

Eleven O’Clock Sunday Morning

“We must face the sad fact that at eleven o’clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing ‘In Christ there is no East or West,’ we stand in the most segregated hour of America.”

—REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Martin Luther King Jr. preached these words in a sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., on March 31, 1968, just days before his assassination. He had repeated them on many other occasions as well, referring again and again to the shameful reality of America’s racially divided churches. Although Dr. King faced racism and challenged segregation in every part of society, it was the “sad fact” of a segregated church that disturbed him the most.

Fast forward to the present time, and picture yourself attending a church at eleven o’clock on a Sunday morning in a large city, suburb, or small town anywhere in the United States. Look around. What do you see? Whether seated in a jam-packed mega church or a dwindling congregation with far too many empty pews, you will probably see that little has changed. More than four decades after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, when racial segregation is supposed to have become a thing of the past, more than likely the congregation where you are worshipping is composed of all or almost all one racial group, whether white, African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian American, or Native American. The simple fact is that regardless of the racial or cultural identity of United States churches, eleven o’clock Sunday morning remains today the most segregated hour of the week.

Why has so little changed in nearly half a century? Actually some things have changed. The lines of separation in United States churches are not nearly as strict as they were forty years ago. Many congregations can point to at least some racial and cultural diversity among their members. And a few congregations have

achieved significant multiracial diversity. In addition, leadership in historically white denominations often includes some bishops, presiding officers, and pastors who are persons of color. And in the larger society beyond the church, more persons of color hold powerful elected and appointed positions in government and in society. Some of the changes we have seen are very dramatic, including the election of an African American president.

We need to lift up and celebrate these changes. But we must be honest too in recognizing that these achievements are largely remarkable exceptions to the norm, and as such they must not be construed as representative of a changed racial climate. Even though barriers are falling, United States society is still fundamentally defined by race. Racial division is very real in our government, in our commercial life, in our schools, in our residential communities, and, yes, even in our churches.

In our churches! It is very important to begin this book by recalling and agreeing with Dr. King that of all the racial segregation still remaining in our society, it is the segregation of Sunday morning that is the hardest to deal with. For many of us our Monday through Saturday lives are increasingly multiracial, but when the work-week ends and we head for worship on Sunday morning, we pass through doors of churches that are still defined by race. Christian churches in the United States are still mostly separated and color-coded as red, brown, yellow, black, and white, with very little intermingling or interaction taking place among them. Even in the few churches that have managed to achieve a degree of multiracial diversity, cross-racial relationships tend to be characterized by politeness and a superficial paternalism rather than deep conversation and interaction between Christians of different colors. More often than not a “colorblind” approach to race relations is taken, where everyone is said to be the same under their skin, and therefore, issues of race and race relations can be ignored. It is very unusual to find a multiracial church that is actually dealing with multiracial issues and where people are actually talking about and working for racial justice.

*Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world;
Red and yellow, black and white,
All are precious in his sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.¹*

Do you remember this song from Sunday school? It is meant to create an image of togetherness. But we are not together yet. Red children, yellow children, brown children, black children, and white children are still being raised in racially segregated churches. Jesus still needs to schedule separate appearances in red, yellow, brown, black, and white churches in order to bring his precious children into his sight.

The Terrible Dilemma of Segregated Sanctuaries

The subject of this book is racism, not racism just anywhere in society, but racism within the church, and particularly within the predominantly white mainline Christian churches in the United States. It is, of course, important for us as Christians to work everywhere, not just in the church, to overcome racial divisions and build racial unity. But we cannot be satisfied with diagnosing and treating the sickness of racism elsewhere in the world if we are not doing the same work in our segregated sanctuaries. It is especially important to ask why the church has such a difficult time facing its own racial divisions and dealing with them.

It is not that the church has no comprehension or understanding of racism; in fact, the opposite is true. Especially during the past forty or fifty years, scholars and other leaders in our churches have contributed a great deal to our society's understanding of racism. The church's biblical and theological perspective has contributed a sharply clarifying lens to other analyses of racism that are based on political, sociological, and psychological points of view. The church has helped us understand that racism is a spiritual problem above all—a sickness of the soul and of the human community. Christianity is uniquely able to diagnose the brokenness of humanity that produces a broken community, as well as to prescribe the medicine required for healing.

But there is a terrible dilemma that we who call ourselves Christian must face: to put it bluntly, the church has a hard time hearing its own message. We are all too comfortable with our segregated congregations. As this book will closely examine, the church throughout history and even today is clearly implicated in promulgating racism, preserving systems and structures of white power, and avoiding and evading our responsibility to deal with it.

