

Today's
Dream:
Tomorrow's
Reality



Anti-racism Education

The Level Playing Field



Why anti-racism?

This program will help answer that question. People ask, “Why anti-racism?” primarily for two reasons: First, some see race matters as a thing of the past because they do not see racism in their day-to-day lives; hence, it must not really exist anymore. Second, the word itself—“anti-racism”—sounds negative to some ears.

This program uses an activity called The Level Playing Field to help people make the connection between racism and real life. Hopefully it will make people see that to be anti-(against) racism is a good thing!

Things to consider about The Level Playing Field:

- Some that end up at the back may feel isolated or hurt, and some at the front may also feel hurt. It is important that the leader focus on the “Closing the Field” and “Conclusion” sections to process this exercise.
- This exercise is ideally used with a cross-cultural group for maximum effect. If your group is largely white and middle class you may not see a great difference in the participant positions at the end. This gives the facilitator an opportunity to lift up how the participants’ lives are affected when there is a lack of diversity. In this case, classism and the need for affirmative action to continue “leveling the playing field” can be addressed as well.
- If you are working with youth in this exercise, be care-filled; this is an age when we desperately want to “fit in,” and this exercise accents our different realities. However, please note that this can be a very difficult exercise for adults as well.
- Do not use this exercise with a large group of whites and just a few people of color, whether they are youth or adults. Do not have people try to assume someone else’s identity just for the sake of doing this exercise. This does not provide an authentic experience for the participants.



While racism is not the only “ism” that divides us, racism is the only “ism” that will be addressed in this presentation. In the United States, however, it is impossible to talk about race without also talking about class, and vice versa. In its anti-racism programs, Women of the ELCA addresses race explicitly, not exclusively.

Preparation for The Level Playing Field

1. Before you do anything else, review the program in its entirety.
2. Find the right space. You will need a large, open space. The depth of the space is essential—people will be both stepping forward and stepping back. Also consider the size of your group.

Participants begin by standing in a line, side-by-side, holding hands. Based on their responses to statements you will read, individuals will stay where they are, take a step forward, or take a step back. As the activity continues, the level of accessibility people have had to services and lifestyle will become evident. People will be forced to let go of others’ hands and become separated from one another. (Those who use wheelchairs will need to approximate how far to move forward or back, and rather than hold hands, their neighbors might rest a hand on the person’s shoulder or on the side or back of the wheelchair. Differences in participants’ mobility, whether wheelchair or otherwise, should be considered beforehand by the facilitator.)

3. Copy the history handout (the last two pages of this resource) for the participants.
4. Have one or more volunteers for reading the biblical texts.

Suggested Script

Why anti-racism?

Some people ask, Why are Women of the ELCA and the ELCA doing anti-racism education?

Because there is more than one answer to this question, we will start by sharing our ideas with each other.

Have participants discuss this question around the circle.

Distribute the history handout.

Talking about racism

Racism is not always easy to discuss. Therefore, we all need to agree to two things: First, we will listen to one another with respect. Second, we will not judge one another. Can we agree to these two things?

We will begin with a brief prayer.

Offer a short prayer. You can use the sample prayer here or another one of your choosing:

Lord of Mercy, gentle God of reconciliation, open our hearts to your leading and your mercy that we may increase our knowledge and compassion for your dominion on this earth. May we learn as your people how to best reflect your love to each other and to the world. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

This exercise uses your own experiences to illustrate institutional and systemic racism. The things being measured are not about individual choice and are not related to personality. You also will see the results of classism: This exercise also reveals the inability to access services and materials, which prevails among poor people as it does among people of color (who, due to institutional and systemic racism, are often also poor or only one generation removed from poverty). In fact, if your group is all or largely white, it will be this relationship between class differences that may be experienced.

It is important that you know that you are free to disagree with some of the things you will hear today. As we said a moment ago, we

will listen to one another with respect, and we will not judge one another. [I/we] hope, though, that by the end of this presentation, you will at least agree in principle that “Yes! The gospel calls us to stand in strong opposition to this evil and work as a community to dismantle racism.”

Two operating assumptions

Because of the importance of these assumptions, it is recommended that they be visible to all on a board or newsprint, or be part of a handout.

