Reflections on White Racism Round-table

When my staff and I began our research on this year’s topic for Heritage Sunday, one of the first essays found was “Reflections on White Racism” written in 1973 by James L. Jones, former Associate Executive Secretary of the Commission on Religion and Race. As I read the first page, my immediate thought was, “Was this written yesterday?!”

Jones’s words speak volumes to conversations happening today, particularly when it comes to the need for white people to talk about race, more specifically the history of racism and how it is so embedded in all facets of our society. He writes, “For us as white people to reflect on white racism is admittedly a difficult process for it means that we admit that we have been brought up in a society that has educated us, formally through our institutions and informally through our lives, to be racist.” If you read those words alone, you might think they were from Robin DiAngelo’s White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Race or any of the dozen other best-selling books on anti-racism published in the past couple of years. Race seems to permeate many conversations on a whole host of media platforms these days—and it should! Because for a long time, the whole story hasn’t been taught to us or spoken of. We’ve all been given a censored look at our histories.

For example, take the Tulsa Race Massacre, which as of last week happened 100 years ago. Tulsa’s Greenwood neighborhood was a thriving Black community in the early twentieth-century to the point that it was called “Black Wall Street.” In 1921, over the course of eighteen hours, hundreds of Black Americans were killed, thousands left homeless, and thirty-five city blocks of Black-owned businesses and homes were destroyed. This was the work of a white mob and was the result of white supremacy, anti-Black racism, and pure hatred. I was raised in Arkansas, took the state-required course on Arkansas/Oklahoma history in high school (the two states used to be one territory), minored in American history in college, then earned a Ph.D. in American Religious History (while taking five graduate level general American history courses) and I had never heard of the Tulsa Race Massacre until 2020! How did this happen?

One way it happens is on the individual level. I will take full responsibility for not delving into the specifics of Black history in the Midwest in the twentieth century. The second, and more pressing, reason is systemic. I have four bookshelves on race in America sitting in my office. I wondered if any of them discussed the Tulsa Race Massacre. None did. Again, some might say, “Well maybe you don’t have the right books on your shelf.” And maybe so. But the larger issue is that this massacre was intentionally written out of the dominant narrative of American history (no matter which lens you use to research it). You have to know about the Massacre in order to find more information about it, which in and of itself is impossible.

This is exactly what James L. Jones is telling us in 1973! Yep, this essay was written almost fifty years ago and it still rings true. We’ve all been formally educated through a system that has intentionally
censured the racist (and often violent!) things white people have done and has omitted some of the major accomplishments of Black people and Black communities. Instead of celebrating Black accomplishments in our history courses, the narrative emphasizes Black suffering. Instead of admitting to white violence, the dominant narrative teaches white success. This intentionality is not the fault of history teachers. It’s the fault of a larger system at play that praises those who tell the dominant narrative and threatens (or labels radical) anyone who dares tell the whole truth.

Towards the end of his essay, James L. Jones challenges the reader to “become serious about racism” if we want to “be the true Church of our Lord.” To do this we must “purge ourselves of both our conscious and unconscious racism” for “there can be no [inclusive] church as long as we refuse to deal with our racism.” It’s been fifty years since he wrote this essay—are we ready to become serious, yet?

The following five essays are written by various persons within The United Methodist Church who were all asked to read through James L. Jones’s essay and think about what it can say to the UMC today, a denomination that is still trying to become intentional about dismantling systemic within its structures.

Emily Jones is the Executive for Racial Justice at United Methodist Women.

Bishop Sally Dyck is a retired Bishop of the Northern Illinois Conference.

Rev. Dr. Grace Pak is an ordained elder in the New Jersey Annual Conference and found of Shalom I.D.E.A.

Rev. Dr. Hilde Movafagh is rector at the Methodist Theological Seminary in Oslo, Norway and is an ordained elder in the Norway Annual Conference.

Liz Crouse is a deaconess in the Tennessee Annual Conference.

Thank you to all of those who participated and offered their insights, Dr. Ashley Boggan Dreff, General Secretary
Emily Jones:

As I'm writing, the country is reeling from yet another police killing: 20-year-old Daunte Wright was gunned down during a traffic stop by a white police officer who said she mistook her gun for a taser. His name joins a long list.

