



# How to have helpful conversations about race in the church





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## Introduction

In 2015, ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton encouraged all ELCA Lutherans and congregations to start having conversations about race. Women of the ELCA applauds this idea; we have been having helpful conversations about racial justice since 1997.

We know some of the hazards of having conversations about race. We know far too many conversations about race fail to be helpful. This is a shame, because it takes a great deal of energy to have any conversation about race. So it makes sense to direct some of that energy to learning how to have *helpful* conversations about race.

The cornerstone of a conversation about race is who we are and whose we are. We gather as community before a forgiving and loving God. As a church, we have made certain commitments of faith to God and with each other. It is within such commitments and such graces that we are able to have helpful conversations about race.

Because I have learned much since I began this work with Women of the ELCA in 1997, I can offer some ideas before you get started with your conversation on race.

## How to use this resource

*Racial justice is part of God's justice. Racial justice advocacy is a rich journey filled with God's grace. This path provides us all opportunities for celebration and invitations to contemplate, consider, repent and pray over the possibilities God's Holy Spirit brings to us when we seek to live as racial justice advocates.*

*It would be unfair to think that any conversation about race could begin and conclude within one hour. It is best to anticipate that these conversations will start and stop, wane and collect energy within the rhythm of your community; they will do that within the time you give them.*

## Conversations about race are cyclical

Increased knowledge of racial context leads to greater connection to this reality, and that leads to action. We take what we learn about racial context, deepen our soul connections to that racial context and grow our understanding of how race works in our society, our church and our world. We then circle back to learn even more about racial context and the racialized history of our nation, deepen our soul connection to those realities and watch for the opportunities the Lord brings to us to take action.

## Think of this process in three steps

These three steps are not isolated from each other, but they are discrete.

**Step one/context:** Gain knowledge of the racialized contexts in our society. Any scholarly work addressing racial inequity can reveal context.

**Step two/connect:** Choose to create and nurture soul connections to the racialized contexts of others. Soul connections form when racial realities are considered with compassion, mercy and the desire to understand.

**Step three/advocate:** Practice racial justice advocacy within your congregation, geographical area, nation and other affiliations.

These are all conversations. By expanding your awareness, developing connecting reflections to contextual poetry, art or Bible study, and by challenging each other to learn the language of racial justice advocacy, you and your group will be on the path to learning how to make your conversations about race helpful.

## The three steps more closely

### Learning context

The most helpful conversations about race happen when people have some knowledge of the racialized history of the United States. The greater this knowledge, the more helpful these conversations about race will be. Racialized historical data provides the framework that makes sense out of what confronts us today.

Learning racial context is learning the role that race plays within life's contextual experiences, like how race determines such things as where we live, work, worship, are schooled and enjoy recreation. Race influences how we experience societal systems through such day-to-day experiences as going to the store, buying a car, catching a cab, applying for a job, buying a house or receiving medical care—the list goes on (and on).

You can download a historical timeline at [welca.org](http://welca.org) under the resources tab and on the racial justice page that shows part of the racialized framework that was established and then maintained by our mostly White nation.

You can read “Birth of a White Nation” by Jacqueline Battalora and have a book discussion. Michelle Alexander’s “The New Jim Crow,” Ira Katznelson’s “When Affirmative Action Was White” and anything written by Tim Wise are examples of writings that are supported by reliable research.

Consider watching “Race, the Power of an Illusion,” [<http://newsreel.org/video/RACE-THE-POWER-OF-AN-ILLUSION>] focusing on episode three: “The House We All Live In.” Check to see if you can find it online at PBS.org. The series on PBS comes with an online discussion guide [[http://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_About/002\\_04-discussion.htm](http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-discussion.htm)].

Discuss #blacklivesmatter in light of the movie “Fruitvale Station,” the killings of Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. How does the #blacklivesmatter movement within our country (not only Black people are in this movement) speak to the movie and these deaths? Invite people to jot down their responses as they view the film and hear the stories of these killings. Share the response.

