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Confronting Racism in Chatom

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Abstract

Confronting Racism in Chatom

By Holly Morales

In a small rural community with shared history and life-long acquaintance, the possibility of bringing African-Americans and whites together to address issues of race is examined. The participants in the initial discussion came from two local churches: one white and the other African-American. All participants indicated they were Christians and faithful followers of Christ. The initial dialogue between the two races failed. The white participants were uninformed and uneducated regarding the challenges that face their African-American brothers and sisters in our society. The white participants completely rejected the concepts of White Privilege and the lack of opportunities and education for African-Americans.

To prevent further harm to the African-American participants, the original diverse group was suspended, and a new white only focus group was formed. The plan was to educate the new white participants about racism, White Privilege, and discrimination imposed on African-Americans. Several local leaders of the white community were chosen to participate in the new study. Following a six-week study of the impact of racism on African-Americans and our society, a change was noted in the thinking of the white participants. The inference of this project is that there cannot be any productive dialogue between the two races until whites are educated about the effects of racism.

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Confronting Racism in Chatom

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To Arthur

Confronting Racism in Chatom

Most of my life, I have lived in large cities where people live in anonymity. I have lived in Buffalo, Indianapolis, Mobile, Bremerhaven, Colorado Springs, Atlanta, and Montgomery. In my experience of living in large cities, I had no lifelong connections with people other than my family. In 2008, I was appointed to serve Chatom United Methodist Church in rural southwest Alabama. I quickly discovered, mostly by error, that many people in Chatom where related by blood or marriage or had either lifelong friendships or lifelong feuds with residents of this small town. To make it in this town, I would need to keep any observations about local citizens to myself. I noticed quickly too that African-Americans and whites did not socialize together. In the other places I lived, it was commonplace to find people of different races dining together, sitting together at sporting events, and worshipping together. In Chatom, however, the opposite was true. The races were separated geographically, socially, and economically. I wondered how people of both races who knew one another their entire lives, had a shared history, and remained here to work and raise families did not interact.

In 2016 with a fiery Presidential Election in full swing and movements around the country, such as Black Lives Matter, I noticed an increase in racist comments, emails, and social media from some residents. I wondered what it would take for people with a life-long acquaintance to come together as a diverse group to share their stories, their experiences, and work together to make our community a Beloved Community, a vision of community shared by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.— a community that would work together towards mutual goals to make Chatom a wonderful place for children to grow and learn.

I felt led to do something tangible to combat the angry, hate-filled, and racist rhetoric that swirled within our community and in my congregation. As a white pastor, I knew I had been called to make a difference and to speak out, act, and model the behavior of Jesus who I claimed to follow. I had preached numerous sermons about racial injustice and had conveyed a message of inclusiveness for all God's people. In our current climate of unrest, violence, and anger, I believed that I had to do more. I had to take some tangible action. I needed to do something in our community that would begin to address the issue of racism. Will Willimon, in his book, *Who Lynched Willie Earle?* offers these powerful words to his readers: "If you are white, have resources, and power granted to you through privileges you did not earn, *and are called to walk with Jesus,* you owe your black sisters and brothers conversation, humble listening, and truthful confession, repentance, conversion, and acts of love, mercy, and friendship."[1] Yet preaching about inclusiveness and talking about justice felt as if I were merely going through the motions. Engaging, listening, and overt acts of Christian discipleship were needed in our community. My witness had to be in my actions and not just in my words. Ken Wystma challenges believers with this: "As hard as it might be, we should realize that discipleship-following Jesus, picking up our cross daily-implies a willingness to lay down power, use privilege for other's benefit, and pay the cost of faithful obedience to God."[2] The community needed to come together, both Black and white for meaningful and open dialogue about racism. I wanted to initiate a conversation between the two races that would break down the long-standing racial barriers in our town.

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1. Will Willimon, *Who Lynched Willie Earle?*: Preaching to Confront Racism (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 63.

2. Ken Wytsma, *The Myth of Equality: Uncovering the Roots of Injustice and Privilege* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2017), 94.

The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church and the church that I serve, the United Methodist Church, began worshipping together occasionally, and our joint worship was the talk of our small town. For weeks after our first joint service, I was approached on numerous occasions at the local grocery store, the post office, and the bank with back-handed comments about worshipping with the "Black church." As followers of Christ, we are called to love one another, bear one another's burdens, and to be patient. Spewing hate and inciting racial divide and anger is in direct conflict with the teachings of Christ. The Apostle Paul encourages us in Ephesians to, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."[3] At the very least, our actions got people thinking and talking about a new time of fellowship. The year was 2016, and there had not been any previous combined services with both races in attendance. We had taken one small step in the right direction and were hoping we had initiated some change.

