

CONVERSATIONS: Race Relations

The Journey to Right Relationship—a Christian Response

INTRODUCTION

This resource promotes change—a reformation of heart, mind, attitude and behavior.

The format is a series of conversations and is designed for a small-group setting. Ideally, the group is racially mixed. But do not wait to begin the series until that happens.

Since true reformation is messy and complex, allow time to ponder, listen and squirm.

Pray for God to be your guide on the journey into right relationship.

Objectives

Provide a series of conversations on race relations in which participants can:

- be formed and re-formed by listening to the Word of God and others;
- enter more deeply into the lament of race relations; and
- commit and re-commit to interacting with others as God intends.

Overview

- Conversation 1:** **We do not know what we do not know**
Begin with common ground—each person created in God’s image.
1 Corinthians 13:11-13
Genesis 1:1-3; 26-28a
- Conversation 2:** **Here I stand; I can do no other ... or can I?**
We have been shaped by our childhood and privileges.
Luke 12:48
- Conversation 3:** **Entering into the lament**
My lament is your lament is my lament.
Genesis 21:15-21
- Conversation 4:** **From God’s reconciliation to right relationship**
We have been reconciled to God through Christ. We are freed to live in right relationship with others.
2 Corinthians 5:17-20



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Tips for leading the conversation

- Groups should be no more than 10-12 people.
- A facilitator should be designated to lead each group.
- Copy and distribute the assigned page (front and back) to each participant at the beginning of the session.
- Try to have a racially diverse group, but it is not essential.
- Diversify your conversation by inviting another congregation to participate. Consider inviting an ecumenical partner congregation.

Facilitators

- Provide a safe place for conversation.
- Do not let anyone dominate the conversation.
- Allow time for silence.
- Ask the group to keep the conversations confidential.
- Adapt the session for your group.

Time frame:

- Each conversation is designed for one hour.
- Depending on the size of the group and the amount of sharing, each session may take longer than one hour. The questions are a guide to shape the conversation. Not all the questions provided in this resource need to be used.

Suggested format

- Four sessions (each one hour)
Example: Sunday school, mid-week class, Lenten series (with a fifth session added to summarize)
 - Advantage: Allows time to reflect, read, research.
 - Disadvantage: Attendance may vary from week to week.
- Two sessions (each two hours)
 - Advantage: Less time is needed to recap the previous conversation.
 - Disadvantage: Attendance may vary.
- Mini-Retreat (minimum of five hours for conversation - meals, breaks, reflection)
 - Advantage: The same people stay together—experiencing a shared journey.
 - Disadvantage: Limited amount of time to process new information and to be changed.



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Conversation 1: We do not know what we do not know

As we embark on this journey toward right relationship with others, our focus will be primarily on race relations. And yet, this journey could easily concentrate on relationships with those who are different from us because of age, gender, religion and the list goes on.

As we begin this conversation, each of us is encouraged to:

- Listen more than speak.
- Pray for each other.

Getting acquainted

It is important to know each other—those who are sharing this important conversation on race relations. Take time to get acquainted with each other.

1. *Share your name and the setting of your childhood. What was the racial background of the neighborhood where you lived as a child?*

We do not know what we do not know

It sounds simple, maybe even silly. We do not know what we do not know. But it's true.

When we were children, we learned to add and subtract. We never thought to ask about multiplication, division or calculus because we didn't know any of that existed. We do not know what we do not know.

2. *What does the phrase "we do not know what we do not know" mean to you? Give an example from your personal life.*

Paul in his well-known reflection on love in his letter to the Corinthians writes about seeing through a mirror dimly. Paul recognized he didn't see the whole picture fully and accurately.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:11-13)

When it comes to race, we confess to seeing through a mirror dimly. We know through our own experiences or what we have learned over time living in a diverse world, that skin color has a profound effect on one's life. We cannot fully grasp the privileges extended or denied to us because of the color of our skin.

3. *What does it mean to see through a glass dimly in race relations?*
4. *What do you hope you gain from this series of conversations?*



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Conversation 1: We do not know what we do not know ... *continues*

Where do we begin?

We begin this series of conversations with the beginning. Take a moment and reflect on the first verses of Genesis. Hear the description of God creating the heavens and the earth.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.

(Genesis 1:1-3)

We begin with the wonder and beauty of God’s creation. We begin by acknowledging God creating a world to be shared by all of us. God intends for each of us—no matter the color of our skin—to share the sky, air, and beauty of God’s creation.

Continue reading from Genesis 1:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” **So God created humankind in [God’s] image, in the image of God, [God] created them; male and female [God] created them. God blessed them...**

(Genesis 1: 26-28a)

This familiar story of creation describes God creating all of humanity in God’s image.

5. *How are you (and all of humanity) made in the image of God?*
6. *If God had a color of skin, what color might it be? Would everyone agree with your answer? If not, why not?*

God created all that exists. And yet, something went wrong. Racial hatred, fear and mistrust is widespread. Many times, the actions of humans towards each other do not reflect God’s goodness and love. It’s just the opposite.

