

## **Pullen's Role in Advancing Racial Justice and Equity**

### **The Committee on Becoming an Anti-Racist Congregation (ARCC)**

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This report aims to provide the congregation with an overview of Pullen's Committee on Becoming An Anti-Racist Congregation work since its inception. There are three key sections: the institutional history of ARCC, its organizational logic and evolution, and observations gained through the ARCC-organized house meetings, including insight from Ian McPherson as facilitator.

#### **INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY**

On May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, amidst international anti-racism protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd and Brianna Taylor, Pastor Nancy Petty challenged Pullen to become an anti-racist church: "The baton of racial justice has been passed to us. If we are committed to not fumbling the pass there are things we need to do as a community." Petty called for us to educate ourselves about racism; review our constitution, by-laws, procedures, and tradition to ensure we are not reinforcing racial bias; initiate a Theologian-in-Residence program; boost our immediate efforts to help our neighbors; define how we will enhance our use of resources to fight poverty; and recognize the intersectionality of race, poverty, and all social justice issues.

In a statement from December of that year, the Deacon Council wrote: "The Deacon Council wholeheartedly endorses Nancy's anti-racist platform for Pullen Memorial Baptist Church. We support her call for us to focus intensely on efforts to fight policies and contest actions that accept or reinforce inequality among racial groups, both within the walls of Pullen and outside them." Having endorsed this agenda for Pullen, the Deacon Council created what would become the Committee on Becoming An Anti-Racist Congregation, or ARCC, to lead these efforts.

Initially meeting once a month, ARCC members spent several months sharing our understanding of anti-racism, sharing resources, and generally trying to decide what the work of ARCC was. Were there specific goals? What were we supposed to actually do? What does "anti-racism" mean? And what did it mean to be "an anti-racist congregation"? Eventually, on the recommendation of ARCC, the Deacon Council approved the following mission statement:

*The mission of ARCC is to engage the Pullen community in striving to become an anti-racist congregation. We understand "anti-racist" to mean implementing practices and policies that support racial justice and equity and challenging systems that perpetuate racial inequity.*

#### **ORGANIZATIONAL LOGIC & EVOLUTION**

A key aim was to ensure that our efforts at becoming an anti-racist congregation were not segregated to just a small group, but rather were a core part of our church more broadly. The Deacon Council asked that each Council in the church identify one representative to serve on ARCC, including two staff liaisons, as a means of helping diffuse the work of anti-racism throughout the broader mission of Pullen.

Relatively quickly it became clear that this would prove to be a difficult structure. Especially in the early days when trying to parse out what the real mission of the group was, the consistent rotation of people on to and off of ARCC as their Council terms began and expired proved a challenge. It meant finding a new meeting time and getting new members up to speed on the mission and work. In an effort to overcome that challenge, the Deacon Council amended ARCC's structure, adding two more At-Large members who would be appointed by the Deacon Council. Those spots, however, have proved difficult to fill. The sum result is that, to date, the Council has rarely been fully constituted.

It bears pondering the reason for the difficulty in filling the Committee. It might stem from the Committee's organization, which could be fixed by changing how the Committee is put together or where it stands in the organizational hierarchy of Pullen. For example, drawing on people who serve on Councils ensures selecting members who already have other church-related obligations. The difficulty in filling the Committee might stem from general anxiety about how to tackle such a difficult problem. It might stem from a skepticism regarding the effort itself. More likely it is some combination of these.

*Recommendation 1: The Deacon Council should consider re-designing ARCC. One consideration is whether it needs to be its own committee or council, rather than a sub-committee of the Deacon Council. Regardless of that answer, another consideration is whether we should continue to use Council members as reps to ARCC. If anti-racism is a top priority for the church, then arguably ARCC members should be selected to work primarily on that effort and not necessarily be required to serve on another council (and possibly Coordinating Council, etc.).*

An important part of ARCC's work was to be organized through an academic study of congregations engaged in anti-racist work, a study known as THRIVE. For various reasons, that project has not provided the kind of architecture to this effort that we initially expected. ARCC members that have engaged in conversation with other THRIVE member congregations have found them to be rewarding. An initial meeting with one of the THRIVE co-PIs, Dr. Gerardo Marti, was very productive. The plan for THRIVE going forward is to engage more directly with congregations and to facilitate the sharing of lessons learned across congregations engaged in this work.

