

Online Group Organizes Young Adventists for Social Justice

| BY ALITA BYRD

Tiffany Llewellyn, a twenty-nine-year-old Adventist social worker from New York, has tapped into the frustration many young black Adventists are feeling this summer, and is harnessing it to create a vibrant organization to fight for positive change. Alita Byrd's interview was posted on the *Spectrum* website on August 14, 2016:

You are the co-founder of an organization called Adventists for Social Justice. What inspired you to start this group? What is it all about?

Following the death of Alton Sterling by police officers [on July 5, 2016], I was frustrated. I was hurting, and other members from church were over-spiritualizing the issue on social media. I just wanted a place that allowed for Christians to hurt together when these incidents happen.

[Co-founder] Jermaine Anthony and I had a conversation shortly after. We were conflicted because we wanted to get involved, we wanted to march, protest, advocate to city officials—we felt overwhelmed with the need to simply do something. On the other hand we felt crippled by the church's silence on issues such as these and we weren't sure how to proceed.

We decided to start a Facebook group to see if there was anyone else who felt similarly; within two days the group had grown to about 2,000 people. The following day I woke up to another death by police: Philando Castile. It was heartbreaking. There had been many similar deaths in history that ripped just as deeply. I had struggled through Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Akai Gurley, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, and all the other profiled innocent lives lost at the hands of police brutality. I had learned how to mask my emotional trauma to simply push through another day, and another one. Eventually I couldn't continue as usual.

We decided to host a conference call to gather ideas and develop an action plan. That call maxed its limit, and

people could not get on. It was then we realized we were feeding a hunger of many Adventist youth who shared our passion for getting involved in social injustices around our country.

Who are the members of Adventists for Social Justice?

ASJ's membership is comprised of anyone who has a passion for social justice issues, is open to partner with us, wants to uphold our church's values, and feels the importance of getting involved. We understand that allies exist within various racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic classes. We are intentional about remaining all-inclusive.

Why is such a group necessary?

I would have to ask how it cannot be? Whether we choose to accept the responsibility or not, this group is long overdue. Our denomination must experience a paradigm shift in our identified goals internally and externally as it relates to the community. The church is a hub—when a community is hurting the question is asked "Where is the church?" We have been given a mandate by God, which also happens to be our organization's mission to "do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless and plead the widow's cause." This should be the focus of the church on a micro and macro level. We cannot seek to evangelize without first understanding the implications. We cannot misrepresent Christ as if He is not burdened by the injustices within society. We cannot preach passionately about Esther and Joseph, confident about what God called them to do, and be silent when it matters most. No, this group is not only necessary, it is overdue.

What has your group accomplished so far?

We are still in the developmental phase of building this organization; however, we have been able to mobilize and organize across states. We have encouraged our

members to explore their communities and get involved in events and movements that share our vision. We have succeeded in providing resources for education and training within our Facebook page—the wealth of information shared there is unimaginable. We have been able to identify various chapter leaders across some states, develop an action plan, and are getting ready for a multi-state launch in September. I think a crucial aspect has been providing a place to belong, to hurt, to be angry, to be empowered. This is just the beginning!

What are your short-term and long-term goals?

Our short-term goals include the official launch of our organization, which will include town halls, church trainings, and community events across various states. This will occur in September. We are also in the process of planning our first annual Social Justice Summit in November, which will be a training ground for those seeking information on how to effectively get involved in social action. We will also identify one core goal we can centralize around for the next quarter, such as voting education. We want to be intentional in how we measure success.

Long term, we are in the process of becoming a non-profit organization. We want to collaborate with community leaders, other organizations, and city officials to meet the needs of each neighborhood. We intend to work within the law and policy arenas to advocate for improved policing laws; we also want to be channels to restore trust between the police and civilians. We intend to help create businesses within communities to increase our economics and boost financial freedom, in efforts to restore and build resources needed for minority communities. We aim to develop mentorship programs, health programs, and educational programs. Social justice is multi-layered and comprehensive, and we want to ensure we are not narrowly focusing on the issues at hand.

