

Three women in Cleveland who are serving the most vulnerable

Yvonka Hall, Yvonne Pointer, and Frances Mills are beacons of hope in the face of racial disparities.

by [Leah C. K. Lewis](#) in the [June 3, 2020](#) issue



HOPEFUL IN OHIO: (from left) Yvonka Hall, Yvonne Pointer, and Frances Mills. (Photo of Yvonka Hall by Marvin Fong / Special to Eye on Ohio)

At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, I, a dreamer by nature, fantasized about human cooperation across ethnicities and cultures. I thought racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia might recede as humans united against a lethal virus.

But it did not take long before the realities of racism—part of the fabric of the United States since the beginning—revealed themselves. African American, Latinx and Hispanic, and Native American communities are all disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Some hospitals reportedly have followed protocols making people with multiple underlying health conditions—a group in which people of color are significantly overrepresented—a lower priority for ventilator access. Asian Americans

of various ethnicities have experienced a rise in racist attacks following the virus's emergence from Wuhan, China.

This is a season of great suffering. What exactly can Christians do to help alleviate it?

I posed this question to three beacons of hope in Cleveland, one of the most impoverished cities in the nation. Each of these black Christian women has long served people in need, often taking matters into her own hands when institutional support was lacking.

Yvonka Hall is the founder and executive director of the Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition. As a former director of the Cleveland Office of Minority Health, Hall honed her prescience to see needs where they will arise. This ability has driven her to fill gaps the system often creates.

One such effort is her Babies and Brunch program, launched to feed children who have lost access to school meals during the shutdown. While the Cleveland Metropolitan School District made arrangements to feed children, those with disabilities and special needs were left out, according to Hall. So she and a small team—including two of her nieces, roughly ten donors, and 20 drivers—began feeding 71 children three meals a day, seven days a week. Over time, donations of soap and toilet paper were added. Candy, donated by a local CVS, enabled Babies and Brunch to give the children Easter baskets cobbled together from baskets, pails, ribbons, shredded paper, and bags that Hall was able to gather.

Hall, a board member for Multiethnic Advocates for Cultural Competence, illuminated for me the distinction between “cultural competency” and “cultural proficiency.” Often, the best systems can do is to become culturally competent. This means that while there is an awareness of social needs, gaps result from the creation of systemic rules and regulations.

How can Christians help in this season of great suffering?

She gave me this example: A client arrives ten minutes late for an appointment and is told that she needs to reschedule. The institutional rules for tardiness don't recognize that she had to catch three buses to get there and is not at fault if one of them was delayed. That's not to mention everything else she had to do to manage her family and her day. Systems often place order and efficiency above human

realities.

Being culturally proficient doesn't mean eschewing all rules and regulations. It does mean a priority on meeting people's needs. During the pandemic, Hall and her team have adhered to practical and essential rules for social distancing, and they've worn masks and gloves—all while discharging their mission to help people.

So has Cleveland activist Yvonne Pointer, who spearheads several programs. She founded Positive Plus, an organization for women whose lives have been touched by violence. She built and maintains a school for young children in Ghana: the Gloria Pointer Memorial School, named for her young daughter who was raped and murdered in 1984.

During the pandemic, Pointer has added another project: she's begun attending to essential workers. Like Hall, Pointer tapped into her network to provide lunch for staff at some local hospitals and police precincts. Restaurants, such as Angie's Soul Food and the Harvard Park Chick-fil-a, have pitched in with matching contributions. "Essential workers don't have time to go out for lunch," Pointer noted. This wave of giving started when Pointer teamed up with another Christian woman, Victoria L. Davis, to provide food to the local women's shelter at the onset of the pandemic.

Both Hall and Pointer bear earthly riches—creativity, charisma, generosity—that are unquantifiable yet priceless. In the face of a death-dealing pandemic, fear has not stymied either one.

Serving in a place like Cleveland is so very necessary. The city has experienced eight straight decades of population loss as jobs from the steel and auto industries diminished. Children grow up and leave the city for education and opportunity.

The pandemic has provided the church with "an opportunity to connect to what is relevant and real," said Frances Mills, director of the Cleveland Office of Minority Health and an associate minister at New Freedom Ministries in Cleveland. Hall and Pointer echoed this. The coronavirus has forced churches to go beyond the four walls of their sanctuaries. Outreach in open spaces or via technology has become the order of the day.

But how can we make the most relevant connections? And how can we fight not only the pandemic but the systemic issues behind its disparities?

Any big-picture answer has to include compelling our public servants to pursue public policies that will enable the heretofore marginalized to thrive. A joint publication from the Center for American Progress and the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity highlights several important areas of focus. People need affordable health care and paid sick leave and family leave. Minority-owned businesses need more access to capital. Direct cash payments to households should continue and increase.

But what if such checks were less necessary because people were earning a living wage in the first place? There I go, dreaming again.

On a smaller scale, a friend passed along a good idea. In Ohio, grocery workers cannot accept cash tips—but they can accept gift cards. As Hall noted, poor people cannot afford to use Instacart, and they may have to “choose between milk and Lysol.” So my friend purchased gift cards for two of her local grocer’s employees, whom she’d interacted with for years.

My friend’s idea speaks to a point articulated by Mills: the value of building relationships. Giving to others matters whether or not we know them. Yet there is something special about sharing within intimate relationships.

Mills told me about her primarily African American church’s strong relationship with Mayfield United Methodist Church, a white church 30 minutes away in Chesterland, Ohio. New Freedom was once located in Chesterland, too, before moving into the city. The churches’ relationship continued; they kept worshiping together and holding joint events. Over the years, the members learned to communicate earnestly, to set aside egos and paternalism. They are “continuously building relationship,” said Mills, “so that conversations that are somewhat difficult can be had.”

Members of Mayfield UMC have remained faithful friends to New Freedom. And friends indeed provide for friends in need. Mayfield members have secured financial grants and intervention for New Freedom. Mills singled out one Mayfield member who has worshiped with New Freedom routinely and who frequently attends to New Freedom’s grounds.

Mills advises that we all come to the table, value one another, and set paternalism aside to create space for individual and collective empowerment. “Our goal is to create a beloved community,” said Martin Luther King Jr., “and this will require a

qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.” This pandemic offers all of us another opportunity to search our souls, purify our worst instincts, and live out the gospel.

I hope my dream can be made manifest and not deferred.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Facing the disparity.”