ADDRESSING RACISM

AN AGENDA FOR CHURCH ACTION

Even as we focus on a World Conference Against Racism, there is much to be done at home.

Otis Turner

Delineating all expressions of racism is a formidable task, as evidenced by a large body of literature on the subject; the task may well be impossible. Nonetheless, I approach this subject in two ways:

- ❖ I set forth an understanding of racism that will illuminate how racism impacts individuals, human relationships, institutions, communities, nations, and international relations as a global phenomenon with many manifestations.

- ❖ I discuss the strategy that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has

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adopted for addressing racism, as a case study that may serve Presbyterians and those of other faith communities as well.

To begin to understand racism, it is important to make a clear distinction between prejudice and racism. Prejudice is a judgment made in the absence of due examination of relevant facts and is held in the face of a body of contradicting evidence. Prejudice can emanate from a wide range of sources such as race, gender, nationality, religion, ethnicity, and many others.[1] Prejudice is a global phenomenon that not only impacts how people relate to each other within communities and national borders, but also how nations relate to each other.[2] Race prejudice alone does not constitute racism. When prejudice is combined with power it is transformed into racism. Power is the capacity of a group of people to control and manipulate resources and social realities to achieve desired ends. Thus, racism is understood as a combination of social power[3] and prejudice that shapes the institutions of communities, nations and, indeed, the global community in ways that preserve power and privilege for some while excluding others on the basis of race.

Racism must also be understood systemically in that it is nurtured and sustained by institutions and systems in society:

> There are, for example, no solitary racists of consequence.[4]

In order for racism to survive and flourish it must have a wide climate of acceptance and must have, wittingly or unwittingly, the participation of a large number of people who comprise its power base. By their action or inaction people communicate a consensus that empowers those who act on their behalf.[5]

This is reflected in the way institutions are structured, how goods and services are distributed, and whose interest institutions serve. Historically, institutions have tended to favor one group in comparison to others. Thus, racist institutions, societies, and nations are not accidents of history, they are created and maintained by intentional human action.[6] It will require intentional human action to change them so that they serve all in an unbiased way. Achieving that goal will be a daunting task because of the many faces of racism and the complex way in which it is interwoven with the values and norms of society. It is not just a black and white issue. In some instances it comes to expression as a systemic dichotomy between whites and people of color nationally and globally. In some instances it is a systemic dichotomy between people of color themselves with national and global implications. And in many

instances it is expressed as a combination of all of the above. But racism is far more complex than its systemic expressions.

I have come to understand that racism is derivative, not causative. It is a visible source of much pain and suffering; but the underlying values from which it derives are not so visible or easy to discern. These values are embedded in our spirituality, traditions, religion, and civic culture. C. Eric Lincoln points out,

> Whenever the Klan has met with firm, public opposition of the white gentry on whose behalf it claims to be acting, its threats to its intended targets have fizzled, and it has withdrawn from the scene in embarrassment and defeat.[7]

The lesson to be learned from this is that racism will not be dismantled until those who benefit from it come to the conclusion that it is in their best interest to do so. Then they must deconstruct the sacred myths from which racism derives its sustenance, nurture, and power. This cannot be done without firm visionary leadership from the religious community. Visionary leadership emerges from a critical self-analysis in which we engage the foundational issues and values that shape our worldview. It is from here that racism derives its sustenance, nurture, and power. The fact that racism is derivative must not be overlooked in our effort to understand why it remains a global problem and how that might be changed.

Ultimately, racism boils down to a denial of the right to belong, the most fundamental sociocultural principle in human society. When affirmed, the right to belong enables people to withstand unimaginable challenges and still hold together in a common shroud of humanity. If denied, it can be a source of incredible inhumanity and tragedy. The extermination of native peoples in the Americas, the enslavement of Africans, the holocaust in Europe, and the mass imprisonment of Japanese-American citizens during World War II are cases in point.

A denial of the right to belong derives from values deeply embedded in religious and civic culture and comes to expression as systemic racism. It is expressed as a rigid differentiation in human valuation that is pervasive, penetrating, recalcitrant, and surpasses most, if not all, human divisions. It has created a chasm that transcends color, class, and economics. For example, no matter how wealthy a Dalit becomes in India, he or she will not necessarily escape the tentacles of casteism, which is a form or racism. Thus, while color remains the most visible

dimension of the race problem, it is not just a matter of color.

