

Final Report of ABCUSA Anti-Racism Task Force

Formation and Scope:

Conceived and formed in the wake of the ABCUSA Call to Prayer for Racial Justice in the fall of 2020, the initial meeting of the Anti-Racism Task Force was held on November 10, 2020 and yielded an unprecedented commitment and dedication to this work by Task Force members. Through prayer, discernment, and honest reflection we have begun to identify and surface the historical and present experiences and stories of peoples affected by racism. Racial hatred, bias, systemic racism, white supremacy, and inequitable opportunity are deeply rooted in our systems of education, health care, economics, government, and faith traditions, permeating all aspects of individual, community, and corporate life. Together, we determined as a denomination, we must be willing to respond appropriately.

The Task Force was given the responsibility to produce following: a.) a list of resources to be shared with the denomination as a whole, and b.) to produce a symposium. In addition, the Task-Force had the below three subgroups:

1. **The Individual Subgroup:** Individual work is some of the most challenging work because it requires the individual to be vulnerable and open to change. This is where anti-racism begins. To end racism we must work individually and collectively to dismantle racist policies at the structural and institutional levels. The individual subgroup is working through "How To Be An Antiracist" by Ibram X. Kendi. We are also identifying resources to share with the denomination.
2. **The Congregational Subgroup** distributed a video clip and survey through the Office of the General Secretary starting May 17 through May 31. They are seeking to gauge where we are as congregations within the ABCUSA and then discern how to efficaciously move forward with this work engaging as many people as possible.
3. **The Institutional Subgroup** has met with eight Executive Ministers and two past presidents of ABC-USA and had conversations with the hope of uncovering the practices, policies, and habits that can be utilized by all parts of the ABC-USA as an organization. (A report from the Institutional Subgroup is accompanying this document.)

Through regular meetings the Task Force concluded it is not enough for us to conclude our response to suffering, oppression, and dehumanization solely with prayer. Prayer is an initial act of faith that moves us to action. It moves us to work. Accordingly, the work of anti-racism is the active dismantling of systems, privileges, and everyday practices that reinforce and normalize the contemporary dimensions of white dominance (Crenshaw, 2020). And so, we added to our calling: regular articles for the ABCUSA Enewsletter, A Three Day Gathering of Prayer and Conversations at the ABCUSA Biennial Mission Summit, and the formation of an Anti-Racism Commission within the ABCUSA.

Report of Work:

A.) Resource list: see attached.

B.) Symposium.

On October 30, 2021 an on-line symposium entitled *The Prophetic Rhythm of Anti-Racism* was held for the entire denomination. The day was set up to have a keynote speaker followed by a question and answer period. After a short break, five reflection papers were presented covering topics from anti-racism to reparations and critical race theory. These presentations were followed by questions and answers and a panel discussion.

The keynote speaker was Rev. Dr. Elyse Berry, the Associate for Advocacy & Leadership Development for the Council of Health and Human Services Ministries of the United Church of Christ. Dr. Berry presented on the topic of Racism as a Public Health Crisis.

The papers presented were blindly selected by a panel of readers from the task force. In total nine papers were submitted with five being chosen to present. The presenters reflected the diversity of our denomination. All nine papers will be added as resources once the technological end is ready.

205 people registered to attend the event from 32 different states. Attendance peaked at 142 participants at one time. Of those in attendance there were 7 ABC-USA national staff persons, 10 regional staff persons, 2 global servants, and a mix of clergy and laity from across the denomination.

C.) Mission Summit

During the 2021 ABCUSA Biennial Mission Summit, the Anti-Racism Task Force hosted a three day gathering of prayer and conversations. The goals of this gathering were:

1. Define anti-racism.
2. Ground anti-racism in Scripture, highlighting all humanity as one people created by one God.
3. Highlight the denomination's role and responsibility, at every level, in advancing racial justice.
4. Educate on today's inequalities and existing wealth gap.
5. Offer advocacy opportunities for the denomination to close inequality gaps.
6. Include moments to repent for our denomination's missteps
7. Provide helpful, usable resources.

D.) Anti-Racism Commission

From the very beginning it was known and believed that the work of Anti-Racism is an ongoing process that will need to go beyond the tasks set forth. It was determined by the Task Force that a commission be proposed to continue this work. Between May and October 2021, drafts of the proposal were created and sent to the Executive Committee, and at the November 2021 meeting of the Board of General Ministries the proposal was adopted and approved with the establishment phase of the process to begin soon.

Attached is the final proposal.

E.) Articles

All articles can be found archived on the ABCUSA website at www.abc-usa.org.

F.) Members

Task Force Members:

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Rev. Justin Thornburgh, Co-Chair

Rev. Dr. Dan Brockway

Rev. Dr. Eugene Downing

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Individual Subgroup:

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Respectfully Submitted,
Dr. Natalie C. Wimberly and Rev. Justin Thornburgh, co-chairs.

