

“SOMETHING MEAN in the world that I could NOT STOP”

by Vicki Sairs

In ZZ Packer’s story “Brownies,” a black girl sees something in her father, in her peers, and in herself: “When you’ve been made to feel bad for so long, you jump at the chance to do it to others.”

She doesn’t like what she sees, but she’s too honest to avoid it. She realizes there is “something mean in the world” that she cannot stop. But the story itself, full of life and humor and a Brownie troop that takes no prisoners, gently points to hope. The narrator, after all, has grasped a difficult truth, and she’s not happy about it.

That in itself is a start.

We know that what she says about ‘something mean in the world’ is true in many contexts. But let’s use her context: she is a black girl in the United States, and her options are conditioned by her race. Her family’s past, present, and future are deeply influenced by a violent history of slavery, segregation and discrimination. What she experiences in this story is just one more aftershock, a reminder of the fault lines in American society.

I don’t like reading that we can’t stop that meanness. I like to think that in the church, we can stop it—or at least try to recognize it when we see it, in ourselves and others, and do what we can not to perpetuate it. Maybe we can even do more.

How do you stop the meanness?

One way is to listen to what it’s like to be a person of color in a majority-white world. The protagonist in “Brownies” had an epiphany, a moment in which she saw a truth clearly that had been hiding from her for years. “Something mean in the world” that she couldn’t stop had been hiding in plain sight.

Our conference, CMC, is overwhelmingly white. Given our history and geography, this is understandable, but it makes us less likely to be aware of the impact of race on our neighbors and fellow citizens of color in areas like opportunity, health, and life expectancy. In other words, a lot of stuff is hiding in plain sight.

In an effort to see what’s hiding, we asked people from conference to comment on their experiences with race in the CMC. Here are some of their answers:

How do you see racial dynamics working out in our conference?

ANGIE COOPER (*Angie is an RBC alum who came to the States as a child, fleeing the violence in her birth country, Liberia*): I find that although people seem to be accepting, they also try to pretend that there isn’t racism or inequality in the world. Generally, it is because that is not their daily struggle; they tend to downplay it or say someone is making too much of the situation.

My response to those who refuse to acknowledge the existence of racism and inequality is: it is real and alive and no matter how much we try to ignore it, it will always be there. It is what I live daily, it is my truth! So I don’t have the luxury to tune it out or pick it up when I choose. There isn’t a choice for me. So let’s just talk about it and see where we can make the change.

ANTHONY RIVERS (*Anthony is an associate pastor at Agape Hilliard and a practicing psychologist*): For me, the racial dynamic in our conference is extremely one-sided. I believe that is partially because race, culture and faith are interwoven. As an African American, the church is the foundation. It plays a critical role in influencing how you worship, dress, socialize, what music you like, and how you interact within the community.

For CMC to truly open its doors to African Americans, it has to understand the strong connection between the African-

ANTHONY RIVERS AT A COFFEE SHOP CHAT AT RBC, TALKING TO STUDENTS ABOUT WHAT IT’S LIKE TO GROW UP BLACK IN AMERICA. PHIL WEBER INVITED HIM TO SPEAK AS PART OF HIS EFFORTS TO HELP HIS SOCIOLOGY STUDENTS “ENGAGE THE QUESTIONS SURROUNDING RACIAL AND ETHNIC INEQUALITY.”





ANGIE COOPER AT RBC'S 2014 GRADUATION. SHE JUST COMPLETED PRE-NURSING AND IS HOPING TO ENTER ALLEGANY COLLEGE OF MARYLAND SOON.

American community and the church. For me, joining CMC was/is like joining an

entirely new culture. I have experienced racial tension in many different ways. For example, when sitting through sermons or discussions of how “Baptists” are so wrong in their methods—I often bite my teeth. It’s difficult for me to look at things from an “I’m right, you’re wrong” perspective. Also, discussing my past experiences in the inner city can be emotionally challenging. There are times when people can make you feel like you’re a charity case from a third world country. When in this situation, I tend to inform people of the blessings that come from living in the inner city.

