

Guidance for Small Group Leaders hosting conversations about racism

1. Context

"...while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." 1 Cor 12:24-27 NIVUK

Engaging in dialogue to address racism is distinctly Christian, as these verses indicate. There are clear truths that come out from this passage which we should bear in mind, specifically:

- » God has put the body together
- » Honour should be given to those that lacked it
- » There should be no division in the body
- » Equal concern should be shown
- » If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; and
- » You (we) are the body of Christ.

2. Rationale for having open discussions on race in Small Groups

2.1 A difficult reality to accept

Black brothers and sisters in our church communities are hurting right now, overwhelmed, confused and angry. There is an unbroken line of systemic racism that could be traced from the 17th century slavery, through to 19th century colonialism and 20th century racism. The whole purpose of the Race Relations Act 1976 and its latest amendment in 2000 was to ensure that the law protected people who might otherwise be on the receiving end of racial injustice and inequality; were the issue really consigned to the annals of history, this act wouldn't be needed, but sadly it is. Reaching a common and accurate understanding of this history is vitally important, before we can move on to true empathy.

2.2 An example from history

Much learning can be gleaned from the Second World War on the importance of reaching a shared understanding of history. Whilst people in many countries suffered greatly during the wars, the systematic and intentional attempt to exterminate the Jews by the Nazis that occurred during the Holocaust was unique, even for war. The Nazis perceived Jews to be a lesser race who they hated and as such, felt justified in their attempt to rid the earth of them. After the war, there was a need to reach a place of common understanding of history in order to move forward. Similarly, in the context of racial injustice, there is a need to bring people to a place of common understanding of the history before we can truly move forward.

We can do this by creating spaces to hear people's stories of oppression and racism and then sensitively reflecting on those stories, however difficult this might be. This process I believe can be healing and restorative both for the person hearing the stories and the person hearing the sensitive reflections. This is one of the reasons to encourage groups to talk about these things.

3. Guidance for conversations

3.1 Ground rules for discussing issues around race

Before you talk about issues surrounding race and diversity, there are some ground rules that it's worth being aware of. You could choose to start the session by sharing them with the group:

- » **Prayer** – invite the Holy Spirit to help the conversation, keeping God at the centre; it will keep us on track
- » **Acknowledge sensitivity** – some wounds are incredibly sensitive to touch, racism is one of them, please bear this in mind when allowing conversations to run and allowing people the freedom to talk
- » **Grace** – people will get things wrong and say things that they don't know are hurtful, wrong or just come out the wrong way- that's fine. However, if things like this happen, they need to be acknowledged and addressed before you can move on. If necessary, this might need to be picked up outside the meeting.
- » **Apology** – be quick to apologise, overcompensate here so no residue of hurt or pain remains from comments made
- » **Purpose** – this needs to be clearly stated at the beginning (see rationale above)
- » **Respect** – all conversations should be conducted in an atmosphere of dignity and respect for the group and the individuals within the group.

3.2 How to facilitate the discussion

Opening up a conversation on race may feel daunting. Here are a few pointers to help with these essential conversations:

- » If a few people present have been affected by racism, create spaces with sensitivity and care within your groups for people of colour to share their different stories, if they would

like to; I believe these stories will help bring us to a place of common understanding, which is important in the healing process

- » Engage as much as you can, with hearts of compassion and love towards them, seeking to understand as much as we can the pain and hurt people carry and where that might be coming from
- » Be quick to listen, slow to speak – don't try to give advice, just listen
- » Acknowledge together the historical and present unbroken line of oppression and the unique experience of black people
- » There maybe people in your group from other minority groups who also have stories to tell; this should be sensitively encouraged
- » In the same way that you as a leader would (hopefully) intervene if someone began making inappropriate suggestive, sexual comments or used offensive language or if a heated conflict began to develop between two people, you should intervene if hurtful or racist comments are made by someone, even in ignorance. The least you should do is to ensure the group know that those comments are unhelpful and not to be shared by the group. You may have to take the conversation back.
- » Pray.

3.3 What about if I am in a white-majority group?

You may find yourself in a group setting with no one present who has been affected by racism, or where there is only one person present who has been affected by racism. In these situations:

- » We would still encourage groups to discuss these issues, but in more general terms rather than sharing personal experiences, so that there is not unnecessary pressure put on an individual and it still feels like dialogue rather than an interview
- » Acknowledge together the historical and present unbroken line of oppression and the unique experience of black people
- » Speak sensitively and in an honouring way about your black brothers and sisters
- » Where necessary, challenge racism in the same way you would challenge sexualised or inappropriate comments made by a man, even if women were not present. Racist attitudes can continue to exist precisely because they remain unchallenged in contexts where people of colour are not present or no one feels a level of responsibility to do so
- » Pray.