

Theological Starting Points for Action
Steering Committee, Canadian Ecumenical Anti-Racism Network
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...and the leaves on the tree (of life) were for the healing of the nations...
(Revelations 22:2)

The time to dismantle and eradicate racism is now. It is urgent for us and our churches to acknowledge our complicity with and participation in the perpetuation of racism, slavery and colonialism, or we are not credible. This acknowledgment is critical because it leads to the necessary acts of apology and confession, of repentance and reconciliation, and of healing and wholeness. All of these elements form part of redress and reparations that are due the victims of racism, past and present.¹

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. . .
(Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1)

Introduction

After four years of work together on undoing racism in Canadian churches, the members of the Steering Committee of the Canadian Ecumenical Anti-Racism Network proposed to document some of the principles and practices they believe were strongly shared and have grown out of their own cumulative experience working to undo racism in Canadian churches. These may be used to encourage more Canadian churches to undertake anti-racism ministry, as criteria to assess ongoing anti-racism efforts, and as touchstones to help focus our own practice.

Principles

Principles can be described as “starting points for action”. The following principles have been distilled from relevant theological convictions: creation, sin, history, Christian identity, and making all things new.

Creation

God created diversity and unity all through the story of creation, and declared it good. Every person is unique, different from all others. Each person is breathed with the breath of God, created in God’s own image, a person of infinite and singular dignity and worth. At the same time, we are all related. Every person is a member of one human race, uniquely related to every other human being.

Sin

Racism is a sin. It is contrary to God's will for love, peace, equality, justice and compassion for all. It is an affront to human dignity and damages the human person. Human dignity is the gift of God's image and likeness in every human being. “Racism desecrates God's likeness in every person.”² Racism puts in peril human lives on a daily basis.

History

It is extremely important to remember rightly: to speak in love the truth of history and relationships between peoples, including history ignored, neglected or unknown to the majority population. It is extremely important to listen, hear, receive and carry the truth of history and relationships between people in love. Racism takes many shapes and forms: personally, institutionally, linguistically, culturally and between civilizations. It ranges from personal prejudice to communal genocide. It constantly adapts to new situations: consequently, there can be no one solution to racism; we do not have all the answers for all time.

However, we believe racism has been done through the concrete actions of people and peoples, therefore it can be undone. Authentic anti-racism work is Spirit-led: only the Holy Spirit can change hearts. It is always a journey unique to each person or community.

¹ This text is adapted from the Statement of the Ecumenical Caucus at the U.N. World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance that was held in Durban, South Africa in September 2001.

² Ibid.

Christian Identity

A transformed identity is always anti-racist. A transformed identity, conversion, cannot include personal, institutional or communal racism. This is an ongoing process, a continual transforming of relationships that divide.

“Behold I am Making All Things New”³

The Book of Revelations reports that all nations will come and worship God. God’s justice demands apology and confession, repentance and reconciliation, truth-telling and reparations, toward healing and wholeness, that all may be one. Undoing racism is not optional. Creation is being restored.

Current Practice & Experience of Anti-Racism Work in Canadian Churches

Much of current anti-racism and multi-cultural ministry in Canadian churches is conducted through training, teaching and education. When facilitating learning events of all kinds, the following practices have been useful.

- Start with the concrete experience of racism, with the people affected (victims and beneficiaries).
- Always aim at consulting with the group who a training is for: do a learning needs and resources assessment.
- Historical timelines are helpful in seeing and feeling how racism has been done.
- Dialogue works better than monologue.
- Avoid anti-racism pedagogies that promote trauma, crisis or conversions, avoid the mentality of a quick fix.
- Story-telling must be mutual, should lead to a structural naming of the truth, not used to “prove” that racism exists, never lead to a kind of “voyeurism” of the victim.
- Caucus groups can be helpful from time to time.
- A circle of chairs is a good practice.
- Be prepared to listen.
- Use differences to get things done – a diversity of voices, also in Bible study, helps to come to a fuller understanding.
- Honour non-European voices in theology.
- Leadership is best shared.
- Link concrete experiences to social structures... analyze and name the specific relationships or power and influence.
- Be prepared to unlearn, and for the fear, sense of guilt, blame and woundedness that goes with it... it is a kind of exorcism.
- Anti-racism sessions often provoke anger and rage. Be ready to receive and carry the other’s rage, and be ready to stand your ground in the face of denial.
- Anti-racism policies can be helpful in building new practices.
- It is unhelpful to work with people, then leave them. There always needs to be a follow-up process.

From our combined work there are additional experiences that we have all shared. We document them here as a reference for others.

- Accountability must be to those who are oppressed, not to structures and systems that perpetuate racism.
- Anti-racism work must address privilege.
- Beneficiaries of racism will avoid addressing it whenever possible.
- The primary obligation of white people is to work with white people... this doesn’t mean we should do it separately. It should be genuinely shared.
- Expect discomfort, always be prepared for emotion and pain.
- Personal relationships, friendships, and hospitality are critical to anti-racism efforts.
- We need both the work of undoing racism, and living into a multi-cultural life, we can’t have one without the other.
- Racism cannot be trained or educated away.
- In fact, formal education is often a stumbling block, wisdom on undoing racism is rarely dispensed from an expert.
- Racism cannot be organized away, although anti-racism policies can be helpful in building new practices.

³ Revelations 21:5