There are two operating assumptions that Women of the ELCA uses in its anti-racism education:

- 1 First, in the United States, we are all born into a racist society without any of us giving our permission or consent.**

What this means is that in this country, racism is an inherited feature of our society and systems. It also means that as people of God, we have the strength and power to learn just how racism works in society's institutions and systems. We want you to know that in all that Women of the ELCA does to combat and dismantle racism, you are an important partner. The work of understanding how racism works and combating and dismantling racism requires energy and commitment. We are convinced that the gospel provides just such energy for commitment.

- 2 Second, anti-racism is about more than developing sensitivities to the results of racism; it reaches deeper, into analysis and into dismantling racism as it exists in our society.**

In other words, anti-racism education is not so much a sharing of wounds and experiences as it is a powerful communal sharing of information. This results in an analysis that leads to developing real strategies. It is these strategies that provide us ways to actively resist structural racism.

These two operating assumptions undergird Women of the ELCA's anti-racism education and organizing.



The gospel calls us to anti-racism

Why is Women of the ELCA doing anti-racism education?

We believe the gospel calls us to repel racism. We believe that the love of God revealed to us through Christ's death, burial, and resurrection made us one family of humanity. Our justification has reconciled us to God and to each other. Therefore, we must learn how to recognize racism, name it, and reject it.

We believe the gospel calls us to dismantle racism. Racism divides God's people and is, therefore, an assault on the very gospel of Jesus Christ and the family of God. For as long as certain of us obtain benefits because of "race" while others are denied benefits because of "race," the image of God is broken. And like viewing ourselves in a broken mirror, there is no way to make our image whole but to replace that mirror. Being anti-racist is about replacing that mirror by building a new way of living, relating, and doing business in this world.

There are many biblical texts that can help us see this call to oppose the division and injustice of racism. Let us listen to John 17:18–23 and Ephesians 2:11–22.

If you do not use the texts recommended above, the following paragraphs will need to be changed, as appropriate.

Why anti-racism? Because racism flies in the face of our Lord's impassioned prayer. Why anti-racism? Because racism is a wall of hostility between God's people that denies the salvation of Christ.

As children of God, we are called to combat all that contradicts the gospel, and that includes racism. The call of the gospel to hate evil is a call to hate racism; therefore, we teach anti-racism.

The Level Playing Field

We are going to do an exercise now that will help us see why Women of the ELCA has anti-racism as an organizational principle and advocates anti-racism education for all its members.

Forming the Field

Ask people to form a line in the middle of the room by standing next to one another, shoulder-to-shoulder, facing the same direction. The space both in front of and behind the line should be about the same. The size of step that you will demonstrate and ask people to use will be based on how much space you have to work with in front of and behind the line. (Doing this exercise outdoors is ideal.)

Once participants have lined up, ask them to loosely hold hands. (If you only have a smaller room to work with, you can try a straddled line: have a "second row" of people line up between and behind two people in front of them. Participants would then hold the hands of the persons a bit behind or a bit in front of them.)

Ask participants to remain silent throughout the exercise. This silence is important, so you may need to remind participants to remain quiet as you go through the exercise.



Directions

Listen to the following statements. Based on your response, take one step forward, take one step back, or stay where you are. Try to keep holding each other's hands.

