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Date: July 28, 2019

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Our Voices

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7.28.19

I'm convinced that the Lord requires something very simple of us: "... to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8). Network, a Christian Reformed Church sharing platform states, if we are committed to this kind of life, then we must speak. The title of my mediation is "Our Voices."

Since I was a kid, I've been obsessed with what is fair and just. You can attribute it to me being a middle child who once my younger brother was born, I got bounced around, sharing a room with either my older or younger sister. Or blame it on my early years growing up in a homogenous rural upstate New York town in the 1960s watching images of the civil rights movement or the Vietnam war on TV with no one around to explain what was happening. I drew the conclusions myself. Or blame it on family or family friends using the "N" word and other derogatory language to describe my first childhood friends who were the token Jewish and African American kids in town.

Blame it on witnessing the treatment of the children of migrant workers who picked apples in the fall that flooded our schools in September just to disappear as autumn turned to winter. Attribute it on being bullied for being put in remedial reading in 8th grade because the "new" reading methodology of the 1960s elementary school didn't teach phonetics. Blame it on me being a bystander, or at times just to fit in, a bully, which just felt awful and filled me with regret. Or attribute it on my first college boyfriend severing a budding relationship just because his parents demanded he not date anyone who wasn't Jewish. Whatever the reason, I was an outspoken kid, and trust me, it got me into a lot of trouble – but it didn't curtail my belief in what is fair and just.

Involvement

I've volunteered in the Lexington community since moving here in 1998. Most of my work was with the schools and politically on referendum campaigns. As the 2016 election progressed, I heard rhetoric and images that seemed unreal, unfathomable in this day and age and the result of the 2016 election was numbing. I was angry and scared. Like many others I turned to social media. Posting on Facebook. My first post after the election. "My heart hurts right now. My heart hurts because what I've seen so far tonight is that many Americans have let hate and fear penetrate their hearts. I ask you America, did you think about the consequences? Painful lessons will be learned. And the ones who will feel the most pain will be the people who are already hurting. Very sad. God help us all." Two days after the election I posted about an incident I witnessed in Dunkin Donuts where a man wearing proudly a "Make America Great Again" hat verbally abused a Brazilian worker who got his coffee order wrong. The customer told the man to "go home – go back to where you came from, no one wants you here." Other patrons and I helped to console the man who had worked at the shop for many years. I posted on Facebook "Hate – you are not welcome here."

I increased the number of my Facebook friends. Trying to expand my reach – to people who supported my views and those who did not. I was determined not to sit this one out. Alongside Jeff, I marched in the Women's March. And on January 25, 2017, I wrote my first letter to the White House asking President Trump not to repeal the ACA.

Beginnings

Speaking with friends, I found out that others were writing letters too. We were frustrated. We didn't want to just read or listen to what was happening, we wanted to do something about it. I was introduced to the Indivisible movement. I read the Indivisible manual and attended an initial meeting with a couple of friends. Wanting a format that was a little smaller and little more intimate, my 2 friends and co-leaders Laura Kerper and Lesley Benson and I decided to start our own advocacy group. We researched and talked to a number of other groups for tips and techniques. We called the group Bridge Network for Democracy or BAND and our inaugural meeting was held at Pilgrim Church on March 19, 2017. We created a private Facebook group where we could announce meetings, post action items, and members could exchange articles, news and ideas, and an email group for those who were not on Facebook. Laura, Lesley and I met prior to the general meeting to plan and set the agenda. The first meeting was messy (even though there were refreshments!) We had a really good turnout and our plan was to gather folks' greatest concerns – but it rapidly turned into a two-hour complaint-fest.

