



A History of Racism in the United States

SESSION 3

| 1954–1973: Movement Time: From Overt to Covert

Goal for the Session

To examine how social movements, along with landmark cases like *Brown*, changed both how people of color interacted with U.S. laws and policies and the ways racism was manifested from overt and legally sanctioned to covert cultural and systemic racism often invisible to the dominant society.

Preparing for the Session

- If participants are keeping journals with definitions of terms relevant to racism, read this session and make note of terms you will want them to add to their journals: for example, the terms “redlining,” “steering,” and “blockbusting,” or the code language terms from the Participant Handout.
- Over the next section of the time line begun in the first session, put the heading “1954–1973: Movement Time: From Overt to Covert” and prepare poster board strips with the major heads “The Rise of the Middle Class” and “Movements for Change.” Have two colors of self-stick notes available (or colored index cards and tape).
- On separate index cards or pieces of paper, print the coded language terms from the Participant Handout. If necessary, repeat some of the terms or add others you can think of so that there will be enough for each participant to get one.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Read Scripture
- Pray together

EXPLORING

- Exploring barriers to access to the middle class
- Agitation versus COINTELPRO

RESPONDING

- Poster children for covert racism

CLOSING

- Pray together
- Preparing for the next session

- Make copies of the fourth and final session’s Participant Handout to distribute at the end of this session.
- On newsprint or a chalk or whiteboard, print the quotes from the Participant Handout used in activities 3 and 4.
- Gather paper and colored felt-tipped markers for the “Responding” activity.

- Read over the session and decide if there are discussion activities where it would be productive to use Eric Law's Mutual Invitation. See session 1 for directions.

Materials Needed

- Bibles and hymnals
- Newsprint sheets and markers
- Prepared newsprint sheets and index cards or self-stick notes
- Paper and colored felt-tipped markers
- Time line (see preparation)
- Paper and pencils or pens
- Copies of the fourth session's Participant Handout to distribute at the end of this session

Teaching Tip

These final two sessions in the study of the history of racism cover the recent history that many of us have experienced. For some in your group, the events of the civil rights movement are lived history. For others who are younger, these events may be dim childhood memories or even just history they learned in school. Be prepared for contrasting perspectives that are shaped by actual experiences of the events being considered.

Opening (5 minutes)

If participants have been creating a journal of terms, invite them to scan the Participant Handout and record short definitions for the terms "redlining," "steering," and "blockbusting," or the code language terms from the Participant Handout as well as any others with which they are unfamiliar, such as the Siegfried line.

1. Read Scripture

Read aloud Isaiah 11:6–9. Remind the group that this biblical vision of the peaceable kingdom is a beautiful picture of what we might someday experience when God's realm comes into its fullness. But Martin Luther King Jr. had another vision, one that could be achievable on this earth—that of the beloved community. He viewed the civil rights movement as a microcosm of that community, where people of all races, classes, and walks of life live an abundant life in God's *shalom*.

2. Pray Together

Pray the following, or a prayer of your own choosing:

Gracious God, we look forward to that time when the earth will be full of the knowledge of you, as the waters cover the sea. Yet we know that we can seek to realize the beloved community now, where all persons can experience the abundance of life in equality. That community will not come without hard work or without a cost. May your troubling, energizing Spirit be with us as we continue to explore that which blocks the beloved community—racism. **Amen.**

Exploring (20 minutes)

3. Exploring Barriers to Access to the Middle Class

Ask to see a show of hands of those participants who were able themselves, or whose parents were able, to take advantage of the GI Bill following World War II, the Korean War, or the Vietnam War. Ask a volunteer to explain what was available in the way of benefits for college or for low-interest loans. Divide into three smaller groups, with one to look at white flight, one at college admission, and one at interstate highways. On the two colors of self-stick notes or index cards, ask them to record the impact on the white dominant group and the impact on African Americans, and attach the notes to the poster-board strip labeled "Rise of the Middle Class." Ask each group to share their information, including definitions of any terms that might be unfamiliar.

Teaching Tip: Note that the writers of the Participant Handout observe the following: "The writers will focus on African American and white class mobility, as the status of Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans varied according to location and is less well documented." If your group includes persons from one of these groups, invite them to give any information they may have about their own experiences.

Invite participants to respond to the following from the Participant Handout:

- "Never will a white man in America have to live in a ghetto hemmed in by court-approved legal documents, trapped by an invisible wall of hate much more formidable than the Siegfried line."
- "James Baldwin called urban renewal 'Negro removal.'"

