

It is time.

LISTEN. DIALOGUE. CHANGE.

Koinonia Day: Together in *fellowship*

Sabbath, April 29, 2017.

It was going to be a high day. A unique day. It was Koinonia Day, born into conception through inspiration just a few weeks prior.

“KOINONIA IS THE GREEK WORD FOR fellowship,” explains Dwight Nelson, lead pastor of Pioneer Memorial Church on the campus of Andrews University. “It is embedded in the Pentecost story where 3,000 people were baptized in Jerusalem. New members devoted themselves to the...*fellowship* [emphasis Nelson’s]. The Bible says everyone was filled with awe. 2 Corinthians 13:14 bids, ‘May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the *fellowship* of the Holy Spirit be with you all’” [emphasis Nelson’s].

“That was code to the followers of Christ that what we experience in him we share with each other,” Nelson says. “It’s a bond—blest be the tie that binds.”

In March, the Spiritual Life Committee was discussing next steps for the campus following the #ItIsTimeAU* campaign still fresh in everyone’s minds. They recognized that the campus was galvanized and didn’t want the school year to end with “a chapel and two videos.”

Nelson appealed to the committee: “The world church’s eyes are on us. We cannot squander this moment.”

After the meeting, Michael Polite, associate chaplain, emailed Nelson, asking to meet.

“Nelson’s speech moved me,” says Polite. “I understood his heart in that moment. I felt like he was seeing an opportunity in a way that none of us around the table were seeing.”

So they met. They prayed. They made a plan that came to fruition on Sabbath, April 29: Koinonia Day.

On this special Sabbath, New Life Fellowship, a historically black congregation which meets in the too-small-for-them Seminary Chapel, and the historically predominantly white congregation of Pioneer Memorial Church, swapped worship spaces for the second church service. Musicians, preachers, deacons and regular attendees all moved to a different space for their regular worship experience.

“Relocating New Life to PMC has been discussed in the past,” says Polite. “I have been uncomfortable engaging in these discussions because they were void of proper context and sensitivity to a hurtful history. This conversation was different; it not only admitted that the current setup is not ideal for the New Life community, but it also positioned New

Life as the lead on crafting the experience and surveying the attendees to see how they felt in the PMC space.”

So, Koinonia Day served as a litmus test. Campus spiritual leaders created a simple survey to distribute to both congregations: Where do you usually attend church? Do you feel comfortable here? Do you feel this was a positive thing? Did you encounter God today?

“It was a really beautiful opportunity to see something powerful that has never been done here,” says Melanie Reed, senior architecture major. “It was packed, and people were worshiping in a different way. It didn’t feel forced, or black and white, it felt like genuine, collective worship among people who all love God.”

It wasn’t just about the worship experience. Following the church service, PMC, New Life and One Place (a weekly church service that meets in Newbold Auditorium in Buller Hall) came together for a fellowship meal on the lawn outside the Campus Center.

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When the weather forecast for Sabbath predicted rain, event coordinators knew they had to prepare a contingency.

Enter Lorraine London Polite, project manager for the provost. On Friday, she worked with Paul Elder, director of facilities management, and his team to set up nearly 1,500 chairs at tables in Johnson Gym. Then, she and Elder personally went to seven stores in the area and purchased 86 identical portable canopies to be set up over the sidewalk between the Campus Center and Johnson Gym so no one would walk in the rain.

“The gym space was important,” says Nelson. “The ambiance and energy of the room made all the difference. It was Koinonia.”

Thanks to Mark Daniels, general manager of Dining Services and Linda Brinegar, executive chef, over 1,600 people were served their haystack lunch in under an hour.

June Price, University chaplain, and her team coordinated the personal connection experience for the afternoon, seating people randomly so they wouldn’t sit with those they already knew. Specially made cards at each table invited those seated to ask and answer questions of themselves and each other.

Price’s team also facilitated room-wide conversation from the front, asking questions and having people stand so all could see who had similar experiences. They

covered everything from liking Taco Bell to losing a parent to personally experiencing discrimination.

“We wanted the audience to understand that we’re similar in deep things,” Price says. “The atmosphere was exactly what was needed. There was great camaraderie as each table actively got to know each other.”

“It was inter-generational, inter-congregational and inter-cultural,” explains Polite. “One student shared that he sat with an elderly gentleman from PMC and had a conversation during which they learned they had more in common than they thought. That’s priceless.”

Garrison Hayes, student chaplain and MDiv student, felt Koinonia Day was exactly what was needed.

“The fingerprints of God were all over it,” he says. “I believe God wanted us to get a small taste of Heaven and the unencumbered fellowship we will enjoy there. He was successful.”

Following lunch, a special Koinonia vespers, facilitated by J. Murdock, pastor of One Place, allowed for additional praise and prayer. Nelson reviewed how Koinonia came about, and used the story to motivate a time of small-group prayer for Andrews. Andrea Luxton, University president, led attendees in corporate prayer and Kenley Hall, associate professor of Christian ministry in the Seminary, gave a stirring charge.

“Let’s make Koinonia not an event, but a lifestyle,” Hall urged.

So, what’s the long-term impact of Koinonia Day?

Responses from the 1,500 survey cards distributed between PMC and New Life will be tabulated and reviewed to determine and define next steps.

“Coming together is an intrusive project,” says Polite. “It’s difficult. It requires sacrifice, time, effort, energy and money. But when you have individuals willing to sacrifice those things together, it’s a sign that staying the same is not an option. They are willing to sacrifice together.”

A multiracial team from PMC will identify strategic steps forward to create a more ethnically inclusive environment at PMC. Concurrently, a New Life leadership team will study possible next steps. These groups will spend fall semester 2017 reviewing, learning and building consensus. Any long-term commitments will be launched in January 2018.

“This is not unique to PMC or Andrews,” says Nelson. “This is life. The nation is as fractured as we’ve ever been racially, and this is an opportunity for God to put something together that reaches far beyond Andrews.”

In his Koinonia Day sermon, Nelson referenced Philippians 1:6 several times: “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

“What God starts he finishes,” Nelson says confidently. “We believe he’s started something and we’re just as confident that he will finish it. The best is yet to come. With Jesus, that is always the case.”

 *To view the Koinonia Day services, visit andrews.edu/diversity/itistime