KENDRA & ABEL CUELLAR (*RBC alums now living in Maryland*):

I asked Abel if he ever felt any sort of effects of racism and he said he never has within the church. His view on the overwhelming majority of the conference being white is that it’s not because of prejudice or racism within the churches, but simply how it happens.

I see this lack of diversity not as a problem for our conference, but rather an opportunity. Instead of viewing our demographics and being frustrated or unsure, we should be excited.

We have the opportunity to reach out to people as the culture around us changes. We have a chance to not only accommodate and tolerate, as is so often what happens, but instead we can welcome and celebrate the differences.

PHIL WEBER (*academic dean at RBC, white*): The obvious dynamic is that as a conference, we don’t have enough racial minority connections to draw many minority members into our congregations.

JOSIAH (*RMM worker in North Africa, name changed*): I don’t see racial dynamics “working out” in CMC because it’s not a meaningful aspect of the conference’s experience: there are few people of color and those there are have no significant leadership roles.

I’m not actually a big fan of the push for cultural/racial diversity; it usually comes not from racial minorities but from people in the cultural majority. Some of the most thriving churches are linguistically and culturally homogeneous, and that’s OK. But positions of privilege should be used to extend shalom to less privileged people, not for self-protection.

ABRAHAM NDUNG’U: Abraham and his family immigrated to the United States from Kenya almost six years ago. In an interview, he spoke very highly of London Christian

Fellowship (LCF), his home church. In speaking of CMC in general, he expressed “disappointment.” He attends CMC, RBC and RMM-related events, and says, “You don’t see that intentionality. There seems to be no attempt to bring in people of color.” Why not invite speakers to come and bring a different view and opinion?

His home congregation, LCF, has been helpful. He was asked to be an elder after two years; when his term ended, he was asked to consider another term. “I really wish the whole conference would be able to do the way LCF has done. My kids are busy there, actively involved—they have plugged in easily.”

“CMC needs to wear bifocal lenses,” he said. “They need to see what’s near and what’s far.” The conference could take a closer look at people of color in their midst and take advantage of their gifts.

NAOMY NDUNG’U: Naomi spoke briefly about how overwhelming it can be to come from another country and culture and get your bearings. When she first attended church meetings, she wondered, “What will the next thing in the program be?” And not long after that, she asked herself, “Why are we so few?”

At the same time, she reminded herself, “I brought myself here; why am I wondering?”

At larger conference meetings, she found that “everyone knows someone in these meetings. They are making connections.” Yet she has found the hospitality at these gatherings “amazing”; she’s made connections as well. Still, she suggests gently, CMC could live in a bigger world.

DANNY NDUNG’U: First, I will say that I do not know if I am super qualified to respond to this since I am an African living in America, and less of an African American. This past semester, I took a Black Urban Experience class that awakened me to lives that Black people lead, the history behind why many Black people live in cities, and the major disparities between [neighborhoods in Columbus].

But the biggest takeaway was that Black people still feel like they have to wake up every day and stand tall in pride of their black bodies in the sea of voices that judge who they are based on factors such as financial and social status.

I am still learning what it means to be African American. Growing up, I never really thought of myself as a minority—if anything, my tribe (Kikuyu) is the majority in Kenya. But moving here, I have heard of stories where parents have to have the talk (not just the sex talk) with their kids about respecting police officers and other authorities. Sadly, my family has also felt racial prejudice in Dublin, Ohio.

I think a good place to start is to recognize that racial tensions are happening where we live. Recognizing that yes, many of our churches do not seem to have a rich diversity in race should not leave us in complacency, but rather call us to

think about what we can do to bring peace. After all, is this not what Mennonites should be known for, peace?

We need to “stay woke,” as the saying goes, to keep our eyes open so that we may know how our faith as Christians can be relevant in 2016.

ROB SWARTZ (*lead pastor at LCF, white*): I think it's a problem and people don't even know it. I believe some of it comes from ignorance. Most simply do not have real friends from other races. They don't understand other cultures or other ways of living. Their understanding of another race is what they read in the paper or hear from others. I find that any kind of bias quickly disappears when we hang out and get to know each other. I also believe that putting ourselves in the minority from time to time is a good experience for us.

