

Dear White Christians . . . Now What? June 14, 2015, Minnesota Conference of the UCC

Thank you so much for extending the invitation for me to be with you; I love that we're having this chance to be together and talk about these sacred matters. I particularly want to thank the entire Anti-Racism Taskforce, and especially Tim Johnson, Okogyeamon and Lisa Bodenheim for so much guidance and logistical support; as well as your conference minister Shari Prestemon. It was clear to me from the moment this Conference invited me that there was a depth of intention and care present in how this time was put together. And, I have been so appreciative of that.

So I hope over the course of today we're going to have deep, substantive, challenging, and difficult conversations. Conversations befitting the challenging and difficult times we are living in right now.

Dear White Christians...now what?

I don't know how many of you shared the experience I had this past fall. But as Ferguson, Cleveland, Baltimore echoed in our public discourse I found myself surrounded by many Americans, but white Americans in particular, who seemed rather stunned. I found myself surrounded as well by brothers and sisters of color also stunned—but a stunned that's seemed to have a slightly different quality to it, deeply inflected with outrage and a kind of tired but fierce (not resigned) despair. For my white brothers and sisters, including white Christians, the stunned has seemed more like surprised—even when also outraged and despair, it's seemed to have a kind of coating of disbelief.

We are (still) this racially alienated? We (still) live in worlds this different from each other? What do we do with this? What now?

It's in this context I want to talk a little bit today about the racial story we've told in the church; the story I think is responsible for why so many of us white Christians have been so surprised. It's a story I suspect you'll recognize, but it's also an inadequate and incomplete story. And I want to think with you today about what a more adequate story might be; a story we need to start telling ourselves and telling this nation, if we are serious about “now what”?

***How many of you have ever heard someone lament in this way: “11:00 on a Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week?” That claim Martin Luther King made in the early 1960s.

This is a pretty common refrain among mainline Protestants. It might be more accurate today to call this phenomena separation rather than segregation and just take the statement at face value looking at racial demographics, statistically this remains true. We do worship in spaces as racially distinct today as we did before the CRM.

The 11:00 statement is made as a lament, because Protestants have explicitly claimed diversity, inclusion and welcome as gospel values for at least two decades now.

Now the basic premise of diversity is that we should celebrate and embrace difference. Separate worship must mean, therefore, we have failed in some way. Racial separation seems indicative of having NOT lived up to the gospel's calls for us to be racially reconciled with another. That we must be resistant to difference or maybe even hold negative views of those who are distinct from us racially. Racial separation is evidence that barriers of dislike, mistrust and non-acceptance remain. Otherwise, those who are different from me or "us," would be "here."

In a very real way, Protestants have made racial separation or alienation *the* racial problem in the church.

And when racial separation is the problem, then the cure, rather logically, becomes a heavy emphasis on togetherness. In response to our separation we invoke images of the Christian community as one in Christ, we lift up metaphors about family, and brotherhood and sisterhood to describe who we should be to one another. We emphasize the diverse beauty of God's creation that we are called to love.

In theological terms, the notion is "reconciliation." I like to call this the "reconciliation paradigm."

Most Protestant denominations, the UCC among the most committed, have explicitly committed themselves to the reconciliation paradigm for at least two decades now. Producing volumes of Christian education material on "reconciliation," they have sought to address our alienation by calling on the need for sacred dialogue across lines of difference.

How many of you feel familiar with this language of reconciliation? Diversity? Inclusion?

Now, I'm not here to disavow those values. Not only do I believe deeply in reconciliation, but I long for a racially reconciled church, and not just that, but a racially reconciled nation so badly my soul aches.

But I have come to believe that the reconciliation paradigm that has failed us, that it has failed communities of color in particular for very specific reasons I want to discuss. In fact, ironically it's our deep investment in a reconciliation paradigm as the primary way to talk about race in the church that is a primary reason we remain so un-reconciled across racial lines.

The reconciliation paradigm rests on an inadequate racial story; but we'll come back to this.

First, I want to start to illustrate it by asking you to try on two different thought experiments.

I want you to imagine there's a congregation examining race and justice, and I ask each person in the room to identify five positive characteristics they associate with their racial identity. To list characteristics they associate with their racial group that they can claim and celebrate. (So, by definition here, any characteristic affiliated with unjust privilege or dominance must be excluded.) After I give the group time to ponder what do you think the results would be?ⁱ

More than likely, the white people in the room will report profound discomfort. Most will claim they can't identify anything particularly positive about their racial identity. Some will explain they tried to identify positive traits by way of their ethnic roots (German, Italian, Irish, etc.). But, in most cases these roots will be admitted as too distant to be meaningful. Overwhelmingly, the sentiment expressed will be confusion, perhaps distress and disarray.

