



A History of Racism in the United States

SESSION 4

| 1973–Present: Post-Movement Time: Racism Redefined

Goal for the Session

To explore a few contemporary manifestations of racism and to reflect on the ways in which racism continues to manifest itself in our everyday lives.

Preparing for the Session

- If participants have been keeping journals with definitions of terms relevant to racism, read this session and make note of any final terms you will want them to add to their journals.
- Print and post the following: “Rosa sat so Martin could march so Obama could run so our children could fly.”
- Read over the first two paragraphs of the Participant Handout and print on newsprint some of the statistics the writers have cited.
- Over this last section of the time line begun in the first session, put the heading “1973 to Present” and prepare poster-board strips with the major heads “Criminalization and Legalized Disenfranchisements,” “Anti-Arab Racism,” “Immigration,” and “Neocolonialism.” (Note that we are dividing the major head in the Participant Handout into separate headings.) For this session, have self-stick notes in the same color you have been using for the alternative history (or colored index cards and tape).

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Read Scripture
- Pray together

EXPLORING

- Review data
- Explore data in small groups
- Compare and contrast racist and antiracist multiculturalism

RESPONDING

- Review the time line

CLOSING

- Read Scripture and reflect on history
- Pray together

- If possible, set up four tables in your space and place newsprint sheets flat on each table, along with colored felt-tipped markers. On the newsprint sheet on each table, print one of the four headings above.
- 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
- Newsprint sheets and markers
- Tables for work groups
- Prepared newsprint sheets and index cards or self-stick notes for time line
- Time line (see preparation)
- Paper and pencils or pens

Opening (5 minutes)

As participants arrive, invite them to add some final terms to their journals, including “beaner hunting” and “meritocracy.” They may also want to review the definitions of neocolonialism and manifest destiny. You may also suggest that they add to their journals any lingering questions they may have about the history of racism in the United States.

1. Read Scripture

Tell the group that you are going to read again the Scripture with which you began session 1: Psalm 78:1–8. As you read, invite those who have been in attendance for these four sessions to reflect silently on what they have heard and learned.

2. Pray Together

God of history, you know our stories and how they have shaped who we are. We know that history reflects the story of the one who is doing the telling, and that our national history is incomplete until we weave together the strands of the powerless as well as the powerful, those in the margins as well as those who see themselves at center stage. As we begin this session in which we look at our most recent history, keep us aware that all history is your history, and it tells not only the painful and beautiful narratives of many peoples, but also the story of your loving, liberating way with your people. **Amen.**

Exploring (25 minutes)

3. Review Data

Call the attention of participants to the statement you posted. Say that these words, or something similar, have been part of the common discourse in conversation and

on the Internet since the election of President Obama. Ask the group to consider the statistics you posted. Ask: Some people have been describing the time we are living in as postracial. In the light of these statistics, would you agree or disagree? Would you agree or disagree that historic racism still casts a long shadow?

4. Explore Data in Small Groups

Divide the group into four smaller groups and assign one group to each of the four tables. Ask the group to read the information in the Participant Handout related to the topic or heading listed on the newsprint on the sheet. Then ask them to use a black marker to print on the newsprint sheet any relevant facts they want to lift up for the entire group. After allowing small groups to work for about five minutes, tell the group that they will now rotate among the four tables, reading what each group recorded on the newsprint. If they have comments about the information, they should jot them on the sheet using a green marker. Any questions they have should be recorded in red. Also, they should indicate with a check mark facts they think should be transferred to the time line.

Allow several minutes for this process. Then call the whole group back together and discuss, encouraging persons to raise questions they recorded or make comments to which they would like the total group to respond. Small groups can then return to their original tables and transfer to self-stick notes the facts, questions, and insights they believe should be added to the time line.

5. Compare and Contrast Racist and Antiracist Multiculturalism

Invite the group to respond to the following: What is the myth of meritocracy? Do you believe it is a myth, or fact?

Call the attention of participants to the writers’ assertions about racist multiculturalism. Discuss the following:

- The writers assert that “Every institution has layers of its identity. The easiest layer to change is personnel. The deepest and most difficult layer to change is that of mission.” Can you name particular institutions where the culture and power dynamics have remained the same, regardless of the placement of people of color

and women in positions within the institutions? What have you observed about the church?

- The writers have observed that this is an example of racist multiculturalism. Agree or disagree?