*Recommendation 2: Pullen should continue to engage with THRIVE. Pullen should consider convening congregations from across the state who are engaged, or interested in engaging, in this work. The THRIVE cohort included congregations in Greensboro and Charlotte with specific anti-racist efforts. It might be worth our time to research what other congregations in the state are doing this work, building a North Carolina network of congregations, and hosting a meeting or workshop to share experiences. More generally, the Alliance of Baptists might be a model for this work for Pullen, as they have been wrestling with these issues for much longer and arguably have made more progress.*

## **ORGANIZING HOUSE MEETINGS**

ARCC members in May 2021 wrote the following:

“If there is a central goal, it is to continually deepen our understanding of the ways in which the life and work of the Pullen community challenges or alternatively reinforces structures and systems that perpetuate racial inequity. Reflecting back on the mission statement, we will begin by ‘engaging the Pullen community’ in learning and discussion with each other. One path toward anti-racism is created by open, loving conversations in Sunday groups, lunch gatherings, Wednesday nights at The Table, or anywhere else Pullenites gather.”

Drawing on Pullen’s history with the holy union vote, ARCC decided to host a series of house meetings. This has been the primary work of the Committee. The aim is twofold. The first is to encourage Pullenites to begin honest, earnest conversations around race within our community, one of the most fraught conversations to be had. The second was to “take the pulse” of the congregation on topics related to faith, worship, and race. In that sense, ARCC members saw the house meetings as focus groups that would bring forward common questions, points of agreement and disagreement, and areas of enthusiasm and areas of skepticism about the work of becoming an anti-racist congregation.

Initial efforts to organize the meetings through volunteers from the general congregation proved impractical, hampered by the lingering effects of the pandemic and the high demand that the meetings placed on ARCC members. Each meeting required finding hosts, training a facilitator, finding a note taker, and getting congregants to sign up. While those initial meetings were useful, it was clear that they were too resource-intensive to be sustainable. ARCC decided then to draw on the governance structure of the church and ask that all Councils, as well as members from other key committees (e.g., children’s and youth committees) and groups (e.g., the choir, young adults), host a house meeting. We engaged Ian McPherson to serve as a facilitator of those groups. Ian’s work in this role has been outstanding.

The house meetings followed a similar format, which ARCC members had tested previously. We began by watching [a video](#) of a conversation between Michael Ray Matthews, President of the Alliance of Baptists, and Robbie Jones, author of *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*. Each group was then asked the same three questions for discussion: what stood out to you in that discussion; how do those points apply to Pullen; and what is Pullen’s role in anti-racism? Meetings were limited to 90-minutes.

Note-takers were present at nearly all meetings. Where no note-taker was available, we used technology to transcribe the meetings. The meetings were run under Chatham House rules, meaning that extensive notes would be taken and some quotes might be used, but no comments would be attributed to any individual. Participants were asked to respect these rules in their own discussions of the meetings beyond the meeting itself. To give participants’ confidence in the anonymity of the process, we did not record the names of those present. As a further protection, to the extent possible, the notes taken do not reflect the group participating in a given meeting.

In the end this generated 15 house meetings. While the number of participants varied widely at the extremes, we estimate that roughly 140 people have participated. The total number of Pullen members and active participants is currently being verified by Pullen staff. In a conversation for the purposes of this report, Nancy Petty estimates that we have 325 active participants and 550

members.<sup>1</sup> If accurate, that means roughly 43% of active participants and 25% of the membership participated in this exercise, levels that are strong for this kind of endeavor. Nevertheless, ARCC members heard critiques that people not currently on the various Councils or Committees or participating in other congregational groupings were unable to participate. We therefore translated the house meeting format to an on-line version and made that available through Pullen's regular communications. No one chose to exercise that option.

The final step in this process was to analyze (or "code") the resulting meeting notes.<sup>2</sup> Four members of ARCC and 1 staff member met for 3 hours on Sunday, Nov. 26<sup>th</sup>. Coders aimed to identify themes that (1) arose frequently or (2) seemed especially important. We compared notes on those themes. We then aimed to answer 4 questions:

1. Where are the points of agreement?
2. Where are there points of disagreement or contention?
3. Where are there points of uncertainty or confusion?
4. What recommendations—as concrete as possible—would you make for the way forward based on what you've read? What are the next steps for Pullen?

