steps.

In Swedenborgian terms, I think we are primarily at a place of repentance, that is to say, a place of acknowledging painful realities and our complicity in them. And at a denominational level it is undeniable that we are a predominately White, educated, and comfortable group of people.

In his ground-breaking writings from the 1960s and 1970s on race in America, James Baldwin occasionally used the phrase "the New Jerusalem" as a name for the diverse, racially equitable society America could yet become. I pray that those of us in The General Convention of the New Jerusalem will be led by God through the stages of repentance, reformation, and regeneration on issues of White privilege and racial inequity. Let us tirelessly and fearlessly

work for the ascent to an American New Jerusalem. ☞



*Garden Church member Octavia Wright speaking at the 2019 Martin Luther King Jr. Day Teach-in.*

ing of George Floyd, we have expressed our support of Black Lives Matter with a banner on our gates, and we have initiated an anti-racism study group. This group meets every other week by videoconference. The group is co-led by church board member Elizabeth Sala, and co-pastors, Rev. Dr. Amanda Adams Riley and Rev. Dr. Jonathan Mitchell. We do not claim to be experts, but rather, we are dedicated to learning together. As we learn in greater and greater detail about racial exploitation and injustice in American history, we often struggle with how to reevaluate our collective past and



Rev. Dr. Jonathan Mitchell is a linguist, philosopher, Shin Buddhist, and an ordained Swedenborgian minister since 1997. He has served Convention ministries in

Washington D.C., Wayfarers Chapel, San Diego, and currently in San Pedro, California. While at seminary he wrote an MA thesis which sought resources in Swedenborg's writings for liberation theology. He continues to be passionate about social justice.



# The Critical Role of Christians in the 2020 Election

BY RICH TAFEL

Both political parties have completed their conventions, and now comes the final stretch of the 2020 election cycle. I've been concerned for the past decade that America was moving away from politics toward violence. As much as you might think you don't like politics—trust me—the alternative is much worse. Humanity figured out a way to peaceably resolve differences through political structures and the rule of law.

When citizens no longer think they can have their issues resolved in the public square through civil discourse, they take things into their own hands. I'm concerned that we are entering into a time of mob rule. As Christians we have an obligation to seek to play a peacemaker role and do what we can to bolster civil society.

After following this election closely and watching the two conventions, I'm convinced that both sides have now planted the seed that if they lose this fall, they will blame unjust practices by the other side. Whoever wins in November, the other side will not accept it as legitimate. This is a dangerous moment. When politics and elections are delegitimized, we devolve to taking the law and disagreements into our own hands, and that leads to acts of violence.

In our tradition, we are called to love our neighbor, even the ones we don't know or like. This act of loving, even when we don't like them, is loving God. There's no loving God without loving God's children. The flip side in our tradition is that we are called to keep our self-love and narcissism in check. When we feel self-righteous against the flaws of others, we are called to look back at ourselves.

Having worked deeply in our political system, I can tell you that arena is dominated by narcissists. There's little room for empathy, humility, or trying to see the world through the eyes of another. I'm not sure where that comes from, but it seems to be created by a deep childhood wound. A friend who is a therapist noted that often this wound is married up to their being seen as a "golden child" as well.

**When we feel self-righteous against the flaws of others, we are called to look back at ourselves.**

Narcissism is rampant in our culture and politics in ways I've never seen it before. The Republican President is a case study in narcissism. Even in a brilliantly scripted convention, when the President had to hold conversations with nurses, COVID-19 survivors, and janitors, his questions reflected an inability to be curious or empathetic. He can only see things for how they impact him.

The Democratic Party's narcissism manifests itself under the banner of social justice. The Black Lives Matter movement that held such hope and unity only a few months ago has morphed into a binary racist v. anti-racist movement between good and evil.

Failure to tow a certain line can easily lead to a charge of racism. Protests which had public support and had specific goals, now have morphed into virtue signaling. When people feel they are fighting for justice, it can free up a dangerous self-righteousness. Looting and the burning of buildings and cars is not okay and fans the flames of backlash politics.

Recently, here in Washington D.C., social justice protestors traveled from restaurant to restaurant where people could finally eat outside and screamed at diners to raise their arm to show Black Lives Matter. When some didn't, they were threatened. Virtue signaling obscures the hard work necessary to bring true economic opportunity to the Black community.

