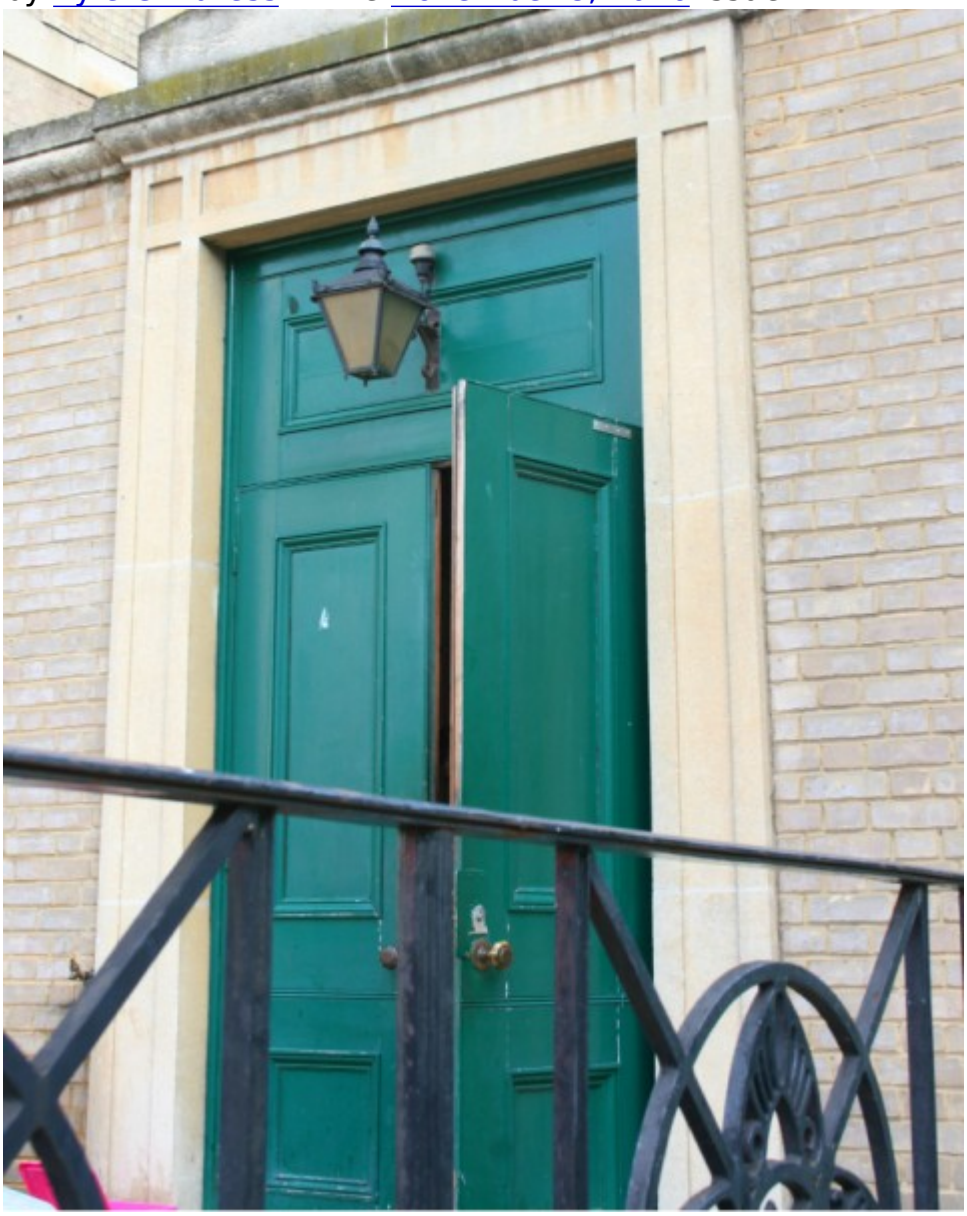
Showing up for racial reconciliation

As a young white pastor, I learned the value of working with black organizations—and not trying to be in charge.

by Kyle Childress in the November 8, 2016 issue



Like a lot of towns around the country, our town recognizes that we have a race problem. We're asking each other what we can do about it—at least some in our town are asking, and some of us have been asking for decades. A couple of months ago two city leaders, both white men, asked me to lunch and confessed their recognition of racial conflict and their ignorance about what to do about it. I pointed out that since I too was a white male, perhaps I was not the best person to ask. Both blushed and sheepishly admitted they didn't know any black people well enough to ask.