Internally, we want to encourage our churches to open up the dialogue. We plan to work with church leadership to develop a theological framework for social justice. The Sabbath School quarterly has done a phenomenal job with beginning the discussion; now where do we go from here? With a framework developed and implemented in our churches and schools, members can feel comfortable knowing that as a denomination we understand the importance of getting involved.

Do you think social media (Facebook) made it possible to form Adventists for Social Justice?

Absolutely! When we decided to start the Facebook group, the idea was to invite our friends who may share our burden. We never imagined it would grow to over 3,000 people within such a short time. That is the beauty of social media.

What topics or issues has the online group mainly focused on?

Education, policies and law, police reform, community development, economic empowerment.

Have you started any groups like this in the past? What experience do you have with activism? Social justice issues? What skills do you have that have helped you to organize this group?

This is my first group of its kind. I have marched and protested in the past around various issues; for example, housing, gun violence, lack of resources for minorities, etc. I believe I have the leadership and organizational skills that will help make this group sustainable. Social action, social justice, and meeting community needs have been my priority from the age of thirteen. I also work with an amazing team of people who really take this group to a new level. Passion will drive any vision, and we have both in abundance. With access to resources the sky is the limit.

What is your day job?

My career is in the field of social work where I am licensed to practice. I work as a clinical social worker as an in-home individual and family clinician, doing therapy for children and adolescents with severe psychiatric disorders. Previously, I worked in New York City as an in-home multi-systemic therapist for juvenile offenders. Every single day I go into these same communities I serve, with nothing but a computer and a folder between me and the residents. I see the needs of my clients and their neighborhoods first hand, and have always been at the front line advocating for more resources to be poured into under-resourced neighborhoods. These same kids that are gunned down because they appear “dangerous” represent any of the youth I work with or speak to daily. This is not only real—it’s personal.

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recall that human majorities, like humans in general, see through a glass darkly—as a litmus test for sound teaching; the notion that conversation about the adequacy of our beliefs is proper to a professional or empowered elite, but not to ordinary members such as the young adults who attend our colleges.

Sustaining the faith of young Seventh-day Adventists is certainly compatible with the metaphor of the church as a “household” shaped by apostles, prophets and, most importantly, Jesus Christ. But the three premises I have listed need to be examined under New Testament light, and no one I wrote to took up my question about biblical justifications for what is going on. High administrators face overwhelming amounts of work, but they still have an obligation to show how the endorsement initiative, so deeply controversial, meshes with the spirit of the New Testament (or even, as I might add, the spirit of our pioneers). If such work is avoided, does that not constitute a “violation” of the “household”? If key premises that drive the initiative fail to represent New Testament sensibility, after all, they surely put the faith of us all, along with our very unity, in gravest peril.

Maybe it’s a fool’s errand to urge such attention to Scripture by high-level administrators. Given their busyness, and perhaps also their biases, only someone self-deceived, it might be said, could hope for such a thing. But discord will follow implementation of this initiative. So, if hoping for attention to Scripture is naive, ceasing to hope is worse. In a household, ceasing to hope is the final betrayal. ■

Charles Scriven chairs Adventist Forum.



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How would you rate the Adventist church on issues of social justice? Are we doing well or not so well?

To be fair, some churches and pastors are involved and doing a fantastic job. They simply “get it.” I have had the pleasure of conversing with some of them; but sadly they are in the minority. As a church, I think we have quite some way to go. Hopefully Adventists for Social Justice can be a channel to get us where we need to be.

How did you become an Adventist? How involved are you in your church?

I was raised within the Methodist religion, and came into Adventism through my mother, who was Adventist at the time. She placed my brother and me in Adventist school at North-eastern Academy, and I never left. I currently attend the Mount Zion SDA Church in Hamden, Connecticut, although the majority of my spiritual training occurred at Rogers Avenue in Brooklyn, New York. I’ve been involved in Youth Ministries for the entire fifteen years I have been in the church. I serve as the Youth Leader at my church. I’ve served as a chaplain for the Brooklyn South Staten Island Youth Federation. I’ve served on multiple committees. I was recently asked to serve as a Young Adult Member on the Atlantic Union Executive Committee. I remain very much involved as I believe in order to see the change I desire, I have to be present and accounted for. ■

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