



# **Erasing Racism**

## **A Spiritual Practice**

**The Rev. Dr. Jacqueline J. Lewis**

# Talking About Race

## 10 Important Things to Know

- 1. Race Matters.** Every single day. We live in a world built on racial hierarchy; every person of color is raced several times a day. To deny that fact disables us from collaborating to create a new world. The truth really will set us free.
- 2** Never ever say, “I don’t see color.” You do, you absolutely do. And you have attached meaning to what you see because you grew up in a race-based society.
- 3** If a person of color thinks it’s about race, it is about race. We bring our stories to every interaction; and those stories inform our experience. ALL of us bring our racial story/racial ethnic identity to every interaction. If you want to be an accomplice in the fight to build a racially just society, listen for the truth in the experience of others. Make it the starting point of the conversation/interaction. “Tell me more...” might be the best response
- 4** There is power in an “I” Statement. You own your feelings “hurt, embarrassed, confused, disappointed...” and how you feel is a certain kind of fact. This mode of communication can be used with friends, intimates, family, and colleagues.

*When I hear that kind of language at the dinner table, I feel worried that the values we say we hold are being undermined.*

*When my emails and calls go unanswered, I feel undervalued as a colleague. In the present context, I can’t help but wonder if this has to do with race.*

- 5** In some cultures, direct, straightforward, to-the-point speech is valued.  
**To create a culture in which we dismantle racism, directness is required.**
  - State the fact/Observe behavior:  
*I did not get an invitation to that meeting.*
  - Ask a clarifying question, listen. Ask another if needed:  
*Why did you leave me off the list?*
  - Describe the consequence (Using the “I” statement):  
*When this happens, I feel hurt and undervalued.*
  - Ask for the preferred behavior:  
*Going forward, I ask you to use the distribution list with my name on it so I can better collaborate with our team.*

**6** If you see something racist, experience something racist, say something. Even if you feel awkward, speaking-up is an act of resistance. You giving voice to the episode and its impact will change the story. This will take practice; your family will be embarrassed if you call it out.

**7** When you have injured someone around the issues of race, apologize. Your intention has nothing to do with your impact.

*“I am sorry” matters much more than “I didn’t mean to.”*

**8** Make this your mantra: *Thank you for telling me.*

**9** You will make mistakes, say it wrong, get it wrong. Try again. Keep learning. Ask for feedback. AND LISTEN.

*I can see that I’ve hurt you; and I’m sorry. Can you tell me more?*

*How could this have gone better?*

**10** Talk about race/racism with your peeps. Don’t pretend the world isn’t on fire—it is. If you make race/racism a normal part of your conversation routine, you will be more likely to approach the difficult moments when something needs to be called out. Invite your friends into a period of reflection on racial dynamics in the arts, in television, in music.

*Let’s talk about race in that episode of Perry Mason. How many Black characters are there in the drama? What does that say?*



## **Getting Started**

### **Exercises for Small Groups**

- 1.** For myself, “I have a dream that someday...” And for my community, my dream is...
  
- 2.** Read these texts, and ask, “What does this say about the future story of this nation?”

Genesis 2.4–3.7	Amos 5.21–24
Exodus 3.1–14	Matthew 28.16–20
Exodus 16.1–30	Luke 1.26–38
Isaiah 65.17–25	
  
- 3.** Imagine that the life of this community is an ongoing story. If you are writing this chapter in the story of this church, what is its title?
  
- 4.** What is the title of the next chapter?
  
- 5.** What will help write that chapter and what will hinder it?
  
- 6.** If values are defined as the way we do what we do, make a list of the values you see lived out in this community, and how they are expressed in behaviors. In other words, what are the norms by which we live out our values?
  
- 7.** If a vision is a picture of a preferred reality, what is your vision for this community?
  
- 8.** What do we need in order to fulfill this call in terms of Resources? Money? Staff? Volunteers? Space?
  
- 9.** What will **you** do in order to fulfill God’s call on our lives?





## **Naming and Shifting the Culture of Your Community**

Questions for your Staff, Board, and Vision Team

- 1.** What are the stated norms in our system? What are the implicit ones?
  
- 2.** What is the theology undergirding the norms?
  
- 3.** How do these norms enable multiracial and multicultural connecting?
  
- 4.** How do these norms impinge or inhibit this connecting?
  
- 5.** List the new norms that need to be in place in order for a multiracial, multicultural community to grow and thrive?
  
- 6.** Brainstorm what we need to do to get the norms in place.
  
- 7.** What norms do we need in order to affirm the racial/ethnic, cultural, gender, and sexual diversity on our team?
  
- 8.** What norms need to be in place in order for us to achieve our five-year vision?
  
- 9.** What norms need to be in place in order to affirm our commitment to racial/ethnic, gender/sexuality, and economic diversity?
  
- 10.** What behavioral covenant can we write to express these norms?  
How can we communicate this covenant to our congregation?



## Culture Shift

Systems and communities become racially and culturally diverse with purposefulness and intentionality. Most congregations believe they are welcoming, but often norms, practices, and procedures do not shift. We continue to behave in ways shaped by the past. We let our habits guide us rather than the behaviors for the new vision. Developing a new culture requires creating new norms in conversation with new people.

For example, how do we welcome everyone just as they are and encourage healing and transformation? How are we vulnerable with appropriate boundaries? How are we permission-giving and conscious of the need for balance in our work and in our personal lives? Use *Naming and Shifting the Culture of Your Community* on page 8 to prompt a discussion about your system.

## Change Management

Change is necessary for personal growth and institutional health. We know this intellectually, yet we are capable of resisting change even when that change is in our own or our institution's best interests. In faith communities healthy change is often viewed as a repudiation or rejection of how we have done things in the past or of what we value. In this sense, change challenges the status quo, calls us into unfamiliar territory, and requires of us new ways of behaving. Change can be disorienting and, if not managed well, can generate anxiety and conflict.

As the world around them changes many congregations are living in the place of disorientation and anxiety. Under these circumstances, they often make ill informed decisions, seek out someone to blame for a difficult situation, or live in denial about mounting problems. Most faith traditions accept the premise that God creates and recreates, makes all things new and moves us toward transformation. This faith stands in contrast to the fear and anxiety that makes congregations resistant to change.

Systems and communities can find themselves tossed about between nostalgia for the past and an urgent need for a compelling vision for the future. Understanding the dynamics of change is a fundamental leadership capacity.

## A Few Principles of Change

- If change is to occur there must be "enough" discomfort, pain, sense of urgency or awareness of threat in the system to motivate the change. However, pain needs hope to create possibilities, otherwise the system and its leaders can become immobilized.
- Leaders are rewarded for making people happy. By making people happy, we decrease the motivation for change. Leaders need to create safety rather than comfort to explore needed change.
- We tend to do the things we know how to do, are comfortable doing, and like to do, even though they have nothing to do with what needs to be done.
- We cannot change the system without changing the norms. If we change the norms, we will not likely get rewarded because we are asking people to behave differently.



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