In conversations with the pastor of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church here in Chatom, an idea began to take seed. My clergy friend and I are the only two female pastors in Chatom. She is African-American, and I am white. We had shared our concerns, shared conversation, and fellowshipped together not just as colleagues but as friends. I wondered if it was possible in our small town to bring people of both races together to have fruitful conversations about race relations and racism. In a town with such a small population (1200) where everyone knows everyone, could we come together and share meaningful, productive, and healing dialogue? If we began small, perhaps we could begin to make tiny inroads in local race relations. I wondered if a productive conversation on racism would help participants have increased compassion for others—if a diverse group of people coming together, and sharing could impart in our community a greater sense of belonging and cohesiveness.

3. Ephesians 4:2 (All biblical quotes are taken from the New Revised Standard Version).

In his book, *Stamped from the Beginning*, Ibram X. Kendi, details effective actions to initiate change:

> The most effective protests have been fiercely local, they are protests that have been started by antiracists focusing on their immediate surroundings: their blocks, neighborhoods, schools, colleges, jobs, and professions. But, it all starts with one person, or two people, or tiny groups, in their small surroundings, engaging in energetic mobilization of antiracists into organizations; and chess-like planning and adjustments during strikes, occupations, insurrections, campaigns, and fiscal and bodily boycotts, among a series of other tactics to force power to eradicate racist policies.[4]

What would be the impact of a small focus group of racially diverse people who came together to share in a discussion on race relations in rural Alabama? To use the term racial reconciliation for this study implies there is equality between the races when the reality in the United States today refutes such a claim. There can be no reconciliation until there is justice in this country. James Cone explains why the term racial reconciliation is a process in his book, *God of the Oppressed*: "To be reconciled with white people means fighting against their power to enslave, reducing masters to the human level, thereby making them accountable to black liberation."[5] The road we needed to travel to achieve an environment of healing and acceptance was rocky and fraught with pitfalls. There will not be any closing of this great chasm between the races until there is honest communication. We had to start somewhere, and we needed to start soon.

Our goal was to address the issues of racism and build a community between the two churches (one with a white congregation and the other with a Black congregation) with hopes of fostering positive relationships between African-Americans and whites. As the focus group

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4. Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped From The Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 510.

5. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 218.

comprised church members, we hoped that Christian hospitality would provide a welcoming space for all participants. As believers in Jesus Christ, we cannot fully share in the Body unless we become unified in our diversity. The prophet Micah encourages us in our walk with God by saying, "This is what the Lord requires of you: Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."[6] We must recognize one another in our otherness, our woundedness, and our differences as children of God; otherwise, we will not experience full oneness with God. The ideal result would be to build *Beloved Community*, a new community, where diverse people seek justice, love, and nurture each other as children of God. In Reggie L. Williams' book, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, he offers this observation on racism, "From the hidden perspective it is apparent that racism prohibits authentic Christian discipleship." [7] Williams is correct; it is not possible to be an authentic Christian if you are a racist. In his book, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh*, author Brian K. Blount discusses the Gospel of John and what it reveals to us about genuine Christian community. Blount echoes Williams' statement by writing the following observation about the community called Christian. A Christian community and witness is one of love, equality, and care for one another. Christians are not called to exclude individuals by race, ethnicity, or illness. Christians are to live a life of inclusiveness. We are called to love and nurture one another in genuine Christian fellowship. Brian K. Blount shares his interpretation of Christian community:

> Interpreters miss John's impact here because of the limited way in which we think of evangelism. Most would define evangelism as a moving out into communities and inviting them to join whatever movement is being represented. John's Gospel does not appear to have that kind of mandate in mind. What it does have in mind, however, is the

6. Micah 6:8

7. Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and An Ethic of Resistance* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 56.

> countercultural belief that Jesus is the Son sent by God to save the world from its sins. This community sustains itself and perpetuates itself through the love its members show toward one another. It is by way of this love that the community can be identified, but also by way of this love that the community stands out visibly as separate and unique from every other community that surrounds it.[8]

Issues of race, prejudice, and white privilege are either ignored or swept under the rug in Chatom, a place where some whites think it is okay to share a derogatory racial cartoon at a church administration board meeting. Racial slurs, jokes, and emails are shared and enjoyed by many white residents. They believe that acting in this way is not harmful. Beverly Daniel Tatum addresses the all-encompassing and destructive effects of these racist acts in her book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in The Cafeteria?* She explains, "Passive racism is more subtle and can be seen in the collusion of laughing when a racist joke is told, letting exclusionary hiring practices go unchallenged, accepting as appropriate the omissions of people of color from the curriculum, and avoiding difficult race-related issues."[9] The people making these horrible racist remarks consider themselves devout Christians and true followers of Christ. I am curious as to why they believe it is okay to say horrible things about God's beloved people. They believe because they are not saying it directly to a person of color that they are not hurting anyone. Tatum's book instructs us otherwise. Chatom might be a place that people would have considered backward, but listening to the current national rhetoric of prejudice, hate, and xenophobia, it seems to be, alarmedly, a microcosm of the new norm.

