



Engaging the Realities of Racism

by Anthony Bailey

Engaging truthfully and courageously the realities of racism in church and society in the context of worship has great potential to be explosive and divisive. As well, any historical or contemporary issues relative to racial tension that may have touched the community or the congregation will be an inevitable participant in whatever worship experience is planned. Worship planners and leaders need to be prepared for this.

Remember, God’s Spirit is with us all in this courageous undertaking.

Some Preparatory Steps

- *Research* the history of the land on which the church building sits. Find out which First Nations people may have stewarded that land before the church building was constructed.
- *Consult* with an anti-racism group and with one or more ethnocultural organizations or groups, telling them what your congregation is planning, and see where that conversation takes you.
- *Self-inventory* your understanding of racism. Worship planners and leaders would be well served by taking steps to deepen their personal awareness and analysis of racism and power.
- *Prayer is vital.* Commission a group from the congregation/community to pray for the planning, conduct, and follow-up of the worship event.

Gathering for Worship

(If possible, receive greetings from a First Nations’ representative or report on any discovery you’ve made about which First Nations’ people stewarded the land before your church building and community were constructed and formed.)

Call to Worship

One: Summoned by the Creator, we come together in worship.

Many: It is a strong and generous invitation to celebrate;

One: to celebrate God,

Many: and each and all of us made in the image of God.

One: O my! What beauty!

Many: What glorious colours and hues!

One: Gathered in worship of this beautiful God,

Many: and in the company of God’s beautiful creations,

One: we cannot help but sing and dance and shout!

Many: With hearts readied in love, souls pregnant with praise,

One: and bodies inclined to act anew,

All: we come together to worship God.

Opening Prayer (in unison)

O Creator God, how could we not delight in the awesome abundance, creativity, diversity, and joy you provide for all creation?

You have been faithful through all generations of humanity, inviting us to be grasped by your love and imagination. Empowering God, it is you who imagines and wills a world where healing and servant power is privileged over tyrannical and oppressive power:

**a world where we relish and celebrate the variety of thin and thick lips,
of kinky, straight, and curly hair,
of broad and narrow noses,
and of a veritable potpourri of skin colours;
a world where the evils of racism,
discrimination, and rejection are overcome
and replaced with the joys of welcome,
hospitality, justice, and peace.**

O God, grant us vision, resolve, imagination, grace, and stamina for this wondrous journey of transformation. You call us to do this together, and so we will.

In the name and way of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Hymn of Praise

Voices United (options): #229, “God of the Sparrow”; #238, “O Lord My God” (if possible, include a First Nations language); #271, “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”

More Voices: #27, “Creator God You Gave Us Life”

Call to Reconciliation

One: We may not know what to call it but we all recognize the longing. All is not right in us or in the world. We are not all we yearn to be and

much of our shared human life lacks integrity and justice. That yearning, that longing, that discontent, is nothing else but the call of God to come home; come home to God, to each other, and to ourselves.

Sung Prayer

Voice United #400, "Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying"

Spoken Communal Prayer of Confession

(Turn away from others or stand facing away from others throughout this prayer.)

All: Forgiving God, we confess that it is not easy to speak the truth to ourselves, to each other, or to you.

We want to try and do this now for the sake of your creation and as an act of obedience to you.

(Turn toward one another and try to make eye contact throughout this prayer, glancing as needed at the words of the prayer.)

All: Together we grieve and mourn the horrific and enduring impact of the residential schools upon our First Nations brothers and sisters. We confess our church's sinful abuse of power and authority in collaboration with the Government of Canada. (silence)

One: God of Grace and God of glory, on your people, pour your power.

All: We confess that the journey toward healing this violence and pain is necessary but difficult and draining. (silence)

One: O God, grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour.

All: We confess that racism is present all over the world, in our country, our communities, our institutions, and even in our churches. We confess that some benefit from this while multitudes are ravaged by it. Struggle against us, O God, even as you struggle with us, until we reject and dismantle racism. (silence)

One: O God, grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the living of these days.

All: We confess that at times some of our worship content, our assumptions, our songs, our jokes, our good intentions, our socializing, our policies, and our structures all have racist elements in them, although often unintended. (silence)

One: O God, grant us wisdom, grant us courage lest we miss your kingdom's goal.

All: We confess that far too many of us who have been primarily victimized by racism have internalized this negative judgment of our being

and worth, thereby not loving ourselves as you have commanded us to do. (silence)

One: O God, grant us wisdom, grant us courage that we fail no one or you.