This is our terrible dilemma; we—the church—suffer tremendously because of our incapacity to act on our own beliefs, to treat our own sickness. This is the issue that I believe must be given a much higher priority on both congregational and denominational levels. It is not enough to diagnose the sickness of racism in society from a Christian perspective; it is also critically important to diagnose and confront directly this same sickness within the church and to investigate directions for effectively addressing and correcting it.

The Need for Open and Honest Conversation

It is simply impossible to overcome racial divisions and build racial unity—in the church or in any other part of society—without dealing directly and straightforwardly with the subject of racism. To begin with, we must name the problem of racism and acknowledge that dealing with it cannot be avoided. To some people it may sound quite obvious that we have to face openly the subjects of race and racism in order to get past them, but other people will disagree with this and fight

very desperately against it. In almost every place in the United States that I visit and have discussions about racism, someone will argue that raising the subjects of race and racism is a negative approach to the problem. The underlying assumption is that we should talk about the “good stuff,” the “feel good” things that help us get along. Instead of talking about differences, we should emphasize our sameness and not “see” color.

Readers may recall the United States presidential campaign in 2008, how difficult it was to talk publicly about the significance of having an African American, Barack Obama, as a candidate for the presidency. One side said that talking about race was “using the race card.” The other side was afraid that Obama’s race would be used against him. The result was a deadly silence about the most visible issue in the campaign. When Obama finally did break the silence, his speech on race in Philadelphia was very helpful in cutting through the fear of discussing this subject.

In the same way, when the issue of racism in the church is raised, often the first reaction is to become defensive. It is difficult to admit that the sins of the world also afflict the church. We fear that exposing the church’s defects and imperfections will diminish its sacred identity and function, and negate its claims to moral authority. Perhaps above all we desire to shield the church from attack by outsiders.

Instead of being defensive, however, we would do well to recognize that dealing with racism in the church can be done most effectively from within by people who are part of and who love the church. It is a high priority of this book to encourage open discussion of racism inside the church, to look honestly at our history, no matter how hurtful and embarrassing, and at our current helplessness before racism’s awful power over us. My aim is to help lift up the potential strength and power of the church itself to confront and deal with racism.

I want to speak most directly to all who share a deep love for the church, to those who are pained by the continuing power and presence of racism and by the hurtful wounds it leaves. I extend to you an invitation to join me in undertaking two tasks. The first task is to help Christians come together to examine the historical context of racism in the church, to understand the barriers of racism that infiltrate and influence the present mission and structures of the church, and to critically evaluate current programs of multiracial and multicultural diversity in the church. The second task is to help Christians become better equipped with effective strategies to dismantle racism and shape an anti-racist multiracial/multicultural identity in our churches, as well as to become more effective instruments of God in helping to shape an anti-racist society.

Two Central Ideas about Racism

Since the subject of racism is confusing to many people, I present here two central ideas that will guide us throughout this book. The first is that racism is not

simply the result of individual prejudice and bigotry, but is more significantly the product of historic institutional power structures. Of course, prejudice and bigotry are a problem in the church, as they are in society, but systemic racism is far more devastating and destructive than individual attitudes and actions. Incredibly powerful barriers to racial justice that were set up long ago are still present within our institutional structures and culture. It is impossible to overcome racial divisions and build racial unity in the church or in society without facing the *systemic power of racism*.

The second central idea is that racism is not only a sin from which we must repent but also an enslavement from which we need to be liberated. Originally the sinful structures of racism erected by white society were intended to imprison people of color, but the jailers have ended up trapped inside their own jail. We who are white are as much enslaved by racism as are people of color. There is no way we can build a path from racial division to racial unity without dealing with the *imprisoning power of racism*. None of us can be free while others are still confined.

These two fundamental concepts—racism is a systemic issue and racism imprisons all of us—will be front and center in each and every chapter of this book. Immersing ourselves in these ideas can open the doors to wonderful new opportunities to transform our churches into the racially just multiracial and multicultural churches they are intended to be.

Getting Personal

For our work together to be fruitful, each of us needs to bring our own personal identity and experience to the conversation. To that end, let me introduce myself. I am a white Lutheran pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) who has been studying, teaching, and organizing around the subject of racism for more than forty years. Although I have also done this work in secular settings, including colleges and universities, social service organizations, governmental agencies, community organizations, and the like, the majority of my anti-racism teaching and organizing has been in the context of the historically predominantly white denominations. I have worked in ecumenical, interfaith, and interracial settings in Lutheran, Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Reformed, Presbyterian, Methodist, Christian, and Unitarian Universalist churches on national and regional levels and in individual congregations. I have also been a congregational pastor and community organizer in white, African American, Latino/Hispanic, and multiracial settings and in cities including Tucson, Oakland, Chicago, and the South Bronx in New York City.