In contrast, more than likely, people of color in the room will have little difficulty with this exercise. Most will identify a number of positive characteristics they associate with their racial identity—characteristics of which they are proud. Most will be able to describe how their racial identity shapes their self-understanding and relationships with others who identify as part of the same racial group.

Now a second experiment: I often ask my students what they would think if they saw a group of African American students walking across our campus carrying signs that stated “Black is Beautiful.” What about Indigenous peoples walking with signs reading: Native power! Sovereignty and self-determination! Or a group of Latino students with signs announcing “La Fuerza Latina!”

My students overwhelmingly say they would interpret any of these scenes as statements of pride, some kind of celebration of Black, Native or Latino culture, or as a protest—a collective justice response to some sort of injustice. Most say they would have a positive or supportive response, or at least be curious.

Then I ask them if this response would be similar if they encountered a group of white students carrying signs that stated “White is Beautiful!” “White Power!” “White Strength!” They usually get quiet at this point and squirm and, of course, they shake their heads vigorously: “no.”

This is an odd response, I point out to them. At Drake we emphasize the need to value “diversity”—that’s “higher ed’s” version of “reconciliation paradigm.” Shouldn’t that mean all diversity?

These experiments expose major gaps in the “reconciliation paradigm.” Reconciliation implies a need to bring the *whole self* to the table if we are to be in authentic relationship with other selves. But such holistic authenticity would seem to be nothing less than impossible if one or more of the parties involved has no clear sense of self.

How can we possibly be reconciled, which presumably requires we celebrate “God-given” racial differences, if a significant proportion of those being reconciled embody a difference that creates such ambivalence and discomfort? If those parties have no coherent way to speak about their racial selves, let alone invoke a positive racial identity?

These experiments highlight a major problem built right into our reconciliation talk, a problem we in the church have not seen, or acknowledged, or talked about and certainly have not adequately addressed.

Here's the problem: the reconciliation paradigm rests on the assumption that all of our differences can be similarly celebrated and embraced; I need to come to better love your blackness, your Native-ness, your Latino-ness; and you? you need to come to love my whiteness? Hmmm....do you see how the reconciliation paradigm gets thrown into chaos, it becomes incoherent, when whiteness enters the room.

Even when we talk about the need for "just" reconciliation; Even when we try to address (as we must) white privilege; At its foundation the reconciliation paradigm still rests on the assumption that there's a kind of moral, spiritual, cultural parallel in our racial identities. I.e., "My whiteness is just like your_____". Different, but equally embraceable.

Here's the racial story of reconciliation:

Our commitment to "reconciliation," of course, comes directly from the courageous and oh-so-brilliant Civil Rights Movement. And, specifically, of course, from the work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who articulated a vision of "beloved community" for the church and for this nation.

"Beloved community" for King signaled a vision of a truly integrated community, a place where people care for and are with one another across lines of difference. It was a vision of life together well beyond mere legal desegregation and that meant realization of divine love in human life as the *a priori* reality of the human condition. It meant that our hostility over differences represented our alienation from those conditions and that we were called to a state of togetherness.

Many white Christians who were active in the movement themselves, or watched as children and, compelled by the movement's courage and vision, became captivated by this vision. And liberal and progressive white Christians, denominations eventually, bought in, hearts opened, to this vision of beloved community. This vision has had a grip on our hearts and minds ever since.

There is deep and legitimate theological and historical precedent for reconciliation.

But the reconciliation paradigm is based on an incomplete racial story. **Here's the undertold racial story.**

If we want to tell a civil rights story in which work for "reconciliation" is the take away, we have to be willing to say that the civil rights movement ended around 1964; that's much earlier than most of us would say it ended. Right, we usually say "through the 60s"—'64 isn't even halfway through that decade.

By the mid-1960s, the Black Power movement had already begun to express disappointments with the civil rights movement.

As early as 1964 riots and fires consumed Rochester, New York—triggered (incidentally) by police violence. And organizers there said, "hey, our problem isn't the right to vote," it's access to jobs. By the time fires had consumed Detroit in 1967, Black Power had thoroughly critiqued

civil rights' analysis of the national racial situation, as well as the civil rights movements solutions for it. (If you watched *Selma* you saw some of these tensions beginning to play out between King's SCLC and SNCC.)

