

## **Racism shown at a Restaurant in Texas Order Placed for Justice**

*Commentary by the Rev. Heather Williams\**

A silence came over the gathered body, the legislative committee on Faith and Order, Saturday April 26, 2008, as the Rev. Darryl Barrow stood for a point of personal privilege.

Being granted a moment of personal privilege does not happen easily or lightly at a Legislative Committee of the General Conference.

Rev. Barrow now stood amid his United Methodist brothers and sisters after being elected as a delegate for the North Central New York annual conference last June. Rev. Barrow, who is a person of color and originally a member of the Methodist Church of the Caribbean, serves as the Spiritual Leadership Director.

On Friday evening, April 25, 2008, at a local restaurant the delegation gathered for dinner to celebrate the birthday of the Rev. Bruce Webster.

The meals were brought to the table one by one – even those who were a half hour late to dinner were served. Rev. Barrow still had no meal, whereas Shirley Verity, a reserve lay delegate, sitting on his right side was served the same meal he had ordered 45 minutes before. Many reasons for this delay were given by the wait staff, but it was clear to those at his end of the table that they were bearing witness to the human sin of racism.

The manager finally arrived after Rev. Barrow's persistence and offered a free meal with the dismissive rationale, "Well, it is Friday and we're busy around here." Rev. Barrow in turn responded, "This is not about free food; it is now a matter of justice."

With conviction and tears, Rev. Barrow conveyed his emotional reaction to such an act of discrimination. All of those who were in the room of the legislative committee on Faith and Order, were moved to silence. His following words rang like a blaring trumpet with the sound of a painful truth: "I am part of a heritage of a culture of exclusion. And this is a sin that the church, the United Methodist Church, has participated in and continues to participate in. That is why I stand on behalf of those who are excluded and I make no compromise on that." At the direction of the chair and the impulse of the Spirit, the body moved towards Rev. Barrow to lay hands upon him. We prayed for all those who feel the sting of racism and for those who inflict and participate in this sin of exclusion.

This was the second time in one day that Rev. Barrow had the blessing of being prayed for in such an intimate way as the laying on of hands. Earlier, another one of our NCNY delegates, Ron Bretsch, wanted Rev. Barrow to know that the delegation was totally behind him offering support. Ron asked to lay hands on

Rev. Barrow as all the members of the NCNY delegation stood in solidarity with their hurting brother.

The cries of justice began when Ron brought word to our Bishop, the Rev. Dr. Violet Fisher, while the Rev. Marti Swords-Horrell spoke with the hosting Bishop, Rev. Ben R. Chamness. Our Bishop is a bold and passionate woman. She came to Darryl to give him her support and to affirm that “this most painful incident” would not disappear into the silence. Bishop Fisher conferenced with General Commission on Religion and Race president Bishop Linda Lee and formed a strategy that included letters to the restaurant’s corporate offices, and reminding the entire body present at General Conference that we are all responsible for the pain of racism, because it impacts more than the intended victim.

Shirley Verity, who sat next to The Rev. Barrow said that though angry at watching the injustice first hand, it was an moment of education for her. Though having lived long enough to wear a crown of softly coifed white hair, she had never before witnessed racism. “ I needed to see that,” she said. “It is no longer someone else’s story. It is mine as well.”

As an observer to the unfolding of events, I am reminded of my place of white privilege. I don’t think I as a white woman can truly understand the depth of pain someone feels when they are denied full participation in our social world because of who God created them to be. I am left with the questions: “Who is it that I exclude from full participation by acts of intentionality and by insidious acts of ignorance? Who is it that I need to stand with as they too find themselves excluded and bear the burden of injustice?”

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus asked his Jewish companion, “Who is the neighbor?” Jesus responds, “The one who showed mercy.” Sometimes even the church talks more about Jesus and walks less like the Jesus we claim to follow. Who is your neighbor and from where do the tears of injustice flow?

*\*The Rev. Heather Williams is covering General Conference for the North Central New York Conference and sends this commentary on an incident which occurred Friday evening.*