**A Call for Reconciliation and Community Building**

**Letter to the Witness Committee by Ruth Reynolds**

* John 13:34 Jesus said: “A new command I give you: Love one another.”
* 1 Peter 4:8 Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.
* 1 John 3:18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

When the COVID -19 pandemic began the life of the Church as we know it changed. We experienced a lock-down which led to a new virtual worship experience, including Zoom meetings for the Faith Presbyterian Centering Prayer group and the Black Dog Class. The solitary life of remaining at home provided a natural springboard into Christian contemplation for our congregation. What would God have me do at a time such as this? Where are the teachings of Jesus leading me? We missed meeting in person at our beloved church and the feeling of community that brings, but what we longed for most was to find meaning and purpose in our lives. To somehow transcend our isolation in an effort to serve God and bring about his Kingdom was the foremost desire of our hearts.

Then, as we sat at our computers, looked at our smart phones and watched television we witnessed the death of George Floyd, which was preceded by andfollowed soon after by many instances of violence and injustice towards people of color in our country. We wondered how our black brothers and sisters in Christ were able to keep faith in the face of all the inhumanity experienced by their people. That was when the Black Dog Class decided to read James Cone’s *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, followed by *Ten Essential Strategies for Becoming a Multiracial Congregation* by Jacqueline Lewis and John Janka. We were shocked and broken hearted by the vast history of injustice and exclusion black Christians suffered from white Christian churches, leading up to this very day.

Trinity United Presbyterian Church is the only all black PCUSA congregation in Tallahassee. The reason it exists is because a founding member of the church, Ms. Irene Mandexter, was turned away at the door of the only white Presbyterian church in Tallahassee in the early 1950’s. Mrs. Mandexter was a lifelong member of Bethesda Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh when she moved to Tallahassee to accept a faculty position at FAMU. After repeatedly being denied access to worship at First Presbyterian she and a core group of Tallahassee blacks founded Trinity Presbyterian Church in 1954. The new all black church became involved in the Tallahassee civil rights movement through nonviolent participation in the Tallahassee Bus Boycott. The mission of the bus boycott was to integrate the Tallahassee public transportation system for passengers and drivers. At the time seating for blacks was limited to the back seats of the bus and there were no African American drivers employed. The efforts the church made towards equality and justice resulted in the firing of their pastor, Joseph Metz Rollins and the abandonment of the church by the Florida Presbytery. The congregation turned to and was welcomed into affiliation by the Northern Presbyterian Church (United Presbyterian Church, based in New York) and went on to buy land and build their sanctuary and church complex. Then, in 1983, the United Presbyterian Church and the Southern Presbyterian Church (known as the Presbyterian Church in the US, based in Atlanta, merged to become PCUSA. That historic national merger placed Trinity United Presbyterian Church back in the Florida Presbytery where it remains today.

During the Civil Rights Movement in 1960 the Session at Faith Presbyterian Church voted not to seat black persons at Faith Worship services. Then in 1963, the year of the March on Washington, Faith reversed its prior decision (see p.4 Faith FIRST Report).

Our General Assembly has stated that racism is a sin. It is not in accordance with the Gospel message through the teachings of Jesus. Further, it is recommended by the General Assembly that congregations “… develop and adopt an antiracism policy in their bylaws…” (224th General Assembly (2020) of the PC(USA). Antiracist policies lead to antiracist action. In light of what Trinity United Presbyterian Church has suffered through the repeated racist actions of the Florida Presbytery and local churches, including Faith Presbyterian, reconciliation is called for. An acknowledgement of our past transgressions towards our local siblings of color, and a sincere apology is a way to a path of future relationship with their church. Healing can come through naming, owning and renouncing the harmful actions of the past. May the teachings and inspired messages of our bible through the call of the Holy Spirit be our guide towards healing, reconciliation and loving community with the saints at Trinity United Presbyterian Church.