If unchecked, this cultural narcissism in America is leading us to violence. When we fail to see it on our side, we perpetuate it. After another senseless shooting of a Black man in Wisconsin, a seventeen-year-old boy with a semi-automatic weapon went to the protest. He killed two people and injured a third. I'm afraid these violent events are just the beginning of what could become a tit-for-tat.

As Republican National Convention [RNC] members left the White House event, they were chased by mobs screaming horrible epitaphs and chanting, "If we can't get justice, we burn it all down." Those protestors may have accomplished what the RNC convention could not—pushing voters toward the President.

Fear is the most powerful motivating force, and people are afraid now.

The mood of D.C. has changed to fatigue. In my meetings with various members over the past weeks, I'm hearing a common thread of plans to leave the city. Other friends asked me about where they might find a place to escape to outside of the city if things get violent.

The role of the church at this time must become a place that speaks against violence of all kinds and doesn't fall into the trap of justifying violence

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# Institutional Racism in the Church

BY ELBERT SMITH

**I**nstitutional and systemic racism within American Christian churches today is a crisis. For me, it is personal. However, some people enjoy White privilege and the recipients of these privileges, and therefore, are in the best position to change it. Others enjoy freedom from the ill effects of prejudice and discrimination prosecuted against Blacks (like me) and people of color. They have most of the power to effect change.

I did not know that much about the innumerable details of society's racialized war machine arrayed against me and other people of color [POC]. This article describes many aspects of it from research for this article. Every reader can feel free to join the movement for change. Understanding the following history, philosophy, institutional and personal aspects of racism in American churches and society can be a springboard to greater justice.

## Definitions

*Institutional racism* (also known as systemic racism) is a form of racism that is part of the normal life of a society or an organization. "Institutional racism" was first coined in 1967 by two famous Black Panther Party leaders named Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*.

The United Kingdom's Lawrence report (1999) offered the following definition:

Institutional racism is when a church or organization provides a limited service to people because of their color, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behavior that amount to discrimination through prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and/or racist stereotyping

which disadvantages minority ethnic people.

A test called the implicit associate test, given by Project Implicit showed that seventy-five percent of people have biases against people of color. Even people of color have biases against other people of color. Most of us have some sort of bias against people of color. It's not overt. These are blind spots, usually.

*Diversity* can mean "one can have a seat at the table," whereas *belonging*, means "having a voice that is listened to and respected." Belonging means it's ok to be ourselves while being respected.

## History

American cotton and other crops in the South fueled industrial production in the North and other parts of the United States.

Later, when America had race riots—White race riots—they happened in urban areas outside of the South, like Chicago, St. Louis, Los Angeles, and the Northeast as well. Some form of racism was everywhere in the U.S.

White Christians did change, but only after the nation was becoming gradually more open. Conservative political actors manipulated White fears on race that were already popular in America. It was both overt and covert racial animus. Conservative Christians united in a single political party, especially after Ronald Reagan's election in 1980.

In the first ever U.S. census, people of color were considered chattel (property necessary for southern economic growth). Besides slave chattel, the U.S. census included farm equipment and animals.

Racial wealth inequality is not caused by chance. Whites make 18x

more than Blacks and 10x more than Latinos. Believe it.

Data shows that the vast majority of Christians right up until the start of the Civil War believed that Native Americans, Slaves, and even Asians, had no souls.

Frederick Douglass, a leading American abolitionist and former slave wrote, "Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference."

## Institutional Racism

Racism cannot be solved simply by knowing some people of color. The institutional aspects of racism have not been solved merely through interpersonal relationships. Implicit bias research shows that our institutional racism brings about a personal racism. We can only end racism by ending the policies and institutional barriers that sustain it in terms of economic and social inequality.

Institutional racism is present when things that are valued like—economic benefits, institutional power, and opportunities—are given to certain groups and withheld from others. In the U.S., institutional racism is most evident in the criminal justice and education systems, employment, housing, personal income, and voter suppression. It can take some time for a person of color to realize that what they are experiencing is in fact institutional racism and not some personal and unique experience.

## Structural Racism includes:

- Housing discrimination
- Limited access to quality education, employment, and even health care.

