

THE SIN OF RACISM

A Pastoral Letter

The House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church

The 71st General Convention

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To all the Baptized of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, Latin America and other parts of the world, grace to you and peace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In response to the express direction of the 70th General Convention, which met in Phoenix three years ago, we address ourselves and the whole church on the perverse and pervasive sin of racism. At each of the interim meetings of the House of Bishops since Phoenix we have devoted considerable time to the issue of racism, sharpening our individual and corporate consciousness in order to speak with integrity to the church at large.

In this letter we evoke words and images sacred to our tradition, share with you an analysis of the current dynamics of racism, confess our complicity with that evil, declare a covenant with each other to combat racism wherever we find it in church and society, and invite all Episcopalians to join us in a mission of justice, reconciliation and unity.

TEXTS

Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

(Amos 5:23-24, NRSV)

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

(Galatians 3:28, NRSV)

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

I will, with God's help.

(Book of Common Prayer, page 305)

ANALYSIS

Racism perpetuates the lie which says some people are superior and have an advantage over others because of the color of their skin, or their cultural history, or their tribal affiliation, or understanding of God's creation, wherein all human beings are made "in the image of God." (Genesis 1:27, NRSV) This lie distorts the ministry of Christ who died for all people, "so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (John 3:16, NRSV) This lie divides people and gives false permission for oppression and exploitation.

This lie is rooted in sin which is the source of racism, sin which is found among all people from time immemorial, sin which is reflected in the primal stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel. It is sin which is still with us in our society, in our church, in this House of Bishops.

God's answer to this ancient sin was to establish a covenant that would overcome division and isolation by binding all human beings to God and each other. For Episcopalians, the implications of this new community in Jesus Christ is spelled out in the Baptismal Covenant. [1] Our willingness to live out that covenant in our individual lives and in our life together in the church, witnesses to the truth which is Jesus Christ.

A contemporary definition of racism sharpens the focus for us. "Racism [is the] abuse of power by a racial group that is more powerful than another group and the abuse of that advantage to exclude, demean, damage, control or destroy the less powerful group; a belief that some races are by nature superior to others; ...discrimination based on such belief. Racism confers benefits upon the dominant group that include psychological feelings of superiority, social privilege, economic position, or political power." [2]

The House of Bishops and the General Convention as a whole have long rejected the evil of racism. Bold statements go back to Civil War days. More recently, the church has supported full civil rights for people of color, and there has been a growing appreciation among us of the plight of all oppressed people and the need for equality in the laws of the nation and in the governance of the church.

Various resolutions have proposed ways for victims of discrimination to participate in the dominant system. Many have suggested that these victims adapt, fit in, change, assimilate if possible. Such efforts may have represented progress in their time, but they are seen by many today as the product of a dominant racial attitude.

New awareness is evident today. New voices are being raised. New circumstances press us to recognize that the issue of white privilege has not

been adequately addressed. Sadly, the atmosphere of proscribed advantage is largely unconscious among us. It exists as a result of years and years of white dominance, which gives advantages to some and leaves others out. In spite of protests to the contrary, the line of demarcation is systematically drawn on the basis of race. The demolition of the walls that separate people unfairly is a piece of unfinished business that God will not allow us to ignore. But the questions are many.

How can inherited privilege and unearned advantage be used as an ingredient of reconciliation? Can the outworn melting pot image of cultural development be replaced by the metaphor of a mosaic, let us say, in which each racial element makes its own contribution to the beauty of the whole? How can white advantage--which has always stood apart: distinct, unassailed and protected--be offered to the service of God and find its appropriate place in the mosaic? Can the "supreme advantage of knowing Christ" (Philippians 3:8) become the glue of a new covenant?

CONFESSION

As citizens of western culture, as baptized Christians and as bishops in the church of God, we recognize that racism is endemic in every aspect of our society, including the church. A poster spotted on a university campus put it this way: "Racism is just about everywhere. It is in our language, customs and beliefs, fears, work, schools and sports. It is virtually everywhere except in those places where people deliberately choose to remove it." [3] No conscious actions need to be taken to maintain racism; it runs on its own momentum. But deliberate decisions do need to be made to root racism out.

We have found the observation of a wise and experienced priest of our church to be compelling: "If racism is to be overcome, and our culture attain

true inclusivity based on plurality and diversity, there is a great deal of confessing that must go on on all sides. Confession that relates to our complicity in the genocide of native peoples. Confession by whites of their continued advantage based on unearned privilege, and by blacks of our co-dependence and participation in that corrupt value system. Confession by both blacks and whites of our collusion in the racist dynamic which excludes Asians, Native Americans and Hispanics. Confession by all of us of our dependency upon violence as a means of controlling others and settling disputes." [4] What this writer discerns in a North American context applies, we believe, to every interracial setting, each with its own particular dynamics. People of all races stand in need of confessing the sin of racism.

