



Sacred Conversation on Race

FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions

In the months following the announcement of the Sacred Conversation on April 3, 2008, some of you wrote or called to express questions and concerns about this conversation. In the following FAQ, we have sought to give voice to the issues you have raised. As more and more Sacred Conversations get underway, new questions will surely arise as well as additional responses to the questions already named. Please feel free to expand upon this FAQ by sharing your experiences with us (RaceTalk@ucc.org).

1. What is the Sacred Conversation on Race?

The Sacred Conversation on Race was announced on April 3, 2008, at a press conference convened by the Rev. John Thomas, President of the United Church of Christ, the Rev. Michael Kinnamon, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, and the Rev. Otis Moss III, Senior Pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ. The press conference was held at Trinity UCC on the 40th anniversary of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s last sermon. As all three speakers noted, events during the Presidential primaries underscored the painful fact that – 40 years after Dr. King's assassination – race continues to be a divisive issue in this country and racism a pervasive and pernicious reality.

John Thomas called upon pastors throughout the UCC to address race and racism from their pulpits on May 18 as an important first step in a long-term sacred conversation on race. In early May, the Collegium issued a Pastoral Letter on Racism that declared: "Racism

remains a wound at the heart of our nation that cannot be wished away or treated carelessly. In this sacred conversation, we seek to engage one another in a deep and sustained dialogue that may be uncomfortable at times, but is absolutely necessary if our nation is to find genuine healing of its past and present sins."

Over the past four months, conversations have begun in local churches, associations, conferences, and among national staff. At every level of the church, people have been at work developing processes that will lead to productive dialogue, deeper spiritual discernment, and action. It is the widespread consensus of those engaging the sacred conversation that this cannot be a one-time occurrence but rather a journey to be nurtured and sustained over time.

If your congregation has not yet engaged the sacred conversation, we encourage you to begin now. This resource guide is designed for congregations in different phases of the process, including churches who are just beginning to think about what a sacred conversation on race would mean in their local setting.

2. What makes this conversation sacred?

The United Church of Christ has long recognized that racism is not only a pervasive system that perpetrates economic and political inequality; racism is a wound at the heart of our nation that has profound spiritual ramifications. As the Seventeenth General Synod declared, "Racism is a sin and an evil that stands as an affront to the Christian faith." To understand the call to conversation as

“sacred work” means that we refuse to settle for the way things are or to despair in the face of tenacious injustice. Remembering our call to be ambassadors of Christ, we cannot surrender the sacred work of racial reconciliation. Relying on the Spirit of the living God to embolden us, we dare to embrace the difficult task of recognizing, naming, and confronting the many realms in which we experience racism – personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural. Additionally, in each of these realms, we have the ability and responsibility to create and nurture change.

Sacred conversations are never easy, especially when honest talk confronts our nation’s painful past and speaks directly to the injustices of the present day. Yet sacred conversations can, and often do, honor the value of diverse life experiences, requiring an openness to hear one another’s viewpoints. Growth often happens when honest conversations are communicated in a respectful environment.

In describing the qualities that characterize a sacred conversation, The Pastoral Letter on Racism says that this conversation on race will be sacred if we...

- ◆ Invoke God’s presence and wisdom whenever we gather, reserving time for prayer at opening and closing and whenever anyone in the group feels a need for it.
- ◆ Establish safe space with a commitment to mutual respect and Christian love.
- ◆ Listen deeply to, and honor, the feelings of anger, pain, and joy in those who have been the targets of racism.
- ◆ Listen deeply to, and honor, the feelings of shame, fear, and grief in those who are waking up to the reality of racism in our churches, neighborhoods, and nation.
- ◆ Do not let the conversation stop with an exploration of individual feelings, attitudes, and behaviors but continue on to examine the realities of cultural and institutional racism.
- ◆ Recognize that our deepest common

humanity is not grounded in race, religious creed, or national origin but in the extravagantly inclusive love of God.

- ◆ Recognize that within our common God-given humanity resides a glorious array of colors, cultures, sexualities, and beliefs.
- ◆ End each conversation with at least one tangible and specific commitment to action on behalf of racial justice in our communities.
- ◆ Understand that this conversation is not a one-time event, but a continuing journey.