Responding (15 minutes)

6. Review the Time Line

Invite the group to move to the time line and read the notations made over the course of the four sessions. If space is tight, you might instead ask several volunteers in turn to read aloud the notes for a particular heading. Say that in this session, when the group has been dealing with relatively recent events in our national story, the group was recording events in only one color. It is an easier task to transform our view of current events in order to include an alternative view, although it still takes some hard work. One recent event that is more difficult to view with a broader lens is the attacks of 9/11. Discuss the following:

- The writers cite the words of comedian Dean Obeidallah, “I used to be a white guy. After September 11th, I became an Arab.” Where have you seen other instances of this same shift in the public perception?

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Read Scripture and Reflect on History

Tell the group that they will again read the Scripture from the opening activity and reflect on where we have been, where we have come from, and where we are now. Read again Psalm 78:1–8. Then invite the group to recall the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 15, 1963. Say:

The Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church had been used as a meeting place for civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and others. In early fall of 1963, tensions escalated when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Congress on Racial Equality joined in a campaign to register African American voters.

On Sunday morning at 10:22 a.m., just as Sunday school was concluding, a bomb exploded in the basement of the church, killing eleven-year-old Denise McNair, and fourteen-year-olds Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley.

Invite the group to reflect on the history of racism and the “dark sayings from of old” that have cast a long shadow across our nation’s history. What are events and consequences from the history of racism that have shaped who we are? What must we remember and not hide from our children? Invite the group to name what they remember from this study that should be brought to light and never forgotten.

Then say:

In January of 2009, two little girls of color, Sasha and Malia Obama, moved into the White House, signaling a momentous step for America.

Invite the group to reflect on the significance of this event. What glorious deeds of God must we tell to coming generations? Again invite participants to share signs of hope for the future, as well as any caveats they may offer along the long road still ahead and the hard work of dismantling racism that remains to be done.¹

8. Pray Together

Pray the following:

Gracious God, we give thanks for the church, where Christians can come together to have dialogue about issues that often remain unexamined under the surface of our lives together. In particular, we give thanks for this time together, for:

(allow time for participants to name things for which they are thankful)

Also we offer up to you continuing concerns, places in our lives where racism is a stubborn and intractable influence. We ask you to move us as we seek to address:

(allow time for concerns to be named)

Send your Spirit, make us attentive to its movement, and energize us for your work. **Amen.**

Teaching Alternatives

- **Complete the gallery of resistance.** Use the information in the text box to complete the gallery of resistance. The groups and individuals named in the box about spoken word as resistance may be unfamiliar to your group but can be found by Googling the names and printing out information. Encourage the group to produce a final “portrait” for the gallery, a poster on which each participant names what he or

she is doing or can do to be a part of a movement of resistance to racism.

- **Examine congressional hearings for Supreme Court confirmation.** By the time your group engages in this study, the confirmation hearings for Sonia Sotomayor may have taken place. If so, the group might examine the transcripts of both her confirmation hearing and those of Justice John Roberts to see if there are differences in the kinds of questions directed to each candidate. To what might these differences be attributed? The group might research news stories, Internet postings, and talk radio to examine the rhetoric used to discredit her. What does the group make of Newt Gingrich's assertion that Sotomayor is racist? According to the definition of racism adopted for this study, do you think that epitaph applies? On what did Gingrich base his assertion?
- **Debate restoring civil rights.** Divide into two groups to debate the following: Resolved: The civil rights of convicted felons should be restored when they have completed serving their prison terms.

Groups should choose a debate team of one or two persons. Assign the affirmative and the negative positions arbitrarily to the debaters. The remainder of the groups can serve as audience and judge to determine which position made the most compelling case.

- **Narratives of 9/11.** Since most participants will have memories of the attacks of September 11, 2001, divide them into pairs and invite them in turn to tell their memories of that day to their partner. Then invite them to respond quickly to the following: "When I hear the word 'Arab,' I feel . . ." "When I hear the word 'Muslim,' I feel . . ." Ask the total group: How has 9/11 changed your views of these groups? Do you think the war on terror has exploited racism in the service of galvanizing the country's response? Why or why not?
- **Naming racism in your community.** Most communities in the U.S. have had incidents of acts of violence against people of color in the not-so-distant past. Make a list of incidences of racism in your community and share information. What is unknown? How is this remembered? How should it be remembered?

About the Writer

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

Endnote

1. This closing Bible study is based on a devotion offered by the Reverend Garland Pierce, of the National Council of Churches of Christ, at the meeting of the Committee on Families and Children of the Council on the morning after the election of President Barack Obama.