

2021 Michigan Annual Conference
Anti-Bias/Anti-Racism Working Group
Bishop Bard | Rev. Dr. Kevin Smalls | Pastor April Gutierrez
June 4, 2021

INTRODUCTION TO REV. DR. B. KEVIN SMALLS - BISHOP BARD

In May 2020, our country watched in anguished astonishment the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Other deaths have become hauntingly familiar to us: Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Jacob Blake, Andre Hill, as reminders of the persistence of racism in our society. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian hate crimes have increased nearly 150%. Racialized thinking, the elevation of whiteness, and discriminatory and oppressive behaviors rooted in such thinking have long been a part of our history, and they are antithetical to the gospel, to the teaching that all human persons are created in the image of God and that God's grace is available to all people. In light of recent events, at the encouragement and with the help of conference leadership and staff, I have formed an Anti-bias/Anti-racism working group in the Michigan Conference. I see such work as an essential part of our journey with Jesus. Rev. Dr. Kevin Smalls, Senior Pastor at Southfield: Hope United Methodist Church, is one of the co-chairpersons of this working group and it is my pleasure to introduce him to you now so he might share why this work is important for our Conference.

REV. DR. B. KEVIN SMALLS, CO-CHAIRPERSON ANTI-BIAS/ANTI-RACISM

We have seen, like never before, the polarization of America. Speaking about the political and social climate in the United States has been difficult at best. Within our own families, communities and in some cases, our own churches we have been struggling with how to address, speak about and confront some of the difficult and horrifying events that our nation has experienced.

However, two of those matters that have continued to emerge is something we cannot ignore, sweep under the carpet or avoid. That is the matter of racism and bias.

The church must be bold in its denouncement of racism and bias as they have caused harm and in some cases death to people of color.

We have been horrified and deeply saddened by the narratives of racism that have surrounded police engagement, everyday conversation in the marketplace and bias imposed on students, parents and community residents and even vandalism toward churches supporting racial equality.

The hope that we have is that the United Methodist Church can offer the love of Christ which breaks down these barriers and work toward the day when all of God's children sit down at the table of kinship, without threat, without bias, and without hatred.

It was with this hope that I said yes to Bishop Bard's invitation to join the Conference's Anti-Bias/Anti-Racism Working Group.

As a working group, we have met to conference with one another; to share our hopes and our dreams; to expose our own fears and challenges; and to begin the necessary process to carve a path that will equip and support our congregations that seek an avenue to address racism and bias; to equip pastors with tools to lead congregations and communities through this most important work.

Now is the time for all to reclaim the promise made at our baptismal and membership vows, to "resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves and to accept the church as a people of all ages, nations and races."

INTRODUCTION TO PASTOR APRIL GUTIERREZ - BISHOP BARD

The other co-chairperson of our Anti-bias/Anti-racism working group is the Rev. April Gutierrez. April will serve as Associate Pastor at Rochester: St. Paul's United Methodist Church beginning July 1. April will share some details about the ABAR group's work.

REV. APRIL GUTIERREZ, CO-CHAIRPERSON ANTI-BIAS/ANTI-RACISM

Over the past year, Bishop Bard, in collaboration with conference leaders and staff, created the Anti-Bias Anti-Racism Working Group to provide guidance and coordination of conference-wide anti-bias and anti-racism work in collaboration with conference leaders and agencies. We seek to equip the Michigan Conference to lead in this area in a way that recognizes the desire to live as a Beloved Community and is informed by our Methodist history in the abolitionist movement.

This annual conference, we are putting forward three resolutions for you to consider. First, to affirm the work of the ABAR working group has begun. Affirming the Bishop's Anti-Bias Anti-Racism Working Group with the same membership and co-conveners as myself and the Rev. Dr. B. Kevin Smalls who are amenable to the Conference Leadership Council.

The second is to provide Training and Support for Cross Racial/Cross Cultural Appointments. Again, this group will be a resource to the Board of Ordained Ministry and to the Cabinet to collaboratively create and implement training and support for clergy and congregations. Cross racial and cross-cultural appointments are a rich blessing to making disciples that transform the world. We seek to resource our congregations and clergy in their ministry.

The third is the Anti-Bias Anti-Racism Training for Active Clergy, Conference and District Staff every four years that will begin in 2022. In collaboration with the Board of Ordained Ministry, we will support the creation of these trainings. I am excited for these new resolutions coming before us this Annual Conference so that we might resource and equip our leadership and congregations to best serve in our churches for the 21st century.

These resolutions represent just a first step in engaging in anti-bias and anti-racism work in our Conference. There is still much work to be done. At times, as a group, we have felt overwhelmed by the challenge of systemic racism and struggled to figure out where to even begin. After listening to each other and the communities we are part of, we believe this is a good first step. We expect this to be difficult and uncomfortable work that will leave each of us changed in different ways. We believe this is the work God is calling us to us in this moment.

BISHOP BARD'S RESPONSE TO ABAR

Friends, we have been living through a difficult time as you've heard me say often enough. The coronavirus pandemic has touched and changed our lives. We have also been witness to events that brutally and painfully remind us that we have work to do on racial reckoning. We have witnessed the killing of Black Americans by law enforcement. We have witnessed violence against Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders. Yes, our country also has a violence problem that includes mass shootings and gang violence, and we cannot ignore the needed work of racial reckoning, of coming to terms with our history as a church and as a nation and the ways in which we have been influenced by and socialized in racial thinking.

This work is essential to our journey with Jesus, for it is soul work as well as community work. This work is integral to building God's Beloved Community. I invite every Michigan United Methodist congregation to engage in a study in the coming year dealing with intercultural competence, racism, or racial reckoning. We will work to provide helpful resources for this work. It is needed work for us all, soul work, Kingdom-building work.