Daunte Wright.
Kurt Reinhold.
George Floyd.
Breonna Taylor.
Ahmaud Arbery.
Atatiana Jefferson.
Sandra Bland.
Walter Scott.
Tamir Rice.
Laquan McDonald.
Mike Brown.
Eric Garner.
Rekia Boyd.
Trayvon Martin.
Oscar Grant.

This litany of the slain, while exhausting, is not exhaustive. We could continue for quite some time naming the Black people – of all genders and ages – killed by police and vigilante violence. This is nothing new.

James Jones' "Reflections on White Racism" was written in 1973, just five years after the formation of the United Methodist Church. This was the same year that Clifford Glover, a 10-year-old Black child, was shot in the back, killed by a white policeman in Queens, NY. In fact, almost any year in United States history is "the year" that many Black people were killed by law enforcement, vigilante violence and/or public lynching.

Our country has a long history of acting like Black lives don't matter.

Jones writes: "Admitting that racism is an old problem, however, suggests that the blame is not ours – the blame belongs to those who have come before us. We must see that it was their problem in their day. We have inherited their problem and compounded it by our own unwillingness to confront it in our day."

Though now nearly 50 years old, Jones' basic concepts remain true. Distinguishing between individual and institutional/systemic racism is a foundational point of antiracist education. Likewise,
the distinction between attitudinal and behavioral racism finds its echo in today's alliterative reminder "intent ≠ impact." It is still the case that, as Jones notes, quoting France Joyce of People Against Racism (now a member of the National Council of Elders), "*What is requi[r]ed is an analysis of white supremacy – however crude at this stage – and a strategy and program for combatting it.*"

In the work of confronting white racism, Jones outlines a three-step process: *"Recognition of our racism is the first step. Confession is a second step. Acts of repentance is the third."* It is here where we must pause and take stock. Our church excels in the relatively safe zones of recognition and confession, but when it comes to acts of repentance – changing behavior, shifting power dynamics, restructuring access to resources, making reparations – we continue to fall short. The text of our *"Charter for Racial Justice,"* another foundational document in the church's history, is structured around "Because we believe… we will…" statements. "We will…" is crucial. As the epistle of James so bluntly puts it: Faith without works is dead.

Are majority-white faith communities doing the necessary and sophisticated work required to address the destructive spiritual dynamics of racism, white fear and the corollary criminalization of communities of color?

As the body count from white racism in its many manifestations continues to tick up, my memory goes to a protest sign from a Chicago march that took place seven years ago, shortly after the grand jury chose not to indict the police officer who killed 18-year-old Michael Brown. A child was carrying this sign in two small hands. Written carefully in a first grader's multi-color bubble-letters were the words: "White Police if your Scared go to church! DON"T Shoot!!"

This child believed that going to church would make all the difference.

I pray that we may someday live up to that child's expectations.
Bishop Sally Dyck:

Since May 2020 there have been literally hundreds of statements and resolutions regarding anti-racism, but their hard work still looms ahead of us. What does that hard work look like? I don’t pretend to have all the answers, but I know statements and resolutions are but a small, although not insignificant, ingredient in the solution; without them it would be akin to forgetting to put salt in bread dough. But there remains much to be done if we are to make progress on anti-racism, including extremism like Christian nationalism.

Recently I was inspired by an NPR article, “How the Military’s Attempt to Tackle Extremism In Its Ranks is Progressing (April 5, 2021).” First the military acknowledged that extremism exists in its ranks since many of those who were part of the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6 were veterans. Have we as a church really acknowledged the deep-seated racism throughout our history?

The new Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, ordered the military began to address the problem by calling on all branches to hold “stand-downs” which means that people came together, learned and talked about extremism in the ranks. Many revealed that they had never talked about extremism until then. In fact, the groups lasted much longer than anticipated because there were so many questions.

All US churches in the UMC need to have similar conversations assisted by resource suggestions. There are so many good books out right now about the history of racism in our country and within the church that can provide guidance, challenge easy answers, and give a voice for people who aren’t in the room.

The troops reviewed their oaths to support and defend the Constitution in light of the actions of the veterans who participated in the insurrection. Likewise, we as United Methodists should review our baptismal vows, including “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?” What would it mean to resist racism and Christian nationalism?