If, magically, color distinctions were erased, the world's preoccupation with race would not end. The presumption of not belonging would still remain as an operative norm in the culture, and racial discrimination would continue. This suggests that the problem is far deeper than color and is linked to erroneous notions about the development of the human species. In some societies where color differences are visually insignificant or even undifferentiated, institutional racism still persists. In spite of the close physical similarities between Koreans and Japanese, Koreans in Japan remain victims of discrimination. Jews in Europe were not exterminated because they looked so different from other Western Europeans. It happened because of a belief in German civic culture that anyone of Jewish origin was inherently imbued with the seeds of depravity.

If the church is going to address racism in all of its forms, it must understand that racism is derivative. The church must also be willing to deconstruct the myriad of values from which it derives sustenance and nurture, many of which are deeply embedded in religious culture and traditions.

The church will also have to deal effectively with the phenomenon of internalized oppression:[8]

> There is no way to live under a condition of oppression without accommodation to oppressive structures, nor is it possible to make accommodations to oppression without subliminally absorbing some of the underlying oppressive values.[9]

Wittingly or unwittingly, oppressed people participate in their own oppression. The efficacy of racism stems in part from its ability to engender and reinforce internalized oppression:

> Racism regulates the relationship between oppressors and oppressed and the interrelationship of the oppressed themselves, and oppressed people are forced by habit, circumstance, and conditioning to depend upon oppressors for guidance, direction, and affirmation.[10]

Once established, internalized oppression can survive on its own and pass from generation to generation as a cultural value.[11]

Internalized oppression also distorts the perceptions of people of color in ways that negatively influence inter-ethnic relations. Often

stereotypes propagated by the oppressor group are appropriated by the oppressed. Thus, oppressed ethnic groups often treat each other in ways that emulate the behavior of the oppressor. Instead of seeing a common cause in the struggle for racial justice across racial ethnic lines, all too often oppressed people behave as if we were each other's enemy. The church will need to understand how the Christian faith has been appropriated to help establish and sustain internalized oppression.

The church must also deal effectively with its own complicity in the perpetuation of racism. Some of the historic suffering of peoples of color around the world resulted from their encounter with the church. The August 31, 2000, issue of the *Christian Science Monitor* featured an article headlined "Canada's Churches Face Past Sins." It noted that a multibillion dollar class action lawsuit has been filed against the Canadian government and four of the country's major religious bodies. The lawsuit seeks redress for a century-long policy of forced acculturation that seriously eroded indigenous languages and culture. This phenomenon was not limited to Canada; it was practiced all over the Americas with the church playing a leading role. The church's encounter with indigenous cultures has often had devastating consequences.

One of the sobering chapters in my faith journey resulted from realizing that the Christian faith can function quite well on both sides of the issue of race. It can be a source of oppression or a source of liberation. When religion and race are interfaced, the moral and ethical boundaries of our conscience are rearranged. This enables religion to function as a shield that protects the conscience of oppressors from a redemptive indictment of racism. As a consequence, they can end up with an easy conscience, a conscience that is numb to the presence of injustice and indifferent to the social consequences of racism. It is a paradigm of the conscience of many well-meaning Christians. C. Eric Lincoln captures the epitome of this occurrence:

> It was religion which sent the American Founding Fathers on their initial "errand into the wilderness," an event which subsequently required the involuntary relocation of millions of Africans to make that errand viable. It was religion that suggested the convenient notion that the benighted Africans could unlearn their heathenism through continuous labor for a white Christian civilization whose God-ordained burden was to be their "masters" and "mistresses" forever. And it was religion which supplied the principal narcotics of dependency and control once the Blacks were broken and reduced to chattelry.[12]

Racism is ultimately a dangerous theological and spiritual problem that allows us to use our spirituality as a pretext for making enemies of each other. Howard Thurman correctly calls our attention to the fact

> that by definition the enemy is one who is ethically out of bounds for us. . . . Why is it that when a nation goes to war with us, one of the first things that happens is a redefinition of the status, character, private life, public life, history, [and] culture of the people that we are fighting? We redefine them out of the human race. The German people become the Huns. Those Japanese become those hideous creatures with buck teeth and horrible eyes surrounded by huge glasses. By redefinition we read them out of the human family. Once that is done, it is open season. We can do anything to them without violating the sensitive, ethical awareness that goes with our own sense of self-respect.[13]

While some major religious bodies have adopted statements acknowledging their complicity in racism, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), that is a mere first step of a long journey. Engaging in a deconstruction process to figure out how theology and biblical interpretation have been appropriated to perpetuate racism will be far more difficult than confessions of complicity in racism. If the church engages the task of dealing with racism in all of its forms, it has much to learn and will, itself, be transformed in the process of engagement. Here is where much resistance is encountered. The prospect of transformation is unsettling because it requires that we make real our professed belief in social righteousness. We have not accepted the fact that justice requires both personal and institutional transformation. There is still a mind-set that seeks to achieve racial justice without fundamental changes in the status quo. Thus the promotion of social righteousness will be a source of tension in the church and the society for many years.

