

# *Many Members, One Table:*

The Anti-Racism / Pro-Reconciliation Initiative of  
The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

## **A Brief Introduction**

In 1996, the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) approved the formation of a church-wide process to discern the nature of racism in North America and to develop ways of helping congregations address racism. Out of this process, an Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation initiative was put before the church in 1998. At their July, 1998 meetings, the Administrative Committee and the General Board approved this initiative. The initiative is based on several premises.

- Racism is a spiritual and theological dilemma as well as a social evil;
- Racist practice exists throughout the life of the church and needs to be addressed. The church needs to get its own “house” in order even as it looks toward being a transformational agent in the larger world;
- Racism is a systemic problem with historical root causes;
- Racism can be defined in many ways. This initiative is based on an analysis of racism that understands racism to be a combination of racial prejudice and institutional and/or economic power.

The initiative is based on a vision for the church as a place “where brothers and sisters of all races, languages, and cultures will grow towards God’s glorious realm, where all have a place at the table and none shall be turned away.” It also calls the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to practice faithfulness with regard to the elimination of racism, which exists in all manifestations of the church, to discern the presence and nature of racism as sin, to develop strategies to eradicate it, and to work toward racial reconciliation.

It is the underlying thesis of the initiative that, in order to achieve the vision, a process of fundamental spiritual and systemic change must take place.

## **The Process**

The initiative promotes education, training, and an organizing model that moves beyond traditional diversity training or interracial dialogue programs. It is a model that offers a systemic, yet faith-based, approach to a problem perceived to be institutionally and structurally pervasive. The approach seeks to be reflective of both Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) polity and theology. Its intent is to allow for every church-related organization (including congregations) to explore and discover the underlying barriers to racial reconciliation and true community.

To further this initiative, a partnership has been forged between Disciples and Crossroads Ministry—an interfaith Christian organization that has engaged in anti-racism work for 15 years and counts 8 denominations among the organizations with which it works. The Crossroads approach enables both education and re-organization of institutions (i.e. general units, regions, congregations, seminaries, etc.) so as to move those institutions toward anti-racist multiculturalism. This process is not intended to be a quick fix, but requires long-term training, organizing, and strategies for change.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Section taken from “Many Members, One Table” document and overview—a document produced by the Discernment Committee on Racism.

The Model for Team Development and Training Process has five stages:

### I. Organizing and Institutional Awareness

During this stage, an institution explores the possibilities of entering a process of systemic transformation. There are several things that the institutional group taking the lead can do in order to help that institution discern its course of action.

1. Identify the crisis/sense of urgency behind the exploration.
2. Pray for and discern the readiness of the institution engage in anti-racism work.
3. Engage in Biblical reflection and the study of literature that will expand the exploring group's understanding of racism.
4. Begin to develop organizing strategies to obtain institutional approval for the exploration of a process of long-term anti-racist transformation.
5. Begin data gathering/research about the model and the initiative being considered.
6. Seek initial introductions to understanding the systemic nature of racism.
7. Participate in an "Introduction to the Analysis Training" in which a socio-historical analysis and of U.S. racism will be drawn.

### II. Team Formation

During this stage, the institution appoints a **Planning and Design Task Force** (PDTF). The PDTF is empowered to lead the process that will result in the formation of an institutional team. There are five planning and design steps:

1. Develop a project description, including a purpose statement and objectives, a time line for the training process, budget and funding plan,
2. Determine Team composition, including a plan for recruitment and selection of the team,
3. Gain approval of the project description from the institution's leadership, including an accountability plan in which the Team's development process is evaluated,
4. Secure funding for the completion of the Team's training process,
5. Appoint the Team, with public announcement and affirmation of its purpose.

### III. Shaping a Shared Analysis

During this stage, the team receives its initial training (Team Building and Analysis) where the nature of racism, its roots in North American history, its continuing effects in our culture and the relationship of the church to this history are explored. This stage includes: a 1-Day Team Orientation, a 4-Day Team Building and Analysis Training, and 4 to 6 months of work to complete team assignments. There are three specific objectives in this phase:

1. Develop a common team analysis of systemic racism,
2. Build team identity, relationships, and gain clarity of purpose.
3. Research and gather data regarding racism in institution based on their analysis

### IV. Teams Skills Building and Strategy Development

During this stage, the team develops short term and long-term strategies for action. A strategic plan that includes a long-term (20-30 years), an analysis of institutional stakeholders, five year goals and two year objectives is developed. This stage includes: a 1-Day Preparation Meeting for the Skills Event, a 5-Day Team Skills Building and Strategy Development and a six month Checking Meeting. The team also continues developing specific skills in these areas:

1. Teaching: Team's explore how to prepare for and deliver introductory educational events which give an overview of the nature of systemic racism and the specific needs for change within their institutions;
2. Organizing: Team's are given skills to strategize, organize, and implement plans for structural change;
3. Research and Evaluation: Team's develop tools and strategies that enable ongoing evaluation and assessment of transformative work within the institution.