3. What will we gain by engaging in this sacred conversation?

Simply put: we will gain from this Sacred Conversation what we are willing to invest in it. If we are open to having our opinions, attitudes, and behaviors challenged, we will learn and grow. If we are able to listen deeply to the stories that others share, we will have our perspectives broadened. If we are willing to hear how our words and actions impact others, we will see ourselves more clearly. If we open ourselves to the experiences, histories, and cultures of people who are racially different from us, the world as we have known it will be altered. If we desire to understand and practice what it means to confront racism where we live, work, and worship, we will enlarge our capacities as agents of change.

The scope, degree, and complexity of racism in our society is so vast that it is, at times, impossible to imagine our world without it. Believing that we can make a difference as we work to confront racism requires faith and community because there is much evidence to the contrary. The Sacred Conversation on Race provides a new opportunity to nurture truth-telling relationships with people committed to change.

We cannot do this work alone. We need friends, companions, and allies who can support, challenge, and hold us accountable. We need to hold up hope to one another when hope is faint. We need to buoy each other up with the stories, songs, and words of those who have gone before us and on whose shoulders we stand. We need to learn and

practice the skills of challenging oppressive behaviors and racist policies. We need to be reminded that the work of racial justice is never done once and for all.

In the midst of peril, these Sacred Conversations offer promise. If we allow the Spirit of Christ to dwell among us, this conversation will be challenging, soul-stretching, and exhilarating because we will have experienced more fully the beloved community we are called to be.

4. Why a conversation on race when there are so many pressing issues deserving our time and attention?

The United Church of Christ has a long history of prophetically naming and addressing the personal and institutional manifestations of racism in this country. Prior to the Civil War, the American Missionary Association (AMA) was formed in 1846 to assist with the defense of Amistad slaves. Since the early 1960s, General Synod has passed 11 resolutions, statements, and pronouncements condemning racism and declaring our intention to become a truly multiracial, multicultural and anti-racist church.

Despite the meaningful progress achieved within the UCC and the nation as a whole, recent events have made clear that the prophetic mantle of confronting racism cannot be abandoned by our churches. Race is still being used as a powerful weapon of fear to divide us from one another and to keep us from recognizing the issues we have in common. As the Pastoral Letter on Racism boldly stated: “Perhaps as disturbing as the glaring economic and social inequities between the races, is the increasing disparity of perception about the *continuing* reality of racism. For People of Color in our nation, racism is an ever present reality that White people too often deny. When the prophets of our day name injustice and seek redress, the urgency of their appeals is too frequently met by the trivializing charge that they are ‘simply playing the race card.’ If the wound of our people is to be treated with care, our sacred conversations must address this callous and dismissive spirit.”

Furthermore, racism has taken on new forms and targeted new victims in our day. Since 9/11, our Muslim brothers and sisters have suffered racial profiling and religious discrimination at an unprecedented rate. As jobs are outsourced and unemployment rates soar, race is used as a diversionary tactic that focuses attention on blaming immigrants rather than on the multinational corporations that are responsible for outsourcing and maintaining a desire for cheap labor. Three years after Hurricane Katrina devastated neighborhoods in New Orleans, thousands of dispossessed residents are still waiting for our government to deliver on its promise to help rebuild their homes and neighborhoods.

This election year is a *kairos* moment in our nation’s history for it sets in bold relief both the challenge and the hope of our time. Whether we identify as a Republican or a Democrat, whether we support John McCain or Barack Obama for President, we have the opportunity to declare – in word and deed – that our first allegiance is to God, the Creator and Redeemer who loves us with radical inclusiveness and grieves the continuing scourge of racism.

5. Race is a very broad subject. How do we decide what this conversation should look like in our congregation?

Race and racism are, indeed, very broad and complex subjects. Contributing to this complexity is how race continues to be a decisive factor in how people are viewed, evaluated, and provided social advantages or disadvantages. The historical roots of institutionalized racism reach back to the founding of our country and racism is still resident in every community throughout this nation. The struggle to end racism has an equally long and tenacious history and today, in every community, large and small, there are people working to dismantle racism.

