

# Voices: Bridging gap between youth and law enforcement

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Bethlehem Baptist Church has served as a foundation stone in the Mansfield community for more than 150 years. The church membership has found itself in the midst of many shifts in the cultural landscape of the country.

Bethlehem is one of the few churches in the North Texas region that survived the brief period of Reconstruction that took place after the Civil War and the era of Jim Crow that ravished the social climate of the southern states for the recently manumitted enslaved people and the generations that followed.

It was the Bethlehem Baptist Church referred to in the epic account *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin. He was the man who changed his complexion to mimic that of a Black man. He chronicled his experiences from the perspective of a Black man living in the segregated South during that period.

Bethlehem is also the birthplace of the movement to desegregate public schools in the South months after the May 17, 1954, Supreme Court ruling in the infamous *Brown v. Board of Education* that “separate but equal education” was unconstitutional.

While it took almost 10 years for the schools in Mansfield to desegregate, Bethlehem and its members played an essential role in bringing about that change through the efforts of then Deacon Chairman T.M. Moody.

It was not a hard decision for the church to facilitate conversations of racial equality and citizen’s rights that emerged after the brutal murders of

Atatiana Jefferson, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. Ironically, the Floyd murder took place the same month, some 66 years following Deacon Moody's valiant effort to desegregate the Mansfield schools.

## **Tumult and response**

2020 was a tumultuous year. It was the year of COVID-19, mandatory closings of businesses and sports venues, mask mandates and death from a disease that plunged the world into a pandemic.

This also was the year when there were mass demonstrations around the world featuring clashes with police and local law enforcement. While many were peaceful, some were violent and deadly.

A group of local high school students wanted their voices heard. The students demanded they conduct a demonstration unsupervised by adults through the City of Mansfield. The blessing of the modern-day, 21st-century Mansfield was "things had started to change."

Mansfield in 2020 was a far cry from Mansfield in 1956, when there was an unsuccessful attempt to desegregate the schools. I am happy to report the city leadership and local law enforcement were sensitive to the events of the day, and they were seeking to find a way to work with our youth, as opposed to doing otherwise.

It was during this time our police chief reached out to the Bethlehem team. We, in turn, invited our mayor to the table along with educators and a trusted area youth pastor. We worked together with the students of our local independent school district to conduct a peaceful demonstration.

The thought at the time was we would use the resources provided by Baylor University's Soundings Project, along with donations from local churches and private donors, to facilitate a safety net around our students as they

marched.

The support of the local community, local law enforcement and city leaders helped to conduct an incident-free event that involved more than 2,500 people.

The day culminated in front of Mansfield City Hall with an old-fashioned worship service led by a renowned national gospel recording artist, along with students from the march. Many of the participants in the march joined what became an all-out worship and praise service there.

The Soundings funding helped to cover the cost of bus transportation, water and first aid items. It was a hot summer day, but the teamwork and sincere hearts of the teens and all involved made it a day that will not be forgotten soon.

## **Bridging the gap**

In the months that followed, students were encouraged to partner with local volunteers from the church to conduct two Zoom webcasts. With the help of the Mansfield police chief, the school district police chief, the constable and other experts in law enforcement, the Bethlehem team facilitated substantive dialogue between groups of students and the public at large.

The law enforcement professionals fielded questions from the students regarding various topics, such as the meaning of the phrase “the thin blue line” and curious questions about arrest tactics. Common ground was achieved on many of the topics broached by both groups.

I believe our students and the general public learned our local police officials already had implemented many of the changes sought throughout the country. The public also learned our local police have stellar numbers

regarding the lack of racial profiling complaints against our officers.

The steps taken by the Bethlehem Baptist Church, local officials and the public now are codified in state law, Senate Bill 30.

Senate Bill 30, also known as the Community Safety Education Act, requires school districts and charter schools to provide instruction to students in grades 9 through 12 on proper interactions with peace officers during traffic stops and other interactions with law enforcement officers.

Thank God for the Soundings Project funding that helped the Bethlehem Baptist Church and the Mansfield community to be at the forefront of this legislation.

*Michael Evans Sr. is senior pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Mansfield and mayor of Mansfield. Bethlehem Baptist Church participated in Baylor University's Soundings Project. Soundings is part of Lilly Endowment Inc.'s Called to Lives of Meaning and Purpose Initiative. The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the author.*