



Sacred Conversation on Race

Planning Your Sacred Conversation on Race

Regardless of the scope and length of your Sacred Conversation on Race, we recommend you engage in a thorough planning process before launching your Sacred Conversation. What follows are some steps and intentional elements you might consider in this planning process. These should not be considered a blueprint or template, because every church has its unique features and history. **Please feel free to add, embroider upon, or change the order of the steps suggested so that this process best serves the needs of your congregation.** For example, if you choose to invite people from outside the congregation to serve as facilitators, you may want to invite them into your planning process at an earlier stage than we have suggested below. Additionally, we encourage you to document your approach to the Sacred Conversations to provide ideas for other congregations as they move forward in their own processes.

1. Select a planning committee

To increase a sense of ownership in the Sacred Conversation process and to hear from different voices within your congregation, we recommend that a planning committee of 4-6 people be chosen. In considering potential members of the committee, be mindful of how the committee can best represent the diversity of your congregation with regard to such things as race, age, gender, length of membership in the congregation, and spiritual gifts. It is important that members of the committee are known and trusted by diverse groups within the congregation. Perhaps most important of all is to recruit committee members who bring passion and commitment to developing a Sacred Conversation process that will flourish in your congregation.

2. Pray for the Spirit's guidance

Before you plunge into the committee's work, take time to pray for the Spirit's leading in all that you do. These Sacred Conversations are intended to be times of individual and congregational spiritual discernment. You can model that intentionality by listening deeply to one another and to God, and by calling upon the Spirit's transforming, healing power in your planning process.

3. Spend time getting to know one another and the subject matter

We encourage you to devote time to becoming better acquainted and familiarizing yourselves with the resource materials in the Sacred Conversation Resource Guide. Even if you have known each other for some time, you may not have had the opportunity to share with each other your experiences, values, and spiritual longings related to race, racism, and racial justice. This is the perfect time! Your Sacred Conversation can begin here as you learn about the hopes and yearnings that brought each of you to this committee. Successful anti-racism, healing, and reconciliation process oftentimes begins with building relationships across differences. The time and care you take in nurturing relationships across difference will provide a much needed foundation for strengthening trust and authenticity throughout this important process.

As a way of beginning your conversations on the planning committee, we recommend that you read and discuss the Pastoral Letter on Racism and Talking Points that were issued by the Collegium to help launch the Sacred Conversation last May. The Pastoral Letter, contained in this Resource Guide, articulates

the challenges and opportunities of a Sacred Conversation at this time in our nation's history. We especially encourage you to read aloud the following section of the Pastoral Letter on Racism that states: "this conversation on race will be sacred if we..."

- ◆ Invoke God's presence and wisdom whenever we gather, reserving time for prayer at opening and closing and whenever anyone in the group feels a need for it.
- ◆ Establish safe space with a commitment to mutual respect and Christian love.
- ◆ Listen deeply to, and honor, the feelings of anger, pain, and joy in those who have been the targets of racism.
- ◆ Listen deeply to, and honor, the feelings of shame, fear, and grief in those who are waking up to the reality of racism in our churches, neighborhoods, and nation.
- ◆ Do not let the conversation stop with an exploration of individual feelings, attitudes, and behaviors but continue on to examine the realities of cultural and institutional racism.
- ◆ Recognize that our deepest common humanity is not grounded in race, religious creed, or national origin but in the extravagantly inclusive love of God.
- ◆ Recognize that within our common God-given humanity resides a glorious array of colors, cultures, sexualities, and beliefs.
- ◆ End each conversation with at least one tangible and specific commitment to action on behalf of racial justice in our communities.
- ◆ Understand that this conversation is not a one-time event, but a continuing journey."

We suggest that you post this list of qualities on newsprint each time you meet and return to them from time to time, asking: how is our Sacred Conversation intentionally incorporating these elements?

There are two resources in this packet that can help facilitate discussion between committee

members. The Individual Reflection Questions can be an excellent way of "priming the pump" for your time of getting to know each other better. The planning committee might also find it beneficial to read and discuss the Frequently Asked Questions. As you read through the FAQ together, consider whether these are the questions you are asking or hearing from people in your congregation. If so, discuss together what other responses you might make. If you are asking or hearing questions not named in the FAQ, add them to the list and discuss together the responses you would make to those questions.

4. Join the Sacred Conversation E-list

A Sacred Conversation E-list can be found on the Sacred Conversations web page (<http://www.ucc.org/sacred-conversation>). If you sign up, you will receive periodic announcements of additional resources to assist your efforts in promoting and implementing your Sacred Conversation.

