

Rev. Jay R. Hartley
October 28, 2018
DM 811

Mini-Research Paper on the Disciples' Anti-Racism Training

In July of 1998, following a process of discernment that led to church leaders naming racism as a sin, the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) approved an anti-racism/pro-reconciliation initiative (Reconciliation Ministry n.d.). Dick Hamm, then our General Minister and President, wrote in his book *2020 Vision*: “the aim is to see every congregation, region, general unit, and other institution of the church in the United States implement this initiative over the next several years” (Hamm 2001, p. 116). Implementation has focused on holding anti-racism training events for members of executive search committees, for regional ministers, denominational executives, and sometimes local clergy and congregations. The goal for the trainings “is not only for transformation within the institution, but also for the institution to participate in societal change. The church is called to an anti-racist life within and an anti-racism/pro-reconciliation mission to the world” (unpublished document “Many Members, One Table” – an internal report from 1999 revised in 2005 provided by April Johnson, director of the Disciples’ Reconciliation Ministries). Yet there is often great confusion when Disciples are asked the question: “Have you been trained?” Some of us have attended 7 day training; others 2.5 day training; others a 2 or 4 hour training workshop. What does it mean to be “trained” in anti-racism work? What do we need to know or understand or be able to do to be considered “trained?” Is anti-racism training a one-time event, a multi-step process, or a lifelong journey? While I believe that anti-racism work is truly a lifelong journey, my goal here is to

explore the foundational concepts of anti-racism training in order to help Disciples begin to be clear about what it means “to be trained.” My claim is that anti-racism training should build a common vocabulary; analyze the history of race and racism within the United States, the Christian Church (DoC), and the specific region of the participants; educate participants about microaggressions; and discuss current events that involve race and racism.

Before discussing the content of anti-racism training, I need to begin by stressing the importance of establishing a safe space for dialogue. Basic ground rules include: one person speaks at a time; everyone should have a chance to speak/no one dominates the conversation; use “I” statements/speak from your own experience; listen generously, believe the experience of the other and assume they speak with the best of intentions; be brave and lean into your truth; and take care of yourself, feel free to leave the room for awhile if the conversation gets too difficult. Ground rules are essential because it is vital that our anti-racism trainings do not “re-wound” anyone.

The first task of anti-racism training is to establish a common vocabulary. Words are symbols, and they signify different things to different people. When using emotionally charged words like “racism,” “racist,” and “white privilege,” we will communicate better when we share common definitions.

Disciples have chosen a working definition following the teachings of Crossroads Ministries: “Racism = race prejudice + the misuse of power by systems and institutions” (Barndt 2007, 59). Racism is not simply race prejudice. Most people, if not all, have some racial prejudice. White people have biases about people of color but can also be biased against other white people. People of color can be biased about white people or about other people of color. Racial prejudice can be conscious, as it is with bigots who claim that people of other races are

inferior. Or it can be unconscious, as when people have an implicit bias that people of a certain race might be dangerous, or smarter, or more likely to help you. Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan challenges the implicit bias of people in his day against Samaritans (Luke 10:25-37). Race prejudice is against God's will. But race prejudice is not the same thing as racism. Racism is the enactment of race prejudice in the misuse of power by systems and institutions.

Power is misused when it is used "to control, dominate, hurt, and oppress others" (Barndt 2007, 75). When the systems and institutions of society work to collectively control, dominate, hurt, and oppress others, then we have racism. Racism is thus a communal phenomenon, and since the systems and institutions in the United States have been created by and are largely run by white people, racism is a collective system that works to control and hurt people of color. But power is also misused to provide special advantages to people and to protect these advantages. So Barndt uses the terms Power¹ (pronounced "power one") to describe the power that oppresses others and Power² ("power two") as the power that protects the advantages of the privileged class (Barndt 2007, 77-79).

Another emotionally charged term that needs defining is "white privilege." Many whites do not feel privileged and so resist this term, often feeling defensive about being accused of misdoing. But white privilege is conferred on us through no fault of our own. Peggy McIntosh uses the analogy of an invisible backpack that we are given at birth: "I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks" (McIntosh 1988, 1). McIntosh (1988, 2) lists 50 aspects of white privilege that affect her daily life, including "5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I

will not be followed or harassed” and “13. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.” Most whites are not to be blamed for having these advantages. We didn’t do anything to earn them. But still, as we begin to recognize that we live with these advantages, we can begin to understand the nature of systemic racism. McIntosh (1988, 6) talks about her personal journey of discovering her participation in the racism of America: “I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.” In other words, McIntosh had only understood the Power¹ aspect of racism and had never understood Power².

A third term to define is “race” itself. Shelley Tochluk, drawing on the work of Theodore Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race*, traces the origin of the concept of being racially white to the late 1600s. In the aftermath of Bacon’s rebellion, in which working class Americans of both European and African descent fought side by side to rebel against the wealthy power elite, the landowners created a new identity known as “white” in order to divide the working class. The Virginia General Assembly began passing a series of laws between 1691 and 1723 to give privileges to whites and limit the rights of African descendents (Tochluk 2010, 58-9). Barndt (2007, 63) adds that race “is not scientific, not biological, and not based on genetics.” It is purely a social construct “created by Europeans during a time of world wide colonial expansion ... to assign human worth and social status, using themselves as the model of humanity, for the purpose of legitimizing White power and White skin privilege” (Barndt 2007, 72). Though race is an arbitrary social construct, it is still a legal construct. The United States Census Bureau requires all people in the United States to identify with a race, although the Bureau allows us to self-identify and to choose to identify with more than one race (United States Census Bureau

n.d).