An abundance of churches that are denominationally diverse dot the entire town. There is much pride in our town's logo "*In God We Trust."* The locals claim Chatom is a Christian town. At Chatom United Methodist Church where I serve, there has never been an African-American

8. Brian K. Blount, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh: New Testament Ethics in an African American Context* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 116.

9. Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together In The Cafeteria?* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 91.

member. There is the rare African-American visitor (one in the ten years I have served here) but no members. In the Town of Chatom, African-Americans live in one neighborhood and whites in the others. Social interaction between the two races is limited to school or the workplace. There is a crucial problem with thinking that this is truly a Christian place. People here really do not practice Christianity as Jesus the Christ taught. They do not love their African-American neighbors as themselves. The local white churches ignore race relations in the community. Will Willimon states in his work, *Who Lynched Willie Earle?*, "Christians are forced to talk about race, not because of changing demographics but because of Jesus."[10] It is not acceptable to be a follower and ignore a problem that is so prevalent and harmful. We must begin to address the issues that racism causes in our society because we claim to be followers and believers in Jesus the Christ.

The idea arose for the intensification of the discussion on racism to include others; this might be a way forward in facilitating a more inclusive community. Would the small size of our town be beneficial for starting a focus group to address racial issues? Jim Wallis's book, *America's Original Sin*, states the importance of racially diverse people sharing their stories: "Understanding our own stories about race, and talking about them to one another, is absolutely essential if we are to become part of the larger pilgrimage to defeat racism in America."[11] Wallis is correct. If we break down the barriers and sit down and at the very least begin to talk to one another, perhaps we will be able to understand one another.

Goals Outlined

10. Willimon, 63.

11. Jim Wallis, *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 1.

By selecting a few individuals from both churches and ensuring their commitment to the study, we started very small. The smallness of the group would foster a sense of intimacy and openness and would allow participants to form relationships and begin to trust one another. Kathleen A. Cahalan advises religious organizations seeking to implement new projects in this way: "When religious organizations mount projects and programs, then, what is at stake is the efficacy of love and care and service. What is at stake is how human beings engage with and relate to one another. What is at stake is how minds are illuminated, hearts are moved, burdens are lifted, wounds are healed."[12] Therefore, mindfulness, attentiveness, and careful planning were essential in making any headway with this project. The people in the focus group being self-professed followers of Christ, coming together for conversation and fellowship, would reflect a love for one another. Love is what separates us from the rest of the world. In an ecclesiastical setting, it is essential that God's love is demonstrated in our interactions together.

We directed the focus group with two general goals to observe through its completion. First, we wanted to study the changes in the participants individual perceptions, and secondly, we sought to study the development of new external relationships and their outward effect on the spirit of the community. Peter Block shares the following idea about building community: "The communal possibility rotates on the question, 'What can we create together?'" [13]

Forming relationships and establishing trust would be essential for this project to make a lasting impact. In making changes in any community, it is essential for people to form relationships, gain trust, and become committed to a mutual goal. The goal was to get African-Americans and whites talking together about race, sharing their individual stories, and

12. Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Projects That Matter Successful Planning & Evaluation for Religious Organizations* (Lanham: First Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), vii.

13. Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008), 48.

overcoming some of the boundaries that separate us. The pastor of the Christian Methodist Episcopal church and I would serve as facilitators and would be representatives of the two identity groups—Black and white—participating in the conversation.

Essential for conveying empathy within the group is to acknowledge that some of the participants are recipients of status and privilege simply because the color of their skin is white. In contrast, others in the group experience rejection and prejudice because they are people of color. Emphasis was placed on the worth and value of each participant to help create a safe space for sharing. It was crucial for group members to feel safe and valued. The author of Hebrews offers us this advice on relationships: "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."[14]

Another anticipated study outcome is sustenance of a community within the small group that would last beyond the scope of the study. H. Richard Niebuhr suggests, "in our history association means community, the participation of each living self in a common memory and

14. Hebrews 10:24-25.

common hope no less than in a common world of nature."[15] Careful observation was critical. It was necessary to be attentive for signs of acceptance, hope, and honesty. John Paul Lederach suggests that for peacebuilding it is necessary to, "Think, feel, and follow relationships. Relationships are at the heart of social change."[16] As a form of measurement, it was essential to observe whether relationships were formed, whether they grew, and if they were sustained beyond the period of the study.

