

2009 Lenten Supper Series  
A Sacred Conversation on Race  
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This March, I was honored to lead a four-week Lenten Supper series called a “Sacred Conversation on Race.” It was a chance for our church to follow-up on the 2008 General Synod’s call for congregations to hold conversations on race, and for us to continue our longstanding commitment to issues of social justice. I’d like to take this opportunity to share what happened during the series.

As a professor of Race and Ethnic Studies at the University of Redlands, I have had many opportunities to teach about racism and to engage in conversations on race. From this experience, I knew that sometimes conversations on race can be emotionally charged and filled with tension. So, from the outset, I wanted to create an environment where people could talk productively about this sensitive issue. The first step in creating this environment involved presenting to the group some assumptions I wanted them to hold on to about what we’re like as people. I told them that it is helpful, when working on issues of race, to assume and remember that people are good. This means that we want to be kind and caring toward others. It also means we wish people the very best and enjoy being with other people. Second, I wanted participants to notice that we are tremendously intelligent. We can apply our minds to do amazing things, solve difficult problems and flexibly come up with elegant and creative solutions to challenging situations.

I told the group that I would remind us of these assumptions repeatedly, because there may be times when the goodness and intelligence of ourselves and others may not always come shining through. When we look around the world we don’t always see people thinking clearly and treating others well. When it comes to matters of race, sometimes we lose sight of our flexible intelligence and become confused and rigid. So why does this happen? If people are good, kind, caring and intelligent, why do we see these difficulties in the world? Why are there so many conflicts around race and ethnicity?

The explanation I offered is that, over the course of our lives, we accumulate hurtful experiences. These are any incidents that make it hard for us to notice and act upon how good, kind, caring and intelligent we are. Hurtful experiences can be unique to us as individuals, but can also come from living in oppressive societies. In this country, racial oppression has been a hurtful social force. We have all been exposed to stereotypes and misinformation that distorts how we see people in other races. Many of us have had hurtful encounters that may have instilled fears and uncertainties that interfere with forming good relations across races. All of us have been damaged by racism.

Fortunately, I believe there are ways to recover from the damage of racism. I told the group that one reliable way to heal is to tell our stories about race and racism. Sharing our experiences helps in many ways. It breaks the silence and shame that often accompanies experiences with racism. Telling stories cracks through our isolation and helps us to see that we’re not alone, that many people have similar experiences. This, in turn, counters tendencies to blame ourselves for the damage racism has caused.

In the second part of the evening, I wanted people to apply these assumptions and perspectives through the telling of their stories. To create a safe environment for this to happen, I asked people to indulge me a bit, and follow a format that may have seemed odd at first glance. Instead of opening up the discussion to the whole group, I had people break into small groups of six. I then told folks that I wanted each person to get a chance to tell a story about how their life has been affected by racism. This story was a chance to think back upon their upbringing and to think of any time or times when their experience was shaped by race or racism.

To give each person a chance to speak, I requested that people take turns talking. I told them that each person would have three minutes to share their story, while the other members of the group were instructed to just listen, with their complete, delighted attention. Pulling out my kitchen timer, I said that when three minutes were up, the next person would have a chance to their story, and so it went around the table. The chance to tell their story, without interruption, without questions, without criticism and without commentary, helped to create the safe space necessary for people to thinking deeply and speak freely.

So on that first night, people told their stories about how race has affected their lives. Then, the next week, we followed the same format. I reminded people of our basic assumptions about how good and intelligent we are, and how racism has been hurtful. In the small groups, I asked people to think about times when they managed to build close relationships across racial lines. In the third week, I told people that if we are to keep working to end racism, we need to be able to do three things: forgive others and ourselves; be patient; and not take anything personally. In small groups, people took three minutes to think about what it would mean or might have meant if these three ideas were part of their lives. Then, in our final meeting, to help us move beyond the Lenten series, I had people use their three minutes to think about times they have taken a stand against racism and what they learned from this. I also asked people to think about what they'd like to see happen in our church.

By all accounts, the Lenten series was a great success. Attendance for the series was strong as an average of 45 people came each evening. Most of the people attended at least two meetings, and several came to all four. Written feedback was also positive. For many, the chance to listen to people's stories was reward in itself. As one person wrote, I "really enjoyed listening to different stories and varied experiences. I think I've gotten to know other church members on a different level." Another said, "Stories are a great way to get to know one another and love each other deeper."

Many participants appreciated the reminders that people are good, kind, caring and intelligent, and that it is not anyone's fault that racism has affected their lives. They noted that these assumptions helped them to think more clearly and easily about difficult issues related to race. One wrote, "I liked the approach, assumptions of 'good, loving, caring.' It tempers what could be uncomfortable if we remind ourselves of this." Another said, "This was wonderful! It helped me to remember that, as a white person, it's not my fault and that sometimes the anger that is being expressed isn't about me or even what is happening right now. Thank you for helping me see that it's not about me."

The ability of stories to begin healing the damage of racism was also evident in the feedback. One person commented, the small groups “seemed to be an exercise of learning about ourselves in such a way that we faced our own issues of race. . . The act of saying something out loud has a lot of power” (emphasis in original). Another wrote, the stories “brought up a lot of experiences I had forgotten about. I have been burdened by the racism I know is part of me. Thanks for helping me to understand the burden and so ease it a bit. I’m not intentionally racist, it just is. The tools you have given us are helpful. Self-forgiveness is a good thing. I appreciate the opportunity to talk out loud about racism.”

The success of the Lenten Series generated widespread interest in continuing our sacred conversation on race. Plans are currently being developed to do just that. One idea is to focus the Summer Series on issues of inclusion and diversity, perhaps using the story telling format to explore issues of immigration, race, and sexual orientation. Stay tuned for updates.