It is very important for me to be able to trace the path of gradual awareness and understanding of race and racism in my personal life and in society. It is especially necessary for me to acknowledge that most of what I now know to be true about racism has been taught to me by people of color. The most accurate

understandings of racism come from people of color and not from white people. In fact, over the years I have had to unlearn most of what I was taught by white people as it became clear to me that what we believe about race relations and racism is at best a confusing distortion of the truth. While growing up, I was taught in conscious and unconscious ways that I should not listen to, trust, believe, or follow the leadership of people of color. I have discovered since that people of color are the experts on racism, while the white community tends to discount, distort, or deny the reality of racism. To understand racism, the first thing we who are white need to do is overcome this negative socialization and learn to listen to people of color and to trust and follow their leadership.

Journeying Together against Racism

In joining me on this journey to understand and dismantle racism in the church, it is important to think about your own identity and the experience you bring. Some readers have been on this path for a long time; others, for a lesser period of time. We are all at different places on the path and we are moving at different paces. White people are usually newer to this path than are people of color. Although most people of color have been aware of their experience of racism all their lives, their experiences of talking about it and analyzing it are different. We who are on this path now have something to teach others, but all of us need to learn more than we already know. For some, this will be your first book on racism and your first opportunity to think and learn intentionally about the subject. For others, this will be one among many books you have read and experiences you have known on a journey that started some time ago. Perhaps you have read my previous book, *Understanding and Dismantling Racism*.² Throughout this book, I will make occasional references to that earlier analysis of racism.

On the path toward understanding race and racism, we need to affirm and respect one another's circumstances. And we need to be honest in admitting that no one, including me, is fully clear about how to accomplish our goals, though we trust that lessons learned in past struggles equip us better for what lies ahead. However, we should not be surprised that along the way there are major barriers that challenge us, including the divisions caused by culture, history, and language, and the difficulties of building trust across the lines of racial division.

The path we are on is not unlike that of the Hebrew people in the wilderness heading toward the Promised Land. There were many stops and starts; sometimes they had a clear picture of where they were going, and sometimes they were hopelessly lost. We too are heading together on a path toward a holy land called Racial Justice. And we too have often lost our way. But as a result of our common efforts, that path will one day be a clear and open highway on which anyone can travel.

Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned over the years is that the struggle to overcome racism is a long-term, multigenerational effort that began

long ago and will continue for a long time to come. The structures of racism in the United States have been in place for 500 years, and it is crucial to realize that the resistance against racism has been going on just as long. Yet it was less than fifty years ago, during the civil rights movement, that the most important decisions toward changing racist structures were made. Since then, there have been many great advances and successes in this struggle and there have also been enormous failures and setbacks. The task of completing this transformation of our society and its structures will still take generations to accomplish. When I made my first decision to resist racism, I joined millions of resisters who came before me; and when I have taken my last anti-racist action, I know that there will be millions more resisters of racism who will follow after me, until the job is finally done and we have become a racism-free society. It is in fact true, not just a truism, that we have come a long way and we still have a long way to go.

In discerning our path forward in understanding and dismantling racism in the church, it is also highly important to point out the leading role being played by denominations whose membership is primarily people of color, Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos/Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans. They have resisted racism in the past in very powerful ways and continue to do so today. Likewise, people from religions other than Christianity, such as Jews and Muslims, have been and still are deeply engaged in working for racial justice in the United States. Above all, we need to recognize the extraordinary role of the African American church throughout our country's history, as the principal leader of all churches in struggles against racism.

As we join this long history of resisting racism, we must realize that the terrible dilemma of the church—the gap between what we teach and what we practice—will not disappear easily, but I deeply believe it can be and will be overcome. Our path needs to lead us to the day when eleven o'clock Sunday morning will be a celebration of an anti-racist multicultural people of God.

Beginning the Journey

I have structured this book to include a chapter, following this introduction, that explores the biblical and theological underpinnings of an anti-racist gospel. This will help us find a common starting place for our journey, a foundation upon which we can build. It is here, too, that we will find the guidance and strength we need to undertake the journey before us.

The rest of the book is divided into three parts, addressing the past, the present, and the future of the church in its struggle with racism. Part 1 is an examination of the history of the church's support of racism, as well as the powerful history of resistance against racism within the church, led especially by the African American church. Part 2 explores the current reality of the imprisoning power of individual, institutionalized, and cultural racism in predominantly

white churches. In the third and final part, we turn our attention to creating a vision for a liberated anti-racist church and to an organizing process to tear down the imprisoning barriers of institutionalized racism and create a new identity and structures for an anti-racist multiracial church.