First Attempt

The objective was that, in the innocuous environment, all voices would be valued and heard, and no new hurts would be inflicted. Peter Block introduces his readers to the *possibility conversation*: "The possibility conversation frees us to be pulled by a new future."[17] And, as we shared in one another's stories, explored the history of race relations in Chatom, and sought to work towards living more intentionally as an inclusive community, we hoped relations between the races would improve. Peter Block encouraged us in our line of thinking by stressing the importance of stating possibilities in the presence of others. The act of speaking about new possibilities before others give credence to our plan to build an inclusive community. In the Bible, 1 Peter encourages us in Christian love with the charge, "Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble."[18] To share in Christian conversation, to listen to love, and to dream of new possibilities is what we hoped for by forming the focus group.

15. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 2006), 37.

16. John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination (*New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 74.

17. Block, 124.

18. 1 Peter 3:8.

Unfortunately, our first attempt failed. The white participants either dropped out or came to me to tell me they did not believe that African-Americans faced any discrimination. I had believed all the right ingredients were in place. As a gathering of Christians, I had hoped that there would be mutual respect and acceptance—that the participants would be compassionate and open-minded. I had not, however, prepared my white participants properly for such a discussion—a painful fact that became apparent quickly in our initial conversation. The white people who participated in the brief, original focus group were completely uninformed about the history of racism and, in fact, did not think it was a problem. In his book, *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence*, Derald Wing Sue gives us this critical observation: "It goes without saying that race talk between individuals from different racial/cultural groups is often filled with strong, powerful emotions, misunderstandings, accusations, and negative outcomes."[19] Unfortunately, I discovered Sue's adroit book on race conversations after we had the first attempt at bringing a diverse group together. Sue's book would prove to be an invaluable resource for our future conversations on racism.

The observation made of the white participants in our initial meeting was that they seemed confused and bewildered by the concept of racism. Their body language and facial expressions indicated extreme discomfort and fear. While I observed that individuals from both the Black and white groups were fidgety and nervous, white persons' level of discomfort and stress appeared to be higher than that of the Black participants. I suspect that, since African-Americans operate daily in a white dominated society, they are used to being uncomfortable around white people. The whites in our group, however, were not used to being around Blacks outside of worksites or schools and this was a new experience for them. Again, I imagine that African Americans feel discomfort in settings where they must intermingle with whites, as they

19. Derald Wing Sue, *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), ix.

must be careful how they respond and interact in a white privileged society. By contrast, whites may feel guilt, shame, and sorrow at how they have treated their African American brothers and sisters and therefore participating in a social face-to-face situation may be awkward for them. In his book, Sue shares the following explanation of why race talk is uncomfortable for whites: "Avoiding race talk is to avoid the acknowledgment of power and privilege held by many whites over their brothers and sisters of color."[20] Talking about race makes whites uncomfortable for many reasons including responsibility, shame, and guilt. We were concerned that we had done more harm than good. The task at hand was becoming more complex.

We quickly ascertained that, while white participants did not want to talk about racism, our African-American participants were more open to a discussion and were more engaged in the conversation. The African-American participants were willing to share their experiences and in fact seemed eager to do so. Participating in a discussion about race gives people of color a chance to share their experiences and the difficulties they have encountered.

After the first meeting, several white members approached me privately and began to share their concerns. One person stated, "There is no such thing as white privilege; there is affirmative action which has given advantages to African-Americans." Another said, "Black people are too sensitive about race, and they play the race card to their advantage." Still another stated, "Maybe if more Blacks held down jobs and were productive rather than relying on welfare, they would get more respect." Another told me, "We have had a Black President, and that means there is no more racial inequality in our country—we are a post-racial country. I consider myself colorblind and not a racist." Bishop Willimon suggests that most whites are uninformed, unfamiliar, and simply uneducated in matters of race. He explains, "When whites claim, 'I am color-blind in my dealings with others,' it's usually an indication of ignorance of

20. Ibid., 86.

how we have been thoroughly indoctrinated into race."[21] Willimon conveys something that became very apparent at our first diverse meeting—white people do not have an understanding of the effects of racism because it has never directly affected them. Whites do not ever have to consider their race, while people of color must always be aware of theirs. The white people in our group stated that they did not see racism as an issue. Since none of them had ever participated in what they considered overt individual acts of racism, they were therefore not racists and had done nothing that contributed to the problem—if indeed there really was a problem. They believed that they held no responsibility for supporting a system that sustains institutional and systemic racism.

To remain silent in the face of racial injustice makes us guilty of indifference to suffering, and that is counterintuitive to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Jim Wallis shares his observation: "Just as surely as blacks suffer in a white society because they are black, whites benefit because they are white. And if whites have profited from a racist system, we must try to change it." [22] One of the members expressed concern because he believes that reverse discrimination and anti-white bias is more of an issue in our country than anything currently experienced by African-Americans. His observation is refuted in an article by Samuel Sommers and Michael Norton, "From life expectancy to school discipline to mortgage rejection to police use of force, outcomes for white Americans tend to be-in the aggregate-better than outcomes for black Americans, often

21. Willimon, 59.

22. Wallis, 49.

substantially so." [23] The perceptions that some of the white participants had was completely inaccurate. In addition, they were resisting the attempts to bring a diverse group together.