The three of us regrouped, drafted a list of the topics – immigration, healthcare, the wall, reproductive rights, the environment, voting rights and many, many others and through email, asked our attendees to rank them. We prioritized the subjects that seemed to be the most important to the group. We compiled a box of supplies. We used Google drive to archive all action items and agendas and we set up reporting systems. At the pre-meeting, the three Ls decided on list of action items, divided the research and created an action sheet that provided background information, sample scripts, and addresses. The goal? Make taking action as easy as possible for our members. Fairly quickly, we realized postcard writing was most effective (other than attending rallies and marches) and we could complete about 4 action items in 1 ½ hours. We meet approximately monthly and we are now in our third year. At the beginning, we tried to stick to the issues that people cared about most, but new issues kept cropping up every other week or even every other day – we found ourselves constantly reacting to the latest issue.

Our Members

Our members are mostly women; however, men and students occasionally join us. New members are always welcome. Professionally, we've got medical professionals, academics, teachers, stay-at-home-moms, retirees, self-employed consultants, artists, writers, scientists, engineers, business folks, community leaders and organizers. Politically, we are liberal, ranging from very progressive to moderate, even bordering on conservative. And our members come from a variety of faith traditions – Protestants, including members from our own congregation, Catholics, Unitarians, Reformed and Conservative Jews, and Agnostics (and I've probably missed a few). There is a core group of folks who attend our general postcard writing sessions and others who drop in occasionally. Some of our group members know the absolute latest news and can site specifics, stats, history, bill numbers, voting records, etc., by heart and others dip in and out of current events. We learn from each other and we don't always agree – and you know what? That is okay! We hold fast to our rule, that if you don't want to do an action item or write the script exactly as written, you can opt out or make any change so that what you write on that card reflects your values, your opinion. We strive to be respectful but direct.

Forget Email, Forget Texting, Postcards are Where It's At

As I mentioned above, we've found that postcard writing is the best use of our time. We respond to local, state and national issues. In general, we target our local, state and nationally elected officials, but we also have written to Committee Chairs or Department Heads, CEOs and even the Mayor of London! We are writing for policy change – policies that we believe will make our country more tolerant, equitable, compassionate, and understanding for all people, protect rights that can help deliver a healthy society and to balance the protection of the earth and all that it gives us with an economy of the future. To date we've written, 1,800 postcards and attended 9 Marches or Rallies.

Vote, Vote, Vote

Almost two years ago, we started to write Get Out the Vote Postcards as one of our action items to support candidates around the country who were in tough races. Through Postcards to Voters, Tony the Democrat and Abby the Addressbot, we procured addresses and were given guidelines as to what to write and any graphic had to be hand drawn. Nothing pre-printed. The message? A friendly reminder to get out and vote. According to an article by Mary Rothenberg in Blue Wave, these postcards helped increase voter turnout by .4% as compared .3% from door to door canvassing. There were reports of people bringing their postcards to the polls, saving, or sharing them – postcards boosted civic engagement not only just for those receiving them but for those folks writing them. To date, we've written for 18 Get Out the Vote Campaigns – 7 of those candidates won. We are most proud of our Get Out the Vote Postcard writing as we believe it has been the most impactful work that we could do to foster democracy. Voting rights remains a key issue for our group.

So, Where Do We Find Our Ideas?

Most of our action items come from other local and national advocacy groups. We piggyback on what other groups are doing to help strengthen their resources. There are so many groups out there that need support and we are happy to give them people power.

But we also don't hesitate to research action items of our own or to write those "thank you" "feel good" postcards! In the murky waters in which we live today, there are so many elected officials who are fighting for truth, justice, equality, and a moral compass that we like to send these folks some love whenever we can.

Don't You Get Tired of All This?

Don't you feel like it just doesn't really make a difference or matter? Aren't the problems just too big? I'm asked these questions many more times than I care to admit. And the answer is yes, yes, yes, but that still doesn't stop me from writing. It doesn't stop me from working with the team to create new action items. I persist. We persist, And I believe that our voices need to be heard - that our voices matter. I'd like close out my meditation today with a verse from Proverbs. As you listen to these words, I invite you to think about how you find your voice and take action for positive change.

This from Proverbs 31, verses 8-9.

"Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy." Amen.