

PERSPECTIVES FROM READERS

My parents didn't vote but brought change

IN AN AMERICA polarized by race and politics, my Amish-Mennonite parents made change. And they didn't even vote.

With last fall's presidential election decided by such close margins, some might see my parents' life choice to stay off the voter rolls as escapist or irresponsible. But think about all the social and financial capital spent on the election for these results: a country divided and embittered, public discourse tarnished, and hope for positive change through politics faint.

Perhaps my parents chose a better way to make a difference.

Elmer and Fannie Lapp grew up Amish-Mennonite in rural 1940s Lancaster County, Pa. Following church tradition, Elmer and Fannie believed they could make the most positive impact on the world not by legislating change but by living it.

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So, in the mid-1960s, my white, Amish-Mennonite parents left Amish country and moved to Washington, D.C. They settled into the Kenilworth neighborhood, a largely African-American community centered around a 422-

unit, low-income, public housing complex.

They got to know their neighbors. They started Bible clubs in their basement. My older brother and two sisters went to the local public school, where they were the only white students.

Other Amish-Mennonite volunteers joined my parents. They baked cookies and casseroles to feed themselves and their neighbors. They built a playground open to all. Two weeks of summer camp in the Pennsylvania countryside introduced kids from the city to the beauty of the natural world. Volunteers built a small church where my father was the pastor.

It wasn't always easy. My parents had to adapt to city life and learn to reach out across racial and cultural differences. Some in the community were skeptical that these strange Mennonites—so separate from their neighbors in race, dress and outlook—had anything positive to offer the neighborhood. The church was guilty of applying Amish-Mennonite traditions too strictly in a new context, and mandates for the bonnet and against wearing ties raised barriers for church membership.

But by 1968, when riots swept the city after the death of Martin Luther King Jr., Kenilworth neighbors went out of their way to shelter my family from any racial backlash. Local leaders voiced support for my parents and their work. Teenagers from the neighborhood added their voices to a choir that toured Amish-Mennonite churches and donated their labor to help build the church house.

As the new Amish-Mennonites became a part of the community,

meeting occasional instances of aggression with nonresistance and a few jeering snickers with gifts of snickerdoodles dropped off at a neighbor's door, these improbable volunteers were slowly accepted for what they were: earnest messengers from an alternate reality, determined to bring the positives of their relatively privileged lives to a place where privilege was increasingly scarce.

Today, with a new president's provocative moves being met by furious activism, my parents' local, person-to-person approach can provide a needed counterbalance to directly political responses. Yes, power needs to be held to account and the lives of the powerless protected. But we must find practical, love-thy-neighbor ways to raise bridges across the racial, cultural and political canyons that confront us, as Elmer and Fannie did.

Go forth then and make change with relationships. Make change by meeting skepticism with love.

And perhaps, like my parents, make change by packing some boxes and driving a moving truck across the lines that divide us, to settle in somewhere you thought you would never dare to go.



Joe Lapp is based in Hanoi, Vietnam, and is working on a memoir about his family's life. Learn more at lapjoe.com.

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