Our sub-group focused on Institutional Racism has been meeting regularly over the past year with the charge to find resources that would aid American Baptist Churches, USA (ABCUSA) and all its constituents to tackle anti-racism on a systemic, institutional level.

While there are countless resources to address individual and congregational racism, we found little to help us take the long, hard look at the systems, structures, practices, and habits that keep racism embedded in our ABC life.

We then wondered what might be working on a micro level that could help us at the macro level. At four of our virtual meetings we invited feedback from ABC leaders. Three of our conversations were with Regional Executive Ministers. One conversation was with two recent past Presidents of ABCUSA. Out of those conversations and our learning together, here are our recommendations moving forward--

Value our Relationships

We often say that ABCUSA is the most diverse denomination in the country. What we don't always do is value the deep relational connections and humility it takes to honor that diversity. Inclusivity is not simply about having the right representation in the room. If we are to be new creatures in Christ then our relationships cannot be transactional, but must be transformational.

One of our guests talked about ABCUSA having white bones. Our cultural DNA is white. White culture values quantity over quality, progress, and a focus on time that makes it difficult to be inclusive and thoughtful. White culture looks at what can be measured rather than the qualities of understanding, inclusion, and the ways we work together that ultimately are more important than the tasks themselves.

Be Honest about our History

We are rightfully proud of our denomination's support of abolition and civil rights, and quick to claim Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but we have been remiss in looking at our history when we have not lived out what we proclaimed. For example, what were our churches doing during the Red Summer of 1919 (or the Great Migration, Tulsa, etc.). What were preachers preaching then? What were church members defending then?

This leads us to wonder why we haven't told those stories? Are we complicit? Is there shame? Are we avoiding it because to acknowledge would mean lament and repentance? Is our faith strong enough to endure a close examination of the church's history?

Structures

We celebrate the decades our ABC Caucuses have worked to empower new leadership in our denomination. At the same time, this should be the work of all. Even when diversity is stressed or even achieved, we seem to have the same individuals asked to represent the aspects of our diversity. What steps can be taken to identify different leaders even within the diversity?

The Evergreen Baptist Association (ABC Region) has the advantage of being created as a new entity and being able to choose a structure that values their cultural diversity, using racial/ethnic caucuses, and a consensus decision-making process. This is a great model for our national and regional organizations to consider in looking for a more equitable way to create an inviting leadership table.

We call on the Board of General Ministries to examine and reform the ways our systems and structures keep all voices from being heard. We ask that changes in policy, procedure, and by-laws be considered and implemented.

Anti-Racism Training

Leaders that make racial equity a priority told us that constant and continuous anti-racism training is one of their regular practices. Anti-racism is never-ending work so we cannot afford to think because we've attended a class or read a book that we are done. So we call on our Board of General Ministries to initiate the process of anti-racism training within all the places the Office of the General Secretary has oversight--

- Board of General Ministries
- National Executive Committee
- OGS staff
- National Leadership Council

We would also strongly encourage all other partners to engage in regular anti-racism work including—

- American Baptist Home Mission Societies
- International Ministries
- All Regional bodies
- Seminaries, Colleges and Universities
- Auxiliaries—ABMen, AB Women's Ministries, Minister's Council
- In age-group ministries—ABYouth, Young Adult caucus
- In every ABC church

We also recommend that a reading list be included as part of the training. A few suggestions: Caste, The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson, How To Be An Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi, White Fragility - Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism, by Robin Diangelo, The Color of Compromise by Jemar Tisby, and other resources from the Anti-Racism Task Force Resource List.

Recruiting and Hiring

ABCUSA is not immune to having race and gender biases when it comes to hiring executive leadership. We have yet to call a General Secretary who is not white and male when other denominations with an overwhelmingly white membership have done so.

We ask that the General Secretary search process include intentional preparation in terms of racial bias and cultural expectations for future General Secretaries in order to create a more open and transparent search and call.

Clergy Commitment

While other denominations require training and standards to be in good standing, as American Baptists, our key opportunity is through the ordination process. We would suggest, in addition to Baptist History and Boundaries as training requirements, that ABC Regions add Anti-Racism training to that requirement, and include a commitment to racial justice in the ordination vows. We would also ask the Minister's Council to include this in the Code of Ethics and other documents.

In Conclusion

We ask the National Leadership Council and leaders across ABCUSA to lead the way as we move towards becoming an anti-racist denomination that lives out the diversity we value. This will not be an easy task, and mistakes will be made along the way, but we can create the brave space for us to keep working together.

In addition, as we come to the end of our task, we have discovered that the Presbyterian Church, USA and the Episcopal Church have been recently working on anti-racism at an institutional level. We would especially commend to you the work of "Becoming Beloved Community" with its four pillars-- Telling the Truth, Proclaiming the Dream, Practicing the Way, Repairing the Breach. This resource can be found at www.episcopalchurch.org/page/racial-reconciliation.

Prayerfully submitted by the following sub-group members,

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Rev. Kymberly E. McNair
Rev. Karen A. Mendes
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