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## Institutional Racism

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- Food apartheid, areas where people of color live which are deliberately devoid of fresh vegetables and quality meats, etc.
- Racial injustice visible in mass incarceration of people of color by the criminal justice system. Including longer sentences, stop-and-frisk laws, over-policing, and the notorious school-to-prison pipeline, particularly in the South.
- Environmental racism, which is the dumping of hazardous waste in and around communities of color and the lack of access to clean water, which lead to health problems.

Disrupting racist systems and structures in our country takes both sensitivity and stamina. Press ahead to understand racism in all of its forms. We must work across systems and structures where racism operates—interpersonal and institutional. Racist systems perpetuate and allow violence against Black, Indigenous, and people of color.

## Selected Scriptures Opposing Racism

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty, instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.

They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long

devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations (Isaiah 61:1–4).

The Lord interacted with the Samaritan woman, the Roman Centurion, the demoniac, all of whom were different than Jesus. It seems that the Lord treats those who are victims of racism and oppression better than others. Jesus stood for equity which can lead to equality, this world appearing like the kingdom of heaven.

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken (Acts 2:4–6).

The Spirit of the Lord, coming equitably on them all, giving each of them the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Associate Professor Jarvis J. Williams, who asserts in an article written for *Christian Today* entitled “Jesus, Deliver Us from this Racist Evil Age” writes, “We believe in a Savior who redeems, a Spirit who reconciles, and a gospel that is the antithesis of White supremacy.”

The power to fight racism is present in the Christian community. Jesus never seemed to consider institutions above people. He struggled against the religious structures of His time that—as we would say today—discriminated against people as they often do now according to their race or other distinguishing characteristics.

Structural racism has two aspects: It is the opposite of what God wants for us, and it is also proof of how sin is systemic *and* personal.

Some Christians today are considering carefully how their world view, intelligence, and even conscience are clouded by personal and institutional sin. Discovering institutional racism

*Let both [the wheat and the weeds] grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn (Matthew 13:30).*

I began absorbing racist beliefs at age five; this was just a few years after segregation had been declared illegal. I began questioning such beliefs in my late teens, around the time of civil unrest in the '60s. I became involved in anti-racist efforts in my late twenties, as I entered seminary and ministry. Through it all, I had good intentions but not a clue as to the real causes, and cures, of racism.

I am grateful to all those who helped to raise me, doing the best they could, even as that best fell far short of the good. I am grateful to God for the spirit of love and truth which helped to guide me, available to me whenever I should choose it. And now I am grateful to this Kairos time, calling me and others to the harvest; to acknowledge our own complicity in the systems that support us but denies others; to root out the weeds of unexamined privilege and implicit bias so that our good intentions might finally bear fruit.

The prophets of old, including Jesus, regularly challenged their listeners to look more closely at the link between peace and justice, to be not just hearers of the Word but doers as well, to change, not just the world but themselves. It is in this spirit that Rev. Jane Siebert, along with Manifold Angels, is initiating a new project this Fall to help us, as a church, to look at the issues of racial justice and equity in new ways. As always, our efforts do not guarantee victory, but defeat is certain if we do nothing. And the possible benefits to the world, our church, and ourselves are inestimable.

I urge you to consider participating in this project, in which we hope to learn, to support, to share, and to imagine a new future. I am confident that any efforts made in this area will bear fruit, both expected and unexpected, if we boldly knock on the door leading to new life.

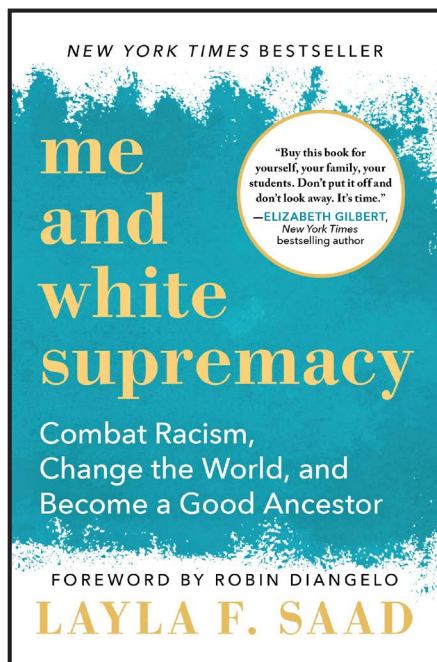
—Robert McCluskey

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## Book Review

## 28-Day Challenge: *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor*

BY ALISON LANE-OLSEN



The Fryeburg New Church recently hosted a virtual book group featuring the work, *Me and White Supremacy: A 28-Day Challenge: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor*, by Layla F. Saad. Saad describes herself as an “East African, Arab, British, Black, Muslim woman who was born and grew up in the West, and lives in the Middle East.” She has written this book as “a personal anti-racism tool to help people with White privilege understand and take ownership of their participation in the oppressive system of White supremacy.”