When I first moved here 27 years ago, I attended the local ministerial alliance. I had come to East Texas from an urban setting with a diverse ministerial alliance, and I was unsettled when I saw about 25 white men at the meeting. No one of color was present, and there were no women clergy in town. At one point a pastor asserted, "We represent the spiritual leadership of the city," and I said, "After looking around the room, I'd say that we represent the white male spiritual leadership." It grew quiet until one of the older ministers spoke up. "The black pastors have their own alliance."

When I got back to my study at the church after lunch, I phoned the pastor of our partner church, Zion Hill, a distinguished African-American congregation. We had formed a partnership in 1971 because both churches were full of educators fighting for the integration of our local schools. The partnership had continued, centered mostly on joint worship services. As tepid as I thought these services were, I soon learned that it was unusual for black and white congregations to meet together at all.

Back when the pastor search committee first called me and invited me to preach and meet the congregation, they also set up a meeting with the veteran pastor of their partner church to talk about race relations in the city. He laughed when I told him I'd stumbled upon an all-white ministerial alliance. He promptly invited me to the black alliance. I accepted even though it met every other *Saturday night*—not a convenient time for a preacher. But I was committed to working on race relations, so I showed up.

Over the years I've discovered that "showing up" is no small thing, but an essential in race relations. It's not having solutions, making suggestions, or volunteering ideas that counts, but just showing up and taking the time, convenient or not, to show up

again and again, volunteering to work, and keeping one's mouth shut and one's eyes and ears open.

When I was a young pastor I thought my job was to blow a trumpet, lead the way, and yell "charge." Will Campbell, radical Baptist and white civil rights activist, friend of John Lewis and James Lawson, taught me that I needed to show up, do what needed to be done, and walk alongside those on the front lines of racial issues. Will opened my eyes to the work of listening and learning.

A couple of years later, while working in Atlanta, I asked C. T. Vivian, Martin Luther King Jr.'s associate and close friend, what advice he'd give me as a young white pastor wanting to work toward racial unity. He said, "Go join black organizations and be a good member. Don't try to be in charge. Over time, if you stay with it and keep learning, you might develop the credibility to lead on occasion, but not at first. Immerse yourself in the black community."

For 27 years that's what I've tried to do, joining the local NAACP, the black ministerial alliance, and attending Sunday afternoon black church pastor anniversaries, as well as funerals, barbecues, marches, and prayer vigils and taking racism and white privilege training. I've encouraged my own congregation to do the same, and sometimes they do. We've worked with our partner church, running joint vacation Bible school, working on Habitat for Humanity houses together, and doing literacy work with at-risk children.

A couple of years ago, our two congregations had an eye-opening conversation about how many times members have been pulled over by the police. It was one thing to hear this on the news, but something altogether different when coming from friends we knew on a first-name basis, including teachers and school administrators. Now, when something happens in town or on the news, white members ask themselves what their friends from Zion Hill think about this.

At the same time, our relationship is not easy. Our joint vacation Bible school was a difficult project, with differing expectations, different emphases in theology, and different perspectives on teaching and the discipline of children. After a few years both congregations decided to go back to separate Bible schools. And our two congregations do not mirror one another in our ability to do joint ministries. At times our congregation could barely keep its own doors open, with little time, energy, or

resources to do more; at other times their congregation has been in a similar predicament. When one congregation is ready to do something new, the other is not always at a place where it is possible.

A major disagreement among some of the black and white congregations right now is the presence of ordained women. Our agreement with our partner church is that at their place we follow their protocol and at our place ordained women participate as usual—not a perfect agreement but a starting point. Last year the joint ministerial alliances held an annual Martin Luther King Jr. commemoration service at a leading black church. During the service female clergy were asked to pray or read from the lectern—and not use the pulpit. The service came perilously close to disintegrating when my congregation almost walked out. The situation is still not resolved.

Furthermore, being with one another across racial lines is difficult when the members of all congregations work longer hours, receive less time off, and are too exhausted to show up. It's tough to jointly volunteer on a Habitat house on a Saturday or have a conversation about why we do vacation Bible school differently or about white blindness when everyone is somewhere else. Resistance to racism is futile when you're so tired that you don't want to get out of your chair at the end of the day.

But we don't give up. Some stains, Howard Thurman said, don't come out without first soaking them. The gospel of the incarnation means that to be with one another across racial lines takes time and showing up. It means persistence and unrelenting patience—but not the patience King decried years ago when he was told to wait as another way of saying "never." No, this is the patience white people must practice as they give up control and enter into and alongside the black community, seeing what might happen even if it turns out differently than we want. This is the patience of trusting friendships across racial lines enough to disagree with one another, knowing that we're in this for the long haul. Of course, all this assumes we know someone black in the first place.

A version of this article appears in the November 9 print edition under the title "The ministry of showing up."