I was raised in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement in Virginia Beach, a community of about 20% African American. I went to a large high school with an integrated, diverse population. We all went to class together; we all played the same sports. I traveled with the band’s diverse and eclectic musicians, sharing buses and rooms. However, for the most part, we sat at different tables in the lunchroom. We gathered in cliques, and we segregated ourselves.

I went to college at The Catholic University in D.C.; I worked downtown, riding the buses and subways. I student taught in Bowie, MD. I was surrounded by diversity on campus and off. But I didn’t see this; I simply saw my world, a black world and a white world. Yet I was mostly unaware, mostly naïve.

In the fall of 1981, I received my first teaching job at Bladensburg HS, just east of Southeast DC. This school predominately served a population of color and a population that struggled economically. In addition, this was a very rough school. I was told: Don’t stay alone in a room after school or go to the parking lot alone, stay out of the stairwells – where drug deals occurred. The police came almost daily.

In this first teaching job, my students struggled to pass a basic literacy test – which included reading advertisements, forms and check blanks. One senior, white, could not write or spell – the letters on his written page looked random. One student never appeared in class: he was incarcerated. I became aware of how sheltered I had been in my honors classes.

A black student, a girl of about 16, and tall, stood up in class and threatened to beat me up. I fled the room to call for help. I didn’t know what to do.
Several weeks afterward, I entered that same classroom to find most of the students peering out the windows. I believed they were watching the light snow coming down onto the football field; they were unusually quiet. I joined them at the window. They were not watching the snow. They were looking out over the field where someone had marked out in letters over the whole field: KKK.

It took a long time for me to look back and really see those kids, to see the Christ in each of them. I wish I had been an older, more experienced teacher. I wish I had understood their anger. I wish I had understood their fear. However, I was dumbfounded and silent and afraid. So I fled. I went home. Those kids couldn’t flee.

Beverly Olsen
St. Mark’s, Mystic

The Episcopal Church in Connecticut (ECCT) entered a “Season of Racial Healing, Justice, and Reconciliation” for a minimum of two years by vote of its Annual Convention in October 2018. Visit episcopalct.org/season-of-racial-healing-justice-and-reconciliation/ to read the enabling resolution and for resources, events, and more. ECCT’s Racial Healing, Justice, and Reconciliation Ministry Network is helping to facilitate much of the resolution’s implementation. Contact the Rev. Rowena Kemp or Suzy Burke, co-conveners of the Ministry Network, at rowjkemp@gmail.com or suzy@alegriaimports.net.