My partner and I envisioned new strategy. We needed to educate white people in our community about racism and its effects before any productive and meaningful dialogue could take place.

I began to do research, looking for books and articles that would assist me in educating whites on the issues that arise from racism and how it has systematically kept people of color from achieving equality in our society.

To begin to have a conversation about race, the white participants needed to learn about the reality of racism in America. The first question was *where to begin*? The clearest answer was, a working definition of race. The definition we came up with was that race is not a biological factor; it is a social, cultural, and economic classification of individuals to benefit one group. Racism exists when one race has distinct advantages in education, housing, and employment opportunities. In an article edited by Jean Halley, an explanation of the effects of racism was helpful as an introduction: "Race exists as a social and political understanding of humans that attempts to assign individuals into distinct groups in a way that systematically benefits some—whites—while limiting opportunities for others—people of color."[24] It became evident that white people needed to take a serious look at the reprehensible history of oppressing non-whites solely for their own economic benefit. The white members of our new focus group needed to realize

23. Samuel Sommers and Michael Norton, "White people think racism is getting worse. Against white people." The Washington Post, July 21, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/07/21/white-people-think-racism-is-getting-worse-against-white-people/?utm_term=.cf9f45507667

24. Jean Halley, et.al. *Seeing White: An Introduction to White Privilege and Race.* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2011), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/emory/detail.action?docID=718698.

how our American system of oppression has caused division, injustice, and lack of opportunity for our African-American brothers and sisters in Christ.

The United States has a long history of subjugating people of color for the economic and social benefits of its white population. Jim Wallis argues that, "our original racial diversity was a product of appalling human oppression based on greed."[25] Wallis summed up the history of racism in our country in that one statement. Whites had used people of color solely because of greed. The United States is not a nation built on noble ideals of freedom and equality. Our nation was built on the pain, suffering, and blood of African slaves brought to America against their will. The white population still holds political power and promotes social programs, tax rates, and policies that benefit whites. American values preserve the economic and social structures that continue to reflect our history of white dominion. These policies have devastating long-term effects because they preserve white privilege and ensure its continuation long after laws and policies have been changed.

As laws are changed to benefit people of color, new approaches and tactics are employed keep the status quo of white dominance. The perpetuation of these policies hinders our ability to progress as a nation and compete in a global market. When over 13% of the population does not have equal access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, we all suffer. Unless we begin to educate white Americans about the unfair policies that continue in our society, the sins of racism and white privilege will continue unchecked. Wallis refutes the claims of whites who state that they are not recipients of privilege: "Whether we or our families or our ancestors had anything to do with the racial sins of America's establishment, *all white people* have benefited from them. No matter who you are, where you live, how you have acted—and even if

25. Wallis, 9.

you have fought hard against racism—*you can never escape white privilege in America if you are white*."[26]

Changing the Approach

In our first failed attempt to bring a diverse group together, we used articles, poetry, and essays written by African-Americans that revealed their suffering from living in a racist society. I thought reading poetry which beautifully expressed the painful experience of African-Americans would be thought-provoking and a good introduction to our focus group. Reactions would suggest that I was incorrect, at least with the group of whites that had attended our first meeting. They resisted hearing poetry that described the experience of African-Americans. Phyllis Wheatley's poem, *On Being Brought from Africa to America***,** and Michael S. Harpers', *American History*, are two of the poems that were selected to be read. We included some articles from the United Methodist General Commission on Religion and Race. We agreed that the poetry we selected made the white participants extremely uncomfortable. We needed to rethink our original resources; we wondered if the original approach had put white people on the defensive.

For the second group of only white participants, I decided to research books and articles addressing the issues of white privilege and racism written by white American authors. This new approach, it was hoped, would not put whites immediately on the defensive. One of the books initially considered was, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*, by Tim Wise. The book did a good job addressing racism but seemed too autobiographical than informational about the problem of racism. I decided that showing the Tim Wise video, *White Like Me*, would be more beneficial than asking the participants to read his book. Another book

26. Wallis, 34.

considered was Will Willimon's book, *Who Lynched Willie Earle?*—a great book, and not too long for people who have overloaded schedules, but I thought it was too geared for preachers. Another resource briefly considered was, *The Anti-Racist Cookbook,* by Robin Parker and Pamela Smith Chambers, but it seemed too simplistic and did not have the depth or background of racism we were seeking. The book chosen for the new focus group was Jim Wallis' *America's Original Sin.* Wallis' book addresses racism in a non-threatening way for whites, and yet conveys the horror of racism for African-Americans. The book includes many Christian references, and the author's Christian love for all humankind shines through. In addition, Wallis covers not only racism in the book but addresses white privilege as well. My research led me to a helpful resource that *Sojourners* offers. It is a six-part discussion guide with suggested Scripture readings, thought-provoking discussion questions, and prayers readily available for download. There are several videos available on YouTube with Jim Wallis talking about racism and white privilege we used with the group. These video resources were extremely helpful in facilitating our discussion and reinforcing the readings from Wallis' book.