In the Baptismal Covenant we promise to resist evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, to repent and return to the Lord. [5] The fundamental Christian rhythm of resistance, repentance and returning suggests that we are all in need of an honest continuing discipline aimed at turning us into converted and convinced anti-racists.

We, the bishop of the Episcopal Church, through no particular merit of our own, are among the advantaged people of our society. Recognizing that peculiar position of privilege and leadership, we confess our complicity with racism and pledge to make appropriate changes in our personal lives, in our diocesan structures and in the church as a whole.

COVENANT

We covenant, therefore, with one another to join forces in combating racism in church and society. Through this covenant we propose to hold each other accountable by reporting our faithfulness, rather than our successes, as we seek to fulfill this mission.

In the past, through a variety of resolutions and programmatic offerings, the church has attempted to deal with racism in its life. Now, we believe, a new moment of choice is upon us. This moment is shaped by a fresh understanding of our baptismal calling as it is expressed in The Book of Common Prayer. This moment is also shaped by the continuing reality of a persistent racism in our present time. Like sin, the garment of racism clings so closely that it seems to be a part of the very flesh of contemporary society. It is our belief that this evil must be combatted in all its demonic dimensions.

Determined to move beyond pious but easy resolutions, we pledge to work concertedly in the following ways:

Conversion. Our first commitment as members of the House of Bishops is to recognize that we are part of a body that is seriously infected with racism, acknowledging to ourselves, individually and collectively, that our spiritual health is endangered by an insidious and destructive virus. Each of us will make a personal inventory of our actions and feelings towards others and where we find evidence of racist attitudes, seek to eliminate them. Those of us who are white, acknowledge that our advantaged position inevitably reinforces the racism we seek to dismantle. We accept the truth that all people are created in the image of God and that Jesus breaks down every wall that divides us and restore us all to unity and wholeness. We place ourselves in his healing hands.

Listening. In order to grasp the killing effects of racism, we recognize the necessity of listening to the voices of those who must expend endless energy to counter the negative consequences of discrimination encountered daily. We understand that the dominant culture must be still and

listen to those on the margins in order to learn how the sin of racism clings so closely that we fail to recognize our complicity. We commit ourselves to create opportunities for individuals to share with us their own experience of racism and racist attitudes.

Envisioning. As bishops, we understand the apostolic and pastoral responsibility we have to proclaim a vision of God's new creation in which the dignity of every human being is honored. Therefore, we will use the occasion of the bishop's visitation to our parishes to share our experiences of racism and to teach and preach the Good News in ways that sustain a vision of justice and peace among all people.

Mission. The church's mission strategy must acknowledge the changing constituency of the Episcopal Church. In urban America, new waves of immigrants are arriving constantly. In rural America, family farms are disappearing and small towns are changing, as people move to places where employment is available. The demographic and ethnic images which defined the Episcopal Church of the early and mid-twentieth century no longer serve us well. We will encourage new approaches to reach new populations with the gospel.

Recruitment. The church must continue to develop lay and clerical leadership equal to the challenge before us. We will give a high priority to the recruitment of African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Hawaiians and Native Americans, and will press for a deployment system that matches emerging talent with developing needs in a church that is increasingly pluralistic and multicultural. We will challenge parishes to make a conscious effort to include people of color in decision-making positions, and to support the appointment of people of color to significant diocesan bodies.

Prayer. We will continue to invoke the reign of God through private and public prayer, so that every barrier that separates God's people may be broken down, that God's shalom shall pervade the world, and the God's reconciling love may be known by all.

Teaching. Finally, we commit ourselves to issue a sustained and systematic series of Pastoral Teachings during the forthcoming triennium on biblical, historical, liturgical, economic and environmental issues connected with the sin of racism and the need for its eradication among us.

INVITATION

The catechism declares that the mission of the church "is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." [6] By baptism all Christians are called to participate in a ministry of reconciliation and unity. Central to this mission is the intentional dismantling of those structures, systems and practices in the church and elsewhere which perpetuate the evil of racism. Racism in the church denies people of color the promise of new life in Christ which is theirs by baptism. Racism is a sin which stains the church contradicts the reconciling power of Christ's death and resurrection. Racism is totally inconsistent with the Gospel, and to that end it must be intentionally confronted and eradicated.

Having entered into covenant with each other to root out the sin of racism in very specific personal and corporate ways, we, the bishops of the Episcopal Church, invite all the members of our dioceses to join us in this mission of justice, reconciliation and unity, as an expression of our commitment to that fundamental covenant each of us undertook at the moment of our baptism. May God give us all the will to engage this task together and the power and grace to accomplish it.

NOTES

A General Note about Language. We have taken particular care in the use of language in this letter. For example, we have refrained from using the term "minority." It is often demeaning in itself; and, in some situations, those discriminated against by those in power are actually in the majority.

1. Book of Common Prayer, pages 304-305
2. Webster's New World Dictionary.
3. Syracuse University.
4. Rodman, Edward W., True to Our God, True to Our Native Land, Episcopal Urban Caucus, 1993.
5. BCP, page 304.
6. BCP, page 855.