Black Power activists weren't hostile to the idea everyone should have legal equality. But they were clear that equal rights was no solution for the diverse, complex and specific ways oppression and subjugation impacted Black life.

And Black Power was particularly critical of "beloved community." In BP's analysis the primary problem was not segregation for which the fix became integration (sounds like an echo of separateness/togetherness focus signaled in the 11:00 lament).

The problem was power and systemic white exploitation.

By the mid-1960s, Black Power showed up in Christian contexts. I want to offer four small glimpses of our undertold Christian story; a story we have completely forgotten is part of our legacy as Christians.

1. The Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU) was one of the most important civil rights groups in the church and accomplished many things, but, one of ESCRU's goals was to end all single race parishes in the Episcopal Church. This makes sense: if you believe the most significant problem with single race parishes is that they are evidence of the sin of segregation, integration—work to realize "beloved community," or "reconciliation"—becomes your goal.

ESCRU's "reconciliation" vision could not see the difference between a Black led, all Black parish and a white led, all white parish and so ESCRU supported the Episcopal Church's in closing down Black parishes that were struggling financially and integrating them into white parishes! This was completely consistent with a reconciliation paradigm.

By the mid-1960s, Black priests who had been central in the work ESCRU and ardent supporters of integration, realized ESCRU's advocacy was eroding their power in the denomination. By 1968 they had moved out and founded the Union of Black Clergy and Laity.

2. A second example comes from the National Council of Churches (NCC) Commission on Race and Religion. This group was very effective in its first two years, and Black and white Christians had been active together in it, but, historian James F. Findley says that by 1965 the Commission had "lost steam." In part, white laity quit showing up to support civil rights after 1964—voting rights was one thing, but when the issues were jobs and economic resources they had less enthusiasm. In part, Black Christians were publicly expressing frustration at how white-led the Commission was and how it failed to include Blacks in decision-making.

So when Benjamin Payton was named the first African American director of the Commission in 1965, he began his tenure by announcing "The *rights* which have been *couched in law* are now *being sought in life as practical social and economic matters.*"ⁱⁱⁱ This language signaled a move to Black Power. And, only a year later—in 1966—Payton called the Black members of the Commission to form their own group, the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC).

That same year, NCBC published a statement in the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*. It raised concerns about King's strategies, questioned the commitment of King's white Christian supporters' and made a theological case for Black Power.

As Black Power became more and more compelling among Black Christians, alienation between whites and Blacks became more and more pronounced, because white Christians who had been allies in civil rights utterly rejected Black power.

At an October 1966 meeting of the NCBC, one speaker announced: "Let the church see that the Black Power Movement is assuming power and consolidating power, then the white church seeks to coopt it by funding its community organization programs and then coopting its leaders. The whites are always in control. They dictate what must be done." He was met with loud applause.

4. Then in 1969, on the heels of the devastating assassination of King, of the Kerner Commission's report which stated that "white racism' remained the major cause of black disorders and urban problems," and of the faltering of the Poor People's Campaign which had been intended to expand the civil rights movement to deal with economic justice, James Forman (with a cadre of grassroots support from various parts of the Black community) interrupted worship at the Riverside Church in Manhattan on May 4, 1969, and read the Black Manifesto.

It began like this:

We the black people assembled in Detroit, Michigan . . . are fully aware that we have been forced to come together because racist white America has exploited our resources, our minds, our bodies, our labor. . . . We are demanding \$500,000,000 from the Christian white churches and the Jewish synagogues. This . . . is not a large sum of money, and we know that the churches and synagogues have a tremendous wealth and its membership, white America, has profited from and still exploits black people. . . . Fifteen dollars for every black brother and sister in the United States is only a beginning of the reparations due us as people who have been exploited and degraded, brutalized, killed and persecuted.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Black Manifesto went on to specify in very specific terms how the \$500 million would be allocated.^{iv}

Not only had Black clergy and laity helped create The Black Manifesto, in the months that followed the Manifestos demands were roundly endorsed by Black clergy and laity—especially those who were part of mainline Protestant denominations.

I probably don't have to tell you that if white Christians disparaged Black Power, they positively excoriated the Black Manifesto, and ran from demands being made by their fellow Christians with more fervor and passion than they had ever run towards civil rights.