Selecting the New White Participants

After prayerful consideration and much conversation, we decided to be very selective about our new white group. The people who we asked to participate in the second discussion group were highly respected local leaders, well known for their service work in the community, and active members of the church they attend. We hoped by selecting these individuals that other whites would take notice and perhaps be influenced to consider joining in later study groups. One individual asked to join in the discussion was a local judge, well-known for fairness in his decisions and his involvement in many local charitable organizations. Another person who joined the group was a professor at the university located an hour from Chatom; known for her

service work in the community. A well-respected retired probate judge was asked to join, and a retired professor from a local college asked if he could participate. We knew all of these individuals to be open-minded and caring; they were selected to make up the new white focus group.

Surveying New White Participants

Because of the early and revealing conversations where the former white members expressed their negative views, we decided to formulate an initial survey with the purpose of moving the new group to think differently about race and racism. One of the first inquiries asked on the survey was: "Have you ever been overlooked while standing in a checkout line because of the color of your skin?" Other questions included: "When you stay at a hotel do the complimentary shampoos and toiletries work with the texture of your hair?"; "Has an employer or anyone else ever assumed that you got your job/position or into a particular school because of affirmative action?"; "Have you ever been profiled, followed, pulled over, or harassed by store security or law enforcement because of your race?"; "While in school, did your textbooks reflect people of color and their accomplishments and contributions to the world?"; "Has anyone ever assumed that, because of the color of your skin, you could sing, dance, had rhythm, or were good at sports?"; "Have you ever given any thought to the fact that you inherit and benefit automatically from a world of white privilege?"; "What is white privilege?"; "Please provide your definition of racism"; and "Do you believe that racism is an issue in our country today?"

A careful assessment of answers given, both before and at the completion of the focus group, provided us with an important means of valuation; did people's thinking change after participating in this project? At the closing of the study, we added these additional questions: "Did participating in this project give you a new understanding of what it means to be a person

of color in our country?"; "How has your participation in the group prompted difference in conversations you have with others regarding race and racism?"; "Are you more in tune with how people of color get treated in our community?";"Has your definition of racism changed since participating in this study?"; "How has participation in this study changed how you think about the history of racial oppression in our country?" These questions were just some of the ways to measure the effects of the study.

Measuring the Results

One of the biggest limitations of this project is the lack of time available. The long-term goals of such a project will take years. Kathleen A. Cahalan outlines some guidelines for measuring impact in her book, *Projects that Matter*: "Impact can be described in three timeframes: as initial, intermediate, or long-term impact. Whether the impact is initial, intermediate, or long-term depends on its place in the sequence of events and upon what kind of impact is hoped for."[27] There are, however, some initial benefits from this project that will provide an immediate impact. One of those benefits was that some white leaders in the community were openly participating in a study about racism. The members of the group believed that the issue was important enough that they were willing to risk condemnation, ostracism, and ridicule to participate. The initial coming together demonstrated that people were beginning to embrace a concept that was immense; a change in behavior, attitudes, and thinking is needed in Chatom.

Whites Learn About Racism and White Privilege

The white members were shown the film by Tim Wise, *White Like Me: Reflections from a Privileged Son*. Wise's short film, based on his same-titled book, was a non-threatening introduction by a white male to concepts regarding racism, white privilege, and the indignities

27. Cahalan, 18.

people of color face every day of their lives. The hope was that seeing the film, presented from a white man's perspective, would help get the group thinking in a new direction. To introduce the concept of white privilege, we used Tim Wise's video from YouTube entitled, *The Pathology of Privilege.* Wise is a knowledgeable, humble, and passionate speaker and his videos were well received. Jim Wallis' book, *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*, was chosen as the white focus group's assigned reading.

We introduced whites to concepts demonstrating how their treatment is different from that of African-Americans. The new group admitted that the concepts introduced were new to them and they would consider and share their reflections at the following meeting. Their reflections were honest; several stated that thinking about the new views on racism had been disconcerting.

We taught the group that whites tend to think of themselves as "normal" and do not refer to another person as my "white friend", or a "white person"; whites typically only refer or notice race when someone is of another race. Whites, when speaking about other whites, do not interject "my white friend" Bob, but will preface a friend of color with a race indicator, as in "my Black friend" Bob. The actions of the white people who inadvertently act inappropriately are called racial microaggressions. They are the everyday indignities endured by people of color, committed by well-meaning but naïve whites who have effected a transgression against their friend by identifying that person by the color of their skin.