*How did it go?* The book was challenging and left me personally feeling a need to reread it, and to continue to grow with it. For twenty-eight days, the reader is given something to read about racism, and instructions to journal on the questions raised at the

end of each day’s reading. Our vocabulary for the twenty-eight days began to be filled with words and phrases like, “White fragility,” “tone policing,” “White exceptionalism,” “White saviorism,” etc. There was so much to learn and open our eyes to! For many of us who met, the content felt both necessary and often overwhelming; I will admit that I thought to myself one day, “*I’m pretty busy... I don’t need to do the journaling... I’ll just do the reading.*” The next time I picked up the book, Saad’s words were, “*White exceptionalism is what convinces you that you don’t really need to do the work—that you do not have to diligently write out your responses to the questions.*” Guilty!

The third week led us into the more personal realm, giving time and care to the people who are directly affected by racism and anti-blackness—a term used to describe the unique discrimination, violence, and harms imposed on and impacting Black people specifically (Merriam-Webster). It was during this week we were asked to read and journal about our own experiences with and stereotypes toward Black men, women, and children. With children of my own, a few of the studies cited concerning children has stayed with me—for example, *did you know that from the age of ten, Black boys are perceived as older and less innocent than their White peers, and that Black girls are stereotyped as needing less nurturing and protection than their White peers?*

While our book group was progressing through the pages, concurrent news stories were reporting that White Christians were more racist than among the nonreligious and

more likely to deny that structural racism exists. And that Black Christians were waiting for “whitelash”—the moment when White Christians would tire of anti-racism work and bristle at hearing more. The history of the White Christian church can also be painful to look at, but we can do better. For those of us living with White privilege—are we going to be an ally? If we choose to be too fragile to acknowledge racism and see our role in this system, then we cannot be a trusted ally for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), and that leaves me feeling heartbroken. If I can’t find the courage to see what is happening, to examine *my own* “White-centered” experience, then how can I be part of a loving response to this important conversation and crisis?

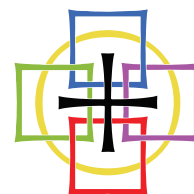
I was so thankful to our participants for their honesty and willingness to do the work. I have gratitude for the book and prayers for equality and an evolving humanity. ☦



Rev. Alison Lane-Olsen is the pastor of the Fryeburg New Church in Fryeburg, Maine. She resides there with her husband, two children, several chickens, and two beloved house bunnies.

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## Institutional Racism

*Continued from page 129*

and its prevalence in our life generates humility about our own righteousness.

### Some scriptures and dictums historically used to support institutional racism

Pope Nicholas V helped establish African slave trade by sanctioning European Catholics in the new world to enslave everyone who wouldn't convert to Roman Catholic Christianity.

Europeans murdered eighty to ninety percent of the natives in the land gifted by the Pope. One conquistador (Bernal Diaz Del Castillo) was quoted as saying, "When we became tired of the killing, God saw fit to give the savages smallpox."

This is perhaps the most popular Scripture of the institution racism-drenched believers, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord" (Colossians 3:21).

Then there is the benign idea that racism is outside of God's realm. European Christian settlers believed that the Christian religion justified enslavement and even genocide of indigenous peoples, and theft of almost all of their land. Slave owners manipulated the Word of God to protect the institution of enslavement, which is the mother of modern institutional racism. It was quite normal to forbid the slaves from Christian worship even in slave quarters. Spreading the gospel was not considered their Christian duty (since they did not want to believe that Blacks had souls at all like human beings). Rather, just the opposite, enslaved individuals and people were punished severely if caught worshipping the (White) Christian God.

I think even today leaders of most churches (even churches filled

predominately with worshipers of color) would say things like, "Let's just focus on the gospel." Rather than be troubled with participating in the struggle against racism in all its forms.

### Responding to In-congregational racism—or not

Who cannot understand how individual congregations may have some investment in maintaining the status quo? Church members often have some fear of what other people might say. Congregations and members have some level of risk if they stand up for racial equality.

