

# A Time for Action

## A Five-Part Strategy to Dismantle Racism

**By Yvonne V. Delk**

W.E.B. DuBois said at the beginning of this century that the problem of the next hundred years would be the color line. He was right. We find ourselves at the edge of a new century and racism is still a major issue.



Racism is the original sin of this nation. It functions as a demonic force with devastating consequences. The justice ground we claimed yesterday is slowly but surely slipping away. What we struggled for, fought for, died for, prayed for, sang for, and preached for yesterday must be secured today. Nothing can remain static. Unless we find a way to move forward, it is inevitable that we will go backward.

This is a time that requires us to break with business as usual, step outside of long-established routines, and search for the daring imagination that will lead to the dismantling of racism.

Thirty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "This is no time for romantic illusions and empty philosophical debates about freedom. This is a time for action. What is needed is a strategy for change." If we are to dismantle racism, we must establish a new, anti-racist ground. Below are five affirmations for dismantling racism from an anti-racist perspective:

### **1. We must start from a historical perspective and not just an individual one.**

The United States was established as a white society, founded upon the near genocide of one race and the enslavement of another. Even though we have come a long way on our journey together, the reality is that in 1998 America there is not a level playing field. Despite landmark court decisions and civil rights legislation, we know that the residual effects of slavery and legal discrimination were not easily erased.

### **2. The focus must be on systemic racism and not primarily on prejudice, bigotry, or bias.**

Racism has to do with the power to dominate and enforce oppression, and in America that power is in white hands. Racism in the 1990s is a systemic phenomena. It does not require individual racists. Racism is found in the system of economic racism that we see as the gap between the haves and the have-nots continues to increase. It is the system of racism in our political, social, and religious institutions that produces unemployment, underemployment, and wretched

housing and health care. It is the system of educational racism that locks many of our young into a segregated system of learning.

The strategy for change cannot simply be "can't we all just get along?" To dismantle racism, we have to address the issue of systemic racism.

### **3. We must start from the perspective of truth-telling and stop the denial that racism exists.**

White sisters and brothers in America must begin to operate on the assumption that theirs is a racist society. To be white in America is to benefit from a system of power and privilege—whether or not one has ever uttered a racist thought or committed a racist act. By accepting power as a birthright, white sisters and brothers enjoy the benefits and rewards of what their racist forefathers and foremothers left them.

### **4. We must be color-conscious and not colorblind.**

I can't tell you how many times I've heard the phrase, "When I look at you, I don't see your color, I simply see a human being." I think this statement is another form of denial. If you don't see my color, you don't see me—my history, my culture, my pain, the injustice of racism.

I don't want simply to be assimilated into this culture. I want to retain my cultural identity and to be free to express it. A multicultural society cannot be based upon the ability of one culture to overpower another or upon the principle of sameness. A colorblind posture will not move us to new ground for building a new agenda. The road we must take is that of being color-conscious.

### **5. We must recognize that work for change begins in the systems we are part of, beginning with our churches.**

While I celebrate pulpit exchanges, choir exchanges, youth exchanges, and dialogue groups between whites and people of color, these strategies alone will not dismantle racism. We must resist the status quo and engage in a paradigm shift to re-create organizations that are multicultural and multiracial. To accept the status quo is to accept the current system of white power and privilege and the disempowerment of communities of color. This involves intentional transformation and strategies for change affecting all levels of our organizational life and culture.

IN SPIRITUAL TERMS racism is a perverse sin that cuts to the core of the gospel message. Put simply, racism negates the reason for which Christ died—the reconciling work of the cross. It denies the purpose of the church to bring us together. Because we are dealing with a spiritual crisis, the social transformation we are seeking will not come without a spiritual transformation.

When we open ourselves for a serious encounter with our Creator it means to change course and head in a different direction. To embrace the freedom of Yahweh is to stand on free ground—it is to recognize that we are not captive to the old order of the Left or the Right. Neither do we belong to the gods of nationalism, racism, classism, or sexism. We do not belong to the gods of

enslavement, subjugation, manipulation, and control. Rather, we belong body and soul, in life and death, to God—the one who pays no heed to any empire. This is a time for rooting ourselves in our identity as the people of God.

As faith-based people, we are called to forge a new agenda for dismantling racism. While it is not upon us to finish the work, neither are we free to desist from it. If we are faithful to the call of God, then God steps in and we are able to achieve far more than what we thought possible—knowing that if God be for us, what does it matter who stands against us?

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