



Transcript

Means of Grace

Episode 49

Recorded Audio: Welcome to Means of Grace, a podcast produced by the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Kim: Welcome to this episode of the Means of Grace podcast. I'm your host Kim Ingram. I'm the director of ministerial services and the conference secretary for the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church. Today we're going to be talking with Deborah Daniels and Cindy Thompson. Each of them is an active lay person in the Western North Carolina conference and also in their local churches and communities. I'm excited about this conversation. I think that our listeners will discover ways that you could be involved in the ministries of reconciliation where you live and in the things that you do.

You will be inspired by the ways that Cindy and Deborah have been providing leadership and you'll gain a better idea of how the ministries of reconciliation reflect our Wesleyan tradition, our biblical understandings and really are a mandate for our churches. So I look forward to sharing this conversation with you. In this episode of the Means of Grace podcast, we are talking about reconciliation and healing. Specifically racial reconciliation and how leaders and churches can help us move closer to our communities that reflect God's kingdom.

We're delighted to have these two guests, Deborah Daniels, who is a member of Mount Tabor United Methodist Church in Winston-Salem and Deborah is also a member of the Conference Leadership Development Team.



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Deborah has extensive experience in facilitating groups, and I also just learned that she has musical gifts where she leads a community choir and participates in a church band. Recently, Deborah paused retirement to teach middle school business. She is one really busy lady.

Our other guest is Cindy Thompson, the executive director of Boundless Impact and a member of Christ United Methodist Church in Greensboro. Cindy has been involved in many initiatives within the Western North Carolina conference. Her call to the Ministry of Reconciliation has really led to the development of many of them. Cindy has initiated and implemented Flame Builders, Innovate UMC, Truth cafes and Imagine Hub. We really appreciate Cindy's extensive leadership throughout the conference.

2020 brought us a pandemic, an election year with all of the changes and strife that came with that and racial and civic unrest. We're now in 2021 we want to look forward with hope, but we can't forget the work that still needs to be done. David Brubaker says that as leaders respond to the needs of a congregation, we must do so based on our deepest values and the wisdom of our own tradition. I wonder if we can start with this. What are the deepest values and wisdom in our tradition that undergirds the work you are doing? Deborah, would you be willing to share with us first?

Deborah: I think our deepest values, our honesty, with being sincere and being willing to hear and listen to what others have to say and be willing to accept others for whoever they are.

Kim: Yes, that really is an important part of our tradition as united Methodist. Thank you. How about you, Cindy?

Cindy: Thank you, Kim and thanks for having me with you today. I would say two things. I think first is just very simply our biblical mandate to love our neighbor. It



sounds like really simple words, but can be the most complex and difficult thing for us to live out in our daily lives. And then I think second is our Micah 6:8 call to mercy, justice, righteousness and humility.

Kim: Cindy, those scriptures are really helpful to undergo this conversation today, and they are also really aligned with the Wesleyan ideas of social holiness and personal holiness and looking inward and looking outward at the same time.

Deborah, I want to talk a little bit more about your experiences. As an active member of Mount Tabor, you established a Church for All People Task Force. I was hoping that you would tell us a little bit more about that. How did it come about? And what are some of the activities that the Task Force has hosted?

Deborah: Members of Mount Tabor have worked hard to expand our church personality, to become welcoming to all as they interact with visitors and each other. And as a starting point, we started with diversity to form a work group, the furtherance vision of becoming a church of all people. To make that vision a reality, it's important for individuals to search inside themselves for dealing with compassion, for accepting and welcoming others.

Initially, we worked through various activities, including a quarterly movie, a discussion series, offering a "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" workshop, where participants look outside of themselves, looking at white privilege, meeting with minority churches and non-Methodist faith institutions to develop a plan for worship and for service, to host activities of minority groups inside the Church taking bus tours to East Winston to learn more about the establishment of the African American community and welcome them, to host African American speakers to come and tell their stories, and then to identify, most recently, we did *Be the Bridge*, a church wide book study by Natasha Morrison. Just having people



to have more experiences, step outside of their neighborhood to find other neighbors and connect outside of the Mount Tabor area.

Kim: Wow, that's a lot of initiatives that you all have done over a period of time. That's impressive. Now Mount Tabor is primarily a white church, right?