Congregation members may have questions about their Christian faith. Should they ignore physical and material concerns like food insecurity, job losses, mass incarceration of people of color, voter suppression, and other important issues? Even if the church building has a sign saying Black Lives Matter, congregations have individual traditions: certain things are done, certain things are not done. Making the lives better for people of color in and outside the congregation, may not really matter. How many would-be congregational leaders might be told things like, "Don't bite the hand that feeds you."

Churches and some members are now expanding their views to see that racism is still a problem and a problem that's growing. There are people who care. And they care enough to act.

After the White supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Russell Moore said of the gulf between American Christian practice and Jesus's Biblical teachings: "In a time like this, Christians might ask whether we should, in fact, be angry. Should we not instead just conclude that this is what a fallen world is like and pray for the final judgment to come? If you are feeling distressed and heated, you have reason to be. White supremacy makes Jesus angry. Jesus was angered by the style

of discrimination of his time. The historic figure Jesus defended the marginalized, foreigners, eunuchs, and even prostitutes. Jesus didn't ignore the systemic and interpersonal racism of his time."

Congregations and church members that have been active are doing things like racial solidarity training and opening their homes and buildings for truth and reconciliation training. They are learning nonviolent conflict transformation and are promoting programs of unarmed civilian peacekeepers, and even de-escalation training for police officers in their local communities.

Some White church members and leaders openly confess their own complicity in institutional racism. Yes, even confessing their personal and collective guilt of both conscious and unconscious discrimination. They are actively reviewing their church structures, policies, practices and procedures.

Churches are being led by the courage of high school and college students, parents, professional athletes, et al., who have taken a bold stand for racial justice.

Those who resist the misuse of power in congregations and outside are considered our brothers and sisters. Let us stand with you—those who demonstrate, dialogue, and embrace nonviolent action to highlight the injustices that have become part of the fabric of the American way of life.

Leaders believe that if racism is confronted by addressing its causes and the injustice it produces, then healing can occur. They are challenging deeply ingrained racist systems and structures in their communities.

"White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," by Peggy McIntosh ([see resource list](#)) is an important work I think worthy of the reader's time.

The racist systems in which we live primarily benefit White people.

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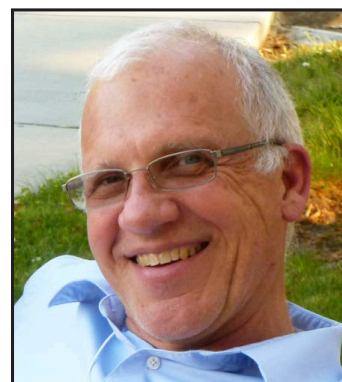
# Vice President Tom Neuenfeldt Steps Down

*A Message from the Executive Committee of the General Council*

The General Council is sad to report that Tom Neuenfeldt, due to family responsibilities, has tendered his resignation as vice president of the denomination. Tom was first elected to the position at the 2016 Annual Convention of the Swedenborgian Church, and for the past four years has very ably fulfilled the duties required of him, going above and beyond the call of that duty—traveling extensively all over

the United States meeting with various ministries and helping out in any way he could. He truly has been President Rev. Jane Siebert's right-hand man, and the Executive Committee of the General Council is especially sorry to see him go. We wish upon Tom, BJ, and their whole family many blessings in the years to come.

Godspeed, Tom, and thank you for your service! ☩



## I Can't Teach You

*Continued from page 124*

from benefitting from a system of beliefs and practices which is at best unfair, and at worst genocidal, that even a minor risk of conflict or loss of face is the deciding factor, enabling them to silently side with the status quo.

I have been pleasantly surprised that a small, but solid, group of anti-racism activists is present within our church organization. I can say with certainty that without this group, it is unlikely that I would still be part of the Church, and I surely wouldn't be in a position to take part in or lead various activities. The nearly unanimous vote to adopt the anti-discrimination statement was a clear affirmation that, as a denomination, we share a belief in the universal humanity and value of all persons. I also appreciate the people who don't know exactly what to do or say, but who go ahead and speak up and reach out and do something. I'm grateful to those who risked making mistakes and responded with personal growth when those mistakes were noticed. I'm thankful for those who educated me and pardoned my missteps. I'm hoping that as we move forward, more of our silent majority will speak up and lend their voices, their prayers, their hands

to this effort. I'm hoping that we can all acknowledge that rooting out the many ways in which our society devalues so many of its members, resulting in others developing and living according to a false sense of superiority, is important spiritual work which must take place on the natural plane as well. I'm hoping that the urgency and the import of this time on history is not lost on any of us. No matter where you are in your journey, or what you have done or said—or not done or not said—you are welcome to join the forward march of true humanity. I am urging you to do so. ☩



