

UNITED
AGAINST
RACISM

CHURCHES FOR CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

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After almost twelve months of prayer, pondering, and preparation, the National Council of the Churches of Christ's thirty-eight-member communions (often denoted by the term *denominations* in common usage) are preparing to take a faith walk. The journey is to ACT Now: Unite to End Racism. The prayer and hope of ACT Now is to *awaken, confront, and transform* our churches and nation into becoming a nation united as one when it comes to standing against racism and for Christians to experience and embody an inclusive and beloved community. This is what we mean by authentic Christianity. Without hesitation, we assert that racism is a sin that continues to tear the fabric of the United States of America. Though other places in the world struggle with discrimination, biases, and government-sponsored injustices, we focus on where we “do” ministry—this is our watch! For each church and Christian community, where we live, learn, work, and play is the context and focus of where we serve. It matters that we have been complicit by our silence and weakest of actions. It matters that we are seeing the rebirth of aggressive acts of hatred and violence against people simply because of their race and ethnicity.¹ It matters that our churches talk about this sin yet nurture and allow it to continue without challenge in hundreds of thousands of local congregations and community gatherings.

This is our watch! This faith walk is not just the right thing to do; it is the core of who and what we are called to be—authentic, faithful followers of Jesus. It must not be an addition to an already crowded agenda but the very essence of claiming the voice of the Church of Jesus Christ. We must

1 See the Southern Poverty Law Center's “Hate Map,” <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>.

discover solutions and help people find personal empowerment in their faith walk—to face bigotry, call out injustice, and stand, even if it finds us standing alone. It is urgent that we find solutions and sustain our efforts to end racism now. Who benefits? Without fear of contradiction, the world benefits!

The time is now, as signaled by the United Nations' decade-long commitment to people of African descent. "In proclaiming this decade, the international community is recognizing that people of African descent represent a distinct group whose human rights must be promoted and protected. Around 200 million people identifying themselves as being of African descent live in the Americas. Many millions more live in other parts of the world, outside of the African continent."²

Further confirmation comes from the World Council of Churches (WCC). Two years ago, the WCC toured the US and witnessed atrocities regarding our ongoing manifestations of white power, white privilege, and white supremacy. They issued a challenge to the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) to act—to utilize its agency as an instrument for change to address the festering wound of racism in America.

Rev. King Solomon Dupont, at his retirement service during the annual meeting of his judicatory in Florida, said in the 1970s as he was retiring from active resistance work, "I knew I would leave some struggles, but not the same ole ones."³ After more than sixty-seven years as a force for racial equity and justice, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA understands that activist's cry of woe. We are struck by the continuing threat to the body of Christ and our collective rejection of the Holy Spirit's persistent push to end the sin of racism. Christian churches, let us take up Prophet Isaiah's challenge to abandon our false worship for authentic worship of God.⁴ Let us vow to use this time so that the struggles we leave for future generations are not the sins or struggles of the past.

2 United Nations, <http://www.un.org/en/events/africandescentdecade/>.

3 Rev. King Solomon Dupont, cochair of the Tallahassee Civic Association, who led the Tallahassee Bus Boycott in 1956.

4 Isa. 58.

Intent of This Resource

The Church of Jesus Christ aspires and strives to be an inclusive, beloved community. For this to be achieved, Christians must become agents of love, safety, and openness toward the “other” as much as people are instinctively loving, trusting, and open to those with whom they share likes, dislikes, and other characteristics. Authentic Christianity is personal *and* it’s relational. Authentic Christianity requires the loving inclusion of all God’s creation. An inclusive, beloved community is a community free from racism. *United Against Racism* is a call to an authentic Christianity, a religion that strives to become God’s inclusive, beloved community. It summons Christians to pray, think, and act to end racism. This resource aims to support churches, communions, and those who endeavor to share the journey of the Christian faith in the pursuit of an unfinished agenda to embody a more excellent way of racial equity. Racial equity and the Christian faith are inextricably tied together.