Deborah: Um, I can probably count on two hands. How many African Americans and members of the church. So yes, it is.

Kim: Since this is audio only and not video, I just wanted to mention that Deborah is an African American woman. So you are one finger of those two hands of African American members of Mount Tabor United Methodist Church. I was wondering if you could just tell us from your personal perspective, maybe how and why you've been a part of this initiative and what it's meant to you.

Deborah: I came to the church when Earl Wilson was the African American pastor who was appointed there, and he invited us there, and we liked what was going on, we liked the kinds of community activities that they were involved in, and my mom, who's 92 now, said, "I like this I think we should stay." And even after Earl left, Mark came and the first week that Mark was at the church, he came to our house and we live in East Winston, literally in the African American community. And he took the time to come to our house to speak with us and to meet with us and we felt good about that and we joined. I don't remember when we joined now, um, been some years now that we have joined now and we're delighted to be there to worship with them and to help them - help other members see what we see and feel what we probably have experienced.

Kim: Cindy, I wonder if you would tell us about some of the work you've been doing with the World Cafe model, and I know we referenced at the beginning of the podcast, but you've been hosting Truth Cafes, and now you have several offerings of the workshop "Racial Healing and the Gospel of Reconciliation." How



has this ministry of reconciliation become important for you and developed over the last few years?

Cindy: Well, Kim, you know that I have you to thank for that, right? Because I didn't even know the phrase, "the ministry of reconciliation" until you and I worked together and helping to launch The Space Between Initiative. And I grew up in the Methodist Church and I had never heard, you know, the phrase the Ministry of Reconciliation, but since you first help name this call of my life, I've become a student of reconciliation and it is truly a lifelong learning process. So the World Cafe model is a great dialogue tool as it provides a safe environment and structure for people to have crucial conversations about divisive issues.

And we use the World Cafe model in our Truth Cafe program. And the Truth Cafe is a workshop that brings churches of different ethnicity together to learn and commit to join action on racial equity. And so, in partnership with the Western North Carolina Conference, we've hosted about 25 truth cafes with over 70 churches most of them being United Methodist churches, and we've reached over 700 participants.

Many of these churches wanted to take the next step and kind of go deeper and their understanding of racial equity and racial reconciliation. And so they're now attending this workshop called the Racial Healing and the Gospel of Reconciliation that Reverend Vincent Howell and I are facilitating and we have several dates coming up for this spring that the registration is open for. And as Vincent and I were preparing for this workshop and through our research, we discovered a United Methodist pastor from the North Georgia conference named Brian Tillman, who has developed a six-step process for reconciliation. And while this reconciliation process can be used for any issue or relationship, it's particularly impactful in racial reconciliation efforts. And so it's important not only



for folks to understand our call to the ministry of reconciliation, but also have a framework for action to take that next faithful step in our journey.

Kim: Yeah, that is one of the hardest things we read and watch and listen and learn, but often we don't know what to do. I was able to participate in one of those workshops and that was one of the great things about it was that it led to action. We'll put the registration information in the show notes and it can also be found on the leadership development page of the Western North Carolina website under "sponsored offerings." Also, I had no idea that there have been so many churches and people who have participated in the truth cafes. I wonder if you know or expect whether it will be something that will be available again in the future.

Cindy: I hope so. It was designed to be an in person experience, and so we had the kind of postponed once COVID hit. But hopefully there will be churches after the Racial Healing and Gospel of Reconciliation workshop who want to get back and do a Truth Cafe. In fact, Deborah's church, Mount Tabor was in the process of planning one when COVID hit as well.

Kim: So that could be a real possibility. This podcast will be released in February, and February is Black History Month. I had someone ask me a couple of years ago about how, and I suppose really wondering if, white churches recognized Black History Month. It was in a meeting and she was reflecting out loud wondering why it is that only Black churches seemed to have that as a focus. And I wondered what you all would offer or have to suggest about that, about whether white churches understand the importance of focusing on the significance of Black History Month and maybe how they might do that. Cindy, would you share with us first, and then we'll ask Deborah the same question.



