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Ministry Manual Chapter:  
Institutional Racism in the Church  
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## **Summary**

This section of the ministry manual is dedicated to the topic of institutional racism in the church. I engaged this topic particularly from the perspective of a white person who has worked in predominately white churches and the resources I present below are particularly presented with the hope of educating white congregations to move toward a broader vision of racial reconciliation by growing in understanding of how racism works in our society and particularly in the church as an institution.

In our era of American history with race I believe it is especially important to learn about the aspects of racism that function beyond conscious individual acts of prejudice. As a white person who has worked in white churches my experience corresponds to the research that says white Americans tend to see racism as a problem between individuals. We live in a time where most white Americans fear being considered racist and where many view racism as a problem for people of color that has little to do with themselves, particularly if they live in a situation where they rarely encounter people of color (which is highly likely in our residentially segregated society). The color-blind theory about race abounds and many people in the churches I have been a part of would be very likely to believe their churches don't have a race problem and that people of all races would be very welcome.

As I began to study racism and multicultural churches this semester it became increasingly clear to me that many white churches have blinders on about the subtle ways in which racism works in our society and even in our own midst. In my own experience in a church that claims to want to become multiracial and in my visits with others it is clear that becoming multiracial and even more importantly working for racial justice takes a great deal of self-examination, learning, and intentionality. I think learning about racism in its institutional form is key for churches who want to work towards racial

justice and diversity in their midst.

After the Civil Rights movement many forms of overt racism have been made illegal, but just because we have equal opportunities employer stickers on the doors of our business does not mean that racism is dead. Many of the sources I read suggested the need to measure the results of racism (Barndt talks about this explicitly). If we really are offering equal opportunity why are people of color lagging behind in so many different measurements of life, from income and employment to healthcare and infant mortality? There are more subtle and covert forms of racism working to uphold our racialized American system. "Institutional racism is the intentional shaping and structuring of an institution so that it effectively serves and is accountable to one racial group and does not effectively serve nor is accountable to other racial groups." (Barndt 2007, 153).

In fact, many authors suggest in different ways the connections between the type of individual racism usually identified by white people as racism and institutional, cultural, and more covert forms of racism. Otis Turner does not distinguish between individual and institutional racism because he defines racism as a set of values that influence the collective beliefs of Americans and this shapes both individual actions and the way its institutions and systems are operated. Other authors I read make similar arguments. In both of Joseph Barndt's books that chapters on individual racism are about how society shapes each of us according to its racialized values and Gail Gunst-Heffner dedicates a chapter to internalized racism which, she argues is what upholds and supports the system of institutional racism. These arguments boil down to a belief that to be a white American is to be racist, whether you intend to be or not. We are beneficiaries of a system of privileges based on our whiteness and whether we mean to or not we participate in perpetuating these systems unless we actively seek to be anti-racist (and even then we still do by the benefits we receive!). Once we recognize the larger influence of society on us and on our racism we, as Christians can identify the need for the church to be actively seeking racial justice, to seek to be antiracist as well as to work to have our churches and denominations reflect this by becoming integrated multiracial churches.

As a member of the RCA some of my investigation was shaped in particular to see what my denomination was doing to address institutional racism. This is reflected in my choices of interviews and site visit to an RCA church as well as reflections on my own experience in the RCA and the amount of time I spent investigating the RCA's denominational resources. However, a great majority of the material I found on institutional racism was not specific to the church, much less to my denomination. I was particularly looking for resources that would help a church, denomination, or interested members learn more about what institutional racism is, teach about it to their congregation, and examine their own institution.

A few of the books and articles I read, as well as some of the organizations I have listed below, provide helpful introductions to racism and its several types. Some of the writing goes deeper into different ways institutional racism is manifested and a few apply it specifically to church contexts. For churches who want to examine their own institutional practices there are several key things to explore with an open mind. Churches should examine their hiring and leadership selection practices and how they define qualifications for those roles. Are the leadership positions mostly filled with white people? And when people of color are included are their voices heard as equally valid? Churches need to ask themselves tough questions about accountability. It is often difficult for white people to submit themselves to the leadership of people of color. We might not like to think that's true, but we have internalized assumptions of their lesser abilities and trust-worthiness. Churches should examine whether the leadership is accountable to people of color, especially if the leadership is mostly white. Other important areas to investigate are access to power, resources, and information. Does everyone know how to work with the institution to make changes or get things done? Does everyone have the resources to do so? This is just a summary of some of the key things I learned through my reading about institutional racism in the church. I hope that the following resources are helpful to others in the church who want to work for racial justice and that soon more and more churches will be learning about these issues.

