



## **Steps for Starting the Conversation**

### **STEP ONE: SHARING THE PASTORAL LETTER ON RACISM**

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.

### **STEP TWO: CREATING SAFE AND WELCOMING SPACE**

Talking openly and honestly about race can be challenging. It is understandable that each of us probably brings some degree of fear and/or ambivalence about participating in this Sacred Conversation on Race. Confronting the impact of racism on our lives, our communities, and our nation is difficult work. It requires openness of mind and heart, as well as humility of spirit, to risk discovering things about ourselves and the world we may not have known before. It asks patience from those who have long borne the burden of racism without sufficient recognition of, or redress for, the injustice. If we give adequate time and attention to the process as well as the content of this Sacred Conversation, we will have the rare and wonderful opportunity to practice speaking the truth in love to one another. If we allow the Spirit of Christ to dwell among us, this conversation will be an exhilarating source of joy whereby we experience more fully the beloved community we are called to be.

#### **Selecting the facilitator**

Careful consideration needs to be given to the question of who should facilitate this first conversation. In selecting the best leader, the following qualities should be paramount: 1) the person is known and trusted by diverse groups within the congregation; 2) the person has experience and skill as a group facilitator; 3) the person has a sustained commitment to understanding and addressing white privilege and racism.

#### **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 facilitator introduce the observers to the group and describe what their role will be.

## Qualities of a Sacred Conversation

The Pastoral Letter describes nine qualities of a Sacred Conversation on Race. We encourage you to post these qualities on newsprint at the beginning of the first conversation and invite people to ask any clarifying questions they may have about them. We suggest that the list of qualities be posted and read aloud each time the group gathers.

This conversation on race will be sacred if we...

- ◆ Invoke God's presence and wisdom when 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.

## STEP THREE: QUESTIONS AND PROCESS TO OPEN THE DISCUSSION

As a way of beginning discussion of the Pastoral Letter and the issues it raises, we invite you to use some of the Talking Points listed below. There are many more points listed than can be used effectively in any one session, so you may want to select **three or four** Talking Points best suited to the time allotted for this first conversation as well as to the needs of your congregation.

### Talking Points:

1. As you consider participating in this sacred conversation on race, what would enable you to bring your whole self to this conversation? What fears do you have about what might happen? What hopes do you bring? What could you and others do to help create and sustain a conversation where every one's voice is heard and respected, and where challenge and growth are also encouraged?
2. The Pastoral Letter on Racism stated that our denominational history can help us understand both the systems of racial oppression and the movements for racial justice that have been at work in our society for centuries. What kinds of programs or study groups might your congregation begin that could help members learn more about the history of racism and anti-racism within the United Church of Christ?
3. In what ways were you aware of your ethnic background when you were growing up? How would you describe that background? In what ways do you think this background has shaped your current values, habits, practices, ways of worship, and personal priorities?
4. Centuries of institutionalized racism in the United States have not only *disadvantaged* People of Color; they have also *advantaged* White people by granting them unearned power and privilege in this society. The nature of structural power and privilege is often invisible to those who have it. This means that White people in this society are often unaware of the unearned advantages granted them. What are some examples of this unearned privilege?
5. Every local community and region of the country has its own history of institutionalized racism as well as histories of individuals, communities, and movements that resisted racism and worked for racial justice. What are some examples of institutionalized racism in your local community? What are some

examples of people, communities, and movements that have resisted racism in your community? How could you learn more about both of these histories – past and current?

6. How would you respond to a White person who says, “The town and church I grew up in had only White people in it. So, racism wasn’t even a part of my life until I was an adult and left my hometown.” How might you help that person understand that racism was at work in the social structures and institutions of his or her home town? How might you invite this person to reflect on how racism helped to shape their understanding of what it means to be White in this society?