Outreach is another issue. Who are we reaching out to and is the outreach a “reaching down” kind of thing or treating others as equals. If we are reaching out to people from diverse backgrounds and races, are they becoming a part of us or will they always be on the fringe of the Mennonite church? Will they be put in positions of leadership and influence in the church or will it always be the white ethnic Mennonites?

LUCY ELFRINK (*attends LCF with her family*): I'm not quite sure how to respond on this since I would be focusing on just what I see in LCF. We all know that whether white or black, we are all part of the same body, and we need each other to bring in different gifts of the Holy Spirit to build a strong church of Jesus Christ.

When I first met Phillip, my husband, and we were planning our wedding, he asked me, “How would you feel being the only person of colour in our church?” My response was if whether black or white, we have the same God, then I don't have any problem with that.

KEVIN MOORE (*Pastor, Sudbury First Nations Church; Living Hope Native Ministries in Ontario*): First of all, let me

give you a little bit of my cultural background. My dad is metis, which means he has a bit of First Nations in his ancestry, but to look at him you would think he is white.



ABOVE SEBAI YAMEN (L TO R), PASTOR AT NEW HOPE FELLOWSHIP IN THUNDER BAY, ONTARIO, JIM KEESIG, ELDER AT NEW HOPE, AND GARY OWEN, BAND COUNCILLOR AT POPLAR HILL FIRST NATION, ALL ATTENDED A LHMN MEN'S PRAYER RETREAT IN MARCH OF 2016.

LEFT LAVERNA (L) AND DAVE (R) BRENNEMAN, LHMN MISSIONARIES TO THE WEAGAMOW FIRST NATION IN NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO, AND HENRY JEREMIAH WATCH AS HENRY'S WIFE, MAGGIE, CLEANS FISH.

My mother is almost a full-blooded Cree Indian. My mother only looks like a First Nations lady. In many ways she thinks and acts like any white person. My parents brought us kids up in the same way any white parents would raise their children. The Canadian government has designated me a First Nations person, but the reality is I think and act just like a white person. I am proud of my Native heritage, but I am Canadian first.

I've spent most of the last 25 years attending a Baptist church in my hometown. To my knowledge, this denomination has zero ministry to First Nations people. There doesn't seem to be much of a desire to reach and teach First Nations people. If it's there I am not aware of it. So when I see what an organization like Living Hope Native Ministries is doing I am encouraged. If Living Hope had its beginnings with the CMC, or at least with some people from the conference, I would say they are making steps in the right direction. I'm sure some mistakes will be made, but the goal is to improve (and maybe even restore) racial relations. I believe the conference could learn a lot from people like Merle Nisly and the Swartzentrubers who have worked among First Nations people for years. I truly believe these are the people you need to be talking to. I'm First Nations, but I need to learn from them, because inside I probably think more like most white people.

STUART SWARTZENTRUBER (*Living Hope Native Ministries*):

Our church in Sudbury is not a CMC church. Sudbury First Nations Church is at least 80% First Nations. I am in the minority and get to experience racial dynamics from a unique angle. Some of our supporting churches are CMC and I am an ordained CMC minister, but I feel I don't have a real good sense of the racial issues in the conference. Saying this, I do have some opinions and observations.

I think many of us do well with racial bias as long as we are at a distance and don't have to experience the tension and stress that cross-cultural relating brings. When we feel our comfort levels being squeezed, and our sense of “right and wrong” being challenged, it is then that our racial, cultural bias rears its ugly head.

I hear comments throughout CMC about “foreigners” taking over businesses we may frequent. I am dismayed at how easily we join in the cry to keep out immigrants and refugees to protect our lifestyle. At times I respond boldly and remind people that the only nonimmigrants in North America are the Native North Americans. At other times I keep silent, to my shame.

MERLE NISLY (*President, Living Hope Native Ministries*): I don't

have regular interaction with the broader CMC conference. I do see a small segment of CMC in the Grace Community Church in Red Lake. I think everyone I know at GCC would adamantly state that they are not racist. However, we all

have our own definition of racism and bias, and I feel that is the greatest problem. I see a lot of people who have become satisfied with a personal level of tolerance and acceptance of other ethnic groups, maybe largely because they are pretty sure they do not hate others.