5. Engage in self-assessment

Before you develop goals for your Sacred Conversation or begin to map out the specifics of format, time frame, and subject matter, we recommend that you engage in a process of congregational self-assessment. This process is designed to help you assess such things as:

- ◆ Where your congregation stands currently in relation to talking about issues of race and racism.
- ◆ How you got to where you are.
- ◆ What issues may seem particularly difficult or potentially divisive.
- ◆ Your congregation's involvement in community-wide efforts for racial justice.
- ◆ Your congregation's demographic make-up related to race and other identities and the challenges and opportunities this poses for your Sacred Conversation.

To assist you in this process, we have developed the Congregational Self-Assessment Form. We recommend that the planning committee devote an entire meeting to filling out and discussing this form. We also recommend that the form be distributed to different groups within the congregation (e.g. church council, board of

deacons, youth fellowship, study groups, etc.) so that the planning team receives input from a representative cross-section of your congregation.

6. Develop goals and objectives

Based on your congregational assessment, discuss and develop goals and objectives for your first round of Sacred Conversations. Below you will find examples of goals and objectives that might be helpful as you work on developing your own list. The list is intended to give you ideas; you are not required to choose items from this list.

Consider doing an initial round of conversations and not attempt to undertake all the work at once. At the close of the first round of conversations, and after you have evaluated the experience, you can develop a new set of goals and objectives for the next round of conversations. With this in mind, we recommend that you develop four or five goals for your first round of conversations. An additional option is to develop short-term goals for the initial round of conversations and develop long-term goals for ongoing journey and organizational change process. Examples of goals and objectives:

- ◆ Share personal stories of how race and racism have impacted our lives.
- ◆ Enlarge our capacity to talk openly and honestly about difficult issues related to race.
- ◆ Explore the difference between individual prejudice and institutional racism.
- ◆ Learn about White privilege – what it is, how it affects us, and what we can do about it.
- ◆ Develop skills in building authentic relationships across racial differences.
- ◆ Practice the skills of interrupting racism.
- ◆ Learn about the cultures and critical issues of diverse groups in our local community.
- ◆ Learn about the history of the UCC – how our ancestors supported or resisted racism.
- ◆ Explore what it means to be an anti-racist ally.
- ◆ Honor those who have gone before us and draw strength from their witness against racism.
- ◆ Learn more about the struggles for racial justice within our community.
- ◆ Encourage members to participate in organizations working for racial justice.
- ◆ Begin to explore the costs for all of us for colluding with or maintaining racism.
- ◆ Begin to explore what our congregation and community might look like if we truly operated as an anti-racist, inclusive institution.
- ◆ Practice being in dialogue rather than debate about issues of race and racism.

7. Consider options for format, content and timeline

Your initial round of Sacred Conversations can take many different forms and address many different topics. As you consider different topics, be sure that your conversations incorporate times of worship, ritual, or prayer. As stated previously, this Sacred Conversation on Race is not – first and foremost – a class to be taken, but a journey to be *lived*. These are just a few examples of the kind of program you might consider:

- ◆ A sermon series followed by in-depth discussion about topics raised in the worship service (held after the service or another time during the week).
- ◆ A series of conversations that incorporate some of the questions found in the Pastoral Letter Talking Points and the Individual Reflection Questions.
- ◆ A book study and discussion. If your congregation has not undertaken a book study and discussion on the topics of race and racism, we especially recommend books with accompanying study guides. For example, *Understanding and Dismantling Racism: The Twenty-First Century Challenge to White America* by Joseph Barndt or *Witnessing Whiteness: First Steps Toward an Antiracist Practice and Culture* by Shelley Tochluk.
- ◆ A weekend retreat led by trained facilitators from outside or within your congregation.
- ◆ A film series (with ample opportunity for discussion) featuring issues of particular

relevance to your congregation and your community (e.g. immigration, racial profiling, the treatment of Arab Americans after 9/11, Native American treaty rights).

- ◆ Conversations with people and organizations that are working for racial justice in your community.
- ◆ Exploration of what it might mean for your congregation to become a multiracial-multicultural church (see appendices).
- ◆ Exploration of Sacred Conversations that are taking place in different parts of the world (e.g. Peace Camps for youth in Chile, interfaith dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian women, and tables of reconciliation in Asia).
- ◆ A series on White privilege – what it is, how it affects us, and what to do about it.
- ◆ Encourage people in your congregation to participate in racial justice workshops and trainings held in other places. Be sure these teams share their discoveries and insights with the congregation as a whole.
- ◆ Encourage people to participate in events or organizations working for racial justice and reconciliation in your community. Again, find ways that those participating can share their discoveries and insights with the congregation as a whole.

