

No. 9926

REPORT ON THE PROCESS OF DISCERNMENT ON RACISM

RECEIVED by the General Assembly

Background Information:

In 1996, the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) approved the formation of a church-wide process to discern the nature of racism in North America and to develop ways of helping congregations address racism. In its first meetings, the Steering Committee (assigned to guide this process) agreed on several things: 1) Racism is a spiritual and theological dilemma as well as a social evil, 2) Racist practice exists throughout the life of the church and needs to be addressed (even as local and national issues of racism are addressed), and 3) Racism is a systemic problem with root causes that have developed over hundreds of years. It is a combination of racial prejudice and institutional or economic power.

With these three assumptions in place, the Steering Committee sought an education and training model that would move beyond traditional diversity training or programs of inter-racial dialogue. It sought a model that would offer a systemic, yet faith-based, solution to a problem it perceived to be institutionally and structurally pervasive. After consultation with several "experts" and other denominational bodies and much prayer and theological reflection, the committee spent two of its meetings in consultation with Crossroads Ministry, an independent, Christian organization which has been engaged in anti-racism work for 15 years and now counts 8 denominations among the organizations with which it works. Through these consultations, the Committee came to agreement on a church-wide initiative that was reflective of both Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) polity and theology. Its intent is to allow for every church-related organization (including congregations) to explore and discover the underlying barriers to racial reconciliation and true community.

The vision the Committee has set before the church is that we are called to be a church where brothers and sisters of all races, languages and cultures will grow toward God's glorious realm, where all have a place at the table and none shall be turned away. In order to achieve this vision, it is the conviction of the Committee that a process of fundamental spiritual and systemic change must take place.

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In July, 1998 the Administrative Committee approved this initiative for the church. Seven teams from seven different entities in the church have now been recruited to inaugurate and pilot this

initiative. Those teams are from the regions of Georgia, Illinois-Wisconsin, Pacific Southwest, Michigan, and include two general units: Christian Board of Publication and Homeland Ministries. The seventh team is made up of Steering Committee members, Reconciliation Committee members, and three members who serve on regional teams. This group is charged with analysis of racist practice and needed change as these exist in the policies, structures, and practices of the Office of the General Minister and President, Church Finance Council and its related boards, commissions, and task forces.

Several phases of training for these teams are currently underway. Phase I began with team building for individual teams in the fall of 1998. Phase II began with a 4 day event to develop and explore an analysis of racism as it exists in North American culture, in the church, and in the general and regional team contexts. Phase III is a five-day event which trains teams in organizing skills available for their use in addressing the structural and systemic problems that perpetuate racism in their particular entities (boards, congregations, rules, policies, etc.).

Initial training will be done in consultation with Crossroads Ministry. Crossroads offers a training model that enables both education and re-organization of institutions (in our case regions, congregations, general units, seminaries, etc.) so as to move those institutions toward an anti-racist multicultural identity. This process is not a quick fix, but requires long-term training and strategies for change.

There are several steps in the process:

- a) An organization (units, congregations, regions) agrees that racism is a problem within its structures; race-based division or barriers keep the organization from being its best or all that God intends for it.
- b) An organization may seek initial introductions to understanding the systemic nature of racism.
- c) An organization decides to form a team of trainers (initially 6-8 persons) to engage in extensive training for teaching and re-organizing. This team meets with several other teams from across the life of the church for a 1 day, a 3 ½ day, and a 4 ½ day series of trainings to learn about the nature of racism, ways to educate others within their own organization about racism, and how to strategize for change within the organization.
- d) The team designs a plan of action to implement education and strategic change within its organization, making sure that all members, employees, etc. are educated about the nature of systemic racism and change that is needed. This includes plans of evaluation and accountability.

- e) In the event of a team member resignation, training for new team members will be made available. All teams will have the resources of Crossroads, the Discernment Steering Committee and the wisdom of a church-wide Disciples Team available to them for support and suggestions.

The Office of the General Minister and President has already begun to identify and work with regions, general units, and other entities in the church to prepare for the 99-2000 training cycle. In August of 1998, almost all regional ministers and most general unit presidents attended a 2-1/2 day anti-racism analysis in order to be introduced to the long-term work. On June 10-13, 1999 an introductory analysis was held in Indianapolis for representatives interested in pursuing anti-racism work in their context. Representatives from Arizona, Central Rocky Mountain, the Upper Midwest, Tres Rios Area, the Northwest, Oklahoma, Mid-America, Indiana, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, the Capital Area, the Northeast, Board of Church Extension, the National Benevolent Association, the National Convocation Executive Committee, the Task Force on Racism and Reconciliation of the National Convocation, the Renewal and Structural Reform Committee of the General Board, the Administrative Committee of the General Board, and the International Christian Women's Fellowship were in attendance.

From this point, these entities will be engaged in a decision-making, team formation, and team building process that will lead to trainings in the year 2000.

Jessica Vazquez has been hired on a part-time basis to help facilitate this Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation initiative.

The Steering Committee for the Process of Discernment on Racism will continue its work through an evaluative phase of this initiative. It will prepare a short introduction to the Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation initiative for a plenary session at the General Assembly. It will assess the efficacy of the work being done in regions and general units as well as the model's ability to move throughout congregations through tools of evaluation. As a part of its work, the committee will meet in August, 1999 to outline a five year plan of promoting the analysis and strategic change throughout the life of the church. The Committee will also continue to monitor resources that are needed to further the work being done in each region/unit/college/seminary/area. Currently, for example, the Committee can identify a need for resources on the nature of "Internalized Racism." Partnership with Jerry Cunningham in the Division of Homeland Ministries is underway to address this need.

The bringing together of teams for training, as well as the work of the teams in their entities, requires significant financial resources in order to advance anti-racist work within the entity. RECONCILIATION MISSION has made available grants to anti-racist/pro-reconciliation teams to further regional/congregational work and travel expenses.

The Steering Committee is blessed with and celebrates the growing partnerships around the church to further the efforts of shifting our identity from a racist to an anti-racist, multicultural church.