## **Annotated Bibliography of Written Sources**

Gunst-Heffner, Gail. Developing Eyes to See: A Study of a Multi-Congregational Anti-racism Initiative. Unpublished dissertation.

It's too bad that this is unpublished because it was the most helpful resource I read on institutional racism specifically in a congregational setting. (However, Dr. Gunst-Heffner works at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI and you may be able to get a copy if you contact her.) In Chapter 5 of her paper Dr. Gunst-Heffner explores several ways that institutional racism is manifested in congregations. She did her research through qualitative study of several congregations, but draws conclusions from it that correlate with other research in the field. Some of the ways she explores racism in the church are within differential access to power, resources, and information as well as issues around accountability. She also goes on in the next chapter to link institutional racism with its supporting partner internalized racism which is manifested in both internalized inferiority for people of color and superiority in white people. This was the only resource I found that was so specifically examining these issues in a congregational context.

Katz, Judy H. White Awareness: Handbook for Anti-Racism Training. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978).

This book outlines an extensive training program around racial issues for white people. The program uses a lot of cultural examples (music, films, knowledge of current events/famous people) that are outdated, though one could perhaps update this and make it quite useful. However, the training itself isn't what drew me to this book, but rather one of the resources from it that I had seen reproduced elsewhere was a list of questions entitled "How to look for institutional racism." This list begins to explore all the levels of an institution and the people

with whom it interacts asking whether people of color are equally represented and integrated. The list was one of the things that attracted me to this project of investigating institutional racism in the church because I wondered what it would be like to tailor such questions to the church context. I think it is a great resource for self-examination by an institution and could be adapted to the church with a bit of work. Another helpful resource I found within the book was a chart outlining the relationship between different types of levels of racism. It showed how conscious and unconscious racism both affect attitudes. Our attitudes are manifested in institutional, cultural, and individual types of racism that all result in behaviors that are either conscious or unconscious. It suggested using this chart as a tool during a presentation on all these types of racism and how they affect different parts of our lives.

Cook, Harley. "White racism--Institutional, Cultural, Personal." Religious Education 65 no 2 Mr-Apr 1970.

This resource is a summary of conclusions reached by several small groups at the Seminar on White Racism and particularly on "the challenge to religious education to understand and improve these relations." It begins with some definitions of racism, including institutional racism and intentional vs. unintentional racism. It provides a good summary of how institutional racism functions and is sustained in cycles by the society. It analyzes the particular situation of suburbia and how these same problems apply to the white suburban church as well. It also has some great suggestions of strategies for addressing racism. One great one is to gather people who represent all areas of life (political, economic, educational, religious) to form a group to investigate the source of the power structures and learn how to deal with racism within it.

Turner, Otis. "The web of institutional racism." Church & Society 82 no 1 S-O 1991, p 13-27.

This is an extremely helpful article. A great summary of institutional racism and how it is interconnected with individual and internalized racism. Turner argues that there really is no distinction between institutional and individual racism because “racism is a set of values and beliefs that influences the collective consciousness of the United States and shapes the behavior and expectations of its institutions and citizens.” His demonstration of how various types of racism are related is very compelling. He also points to the importance of power, which turns prejudice into racism and that the power of racism is derived from all of us in the society who accept and participate in it actively or by lack of action. He makes a point, that I think is important for churches that social change is not equal to liberation because social changes can happen without changes in the collective attitude. Racism is adaptable. Finally Turner makes a few suggestions for addressing racism, which begins with critically examining our values to bring invisible racism to light. This is an important step for churches who are said to be institutions of truth in our society. We must begin by uncovering the truth.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States. (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

This wouldn't likely be the first book I would hand someone who is just beginning to think about how race works in our culture. However once someone has a basic understanding of racism beyond individual prejudice, of white privilege, and of racism as something that is still thriving today, it is a very helpful analysis of how the racial system in America is upheld by the dominant ways of talking about race in our culture today. This book does a lot of qualitative analysis of speech patterns in the major ways people talk about race and tell stories about race interactions. With a framework in which to place these patterns of speech it begins to become clear how white's unwillingness and inability to talk about race serves to uphold white privilege in our society without anyone sounding racist as an individual. I think that as we begin to

understand the deeper structures that maintain racism in the United States and important step is understanding how those structures are upheld by the dominate ideology that we all are influenced by and participate in. Bonilla-Silva's analysis of language in this book is enlightening for that purpose.

