

CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE FOR INTERRACIAL RECONCILIATION:
THE NEED FOR PASTORAL ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE
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Perhaps some of us can agree that the United States of America (USA) was built upon racist beliefs, actions, and legislation. For example, the presidential White House was created through the use of slave labor. Not only that, but our national heritage enacted legislation that codified racist beliefs into law. For example, the 20th century Federal Housing Act (FHA) created the modern-day mortgage and housing market; but only for white people. It effectively segregated cities by refusing to rent houses or allow mortgages to African Americans.¹

The years of slavery, Cold War, Jim Crow, and the 2001 Patriot Act, among countless others, have further codified racism into the USA. Christians throughout the history of the USA are just as guilty of racism as non-Christians. The perpetuation of racism has stained the hands of the people of the United States, including Christians who have participated in founding the Atlantic, race-based slave trade.² We, the church, can imagine a world where the Kingdom of God has come fully, where racism no longer viciously harms our neighbors, and where no binary such as oppressor and oppressed exists. Yet, this is far from the truth, even within the Church of the Nazarene.

Although Christians are often quick to deny the current existence of racism, it has never been eradicated; for it exists today in hidden, dangerous forms throughout our society. One current form of racism is the tendency to see other people as ‘non-colored.’ This form of racism occurs when people believe that to eradicate racism, one must deny that the color of one’s skin holds intrinsic significance. While this might not initially sound like traditional racism, it still creates the same injustice in our society and churches. It has deep power to harm people, without regard to the color of their skin.

When a person’s race and color affect their opportunity for equality and just living, purposefully eliminating these factors (“I don’t see Korean or American, I just see you as an individual”) adds to the racial inequality persons of color already feel and experience...color-blind racism becomes more perilous because it is so inherently embedded in our daily lives and discourse and comes from persons as close as our friends.³

¹ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “The Case for Reparations.” *The Atlantic*. June 2014. Accessed October 10, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/>.

² K. Teel, *Racism and the Image of God* (Place of publication not identified: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 4.

³ Mark Hearn, “Color-Blind Racism, Color-Blind Theology, and Church Practices,” *Religious Education* 104, no. 3 (2009): 276-277, doi:10.1080/00344080902881298.

It is vital that churches, pastors, and all Christians recognize that the color of one's skin is deeply intertwined with their personhood. All people, including their skin color, are created in the *imago Dei* and the church's ability to recognize that fact will have profound consequences.

The Church of the Nazarene is not unsusceptible to racism because racism knows no borders. Corporately and individually, churches and pastors in the USA are influenced by racism and are often unknowing participants in its structures. Our churches can no longer ignore the effects that racism has on our people and our pastors.

'What about today?' we ask. Christians may proudly declare that racism no longer has a foundation, especially in our churches. Slavery has been outlawed and our country has, for the most part, amended its racial differences. However, "Neither the secular belief in human equality – 'all men are created equal' – nor the Christian teaching that all are created in God's image has prevented this evil. On the contrary, perverted and inadequate forms of these beliefs have been used to justify it."⁴ Racism is an issue that must continue to be addressed. Unless we look closely and critically at racism within our churches, we will continue to perpetuate it.

If we hear a news story about a black man slain by police and assume he must have done something wrong we should notice how our conjecture echoes the casual response of many European Americans to lynching and investigate racial inequity in police violence. If the media demonizes a black mother on welfare, we should notice how this feeds upon the stereotype of black women as hypersexualized and make it our business to discover that the typical welfare recipient is white. And because we are still benefiting from the legacy of slavery, we must listen to people of color. Both in individual reading and research and in actual conversations, we need to ask when, where, and how people of color experience discrimination, and we must believe what they tell us. This is hard, exhausting work. But only by relinquishing what we think is our authority to decide how situations will be addressed... by listening to people of color and following their lead, can we move forward toward a better future for ... our churches.⁵

Racism surrounds us and has deeply influenced common humanity in the USA. In many cases, and for certain races, participating in racism is as quotidian as breathing– happening without our conscious awareness. Is there any hope for the justice of the oppressed? A church must pay deep attention to that which is happening in its building and in the lives of its members.

