



Awkward conversations about racism

ALL TOO OFTEN our conversations about racism in The United Church of Canada are limited to the treatment of Indigenous peoples. While there is no doubt that First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people have experienced, and continue to experience, the devastating consequences of racism, our dialogue about White privilege and White supremacy in our church needs to expand to acknowledge the experiences of Black people. Too often our position has been ignored, silenced, or rationalized away.

Not long after my arrival in Canada from Barbados in 2011, I felt strongly that there was a need for a broader discussion about racism that included its effects on Black people.

Slowly but surely, this discussion has begun. In 2016, a series of events occurred in Edmonton that highlighted and explored the ways that Black people confront racism in their everyday lives. One of these events led to the organization of #MakeItAwkward, a social media campaign that began when Jesse Lipscombe, a well-known Black producer and actor living in Edmonton, was called the N-word publicly.

The result was a movement that

called upon Canadians not to ignore racism when it raised its head in action or speech. The idea was to engage the person who spoke or acted and help them to see that their words or actions were unacceptable. It was a call to engage in something awkward by polite Canadian standards.

In October 2016, I nervously presented a proposal to the Executive Committee of the Alberta and Northwest Conference to hold a two-day symposium called “An Awkward Conversation in the Church”. The proposal was accepted and plans for the event began. The fruit of the planning was realized in October 2017 when over 80 people gathered in Edmonton for the symposium.

We were led on this journey by Adele Halliday, the United Church’s Team Leader for Discipleship and Witness, who served as our facilitator and main speaker. Guest speaker Dr. Anthony Reddie of The Methodist Church in Britain also led us to understand how White privilege and White supremacy can occur in overt and covert ways.

Personally, I found it painful to listen to the stories of Black clergy and others who have experienced racism within the church. I had no idea that

Participants gather in table groups at the Awkward Conversations symposium in Edmonton.

such deep hurt and frustration were felt in various parts of the church.

But listening to these stories confirmed for me that the issues we are facing need to be aired openly. The only way forward for us as The United Church of Canada is to confront the many ways that racism, xenophobia, discrimination, White privilege, and White supremacy have become entrenched in the ways we have become church.

It was clear that the symposium would have a strong impact when the Executive Committee of Alberta and Northwest Conference met the following week. During its meeting the Executive issued a declaration on racism in the church. In so doing, it acknowledged that racism exists in the church. More importantly, it gave voice to the vision of a church free from racism and White supremacy.

What’s next? Christopher “Tambu” Herbert from the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago once sang, “The journey now start.” I left the Awkward Conversation event singing those words.

You see, what we did in Edmonton was only the beginning. If we are truly going to confront racism in the church, then we must have such conversations throughout The United Church of Canada. It is only then that we will be able to address the issues, acknowledge the pain, and resolve to create a new, truly inclusive church. Anything less would be mere talk and an oversimplification of a very complex issue.

So, we in Alberta and Northwest Conference have started the conversation. Who will continue it?

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