



Why Is It So Difficult to Talk about Racism?

There are many reasons why it is difficult to talk about race and racism. There are also many reasons why we must and should have this conversation.

Goal for the Session

Participants will explore and discuss the reasons behind our reluctance to engage in fruitful dialogue about race and racism. The session will also provide opportunities to dispel common misconceptions about racism and the responsibilities of all Christians to intentionally engage in this difficult dialogue.

Preparing for the Session

- This study is part of the Racism Study Pack. Your group may use this study alone, although we suggest you use it along with the other studies in the pack. The following is the suggested order of the study pack, although you may study in any order your group chooses.
- Why Is It So Difficult to Talk about Racism?
- Racism 101
- The Bible and Racism
- A History of Racism in the United States
- White Privilege
- Is Affirmative Action Still Needed?
- Do Segregated Churches Imply Racism?
- This one-session study does not assume participants have arrived having read the Participant Handout. However, it is highly recommended that the leader either e-mail studies to participants the week before

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Prayer
- Setting the ground rules
- Word association

ENGAGING

- Case study
- Recognizing systemic racism
- Understanding the difficulties of racial dialogue

RESPONDING

- Future steps

CLOSING

- Prepare for the next session
- Silent meditation

each session studied, or make copies of the upcoming session's handout and distribute them to participants at the end of each session.

- Distribute copies of the Participant Handout for this session either the week before it begins or at the beginning of the session. Always have extra copies on hand for visitors or new members.
- Discussions about race and racism ideally take place with a mixed group of people representing a diverse

heritage. However, this is not always possible and having a well-planned and thoughtful discussion is a good first step. Please see "Additional Teaching Tips" at the end of this Leader's Guide for suggestions.

- Prayerfully read through both the Participant Handout and the Leader's Guide. Make notes in the areas that you feel will be challenging. If necessary, write out a script.
- Identify your own struggles with race and racism in order to avoid being drawn into any negative assumptions.
- Pray for yourself and the participants.
- Write out terms and questions on newsprint.

Materials Needed

- Pens
- Paper
- Newsprint
- Tape
- Markers
- Participant Handouts

Teaching Tips

- For any fruitful dialogue to occur there has to be a safe environment. Be careful that no one in the group attacks another participant who expresses a negative opinion. This is a time for open dialogue.
- If there is a single person of color, do not assume that this person represents or speaks for all people from their racial group.
- Keep all of the work produced on newsprint and tape it where it will be visible for the next session.
- If your group plans on using all the studies in the study pack on racism, consider buying journals for participants or suggesting that they all keep one. Definitions of key terms, new insights and resources learned, questions raised, and a written record of feelings can help participants make this experience fruitful and lasting.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

You may pray the prayer below or one of your own choosing.

Loving God, in times of struggle and strife you are present.

We ask for your Spirit to be within and among us as we engage in a painful and uncomfortable dialogue and move toward reconciliation. Give us strength to speak truthfully in your love and patience in our listening. We lift up all of our distortions to you so that your creation may be made whole. **Amen.**

2. Setting the Ground Rules

The dialogue that will happen during the course of this session and the ones to follow is complex. It is recommended that in order to navigate around the complexities of these issues the group establish some ground rules. Below are some recommended rules, but you may wish to include others, according to your group dynamics.

- What is spoken in the room must remain confidential.
- Listen without judgment or defensiveness.
- All voices must be heard, regardless of their stance.
- Invite participants to commit to this ongoing discussion. This session is just the beginning.

You may create a covenant with these rules or write them on a sheet of newsprint that should remain visible throughout all the sessions.

3. Word Association

Write the words *race* and *racism* on a sheet of newsprint or chalkboard or whiteboard. If it is possible, use newsprint to enable continued use throughout the upcoming sessions for comparison and revision. Mention to the participants that these definitions are a work in progress. Pass out a sheet of paper and pen or pencil. Invite participants to write down words they associate with *race* and *racism*. After a few minutes, ask participants to share their responses. Record their answers and ask the questions below.

- Are there any surprises?
- What kinds of feelings do race and racism generate?
- What kinds of questions do the collective responses generate?
- Are acts of racism intentional?

Exploring (20 minutes)

4. Case Study

Invite participants to pair off and read page 2 of the Participant Handout that describes the study conducted by MIT and the University of Chicago. After reading about the study and the following section about definitions of racism, ask participants to answer the following questions together and write down any new questions or insights.

- What is problematic with defining racism based solely on intentional practices of discrimination?
- What is problematic with defining racism based on disadvantage rather than the system that contributes to such circumstances?
- What is the new definition of racism that the author is proposing? How does this change our understanding of race and racism?