This sacred conversation is an opportunity to shine a light on both the problem and the promise, past and present. Chances are, there are people in your congregation who have stories to share about the damage racism has inflicted and the spiritual power that comes with resisting and healing this damage.

Without a doubt, there are individuals and communities not far from your church who know exceedingly well what racism looks like in your town or city and who can testify to the possibilities for change. The Sacred Conversation on Race is an opportunity to invite these stories to be shared.

An important reminder as you consider the focus or content of your Sacred Conversation: Americans have traditionally had a tendency to view issues of race and racism within a Black/White paradigm. Given the fact that slavery was a foundational economic and political reality in this country for more than 300 years, it is understandable that racism is often cast in Black/White terms. However, limiting the discussion to Black/White relations can render invisible the many other racial/ethnic communities that experience racism on a daily basis, including Latino/a communities, Asian Americans, Arab Americans, Native Americans, and new immigrant communities.

As part of the Congregational Self-Assessment, we recommend that you take time to consider the importance of learning more about the diverse populations within your local community. What do you know about those different populations? For example, do you know how racism has affected the lives of new immigrants in your community economically and politically? Do you know about their efforts to resist racism or their cultural contributions to your community? In what ways has your church community been connected to, or disconnected from, those struggles and cultural contributions?

In the coming weeks and months, there will be additional resources available on the Sacred Conversations website that address the breadth and complexity of issues related to race and racism. For example, we intend to invite leaders from different racial/ethnic communities within the UCC to share their perspectives on issues of race and racism that affect their communities.

There is no template for a sacred conversation that would fit every congregation. Discerning what the conversation should look like in your local setting will entail an assessment and a

“pre-conversation” dialogue about where you are as a congregation and how you got there. The Sacred Conversation Resource Guide contains tools to assist you in this discernment, including the Congregational Self-Assessment Form and Planning Your Sacred Conversation. When you have completed this congregational self-assessment, there are other tools in the Resource Guide designed to assist you in choosing the content, format, and facilitators best suited for your first and ongoing rounds of conversations.

The good news is that wherever you are on this journey, a new beginning is possible. Whether your congregation never talks about race and racism, or whether race and racism are a constant topic of conversation, there is sacred work to be done.

6. Who should lead this sacred conversation in our congregation?

We recommend that you give time and attention to finding skilled and experienced facilitators to lead your sacred conversation and we recommend that you pay these facilitators. When we speak of skilled and experienced facilitators, we mean people who are knowledgeable about both content *and* process when it comes to talking about racism and who understand the sacred dimensions of racial justice. Conversations on race can evoke deep emotions, conflicts, and misunderstandings, as well as foster new insights, behaviors, and spiritual growth. A skilled and experienced facilitator can help the group work through difficult dynamics in ways that neither shames people nor allows hurtful and oppressive behaviors to go unchallenged.

If you are considering asking someone within your congregation to facilitate, the following qualities should be paramount: 1) the person is known and trusted by diverse groups within the congregation; 2) the person has experience and skill as a group facilitator; 3) the person has a sustained commitment to understanding and addressing White privilege and racism; 4) the person has gifts for leading a prayerful time of spiritual discernment.

You may find it preferable to contract with a facilitator from outside your congregation. This allows everyone within the congregation

the opportunity to fully participate in this conversation. An outside facilitator can also bring a fresh and non-aligned perspective because s/he doesn't have a history of involvement in your congregation.

In many cases, a facilitative team is preferable to one facilitator. Because conversations on race can provoke deep emotions and disagreements, a team of facilitators can process together how to best address and work through conflicts that may arise. A racially diverse team can also provide an important model for how to nurture an authentic relationship across racial difference.

If you do not have the financial resources to contract with a trained facilitator team, you might want to partner with another UCC congregation in your Association. In some Associations, three or more congregations are collaborating in this sacred conversation and making an effort to build a racially diverse conversation.