Beyond vocabulary, a second essential component of anti-racism training is learning about the history of racism in America. Racism colors the history of the United States, even as it worked to de-color the United States. Howard Zinn (2001, 1-7) begins his *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* with a recounting of the racial genocide of native peoples. Slavery was the first major manifestation of the misuse of power to hurt and control people of African descent, but the Jim Crow laws of the late 19th and much of the 20th centuries were another manifestation of racism. Michelle Alexander (2012) persuasively argues that mass incarceration is now a third major misuse of power to control and hurt people of African descent in the United States. From numerous treaty violations with native American peoples to the internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII to racial profiling of Arab-Americans to the proposal to build a border wall to keep immigrants out, the history of the United States is filled with examples of racism as Power¹ to hurt and control people of color and Power² to protect the privileges of the powerful. Studying the dynamics of these examples of the systemic misuse of power helps us better understand racism as a systemic and institutional problem, not just a problem with racist individuals. Seeing the similarities in all these systems helps make it clear that racism is a systemic misuse of power to advantage white people and control people of color.

For Disciples, a third component of anti-racism training is learning about the history of race in the Disciples tradition. Once we begin to understand the systemic nature of racism, we are ready to look at our own church structures, our own history, to see if and where and how racism exists in our church. First, we must acknowledge that all members and leaders of church exist as members of the greater American society, so the hurts and distortions of our racist culture are present in all of our lives. But how does that specifically manifest itself in the

structures and institutions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)? Training might include a study of the Oklahoma land rush of 1889, which provided the land on which a number of our congregations worship (Hobgood 2009, 101) and which is still CELEBRATED on the website of one of our congregations (FCCOKC n.d.). Training might include learning about the Yakama Indian Mission and how the Disciples' boarding school participated in breeding native culture out of students by cutting their hair, making them wear the clothing of white people, and making them speak English. Training might include learning about the strong, independent history of the African-American Disciples' National Christian Missionary Convention (NCMC) before the "merger agreement" that united the NCMC with the predominantly Anglo-American International Convention of Disciples of Christ and United Christian Missionary Society in 1968 to form our current denomination (Cardwell and Fox 2016). Understanding the proud and independent heritage of the National Christian Missionary Convention will help us understand why there is significant frustration on the part of African-American Disciples leaders about the sharing of power within our denomination, frustration that sparked the conversations leading to the anti-racism initiative. Each of these examples can help us see how Power¹ and Power² can operate in church structures.

A fourth component in anti-racism training is learning about micro-aggressions. A group of professors at Teachers College, Columbia University offer an analysis and list of racial microaggressions. "Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue et al. 2007, 271). Sue et al. (2007, 278) offer three categories of racial microaggressions: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. Microaggressions are often committed unconsciously by

white people who do not understand what they are communicating, although they can be conscious as well. Many consider the flying of a Confederate Battle Flag to be a microassault. A white woman clutching her purse as a black man approaches communicates the microinsult : “you may be a criminal.” Asking a boy who appears Asian if he speaks English, as happened recently by one of the children’s teachers in my congregation, communicates the microinvalidation of “you are an alien here.” Sue et al. (2007, 279) argue that “covert racism in the form of microaggressions ... has a dramatic and detrimental impact on people of color. Although microaggressions may be seemingly innocuous and insignificant, their effects can be quite dramatic.” I believe the vast majority of members of Disciples congregations are not overtly racist and are probably unaware of the many microaggressions we commit, and so we do not recognize how we continue to do damage to people of other races. Keeping in mind our command to “do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31), learning about microaggressions is a vital part of anti-racism training so that we do not harm others unintentionally.

A fifth component of anti-racism training is a study of current events to see how and where racism is evident today. For instance, in light of several recent highly publicized incidents of white police officers shooting unarmed black men, training might focus on the history of policing, whether police academies include extensive implicit bias training, and the laws surrounding police use of force in order to understand the structural nature of the situation. Or a training event might focus on economic racism by exploring Bertrand and Mullainathan’s (2003) study of racial discrimination in the job market: “Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal?” There is no limit to the number of current events that might be studied, so we will never complete anti-racism training, but our training events should include analysis of

how racism is still functioning at the systemic level.

Finally, although it almost goes without saying, anti-racism training in the church should be fully grounded in a Christian theology of inclusive love. One of the early slogans of the Disciples of Christ claims “Christian unity is our polar star.” Unity and mutual love are major themes in the Bible. “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity” (Psalm 133:1). “For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” (1 John 3:11). “Jesus takes this vision and adds to it: “you have heard that it was said, ‘you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (MT 5:43). Like the writers of Psalm 133 and the letter of 1 John, Jesus is spelling out that God’s command to love others includes all others.

Anti-racism training is truly a lifelong journey. We continue to face new examples of racism, and it would truly be a long journey for anyone to completely purge themselves of committing microaggressions. But while we may never be able say “I have completed anti-racism training,” we will certainly be off to a good start if we develop a common vocabulary, understand the history of race and racism in the United States and within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), if we understand the perniciously harmful effects of repeated microaggressions, and if we engage in analyzing current issues in our culture through the lens of Power¹ and Power² -- the ways our systems and institutions misuse power to hurt and control people of color and to maintain advantages for people of European descent. For truly, “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity” (Psalm 133:1).

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