

Institutional Racism

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When the Texas Conference of Churches came together for its 34th annual assembly in Austin in February, 2003, we reflected together on the critical issue of racial justice. At the same assembly, we passed a resolution on dismantling racism. In view of the fact that this is a current topic for the Texas Conference of Churches, I offer some reflections on institutional racism.

Our American society, which is predominately Christian, continues to be influenced by racial and ethnic intolerance, and even hostility. The history of our country has been deeply marked by the sin of racism, which is a betrayal of our Christian faith as well as our democratic ideals. Unscrutinized values and attitudes about race are all too often found at the core of major American institutional policies that impact negatively, with devastating effects on persons of color. Sadly, the Church has sometimes been influenced by these negative attitudes about race.

Institutional racism is about innate systems prevalent in society that gives advantage to certain groups over others because of perceived racial difference. For example, in the United States, white privilege is a result of institutionalized racism—being identified as white affords certain advantages throughout many systems of day-to-day life.

These systems can be difficult to identify, especially for the advantaged group, because it is inherent within the structure, system, or process. Institutional racism is systemic, not personal; therefore, one does not have to be “racist” to benefit from being white. Racism is prejudice plus power manifested by the “privileged race” through social and institutional structures that reinforce and maintain the privilege and oppression.

Racist individuals can grow more tolerant with time and circumstance, but institutionalized racism lingers within organizations and is far more difficult to drive out. In fact, it can almost appear invisible, except for its outcomes and manifestations. Members of affected organizations often redefine racism’s manifestations as other issues.

God created humanity to be one family. The sin of racism has divided God’s family. Our commitment to an anti-racist identity is a call to heal God’s family in the conviction that personal and systemic racism continues to perpetrate deep spiritual and social brokenness and even endangers creation. While legal racial exclusion has ended in our institutions, full access to the resources and power of our institutions has yet to be accomplished.

Because racism can be both personal and institutional, efforts to combat it must address personal attitudes as well as organizational structures. Focusing on diversity—particularly racial diversity—is a positive approach that does both. It is a process of creating and maintaining a positive environment where the differences of all employees are recognized, understood and valued. Through this process, all may fully participate in

achieving their full potential and maximizing their contributions to the organization. Honesty and social analysis--a cultural assessment survey--help us to identify inequalities within the systems that would otherwise go undetected. Some of these systems are practices of hiring or selection, promotions, terminations, compensation, employee development, performance appraisals and work styles. The goal of anti-racism is personal and institutional transformation, not simply adding people of color to an organization. It is not enough to be multi-cultural. There are organizations that are multi-cultural and still racist in their institutional structure. The Church should be the leader and inspiration to bring about this institutional transformation.

There is no quick fix to the problems related to racism. We must start by embracing our past. Embracing the truth of the past can be disconcerting, confusing, and challenging. However, it will allow us to face our own failures and omissions that foster institutional racism. Racial equality calls for racial reconciliation. This means more than integration. Integration can simply result in lives that intersect, paths that cross but don't really connect. Reconciliation is a fundamental transformation of society by constructing a society where race is no longer the basis for social, political, or economic hierarchy.