

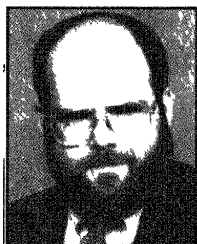


A CALLING FOR A LIFETIME

Moving antiracism commitments from paper to practice.

W. Mark Koenig

The challenge continues. Over the years, congregations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have engaged in a variety of ministries that have addressed racism, racial prejudice, and racial hatred in meaningful and effective ways. Rightfully, our congregations give thanks for the creative and sometimes daring ways in which they have resisted racism and worked for the healing of racial prejudice. At the same time, our congregations must confess complicity in the creation and maintenance of racist structures and systems in all parts of our nation's life, recognize that they have neither spoken boldly enough nor acted courageously or creatively enough in responding to racism and racial prejudice, and realize that addressing racism and racial prejudice remains an ongoing task.



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A report adopted by the Presbyterian Church's 211th General Assembly (1999) provides congregations, presbyteries, and synods with direction for that task. "Facing Racism: A Vision of the Beloved Community" proposes a churchwide strategy that calls on the General Assembly, governing bodies, congregations, educational institutions, related agencies, and ecumenical partners to work for racial justice by developing an antiracism identity. Antiracism:

is an intentional stance that opposes the sin of racism while affirming the dignity and humanity of those who may hold racist views or benefit from it. It opposes the sin, not the sinner (*Minutes*, 1999, p. 283).

What shape will that take? What will congregational work for racial justice look like in the twenty-first century? What will it mean for congregations to adopt an antiracism identity? Here are five possibilities.

1. Congregations that seek to adopt an antiracism identity will recognize that racism and racial prejudice continue to wound and haunt God's children. Too often, people feel that we have dealt with the problems of racism and racial prejudice, that "we have been there and done that." That was what the 1960s were about.

It is true that strides have been made. Many legal barriers have fallen. Personal relationships have developed. What was commonplace has become, at least publicly, unacceptable. But, as the "Facing Racism" report notes:

Dr. W.E.B. DuBois observed that the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of race.¹ As we face the dawn of a new century, it is quite apparent that racism will be a continuing legacy. Civil rights are increasingly at risk as hate and intolerance become a part of both public and political discourse. As the nation backs away from the goal of eliminating segregation in public schools, court-ordered desegregation plans are being successfully challenged; and federal courts are dismissing record numbers of cases of racial discrimination.² Affirmative action, which has been the cornerstone of progress in the past, is under attack nationwide.³ An alarming number of churches, primarily African-American, have been burned. The number of hate groups has increased; and web sites advocating hate and violence are proliferating on the Internet. Several professional sports teams still use caricatures of Native Americans as mascots. The Atlanta Braves, Cleveland Indians, and Washington Redskins are cases in point. The judiciary, which provided the leverage for dismantling legal segregation in the fifties and sixties, is paradoxically providing the legal mortar that is reinforcing racial injustice as we enter the next century (*Minutes*, p. 278).

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To adopt an antiracism stance is to recognize that working for racial justice is not finished. Working for racial justice is not something to remember from the past. Working for racial justice is not a program for a moment, it is a calling for a lifetime. Continually, we grow in our understanding of the racism that permeates our society and the prejudices that we personally carry. Continually, we grow in our ability to work to dismantle racism and to heal racial prejudice.

2. Congregations that seek to adopt an antiracism identity will clarify the distinction between *racism* and *prejudice*. They are closely related but distinct phenomena. The "Facing Racism" report affirms:

Prejudice is understood to be judgments made in the absence of due examination and consideration of facts; and these judgments are held even when contradicted by facts. In the absence of a factual basis, prejudices are driven primarily by emotional responses such as fear. When prejudice is based on racial consideration it is race prejudice. However, race prejudice alone is not racism. When prejudice is combined with power it becomes racism. Power is the capacity to command, control, and dominate social reality for the purpose of achieving a desired outcome. Those who control power have the capacity to transform prejudice into racism by establishing and maintaining institutions and structures that embody group biases. Thus, it is the combination of power and prejudice that is so destructive. Racism is, therefore, the marriage of power and prejudice. Simply stated, racial prejudice plus power equals racism (*Minutes*, p. 283).

