

Comments by the Rev. Dr. Jacque Foster
St. Louis-Area Disciples Summit on Racial Justice
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Sacred Conversations on Race

One the one hand, it is easy for us to feel that, regardless of our race, we have talked so much about race that there's just nothing left to talk about. Or we don't want to admit what is deep inside us.

Most often white people back away from doing our own work on racism. Or we do not see the work we have to do. At other times we see it, but are afraid of it.

There are people of color who are really tired of carrying the weight of conversation and trying again and again to help white people see what we don't see. It's not your job. It's our job. And there are people who are black who do not want to talk with anybody – especially not white people about what our society's racism has done in their lives.

For all of us there is the reality and pain of anger and defensiveness.

There are those of every race and perspective who say, 'I'm tired of talking. We talk but we don't do anything.'

I have come to believe that for ALL of these reasons, we NEED Sacred Conversations on Race. I don't think we need them once. I think like prayer we need them to be ongoing.

Sacred Conversations:

1. Not one of us has had enough conversation about race, racism, and racial justice – no matter how much we have talked, our LISTENING and TRULY HEARING the other and ourselves has been limited. One of the qualities of Sacred Conversations is that we learn to listen – to companion – to be with. We truly come to know each others' stories.
2. A second aspect is that most of the work that we need to do to interrupt the violent cycle of racism in our world is to learn to talk and listen. Until we are willing and able to share our lives on a level that moves us past

assumptions, fears, stereotypes, and resentment, we will continue to instill in our children and in our communities the sickness of racism.

3. We cannot go around our pain, anger, and fear and expect to become new people. We have to go through it in order to become new people. We know that in the person and life of Jesus - Just as we cannot follow Jesus without going through the struggle, we cannot become the beloved community of God's people without going through the struggle.

4. And Yes, there are some practical advocacy and policy things that we need to do. We need to work on education, and the criminal justice system, and jobs, but I would argue that MOST of the time, when we say that we're tired of talking, we want to do something, it is the case that we have not talked and listened to the depth that we need, we have not engaged others in the conversation – and our appeal to “do something, rather than talk” is a way for us to escape the conversation (because we don't want to be pushed.)

The image comes to my mind of this sanctuary being open for prayer after 9/11. A man came in and almost as soon as he had come in, he was headed back out the door. I saw him leaving and frankly I missed the fact that he had already been in the sanctuary. So I said, Oh the sanctuary's open. And he said yeah, I said a little prayer.

I realized in that moment that there was difference for me between “saying a little prayer” and praying in the sense of taking my whole self to God and being with God in a way that I meet myself in that relationship.

For me there is a difference between saying “we've talked about race” and “giving my whole self to an ongoing conversation with others so that I meet myself and them in a new way in the relationship.

Our congregation has participated in Sacred Conversations on Race in a number of ways. Through Metropolitan Congregations United (MCU) – we have met as a group engaging with other congregations in large gatherings in which we heard others' stories. We have heard each others' responses to stories from the history of race and racism in St Louis. We have then added our own stories to create a shared history from our memories.

There were then conversations in our congregation in small groups, engaging people who might not come to a larger gathering. Listening.

Having to always be respectful of the fact that there are people in the congregation, black and white, who don't want to talk to anyone about race. We encourage while knowing that everyone will not go there.

A black member of our congregation told me that he couldn't talk about it, because no body was going to like what he had to say. And I encouraged him, saying "We can handle it." And sure enough when he did - it was really hard and fees were hurt. But I had several conversations that week and by God's grace – do you know that everyone was back in that room the next week to keep talking.

There were gatherings when we met with 2 other congregations and facilitators who helped us to enter into conversation together. In these we had the opportunity to open ourselves to others and to hear each others' fears and dreams.

And then we came back together with the whole MCU gathering to share again AND to look at where we wanted to go from there. – Some of us working on policing, some on education, other community issues in which we could work with people of other congregation in our neighborhoods.

We continue to bring Sacred Conversations on Race into our Compassionate Listening experiences. In Compassionate Listening recently we were in triads talking and listening from the heart. And three white men were talking about their own work and their own deep feelings in healing racism. NOT because that was a designated topic. – but because when the question was about a challenge in your life - that's where their hearts went. I believe that is, in part, a result of Sacred Conversations on Race.