Barndt, Joseph. Dismantling racism: The continuing challenge to white America. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991).

This book would be a good starting place for churches who want to learn more about racism. It is specifically addressed to white people, and especially to Christians. Barndt goes through some of the history of racism in America and describes in detail institutional and cultural racism as well as how individual racists are formed by societal forces. He boldly names racism as a white problem, and presents a lot of challenges, but I think he does so in a way that is not overly threatening. The book is quite accessible for someone who hasn't done a lot of reading in the field. Though it doesn't clarify all the nuances it would be a great place to start, especially for churches. In the final section of the book he applies the concepts he has presented specifically to the church as an institution and spells out some of the ways church institutions might demonstrate racism and their participation in upholding the status quo structure of our society.

Barndt, Joseph. Understand and Dismantling Racism: The Twenty-First Century Challenge to White America. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007).

This book has much in common with the one above, but “tries to show new learnings about systemic racism from the past fifteen years and to describe exciting new organizing opportunities to transform structures of systemic racism.” It reflects changes in the society and in the authors own growth in understanding. It has an added chapter on white privilege and power and contains one of the best definitions of racism I have read: “Institutional racism is the

intentional shaping and structuring of an institution so that it effectively serves and is accountable to one racial group and does not effectively serve nor is accountable to other racial groups.” It also includes an expanded section on the different levels of institutions and how to discern racism in all the various levels. I think this could be a very helpful chapter for a church concerned with identifying institutional racism in its midst to go through.

DeYoung, Curtiss Paul, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey and Karen Chai Kim. United by Faith: The multiracial congregation as an answer to the problem of race. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003)

I am honestly not sure why this book was recommended to me for the topic of institutional racism in the church. It is a very interesting book that includes theology supporting multiracial churches, engages scripture, and examines churches and why they are not multiracial or how they can become multiracial. The most applicable chapter to this topic was the last chapter “The Promise and the Challenge of Multiracial Congregations.” This chapter drew some conclusions about the types of multiracial churches the authors encountered in their sociological study and how those churches carried on multiracial ministry. It even proclaimed one rare model as the best and explained why based on their previous theological foundation. My main disappointment with the book is that though it was an encouragement to churches to become multiracial, it did not define the current problem of race that we face and how exactly multiracial churches are the answer. It does go through some of the history of race in America, particularly with how it affected congregations in mind, and then it continues into the emergence of multiracial congregations, but I think it misses some important points by not addressing the problem of race as anything more than lack of integration in our churches.

Jersild, Paul T. and Dale A. Johnson, eds. Moral Issues and Christian Response. (New York: Holt,

Rinehart and Winston, 1971).

This book has a great chapter on racism and how the church ought to engage with it. It contains several articles from different perspectives. One of the most relevant is “Institutional Racism in American Society.” I was surprised by how carefully and thoroughly this article talked about institutional racism in its invisible or informal forms in the early 70's which the writer admits almost nothing has been written on to this point. Another fascinating section in the chapter is an address by a black man who left the church long ago because of its participation in the oppression of African Americans. I highly recommend this brief chapter as well as the sixth edition with new articles listed below.

Jersild, Paul T. Dale A. Johnson, Patricial Beattie Jung, Shannon Jung, eds. Moral Issues and Christian Response, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998).

The most beneficial article in this books chapter on race is a statement “On Racial Justice” by the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. This statement briefly describes some basic history and definitions as well as the church's involvement as a whole, but most of all it is a call to the church to commit itself to racial justice, examine racism, not simply as an individual phenomenon, but realize the institutional nature of racism and work to eradicate it's effects from society. Both this chapter and the one in the first edition have very helpful introductory sections that summarize the issue, Christian responses, and the articles that follow. Many of the other articles in this edition address the issue of affirmative action. Churches may find some of the articles that spell out the reasons for affirmative action helpful as they think about their own practices around hiring and choosing leaders and the ways in which we assign merit and identify qualifications.