Level playing field statements

- 1** If your parents spoke English as a first language, move one step forward.
- 2** If, as a child, you had your own room with a door, move one step forward.
- 3** If, as a child, you had numerous age-appropriate books, move one step forward.
- 4** If you were raised in a community where the vast majority of police, politicians, and government workers were NOT of your racial group, move one step back.
- 5** If you had a parent who read to you, move one step forward.
- 6** If you have ever been denied a job or promotion because of your race, move one step back.
- 7** If you can get your hair cut in most any hair salon, move one step forward.
- 8** If you have a family member or friend who is spending time or has spent time in prison, move one step back.
- 9** If you have ever received public aid like Welfare or WIC, move one step back.
- 10** If you have never been harassed or disrespected by police because of your race, move one step forward.
- 11** If one or both of your parents never completed high school, move one step back.
- 12** If either or both of your parents are college educated, move one step forward.
- 13** If either or both of your parents have advanced degrees, move one step forward.
- 14** If you read thoroughly about the history of your race in kindergarten through twelfth grade school books, move one step forward.
- 15** If neither you nor your parents have ever been on public assistance, move one step forward.
- 16** If teachers or guidance counselors ever discouraged you from pursuing certain activities, careers, or schools that you wanted to pursue, move one step back.
- 17** If you have ever eaten government "surplus" food, move one step back.
- 18** If you, as a child, were ever told you were dirty, shouldn't touch someone's food, or shouldn't drink from the same glass because of skin color, move one step back.
- 19** If you have ever been asked if you were the secretary, maid, housekeeper, janitor, or gardener, or a subordinate of some kind, when you were the boss or homeowner, move one step back.
- 20** If you needed braces as a child but you did not get them, move one step back.
- 21** If you have ever been stopped or questioned by police or other people about your presence in a particular neighborhood, move one step back.
- 22** If your relatives of any generation were forced to leave ancestral lands, move one step back.
- 23** If your father was never unemployed, move one step forward.
- 24** If you have ever had to go to a government or privately operated food pantry to make ends meet, move one step back.
- 25** If you have relatives of any generation that have been lynched, move one step back.
- 26** If you have seen the owner of a purse (or other valuable) close it, move it, or clutch it tighter when you approached, move one step back.
- 27** If you had more than one bathroom in your house growing up, move one step forward.
- 28** If you have never been followed by a security guard in a store, move one step forward.
- 29** If while you were growing up you were regularly told you couldn't drink all the milk or eat all the food you wanted because there was not enough, move one step back.
- 30** If your parents had an inheritance from their parents of more than personal possessions, move one step forward.



- 31** If you went to private school, move one step forward.
- 32** If you or members of your family have ever lived within 30 miles of a nuclear test site, move one step back.
- 33** If you have ever been homeless, move one step back.
- 34** If you have an immediate family member who is a doctor, lawyer, professor, or other “professional,” move one step forward.
- 35** If you regularly cash checks without showing additional identification, move one step forward.
- 36** If, as a child, you vacationed outside the United States, move one step forward.
- 37** If you commonly see people of your race in positions of leadership in business, the courts, and government, move one step forward.
- 38** If most medical models for disease research and understanding are based on your racial group, move one step forward.
- 39** If you have ever been told that your religion or spiritual beliefs were strange, primitive, heathen, or just plain wrong, move one step back.

Closing the field

At the end of the exercise, ask people to look (while remaining quiet) at where they are on the playing field. Ask participants to note who is near the front and who is near the back.

Ask them how it felt to let go of others' hands. Point out that The Level Playing Field has a generational feature to it and that the things that made people step forward or step back have nothing to do with any personal decisions they made, but with their context—over which they had no control.

Optional: Ask people to run or move forward to the front wall as quickly as they can at the count of three. If outside, ask people to run or move as quickly as they can to some landmark (sidewalk or side of building).

If not running to wall, ask: “If I were to ask you all to run to this wall, who would win the race?”

Conclusion

- What did you notice while you were participating in The Level Playing Field?
- Did the exercise show us how the idea that there is a level playing field we all play on is really a myth?
- Why do you think the myth of a level playing field lives on?

Share responses as time allows.

It is important to note that not only people of color are held back on the “level playing field.” People who have lived in poverty are also made to step back from the promises of the systems of this world.

Women of the ELCA is committed to developing an anti-racist identity because myths like the level playing field have injured people’s lives. Much blaming of the victim, judgment, and name-calling is based on myths such as this.

[I/we] hope you have been encouraged to become even more involved in learning what it means for Women of the ELCA to become an anti-racist organization. There are many other things Women of the ELCA would like to share with you.

Close with a prayer. You can use the sample prayer here or another one of your choosing:

God of Unity, awaken your Spirit within your people that we may work to magnify your name and live as doers of your word. God of Healing and Salvation, provide within each of us a place for your love and mercy to live and grow. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

About the Level Playing Field: The Lutheran Human Relations Association (www.lhra.org) brought The Level Playing Field to the ELCA’s anti-racism training materials. This material was adapted from a “Horatio Alger” exercise. Joan Olsson of cultural bridges granted continued use to LHRA. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (www.elca.org) shares its anti-racism resources with the women’s organization of this church, and Women of the ELCA (womenoftheelca.org) has made its materials available to the ELCA since 1997. The ELCA and Women of the ELCA share a vision to claim and live out an anti-racist identity. Women of the ELCA has made an anti-racist identity an organizational principle, which makes it part of its constitution. Any questions about the use of these materials should be directed to Inez Torres Davis, Women of the ELCA, at 800-638-3522, extension 2428, or InezTorres.Davis@elca.org.