7. *In your opinion, why do some people think that their race is superior?*
8. *When and how do people learn to judge and mistrust others because of the color of their skin?*
9. *Describe our world if we treated each other as those made in God’s image.*

Prayer:

Gracious God, we confess those times when we have treated others as less than someone created in your image. Send your Spirit to be our guide on this journey. Amen.



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Conversation 2: Here I stand; I can do no other ... or can I?

In 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door for the purpose of public debate, sparking the Reformation. As a Bible scholar, professor, and priest, he had spent his life immersed in Scripture. Luther came to the conclusion that reforms were needed in the church he loved. Four years later in April 1521, Luther found himself before Emperor Charles V defending his call for reform. The stakes were high. At the end of his defense, Luther is attributed to saying, “Here I stand; I can do no other.”

1. *What do those words, “Here I stand; I can do no other” mean to you?*

The ground where we stand today

Perhaps those words of Luther rings true for us. For here we stand. We are rooted. We cannot change the color of our skin. Here we stand. We cannot change experiences of childhood. Here we stand. We have been formed, informed and reformed by our family, friends, acquaintances, education, community and, of course, media. Or can we be changed?

To better understand where we stand today, it is helpful to reflect on our childhood. We can recognize opportunities extended to us and, at the same time, acknowledge others were not extended the same experiences—both the good and bad.

CHILDHOOD CHECKLIST

Take a moment to reflect on your childhood. Check any on the following that apply.

When you grew up, did you:

- live in a house owned by your parents?
- have someone read books to you as a child?
- attend an elementary school with lots of books and resources?
- have parents, grandparents and neighbors who kept a watchful eye?
- know supper would be on the table every night?
- have adults asking about homework assignments from school?
- never hear gunshots in the neighbor’s house or apartment?
- have someone believe you could pursue your dreams—whatever they might be?
- have local government officials who had the same color of skin as you?
- have a grocery store nearby?

Writer’s disclaimer

As I write these words about race, I cannot help but reflect on those experiences that shaped and influenced my current perspective. I am white, female, and clergy. In the United States, that means both privilege and restriction.

Childhood checklist reflection

Take a moment to review your answers.

2. *What on this list was a primary influence in providing you a solid foundation for life?*
3. *Would you use the word “privilege” to describe any item on the list?*



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Conversation 2: Here I stand; I can do no other ... or can I? ... *continues*

Moving beyond childhood

Our childhood is not the sole determinant for life. We are shaped by many factors, but the influence of our childhood experiences cannot be overstated.

In addition, education and money can open doors and provide opportunities—no matter the color of your skin. Within all races, there is a certain degree of stratification. Thus, it is impossible to make blanket statements to describe the experiences of any particular race.

White privilege

And yet, some privileges are extended or withdrawn simply because of a person's skin color. In the United States, whites are often extended privileges solely because of the color of their skin. This is commonly referred to as *white privilege*.

4. *What is your reaction when you hear the term "white privilege"?*
5. *Give an example of white privilege.*
6. *When did you begin to be aware of white privilege?*

White opportunity

Whites who become aware of the realities of white privilege in their life (and those who have been provided privileges for a variety of reasons) can get stuck in guilt. Even Jesus had some strong words to say to those who have been given much in this life—that includes privilege because of the color of skin. (See text box.)

7. *What is required from those whom much has been given?*

Privilege provides unique opportunities to offer a voice, presence, and passion for change. Some of these opportunities might mean digging deep to gather the courage and inner fortitude to address issues long revered by others.

8. *Why might courage and inner fortitude be needed?*
9. *What are the unique opportunities for whites to bring change? Any limitations?*
10. *What are the unique opportunities for people of color to bring change? Any limitations?*
11. *Give recent examples (small or large) of diverse people working together to address prejudice, inequity, or institutional racism.*
12. *What can each of us do within our realm of influence?*

Jesus said,
"From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."
(Luke 12:48)

Prayer:

Holy One, we confess to standing
with eyes and hearts shut.
Open us to be in relation with others. Amen.



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Conversation 3: Entering into the lament

Laments are deep, heartfelt expressions of grief and sorrow. Laments are not uttered when someone steps on our toes. Instead, laments come from a depth of our being where deep wounds of life dwell.

1. Define the word “lament.”
2. How does “lament” differ from sadness or grief?

The Bible is full of stories of men and women who cry out their laments to God.

Consider the lament of Hagar. After the birth of Isaac, Sarah asked Abraham to send Hagar (Sarah’s servant) and Ishmael (Abraham’s first-born son) away into the desert. Read the story of Hagar and Ishmael as the water runs out:

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away.

And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.

And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt. (Genesis 21:14-21)

It was unfair and unjust for Hagar and Ishmael to be cast out into the desert for a cruel and certain death. Once the water was gone, there seemed no hope. Hagar could not bear to witness the death of her child. Take a moment to imagine the lament from the desert.

3. What is the lament of Hagar?
4. How does God enter into the lament of Hagar?



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Conversation 3: Entering into the lament ... *continues*

A personal lament

Read through the following series of questions and responses. A person who is wearing red gets to ask the question. The group responds.

Q: Do I hear you?

A: *No, not if you are busy making your point!*

Q: Do I hear you?