Racism is an issue of social justice. How the church sees itself in relation to social justice will determine, to a large degree, how it seeks to respond to racism in the church and the society. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has set forth these great ends toward which all activities of the church should move:

- ❖ the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind
- ❖ the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God
- ❖ the maintenance of divine worship
- ❖ the preservation of the truth
- ❖ the promotion of social righteousness
- ❖ the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. (*Book of*

Order, G-1.0200)

All of these principles are organically related in that they are linked together by a biblical understanding that God created humans to be in community, with a divine mandate to make justice, love, and peace the fundamental bases of all relationships.[14] This mandate comes to expression most poignantly in the promotion of social righteousness, generally understood as uprightness, rectitude, or justice; it may be applied to both God and humans. The Presbyterian Church understands justice as

> the order God sets in human life for fair and honest dealing and for giving rights to those who have no power to claim rights for themselves. The biblical vision of doing justice calls for
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> - dealing honestly in personal and public business
> - exercising power for the common good
> - supporting people who seek the dignity, freedom, and respect that they have been denied
> - working for fair laws and just administration of the law
> - welcoming the stranger in the land
> - seeking to overcome the disparity between rich and poor
> - bearing witness against political oppression and exploitation
> - redressing wrongs against individuals, groups, and peoples in the church, in this nation, and in the whole world. (*Directory for Worship*, W-7.4002)

The classic statement on the Great Ends of the Church was adopted by the United Presbyterian Church of North America in 1910. However, it was not until 1963, when the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was drawn into the civil rights movement, that the Presbyterian Church embarked upon a journey that would ultimately move it to struggle with what it means to promote social righteousness around the issue of race. It took thirty-six years (1963 to 1999) for the denomination to begin to understand the complex relationship of values, prejudice, and power from which racism derives. The 211th General Assembly (1999) adopted a comprehensive strategy that sets the agenda for the church's struggle against racism in the new millennium. It is a sevenfold strategy that seeks to involve the whole church in the struggle.

"Facing Racism: A Vision of the Beloved Community" is designed to chart a new course for racial justice ministry in the denomination. Its strength stems from the fact that it does not reinvent the wheel. Rather, it builds on learnings from both successful and failed policies of the past

and seeks to move the church to a new level of understanding and engagement.

People of good will have long recognized that eradicating the sin of racism from church and society was a high priority. For a while some thought that breaking the bond of segregation and the passage of civil rights legislation would do the job. At the zenith of the civil rights movement Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us that we were at the beginning of the journey, not the end. It would be decades before the church would realize that speaking eloquently about eradicating racism would not make it go away.

Over time there has emerged an awareness that the phenomenon of racism was far more complex and intertwined with the structures, culture, and values of our society than was originally thought. Following that awareness came the realization that it is possible to conquer racism. However, it will take generations to accomplish. Experience has taught us that people cannot leap from centuries of racial polarization into a new vision. It is a long journey that will require confession, commitment, sacrifice, discernment, prayer, and worship-based action. That realization, nudged by changing demographics, has pushed many local communities to face the growing problem of racial conflict.

This is what is driving a paradigm shift. People in local Presbyterian congregations are asking for help. The fundamental problem is figuring out how to move beyond talk to constructive change. The "Facing Racism" document sets forth a dialog process that will guide the church's engagement of racism in the years ahead.[15]

The task of dismantling racism must be a partnership effort that involves all levels of the church: the General Assembly, middle governing bodies, congregations, educational institutions, related agencies, and ecumenical partners. These are the points of engagement outlined in "Facing Racism: A Vision of the Beloved Community." The process is grounded in the notion that dialog is central to constructive social change. Training is integral to the task of equipping the church to engage in the struggle for racial justice in this century. A training resource manual is being developed that sets forth models for dialog, plans for Bible study, worship, and methods for visioning, strategizing, organizing, and engaging. This is the primary resource that will be used in preparing people to carry on an antiracism ministry at the grassroots level. The training manual will anchor the implementation strategy and provide continuity throughout the church.

