



When talking isn't enough

Moving from conversations about race to actions toward racial justice

After his contentious debate with Johann Eck in 1519 on matters ranging from the doctrine of justification to the authority of the church, Martin Luther clarified his views in a series of treatises. One of his crucial insights on the Christian life is instructive as we seek to faithfully combat racism and participate in racial reconciliation. In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther contended that our salvation is a free gift from God through faith in Jesus Christ, yet every Christian is bound by love to serve one's neighbors.

In the 1960s, white Southern Presbyterians applied this teaching to the civil rights movement in different ways. As the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and other groups organized demonstrations and protests, one common response from Presbyterians was to pray, from a distance, for peace and the ceasing of civil unrest.

For some, this was not enough. In a report to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.) General Assembly in 1965, the Permanent Committee on Christian Relations called for members of the Southern denomination to do more to serve their neighbors. They challenged their white sisters and brothers to acknowledge their complicity in the widespread discriminatory practices against African-Americans and other communities of color. The Committee also asked congregations to see in the witness of Scripture that the corollary to loving one's neighbors was an active pursuit of racial justice.

Other white Presbyterians disagreed. They turned to the same Bible and found ample support for maintaining segregation. One pastor in Mississippi interpreted laws that forbade Israel from dwelling with the Canaanites as grounds to oppose the civil rights movement.

Between 1963 and 1965, some white Presbyterian congregations refused seats to black worshippers visiting on Sunday mornings. The largest Presbyterian congregation in Memphis welcomed African-Americans but designated separate pews for them. Several members of the church opposed even this measure and left to begin a new church. A congregation in Selma pushed away two demonstrators hoping to convene at the church's doorstep because one of them was black. Other congregations in cities across the country fled from the challenges of integration and joined the large waves of white flight to the suburbs.

Presbyterians today unequivocally denounce racism as

contrary to the will of God and believe that God's reconciling love "breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference" (The Confession of 1967, 9.44a). But we must also repent of past sins, revise old methods and discern new ways to serve our neighbors. The troubled legacies of the past reverberate in the present.

When we engage in the ministry of racial reconciliation, we recognize the following two realities in the United States: (1) Race-based discrimination against people of

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color persists; (2) White people continue to receive advantages because of the color of their skin. We need to honestly confront the realities of both discrimination and privilege if we are to move forward in the work of transforming our churches and society.

One way to do this is to reconsider how we love our neighbors. In a denomination in which over 90 percent of our congregations are white, our pursuit of justice must extend beyond conversations about race within our church walls. We cannot serve our neighbors if we know little about them.

Many of us are passionate about making our churches more hospitable to welcome neighbors who are different from us. But fewer are willing to leave our comfortable churches to meet our neighbors where they live.

It is much easier to learn a handful of new culturally diverse songs for worship than to follow Jesus into the messy and painful world of pervasive racial inequality and injustice. Yet if we believe that God's reconciling love empowers us to overcome every barrier, our conversations about antiracism should produce fruit in the forms of confession, commitment and community engagement.

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