

**Seeking the Beloved Community** is a monthly gathering of Black and White brothers of faith, working to build relationships of integrity across racial and cultural differences. For the last nine years, the group of 20-25 men has gathered for breakfast the first Saturday of each month, often but not always, in the Fellowship of Hope meetinghouse.

Perhaps the group's significance, and attraction, lies largely in the normalizing of "just being together". Brothers sing, pray, share food, and talk together. Frequently the group hears a first person testimony shaped around "my people, my home, my passion", sometimes shared with remarkable vulnerability. The gathering has become a safe setting for Black and White men to expose personal experiences of abuse, humiliation, mistrust, privilege, and resilience.

Regular participants come from various churches in Elkhart and Goshen, though meetings are typically hosted by one of 5 churches in South Central Elkhart—in Covid times, meetings have been on Zoom. Conversation sometimes emerges from sharing by an invited guest, or it is focused by a participant, and may be pursued in smaller groups, sometimes in circle-style. Themes vary from month to month; typical topics have been: gun violence and incarceration, patriotism, personal nonviolence and bystander response, immigration, Elkhart Black history, Goshen as a Sundown town, White privilege, and the Poor Peoples' Campaign. Group gatherings are planned and facilitated by a coordinating group of 5-6 men.

The group took its present shape in the fall of 2013, having evolved out of irregular gatherings of men from Fellowship of Hope and Church Without Walls (for some 20 years). A homicide in April 2013 (at Cleveland & 6<sup>th</sup>), followed by several others in South Central Elkhart, gave urgency to the need for deeper relationships of trust and love among those concerned about neighborhood violence. That such violence is most often perpetrated by men gave importance to seeking solidarity among men of different churches, races, and backgrounds, while continuing to share around events and dynamics in our South Central Elkhart neighborhoods.

(Personal statement) Friendships nurtured in this group have helped me to see subtle differences between Black and White cultural norms. The (White) norms I assume and unconsciously impose relate to various life experiences: extended family relationships, child rearing, marriage expectations, spending priorities, what one values in clothes and cars, exposure to violence/incarceration, ways of interpreting the Bible, church leadership, and styles of worship.

I have slowly become aware of the normative power of the White, middle-class, Mennonite cultural values that I hold and that Black friends have to negotiate in order to relate to me. As I can begin to set aside the assumption that these are superior values, and honor the norms of others, then perhaps the systemic grip of White supremacy is weakened. The point is *we are not yet the Beloved Community*, but we are tasting it, by coming to know and feel at ease with each other. —Keith Kingsley

April 7, 2022