



The Witness for Justice Begins at Home

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On February 1, 1960, four North Carolina A&T University students who were deeply disturbed by the tortuous murder of Emmett Till sat down at the Woolworth's lunch counter in downtown Greensboro, NC, challenging the restaurant's "whites only" policy. Denied service, the four young men—Ezell Blair Jr., David Richmond, Franklin McCain, and Joseph McNeil—refused to give up their seats. The Greensboro Four, as they came to be known, followed the nonviolent practices of Mohandas Gandhi and civil rights activists, ignoring the violent provocation of local law enforcement and customers. They stayed seated until the restaurant closed, then returned the next day with more students from area colleges.

By February 5, the number of daily protesters at Woolworth's had grown to 300, paralyzing the restaurant and surrounding businesses. By March, this movement had gathered massive media coverage and spread to 55 cities in 13 states to protest segregation in libraries, beaches, hotels and other establishments. What began as the effort of four students determined to change the racist reality of their community became a launching pad for community mobilization against racism everywhere. In response to the success of these sit-ins, dining facilities across the South were integrated by the summer. Four black Woolworth's employees—Geneva Tisdale, Susie Morrison, Anetha Jones, and Charles Best—were the first to be served at the counter where it all began.

I've come to believe both courage and compassion are contagious but the witness for justice begins at home. Movements for justice are not birthed on public platforms with celebrity faces. Such is often a product of such momentum but never the impetus. Iconic public figures like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mrs. Rosa Parks, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Malcom X, Congressman John Lewis, and Governor Robert M. La Follette are the fruit of movement trees whose roots are the actions of courageous citizens who decide the unjust treatment of humanity is too great a burden to bear. So they begin to rise up, and sit down and march and sit in, but they all start at home.

Recently, Justice & Local Church Ministries has partnered with RIP Medical Debt and UCC Conferences and local congregations to abolish medical debt for people living at or below the income threshold of poverty in communities we serve. We

began in the Illinois Conference, working together to abolish \$5.3 million in medical debt for over 5,000 families. Last month, we partnered with the Missouri Mid-South Conference, some Missouri churches, and the Deaconess Foundation to abolish \$12.9 million in medical debt for over 11,000 families. Our next stop will be the Southern New England Conference, followed by the Central Atlantic Conference.

In every case, the impetus is local church engagement in the communities they serve. The witness for justice begins at home at spreads abroad. Every quarter, from now until the 33rd General Synod, we will work with Conferences and local churches to abolish debt in every geographical region the United Church of Christ serves.

We are hopeful to continue with others in building a movement concerned with burdens of health costs on impoverished families and communities. We can do this. We can be a part of changing our reality. We can be a part of telling this story. We can help lives and this planet, if we act with courage, if we rally our neighbors, if we challenge our state and local politicians, if we join this movement in our cities and our towns, because the witness for justice always begins at home.

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