Statistical data for wealth, longevity, incarceration, infant birth mortality, education and so forth, provide racial context by revealing the racial differences of living White or living as people of color. Knowing these differences provides a context to explore and acknowledge.

## Creating connections

The most helpful conversations about race nurture a soul connection to the issues around racial injustice that deepens existing relationships and creates new ones. The most helpful conversations about race cultivate concern, conversion, commitment and compassion.

Beyond facts, figures and charts, creating connections is about allowing our souls to be touched by the experiences of others. I encourage White people to refrain from asking a person of color in your congregation or family to explain how they feel about race matters. It is more beneficial to all concerned to

learn from a poem by a published poet of color or to view a movie that faithfully depicts racial realities.

Respecting and developing silence as part of a conversation is an element of creating connections. Too often we regard silence as a judgment when, in fact, it is central to listening. It is part of pondering, receiving and connecting.

Learn to incorporate silence in the following suggested methods of connecting. You can intentionally allow for 30 seconds or more of silence after each stanza of a poem and certainly at its close before any response is made. Or you can incorporate the habit of holding silence after someone shares their insight.

While no single experience is definitive, the list below offers ways to begin helpful conversations about race. In many cases, you can find the resources using a Google search.

- Use Women of the ELCA resources to cultivate soul connections to the issues around race. View and download “Peter & Cornelius,” “Listening to the Third Slave,” or others found at [welca.org](http://welca.org) under the resources tab and on the racial justice page.
- Listen to one of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speeches.
- Listen to one of the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman’s meditations.
- Read “Poem for the Young White Man...” by Lorna Dee Cervantes.

Take time to listen to or read through the media you've selected at least twice. Three times is often better. Do this slowly.

In groups, ask different people to read in their own voice. As people listen, ask them to jot down or—in handout materials—circle words or phrases that jump out at them. For the movies, ask people to make note of scenes that resonate deeply.

Then they can either share these in small groups, large groups or write in a racial justice journal.

Consider using films as a way to get conversations going. Look behind the messages of Hollywood to see the people whose stories are being told. People watching the films can jot down the plot twists and subplots that touch their hearts for relaxed sharing after the film.

- Watch the movie “Selma.”
- Watch the movie “McFarland, USA.”
- Watch the movie “42.”

Once context and connections are made, conversations become more helpful. Developing soul connection takes time, but once made, the possibilities of having helpful conversations about race are enhanced. And the creation of actions of advocacy are multiplied.

Helpful conversations about race are entered with grace and care because of the high degree of mutual vulnerability. Helpful conversations about race name the elephant in the room—the one that we are taught it is not polite to notice or to mention. We attempt to name that elephant without causing that elephant to stampede. We must pay attention to how we communicate, what resistance to the topic might look like and how we can best learn the language of racial justice.

## Advocacy

The most helpful conversations about race lead us to advocacy. All of this contextualizing and connecting helps not Christ's church nor does it lessen human suffering if we do not also effectively advocate for racial justice!

Advocacy can be a unified effort, such as a letter to the editor signed by all in your group or hosting a cross-racial forum on racial justice.

Having helpful conversations about race in the church requires us to find ways to engage each other within the topic. To do both, certain skills are required.

## Developing skills

We aren't taught how to talk about race in our schools, at town hall meetings or in our churches. We have all probably seen people on TV “talking” about race in ways that sound more like shouting matches! We don't want to have that kind of conversation.

We want our conversations to use facts and real-life occurrences and events (context) with some sense of what the issues within and surrounding racial injustice mean to us (connection). Both context and connection take time to develop.

The conversations are times to practice using healthy ways to communicate and to practice the language of racial justice advocacy. Helpful conversations about race require compassion. None of us is perfect, and we might say unhelpful things. Inevitably, we will think unhelpful thoughts.