#### V. Beyond Training: The Work of the Transformation Teams

When the training is completed it is expected that the team will begin the work of implementing its Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation strategies. The team will also be expected to:

1. Carry out a clear strategy for organizational change that leads to an Anti-Racist/Pro-Reconciliation institutional identity,
2. Shape awareness of systemic racism within region, general unit, church instrumentality or congregations and develop an analysis of the specific barriers to change,
3. Develop commitment within the institution to dismantle institutional racism and establish an anti-racist purpose for all mission and identity,
4. Reflect spiritually and theologically about the Christian call to dismantle racism,
5. Lead educational Anti-racism/Pro-Reconciliation events,
6. Attend advanced strategy sessions for the purpose of addressing specific roadblocks and conflicts,
7. Work within team and with the General Staff to evaluate plans and events according to measurable goals

## Terminology

**Terms and Language:** It is helpful in any dialogue and reflection on the nature of racism to have common use of terms. The terms used in this document are defined as follows.

Racism--Race prejudice joined with power.

“Race prejudice” is any action or attitude, conscious or unconscious, which demeans or subordinates an individual or group based on skin color, race, language, or culture. Race prejudice is sin because it serves to divide the body of Christ and dehumanize children of God.

“Power” is used to mean access to institutions or control of the means of production. Power that is joined with racial prejudice is coercive, manipulative, and/or competitive, giving impetus to unjust acts of racism.

“Race” is used to denote one group of people as distinguished from another is problematic. Race was first used in this way to segregate Jews from the rest of European society. When European nations were creating empires by the colonial subjugation of peoples in Africa and Asia, some intellectuals in Europe developed the new science of anthropology around the concept of race. In fact, race is a socio-political construct, which helped justify European imperialism and exclusion. (For example, exclusion of African-Americans and Native Americans from full voting participation in the new United States of America.) Since that time, this construct of race has continued in use as a means to divide people.

While some progress has been made in race relations, racism in North America still persists and is pervasive. As a systemic problem, power and privilege based on race can manifest itself in many ways. Racism has individual, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural manifestations.

Individual Bigotry--an unfavorable stance toward another person or group. Racially motivated bigotry manifests itself as separation of persons; stereotyping; devaluation; fear; scape-goating; and over generalization based on race.

Internalized Racism--an unfavorable opinion of self or feelings of low self-esteem and low self-respect based on one's own race. When the dominant culture is white, it devalues persons who are non-white. Persons who are not white then take on this devaluation consciously or subconsciously.

White Privilege -- automatic advantages and/or rights given to persons based solely on the fact that their skin is white. Examples of white privilege include:

- In North American schools, history is told primarily from a European perspective.
- White North Americans can swear, dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters without having others attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of their race.
- White North Americans can take jobs with affirmative action employers without having

co-workers suspect that they got the jobs because of their race.

- White North Americans do not have to be on their “best behavior” when stopped by police for a burned-out headlight for fear of being arrested.

Institutional Racism -- discrimination that exists within public and private organizations, the government and legal systems, the media, and other institutions which metes out rewards or penalties based on race. Racism in institutions impacts "career advancement, the way social goods are distributed, who receives training and skills, health care, formal education, political influence, moral support, self-respect, productive employment, fair treatment under the law, decent housing, and the promise of a secure future for self and children." (Institutional Racism in America, Knowles and Prewitt, Prentice-Hall, 1969.)

Devaluation of Cultural Variations in Experience--use of power to perpetuate the cultural heritage, use of language, and tradition of persons of European descent while at the same time demeaning or destroying the cultural heritage of African Americans, African Canadians, Caribbean Americans, Blacks, Asian Americans, Latinos, Hispanics, Indigenous Persons, First Nations Peoples, or Native Americans.

Institutional Anti-racism -- A conscious, intentional effort to eradicate racism in organizations and structures by moving to help the institution claim an identity as anti-racist. This identity involves the renouncing of skin color-based privileges, benefits, attitudes of superiority, and rules that govern the life of the institution.

Multi-cultural diversity --To be truly knowledgeable, welcoming, and respectful of the image of God in every person by celebrating the richness of racial and ethnic diversity of God's world. The church must recognize its call to be as diverse as the community it seeks to serve.

Racial Reconciliation - Describes God intended purpose for creation. From the outset of creation, “God created humankind in God’s own image.” Finally, the distinctions people make to divide themselves violate what we know of God’s desires for the Body of Christ to be one. We need to be reconciled when right relationships are injured or broken--in need of healing. Racial reconciliation does not mean friendly relating; it is an ongoing process of transformation--a fitting response to God’s work of reconciliation in Christ.

The reason why this document continues to use terms like racism, racial divisions, and racial reconciliation is that the truth of the sin of division, as well as the gospel of love which transforms and overcomes sin, must be spoken in language people understand. In our society, race and the associated terms are the language people use to talk about the massive feelings, tensions, injustices and violence related to skin color.

Regarding the use of people of color: there is and has been ongoing change in the terms commonly accepted to describe various racial and ethnic groups in North American societies. Many believe that the reason for the change is that terms become misused or take on offensive or racist significance. So, for example, people of color has replaced minority groups as acceptable language because minority has been used to mean “lesser in value.” Common terms used to describe persons today will certainly change in the future.

For further information about this initiative, please contact a member of the Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation Staff Team for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ):

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