If you choose to invite a person or team of people from outside the congregation to facilitate your conversation, be aware of the temptation to ask them to do all the work for you. The facilitators should work with you to nurture and educate your leaders so that when the outside facilitators leave again, they will not take the conversation with them. Instead, it will continue on under the leadership of people within the congregation.

7. How do we find skilled and experienced facilitators?

There are several avenues you might pursue in your search for trained facilitators. You may wish to get recommendations from racial justice organizations in your community (e.g. the local NAACP or the Department of Multicultural Affairs at a nearby university). Justice and Witness Ministries is collecting names and contact information of people within the United Church of Christ who have skill and experience in leading conversations about race. If you contact RaceTalk@ucc.org, we may be able to provide names of people in your region. Your Conference staff members may also be an excellent source for referrals. In addition, the Sacred Conversation Resource Guide has a list of organizations that

provide racial justice training and education in different regions of the country.

8. How can we have a sacred conversation on race when all the members of our congregation are White?

Joseph Barndt, a White Lutheran pastor and founder of Crossroads Ministries, tells of a life-changing encounter that occurred in the late 1960s. Barndt was working at the time for a civil rights organization in a Black community. An African-American co-worker confronted Barndt and asked him what he was doing in this predominantly African American community.

"I am working to end racism," Barndt responded. His co-worker then asked, "Why don't you go home and free your own people?"

At first Barndt was shocked and angry but his defensiveness soon gave way to gratitude and a deeper sense of calling to work for racial justice. He came to see that his African American colleague was befriending not rejecting him because Barndt was being pointed in a new direction. "The new direction," says Barndt, "was to work with White people and to work for change in the White community. For me personally, and for many others, it was the beginning of new discoveries." One of many new discoveries for Barndt was this: "White people, along with People of Color, are not free. Racism is a prison for us too" (*Dismantling Racism: The Continuing Challenge to White America* Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1991).

If you are White, you may have grown up believing that racism is a problem that primarily concerns People of Color and that White people can only experience, understand, or confront racism when People of Color are present. Racism does, indeed, affect us differently depending on whether we are White people or People of Color, but every single one of us living in the United States has been touched and shaped by racism regardless of whether we know people of a different race or not. For example, all of us are inundated with media messages about race that often reflect misinformation and stereotypes. Moreover, if we live in racially homogenous

communities, we can experience the insularity that racism and social segregation breed. The Sacred Conversation on Race is an opportunity for White people to learn more about what it means to be White in this country, as well as learning about what it means to be a Person of Color. Although there are discoveries that can only be made in a multiracial group, conversations about race and racism can and should take place in every congregation regardless of the racial makeup of its membership.

It can be very important for White people to learn how to talk about, analyze, and confront racism without depending on People of Color to be their teachers. It should not be the responsibility of People of Color to educate White people about the realities of racism anymore than it is their responsibility to always, in every situation, name and challenge racism. An all-White congregation could, for example, engage in study and conversations about White privilege (see the annotated bibliography for resources about White privilege). If members of the congregation have infrequent contact with People of Color, this could be an excellent time to explore why that is the case.

Having said that, it is also true that members of an all-White congregation may choose to see this Sacred Conversation as an opportunity to engage in new ways with People of Color in their community. This could be done by participating in educational or cultural events led by People of Color. It might also be possible to partner with other congregations in your community, Association, or Conference for the planning and implementation of this Sacred Conversation.

Whatever the form your Sacred Conversation takes, the purpose is not to point fingers, assign blame, or evoke guilt. The purpose is for each of us, whatever our race, to deepen our understanding of how racism damages all of us and to enhance our capacity to recognize, name, and confront racism.

9. Is conversation enough? Isn't it more important to work for institutional change?

The Sacred Conversation on Race is not intended to begin and end with words

alone. Neither is it intended to be a program that simply imparts new information and knowledge about racism. Because this is a *sacred* conversation, personal and social transformation are the ultimate goals. As new insights are gleaned, the Sacred Conversation can provide a context for people to challenge themselves and each other to ask: now that we understand this aspect of racism more fully, what are we going to do about it?