We must practice grace even as we push back on White fragility. I suggest reading The Good Men Project's “White Fragility: Why It's So Hard to Talk to White People About Racism” [<http://bit.ly/1oulyEd>]. Authentic, helpful conversations about race can draw people closer into community. This is the kind of conversations we can learn to have!

## Nine healthy ways to have a conversation

Using healthy ways to communicate bolsters our best intentions. Use these ideas to communicate about race, racial injustice or other difficult conversations. Read them multiple times. Pray them even. These conversation helps are used with permission from StirFry Seminars, Berkeley, Calif. ([www.stirfryseminars.com](http://www.stirfryseminars.com))

1. Reflect back what is being said. Use their words, not yours. What happens when someone rephrases what we have said is that we are forced to interpret what we have said by using new words.
2. Begin where they are, not where we want them to be. Respect the journey. We have not all had the same experiences or training. We may share similar worldviews, but we are our own people.
3. Nurture a curiosity for and about what others are saying. Nurturing curiosity about others builds bridges.
4. Another way to avoid making judgments is to notice what a person is *not* saying. Noticing what is *not* being said can sometimes be as important as hearing what is being said!
5. Nurture the relationship by emotionally relating to how they are feeling. Even when we are unsure of the “rightness” of any response shared, we can identify as another human being to how things can frustrate, hurt or confuse.
6. Don't pretend to understand when you do not understand. Your place is of equal value to anyone else's. Take the time to notice how you are feeling. Be honest and authentic.
7. Take responsibility for your part in any conflict or misunderstanding. Anyone can misspeak or misunderstand. Taking responsibility is not the same as taking blame.
8. Try to understand how their past affects who they are and how those experiences affect their relationship with you. We cannot always understand experiences or clearly see how experiences shape others, but we can accept that those experiences were real and that they did shape them.
9. Finally, stay with the process and the relationships. Rushing to a solution requires certainty. Certainty undermines community. Avoid being solution-driven. Being solution-driven can silence the very voices we most need to hear or circumvent the healing possibilities found in having difficult conversations.

## Managing resistance to difficult conversations

Resistance is normal, and it will come. Managing resistance is necessary to having helpful conversations about difficult issues, including race. People who know how to manage their own resistance to difficult information can lead by example.

The dictionary defines resistance as “the refusal to accept or comply with something; the attempt to prevent something by action or argument.” It is also defined as “the ability not to be affected by something, especially adversely.”

Resistance is natural. It can alert us to what is new or different. Unmanaged, resistance can block progress. When we manage resistance, we widen our potential.

We probably all know stories about people who refused to make changes that would have helped them. Such stories show us what can happen when we resist helpful change.

We personalize change either based on our feelings as in **emotional resistance** or how we interpret our core values being challenged as in **psychological resistance**.

We change what we do or the way we do things to remain faithful, to stay alive, to remain relevant or to reach a particular goal. When we confront our own resistance in helpful ways, we choose to grow. When we handle our resistance, we remain open to God doing a new thing with, for or through us.

## Learning the language

If you have ever been in a foreign country without a working knowledge of the language, you know how frustrating it can be to try to have a successful conversation about anything important. We aren't sure we are using the right words, and people answer us with words we do not always understand.

This is not as much of a problem when ordering in restaurants. But for something as critical as seeking medical assistance, knowing how to speak the language can be a life-or-death situation.

## Emotional resistance

When a person is emotionally resistant, he regards new information as betrayal. He sees change and the new information that requires the change as a judgment.

Emotional resistance is turf-related. For example: “We have been doing this work for years.” “We work as a group.” “We have always...” or “No one has complained about this before.” Or “We've never had difficulty with the way we have done this. Why should they/you?”

## Psychological resistance

Psychological resistance relates change to our values. Whenever deep-seated expectations, perceptions or beliefs are challenged, resistance is psychological. These do not have to be legitimate or even factually provable perceptions, only deep-seated.

