News

Demonstrators protesting racial injustice in Washington march down Constitution Avenue Jun

Demonstrators protesting racial injustice in Washington march down Constitution Avenue June 13, 2020. In a webinar, Rudy Dehaney, coordinator of youth and young adult ministry for the Northeast Catholic Community in Baltimore, said young adult ministers need to educate young Catholics about anti-racism and help them channel their talents toward social justice. (CNS/Michael A. McCoy, Reuters)



by Madeleine Davison

View Author Profile
mdavison@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

January 7, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Ministers and formation leaders should provide young adults with the knowledge and direction to channel their passion for social justice into dismantling systemic racism, said Rudy Dehaney, coordinator of youth and young adult ministry in the Northeast Catholic Community, a collaborative of eight churches in Baltimore.

Dehaney, speaking in a workshop at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' National Leadership Forum on Ministry with Young Adults, said young people are already very motivated to push for social change.

"Young people have the power to be protagonists … to drive action and change in our society," he said.

In a 2020 GenForward survey, a nationally representative survey of U.S. young adults, conducted prior to the presidential election, respondents were asked to

choose what they thought was the most important issue facing the country.

Roughly 12% of respondents chose racism as their top issue, making it the second most common choice after the coronavirus pandemic (which 23% of respondents chose) on a list of more than a dozen options, including health care, education, homeland security, immigration and abortion.

Racism was the most common choice for Black young adults, with 29% of Black respondents selecting it as the nation's most urgent problem, along with 8% of white respondents, 11% of Asian respondents and 13% of Latino respondents.

In a 2018 document on young people and faith, the Synod of Bishops wrote, "In the face of society's contradictions, many young people wish to offer the fruits of their talents, skills and creativity and they are ready to assume responsibility. Among the themes they hold most dear are social and environmental sustainability, discrimination and racism."



Rudy Dehaney, coordinator of youth and young adult ministry for the Northeast Catholic Community in Baltimore, speaks during a webinar at the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' National Leadership Forum on Ministry with Young Adults in December 2020. (NCR Screenshot/Natyamforum.com/)

"Racism is a reality in our country that many young adults understand and want to fix," Dehaney said.

Dehaney said young adult ministers need to make a habit of talking about racism regularly.

"George Floyd shouldn't have to die for us to talk about racism," he said. "Breonna Taylor didn't have to die to talk about racism. ... This should be an ongoing conversation that we have to come back to month after month, year after year, to assess where we are going, [and] what we are doing to fix these problems."

He said the goal should be to create a church, and a body of young adults, that is actively anti-racist, not just passively "not racist." Teaching people to "love one another the same" is not enough, he said.

Instead, citing NAC International Perspectives: Women and Global Solidarity, he said Catholics need to focus on dismantling systems, organizational structures, attitudes and policies that perpetuate racism, and on "sharing power equitably."

Dehaney also quoted Pope Francis' recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, in which the pope argues that solidarity means acting for the good of the community, prioritizing people over property accumulation and capital, and "combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labor rights."

"Even if you treat people with love in your current life, these systems are still causing people harm, damage or even death," Dehaney said.

A truly anti-racist church, he said, would value all races and cultures equally, work against its own racial biases, listen to those who have been harmed and make amends for past injustices and actively work to change structures and laws that uphold inequality.

"An anti-racist church ... is a church where the term 'Black Lives Matter' is not a term to be questioned, changed or flipped around for our comfort, but is understood and affirmed by the actions of our leadership and the body inside of the church," Dehaney said.

The church has work to do in order to become anti-racist, he said.

To begin that work, ministers and formation leaders should start by educating young adults on the issues. Racism is complex, Dehaney said; it's not something that can or should be covered in a single session. Rather, young adult ministries should offer a series of talks or retreats to keep the conversation going.

He said these talks should always include discussion of the history of racism in the country and in the church, as well as information on racial biases and how they affect our actions and societal structures.

Advertisement

He recommended following up after the initial series or retreat by hosting book clubs to discuss books such as Fr. Bryan Massingale's *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, collaborating with other young adult ministries from different communities and attending local events such as city council meetings to better understand the issues.

Young adult ministries should also engage in concrete actions to fight racism, Dehaney said. Talking about racism is not enough.

"If that's all we do, then all it's going to amount to is the same old, same old, and the structure is still going to be in place," he said. "That's not actually doing something that dismantles the structure of racism."

He said young adult ministries should collaborate with other communities to create plans of action that they can revisit to see if they are meeting their goals. These goals should include structural changes within and outside the church, he said.

It's easy to get discouraged, because racism is a deeply entrenched problem and many people do not want to see change, so there will be pushback, Dehaney said.

"Faith is your anchor, faith is what will keep you moving forward," he said. "No matter how hard it is, I want you to keep working and keep moving towards making our church an anti-racist church."