Cindy: Yeah, I think Deborah started to hit on this and that her church, Mount Tabor, is the only church in her area that celebrates - white church - that celebrates Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. And so first, our churches have to recognize that so much of our U.S. history that we have learned has literally been whitewashed. And so the painful parts of our history that includes slavery, lynchings, Jim Crow era, the fight for civil rights, all of this impacts the current racial gaps that still exist today in health care and housing and criminal justice system, in education access and job opportunities.

So while it's a part of our history, it still impacts people's lives today. All of our U.S. history must become a shared history with white churches celebrating the valuable contributions of Black Americans to form our purposeful union, in the words of Amanda Gorman. And that means that all Americans have equitable access to liberty, opportunity, prosperity, and the pursuit of happiness.

Kim: Deborah, I wonder what you would offer about white churches celebrating Black History Month.

Deborah: Well, Black History Month really started as Negro History Week, and then it expanded to be a month. But I think that we have to be very intentional if we're going to be a more perfect union; that we have to learn about each other and we have to listen to each other. We have to go back to what we were doing in the seventies, which was to have honest talks and to exchange things about our cultures and help others to understand that the more we are different, we're really more alike.

Kim: So when using the phrase that we should go back to the way that we did it in the seventies, I wonder if you're implying that we haven't really made much progress or is that more something that we did then that worked well that we should keep doing or try to do again?



Deborah: I think we kind of dropped the ball. I think that once Martin Luther King was assassinated, the momentum kind of fizzled out and nobody really stepped up and then Bobby Kennedy and that, you know. And then we started losing people who were instrumental in making all that happen, and nobody really picked up the reins to keep it moving. And so now we found ourselves in a space where people cannot respect others. And at this point, really it's about politics and about just all the wrong reasons why we should be together, that we need to think about, you know, why are we really here, what's our purpose?

Cindy: I think Deborah brings up such an important point that those voices that were being raised in the late sixties were silenced by bullets, right? And so there's a reason that that progress stopped. It's because people were killed who stepped up to take a stand. And so the courage that it takes for people to pick that mantle back up now in 2021 is going to take a large number of people banded together, not just those single iconic individuals. Deborah, do you - do you feel that or?

Deborah: Yeah, it's going to be - it just can't be all white or all black or all red or whatever, and we're going to have to look at all - I mean, we got to go back to the beginning of what happened to the Native Americans and what happened to the Asians and what happened to the - because we got a lot to really get right to learn how people really mistreated and just trying to figure out how do we fix that so that we are more united, that we can make amends to how people were treated. But I've said it a lot - all of us who came to who are here in this country now are some form of immigrant, whether we came by chain or if we came as indentured servants or if we came in search of a new land, we're all immigrants.

Kim: So what would you say coming from a church perspective, maybe the church had more influence on society in the 1970's than it feels like it does today. But I still think the church has a significant role. So I wonder about that kind of



following up with this conversation about what you think the role of the church is today.

Deborah: In the seventies, we at St. Paul United Methodist and Centenary, the youth did things together. We pulpit exchanges with different, you know, a white minister might have come to our church and our minister might have gone there or exchange choirs or some kind of worship at the 11 o'clock hour which, of course, is the most segregated hour in our land. But what we did exchanges with pulpits and services so I think that does help and that gives people an opportunity to see how things are really alike but different as well.

Kim: So this does segue into something I've been thinking about. There's this theme in our new government administration around unity. It does seem that in our broken country, we're in a time that we need healing. But healing can't mean going back to whatever we consider normal before the pandemic. On a recent podcast, I heard Brene Brown quote Sonya Renee Taylor. Ms. Taylor said, "Our pre-Corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We're being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment, one that fits all of humanity and nature."

It seems that maybe this is a statement with which both of you would concur. So I wonder if you have any suggestions for what next steps might look like as we move forward. Or as we begin to think about a post pandemic reality.

Cindy: Kim, I believe that God is always doing a new thing. And as difficult as these past 10 months have been, there is no going back to some pre-COVID status quo. During this time of continued and unprecedented disruption in our lifetimes, the church has a unique responsibility to usher in what could be the greatest movement of God in our history around unity and reconciliation. This is



an area that the church, you know, that's our DNA is around unity and reconciliation. And so while perhaps the greatest divisions our country has faced since the Civil War exist right now, this is a time of great opportunity for our church. But we must become the church for all people, and that's the name of Deborah's team that she said earlier is a church for all people. Loving all people which means that we have to work for justice and prosperity for all people, as well.

