



Resolutions To Action

LCWR Global Concerns Committee

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LCWR Assembly Confronts Racism and Religious Life

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EXPERIENCE

During the course of the 2016 LCWR assembly in Atlanta, *Embracing the Mystery: Living Transformation*, we, the members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, affirmed a resolution committing

ourselves to examine the root causes of injustice, particularly racism, and our own complicity as congregations, and to work to effect systemic change . . . and We pledge prayer, education, and advocacy and commit to using our collective voice, resources, and power in collaboration with others to establish justice which reflects God's abundant love and desire that all may have life.

This set the context for what was to become a powerfully moving moment as we listened to Dr. Shannon Dee Williams provide an overview on the history of racism and US religious life.

The pain and discrimination suffered by women of color who joined religious congregations in this country became a palpably present truth which could not be denied. The words of one of the responders, Dawn Tomazewski, SP, resounded in our hearts: ". . . not only does our country need healing but also our congregations. I want to make amends with these women; I need to make amends with these women."

Following some quiet moments of reflection, we were invited to write an example of when we, individually and as predominately white congregations, had not been welcoming to women of color. Our papers became a chain which extended down the assembly aisle. Our prayer was one of lamentation which ended with the plea for forgiveness and the breaking of the chain.

The experience was an awareness-raising, heart-rending moment at the time; but more than this, the images of forming and breaking the chain remain as a sign of our commitment to continue the work of healing racism within ourselves, our congregations, and our country.

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Eight years ago the United States elected its first president of color. Many thought this would be the beginning of a post-racial era. It was not. Racism, both at the individual and systemic levels, continues to permeate our society. We need to look no further than Ferguson, Cleveland, Baltimore, or Minneapolis or to the inequities in the healthcare system, growing wealth disparities, unequal educational opportunities, the modern-day slavery of human trafficking, or those victimized

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by unjust environmental practices, to know that systemic racism is alive and active.

ISIS and other hate groups around the world are on the increase. Recently the KKK leafleted one of our own quiet neighborhoods in South East Michigan with hate messages. Proposals for exclusionary immigration policies and the accompanying wall-building are attempts to close out the "other" and protect white privilege. Both are an indication of stubborn racist attitudes and systems.

The increasing exposure of these manifestations of racism by the media is encouraging. More public discourse on racism is needed if society hopes to address the underlying issues perpetuating racist behavior.

REFLECTION

LCWR and other groups are delving into the root causes of injustice, often coming up with racism as one of the stubborn strains. Catholic social teaching and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are among the foundational documents that speak to the value and dignity of the human person.

A more recent voice addressing the prevalence of racism is that of Pope Francis. Speaking about the 2014 World Cup he said, "To win, we must overcome individualism, selfishness, all forms of racism, intolerance and manipulation of people. One cannot be a self-centered player and experience success." In July 2014, he challenged us to examine US immigration policy. Speaking of immigrants in this country, the pope stated, "Many of their rights are

violated, they are obliged to separate from their families and, unfortunately, continue to be the subject of racist and xenophobic attitudes."

Protecting white privilege is often behind exclusionary behavior. It is frequently easier to deplore racism and its effects than to take responsibility for the privileges some of us receive as a result of it. Key to dealing with white privilege is the courage to own it, and the willingness to learn to be accountable to people of color. Janet Helms, quoting Beverly Turner, in an article for Unitarian Universalists says,

The task for whites is to develop a positive white identity based on reality not on assumed superiority. In order to do that each person must become aware of his or her whiteness, accept it as personally and socially significant, and learn to feel good about it. Not in the sense of Klan members "white pride" but in the context of a commitment to a just society." (Beverly Daniel Tatum, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria Table?")

Our hope for a better future lies in the rise of a deeper commitment to anti-racist work by increasing numbers of individuals and groups engaged in consciousness-raising discussions examining white privilege, systemic racism, and racist practices which will lead to concrete actions for justice in solidarity with people of color.

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ACTION

- Learn to live as multi-racial people. Respect and welcome differing perspectives.
- Be an accountable ally to people of color.
- Research and own your congregation's complicity in racism.
- Work to change racist institutions, including ones of which you are a part.
- Seek out multi-cultural experiences.
- Read books written by people of color

A SMALL SAMPLE OF WRITTEN RESOURCES:

- *The Invention of Wings*, Sue Monk Kidd
- *When Race Becomes Real: Black and White Writers Confront Their Personal Histories*, Bernestine Singley, editor
- *A Peoples History of the United States*, Howard Zinn
- *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* -- a novel on the criminal justice system, Bryan Stevenson
- "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," Peggy McIntosh
- *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, Bryan Massingale
- *Arc of Justice*, Kevin Boyle
- *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria Table?* Beverly Daniel Tatum