



## SACRED CONVERSATIONS

They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,  
saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.  
— Jeremiah 8:11

# A PASTORAL LETTER ON RACISM

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Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change  
in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.

— The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

## Beloved Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

**O**n May 18, in United Church of Christ pulpits all across the nation, pastors will be preaching on race in the hope of inaugurating a sacred conversation in the coming months that is urgently needed in our churches, in our homes and work places, and in the halls of power. Racism remains a wound at the heart of our nation, a wound 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. Not only the health of our nation is at stake, but also truth-telling and racial reconciliation are crucial to our spiritual, physical, and emotional wholeness.

Our conversations will be sacred if we trust in the Spirit of the living God to do a new thing in our midst and create beloved communities where, as Dr. King envisioned, descendants of former slaves and descendants of former slave owners sit down together with Native peoples and immigrant peoples and their descendents to share our lives, our fears, and our dreams. Our conversations will be sacred if we pray for the grace and courage to speak the truth in love and to hear one another all the way through. Sound bites and simple answers cannot be the order of the day.

Unfortunately, there has been so much violence perpetrated against People of Color throughout our nation's history, and so little acknowledgment, remorse, or repentance on the part of White people, that the trust required for these conversations will have to be nurtured with care. Engaging in this sacred conversation will be difficult and soul-stretching. This same conversation can potentially be exhilarating and renewing if we allow the spirit of Christ to dwell among us.

There may be those who would object to these conversations, who would cry "peace, peace," when there is no peace – and who would insist that the civil rights movement leveled the playing field years ago or would contend that we now live

in a "post-race" society. This reasoning denies the deep racial divisions that still exist in our country and trivializes the pervasiveness of contemporary racism. If we fail to acknowledge honestly these racial tensions or to examine their underlying causes, the anger, backlash, and misunderstanding that are resident in our communities will only go underground and fester. We will continue to be susceptible to the tactics of those who wish to keep us racially divided and distracted from addressing the issues we share in common.

## Spirited resistance to racism

**A**s members of the United Church of Christ, we have a rich history of spirited resistance to racism that can serve as both a resource and an inspiration for this sacred work. One such resource is the *Pastoral Letter on Racism and the Role of the Church* published in 1991 by the Commission for Racial Justice. The biblical, theological, and political analysis of this ground-breaking document remains relevant for our day. The *Pastoral Letter on Racism* boldly names the "sin and idolatry of racism" and calls Christians to renew their commitment to be a people grounded in the love and justice embodied in Jesus Christ and the beloved community that King envisioned.

*The Pastoral Letter on Racism* documented what it called "a sobering truth" – namely, that despite the meaningful progress achieved during the civil rights era, "quality of life for the majority of racial and ethnic people is worse today in many ways than it was during the 1960s." The letter went on to name a number of disturbing trends that signaled growing racial intolerance and hostility: increasing inequities between the rich and the poor; charges of "reverse racism" and attacks on affirmative action; a resurgence of racially motivated hate crimes and; fear of "foreigners" surfacing in movements such as "English Only."

Seventeen years later, in 2008, we might wish to believe that we have made significant progress in addressing and reversing those alarming trends. Lamentably, that claim cannot be substantiated. We have witnessed a systematic assault on affirmative action policies at the state and national

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level. In the wake of the “war on terror,” our Arab American and Muslim brothers and sisters contend daily with discrimination, racial profiling, and misunderstanding about the true nature of Islam. As unemployment rates soar and jobs are outsourced overseas, frustration and rage are unleashed upon the most vulnerable within our borders – immigrants and those who some call “illegal aliens.” After more than two years, thousands of dispossessed residents of New Orleans are still in diaspora, awaiting our government’s promise to help rebuild their homes and neighborhoods. The divide between rich and poor is greater than at any time since the Great Depression. Despite the rise of a Black middle class over the past 40 years, the average net worth of White families in 2008 remains 10 times greater than the average net worth of Black families. Racial segregation in our public schools has intensified and has now been condoned by the United States Supreme Court.