Churches must think deeper; for it matters what we think. The life and teachings of Jesus form a part of the Church of the Nazarene's understanding of interracial reconciliation. The Gospel of Mark shares the story of Jesus' healing of a blind man. Mark says: "He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?"²⁴ And the man looked up and said, "I

⁴ K. Teel, *Racism and the Image of God* (Place of publication not identified: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

can see people, but they look like trees, walking.”²⁵ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.”⁶

One commentary said:

...it would appear that the man once saw but had progressively gone blind, in that when partially healed he shows a recognition of what trees look like (v. 24). At the first stage of his healing, the man appears still to have a severe case of nearsightedness, with things at any distance looking quite blurry.⁷

May we, as a denomination, not become blind to the need for interracial reconciliation. May our sight be made progressively sharper, and not progressively blurry, as we participate in the restoration of the Kingdom of God both now and in the future.

Churches must speak clearer; for it matters what we say. Our language shares our deepest held theology. Most importantly, our subconscious use of language shares the implicit beliefs of a congregation. Language is a phonetic form of a set of beliefs that may never be explicitly stated yet is still complexly woven into the core existence of a church. “To make a theological statement such as ‘Your Koreanness matters to God,’ highlights the particularity of a person while avoiding an implicit message that God really might not see them as in the statement “You matter to God.”⁸ The fact that someone is Korean or that someone is American matters deeply to God. Our ethnicity forms the way we participate in the *imago Dei* and must be valuable in the sight of pastors.

Social justice must begin, and actively continue to be practiced, within our churches and within the very pews of our buildings. But, do we really know the people in our churches? Do pastors understand the significance that one’s birthplace has on his or her current understanding of the Gospel? The work of a pastor is not just to preach, teach, and lead, but to know and understand his or her members of the church.

Ethnography is a social science that deeply studies other cultures, specifically of cultures unfamiliar to the ethnographer. “Rather than *studying people*, ethnography means *learning from people*.”⁹ The ethnographer is one who *chooses* to come into deep relationship with another culture through the primary means of formal interviews, informal participant observation, and concentrated study. It parallels the Christian understanding of the incarnation in that ethnographers seek to become identified with someone who is different from themselves. James Spradley, one of the leading voices of ethnography, says that:

Ethnographers adopt a particular stance toward people with whom they work. By word and by action, in subtle ways and direct statements, they say to others, ‘I want to

⁶ Mark 8:22-26. In *Holy Bible: NRSV, New Revised Standard Version*. New York: Harper Bibles, 2007.

⁷ Larry W. Hurtado, *Mark* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 134.

⁸ Mark Hearn, “Color-Blind Racism, Color-Blind Theology, and Church Practices,” *Religious Education* 104, no. 3 (2009): 284, doi:10.1080/00344080902881298.

⁹ James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2016), 3.

understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?' This frame of reference is a radical departure from treating people as either subjects, respondents, or actors.¹⁰

Ethnography is all too often relegated to the task of skilled academicians or social science researchers. However, ethnographic research can and must also be the work of pastors. There is no better way to understand the life of a local church than through ethnography. Mary Clark Moschella is an ethnographer who wrote a significantly valuable guide in leading pastors to practice ethnography as a means of reconciliation. A pastoral ethnography takes the traditional elements of ethnographic research and applies them towards a congregational setting. This type of research will allow a pastor to begin to understand the effects of racism within the church.

A pastoral ethnography is the initial step to social justice within a church because it removes the distance caused by racism. It brings the pastor into deep, incarnational relationship with church participants. "Human relationships are at the heart of pastoral ethnography."¹¹ When we know those around us we are much more equipped to instill patterns of justice in our churches. Pastors can continue to develop these important relationships while looking deeper at beliefs and attitudes.

Ethnographic congregational research will yield high results for both pastor and lay person. For example, this research process will: "shine a light on what matters to people in a community,"¹² "create safe spaces in which honest opinions can be shared,"¹³ "help people heal and free them to move with strength and vigor"¹⁴ by telling their story. Or it can be "a vehicle for honest sharing about the group's past and thoughtful discernment of God's presence in the group's story, which helps to get the group 'unstuck.'"¹⁵ These results will allow the church to become a fuller representation of the Kingdom of God on earth. It will strengthen the people of the church in ways that are even beyond simple identification.