The points below reflect what ARCC feels are the most significant points of consideration derived from those house meetings.

1) Acceptance of racism's role in history – No one contested the role of racism in shaping the United States. While few used the phrase "institutional racism" or "structural racism," participants often talked about racism in institutional terms: unequal schools, whitewashing of history, oppressive land tenure, discriminatory policing and the justice system, etc. Many older participants shared their experiences with school desegregation and the struggle for Civil Rights. There was a general acceptance that racism had left an indelible mark on the United States.

2) Surprise at prominence of racism in Christianity – In the video, Robbie Jones presents research suggesting that racism is a rampant problem in American Christianity in particular: that there is a positive correlation between religiosity and racist attitudes. The correlation strengthens as you move from Catholics to mainline protestants to evangelicals. It was not uncommon to hear people who grew up in a tradition with "less racist" attitudes express a lack of surprise regarding those groups with more racist attitudes but surprise at the prominence of racist attitudes in their own tradition (for example, those who grew up Lutheran expected the racism of evangelicals, but were surprised to see the high level of racism among mainline protestants). One interpretation of this point is that it is much easier to recognize racist attitudes in others than it is to recognize it amongst ourselves. There was widespread disappointment at the connection between faith and racism. Few to no conversations, however, really tried to pick apart that relationship, either the various ways the two could be connected or the reasons for that connection. A closer interrogation of this connection might prove to be a useful way for identifying the ways in which we at Pullen fail to challenge racism.

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<sup>1</sup> "Active participant" here is defined as someone who has participated in at least one event in the previous month and may or may not be a member. "Member" is someone who has formally joined the church and considers themselves to be member, regardless of their recent degree of participation.

<sup>2</sup> You can read the full instructions for coding the notes at [this link](#).

3) Lack of clarity regarding “anti-racism” – The common discussion questions intentionally did not define “anti-racism.” Not surprisingly, groups often expressed confusion or uncertainty about the term. Some participants understood it in ways similar to ARCC’s mission statement. Others understood it as maintaining a moral opposition to people or groups deemed to be racist. Still others identified specific policies that they felt were either racist or anti-racist. There was general agreement, when the point was raised, that we as a congregation need to strive for a common understanding of the term.

4) The importance—and the challenges—of identifying a finish line – Conversation commonly centered around measuring progress. How do we know if our efforts are working? A commonly suggested marker was an increased number of people of color joining our community. Nearly just as often, other participants suggested that various factors drove “Sunday segregation,” some of which suggested that increasing diversity of our membership should not be the goal (e.g., the need for a safer space for people of color forced to “pass” in a White-dominated world). Others noted that often there are also theological differences that separate Pullen from more diverse or largely minority-serving faith groups. Participants commonly brought up the former relationship with Martin Street Baptist church and proposed either re-establishing that work or, after hearing the challenges of that relationship, suggested find an alternative congregation to work with.

5) The importance—and the challenges—of worship – Related to the above, how we worship was a common point of discussion. If our worship had livelier music, was less rigid, had more people of color leading, would we see a more diverse body? Or would integrating other worship traditions help us develop a greater appreciation for why worship traditions often vary across racial and ethnic lines and thus for the faith of those groups? Some participants had a strong, negative reaction to these suggestions, preferring a more contemplative service.

6) Building an anti-racist next generation – One of the most common steps participants suggested was to focus on educating children. Especially in the current political climate, discussants highlighted the need to have these conversations and integrate an anti-racist message from the earliest days for our children.

7) Lack of reflection on ways in which Pullen as an organization reinforces racism - The most common response to the question about how racism plays out in Pullen’s faith traditions focused on what our response to racism has been or should be, not on how we might be reinforcing racism. There were, however, calls for a closer look at what we, as an organization, do in order to identify points where we might be falling short of an anti-racist standard. These calls were focused especially on how we spend our money and how we engage in the community beyond our building. Some conversation also focused on our physical presence and wondered whether our art, classrooms, hallways, or windows reflect a fundamentally White Christianity.