But the people who actively seek to understand others and who actively look for ways to empathize with others are uncommon. There are lots of people who appreciate others to the point of being patient and tolerant while indigenous people move toward dominant culture, but not many who would choose to change things so that the movement required of others is minimized.

In our world, it is assumed at a core level that the indigenous people around us will have to adapt to dominant society and to learn to love and appreciate what has been imposed upon them. There are relatively few people who feel it necessary to give up privilege or to change realities so that indigenous people or immigrants might enjoy life and social interaction in their own “skin.”

One of the most common experiences in my world is the harmful effect of assuming common stereotypes about groups. It is assumed that some will never develop the expected level of dedication to work ethic, to stewardship, to time management and other typical dominant values. From that, a subtle level of disapproval and condescension seems constantly present.

I have heard some surprising and shocking statements about African Americans from conservative Christians. I remember hearing a solid member of a CMC church refer to “them black boys” at work. It apparently didn’t seem necessary to develop any kind of close relationship or to change any of those views of “black boys” since the contact with them was not voluntary and there was no intent to invite them to become part of his life—either at church or at home.

RITA NISLY (*Living Hope Native Ministries*): Although I have not thought a great deal about this particular issue within this group, it seems that since our conference churches have been involved (for many years) in cross-cultural mission, there should be no questions left to answer regarding what racial dynamics we embrace. However, realizing we are members of the human race, I’m sure there will always be struggles both in accepting the skin colour and ethnicity of ourselves as well as that of others. We can be ever so pious in supporting missionaries in foreign countries but what if those same people groups show up in our towns and “take away jobs”? We easily forget that our ancestors were also immigrants.

DARLENE SCHROCK (*Darlene and Lynford Schrock are white; they fostered and then adopted two African-American children, making them a family of seven*): One of the really difficult things for us with our kids in the very white world we currently live in is knowing that they should be connected with their culture of origin and really desiring positive role

models for them in that culture, but not having easy, natural ways for that to happen. And to be honest, right now we are so consumed with the most intimate transracial connection we’ve ever had—a son and daughter—that being intentional about pursuing any of those other friendships that would be so valuable feels almost overwhelming.

At this point, most people are very accepting and supportive—it mostly feels like adopting cute kids transracially is cool. We’ll see how that plays out . . . when they become dating age!

We attended a training by a transracial adoptee. He strongly agreed with the fallacy of the idea of colorblindness. I have heard people say something like “I didn’t even think about it that he wasn’t white.” His premise was that it is impossible for a minority in our world to forget that they are different. It seems so much healthier to acknowledge and celebrate both commonalities and differences than to try to ignore them.

One thing I reacted to in a Facebook comment was when someone was convinced there wasn’t much racism left in America, and wondered what the big deal was about it (and I think was sure he wasn’t racist himself). I think we can, in real transracial relationships, listen to the experiences, feelings, stories of those in minority, and grow a lot in awareness, empathy, and understanding. However, for any of us in the white majority, especially any of us whose daily transracial interactions are pretty limited, to assume we can truly know what it is like to live in our culture as a minority seems . . . I can’t quite get hold of the word I want . . . naive? It feels to me we have no right to assume we know, or have any way TO completely know just what it feels like.

SHAWN EICHER (*Shawn and his family will be moving to Flint, Michigan; see the June Beacon*): While we may not be part of the outright discrimination issues in our country and communities, we have not stood with our black brothers and sisters. We have not stood up and defended the oppressed. Why is this? Is it because there is such segregation in the communities that we live in that we fail to see the oppression? Do we think they may deserve the treatment they get? Can you see why many of the black community see the white church as a whole as untrustworthy?

JEN AND REGGIE COOPER: Jen and Reggie Cooper are active at LCF; they met with me for an interview. The Coopers grew up in different settings. Jen grew up in a transracial and transcultural family; her mother is a white American and her father is from Kenya. Reggie grew up in a black community in South Carolina and experienced the effects of racism much more directly than Jen did.