Many people, though often filled with good intentions, are immobilized in the face of seemingly insurmountable injustice. Many churches within this denomination have done well to begin the conversation on interracial reconciliation. These conversations are beautiful steps toward healing and justice. However, in many churches it is past time to take the next step through tangible acts of justice-making. This step begins with pastors in the local church. A written pastoral ethnography will be the foundation of a church's ability to implement justice and the love of God.

¹⁰ Ibid., 34.

¹¹ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: an Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 86.

¹² Ibid., 34.

¹³ Ibid., 35.

¹⁴ Ibid., 36.

¹⁵ Ibid., 36.

The church has resources at its disposal, if only we would utilize them. We *can* trust the social sciences. We *can* study and listen to those around us. Most importantly, the Church of the Nazarene can practice ethnography.

Paying attention to the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes related to group life will give the pastor a fuller and richer understanding of the complexity and variety of cultural stories within a congregation or a community. The pastor as learner can better ‘read’ some of the shared knowledges and habits [of the church]. In these ways, the practice of ethnographic research can become a form of holistic pastoral listening that attends to the range of meanings, experiences, desires, and theologies that congregations express not only through their words but also through their lives.¹⁶

The implications of this type of research are incredibly valuable as they reveal hidden truths and illuminate racism. When a pastor and a church seeks to learn from, and not just of, its people, justice will be enacted.

Today, the Church of the Nazarene stands at a unique crossroads between action and passivity. The way in which the Church responds to initial reconciliation is directly related to its ability to enact lifelong justice or injustice. This past summer, the Church of the Nazarene recently convened at General Assembly. A resolution was passed that spoke passionately against the injustice experienced by so many throughout the world. A part of the resolution on “Affirmation and Declaration of Human Freedoms” says:

Built upon our Wesleyan-Holiness Christian heritage and call to holiness, we make the following affirmations:

1. We affirm that the pursuit of justice, reconciliation, and freedom is at the heart of God’s holiness being reflected in people. We commit ourselves and our ecclesial resources to working for the abolition of all forms of slavery, trafficking, and oppression, and to participate in intentional networks, conversations, and actions that provide hopeful alternatives.
2. We affirm that churches should faithfully respond to the impulse of God’s holy love by working for God’s reign to be ever more visible. We are called to be faithful witnesses in thought, word, and deed, to the holy God who hears the cries of those who are oppressed...
3. We affirm that acting justly involves the compassionate care for those in our immediate surroundings and also being able to name injustice, and denounce the powers that cause it...God’s justice calls us beyond equal treatment, tolerance of one another’s differences, or simply reversing the role of oppressed and oppressor.

¹⁶ Mary Clark. Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: an Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 10.

This beautiful language of justice and reconciliation is officially codified into the Church of the Nazarene and will be included in the new *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene* in the beginning of 2018. This declaration forms our renewed commitment of congregational justice.

Racism, indeed, exists societally and congregationally. It portrays itself in individualistic and systemic ways. There is no escaping from racism, even in our churches, until the Kingdom of God has fully come. As Wesleyans, we live in the tension of what is and what ought to be – between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet.’ We eagerly anticipate the full restoration of God’s kingdom on earth as it is heaven. Yet, although we wait, we do not wait complacently. We do not have to proceed into situations, churches, and cultures with a blurry, confused perception as the blind man in the Gospel of Mark. When the Church of the Nazarene becomes overwhelmed with injustice, may we remember the words of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures.

¹⁴ Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,
just as you have said.

¹⁵ Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate¹⁷

May our churches be the gates of which the prophet Amos spoke. We must seek the social justice of all people, including both the minorities and the majorities in the interaction of interracial reconciliation. If we desire to see justice in action throughout our world, we must realize that often it begins at the local church with individual pastors. “If God’s image is present in each of us and related to our human dignity, then when we insult one another, we insult God. Rightly understood, enacting or condoning racism is not only a sin; it is heresy.”¹⁸ A pastoral ethnography is a tangible means of bringing about a just congregation because it calls the pastor to see, hear, understand, and relate to the people within the church in the deepest and most serious ways possible.

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¹⁷ *Amos 5:14-15*. In *Holy Bible: NRSV, New Revised Standard Version*. New York: Harper Bibles, 2007.

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