In the stand-downs, the military acknowledged that its reputation is to be apolitical and so has overlooked the fact that some military personnel are members of organizations that espouse extremist thoughts. Some churches preach that Christianity is only meant to invite people into personal salvation with the tacit understanding that religion isn’t about politics. Ethical behavior is relegated to a vague “love your neighbor” that doesn’t get too specific. But as United Methodists we embrace both personal and social holiness. Social holiness calls for justice within the church and society.

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1 Christian nationalism is a belief that the US was founded as a Christian country and therefore is a privileged religion in the US. Coupled with its other belief in American exceptionalism, any actions no matter how violent are justified in terms of keeping the country “Christian” and “exceptional.”
The military acknowledged that the problem is deeply embedded with a long history so it won’t be solved overnight as is also the case in the church. Therefore, there’s a need to keep talking, keep pointing out the problems, and keep working on it. Like substance addiction, racism is something that we are all perpetually recovering from and therefore it’s never “won and done.”

I’ve also reflected a lot on how people actually change. What helps others see, accept, and change themselves in regards to deep-seated racism? How am I motivated to change? Through fear, coercion, shame, blame, and ridicule? Not usually but I’ve seen a lot of those tactics this year.

Motivating people to read, reflect, discuss, learn, re-learn, care, and go even deeper requires that we invite people into a safe space with a spirit of compassion, concern, and grace and encourage sincere questions and comments that begin to open hearts and minds.

Not in stand-downs but through the genius of Methodism: small groups.
The historic document, “Reflections on White Racism” written by James L. Jones in 1973 is a stark reminder of how immovable the United Methodist Church has been on the work of addressing the sin of racism in the Church. It has been almost 50 years, a half of a century since this document was written. However, Jones’ reflection and analysis still ring true and current. Sadly, we still fail to admit or recognize that we are racists, making us impotent to deal with the “racist psychology which engulfs us at every turn.” We proclaim to be the church of “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors” that we are an inclusive church embracing the diversity in our midst. However, the reality is that we are a church of 90% white membership in the U.S. while the U.S. population is 60% white and 40% non-whites. Admittedly, there are pockets of the church working hard to address the sin of racism, but until the church as one recognizes, confesses, and commits to confront the collective sin of racism systemically and institutionally, Jones’ historic document will continue to be current.

One of the things that has changed in the Anti-racism conversation in the last 50 years is the recognition that it is more than a conversation about Blacks and Whites. Since the pandemic began in 2020, there has been significant increase in the racism and hateful violence against Asian-Americans, scapegoated as the “cause” of the pandemic. There has been increased awareness and acknowledgement of the racism and genocide against indigenous people in the early days of American history. The systemic discrimination and racism against Latino migrants and building of the wall in the southern border of our country especially in the last four years while the U.S. economy continues to be built on the backs of these migrant workers demands attention. The Americans of Middle Eastern heritage have been targeted systemically and culturally out of fear especially in the last two decades exacerbating the racism against brown people. As Jones has pointed out, the racism issue is continuing to be white people’s issue. However, it has grave effect on all members of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color). Thus, in 2021, the conversation of Anti-racism needs to be inclusive of BIPOC, encompassing the voices and experiences of discrimination and violence against all people of color.

What would it take for United Methodists to revisit Jones’ historic document in 2073, 100 years since it was penned, and celebrate that the Church has made significant progress in addressing the sin of racism? What are the changes needed in our faith actions to be a church that truly welcomes and values all people regardless of skin color and cultures, that the church looks like the surrounding community? Jones pointed out, “Recognition of our racism is the first step. Confession is a second step. Acts of repentance is the third.” “There can be no such Church as long as we refuse to deal with our racism.” One thing is clear. We must commit to do the acts of repentance now if we want to celebrate changes and progress 50 years later.

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2 https://www.gcfa.org/media/2131/2018annualconferencelaymembershipbyethnicityandgender.pdf
3 https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219
Rev. Dr. Hilde Movafagh:

I was three years old when I saw a black man in real life for the first time. Growing up at the west-coast of Norway in the early seventies was not a multicultural experience. Immigration had not started yet, at least not where I lived. I was with my mother at the local bus when the black man entered, and I asked loud and clear, to my mother’s embarrassment, “Is that man hungry, Mom?” My source of information was the mission-work at church. I had seen pictures in church of Africans, and the aim was to encourage to donate to the mission-work. The image that they were poor and needed our help was established in my mind.