They both prefer a more diverse congregation, but they recognize the challenges facing CMC congregations. “CMC is very tied into family dynamics,” says Reggie. His childhood church, Faith United Methodist, was “highly rooted in families there and has a strong civil rights history” and was “all black.”

“Family and culture are a big part of most churches,” says Jen. As families become more diverse, though, so will our churches. “As families and friends diversify, invite them to come.”

Reggie studied London’s history when they moved to Ohio. The town divided along racial lines, with the railroad tracks being the marker. Now there has been some “merging across the tracks” and the growth of interracial families. First Baptist in London started “as a place for African Americans in this community to worship.” Working with and fellowshiping with churches that are already relating to blacks might be a good way for CMC churches to go, he says.

In all of this, they both stressed the need for understanding one another and developing empathy. “We’re all working toward the same thing,” says Reggie, “pulling people toward Christ.” We need to focus on love and “working things out through love.”



SARA AND MAURICE MILLER, PASTOR COUPLE AT IGLESIA CRISTIANA VIDA ABUNDANTE IN ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO.

SARA & MAURICE MILLER

(*pastor couple at Iglesia Cristiana Vida Abundante in Albuquerque*): Sara, a Latina woman, says, “I have not seen or heard of any instances of racial discrimination or expressed superiority from anyone in our conference. Therefore it is difficult for me to see this being a problem.”

Maurice, who is white, says, “After having lived in the southwest part of this country for almost thirty years, we feel somewhat isolated from other conference churches, except for our sister church, Living Word Christian Outreach. When we first moved here, the LWCO congregation consisted of about 50% English-speaking Hispanics, 25% African Americans and 25% white, a unique mix which I admired. A few members of our own congregation formerly lived in some of our northern states and southeastern states and reported that they felt strong racial discrimination, especially against Hispanics and blacks. I have not heard of many racial instances here in New Mexico.”

LUDLOW WALKER (*pastor at Southmost Mennonite Church in Florida*): Ludlow grew up in Jamaica, got saved in Belize, then came to the States and joined Southmost Mennonite Church in the 80s. At that time the church was almost completely white. Gradually, says Ludlow, the white people left. When he became the pastor at Southmost, he reached out to all the people in the community, and it became a black church.

Most of the churches in his area are primarily black or white. “That’s the way it is, and that’s the way it should not be.”

The only exception he sees is the Pentecostal church. “They are a group of believers that make an effort to reach

all the people.”

Ludlow sees “a clannish spirit” among Mennonites. They reach out to their own people first, people of their own race, “not just color, but their ethnic, biological group.”

This mystifies him. “Mennonites go on the mission field and they reach out to all people of all colors. I find it strange. And these people of color become Mennonites. They do that on the mission field, but here at home it’s somewhat different. I don’t have an answer to why. . . I’m still searching. Why is it we’re not more diverse?”

He believes we could do a better job of reaching out to everyone, the way the apostles did in Acts and the way the Pentecostals do today. “I would love to see our Mennonite churches reflect diversity like the Pentecostals.”

Do you see racial bias in yourself? How do you respond to that?

Most people acknowledged biases. Here is a sample of their responses.

ANGIE: I also see racial bias in myself, which makes me understand other people’s position and thought process, but I never allow it to consume me and I ask God to clear me of those. It would help if they talk about the issues! The biggest change starter is acknowledging the problem and not making people feel like what goes on in their world isn’t real simply because it doesn’t go on in yours.

JOSIAH: Yes. I’m ashamed of it, but I’m attempting to be increasingly honest about the racism that’s deeply embedded in me. I believe honesty is the only way to not live out of it. I have intentionally placed myself in situations where I’ve been a minority, and I’ve listened to the perspective of others.

ANTHONY: I do see some racial bias in myself. Since I view church and culture as being very intertwined, I tend to prefer what I know and am used to having. This includes styles of worship, styles of Sunday service, and food. I have had to learn that different just means different. Different does not mean less than or greater than. I have also had to understand the Mennonite culture in order to be closer to individuals within the congregation (i.e., ways of communication, problem solving, handling conflicts, etc.).

