

PLYMOUTH CHURCH

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The Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims at 75 Hicks Street in Downtown Brooklyn was part of the underground railroad protecting former slaves. (Todd Maisel/New York Daily News)

In 1847, 21 women and men in Brooklyn heard brutal accounts of the cruelty of slavery and decided to start a church to fight for abolition. Henry Ward Beecher, the founding senior minister of that church, Plymouth Church in Brooklyn Heights, was a gifted speaker who led the church to buy the freedom of young African Americans in mock slave auctions. The church helped freedom-seekers on their way to

Canada and became known as “The Grand Central Depot” of the Underground Railroad. Abraham Lincoln joined the congregation for two services in 1860 to pray for the abolition of slavery.

In the next century, Branch Rickey, a member of Plymouth Church and general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, prayed in the pastor’s office until he decided that God wanted him to invite Jackie Robinson to integrate baseball. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. preached an early version of his “I Have a Dream” sermon at the church.

Plymouth Church, my church, has a long history of condemning racism and violence. But, while it is helpful to draw inspiration from those in our past who used their platforms and resources to fight against racism, we must recognize how far from complete their work – and ours – is. It’s time for churches to step up again, as Plymouth did 150 years ago, to continue the fight for racial equality.

The brutal murders of countless African-Americans are causing churches like ours to renew our efforts. We have gotten complacent about prejudice. We are used to hearing that New York’s school system is the most segregated in the country, our city’s hospital network operates with an alarming level of discrimination, and our prison system is horribly unfair to people of color.

Communities of faith have to be committed to digging deeper, listening harder and creating the groundwork for change. We have to be outraged by the bigotry that is woven into the fabric of America. We start by sharing grief and anger at the senseless killings of unarmed black people. We pray for the families as they wrestle with the senseless losses they have suffered. We support Black Lives Matter. But we cannot stop there and too often, we and our fellow congregations have stopped there.

We must build anti-racism into the very DNA of our houses of worship. Plymouth has begun this process by establishing monthly meetings to unpack our unconscious biases and share action steps with

participants – from calling elected officials, to signing petitions, to showing up to protests. Many parents are struggling with how to discuss race and this movement with their kids, so we're setting up sessions just for them.

Churches must keep themselves accountable by creating consistent time and space to have difficult and essential conversations about race, and by engaging as many others as possible in this work. Plymouth has begun to meet with other local faith groups to share [resources](#) and ideas.

We must facilitate opportunities for our congregants to search their souls – all of us must, but especially those of us who are white. Most white people are so used to white privilege we do not even recognize it. We have to be honest about the prejudice that lies so deep within us that we do not admit it to ourselves, repent of the apathy we hide, and realize that if racism seems like someone else's problem, then we are part of the problem.

Churches can do so much more in the fight against racism. We have to do better as communities of worship, as a city, and as a nation.

Younger is the senior minister of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn Heights.