All: We repent the things we have confessed and ask your forgiveness. Empower us, by your power and grace, to commit now to change direction, priorities, attitudes, and actions in ways that serve your dream and your will for a blessed, healed, just, and redeemed world.

Silent Confession

Words Assuring Us of God's Forgiveness

Response: *Voices United #958, "Halle, Halle, Halle"*

Time with the Children and Young People

(There are a host of anti-racist and intercultural books and resources geared to children. Ideas can be culled from these to augment a conversation with the young people about love and respect for all people, and God's desire for justice and joy for all. Solicit from the young people stories, experiences, and ideas relative to racial reconciliation and be prepared to help them interpret these—if necessary—in light of what Jesus taught and commanded.)

Hymn

Voices United (options): #364, "Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive"; #570, "Jesus' Hands Were Kind Hands"; #595, "We Are Pilgrims"; #598, "When Pain of the World"; #600, "When I Needed a Neighbour"

More Voices (options): #154, "Deep in Our Hearts"; #169, "When Hands Reach Out Beyond Divides"

Hearing and Proclaiming the Good News Scripture Lessons (suggested texts)

- Jonah 3 and 4: Wrestle with the text, and the whole story of Jonah, through a theological lens with racial sensitivity. Jonah begrudged God's generous mercy and favour to a people Jonah resented and wanted excluded from God's indiscriminate grace.
- Ezekiel 37:1–14: As insurmountable as the task of dismantling racism seems, God's Spirit is able; we are invited to cooperate in the reassembling of humanity according to God's will.
- Psalm 98, 133, 146: joy, justice, unity
- John 13: 31–35; 15:7–17: commanded to love, imbued with joy
- Ephesians 2:11–22: dismantling the wall of hostility
- James 2:1–9: no favouritism, no privilege of some over others

- Revelation 7:9–12: those from every tribe and people together in praise

Choral Anthem/Solo

(Select an anthem from a non-majority culture or language according to the capacity of your choir and/or soloist.)

Message

(In addition to study, reflection, prayer, and inspiration from God’s Spirit on one of the texts suggested above, or others, the United Church’s anti-racism policy statement “That All May Be One”—see www.united-church.ca—and the resource could be useful in preparing the message. Alternatively, a holy conversation of story-telling with intentional theological and biblical reflection could be “overheard” between a person victimized by racism and another person conscious of how they benefit from White privilege.)

Responding Faithfully

Offering

(Following the message, invite the congregation into a time of individual or small group reflection, discernment, and covenanting. Distribute the “Covenant of Commitment” below using the offering plates. After a period of time supported by appropriate reflective hymns or music, invite congregation members to come forward with their offerings and commitments and place them in a multi-strand woven basket.)

Offertory Prayer and Prayers of the People

(These could be combined. Thanksgiving for all that has been offered in money, faith, and commitment can be joined with intercessions for the world, the church family, and the community, as well as for the beneficiaries and victims of racism and abuse of power.)

Sending Hymn

Voices United (options): #572, “Send Me, Lord”; #575, “I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me”; #670, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand”; #695, “God Is Passionate Life”; #697, “O for a World”

More Voices: #154, “Deep in Our Hearts”

Words of Commissioning and Blessing

One: Sisters and brothers, too many of us have tried it our way;

Many: **the way of might, racism, rejection of many and privilege for some.**

One: Some have struggled to resist, cried out to God and against oppression.

Many: **But now, renewed in our faith and in our resolve,**

One: in joy we take up again our commission to love, to heal, to seek justice, and to reconcile.

Many: **We go now in faith to reject violence, domination, and racism and, instead, to embrace God’s blessing, which emboldens us to unrelentingly discern and pursue God’s way of unity, ubuntu, and beloved community.**

(Plan follow-up meetings, workshops, exposure trips, and anti-racist training. See also the related resources on page 36.)

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Covenant of Commitment

(This may be used by the congregation and/or small intentional groups who wish to covenant with each other to undertake this covenant of commitment.)

By the grace of God, we pledge to support each other in our personal and communal journey to struggle for racial justice. We will read, study, pray and meet together with persons and communities of colour.

We will draw on the Spirit for wisdom and learn skills of analysis, to help us become more vigilant in our discernment of racism, and more emboldened to expose it and resist it.

We promise to support each other in the difficult yet joyous privilege of loving all members of the human family.

This we pledge by faith, in the name and way of Jesus.