

Old Pointe Comfort, The National Council of Churches, and How to be an Antiracist

By Andrew Gardner

I grew up in Tidewater, Virginia, and am the product of Virginia public schools. I remember many of the field trips I took growing up. I remember visiting the battlefields of Yorktown where I learned Cornwallis surrendered to Washington in the American Revolution. I remember visiting Jamestown where we learned about one of the first English colonies of North America. I remember visiting Colonial Williamsburg to learn about colonial life.

I don't remember visiting Old Pointe Comfort, the site where "twenty and odd" Angolans were transported on the *White Lion* to be sold as slaves to Virginia colonists 400 years ago in 1619.



This year, the National Council of Churches (NCC) met from October 13-16 in Newport News, Virginia, to visit Old Pointe Comfort and remember this haunting and historic event. I had the privilege to attend the NCC's Christian Unity Gathering as a representative of the Alliance of Baptists.



On the gathering's final day, the collective gathered for the meeting held a service of remembrance that ended underneath the Algernourne Oak. This tree of more than 470 years bore witness to the first Africans reaching the shores of Virginia. It witnessed the birth of what some scholars and activists have referred to as "America's Original Sin"—the sin of slavery.

The theme for this year's Christian Unity gathering was "Ending Racism: Confronting Our Past, Revisiting Our Present and Naming God's Preferred Future," and the theme

continued the NCC's commitment to its initiative "A.C.T. Now to End Racism" which was established in 2017. This year the NCC affirmed its commitment to this initiative through 2024, and the organization's convening tables have begun their work addressing issues of racism and white supremacy.

Author of the recently published *How to be an Antiracist*, Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, served as the keynote speaker for the gathering. He explained how his parents met at Urbana '70, a student missions conference in Illinois, and began the construction of a personal liberation theology. For Kendi, a "liberation theology" remains distinct from a "civilizer theology"—the former unshackles Christianity from the sin of racism, the latter remains deeply wedded to the sin of racism.

Kendi proposed that simply not being a racist was and is not enough for individuals committed to racial equality. Echoing Dr. King's explanation that white moderates during the Civil Rights Movement condoned the racism of Jim Crow through their neutrality, Kendi argues that not being a racist is a form of neutrality. In order to counter the throngs of Americans who so easily utter phrases like "I'm not a racist," or "There's not a racist bone in my body," Americans committed to racial equality must become "antiracist."

Antiracists are committed to recognizing that the shortcomings of one individual are not representative of an entire racial group, Kendi explains. A commitment to antiracism is more of a practice than a state of being. The commitment entails rooting out the white supremacy in our lives and communities rather than suggesting it was never there to begin with.

The call of the National Council of Churches to End Racism serves as an important challenge to its 38 member communions and one that the Alliance of Baptists has accepted and continues to address. Regardless of how progressive we may characterize our congregations and our theology; the sin of racism and white supremacy continue to infect our denominational body. We must be willing to acknowledge these sins when we see them in order that we may address them and seek restitution for them.

Sitting beneath the Algernourne Tree, I wondered why I had never been to this historic site that is less than a 20-minute drive from my childhood home. I wondered if my public schoolteachers had known it even existed. There is much work to be done.

As the NCC commits itself to the work of ending racism, I am glad the Alliance of Baptists will be laboring alongside in this difficult and long-overdue work.

Andrew Gardner is a doctoral candidate in American religious history at Florida State University. He is the author of [Reimagining Zion: A History of the Alliance of Baptists](#) (2015).

