

## **ADDRESSING RACISM: WHAT WILL IT TAKE?**

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For several decades, various groups have addressed racism in our local area. In the past few years, the issue was taken up by a local committee established to address racism in its many forms. The Mission of the local project is to “work together for a community where all people will have equal voice and access to resources and opportunities.” The goal is to work for systemic change with the assistance of Crossroads Ministry, a national organization established to address racism. While some progress has been made, there is still a lot to accomplish.

The first task is to identify racism on a personal and organizational level. How can we dismantle walls that have divided us for centuries? Will we have the courage and the will to join minds, hands and hearts to create a community for the good of all. Racism is not just a Black-White issue. In the US, there is an influx of Spanish-speaking people, Native Americans and other groups seeking their rights. The question before us is this: “Can we create a genuine multicultural democracy in a global economy”? Racism exists in many different forms and in all countries around the world. The United Nations has declared that preference based on race, color or national origin cannot be perpetuated and must be eradicated.

### **HOW DO WE DEFINE RACISM?**

Sometimes racism is confused with bigotry and prejudice. Racism implies a belief that one race is superior to another. Judgments are made about groups as well as individuals. Such attitudes by the dominant group will lead to discrimination and conflict. Racism implies prejudice as well as power and privilege which do not disappear without a deep struggle. Some church leaders have called racism the major sin of the 21<sup>st</sup> century which diminishes and imprisons both oppressed and oppressors and hinders full human growth.

### **CAN WE CREATE AN INCLUSIVE, PLURALISTIC SOCIETY FOR THE GOOD OF ALL?**

First we need to recognize that laws, rules and goals have been created by the dominant culture. “Come and be like us” will not be sufficient to create a just multicultural organization. Neither can the people in power and control be the only ones to benefit from the system. We need to make every effort to use the gifts and perspective of all participants and allow all to benefit for the sake of the common good. Rev. Joseph Barndt, pastor of a Bronx church, affirms that it will be a challenge to bring such changes about in our institutions – in churches, schools, businesses and other organizations. Rev. Cornell West, professor at Princeton University poses this question: “How much do we care about the quality of life together? Is it a low priority?”

### **WHAT MORE IS NEEDED?**

While all of this exploration is going on, we need to walk with those who are destroyed by poverty and Racism and help them reclaim their own dignity and help open doors of opportunity for them. Martin Luther King Jr. reminded people that they should not let poverty or racism define who they are but to claim their dignity and worth as full human beings and work with others to find a way to create a pluralistic, inclusive and healthy community. Each organization and structure can build from the

gifts and perspective of all – Black, Brown or White and let all enjoy the fruits of the effort. It will not be an easy task but one well worth the effort. It will help recover hope in all aspects of life and benefit everyone. We have a choice before us of “chaos or community,” as Dr. Martin Luther King pointed out. We can address racism in a holistic way – name it, face it, denounce it and dismantle it. Then we must work together to create a community that is whole, inclusive and just, and respects the rights of all residents. I believe it is possible. It is the most important moral issue of our time and one that is worthy of our best efforts. As beneficiaries of white power and privilege, we can reject a false sense of superiority and reclaim our true role as members of the family of God, reaching out in responsibility for one another. We can start with the institutions in which we are directly involved and create organizations where all can benefit and enjoy a full human life. Alexis Vaughn, editorial assistant at Sojourners reminds us “The task of dealing with racism calls us to fight constantly against fear, doubt and the temptation to be complacent. If each of us does this, these institutions around the world do not stand a chance against a truly free, blessed and committed people.” (Jan. 08)

We can learn to understand and value people of all cultures and incorporate their gifts into the building of a human community that will benefit all people. This calls us to educate our youth and ourselves the value of human dignity and the need to address all forms of racial discrimination that begin in our minds and hearts. We can learn from all the injustices of the past and make sure they are not repeated in future generations. We also need to make sure that the church addressed the sin of racism. We all need to acknowledge our share of the blame for the wrongs of the past and work tirelessly to eradicate them. Immigration issues now facing us in the United States and around the world, will force us to take a deeper look at the issue and respond with courage, faith and hope.