The possibilities for format and content are endless. You may wish to mix and match elements from different options listed above or create something not found at all on the list. As you discuss possible topics, avail yourselves of the resources found in the Sacred Conversation Resource Guide. In light of your discussions in response to reading the Pastoral Letter, filling out the Congregational Self-Assessment Form, and developing goals and objectives, what would be the best subject matter, format, and time-line for your first round of Sacred Conversations?

Whatever you choose as a means of launching your first round of conversation, take care that the format incorporates elements that address heart, mind, and spirit. Be mindful of including time and resources that nurture the spirit and invoke

God's Spirit and presence. Music, poetry, prayer, and ritual are just some of the ways that call us to remember that this conversation is sacred because our hope is grounded in the radically inclusive love of God.

8. Explore how the Sacred Conversation can be integrated into every aspect of your church's life. The Sacred Conversation on Race is not for adults only and it need not be limited to only one realm of church life at a time. All of us have stories to share from childhood when we learned our first lessons about race and racism. Too often, those messages were laced with fear, shame, or prejudice. The Sacred Conversation on Race provides an opportunity to heal from those early messages and to offer different, life-affirming messages to our children.

The Sacred Conversation Resource Guide contains a multitude of ideas, activities, and resources for different realms of church life: worship, Christian education, youth group programs, Bible studies, community outreach, and global ministries. Check out the resources available online, consult with other churches in your area to learn what they are doing, and create your own.

9. Select facilitators for your conversation Careful consideration needs to be given to the question of who should facilitate this first round of conversations. In almost all cases, we recommend a facilitator team rather than one individual as leader because a team can model racial diversity and can incorporate the gifts and skills of two or more people. In selecting leaders from within your congregation, the following qualities should be paramount: 1) the individuals are known and trusted by diverse groups within the congregation; 2) they have experience and skill as group facilitators; 3) they have a demonstrated and sustained commitment to understanding and addressing White privilege and racism; 4) they have gifts for leading a prayerful time of spiritual discernment.

You may prefer to invite a facilitator team from outside your congregation to lead your Sacred Conversation. Choosing someone who is not a part of your congregation can allow your pastor and lay leaders to fully participate in the conversations. Furthermore, people who are not

members of your congregation can bring a fresh, non-aligned perspective to the conversations. In searching for trained facilitators, you may wish to get recommendations from racial justice organizations in your community (e.g. the local NAACP or the Department of Multicultural Affairs at a nearby university). Justice and Witness Ministries is collecting names and contact information of people within the United Church of Christ who have skill and experience in leading conversations about race. If you contact RaceTalk@ucc.org, we may be able to provide names of people in your region. Your Conference staff members may also be an excellent source for referrals. In addition, the Sacred Conversation Resource Guide has a list of organizations that provide racial justice training and education in different regions of the country.

Whether you choose to contract with outside facilitators or invite members of the congregation to lead your conversations, we recommend that you interview the prospective facilitators to be certain that they are the best fit for your local setting. To assist you in this interviewing process, we have developed a set of questions for your use (see Interview Questions for Prospective Facilitators). As with any resource in this Guide, we encourage you to adapt this list of questions to reflect the needs of your local setting.

10. Recruit process observers

You might also consider inviting two or three members of the congregation to assist the facilitator(s) by serving as observers of the process. Being observers does not preclude their participation in the conversation. Rather, they are charged with the responsibility of listening deeply to how the group is forming: what is being said and what may be left unsaid. Ideally, these observers will reflect the racial diversity of the congregation. We recommend that the facilitators introduce the observers to the group and describe what their role will be.

11. Announce your Sacred Conversations

We invite you to use the Pastoral Letter on Racism as a means of initiating the Sacred Conversation in your local congregation. The Pastoral Letter is invitational in tone and seeks to address the following issues: 1) why this Sacred Conversation on Race is crucially important at this time in our nation's history; 2) why and how the United Church of Christ can play a unique

and pivotal leadership role in this conversation; 3) what this conversation might address and; 4) what makes this conversation "sacred."

You may wish to read portions of the Pastoral Letter aloud from the pulpit with an invitation for people to stay after church to hear the full letter and talk about next steps. Or you might make copies of the letter available for people to read in advance of a specially called event. Whatever context you choose, the letter can serve as an introduction to the Sacred Conversation as well as a starting point for discussions about how your congregation wishes to engage this sacred conversation over time.

12. Encourage individual self-reflection prior to the first session

As you well know, members and friends of your congregation will come to the Sacred Conversation with very different experiences, backgrounds, and levels of awareness about race and racism. Because this is a conversation open to all, attention will need to be given to helping everyone feel welcome by familiarizing all participants with language and concepts that may be new to some. For this purpose, we have provided a Multiracial/Multicultural Glossary of Terms in the Resource Guide and we encourage you to share it with participants in your Sacred Conversation.

Depending on the content of your first round of conversations, you may wish to distribute an article or chapter of a book that can provide a good and accessible introduction to the subject matter.