5. Recognizing Systemic Racism

- Make a list of institutions such as schools, congregations, and businesses on a sheet of newsprint. You may wish to add more. Discuss the positions that you find people of color versus white people in each of these institutions.
- Would you change your initial definition from the previous activity? If so, how? If no, why?
- Invite participants to come together as a group and go through the questions they discussed in Activity 4. If possible, use the same sheets of newsprint from the beginning of the session or have it visible so that participants can see the revisioning process of these two words.

6. Understanding the Difficulties of Racial Dialogue

Invite participants to read the rest of the Participant Handout. As a group, go through the following ques-

tions. Write participants' responses under each question. This will not only aid those who are visual learners but will also help to prevent misunderstandings or intentions of the participants.

- How did you learn to identify yourself as someone of a specific race? How did it feel?

If your group is all white, explain that for many people of color this is usually a traumatic experience and the beginning of the realization that you will not have the same opportunities as the white majority.

- How does the "myth of meritocracy" contribute to the difficulty of racial dialogue?
- How do historical accounts contribute to the difficulty of racial dialogue? Point out the importance of a balanced understanding of our history. It not only includes the painful past but also the acknowledgment of those who took steps to resist racism.

Responding (5 minutes)

7. Future Steps

On a sheet of newsprint write "Future Steps." Invite participants to share what we can do as a faith community to continue the work to combat racism. Below are some possibilities.

- Take comfort in the promise of Scripture that we are all created in God's image.
- Speak truthfully about race with the assurance of God's forgiving and healing love.
- Commit to be part of the upcoming sessions on racism.
- Begin to be mindful of privileges held by whites and the lack of privilege for people of color.
- Share what you learned from this session with at least one other person who was not present.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Prepare for the Next Session

If your group is continuing the study, distribute copies of next session's handout and commit to reading it before the session.

9. Silent Meditation

Invite participants to silently meditate on the author's statement on page 5 of the Participant Handout, "Diversity is not the problem we have to solve; it is the context in which God invites us to live with love." Read slowly and carefully.

Teaching Alternatives

- Invite participants to view the movie *Crash*. Discuss the race relations presented in the movie and how this informs our understanding of race.
- Discuss ways that your congregation can celebrate diversity. It may be in the form of worship, fellowship, or mission.

About the Writer

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For More Information

Please look through the endnotes in the accompanying Participant Handout. There are many excellent resources listed there. Others include:

Brian K. Blount and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, eds., *Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

James Echols, ed., *I Have a Dream: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Future of Multicultural America* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

Additional Teaching Tips for Various Types of Groups

Leading a session on racism is ideally accomplished with a diverse group of participants representing a variety of heritages. But unfortunately this is not always possible or realistic. Given these circumstances we have provided tips for facilitating these sessions in a fruitful manner.

General Guidelines

- Remind participants that these sessions are a starting point. The work to challenge racism is ongoing. Remind yourself that conversations dealing with racism are difficult and uncomfortable. This is normal.
- All voices need to be heard and respected. Be mindful that no one is targeted for their views. Encourage everyone to listen to each other and the writers of the sessions without being defensive.
- Be mindful that the conversation stays on topic with time to share experience, analysis, and hopes for the future.
- Identify your own struggles with race and racism in order to check any negative assumptions or stereotypes you may have.

All-White Congregations

- Be alert that the conversation stays on topic and does not downplay the effect of racism.
- An all-white conversation may provide a forum for an honest expression of views. Issues of white guilt and denial are normal if the discussion is fruitful. Address these issues and avoid the tendency to downplay or ignore them.
- Racism cannot be and is not an issue only for people of color. Encourage participants to take ownership.

Primarily White Group with a Few People of Color

- Be alert to statements or questions that ask the person of color to make a sweeping generalization for all people of color. For example: What do people of color need or want?
- Racism must be challenged together by people of color and white people. Watch for manifestations of white guilt in the form of denial.
- If possible, have two facilitators, one white and one person of color.
- This group makeup can be tricky because the power dynamic so closely mirrors what people of color experience in many aspects of their lives. Be mindful that the people of color in the room don't feel pressured to "educate" the white participants about race or racism. Also, make sure that the experiences of the people of color don't get sidetracked, downplayed, or explained away even if there is disagreement in the room.

Primarily People of Color with a Few White People

- The white participants may feel unable to express themselves openly, resulting in a lack of honesty. Be careful to keep the conversation from becoming accusatory.
- If possible, have two facilitators, one white and one person of color.

Group with All People of Color

- Facilitator must be a person of color for honest exchange.
- Not all people of color will agree about what the definitions or implications of racism are in society or in their lives, so don't assume opinions or feel the need to force consensus. Instead, call participants to a spirit of support amid different experiences, creative collaboration, and coalition building.