Now, the Norwegian society is quite different. I have a Persian surname now, because my husband was one of the early immigrants from Iran. Everywhere in Norway, the crowds of people are quite colorful, even though the white Norwegian skin is the majority. On the one hand, Norway has become a global society with impulses from all over the world where immigrants of all kinds contribute to being the society that we are. On the other hand, we struggle with racism, integration-issues, cultural misunderstandings, and lack of consciousness of what white privilege means.

“Reflections on white racism” is written from an American context where the history of slavery, of civil war, of colonialism is quite harsh, and where this history is described as a direct source of the experienced racism at the time of writing. Our Norwegian history is different. We were not a part of the colonizing period except for a few spots at Antarctic, and we were under Denmark for several centuries. However, we did have a culture of robbing and raping when the Vikings performed their supremacy a thousand years ago, so we have our share of embarrassing history as well.

The context of the article is not ours, the history of white supremacy it describes is not our history, but is there still something to recognize in the article? I do recognize the challenges in our own society. In the cabinet leading the country, of 20 members there is only one colored. This number is not representative of the people. Some immigrant kids become doctors. Some are capable of combining their inherited culture with their new and find their own fusion of it. Other immigrant kids struggle, find it hard to find a job or hard to combine their two cultures. Immigrant kids dominate on the crime-statistics, on mental health and on lack of higher education. And – the fact that we call them immigrant kids even after a generation is in itself a strong sign of how hard it can be to fit in. In my opinion, the point of the article, that we as the white majority often fail to see our privilege and is a part of a structural racism is true here as well, even if the historical background is different. The church is for all. However, the fact that there is a growing number of immigrant churches that reflect the culture of their background, or international churches where language and profile reflect a wider international society, is a sign that the mainstream churches fail to include people of different cultural background. They really want to, and there are plenty of initiatives to help churches being a more colorful fellowship. The open door described in the article is still a fact. Churches really want to have colorful members, but it is harder for them to change to actually be the colorful fellowship they aim to be.
We don’t have to look far to see the effects of racism and white supremacy in our nation. This week, another young black man was killed by police during a “routine” traffic stop. It may be more difficult for Methodists to see these evils within our congregations, institutions, and in ourselves. Reading this essay by James L. Jones, written in 1973, has forced me to take stock in how little has changed in the last 50 years in terms of white racism inside our church. The things Jones writes about are still happening personally and collectively. Our legacy of inaction and negligence is lengthened every day we fail to confront white supremacy.

Still, there is hope and inspiration to be found in these pages. Jones is a person of bold faith who calls out euphemisms and the power of language, questions hiring practices both within the church and its agencies and in the many vendors with which it does business, and acknowledges the difficulty of the task at hand. Jones quotes Frank Joyce, Executive Director of People Against Racism, in defining racism as a White problem and which calls for an analysis of white supremacy. This framing lays responsibility in the hands of White Christians to confront and eliminate racism within our Church. Additionally, Jones lays out a clear call to action that involves the three steps of recognition of racism, confession of racism, and acts of repentance.

He sees this as the path to a true community of people where all are affirmed. He writes “the urgency of the call in our day manifests itself in our inability to respond to it.“

When I taught Sunday school to the young kids in my church, we talked a lot about Jesus coming to turn the world upside-down - to uplift the poor and send the rich empty away, for example. Many Christians I know live lives that reflect Jesus’ rejection of the status quo: choosing to live, work, and serve with the table-turning model of Jesus in mind. Unfortunately, we have not been able to build an institutional church with the radical, inclusive, and subversive ethos of Jesus.

In this essay, Jones writes: we have “allowed” Blacks to come to our White church. . . and most of the time they were turned away. This feels like a direct indictment of the “Open Doors” slogan, doesn’t it? We can proclaim that our doors, hearts, and minds are open but until we have abolished the white supremacy that underpins it all, they will stay closed. Saying that our doors are open has not been enough and will continue to not be enough until we recognize and abolish racism individually as Christians and institutionally as Methodists. May God give us the vulnerability, humility, and wisdom to change.