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Office of University Communications

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Discussion led by CBFNC's Reconciliation Ministry Team

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.— It's been more than five decades since the inception of the Civil Rights movement in America, a lifetime since Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolent revolution against the inequality and injustice that permeated the American South. But as one Gardner-Webb Divinity student recently put it, "there is a residue of racial tension still lingering in our churches and communities, and it is ours to decide what to do about it."

An interracial group of dozens of Gardner-Webb Divinity students and professors recently took up that challenge with fervor by sharing in a conversation titled "The Future of the Church: A Listening Session on Racial Reconciliation." The event was sponsored by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina's (CBFNC) Racial Reconciliation Ministry Team and the GWU School of Divinity Student Association (SDSA).

As participants enjoyed a meal together, they were asked by the CBFNC Team to discuss three topics: their experiences of racism in the church, their associations with the words 'racial reconciliation,' and their own fears and reservations about engaging in the topic and process of reconciliation between the races. After small roundtable discussions, moderator Gyasi Patterson, vice chair of the Racial Reconciliation Ministry Team, opened the conversation to the entire group.

"There is no other place on the face of this earth where this conversation can truly happen than the church," Patterson said. "Too often in political settings, these conversations erupt in anger or frustration. But the church is bound together by the love we share in Christ—it's the skin, the epidermis, that holds the body together."

The students and professors shared painful memories of racist bitterness inside and outside the church. They struggled to define terms like "racism" and "hatred" and "equality." They searched for the distinction between different worship preferences and elitist pride, and imagined what true interracial worship would look like. They even questioned whether their task might better be called "conciliation" than "reconciliation," since they were uncertain whether true community between the races has ever existed.

But they also talked a lot about hope—for mutual understanding, for admiration of one another, for the wounds of the past to be finally laid to rest, and for the realization of true unity as the church of Christ.

As one participant said, her hands extended in a gesture of supplication, “Maybe we can’t change our entire community, or our church, or even our own families. But I can decide, for myself, to begin taking a real interest in those who are different from me.” Individual empathy and boldness, she said, might not only build bridges between individuals of different races, but also show that the gaps to bridge are smaller than we might think. “It can’t be corporate. It’s got to start with individuals,” she said to a man of a different race. “People like you and me.”

The conversation was just the latest in a series of uncoordinated but intentional efforts at Gardner-Webb to break the ban of silence that so often threatens to perpetuate racial inequality. In November of 2011, the GWU Theatre staged the racially charged but redemptive play “My Sweet Charlie,” hosting discussions after each show about the ongoing process of racial reconciliation in America. Then in January, Civil Rights veteran Carolyn McKinstry, whose Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham was bombed by white supremacists in 1963, delivered the Martin Luther King holiday address at Dimensions.

“In our community of faith in the School of Divinity, I don’t see racism as an issue in terms of our fellowship with each other,” said Dr. Robert Canoy, dean of the Divinity School. “We’re all very interconnected in each other’s lives. What we do know, though, is that in the broader culture there does continue to be overt and covert racism. So our goal is to prepare students to be ministers who make a difference in that regard. We don’t want racism to go unattended.”

SDSA President Charlie Barnett said he was especially glad to participate in the conversations because as a white American male, he admitted, he has not been forced to confront racism in the way many of his fellow students have. “For the most part, in my everyday life,” Barnett said, “I have a choice whether or not I think about these issues. But the fact is that is often not the case with those who are oppressed, those who are minority groups, even other genders. So I appreciate the chance to have this type of dialogue about issues that, otherwise, I might not have to deal with.”

The words that kept surfacing were “conversation” and “dialogue.” Students expressed their appreciation for the chance to share with each other in a non-threatening setting about an issue that, historically, has been anything but safe. As Patterson said, “The goal for CBF’s Reconciliation Team, and I hope the goal for the global church, is not just diversity, or the presence of difference. We want community, real relationships with one another, and conversation is where community begins.”