Deborah: I think it's very important for each person to look inside themselves and to recreate themselves, to look at the needs of others, and the church needs to look at "Okay, so what are we really supposed to be doing? Because right now we've proven that it's not about the church, it's not about the physical building. What can we do outside of ourselves? How do we step outside of our church to see the needs of others?" I think that's very important in terms of, you know, that we still have so many places where people are hungry, people without shelter, just the basic needs, and we go back to the basic needs and back to the ten commandments. Perhaps that will kind of refocus us on keeping the main thing the main thing and that's God.

Kim: So I heard recently on NPR that Representative Clyburn from South Carolina has submitted a proposal that *Lift Every Voice and Sing* become the national hymn. According to NBC News, *Lift Every Voice and Sing* emerged as Black Americans faced the threat of lynchings and the realities of segregation and discrimination. The NAACP leader, Weldon Johnson wrote it originally as a poem in 1899 before his brother, John Rosamund Johnson, wrote an instrumental arrangement for it, making it a song and recognition of the Black Freedom struggle to celebrate decades of overcoming and hope for a better future.



I know it might be familiar to many of our listeners because it's a hymn of our church. But I wanted to share just a few of the words,

Lift every voice and sing
till Earth and heaven ring-
ring with the harmonies of liberty.
Let our rejoicing rise
high as the listening skies.
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

It is a hymn of our church and we don't have a national hymn. So this is kind of a new proposal and I wonder what you thought about it. How do you think Lift Every Voice and Sing becoming our national hymn might could help the country.

Deborah: I think I go back to “Give me your tired your poor,” or “with liberty and justice for all,” or “sweet land of liberty.” And so often that leaves out minorities and women because they were not thorough when these traditional national songs were written. So we need something that can unite us. And I think that music is the first - it's one of things that can unite us. And it's an idea to think about or maybe we need another one, maybe we need to come up with whatever that is. But we need to do something to be more inclusive.

Kim: How about you Cindy?

Cindy: I think Representative Clyburn has a whole lot of power in Congress right now. So he may very well be successful. And I think for many people, certainly not all, but for many people that it would be a song of healing and unity that's very much needed during this current climate. Interestingly, this hymn was first heard publicly during a 1900 celebration of the life of Abraham Lincoln. He kind of inspired the words of this hymn, and then in 1919 the NAACP adopted it as their



official song. And I think what's even more interesting is that recently celebrities like Alicia Keys and Beyonce have made it more popular to a newer generation. And it's a beautiful and moving hymn and if we're going to have a national hymn I can't imagine a better one to kind of speak to where we are in our country right now.

Kim: Yeah, I think it will be an interesting conversation to follow. I'm with you, I kind of like the idea of having a hymn of the church music from the church, and I agree with you Deborah, music does or can unite us in so many different ways, and Cindy, I agree, it can be interesting with the pop star's popularizing it that it might help it to become known and popular beyond the church. So there might be some neat opportunities, and some people might disagree with it.

Many congregations have people who feel differently about many things. And so I'm afraid sometimes, in order not to step on anyone's toes, leaders feel the need to tow the line or maybe stay in the middle so they don't ruffle too many feathers. And then important issues and conversations might get ignored or approached through rose-colored glasses. We'll have many laying clergy leaders who are listening to this podcast. And so I wonder, how do we talk about these important things? How do we share the gospel message of racial reconciliation and healing without being accused of fueling division or upsetting the apple cart, so to speak. Deborah, what kind of suggestions do you have for leaders about how to broach difficult conversations?

Deborah: I think we just need to clean the slate and just start over and say that let peace begin with me and you have to just make that commitment for yourselves that I'm willing to be the change I want to see.

Cindy: Similarly, in our Ministry of Reconciliation Workshop, we talk about the importance of standing in the middle for unity and reconciliation, and a lot of



people think that the middle is, you know, it's looked down upon; but Jesus was the example of standing in the middle when he's, you know, was crucified on the cross. He was standing in the middle as that reconciling agent between humanity and God. And Satan's greatest weapon is dividing us into these tribes of identity around race and ethnicity, politics, religion, gender, sexuality and even nation.