4. Agitation versus COINTELPRO

Call the attention of the group to the quote from the Participant Handout that you posted on newsprint:

Some good friends of the cause we represent fear agitation. They say: "Do not agitate – do not make noise; work." They add, "Agitation is destructive or at best negative—what is wanted is positive constructive work." Such honest critics mistake the function of agitation . . . agitation is a necessary evil to tell of the ills of the Suffering. Without it many a nation has been lulled to false security and preened itself with virtues it did not possess.

—W. E. B. DuBois

Then ask someone to briefly describe COINTELPRO as defined in the Participant Handout. Ask for volunteers to form a panel discussion. Assign the following roles: W. E. B. DuBois, an FBI agent, a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a white middle-class homeowner in the South, and an African American parent (if your group is small, choose two contrasting roles). Ask the remaining group members to caucus for a minute or two to formulate questions about the role of agitation in the American scene during this time period and then have the panel address those questions from the group. Follow with general discussion.

Ask: W. E. B. DuBois observed that "agitation is a necessary evil to tell of the ills of the Suffering. Without it many a nation has been lulled to false security and preened itself with virtues it did not possess." How do you respond to that? Did the agitation around the civil rights movement and other related movements represent a necessary evil?

Responding (15 minutes)

5. Poster Children for Covert Racism

Turn the stack of prepared index cards face down and hand each participant one card. In turn, ask each person to turn over the card, read the term aloud for the group, and respond quickly with whatever that term elicits. Ask them to think (but not to name) other more overtly racist terms used to describe racial groups. Then ask:

- The writers contend that we have moved to a time of more covert racist expression as opposed to overt racism. What are the damaging aspects of each form, in your opinion? Would you say overt or covert racism is more damaging? Why?

- Do you agree or disagree that these terms (and others) are coded language?

Call the attention of the group to the two examples the writers use of the ads using Willie Horton and Harold Ford Jr. Say that in a real sense, these ads were as damaging as having one's poster on the post office wall. Distribute sheets of paper and colored felt-tipped markers. Remind the group that these ads used the image of a black man and a white woman (or in the case of Horton, his crime against a white woman) to exploit racial fears in order to get a candidate elected. Invite them to think of similar images of racial fears that might be similarly exploited, and make a "wanted" poster that illustrates that fear.

Teaching Tip: It's not necessary for participants to draw these posters; they can use words or phrases instead, writing ad copy for their posters. But for adults who shy away from anything that smacks of artistic expression, sometimes just using color can free up a more creative response.

When participants have completed their posters, invite those who are willing to share them. Then remind them that there is another kind of poster child. Those old enough to remember the early March of Dimes posters will recall that a photogenic child, usually one in braces, adorned the posters of the campaign against polio. This kind of poster child is an idealized, stereotypical image. Ask:

- Can a poster child for a particular racial group be an example of covert racism? Is such an idealized image damaging? Why or why not?
- How does coded language (or do images) obscure the ways communities of color are impacted by racism?

Closing (5 minutes)

6. Pray Together

Ask participants to consider in silence what they have heard and experienced in this session. First ask them to bring to mind anything that was a revelation for them, new information that perhaps changed their perspective on racism. They can name these insights out loud, or in silence in their own thoughts. Then ask that they bring to mind anything that was troubling or disturbing, and to name that aloud if they so choose. Close with the following, or your own words:

Gracious God, you have promised that where two or three are gathered together, there also will be your Spirit. We give thanks for the movement of your Spirit in our midst, energizing us and opening our eyes and ears to new insights. And we thank you for the troubling movement of the Spirit, stirring us up, disturbing our preconceptions, uncovering pain and injustice. **Amen.**

7. Preparing for the Next Session

Distribute copies of the Participant Handout for session 4 and have participants agree to read it before the next session meets.

Teaching Alternatives

- **Gallery of resistance:** If you started a gallery of resistance in the last session, continue to add to it with entries about Yuri Kochiyama or the feminist movement (from the text box), or some of the following from the text: the Howard University Law School; the NAACP Legal Defense Fund; the Highlander Center in Knoxville, Tennessee; W. E. B. DuBois, and Howard Thurman. Assign small groups to read the informa-

tion in the text boxes. Then have them create posters with the information and add them to the gallery.

- **Research interrelated movements.** Divide the group into small groups, with each one choosing one of the movements in the text box to research. Have available information from the library, or ask participants to do an Internet search on the movement. Encourage small groups not only to seek basic information about each group, but how it related to other movements of the time. Have the groups present brief reports on their findings.
- **View the history of the civil rights movement.** For groups with participants who are not old enough to have experienced the civil rights movement, plan to schedule times to view the PBS series *Eyes on the Prize*, listed in the additional resources for session 1.

About the Writer

Martha Bettis-Gee is associate for child advocacy in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).