Terrie Crenshaw is a member of the Hillside Swedenborgian Church in El Cerrito, California. She grew up in the Church of the Holy City in Michigan, attending Almont Summer School and traveling with

the Youth League to many churches within driving distance. She is a founding member of the Manifold Angels Facebook group, and co-author of the anti-discrimination resolution confirmed by the 2018 Convention. She also follows in the footsteps of her mother, Mary Crenshaw, as a trustee of the CSS board.

## 2020 Election

*Continued from page 127*

when it aligns with our side. In addition to speaking against violence, we must continue to speak up for the underdog, whoever that might be. I'm concerned that churches are themselves swept up in partisanship, on both sides, and only pointing out mistakes in the other. We've got to work to be a space that speaks the truth and welcomes all.

## Where's the good news?

The key for Christians is to be consistent with our principles that we need to try to love everyone and be outspoken advocates against violence. We must be forces for good by tapping into the loving power of Jesus. I do believe the world is evolving into a higher level of spiritual development. To get there, we will need to go through the chaos and uncertainty. ☩

Rev. Rich Tafel is a national leader in the intersection of faith and politics. He serves as pastor at the Church of the Holy City, located in the heart of Washington D.C., a few blocks away from the White House.



## Letters to the Editor

### Swedenborg and Monarchian Modalism

Dear Editor:

I enjoyed the lively presentation of historical Christian doctrine in Jim Lawrence's piece, "One and Done: Swedenborg's Controversial Trinity" in the September 2020 issue of *the Messenger*. I greatly appreciate a good theological romp!

However, the piece did contain one discordant note: the idea that "Monarchian Modalists... accomplished a Triune Divine in a way Swedenborg would have appreciated." Though it's uncertain how much he knew of their teachings, in *True Christianity* §378 Swedenborg did include the followers of Noetus and Sabellius, two of the leading early proponents of modalism, in his breathless list of heretical movements that assaulted and tore apart Christianity from its infancy.

It is true that Swedenborg and Monarchian Modalism are similar in that both reject a Trinity of Persons while accepting the full divinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, the way they do this is so dissimilar that there is no possibility Swedenborg would have "pointed to those shapers of a triune Godhead as a better model than not only the Nicene Creed but the Athanasian Creed, as well." Swedenborg's theology decisively rejects both Monarchian Modalism and Nicene trinitarianism, which is defined most fully in the Athanasian Creed.

In modalist theology, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three different "modes," or roles, or ways of appearing, of God. God relates to us as a Father who is the Creator, as a Son who is the Savior, and as a Holy Spirit who grants us eternal life. It is the same God appearing to humans in three different ways.

In Swedenborg's theology, the

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not modes, or roles, or ways of appearing of God. Rather, they are "essentials" or "essential components" (Latin: *essentia*) of God, just as our soul, body, and actions as human beings are not modes or roles or ways of appearing, but rather are essential components of who we are as an individual.

No matter what role we may be in at any given time—mother, daughter, sister, and so on—in every one of them our *soul* is *acting* by means of our *body*. All three of our "essential components" are present in *all* of the ways we relate to other people. In the very same way, *all* of the roles of God—Creator, Savior, giver of eternal life, and so on—are the Father appearing as the Son and being expressed in action as the Holy Spirit. That is why it is perfectly good and right to pray to Jesus Christ as "our Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9).

The irony is that the Nicene Christian Trinity of Persons, which sees God as "three in person but one in essence," is much closer to modalism than Swedenborg's Trinity is. Swedenborg's statement that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are *essentials* of God decisively refutes the modalist idea that they are mere roles or appearances of God. Meanwhile, the Trinity of Persons simply took the early modalists' three *roles* of God and crystallized them into three *Persons* of God, each of which represents a different mode of the underlying divine essence.