Psychological resistance can sound reasonable. For example, this question, “Can't White people lead people of color in a compassionate and healthy way?” suggests a psychological resistance to people of color in leadership. Experienced racial justice advocates actively endorse people of color in leadership.

Psychological resistance can take the form of entitlement. For example, a person might expect to be seen as a good person without doing anything to warrant the judgment.

Having helpful conversations about race requires us to learn the language used by those who already know it. Speaking the same language is important in any successful conversation. To that purpose, we offer you a glossary of terms at the end of this resource that might make it easier to have helpful conversations about race.



## Planning forward

We hope you will have many conversations about race. There are several ways to continue the conversation.

### Start a book club reading one of my six recommended books:

1. “Birth of a White Nation” by Jacqueline Battalora
  2. “When Affirmative Action Was White” by Ira Katznelson
  3. “Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong” (2 volumes) by James W. Loewen
  4. “Affirmative Action: Racial Preference in Black and White” by Tim J. Wise
  5. “Slavery by Another Name” by Douglas A. Blackmon
  6. “America’s Original Sin” by Jim Wallis and Bryan Stevenson
- Allow your conversations about race to include the stories of the indigenous of all continents. Pay attention to your own geographic demographics to include Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Middle Easterners and Pacific Islanders in your helpful conversations.
  - Use articles, blogs or editorials that speak of the racial segregation/inequity of housing, education, mass incarceration and implicit or explicit bias in your community, your county, your state, your nation and the world. Find two ways to respond: one collective way, such as door-to-door canvassing or circulating petitions, and one personal way, such as writing a letter, your own blog or sharing the racial justice issue through social media.

### Additional study ideas

- Download and read Race Forward’s PDF “Moving the Race Conversation Forward.” Here is the link: <http://bit.ly/1QYdWYI>.
- “Like” Colorlines and Race Forward on Facebook and receive racial justice news updates that nurture your growing knowledge of context, strengthen your connection and help with ongoing conversations.
- Search the Internet in your geographical area to identify anti-racists or racial justice advocate organizations. Perhaps you can share a meal and informational program.

By expanding awareness, developing connecting reflections to contextual poetry, art or Bible study and by challenging each other to use the language of racial justice advocates, any church group will be on the path of racial justice and living God’s justice.

Advocacy is key, but to get at the root causes of racial injustice, it’s important to name White privilege. Unearthing the gospel potential of confronting racial injustice requires faith in God, an ever-growing knowledge of racialized contexts, and a blessed soul connection to the human suffering caused by White privilege. We are all made less by the racial injustice that continues to haunt our nation and Christ’s church.

## Conclusion

This program sets out an outline for having helpful conversations about race in the church. It is an outline that can be practiced again and again with each subsequent approach, broadening and deepening our understanding and commitment to racial justice. It has highlighted these essentials:

1. We begin as God's people, solidly accepted by a loving and forgiving God.
2. We are open to expanding our comprehension of our nation's racialized history and the multiple racial realities that exist in Christ's church and nation today.
3. We can talk about difficult topics in healthy ways.
4. Resistance to new ideas is natural but must be addressed.
5. Racial justice advocates use a language that all can learn.
6. Growing in these ways is a grace forward process.

We can develop a racial lens to understand the influence a person's race has on his or her future possibilities. The more we have helpful conversations about race in the church, the more we realize that racial justice is God's work. It is important work that is needed for healing the church, our nation and the world.

## Glossary

These definitions are common among anti-racism practitioners and racial justice advocates. Practice using these terms as you develop greater knowledge of the racialized context of our nation and a greater empathetic connection to today's racial realities. You can also check the use of these words and phrases with the definitions offered here.

**ANTI-RACIST:** refers both to the perspective and people sharing the perspective of being in complete opposition to racism and all that it provides both structurally and personally (see racial justice advocate).