Observations of the new group indicated that the participants were very engaged in the materials provided for the study. Their body language and emotional responses demonstrated the shame and sadness they were experiencing because of what they were learning. Several individuals shed tears and others appeared to grieve over some of the material in Wallis' book.

The reactions we received from the new group was almost a complete opposite of the failed group's responses.

Tim Wise notes in his book, *White Like Me*, race is not something that is readily considered by white Americans. "As the dominant group in the United States, whites too often have the luxury of remaining behind a veil of ignorance for years, while people of color begin noticing the different ways in which they are viewed and treated early on."[28] Wise is correct in his observation—when we asked the white participants if they had ever thought about their race, the group answered overwhelmingly, "No." Whites do not talk about the issues of racism or race because we do not have to talk about it. Everyone in the group agreed. Racism is not an issue we face daily. We never have to consider our race before attempting to do anything: applying for a job, seeking housing, applying for a loan, or making an application to school. We simply do not understand the experience of African-Americans and how our thinking and what we do impacts their lives daily. The decisions of the African-American community have little or no impact on the lives of white Americans.

Another reason whites do not like to talk about racism is that they believe that are not overt racists. In, *Race Talk and The Conspiracy of Silence*, Derald Wing Sue shares this insight: "Because most whites experience themselves as good, moral, and fair-minded human beings who actively stand against overt acts of discrimination (hate crimes and obvious discriminatory acts), it is disturbing for them to realize that they possess racial biases."[29] I noticed that the participants were uncomfortable with the realization that they may have contributed to the problem. They admitted it was extremely disconcerting to recognize that their inaction, silence, and ignorance

28. Tim Wise, *White Like Me* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2011), 27.

29. Sue, 31.

contributed to a systematic problem. Those are some of the contributing factors as to why whites do not talk about race. The group admitted that race had been a non-issue for them.

The concept of "White Privilege" was alien to the white focus group. Each participant admitted that until recently they had never even encountered the term. Several members added that they had never entertained the idea that they received differential treatment because of the color of their skin. Derald Wing Sue indicates the following reasons why whites may wish to avoid the topic of privilege: "Confronting White privilege in race talk means entertaining the possibility that meritocracy is a myth, that whites did not attain their positions in life solely through their own efforts, that they have benefitted from the historical and current racial arrangements and practices of society, and that they have been advantaged in society to the detriment of people of color."[30] For some white people, that may be more than they are willing to consider. Ours is a culture where the concept of social hierarchy has been a reality since this nation's inception. The idea that one group of people receives breaks they do not deserve, gets jobs they are not qualified for, or gains entrance to a school not on merit but because of the color of their skin was a shocking concept. It was an unsettling new awareness, and it provoked some soul-searching dialogue and discovery. After a lengthy discussion the group all agreed that, despite the civil rights movement that began in the 1960s to address discrimination endured by people of color, five decades later our society is still hierarchical, exclusionary, and stubbornly resistant to change.

If "whiteness" is invisible to whites, do they consider themselves the norm and everyone else as different? Derald Wing Sue's insight is invaluable for changing our perceptions: "Making whiteness visible is a critical step in thinking critically about race and addressing systematic

30. Sue, 32.

inequality in the United States."[31] The white experience in Chatom is so different from the African-American experience. As a white American, I do not have to think about being perceived as a member of a "difficult" or "different" racial group. I never had to have a discussion with my son about how to deal with policing authorities because of his race, and I do not have to worry about overcoming negative racial stereotypes. I do not have to think about my race daily. Unfortunately, that is not the case for my friend and colleague from the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. She had to have "the discussion" with her son about the policing authorities, which areas to avoid in town after dark, and numerous other conversations about being a minority race in Chatom; something I never had to consider.

If whites and their culture are normative, what does it mean to be a person of color in a predominately white America? Tim Wise shares in his book, *White Like Me*, that recent studies indicate African-American children are aware of the negative stereotypes associated with being black from a very young age, unlike white children. Wise also shows that it is possible to be white in America and have virtually no interaction with people of color; this is not the case for minority groups. Reggie Williams reveals how imperative it is for African-Americans to consider their race in everything they do: "Most liberal Whites failed to see white supremacy as a matter for Christian attention, and as a consequence, they ignored the constant dangers of daily life in America for black people. But avoiding racism is not a choice for African American Christians; it was a matter of life or death in a society organized by race and enforced by violence."[32]

So, I began with some questions for the new group after reading the quote from Reggie Williams' book:

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31. Sue, 24.