8) A need for greater reflection on our theological ties to White supremacy – Conversations that considered how our theology might be reinforcing racism were rare. Of those few self-critical conversations, the most commonly identified problem was a collective satisfaction with one might call our progressive bona fides. Some participants identified that our identity as a progressive, even radical, church might lead us to ignore issues where we are not as progressive or inclusive as we imagine ourselves to be. Some identified the Baptist tradition of individualism as blinding us to structural or institutional racism. Generally, however, conversations that led into a more critical consideration of how our theology might be reinforcing racism were rare.

9) Uncertainty, and disagreement, about Pullen's role in anti-racism – It bears emphasizing that not everyone is on board with anti-racism as a primary focus for Pullen. Some people who were asked to participate in the meetings declined to do so. Others have expressed concern that anti-racism is being forced on the congregation or that they felt the effort implied that they were racist. It also bears emphasizing that these were minority views.

Thoughts from Ian McPherson:

The video has served as an effective jumping off point for discussion. It provides multiple means of entry for participants, who are free to engage the material in structural or personal terms (or both). There has been an openness to the information provided, even from those who express some discomfort with the content. The heaviness of the topic was often visibly discernable in the faces of participants. I credit the groups with creating an environment in which many perspectives could be shared and held.

One of the more dominant anxieties that emerged concerned the demography of Pullen, with some naming that they were perplexed about why it has remained a predominantly white institution despite its support of racial and social justice since the Civil Rights era. Without a clear definition of what an "antiracist church" is, many seem to think it is synonymous with a "multiracial church." For the majority of participants, the assumed metric of our antiracist commitments is the racial composition of the church. For some, the recent increase in congregants of color is a sign of progress; for others, our current racial makeup is a sign of how much work there is left to do.

Consequently, our collective imagination seems to be limited concerning the possibilities of living into our antiracist commitments. A few expressed interest in direct political action (though were not too specific about tactics or issues). Others expressed interest in further education and discussion through our current systems of faith formation. Still others harkened back to a past relationship with a predominantly Black congregation and wondered about Pullen pursuing such a cross-racial congregational partnership again.

The scaffolding of the discussion questions is brilliant. Initial impressions of the content is followed by its applicability within the Pullen context, and then participants are asked to imagine what the congregation's "next most faithful steps" could be. The level of engagement from one question to the next is rather telling. The content is easily engaged in broad strokes. What it might reveal about Pullen is more difficult to name. Harder still is defining what specific actions might result from our reckoning with the vestiges of white supremacy within our own context.

*Recommendation 3 – The Deacon Council should decide how to approve or affirm the findings of ARCC once the analysis is complete.*

**LOOKING FORWARD**

The task of ARCC in the coming year will be to, first, decide a prioritization of the various tasks explicitly or implicitly included in the above points and, second, to create a plan to move this important, difficult work forward. Incoming ARCC chair Maggie Zeillmann has proposed three overarching points to shape this work:

- 1) Learn together as a congregation about systemic racism, implicit bias, and theologies of liberation.
- 2) Examining Pullen's constitution, bylaws, budgets/finances, and traditions to identify areas for improving racial equity.
- 3) Engage in antiracist work outside of Pullen, in partnership with other churches/organizations that are already doing this work.

THRIVE promises to be a useful network of contacts in that regard.

### **CONCLUSION**

In its May 2021 statement, when it suggested that a first path forward on our journey to becoming an anti-racist congregation was through conversations, ARCC also wrote the following:

“A second path is forged as we develop new habits designed to help us see our role in countering or reinforcing racism: new questions to ask, new logics to consider, new outcomes to imagine. It is work that requires a close look at all that we do. It is an on-going evolution. It requires that we give and receive grace when we make the missteps that we inevitably will make. It is hard, important work...

This is a long and on-going process. It requires a commitment to being open to looking inward, observing our own traditions, discovering where our own traditions and ways of doing may have effects we do not intend, identifying barriers that prevent us from having the effects we hope to have, and allowing our learning process to move us forward in our journey toward becoming an anti-racist congregation..

We only ask that you join us on this journey. Ask us and each other hard questions. This work requires that we be open and honest on issues that are among the most fraught that we face in the United States. In that best Pullen tradition, let us challenge ourselves and each other to see more clearly how we might, to paraphrase Paula Clayton Dempsey..., welcome all God's children to the table.”