The history of anti-racism and Women of the ELCA

1993–1996

The mandate for Women of the ELCA's anti-racism efforts, as well as its cross-cultural programming, goes back to legislative action of the 1993 Triennial Convention. The convention actions affirmed inclusivity, called for efforts to reform policies and practices that are systemic and racist, and confirmed continued education and programs about racism.

The 1993–1996 executive board called for ongoing programs and strategy to help this organization become more cross-cultural and understand anti-racism. The board began a tradition of anti-racism education each triennium. Cross-cultural programming was established and firmly grounded within the anti-racist context.

In September 1995 a consultation of 25 Women of the ELCA participants was held. Former participants in related programming were included as well as some women from racially diverse congregations, which the ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation assisted in choosing. A strategy for the development of a program that would educate women about racism grew out of the consultation.



1996–1999

The 1996 Triennial Convention added to the earlier directives by specifically requesting education in institutional racism. Additionally, the 1996–1999 executive board directed the executive director to hire a professional to work with the organization's goal of becoming anti-racist and cross-cultural.

In April 1997 more than 100 women—many of them synodical leaders and executive board members—attended an intensive anti-racism education presentation and training. No one was asked to make a commitment to the ministry at that time. Within three months of the training, nearly 90% of those who attended made a three-year commitment to provide anti-racism presentations in their synodical organizations. This network of women was named Today's Dream: Tomorrow's Reality (TDTR).

Additional women were trained for TDTR in 1998. The Conference of Presidents had an anti-racist education component in February 1999.

1999–2002

Plenary action at the 1999 Triennial Convention directed that anti-racism education be continued as a priority through 2002 and become an organizational principle.

In 1999, Women of the ELCA received a \$50,000 grant from AAL (Aid Association for Lutherans) for the continued education of anti-racism presenters.

A November 1999 training brought in new women, as well as women who had been trained by team members but had not attended a formal training.

Today's Dream: Tomorrow's Reality



Anti-racism Education



2002–2005

Additional plenary action at the 2002 Triennial Convention adopted wording that made anti-racism part of Women of the ELCA's constitution as an organizational principle. At this same convention, new and stronger wording that claims an anti-racist identity was read for action at the 2005 Triennial Convention.

In 2002, a youth component of TDTR called "Bridging the Gap" was developed.

Also in 2002, two consultations were held with currently active members of the TDTR network. These consultations explored the existing TDTR materials to discuss which of them worked well, which didn't work as well, and what kind of learning opportunities were missing.

A planning team of eight women worked closely with staff throughout 2003 and into 2004 to determine what new TDTR materials would need to be developed and what current materials needed to be re-worked or enhanced. As a result, the TDTR materials underwent major overhauls.

The 2003 Conference of Presidents recommended that synodical organizations mirror the commitment of the executive board to anti-racism education by having anti-racism education for synodical boards, and that the executive board seek to mirror the commitment of synodical boards by having Today's Dream: Tomorrow's Reality for each executive board.

The executive board adopted these recommendations in addition to continuing its practice of having anti-racism education once a triennium.

2004 began with the final training of TDTR members in our new materials, and staff began to review, rewrite, and write new materials for 2005.

In 2005, staff began to identify what pieces of TDTR were suitable for wider distribution to the entire organization, beyond the TDTR network. Some new materials are planned as well.

2006

Women of the ELCA provided stronger language for our thirteenth organizational principle, which now reads as follows:

SECTION 13. Anti-Racist Identity

This community of women shall claim and practice an anti-racist identity and actively seek full participation and shared power in determining its mission, structure, constituency, policies, and practices.

*Again I saw all the
oppressions that are
practiced under the sun.
Look, the tears of the
oppressed—with no one
to comfort them! On the
side of the oppressors there
was power—with no one
to comfort them.*

Ecclesiastes 4:1