**#BLACKLIVESMATTER:** Black Lives Matter is a chapter-based national organization working for the validity of Black life. It was created in 2013 after Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman, was acquitted for his crime; and dead 17-year-old Trayvon was posthumously placed on trial for his own murder. Rooted in the experiences of Black people in this country who actively resist their dehumanization, #BlackLivesMatter is a call to action in response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society.

**CONSTRUCT:** *used as a noun, not a verb.* An idea or theory containing various conceptual elements, typically one considered to be subjective and not based on empirical evidence, according to the Oxford Dictionary. History (and its telling) is largely an ideological construct. Race is often called a sociological construct but it is also political in nature, as it dictated U.S. historical exclusion from civic participation any person not White.

**CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE:** the knowledge, skills and affect/motivation that enable individuals to adapt effectively in cross-cultural environments, according to Wikipedia. Cross-cultural competence requires organizations, systems and institutions adhere to a defined set of values and principles that promote behaviors, attitudes, policies and structures that enable them to work effectively cross-culturally.

**CROSS-RACIAL COMMUNICATION:** the ability to communicate with people of other races with clarity without requiring them to speak the language or use the lexicon that we use within our own culture. In the United States and the ELCA, this usually happens in one direction; everyone else has to learn to speak using the cultural references, imagery and lexicon used by White people of the middle class.

**CULTURAL APPROPRIATION:** when one (often privileged) group takes on or appropriates a cultural attribute of a less privileged group without necessarily understanding or caring about the significance of that attribute to the people or culture to whom it belongs. One example: sports team mascots and the misuse of indigenous regalia these mascots often display.

**CULTURAL RACISM:** in the U.S., the idea rests upon assumptions made about both White people and people of color. It normalizes a particular image of whiteness with White privilege dictating acceptable standards or cultural norms. This White privilege includes the power to name and define these norms, making anything outside of these defined norms abnormal, sub-standard, less civilized, primitive, exotic or less evolved.

**EMOTIONAL RESISTANCE:** regards new information as a betrayal. Sees change as well as the new information that requires the change as judgment. Takes change personally, providing unhelpful regret or unnecessary guilt for what has already been. Emotional resistance is turf-related; emotional resistance provide rationale for not changing. Emotional resistance is ego-based or personality driven.

**EXPLICIT BIAS:** the attitudes and beliefs we have about a person or group on a conscious level. Much of the time, these biases and their expression arise as the direct result of a perceived threat. When people feel threatened, they are more likely to draw group boundaries to distinguish themselves from others.

**EXPLICIT RACISM:** racism that is clearly stated, well-formed, often with detail. Bias that leaves no room for confusion or doubt on anyone’s part. Explicit racism is out in the open, conscious.

**IMPLICIT BIAS:** the attitudes or stereotypes affecting our understanding, actions and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual’s awareness or intentional control. Residing deep in the subconscious, these biases are different from known biases that individuals may choose to conceal for the purposes of social and/or political correctness. Rather, implicit biases are not accessible through introspection (Kirwin Institute).

**IMPLICIT RACISM:** racism that is implied, not clearly expressed or well-formed. It is unconscious, unspoken but still acted upon. Not clearly defined, unclear.

**INSTITUTIONAL RACISM:** laws, policies, practices and procedures that historically created and currently maintain the White privilege inherent within structural racism. The myriad ways institutions indirectly and directly support, endorse, promote and enforce cultural racism through human resource policies, hiring and advancement practices, institutional culture and accepted business norms.

**INTERNALIZED RACISM:** the result of structural racism shaping our personal beliefs. Our ideas and attitudes toward people of another race, as well as people of our own race, are shaped and continue to be informed by structural racism. Internalized racism is an umbrella term that includes individual racism, *our internalized beliefs based on race*, and interpersonal racism, *how individually internalized racism is expressed and communicated*.