While reconciliation is a sign of an inclusive, beloved community, our task is to discern the truth and work that truth into our lives. Truth-telling is a key pillar of the truth and reconciliation process. For it to be inviting and generative, we believe it is necessary to frame “truth-telling” in terms of “dialogue” and “conversation” more so than “telling,” which connotes or emphasizes one-way communication. Leonard Swidler writes, “Dialogue is a two-way communication between persons who hold significantly differing views on a subject, with the purpose of learning more truth about the subject from the other. . . . Dialogue must include a common understanding that no one side has a monopoly on the truth of any given subject. . . . The general goal of dialogue is for each side to learn and to change accordingly.”⁵

In our world today, the idea of “truth” as universal or particular, constant or ever changing, is debatable. Swidler provides an alternative to views of “truth” being either “true” or “false.” The *truth* we strive to know and make known is “related to the historical context, intentionality,

5 Leonard Swidler, “Understanding Dialogue,” in *Interfaith Dialogue at the Grass Roots* (Philadelphia: Ecumenical Press, 2008), 11–13.

perspective, language, and interpretation” of groups, communities, and their policies and practices. In this context, the truth we seek to understand is not absolute, and it is not relative; it is relational.

This resource is asking us to do the real work of our Christian faith. We must confront racism head on through a series of conversations, prayers, reflections, and group activities and the sharing of stories. Our goal is to help us all not miss the mark this time. Our goal is to not substitute words of reconciliation for peace with justice. Our goal is to do the work of justice through racial equity as God’s mandate. Our goal is to use pedagogically sound approaches that encourage critical reflection and action, inspire and call others to join the National Council of Churches in this just and noble cause, and deliver a resource that affirms the diversity of the ecumenical community and is valuable and applicable to the Church, our nation, and the world.

How to Use This Resource

This resource is not designed to be read like a novel from cover to cover. Instead, it is a resource for working and living relationally for racial justice. It offers prayers, thoughts, and reflections for use by individuals, small groups, congregations, and communities who strive to express and embody authentic Christianity. For churches, this resource can serve as a tool for conversation surrounding truth-telling and racial equity in small or large group settings. For individuals, this resource can serve as a source for deep theological reflection on social relations and how the way society is arranged helps and hinders us from living in community with others. For faith communities operating at regional and national levels, the prayers and thoughts prompt reform and transformative action about how an inclusive, beloved community calls Christians to examine policies and change priorities for achieving racial equity and ending racism.

Brief Overview

The resource is divided into eleven themes, each with “Key Terms,” “Narrative and prayers,” “Think about It. Talk about It,” “Engage,” and

“Go Deeper. Read More” sections. Following the last theme, “What Will You Do?,” there is a section, “Learning Practices for People of Faith.” This section is provided to help persons and groups wanting to extend the conversations to do so in greater depth.

Mary E. Hess offers a thought-provoking framework for understanding the current brokenness of our nation and the contribution religious educational practices can lend in the service of reconciliation. Hess creatively puts together a view on how digital media can be employed to help today’s learners re-engage with views, symbols, and understandings of Christian faith that promote an inclusive, beloved community as an expression of authentic Christianity. Hess’s educational methods and recommended uses of digital media invite participants to reflect on what in their own experiences resonates and is dissonant with those of scripture and tradition.

United Against Racism concludes with an extensive list of resources that pastors, educators, and concerned leaders can draw on to support their growth and that of their congregation. Throughout the project, our aim is to undergird Christian communities in their work of building inclusive, beloved communities that express and embody love, safety, and openness as an antidote against racism. We declare that racism and every barrier of exclusion exist only in opposition to the reign of God and the life Jesus lived, the cause for which he died, and the purpose for which God raised him to live forevermore.

MOURNING THE TRAUMA

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UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

*They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying,
“Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.*

—Jeremiah 6:14

Key Terms

PREJUDICE is a personal attitude toward other people based on a categorical judgment about their physical characteristics, such as race or ethnic origin.

RACE is described by sociologists Neil J. Smelser, William Julius Wilson, and Faith Mitchell as “a social category based on the identification of (1) a physical marker transmitted through reproduction and (2) individual, group, and cultural attributes associated with that marker. In this way, *race* is both a form of ethnicity and distinguishable from other forms of ethnicity.”¹

RACISM is racial prejudice plus power. Racism is the intentional or unintentional use of power to isolate, separate, and exploit others. This use of power is based on a belief in superior racial origin, identity, or supposed racial characteristics. Racism confers certain privileges on and defends the dominant group, which in turn sustains and perpetuates racism. Both consciously and unconsciously, racism is enforced and maintained by the legal, cultural, religious, educational, economic, political, and military institutions of societies.

1 Neil J. Smelser, William Julius Wilson, and Faith Mitchell, eds., introduction to *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences*, vol. 1. (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2001), 3.