### **Annotated Bibliography of Organizations and Resources**

RCA Multiracial Congregational Team. Multiracial Ministries. Reformed Church Press, 16 April 2008. <<http://www.rca.org/NETCOMMUNITY/Page.aspx?pid=3129&srcid=2225>>. The RCA's multiracial ministries site includes many helpful resources for both individuals and congregations. In particular it includes a presentation introducing the concept of institutional racism and resources such as Crossroads Anti-racism Training which address institutional as well as personal and cultural forms of racism. One of the key features is a continuum for assessment and next steps for individuals and congregations. This vision for moving towards a racism free future certainly includes addressing larger systemic issues as well as personal biases. Overall, this is a great site for RCA congregations which gives many resources and contacts for help facilitating change and preparing people and congregations to embrace a multiracial future all placed within the context of the larger denominational goals.

Christian Reformed Church Ministry of Race Relations. Race Relations. Christian Reformed Church in North America, 16 April 2008. <<http://www.crcna.org/pages/racerelations.cfm>>.

The website for the CRC's Ministry of Race Relations doesn't have a lot of links to direct information to be accessed online. But they are participating in and producing some great programs that include working against institutional and systemic forms of racism in the church. They are an integral part of the CRC's overall Initiative for Dismantling Racism which is working on Anti-racism across the CRC. They also offer training (including sessions in Grand Rapids that are open to anyone as well as in local churches) and annual conferences which include teaching about and presenting action steps to address the deeper and more subtle forms of racism perpetuated by institutions and cultures, including the church.

Rice University, Department of Sociology. CORRUL. Rice University, 16 April, 2008.

<<http://www.ruf.rice.edu/%7Esoci/corrul.html>>. The Center on Race, Religion, and Urban Life (CORRUL) at Rice University “advances knowledge in three dynamic, interconnected dimensions of 21st-century society—race, religion, and urban life.” The Center uses

sociological study and conducts research, but also desires to apply the knowledge gained to better society. It is a relatively new way of doing this type of research and work, but I think it has a lot of potential to produce interesting and relevant research and ideas for churches addressing race issues. The website includes lists of the center's activities and current research projects and new publications.

The Louisville Institute. 16 April 2008. <<http://www.louisville-institute.org/index.asp>>. The Louisville Institute is a program that supports research and leadership education on American religious institutions. "Its fundamental mission to enrich the religious life of American Christians and to encourage the revitalization of their institutions, by bringing together those who lead religious institutions with those who study them, so that the work of each might inform and strengthen the other." A good starting place on this website would be to search through grant reports for ones relevant to race issues in the church. Many of these grants result in publications, but one may also contact the grant recipient of a relevant study to get more information.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Multicultural Ministries. ELCA, 16 April 2008. <[http://www.elca.org/multicultural/mm\\_index.html](http://www.elca.org/multicultural/mm_index.html)>. This denominational website for multicultural ministries is particularly interesting to me because it has a wide range of topics including resources specific for different ethnicities, general education on multicultural ministry, and a section on resources for racial justice. This section had several Lutheran publications that dealt specifically with institutional racism types of issues and is concerned with combating racism besides developing multiracial churches. This site was lacking other types of resources such as personal contacts for resources and training opportunities.

## **Interviews**

For my interviews I decided to interview two African American women in the RCA about their

experience in and perceptions of the RCA and its work on anti-racism. The first interview was a conversation with a student who recently decided to join the RCA. I asked her about that decision and what influenced it. She said that part of her reason was that the RCA provided more opportunities for her as a woman than did her Baptist tradition, although she also plans to get ordained in her Baptist church as well. But the other major reason for deciding to join the RCA was a sense of hopefulness she has about the direction the RCA is trying to go in terms of anti-racism.

She told me about being invited to participate in a group of emerging church leaders to talk about the steps the RCA needs to take to fight racism in the church. And she spoke of her surprise when she attended the One Thing Conference this winter and had the opportunity to meet many African American pastors in the RCA and many who shared her own Baptist background, but who were now very much a part of the Reformed tradition. She also met pastors from other ethnicities and races all gathered to focus on the goal of multicultural churches. She emphasized that as the group of African American pastors gathered to support one another and talk about the RCA's goals that one member of the group reminded them that they were not there to support the "black agenda" but to work towards multicultural churches.

