

Why It Is Important for the Church to Discuss Race and Racism

By Pamela A. Lewis



Over the last few years race and racism have been much in the news, and as a country, we have been engaged in what is called a “national conversation” about these topics. While some have welcomed the conversation, others have asked, “Why does everything have to be about race?” Though this question has been asked predominantly by white people, it has not been limited to just that racial group and is often expressed in a spirit of wearied frustration over what sounds to them like a broken record. White people who ask this question are not necessarily the inveterate bigots who spew racial epithets. They are the good and well-intentioned folks, who would never utter the N-word, support racial diversity, and who count Black and other people of color among their best friends, partners, or may even have people of color in their families. They neither consider themselves to be racists, nor feel responsible for this country’s history of slavery. And they may have voted for Barack Obama for President both times.

Convinced that the bad old days of racism are over, and that we are now living (or supposed to be) in a “post-racial” America, this group feels it is time to move on. They assert that the “overcome,” as in “We shall overcome,” the beloved civil rights-era hymn, has been realized, and that the nation has made impressive progress in race relations in a very short period. They acknowledge that problems remain, but, like Rodney King, a Black man who was brutally beaten by white cops in 1993, had asked, they also ask, “Can’t we all just get along?” ^[1]

Recent events and social conditions suggest that getting along and achieving racial justice have proved elusive: inequities in the healthcare system, as Covid-19 revealed, are pervasive; heated disputes over confederate flags and monuments have roiled the country; racist- and antisemitic-inspired attacks against and murders of people of color and of Jews have shockingly contradicted the belief that ours is a nation where all people can live in peace and safety; recent (and continuing) assaults on members of the Asian

community have revealed deep-seated anti-Asian hatred that belies that this community is fully accepted; the emerging aberration of “Christian Nationalism”; and clashing views over what aspects of American history should be taught in our schools threaten understandings of academic freedom and cherished beliefs of the “marketplace of ideas.”

Racism has been called “America’s original sin.” Yet the Church, despite its understanding of sin as one of humanity’s central problems, and despite its having issued statements, passed resolutions, and taken actions to address racism’s persistence (and at times resurgence), had never forthrightly identified it as what it was. Finally, in March 1994, the House of Bishops issued at General Convention a Pastoral Letter declaring racism to be a sin, as it is “totally inconsistent with the Gospel.”

The Pastoral Letter signaled the Church’s awakening to the uncomfortable truth that racism was a destructive presence, not only in the secular society, but in the Church as well.

The Episcopal Diocese of New York, under the leadership of Bishop Dietsche, and through the work of the Diocese’s Commission on Reparations, has devoted its time and efforts to raising awareness about and to struggling against the sin of racism both outside of and within the Church. Created to call on dioceses to respond to the truth about the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its aftermath of segregation and discrimination, as well as to collect and document information about the Diocese’s complicity in the institution of slavery and how that legacy has informed present-day privilege and under-privilege, the Commission has gathered invaluable information from its years of investigations towards helping to discern and map out a process leading to restorative justice.

At Convention in 2018 the Bishop and the Reparations Commission asked the churches in the diocese to delve into their history, to “uncover and relearn” those areas that may have touched on slavery. The Church of St. James Madison Avenue heeded this request and discovered that its wealth had been built on the enslavement of African Americans. There is a plaque on the Madison Avenue side of St. James’ attesting to this, and many churches in the diocese have also engaged in researching their history with a specific focus on the presence of enslaved people. (Although all slaves in New York were finally freed in 1827, New York City remained the largest slave market in the world.)

In that same year, the diocese declared and observed “A Year of Lamentation,” which brought forth an array of spiritual, cultural, and educational offerings that served to help this diocese to learn about and understand its role in the enslavement of people of African descent and their past and present suffering. This was followed by “A Year of Apology and a Year of Reparation in 2019, when the Bishop asked Convention to earmark \$1.1 million of the diocese’s endowment as “seed money” to establish a reparations fund to invest in the lives and communities of descendants of enslaved African Americans. Convention unanimously approved the allocation; as a member of our Vestry at the time and a delegate to Convention, I felt proud to have voted in favor of that important proposal.

When Fr. Turner and I discussed my writing this article (and I extend my thanks to him for asking me to do so), we agreed that it would be important to mention the diocese’s Anti-racism Workshops, which are available for laity and clergy to attend at various times of the year. In February I was among several lay and clergy from various churches in our diocese who attended the four evening sessions via Zoom. We learned about one another and our respective churches, and we read and watched printed and visual materials about the deeply complex and often vexing subject of race and racism. Through the moderation of facilitators from the Diocese’s Reparations Committee, we plumbed the depths of how (and why) racism began in America, why it stubbornly persists, and, most importantly, how it has affected – and continues to affect – the Church. Though the topics and ensuing discussions were challenging and even uncomfortable, they were valuable, in that they obliged us to be honest with ourselves and with our fellow participants. At the end of the sessions, we realized that we all, regardless of how we self-identified racially, bear the stain of racism; but it is only a question as to what degree that is true. The Anti-racism workshops are not designed or intended to make participants feel ashamed about who they are; they are not about “political correctness” or about being “woke.” Rather, they are designed to help participants to confront the truth about our history and to disabuse ourselves of the mythologies that have informed racist policies and practices. The Bishop has called these mythologies the “long shadow,” which have followed us and impeded our ability to become the Beloved Community, wherein the long shadow will have no place. The workshops are grounded in the Gospels and in the teachings of Jesus, who is the true and absolute model of love. We might consider the workshops as we might consider confession: We don’t have to attend, but it would be to our benefit if we did.

Because it has been revealed that the Church has been complicit in slavery and has benefited from what it wrought, the Church must discuss race and racism in all its manifestations and must strive to remove racism in all the places it remains. Unless there is personal *and* corporate apology and repentance, there can be no healing, no true *metanoia*. This will be ongoing work, requiring constant vigilance and perseverance.

The Church must discuss race and racism, because they have been at the heart of our shared history and informed the Church's development, determined who occupies positions of power, and even have, arguably, played a part in her iconography. As we look to the Church for spiritual and moral guidance and to speak the Truth as enshrined in the Gospels and embodied in Christ, in whom there are no distinctions, she must simultaneously reject what contradicts the spirit of the Beloved Community while upholding what fosters it; otherwise, her credibility will be shambolic and her future uncertain.

As we are poised to enter Holy Week, but also move to another remembrance of the unholy death of Martin Luther King, Jr. (April 4th), the Beloved Community's greatest proponent, let us remember that we are more than our "race," but are one people.

The Church has everything to gain in discussing race and racism, but everything to lose if it does not.

About the author: *Pamela A. Lewis is a long-time member of Saint Thomas Church, a former vestryman, and serves on various lay ministries.*