If any doubt had remained about whether realizing "beloved community" might be difficult, it was gone when white Christians previously happy to talk about reconciliation and integration,

became hostile and intransigent when talk turned toward concrete forms of repair by those complicit in and benefitting from centuries of perpetration.

So racial alienation came to rule the day. Findlay claims that by the early 1970s “[e]verywhere there were signs of disruption and decline in the old coalitions and friendships between whites and blacks in the churches;”^v that the era of the Black Manifesto left Black and white Christians more alienated than they had been prior to civil rights.

We need to really notice this: This is precisely counter to how we tell our civil rights story. When we tell a racial story that emphasizes how much better things came to be between us as a result of civil rights—even if we say we still have a ways to go—we literally give a “white-washed” version of our own history.

We in the church desperately need to start remembering and telling and listening to this (and other) undertold stories.

And I’ll tell you why.

It’s not that the civil rights movement accomplished nothing, nor that it wasn’t courageous and brilliant. It did and it was. It’s not that the Black Power movement was perfect. It wasn’t.

But at the end of the day the critique Black Power eloquently, passionately and repeatedly made nearly 50 years ago now, was proven accurate by urban rebellions and outrages of the late 1960s and early 1970s. At the end of this day, Black Power’s critique remains terrifyingly predictive of the events we saw beginning to unfold in this country this fall.

There’s good reason those images coming out of Ferguson, and then Baltimore, looked so much like the images that came out of Selma.

If the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the national response to incredible civil rights organizing, the national response to rebellion and the analysis of Black Power was silence, repudiation and denial. It’s my view that, to the extent Black Power’s analysis has never gotten a real public hearing nor informed our economic, social, political, or RELIGIOUS initiatives, we—as a nation and as organizations and communities within this nation—in fact remain caught in the same racial realities in which we were in the late 1960s early 1970s.

And this has been painfully true as much for white Christians, as it has for the nation as a whole.

In the church we have carried forward the reconciliation, integration, and diversity visions of civil rights, despite the reality that these were unequivocally announced as and demonstrated to be inadequate; as if those critiques of our brothers and sisters of color never happened. We’ve held onto the reconciliation paradigm and largely ignored, forgotten, marginalized, and even repudiated, the calls for power, repair, and redress; real structural adjustment offered repeatedly as real anecdotes for what ails all of us.

This is a reparations paradigm.

If “reconciliation” is the take away point for the civil rights story we usually tell, the take away point for the more complex civil rights story—one that includes Black power—is “reparations.”

Let’s go back to our thought experiments. There are concrete, material reasons our differences are not parallels that can be celebrated and embraced on their own terms; each difference unique in our own beautiful way. In this nation, at this time, our racial differences are the very embodiment of an unjust relationship.

My student can’t say ‘white is beautiful’ and folks in that church can’t list out all the things they celebrate about ‘whiteness’ because whiteness—for now—is ongoing evidence of the history and persistence of unjust, material relationships, of violence, in this country. That’s why those exercises create such cognitive dissonance for white people. That’s why “diversity” and “reconciliation” become so clunky, at best, when “whiteness” enters the room.

And reconciliation alone is simply not adequate to dig into those material realities.

Our work as Christians is to stop ignoring that cognitive dissonance whiteness creates in our longing for reconciliation...and instead to wade into it, to attempt to understand it, see why it’s there and what it thus demands of us.

Black Christians in the late 1960s weren’t asking white Christians to sit down and reconcile. They were demanding that white Christians repent and repair; they were calling white Christians (calling us) to acknowledge the meaning of their white racial identity in the context of a white supremacist history; to take seriously the kind of material relationship that identity put white Christians in, relative to men and women of color; and to respond to their structural and social location in a society still organized in such hierarchical and violent terms that “reconciliation” talk had come to sound like so much resounding gongs or clanging symbols.

Black Christians were challenging white Christians to engage in concrete, meaningful activities of repair in response to the very specific and very identifiable realities of injustice that structure all of our lives.

Now we might be tempted to respond to the real pain in this undertold story with despair and hopelessness. I want to challenge us to the contrary: I believe a reparations paradigm offers an incredibly clarifying way to understand the meaning of race in our lives and relationships with one another across lines of racial difference. A reparations paradigm can help us identify more clearly, and utterly necessary pathways for responding to our actual racial situation; pathways far more productive, truth-full, and life-giving than any that reconciliation has been able to open up so far.