STUART: I do see racial bias in myself. It is hard to accept after being in cross-cultural ministry for 30 years. I guess I hear my First Nations friends talk about the racial comments they hear and how it affects them. I see in the hidden and sometimes not so hidden part of my own heart some of the same feelings. I think we need to realize that since we all belong to a culture, we will always have a cultural bias to some extent. My prayer for myself is to recognize that my own culture and race have many flaws. I don’t think the goal of CMC should be color-blindness or acting like other races or cultures are

perfect. I would pray that in understanding my own unique cultural brokenness, I could extend a warm hand to other cultures and a willingness to learn the beauty of that culture and openly recognize the need to forgive one another when pride causes us to belittle or condemn one another's culture.

JEN: Jen's experience growing up was largely positive; she credits being lighter skinned. When she went to college and had more black friends, she became more aware of the unfairness and injustice they all faced. She finds it frustrating that she is "equally comfortable in an all-white group and in an all-black group, but it's rarely together."

Also, "from an African-American perspective, we are biased against ourselves as well." She recognizes that this is a result of a history of being devalued.

REGGIE: Reggie could tell "many stories" of how he and his family were treated. "God is working on me, removing my biases." When he finds himself in a situation in which he sees racial bias against blacks, he tries to "focus on love. If we can work things out through love, that's great. But also, if you see a problem, if we want to change how we see other cultures, having our youth exposed to different cultures" is a good place to start.

What actions would you suggest to help our churches be places of true racial reconciliation?

Here is a list of some suggestions from our respondents:

- Spend time in settings in which you are in a racial minority.
- Listen to people of color who "share similar theological convictions but different perspectives on race."
- Invite more speakers of color to all of our events, to speak on a wide range of topics, not just race.
- Build close relationships with people of different colors and cultures.
- Try to understand what these racial tensions are through reading up on them, following the news, and connecting with minorities to try and understand it from their perspective.
- Ask the Lord to help us as a conference to understand what this means for us, but don't remain in the status quo.
- Educate your people; help them to understand other cultures. Teach about this at your Bible colleges. Have a cultural awareness week at your churches.
- Partner with churches who are already relating to blacks or other people groups.

PHIL: The first step, I think, is to acknowledge, both intellectually and emotionally, that race is still an incredibly powerful predictor of life outcomes in America, and that the causes of the differential outcomes go much deeper than personal animosity or intentional discrimination. If we can move the discussion beyond "Am I guilty of racism?" to "How can we change the outcomes for our minority fellow-citizens?" I like to think we will spend less time being defensive and more time being empathetic and effective.

ANTHONY: I would suggest that CMC engage in more partnerships/programming with other non-CMC primarily African-American churches. This will create more relationship-building opportunities. I also suggest that CMC support/connect/get involved with issues that influence the African-American community (education retention, crime reduction, employment opportunities, housing, etc). I believe that true racial reconciliation is best served through action. It's not what we say, it's what we do. I really do believe that CMC has a ton of awesome people that the African-American community knows nothing about. I hope and pray that changes.

MERLE: We don't learn well from experiences only. Few people will significantly change typical racial bias on their own. Some of the needed change comes about from a process of re-education, from conversations and exercises that are intended to challenge and dismantle the presuppositions we develop as members of the dominant and privileged segment of society. It's usually the result of intentional process.

As for reconciliation, I sense that many Christians do not even feel a need for racial reconciliation. Instead, the most common view I observe is that the indigenous person or immigrant just needs to adapt more fully to current norms. Few people look back on American and Canadian history in a way that brings conviction of wrongs and of the urgency of reconciliation for those historical wrongs.

In our setting, we are consciously and systematically sharing a formal apology statement in an effort to remove barriers caused by historical wrongs toward the indigenous people. Why wouldn't we want to eliminate every hurdle to those who have been wronged in any way, even if only in their own perception?

REGGIE: Reggie is active in the Minority Leaders Research Collaboration Program, working with interns from institutions that serve minorities. "There is a lack of diversity in the STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering and Math] field job force, in government, industry and the academy," he says.

In the STEM field, "it's a well understood benefit" to have different views represented. "If we alienate or ignore key parts of our society in our field, our work suffers." Isn't this also true in the church?