This distinction is critical to better understanding the necessary action steps to take. Healing racial prejudice is needed. So is coming together to analyze how racism is institutionalized in systems and structures; the privilege such racism provides white people; and the ways such racism oppresses people of color. After such analysis is done, people can organize for the hard work of dismantling racism.

3. Congregations that seek to develop an antiracism identity will affirm the God-given dignity of each person. Racism proclaims that human value comes from the color of our skin. The gospel replies, "Nonsense." Value and dignity come from God. We are God's children, created and beloved by God simply because God's nature is to love and give life. We are given meaning by God and we belong to God. In Jesus Christ, God's love for each of us and all of us continues to be revealed.

If we are used to defining ourselves—consciously or not—in racist ways, such good news may well turn us around. If our primary defini-


tion of ourselves is that we are "white," then Jesus calls us to reconsider, to reorient the way we look at ourselves and at all of our sisters and brothers. In worship, preaching, praying, teaching, serving, in all ministries and all of life, congregations developing an antiracism identity will affirm the Good News that we all are God's children.

4. Congregations that seek to develop an antiracism identity will share power and control. Integration and racism are perfectly compatible.⁴ Formal power structures and informal systems of control will need to be analyzed and, where needed, dismantled and rebuilt as congregations move to an antiracism stance.

5. Congregations that seek to develop an antiracism identity will affirm diversity as a gift from God. Our culture often views diversity as a problem; hence, we seek to flee from it. What if we were to view diversity in a different way? What if we saw diversity as God's good intention? What if we viewed diversity as providing opportunities for learning more about God's love and for sharing the news of God's love? What if we viewed diversity as providing opportunities for growth? As we view diversity as a problem, we come to believe that our story—the story of who we are and how we came to be—is *the* story. By receiving diversity as a gift, we recognize that our story is only part of the story. The story, the whole story, is found by looking not only at our own experience but also by looking at the experiences of others—some of which are profoundly different from ours. Such an approach leads to a deep, rich sense of what it means to be human, created in the image of God.⁵

How congregations develop an antiracism identity may vary according to the situations and circumstances that each congregation faces. While the *dynamics* of healing prejudice and dismantling racism will be similar in different places, the *specifics* may vary. One congregation may not be able to replicate the results of another congregation nor follow its process. Nonetheless, congregations may well learn from each other. Nibs Stroupe and Inez Fleming have blessed the church with the story of the Oakhurst Presbyterian Church's efforts to be and become a diverse community in Decatur, Georgia. Their book, *While We Run This Race*, analyzes the power and pervasiveness of racism and tells of Oakhurst's efforts through God's power to make "the transition from being dependent on the system of race to confronting the system of race."⁶ No other congregation may do exactly as Oakhurst has done. All congregations can learn from the Oakhurst story as they undertake the journey of developing an antiracism identity.

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The journey may seem daunting, but we do not walk alone. As congregations seek to develop antiracism identities, they do so building on the work of so many who have gone before, as a cloud of witnesses surrounds and supports and sustains them. And they do so following Jesus Christ, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and called by God, whose intention is for all God's children in all our God-given diversity to live together, loving one another as God loves us. May it be so. 

— Notes —

1. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1961), p. ix.
2. Herbert Hill and James E. Jones Jr., eds., *Race in America* (Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), pp. 83-96.
3. For a discussion of affirmative action see Barbara R. Bergmann, *In Defense of Affirmative Action* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996); George E. Curry, ed., *Affirmative Action Debate* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1997), pp. 241-258; Orlando Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas, 1997), pp. 147-169.
4. For a discussion of racism and integration see Otis Turner, "The Web of Institutional Racism," *Church & Society Magazine*, September/October 1991, pp. 22-23.
5. Nibs Stroupe and Inez Fleming, *While We Run This Race: Confronting the Power of Racism in a Southern Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), pp. 158-160.
6. *Ibid*, p. 153.

— For Reflection, Discussion, and Action —

- Mark Koenig interprets the 1999 General Assembly report, "Facing Racism: A Vision of the Beloved Community." What does he mean when he says congregations will need to adopt an "antiracism identity" (page 127)? How is this identity different from the 1960s perspectives on fighting racism and racial prejudice?
- What is the distinction between "dismantling racism" and "healing prejudice"? What illustrations of each can you provide in your congregation and in your local government?
- Encourage study of the paper "Facing Racism: A Vision of the Beloved Community" (see Resources, page 157). How will your church change if it adopts an active stance to become an antiracism congregation?



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