What’s most devastating and painful about this history is also, I think, what is simultaneously so beautiful and life-giving about it. Although white Christians overwhelmingly rejected the demands of repentance and repair fifty years ago, by remembering this story we are invited to make a different choice. We know, as Christians, that in confessing the reality of SIN repentance and repair offer us the possibility of new life; the possibility of liberation.

Do you think Zacheus was liberated? I do!! What do we in the church “own”? And how did we get it? What would it mean to realize we are Zacheus? Called to GIVE IT BACK in order to actually become disciples.

And in the context of race, reparations and repair offers a new vision that might allow interracial togetherness to manifest as white people, joining alongside of and in response to communities of color, in the work of justice by taking up the specific work that is rightfully ours.

So, I want to pause here and say that the story I’m telling is not just a Black and white story. On the one hand, the power and visibility of the #blacklivesmatter movement right now makes it appropriate to tell a story that compels a shift from a reconciliation to a reparations paradigm the way I have told it today.

For one thing, as white Christians try to support the incredible resistance movement building around the nation, we are likely to find ourselves tempted to use the rhetoric and framework that is most familiar to us; “reconciliation.”

But I think we must resist this temptation mightily, and instead recognize in the #blacklivesmatter movement an opportunity, a call even, to try a different framework than we have to this point. If decades of work on reconciliation still yielded Ferguson, Cleveland, Baltimore, and McKinney, TX it is clearly time for a different kind of work: reparative work.

Are we active in this movement?

But on the other hand the call to a reparations paradigm—repentance and repair extends to white relationships with other communities as well.

As Black Power shifted the conversation from integration to power and justice; so did Native and indigenous organizers and power movements among Latinos, Asians and Asian Americans articulate reparations paradigms.

And though we’re in a different historical moment, these movements never stopped. They are active today. They manifest today here in Minnesota in deep advocacy for sovereignty and land right movements among the Dakota.

Whatever the local context, and the specific histories and contemporary issues, a reparations paradigm is an urgent and appropriate paradigm through which to consider the nature of our racial relationships, and can be engaged in ways that are responsive to our local contexts.

For many congregations here in Minnesota, the history, violence, and material relations that exist to this day between the Dakota people and Minnesotans may be a particularly acute and powerful interracial reality. This reality is no more new than is the reality of police violence against Black communities; and it is also no less urgent.

I've seen in the many contexts in the church, "reconciliation" being used in the work to cultivate a different kind of relationship between indigenous communities and those of us who are part of settler-colonial communities (here the language of 'race' gets complex, though the dynamics are the same). And, the reconciliation paradigm here holds as many perils as it does when used to frame Black/white relationships.

What might it mean then to take up the language of reparation (repentance and repair) instead of reconciliation in order to engage that work?

What would the concrete implications be? What would Zaccheus do?

These are powerful questions for communities/congregations to take up.

Here's what I want to leave us with, then, as we move into deeper dialogue and discussion together.

Those of us who long for racial reconciliation must, I think, take the counterintuitive move to stop making reconciliation itself the work. Instead, we need to begin to honor the undertold stories of our interracial legacies, the stories in which communities of color have said to white communities: if you want to be our allies, you must do the work of repentance and repair

Dear white Christians...now what? Repentance and Repair isn't easy work, nor does it unfold into obvious, immediate, self-evident paths. It is uncertain and it is difficult—but it's sacred work. Now is the moment for us to remember and learn a new old story, so that we can begin to write a new old vision on the wall. That vision is a vision that begins with repentance and repair.

ⁱ This exercise was inspired by Joseph Barndt and adapted from his book *Dismantling Racism: the Continuing Challenge to White America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991).

ⁱⁱ Findlay, 178.

ⁱⁱⁱ "The Black Manifesto," 120.

^{iv} a southern land bank, publishing and printing industries, audio-visual networks, a research skills center, a training center, assistance to the National Welfare Rights Organization, a National Black Labor and Defense Fund, the establishment of an International Black Appeal to raise money for cooperative businesses in the U.S. and the African Motherland, and a Black university in the South That morning at Riverside, Forman articulated additional demands specific to Riverside Church because of its Rockefeller-endowed wealth: family and corporate interests he deemed to be actively engaged in the ongoing economic exploitation of Harlem. "The Black Manifesto," 121-122.

^v Findlay, Jr., 220.