7. In what ways does your local congregation reflect a particular cultural and ethnic tradition in its form of worship, meetings, leadership style, and the way decisions are made? Has this been a conscious choice on the part of your congregation’s members and/or pastors? In what ways, if any, does your congregation reflect a variety of cultures and ethnic traditions in its forms of worship, meetings, leadership styles, and the way decisions are made? Has this been an intentional process? Has your congregation ever discussed what it would mean to become a multiracial, multicultural congregation?

8. Since 9/11, Arab Americans and Muslims in the U.S. have been the targets of increased discrimination and religious intolerance. What have been instances of this discrimination and/or religious intolerance in your local community? What might you and your church community do to become more informed about the discrimination and religious intolerance that Arab Americans and Muslims face in your local community? What might you and your church do to address this discrimination and religious bias?

9. The ethnic/racial makeup of the United States has changed dramatically throughout the last 20 years with significant immigration by people coming from the global South. Many towns and cities have experienced this phenomenal growth by instituting anti-immigration laws, particularly affecting Latinos/as. How have you seen this growth in your local community? In what ways do your personal ideals about the American dream affect how you think and feel about these new immigrants? How can reflection on the inclusive nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ assist you in making the stranger welcomed in your community?

10. If we consider 1776 to be the birth of the U.S. government, our nation is approximately 230 years old. For all but the last 40 years of that history, slavery and/or segregation were legally enforced realities that systematically denied People of Color equal access, rights, and opportunities in every realm of American society (education, housing, health care, etc.) It is not logical that the effects of several centuries of systemic racism could be eliminated or equalized in only 40 years time. How would you respond to someone who says, “Racism is a thing of the past and we now have a level playing field”?

11. It has been recommended that each conversation in this ongoing dialogue end with at least one tangible and specific commitment to action on behalf of racial justice in our communities so that these sacred conversations issue in deeds as well as words. This specific commitment might be something undertaken by individuals within the group or by the group as a whole. What process will enable your congregation or group to discuss and enact this recommendation? What mechanisms of follow-up or accountability might be helpful?

### **Process for discussion**

Depending on the size of the group, you may wish to divide into small groups, groups of three, or even pairs so that everyone has a chance to speak and be heard. After sufficient time is given for discussion, each small group can share briefly in the whole group a few highlights of what they discussed. You might also invite people to reflect individually about a Talking Point, by jotting down thoughts and feelings, before asking them to share their responses in the small or large group.

#### **STEP FOUR: REFLECT ON THE 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:

1. What were the most useful parts of this conversation?
2. What were the least useful parts of this conversation?
3. 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 the conversation (first reflecting individually and then sharing their responses in the group):

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

#### **STEP FIVE: AGREE ON TOPIC FOR NEXT CONVERSATION**

It is likely that out of the small and large group discussion, issues will arise that need further attention, input, and discussion. If there seems to be obvious consensus that one topic in particular is most urgent, that topic can be announced as the focus of the next conversation. If several issues have arisen, they can be posted, along with the suggestion that the leadership team will gather to decide the next topic and process for conversation.

#### **Considerations for a sustained and in-depth conversation**

Understanding that this conversation is not a one, or even two-time, event, but a continuing journey, Justice and Witness Ministries is committed to providing assistance and resources for a sustained and in-depth conversation. We encourage you to check the Sacred Conversation web page weekly for new and updated materials that will be posted as we research and gather them.

Over the coming weeks, the UCC web page will provide:

- ◆ Suggestions for locating trained facilitators and organizations in your area that provide racial justice education and training.
- ◆ Qualities to consider when searching for the right program and/or facilitator.
- ◆ A calendar of upcoming events around the country.
- ◆ Suggestions for books and essays that address particular subject areas.
- ◆ Suggestions for DVDs and videos that address particular subject areas.

We seek your feedback. 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.

We are also available for consultation. Rev. Dr. Melanie Morrison is serving as an advisor to Justice and Witness Ministries and the Sacred Conversation of Race. If you wish to explore specific resources, questions, or concerns related to engaging the sacred conversation in your local setting, Melanie can be reached by email: <[racetalk@ucc.org](mailto:racetalk@ucc.org)>.