A: *No, not if you are scared by my lament!*

Q: Do I hear you?

A: *No, not if I don't trust you with my story!*

Q: Do I hear you?

A: *No, not if you don't love me.*

5. *What is the lament in this exchange? How does this exchange relate to race relations?*

Deafening laments

When it comes to race relations today, the laments are loud. These laments are not solely from events from today or this month. They are deeply rooted in a pattern of behavior from past years, decades and generations.

6. *Summarize today's lament regarding race relations.*
7. *Why is today's lament about race relations so LOUD? Should the race relations lament be louder, stronger, and more passionate? Explain your answer.*

Entering the lament: strive for peace and justice

It is true that we do not live in God's fullness of time. Harmony is not fully ours. We are still catching up to God's vision and God's intentions for us. Christ frees us to enter into the lament of others and stirs in us a deep desire for right relations with our neighbor.

It might be tempting to ignore race relations, but that means we would ignore God's vision for the world. On this journey to right relationship, we can use our unique gifts, passions, and backgrounds to be an ambassador for God. We can use our voice, wealth, education, training, time, life experience and especially our privilege for good.

8. *How is God stirring you to enter into the lament of race relations? What might it mean to:*
- show up
 - learn more
 - network—build relationships
 - speak the truth to power
 - challenge institutional racism
 - advocate for change in policy and practices

Prayerful Pondering: My lament is your lament is my lament

When we hear laments of others, each of us tends to respond in consistent ways. Sometimes this is referred to as *flight or fight*. When you hear someone crying a lament, how do you typically respond?

How helpful is your response to the person who is lamenting? Explain your answer.

Prayer

Gracious God, we confess to avoiding the lament of others. Give us courage to enter the lament of race relations. Amen.



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Conversation 4: From God’s reconciliation to right relationship

Confession as part of the journey

It is painfully clear that we have not fully embraced God’s vision for us—for each of us is made in God’s image. God intends for each person is to be treated with dignity and respect. We have a shared humanity.

And yet, that is not always how we act. That is not always how society functions.

The haunting cry of the lament reminds us of those who are excluded or denied opportunities due to skin color. For that, we are sorry. For times when we have treated others as inferior, we confess.

RECONCILIATION Restoration, reunion, a bringing together (again)
RIGHT RELATIONSHIP Interact with each other as God intended

1. *In regard to race relations, what else needs to be confessed?*
2. *Take a moment for silent prayer and confession.*

God’s action: Reconciliation

But there is good news. God has already reconciled us to God in Christ. We are freed in Christ to live in a new way, treating each other as God intends. In his letter to the Corinthians, Apostle Paul describes God’s action of reconciliation through Christ and its consequences for followers of Christ.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new. All this is from God, who **reconciled us to [God] through Christ**, and has **given us the ministry of reconciliation**; that is in Christ God was reconciling the world to [God], not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the **message of reconciliation** to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making [God’s] appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:17-20)

Take a moment and let the words of Apostle Paul soak into your being.

Everything old has passed away. God is in making everything new. God has already reconciled the world to God. And in God’s time, this reconciliation will be made complete.

Reconciliation on earth cannot be rushed

The pain of the past has to be acknowledged. Racial reconciliation cannot occur in the future while the racist patterns of old continues to exist. **We cannot have a re-union where there never was union.**

3. *What would need to happen before there is racial reconciliation in church? In society?*
4. *What new patterns of behavior and changes of policies need to replace the current practices?*
5. *Describe a world where we recognize and respect our shared humanity.*



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Conversation 4: From God’s reconciliation to right relationship ... *continues*

New creation

Apostle Paul describes the positive consequence of being connected to Christ. We are transformed into a new creation. Everything changes—how we live each day and how we regard others. It cannot help but influence our interaction with *the other*—those who are different from us.

As we live in Christ, we are changed into this new creation. Read the following passage again.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new. All this is from God, who reconciled us to [God] through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is in Christ God was reconciling the world to [God], not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making [God’s] appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:17-20)

Called into right relationship

This *journey to right relationship* is truly a journey. Hopefully, each day of our lives, we discover more about how God desires us to live in right relationship with God, ourselves and others. We rejoice in our shared humanity. We celebrate the beauty of diversity—of those created in God’s image.

6. *How might God use you (as part of this new creation) to bring an end to hatred?*
7. *What have you learned about race relations and the journey to right relationship?*
8. *What are possible next steps for you (and the group) on this journey to right relationship?*
9. *What do you want to say to those in this group with whom you have shared this conversation?*

Closing litany

Leader: Gracious God, you call us on a journey to right relationship.
Group: **And yet, we do not know what we do not know.**
Leader: But here we are.
Group: **Here we stand; we can do no other. Or can we?**
Leader: We hear the cries of those whom you love, those created in your image.
Group: **Send your Spirit to give us courage to enter into the lament.**
Leader: Send your Spirit to re-form us to be a new creation in Christ.
Group: **Send your Spirit to fill us with love so we might treat each other as you intend.**
Leader: Thank you for this time together, for each person who was part of this conversation, and for the opportunities to live in right relationship.
Group: **Amen.**