Please, in seeking to find similarities between our beliefs and other Christian doctrines, let's not lose sight of the resounding dissimilarities that distinguish Swedenborg's theology from all of the dogmas that were thought up by so many historical Christian theologians—theologians who came along after the earliest Christians' focus on a life of love and kindness had given way

to pitched battles about "correct belief" within a church that was fast abandoning Jesus' teaching, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

—Lee Woofenden  
Soweto, South Africa

### Author's Response

Dear Editor:

Rev. Lee Woofenden has written a thoughtful response to my article in which I try to situate Swedenborg's "Oneness" Trinity in dialog with historical thought. He and I have been having this conversation for a few years, and it is helpful to have a vigorous dialog partner who cares about the quest to understand not only how Swedenborg can be saved from the common anti-Trinitarian charge, but also about what Swedenborg actually means with his critique of Nicene Trinitarianism and how the Trinity should be understood.

It is true that in *True Christianity* §378 Swedenborg cites Sabellians and Noetians among those who "attacked" the true church, but that is a problematic passage. He encircles there virtually everyone who was writing in the second and third centuries and ignores the fact that in Christian history on Trinitarian thought it is widely agreed that there was no consensus on the matter until Nicaea in the fourth century. What is this true church that he says is being attacked? He doesn't clue us in. He refers to no documents, no authors, no fledgling scriptures.

Is he talking about the apostolic teachings? There was no apostolic teaching on the Trinity. It is a concept that emerged after the second century in terms of any import. There was no accepted canon of Christian scripture

*Continues on page 134*

## Letters to the Editor

Continued from page 133

when these early figures listed in §378 were writing. Such a consensus for even which the Gospels would make the final cut doesn't arrive until late in the fourth century. We know it can't be Paul, who would be one of the early authors developing this true church, because Swedenborg indicts Paul as the worst of the apostolic writers (despite ending up with more works in the New Testament than any other). There are no actual writings to which we could point that would indicate where this "true church" ever existed in thought or articulations.

Swedenborg in fact censures many authors and praises none in his published writings. The closest he comes to a compliment is when he seems to be appreciative of what Augustine is doing in the spiritual world after his death (*True Christianity* §840), but he has no word of praise for Augustine's earthly writings (and he also gets Augustine's century wrong in that passage). Another name on this list of attackers is Caspar Schwenkfeld, who happens to be the closest author in Christian history for shaping something similar to Swedenborg's glorification process for how Jesus's human side became divine.

The upshot for me is that Swedenborg was not known to be a careful student of early church writings, and the writings of Sabellius and Noetus, were not in existence. They are still not extant. We only know about them from those who attacked them. Swedenborg is aware of those attacks, and so he alludes to them, but it is only in the past half century that scholars of early Christian thought have shaped some further analysis discerning the logic of these early Triune advocates. Swedenborg is too vague in his terminology for me to see how "essentials" clearly frames a different triune oneness than roles, modes, functions, etc.

## Institutional Racism

Continued from page 131

Therefore, some feel it places a higher expectation on White people to do the necessary work of dismantling these systems; anti-racist work is not optional for Christians. It is Christian discipleship.

He has no comment at all distinguishing himself from other triune thinkers; he's only contesting the Nicaean Trinitarian doctrine that became orthodoxy. I laid out in my article some of the overlaps I see with Swedenborg's triune oneness and what is being discerned as to what Sabellius, Praxeas, and Noetus seemed to be proposing, and I think the overlaps are worth noting and do put him closer to them than to the Athanasian Creed.

I'm steeped in the Swedenborgian tradition, which tends to place Swedenborg alone as a revelator and to claim for him uniqueness. I have often marveled, however, at how rich the synergy seems between his ideas and the history of Christian thought. Undoubtedly unique at times, many of Swedenborg's most important concepts nevertheless resonate in profound ways with historical discourse on the same idea—such as correspondence(s), regeneration, divine providence, deed over creed in spiritual living, levels of inner opening, freedom and responsibility, and yes, the triune Oneness of God.

No one comes close to Swedenborg for me as a guide to meaning and purpose. Yet as one also immersed in the history of Christian thought, Swedenborg can be a tricky author when referencing past authors. I sometimes need to deconstruct what he writes in order to continue the conversation.