We also recommend that you make use of the Individual Reflection Questions, distributing them well enough in advance of your first session to allow people ample time to ponder and respond to the questions. The introduction on the Individual Reflection Questions emphasizes that it is not a test and the answers will not be handed in. It also states emphatically that there are no wrong answers. People are encouraged to use these questions as a tool for personal exploration and discovery. Nevertheless, it might be helpful if one or two planning committee members make known to the congregation that they are available should anyone have questions about the reflection sheet or want to talk about what they are discovering.

13. Develop norms and guidelines for your Sacred Conversations

When your Sacred Conversations get underway, one of the first things you will need to do is develop guidelines or norms for the group that help create a safe and welcoming space. These might include agreement that:

- ◆ Everyone's story is heard and respected.
- ◆ Things shared in confidence are held in confidence.
- ◆ People are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning and growth.
- ◆ It's okay to disagree.
- ◆ It's not okay to shame, blame or attack.
- ◆ Hurtful or offensive remarks and behaviors do not go unaddressed.
- ◆ People can practice speaking the truth in love.
- ◆ People can practice trying on new ideas.

Sample guidelines

You may want the group to help create the guidelines by naming things that would enable them to bring their whole selves to the Sacred Conversation. It can also be helpful to list a few guidelines in advance and then ask the group members to add others. Among the guidelines you might wish to list are these:

- ◆ Listen carefully before responding and check out what you are hearing.
- ◆ Speak from your own experience; use "I" statements.
- ◆ As you share insights gained from the group, respect confidentiality.
- ◆ Honor your own discomfort at things that are being said or done by members of the group, so that expressions of racism (and other "isms") do not go unaddressed.
- ◆ Pay attention to times when you are responding (verbally or nonverbally) with

defensiveness and denial, and be open to exploring what lies beneath those responses.

- ◆ Share the time and space with others.
- ◆ Allow each other and ourselves to change.

When the list is complete and the group has agreed to covenant together to uphold these guidelines, post them in a spot visible to all and let the group know that they will be posted during each conversation. Invite people to speak up if individuals or the group as a whole deviates from these guidelines or if additional guidelines need to be added as the conversations continue.

14. Evaluate your Sacred Conversation

Creating space where everyone's voice is heard and respected, and where challenge and growth are encouraged, is a process that requires ongoing attention and care. Therefore, it is important that opportunities be given for people to express both their appreciation for the process and their concerns about how it might be improved. You might invite people to fill out a simple evaluation with questions such as these:

- ◆ What were the most useful parts of this conversation?
- ◆ What were the least useful parts of this conversation?
- ◆ How might this conversation better reflect your hopes and concerns?

Community will be deepened and strengthened as people have opportunities to share with others how they are growing and changing. One way of soliciting these testimonies is by asking people to complete these sentences toward the close of each session of your conversations (first reflecting individually and then sharing their responses in the group):

- ◆ Some of the insights and discoveries from this conversation that I take with me ...
- ◆ Something unsettling or unfinished that I am going to continue reflecting on ...
- ◆ One thing I commit to doing and/or learning more about ...

Debriefing in the whole group at the end of each session can also provide an opportunity to hear ideas for subsequent topics of conversation.

We also recommend that you invite people to fill out a written evaluation at the end of your initial round of conversations. This evaluation can provide helpful feedback as the facilitators and planning team meet to assess what worked well in this round of conversations and what could be improved in the next round of conversations. In addition to providing an opportunity for people to assess the strengths and limitations of this round of conversations, the evaluation form can also solicit ideas for future Sacred Conversations.

You may wish to use the Evaluation Form found in the Resource Guide or you may create your own evaluation form by adding additional questions. For example, you may want to formulate questions that invite evaluation of how well the group did in achieving the goals and objectives of your Sacred Conversation.

15. Share your experiences with the wider church

The Sacred Conversation on Race will be happening in churches all across the country, in small towns and large metropolitan areas;

in congregations that are racially homogenous and in congregations that are racially diverse. Sacred Conversations will be occurring in local congregations, Association gatherings, Conference Annual Meetings, and General Synod 2009. The *UCC News* will continue to provide a montage of experiences from different regions of the country. You have the opportunity to learn from, and contribute to, these many different levels of conversation by sharing something of your church's story in these different venues.

Please let us know how your conversation is going. Share resources with us that have proven particularly useful. Announce special events in your area that others might wish to attend. We assume that there is a wealth of wisdom and experience within our churches that, when shared more widely, can enrich us all.

16. If you need additional assistance or consultation

If you wish to explore specific resources, questions, or concerns related to engaging the Sacred Conversation in your local setting, please email RaceTalk@ucc.org.