**INTERPERSONAL RACISM:** how individually internalized racism (or White privilege) is expressed and communicated to ourselves and to/with others. Interpersonal racism can be passive, including such things as avoidance, the feeling of “bending over backwards” whenever anything is changed to accommodate others, choosing one person of color as exceptional or as an example for all others, and the practice of silently measuring people of color using stereotypes. (This listing is not exhaustive in any way.)

**INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION:** the ability to effectively communicate with people of a different culture. Not limited to inter-racial in nature. It can also be rural to city, city to rural, inter-generational, inter-gender, inter-faith and so forth.

**RACIAL BIAS:** the attitudes or stereotypes that affect an individual’s understanding, actions and decisions in both a conscious and unconscious manner.

**RACIAL CONTEXT/RACIALIZED CONTEXT:** the role race plays within life’s contextual experiences such as how race determines such things as where we live, work, worship, are schooled and enjoy recreation. It influences how we experience societal systems through such day-to-day experiences as going to the store, buying a car, catching a cab, applying for a job, buying a house or receiving medical care—the list goes on (and on).

**RACIAL EQUALITY:** the condition in which a person’s racial identity and statistical standing are not considered. Everyone is treated the same, albeit that “same” can show partiality.

**RACIAL EQUITY:** the result of racial justice. It is the condition in which *equitable* access to services and opportunities is enjoyed by all people regardless of their race.

**RACIAL INJUSTICE:** the condition in which a person’s racial identity largely predicts, in a statistical sense, how one fares.

**RACIAL JUSTICE:** the condition that demonstrates that a person’s racial identity no longer predicts, in a statistical sense, how one fares.

**RACIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATE:** a person who actively advocates for racial justice (see anti-racist).

**RACIAL LENS:** considering a situation or experience using the lens of race rather than other lenses (such as economic class, gender or other demographic lenses).

**RACIAL MESSAGING:** the implicit as well as explicit messages received regarding people of different races through structural racism. This includes cultural, institutional and interpersonal influences. This messaging can be as subtle or implicit as presenting the guy who wears the white hat as the good guy and the guy who wears the black hat as the bad guy. Or it can be as explicit as the most racially stereotypical depiction of people.

**SKIN COLOR:** when referring to racism, this pertains to the explicit as well as the implicit bias appearing along the continuum or range of skin colors from the whitest of white to the blackest of black in which skin color is used to classify, qualify or disqualify people.

**STRUCTURAL RACISM:** carries the *cumulative and compounding effects* of historical and current racism as it appears within the framework of an entity (nation, organization, corporation, etc.). It is the statistically evidenced experience of people of color within a structure that favors White people. An umbrella term that includes systemic, institutional and cultural racism.

**SYSTEMIC RACISM:** describes racial inequity as a result of the collusion of cultural and institutional measurable racisms.

**WHITE FRAGILITY:** White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This environment of racial protection builds White expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering tolerance for racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White fragility. White fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the display of emotions such as anger, fear and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, reinforce White racial equilibrium. (Phrase attributed to Robin DiAngelo.)

**WHITE PRIVILEGE:** in the U.S., the result of laws that began to be formed before the founding of the nation that established whiteness as qualifying criteria for ownership or inheritance of land, firearms and condition of debt servitude or slavery (human bondage). These laws were further fortified through the immigration and naturalization laws established to create, strengthen and expand a majority White nation. They used the illustration of the melting pot into which all European “races” were to melt and become the “American race.” White privilege and its corresponding laws (from Jim Crow to Sundown Towns) provided multiple civic opportunities to Whites that were denied to people of color for hundreds of years.

**WHITE SUPERIORITY FRAMEWORK:** an extreme human construct (framework) built upon the theory of White superiority above all other racial groups, promoting White privilege based on the belief in the intrinsic superiority of White people. This framework based on the **doctrine of discovery** includes genocide, colonialism and racial dominance through military force, war and genocide. Possesses a history of privilege and preference given to White people and White culture with depictions of White power, White nobility and White strength as archetype.