32. Williams, 21.

1) How would being considered different, unexpected, and not normative effect a person's self-image?

2) How do you think that would feel?

3) How does living in a society where you are systematically discriminated against, distrusted, and under-represented affect your ability to be a productive citizen?

4) How would you feel if you were followed around in a store because of the color of your skin and the negative societal perceptions that have indoctrinated the way people see you?

5) What does that kind of oppression do to your self-esteem and self-worth?

These are questions that the white group was exploring. And the group has admitted these questions are concepts they had never thought about before participating in the study group.

We hoped that by introducing the white members to racism separately, we would remove any discomfort that they would feel in a diverse group. More importantly, we did not want to subject the African-American members of the group to more racial prejudice and to perceptions that were uninformed. To change people's thinking long-term is beyond the scope of this project. My goal was to instruct the white group on the history of racism in the United States—the effects of racism on not only on people of color but the negative impact it has on whites as well. It is impossible for whites to begin to understand the non-white experience if they have never thought about racism from an African-American's point of view. Since the new white group was made up of professional and well-respected individuals who held leadership positions in Chatom, we hoped that others would follow suit. I was encouraged by their willingness to be a part of the group, as their participation would positively impact the project in the future. We hoped that their positive influence on other white members would result in attracting more people to consider learning about the issues of racism.

I have made several personal observations of the group. Attentiveness to body language and the level of engagement demonstrated by participants has indicated that this group was more open and receptive to learning about racism than the initial group. They have been more receptive to new points of view and ideas. Members have openly shared that many of the concepts we discussed they had never considered before. Whether or not they permanently incorporate these new concepts into their way of thinking is beyond the scope of this project.

The discussions shared in the group have given me some hope for progress. One member stated that she had become mindful of the interactions between whites and African-Americans at her workplace. She also told the group that she had noticed differences in the way African-Americans were treated—something she had never noticed before joining the study group. Another member shared that, when waiting in line at the drug store, he will now politely point out when African-American customers are left waiting in order to first serve a white customer. He also stated that he now makes a concerted effort to speak to all African-Americans he encounters daily.

The objective remains to revisit the more diverse group with our better informed and more willing white participants. The plan is for the new diverse group to begin meeting each Sunday after Worship Service. Chatom United Methodist hosted the Cooper-Lewis Christian Methodist Episcopal Church for a joint Easter Sunrise Service 2018. We celebrated our third year of sharing the joy of Easter Sunrise Worship and Table Fellowship together. The discussion is underway about sharing other services together as we move to make inroads between the races.

I believe the changes that were made in the people and the new approach will provide the environment and players that will make for a successful diverse focus group. The mistakes made

with the initial focus group have given insight into what does not work here in Chatom. By educating the white group separately and making them aware of the issues facing people of color, our discussion in a diverse group will be more fruitful and effective. One participant shared that he had been impressed when some of the members of Mother Emanuel AME church dared to forgive Dylan Roof for killing members of their church family in 2015. He then added that, after completing our six-week study, he was now incredulous at how the church members had reacted after the shooting. They demonstrated Christianity in the truest sense, he stated, and he did not think that a white church would have acted with such grace if the situation was the other way around. He also said that the Christian Methodist Episcopal witness and worship seemed more authentic to him.

The scope of this project only allows for a start in working towards making a difference in racism in our community. Ken Wytsma shares his assessment on the enormity of the task to eradicate racism in our society:

> Race, as a way of seeing and categorizing people, is a paradigm with immense historical momentum. A boat does not stop immediately when it is throttled down, and its wake continues even longer. Likewise, race, racial bias, and racially constructed societal patterns don't immediately pass from memory when they are discredited. They linger in the shadows of our laws, in the ways society is represented in movies and music, and in a deeper and more profound manner-in the ways we perceive ourselves as privileged or not.[33]

Perceptions, stereotypes, and ingrained racism will take a very long time to overcome. My project is a tiny step in the right direction. The short-term goal was to get people to begin to consider how racism effects not only people of color but is a detriment to us all. The ultimate, long-term goal is to have a cohesive and racially mixed group to go to public schools, churches, and community events to speak against the sin of racism. Perhaps this is the most profound lesson learned so far: white people are often completely unaware of racism. Once we evaluated

33. Wytsma, 80.

our first failed attempt, considered our missteps, and formulated a new plan we began to see some glimmer of hope. When the selection of the right materials and the people for our context were in place, we saw some small changes in thinking and conversation. I saw hope in our second focus group— even though change will be slow and painful, some people in our community have begun to talk about it and to do something about it.

The project achieved some success in several ways: participants began to consider race issues they had never thought about before, people in Chatom were coming together to talk about race, and relationships were established that would positively impact our community.

To address the issues of white privilege and racism is a process that will take a very long time, many voices coming together to share, and a great deal of commitment.

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