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.

### Interrupting historical amnesia

One of the gifts of this sacred conversation can be an honest and in-depth examination of the social, economic, and religious history that has brought us to this present time. Our denominational history can serve as a microcosm of the wider society in helping us understand both the systems of racial oppression and the movements for racial justice that have been at work for centuries.

We have the high and holy calling to interrupt

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our nation’s historical amnesia by passing on to our children a history of our church and nation that is authentic and complex; a history that neither demonizes nor sanitizes our ancestors. For example, the congregational stream of the United Church of Christ has roots that reach back to the Puritans who left Europe in the 1600s to found a “city on a hill” that could be a light to the nations. The “New World” that the Puritans sought to found, however, spelled death, devastation, and displacement for the Native inhabitants of North America when the Puritans failed to recognize the indigenous spirituality of American Indians as divinely inspired and failed to respect their inherent right to their sacred homelands. Were we, with all humility, to critically examine the cultural and spiritual world view of the

Puritans, we might gain new insight into the historical antecedents of the current U.S. foreign policy that has divided the world into the forces of good vs. the forces of evil and pronounced that God is on our side.

We also have stories of spiritual forebears who were leaders in the struggle to end slavery and to create new institutions in the reconstruction era. Before the Civil War, African-American teachers from New England, the Midwest, and as far south as Virginia, went to Canada to teach fugitive slaves and prepare them educationally for life back in the United States. During Reconstruction, under the auspices of the American Missionary Association, men and women – Black and White – founded schools for freed men and women. These teachers were often reviled and hated, yet they persisted to carry out their work under the threat of violence or death.

We remember that our ancestors’ ministries during the 19th century included the abolition movement, the struggle for women’s suffrage, and the creation of social justice organizations and churches that assisted immigrants new to our shores. In the early 20th century, the Social Gospel movement emboldened our forebears to denounce economic injustice and express their solidarity with immigrants who endured pain and hopelessness in urban tenement communities. During the

Second World War some of our forebears spoke out against the internment of Japanese citizens, and some congregations helped to sustain their Christian sisters and brothers during their forced relocation. In the 1950s we spoke up for Native Americans whose land was once again being stolen in order to build a dam that would devastate their communal life. In the 1960s our church provided sustained support for civil rights organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and participated fully in the racial justice work of the National Council of Churches. In the 1970s we stood with migrant farm workers demanding just wages and dignified living conditions. We are, indeed, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses whose faith and witness can embolden ours. The United Church of Christ also took concrete action to address and redress historic wrongs done when, in 1993, UCC leaders extended a formal apology with restitution to Native Hawaiians for injury done to them and their culture and religion by the White Congregational missionaries sent there in the 1800s.

Our call is to trust that reconciliation is possible, but can only be achieved by beginning the process together.

### Qualities of a sacred conversation

This conversation on race will be sacred if we ...

- ◆ Invoke God's presence and wisdom when 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.
- ◆ Continue the conversation beyond 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.

- ◆ Realize 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.

On May 18, we are invited to take up this sacred work once again. Remembering with gratitude those who have gone before us, and relying on God's healing Spirit, let us covenant to treat the wound of our people with the care it deserves.

In the midst of peril, these sacred conversations offer promise. For those of us who are White, neither the sins of our ancestors nor our own past failures to confront racism need mire us in guilt. For those of us who have suffered the ravages of racism, neither our rightful indignation nor our temptation to despair need keep us from trusting once again. We are each blessed by the abundant grace of a forgiving God, a God who knows our pain and will be present in our healing. Our call is to trust that reconciliation is possible, but can only be achieved by beginning the process together. As Christians, we profess and proclaim the outrageous conviction that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Set free by that unconditional love, and emboldened by the faith of our sisters and brothers, we can find the courage to raise our voices for justice and make America and the church all that they ought to be.