In shaded boxes and call-outs throughout the book I provide suggestions and directions for working together on our journey toward an anti-racist church. In each instance I ask you to think about your own experiences with race and racism both in church and society and then to talk with others about your experiences and your perceptions. I also make suggestions about researching your particular congregation's or denomination's experience with issues of race. I ask you to evaluate your church's current beliefs and activities and to explore ways in which you can personally be part of a process helping your church to work toward freeing itself from the bounds of racism.

Perhaps you are part of a congregational study group or are a student, teacher, or administrator in a church college, university, or seminary that meets regularly to discuss this book. Or maybe you are part of a social service agency or involved in a church-based community organization that is concerned about issues of race. Although my suggestions are addressed to a congregational setting, they are easily adaptable to your particular situation. You will find the first of these suggested activities on the following page.

May God bless us on our journey together.

Your Congregation's Identity

Question 1: Which of the Following Best Describes Your Congregation?

Separate and Segregated?

The vast majority of congregations or Christian communities in the United States fall into this category. While such congregations may have a small percentage of persons from another race, the dominant reality is that of a single race, language, and cultural expression. Some of these "single race" and "single culture" congregations may have made efforts to seek cross-racial and cross-cultural experiences by reaching out and building relationships with neighboring churches or by participating in multicultural programs provided through their denomination.

It is tempting for separate and segregated congregations to have the misguided perception that only multiracial congregations need to be concerned about racism and so to dismiss the importance of dealing with issues of race in their setting. In fact, the more segregated one's life is, the more imprisoned it is in the church's "terrible dilemma" of not being able to hear its own message. It is here in the emptiness and isolation of racial segregation that racism is doing its greatest damage to the body of Christ.

Multiracial and/or Multicultural?

Numerically, congregations that are significantly multiracial and/or multicultural represent a very small minority of the churches in the United States, but such congregations tend to have a greater interest in issues of race. It is important to note that *multiracial* is not the same as *multicultural*, even though the terms are often used interchangeably. A congregation can be multiracial and still have a single culture. There are, for example, a number of formerly white congregations that have successfully attracted significant numbers of people of color, but have not substantially changed the cultural expression of their congregational life. These are still culturally white congregations, even if they have a membership from many races. However, a multiracial congregation can also become multicultural. There are many multiracial congregations that are working very hard and very intentionally to also be multicultural—in other words, to develop their worship, spiritual, educational and organizational life as an expression of the culture of all the racial groups that are represented in their membership.

There are increasing numbers of congregations making intentional efforts to provide ministry in multiracial neighborhoods and communities, and to build congregations that are multiracial and/or multicultural. The decision to become a multiracial congregation is a response to a holy and sacred calling. It is a decision to counter the forces of segregation and to try to bring together under one church roof the reunited family of God. It is also an unusual decision that relatively few congregations have made. This is a highly important “frontier ministry” from which all churches will ultimately benefit. Congregations on this multiracial frontier are learning lessons and developing models of ministry that have the potential of leading many others toward change. This sacred calling is not only important and exciting, it is also a very difficult ministry, in which participants work against serious odds and are challenged by many very difficult barriers.

Question 2: Where Is Your Congregation on the Journey toward Anti-Racism?

Whether in a separate and segregated or a multiracial/multicultural congregation, it is possible to avoid facing the questions of race and racism. In fact, in multiracial/multicultural congregations, the subject of racism is sometimes avoided with even greater tenacity. So much emphasis is placed on “just getting along” with people of other races that the “R-word” is seen as off-limits. *Is your congregation dealing with the subject of racism? If so, how?*

Question 3: Where Is Your Denomination on the Path?

Although some congregations are independent of denominational affiliation, most are part of a larger church, and are very much affected by the directions that are taken by their denomination, either on a national or regional (diocesan, synodical, district) level. Every denomination in the United States has been deeply affected by its history around the subject of race and racism. Especially as a result of the civil rights

movement in the 1960s, every denomination has had to make new decisions regarding this subject. The position and programs of a denomination on the subjects of race and racism have a major effect on local congregations. The race and culture of a congregation are very likely a reflection of the race, culture, and history of the denomination. If a congregation is attempting to become multiracial and multicultural, it will make a major difference if it is supported, encouraged, and equipped by denominational programs. Moreover, if a congregation decides to deal with racism and is not supported by its denomination, the task will be made much more difficult. Conversely, a denominational program to deal with racism on a national or regional level cannot be effective if it does not reach into its congregations. *What is your denomination doing about this subject of race and racism, both on a regional and national level?*

Many white denominations were divided into separate churches in previous centuries, usually along north/south geographical lines, because of positions on slavery or racial segregation. Some of these same divided churches have also fairly recently been reunited. Some other denominations that were historically separated along black and white racial lines have also been recently united as a single church.³ *Has your denomination been part of a merger that reflects an effort to overcome past racial divisions?*