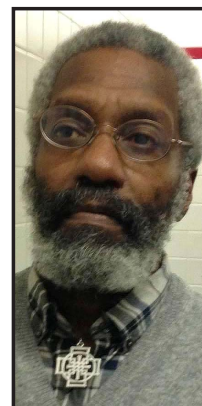
—Jim Lawrence  
Berkeley, California

## Current Times

Not enough Christian churches have taken a stand against Islamophobia, mass incarceration, the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

The globally famous video of the murder of George Floyd by a White police officer—while three other officers watched—has displayed how much Black lives and people of color have been devalued in America. Let's educate people, particularly White people, about the structures of systemic racism in education, health care, judicial, economic, religious, governmental systems, and elsewhere. Let's teach the truth that White privilege benefits White people in many ways that can be acknowledged by them. Let's support White people who move beyond passive support to become active allies.

It's time to refuse to accept the indifference hiding behind a comment like "It's not my problem." Let's root out claims of innocence behind comments like, "I'm not a racist." Let's avoid disavowal of responsibility behind comments like "I don't see color." Let's stop minimizing the issue with comments like, "All lives matter." Let's avoid the willful helplessness behind ideas like, "There's nothing I can do." ☒



Elbert Smith is a native of Lincoln, Nebraska, who is sheltering in place in northern Arizona. He managed a business in the high fashion sector for decades. He worked with non-profit and permaculture projects in recent years. He's attended several of our annual conventions.

Sources listed on page 135





### About the Swedenborgian Church

Emanuel Swedenborg was born January 29, 1688, in Stockholm, Sweden. Although he never intended a church denomination to be founded or named after him, a society was formed in London fifteen years after his death. American groups eventually founded the General Convention of Swedenborgian Churches.

As a result of Swedenborg's spiritual questioning and insights, we as a church exist to encourage that same spirit of inquiry and personal growth, to respect differences in views, and to accept others who may have different traditions.

In his theological writings, Swedenborg shared a view of God as infinitely loving and at the very center of our beings, a view of life as a spiritual birthing as we participate in our own creation, and a view of scripture as a story of inner life stages as we learn and grow. Swedenborg said, "All religion relates to life, and the life of religion is to do good." He also felt that the sincerest form of worship is a useful life.

## Pandemic Relief for Ministries

The Executive Committee offers a *big thank you* to the individuals, societies, associations, and the General Council for their donations to the Pandemic Relief Fund. The collection gathered during the 2020 Virtual Convention went into the fund. In addition, General Council was able to add some money from our budget as expenses have been cut due to no travel, no in-person meetings, and no regular convention. The Massachusetts New Church Union, Illinois Association, Chicago Society, and Cambridge Chapel also contributed for a total fund of \$31,900.

Individuals donating were: Pastor Helen Barler, Rev. Gabriella Cahaley, John Childs, Rev. Betsy Coffman, Rev. Julie Conaron, Stan and Karen Conger, Terrie Crenshaw, Melissa Donaldson, Lon Elmer, Elizabeth Giddings, Victoria Henderson, Joehee Kim, Rev. Solomon Young Min Kim, Jennifer Lindsay, Amy Little, Andrea LoPinto, Rev. Renee Machiniak, Martha Richardson, Rev. Dr. Amanda Riley, Michael Robbins, Sharon Shulte, Rev. Jane Siebert, Rev. Kathy Speas, Rev. Rich Tafel, Rev. Roslyn Taylor, Dennis Vail, Rev. Wilma Wake, and Jesse White.

Eight ministries applied for financial

help. Each wrote a letter of request explaining the financial stressors affecting their ministry, such as decreased offerings and lost revenue due to canceled rental opportunities. In addition, they provided information about their application and receipt from the Paycheck Protection Program (the CARES Act) and additional requests for giving from their congregation. Grants were awarded to all eight: Hillside Community Church, El Cerrito, California; Wayfarers Chapel, Rancho Palos Verdes, California; Church of the New Jerusalem, San Francisco, California; The Garden Church, San Pedro, California; Church of the New Jerusalem, Bath, Maine; Church of the Holy City, Royal Oak, Michigan; Church of the Open Word, St. Louis, Missouri; and Church of the Holy City, Washington, D.C.

As the pandemic goes on, it continues to be a difficult time for our ministries. We hope and pray things are improving and everyone is learning how to reduce expenses and reach out for help where available.

*President Rev. Jane Siebert, Vice President Tom Neuenfeldt, Secretary Karen Conger, and Treasurer Jennifer Lindsay.* ☒