It is our conviction that racism is manifest in four realms – personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural. For our Sacred Conversations on Race to affect change that is lasting and genuinely transformative, our study, dialogue, and action must address all four realms. Although we may choose to focus on one realm at any given time, if we remain in that realm, to the exclusion of the others, our work for racial change will be truncated and incomplete (see the Four Realms of Racism and Change).

10. What if our Sacred Conversation stirs up feelings that prove hurtful to some?

Talking openly and honestly about race can be challenging. Confronting the impact of racism on our lives, our communities, and our nation is difficult work. It requires openness of mind and heart, as well as humility of spirit, to risk discovering things about ourselves and the world we may not have known before. Along the way, we may very well encounter feelings in ourselves or others that are potentially hurtful: defensiveness, resistance, anger, self-righteousness, and moralizing. Skilled facilitators can help us acknowledge and deal with these feelings when they surface in destructive ways and they can invite us to engage in the emotional and spiritual work necessary to heal from hurt or misunderstanding.

It is especially important that all participants in the conversation take responsibility for their growth and learning. Too often in conversations about race and racism, White people look to People of Color for answers, approval, and acceptance. Skilled facilitators who understand the dynamics of racism can help ensure that People of Color are not put on the spot to explain issues of race and racism, respond to the comments of White people, or

speak on behalf of other People of Color.

Whatever the leadership and format you choose for your conversations, we recommend that you adopt norms and guidelines for the conversations that help safeguard the well-being, and foster the spiritual growth, of all who participate (see Planning Your Sacred Conversation for sample guidelines). It is not possible to guarantee participants that they will be spared painful or hurtful interactions. However, if adequate time and attention is devoted to the leadership, process, and content of the Sacred Conversation, participants can be assured that these interactions will be addressed in a manner that is both just and loving.

11. What happens if we get bogged down or feel overwhelmed by these conversations?

You are bound to experience times when the conversation becomes stalled or people seem to be exhibiting low energy or lack of engagement. Many different factors can be at work and the facilitators will need to give attention to what may be contributing to the impasse and how best to respond. It could be that the conversation has become too intellectual or abstract and it is time for a change in activities – for example, the group might become re-energized if invited to do a role play of the issues being discussed. It might be that some people are dominating the conversation and others are not having sufficient opportunity to be heard. If this is the case, then the group guidelines may need to be reviewed and observed. There may be participants who are feeling threatened by the subject matter and it may be time to check in with the whole group to see how people are feeling about what they are learning.

It can be reassuring to everyone involved to know that getting bogged down and feeling overwhelmed are not unusual or insurmountable obstacles. Talking about race and racism can evoke strong feelings. In

fact, the more authentic the conversation, the more likely it is that challenging situations will occur. Tensions, such as feeling bogged down or overwhelmed, can be important messengers signaling that it is time for the group to pause and ask: why are we feeling overwhelmed? What is it about race or racism that bogs us down? If we are feeling stuck or overwhelmed, what feelings are below the surface that may contribute to that sense of being stuck or overwhelmed? What do those feelings tell us about what we need in order to stay with this process and move into deeper learning about ourselves and one another?

It is critically important that participants in the Sacred Conversation covenant to stay with the process when it becomes uncomfortable, difficult, or painful. Far too often, in conversations about race and racism, White people opt out when they grow uncomfortable or overwhelmed. This is one of the ways that White privilege is exercised. When White members of the group decide to leave, rather than work through the feelings of discomfort, this can have devastating effects on the group's efforts to create an environment that is authentic, compassionate, and inclusive. We therefore recommend that a covenant to stay in the conversation, and to learn from times of discomfort and tension, be talked about at the outset as group guidelines are developed. If individuals later have feelings of "flight," the group will be more prepared to take the time needed to talk about what is happening and what is needed.

The responsibility for safeguarding the trust and the community that are being created must be shared by everyone taking part in the conversation. Facilitators cannot do this alone; the entire group needs to covenant together to stay with the process and work through times of tension and growth. By sharing this responsibility, the possibility of authentic relationships across difference will be nourished and enacted.