Getting teams of trained people in presbyteries is essential for providing support for congregations, because they are the centerpiece of an antiracism ministry. The congregation is a place where moral values that support justice and inclusiveness can be taught and nurtured. It is also a place where families can receive support for nurturing values essential for living in a multicultural society. It is a place where worship and nurture come together in ways that can transform lives and perpetuate values that can change both church and society. Congregations are also strategically placed to effect change in the community by building bridges of communication across racial and cultural lines as they worship together and learn how to live into a vision of the beloved community.

Systemic racism does not persist just because of the action of people of ill will. A contributing factor is the inaction of people of good will.[16] The Formula of Agreement, between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the partners in the Consultation on Church Union present an opportunity to enhance the effectiveness of racial justice work through mutual support, planning, resource development, and coordination. The cooperative work of churches helped move the United States forward in the 1960s and 1970s. The struggle against racism in this century will require churches to work in more coordinated and effective ways.

We are facing challenging and exciting times as we seek to move to another level in the struggle for racial justice. Diversity is greater than ever before and more people are affirming it than ever before. But these are also dangerous and unstable times. We cannot stay where we are as a church, as a nation, or as a global community. We must move forward or risk repeating some of the tragedies of the past.

Because we have created a diverse table, we can now see what a joy it can be. But there is a danger that we may think that the diverse table is the beloved community when it is not. The diverse table is the place where we can create the beloved community. We must be mindful of the fact that we do not have an adequate normative value infrastructure to sustain a multicultural and multiracial society free of racial conflict. We have achieved a level of tolerance that will enable us to come together and engage in the kind of dialog that can result in personal and institutional transformation.

However, we must remember that we come to the diverse table with

past histories that can destroy it. We bring to the table the self-interest of all the competing groups. But as we engage in dialog, competing self-interests can be transformed into a common self-interest. Martin Luther King Jr. points out that in order for a common self-interest to have permanence and loyalty, the multicultural elements must have goals from which they benefit but which are not in fundamental conflict with each other.[17] This is what the "Facing Racism" document is designed to equip the church to accomplish. There is much work to be done and much to learn on the journey. We have taken a significant step. Thank God for that.

Notes

1. For a discussion of prejudice see Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1958).
2. For a discussion of the global dimension of prejudice, see Daniela Gioseffi, *On Prejudice: A Global Perspective* (New York: Doubleday, 1993).
3. For a discussion of social power, see C. Eric Lincoln, *Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), pp. 11-12.
4. Lincoln, p. 11.
5. Ibid.
6. Max L. Stackhouse, "Institutions/Institutionalization" in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, James F. Childress and John Macquarrie, eds. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), p. 304.
7. Lincoln, p. 12.
8. Internalized oppression is used here to refer to a complex constellation of psychosocial factors that cause victims of oppression to internatize negative values which, themselves, become part of the structures of oppression. For a discussion of internalized oppression, see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), and Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968).
9. Otis Turner, "The Web of Institutional Racism," in *Church & Society*, September/October 1991, p. 21.
10. Ibid., p. 22.
11. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, pp. 32-33.
12. Lincoln, p. xx.
13. Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1956), pp. 16-17.
14. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Henry Beveridge, trans. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), Book I, Chapter 1, pp. 37-39.

15. Dialog is fundamental to any process of social transformation. No agreement or treaty has ever been reached without it. If people cannot talk, they cannot find the common ground upon which the beloved community can be built.
16. James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), p. 296.
17. Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 151.

For Reflection, Discussion, and Action

- In explaining the meaning of racism, what linkage does Otis Turner make between prejudice and power?

- How does the author relate racism to institutions and systems in society, and as a social regulator? What does he mean by the suggestion that racism is "derivative"? Why is the right to belong so central to the well-being of a society?

- What does the concept of "internalized" oppression mean, and how can the church help deal with the phenomenon? What does Otis Turner describe as the role of the church in addressing racism, and on what does he base that role?

- In what ways is your congregation, or church council, or presbytery, involved in working to eliminate racism? The Presbyterian program is outlined here; if you are part of another faith community, what is happening where you are?

- For more information or to organize antiracism teams, contact Otis Turner, Associate for Racial Justice Policy Development, (888) 728-7228, ext. 5698; otist@ctr.pcusa.org; or Mark Koenig, Associate for Antiracism Training, (888) 728-7228, ext. 5097; mkoenig@ctr.pcusa.org