But Christ, he never takes sides, and people don't have to earn grace. Jesus also never hesitated to speak truth to power and sin, and it's been said that racism isn't a skin problem, it's a sin problem. And so the way that we speak into these issues using scripture as our foundation, using Jesus' stories as our examples, are really powerful ways to help people see the power of standing in the middle around unity and reconciliation.

Kim: Yeah, that's really powerful. Thank you both. The article that I quoted earlier in our conversation by David Brubaker - that I'll also put in the [show notes](#) - encouraged leaders to stay connected to the people, and I quote, "There needs, anxieties, hopes and dreams are what matter most right now. Ask your people what they need and what they hope to see in the coming days." This connects back to the discussion we were just having. I think that having hard conversations when leaders have a relationship within their community, it maybe is easier to say the hard word or do the hard thing. So I wonder for each of you what you would offer, what do you hope to see in the coming days?

Cindy: Well, I wish every church would be like Deborah's church at Mount Tabor and have some kind of justice reconciliation or equity team that's willing to stand in the middle with Christ. That, for the churches that we did our Truth Cafes, if they stayed together and kind of formed some kind of equity justice team, they were much more likely to kind of keep the momentum going. And I'm happy that



our church, Christ United Methodist, has recently formed one of these teams and I'm starting to hear more and more churches that are doing that.

And it's a way to really make an example to the congregation and to the community of what the church stands for, and to figure out ways to take action about moving forward. And so, you know, if I could have what my dreams, it would be more people that are willing to stand in the middle for unity and reconciliation. And if we just align our hearts with Jesus and we see ourselves and other people the way that God sees us that we're all precious Children created in his image. A guy named Will Cesar said that "unity is the atmosphere of heaven." So just think about that, "unity is the atmosphere of heaven." We will be one human race for all of eternity. And as Deborah said, it starts with doing that inner work of educating ourselves, accepting and acknowledging the issues around structural racism in the United States. But it must move outward to that action towards right relationships with each other and in our communities. And it's hard, long work, but it's the most rewarding and purposeful and impactful work that I've ever done.

Kim: Thank you for that word, Cindy. It was a word of hope and also a word of encouragement. Deborah, I wonder what your hope for is in the days to come?

Deborah: We got to stop talking the talk, and walk the walk. Pastors and leaders in our church have to be willing to take a risk because Jesus took a risk to do the right thing and be leaders in this particular instance. It's not - I think that it demonstrates their authenticity and their willingness to make a difference, to be a difference, because generally the leaders and the pastor of the church set the tone for how our people are living. So we got a lot of work to do, and we just got to find a few willing workers and make it happen.

Cindy: An army of willing workers.



Kim: Yeah, I think that we talked about our tradition earlier, and I think about our Wesleyan tradition with John Wesley going out, you know, into the fields, in the mines and the places where the people were in. I mean, I think in that way he took a risk and went to share the good news for the people who needed to hear it. And then, in our biblical tradition, we say in our church tradition that the kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven.

And Cindy, I love what you just said about in heaven, we're all going to be united. We're all going to - there's not going to be a division and differences and so that is such a clear mandate for us that if our goal is to co-create with God and help heaven be ushered in on Earth, then then it's a clear first step of what we need to do to make it look like that. So I really appreciate both of you for having this conversation and especially for the way that you're providing leadership in your communities and in the annual conference to help us to see what are some new ways to move forward. And just to have the courage to speak out. So, thank you both for being here.

Cindy: Thank you, Kim. And thank you, Deborah, for allowing me to be in this space today.

Deborah: Thank you too Cindy.

Kim: I am so grateful that Deborah and Cindy took time to speak with me today. I learned a lot and was just really motivated and energized by the ideas they had for how we can all participate in the ministry of reconciliation to our churches and in our communities and just individually. I feel like we've been challenged to be a part of an initiative that makes room and welcomes all of God's people. I hope that you have gotten something - a specific action that you might take as a result of listening to this podcast, And in the conference, I look forward to us really being the church God needs us to be in order to help the kingdom come.



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