Obviously, everything doesn't go perfectly. She talked about some of the flaws she saw in the One Thing Conference. She said it was obvious from the worship that white people had planned the event without consulting with the other minority groups present. She also reminded me of an unfortunate incident involving one of the speakers, which to her was a clear indication that he was not able to think outside his own culture, or to imagine how his remark might be received by others. He made it their responsibility if they took offense to what he said since he did not intend it to be so. Though there are clearly signs of work yet to be done, this student is very hopefully about the RCA's choice to engage in the hard work of anti-racism and growth toward multicultural church living. She went on to talk about some of the work of the RCA's multiracial initiatives, such as the continuum of multicultural/multiracial congregational living that Earl James presents. She said it is important that

even mono-racial churches in the RCA need to be talking about race and racism for the denomination to meet its anti-racism goals.

My second interview was with a local RCA pastor. She told me about her journey into the RCA. She was encouraged to come to Western Seminary by one of the professors to whom she responded, “why would I go there, there's no one like me there.” The professor encouraged her more saying that the seminary was wanted to become more diverse and would need some brave students of color to be the first ones and he offered the seminary's willingness to give a scholarship to encourage students of color to come. So after some consideration, she decided to try it, at least for a year. The first year was hard, but some key moments got her through. First, about halfway through the first year she realized that she was not the only student for whom the language and ways of thinking were foreign and difficult. This was a great relief, that there were other reasons she was not understanding, not just the racial/cultural divide. Another key moment was finding an African American woman in the RCA to mentor her. Their relationship has helped shape her sense of call and helped her find a place in the RCA.

This pastor talks about her call not in terms of her position or career whether she is working as a pastor or a social worker or something else. She explained to me that she grew up in a neighborhood with a wide range of ethnicities, but then went to an all black college where she worshipped in an all black church. Now she finds herself in a mostly white church. She believes that she is called to multicultural ministry, but it is hard work. It is work that is hard to measure, because it's about much more than just bringing in another racial or ethnic group. Before she took her associate position, a Hispanic man filled it and brought many Hispanic people to the congregation, but when he left, they left. She told me that she sees her role as constantly teaching to change attitudes and make this a place where minorities would be comfortable coming. Many people in the church thought that once they hired her as a pastor and her husband as a music coordinator that other black people would start coming. But she says, not that she doesn't invite them, but this isn't yet a place that most of my friends

would feel comfortable. She talked about doing racial sensitivity training with the elders and other programs she coordinates. Recently they held an African American film festival, but no one came. Yet, she wasn't too discouraged because she still believed that they needed to have events like that.

I also asked her about the RCA as a denomination and its work on anti-racism. She observed that the RCA is really at a point where they have to engage this issue, they can't avoid it any longer. But nonetheless, whatever the motive, she was glad they were. She said that she has been talking to Wes Granberg-Michaelson about the leadership change that will soon be coming in the top levels of denominational officials, encouraging them to choose at least one person of color who knows what it takes to do multicultural ministry. One of her fears is that we keep talking about multiculturalism but we have no models in the RCA of successful multicultural churches, so a bunch of us who don't really know what we're doing just keep talking about what to do. This pastor sounded much less optimistic about the RCA than the student I spoke with, but she insisted that she is hopeful.

### **Site Visit**

On March 16, I visited Calvary Reformed Church in Holland, MI during their 9:30am worship service. I chose to visit Calvary because I am interested in the Reformed Church in America (the denomination I belong to) and how it is doing multicultural/multiracial ministry. Calvary is frequently mentioned for its efforts at multiracial ministry here in Holland. Since I had already had conversations with Pastor Denise Kingdom-Grier about Calvary and its ministry I knew that, at least according to her, Calvary still had a lot of work to do with becoming more multiracial. So I did not expect huge percentages of people of color among the mostly white congregation.

Nonetheless, as my husband and I pulled into the parking lot (we drove because we were running late) I noticed that the parking lot was full of cars and there was a line ahead of us of people driving into the neighborhood for church and finding a place to park. I didn't notice anyone that seemed to be walking from nearby. As we walked in we found ourselves surrounded by older white

people and white families, and for the first few minutes after we came in and found a place in the pews I didn't notice any non-white families. As people settled into their seats and I continued to look around I finally thought I could see a few people of color sitting towards the front of the sanctuary. My husband and I estimated there were 300 or more people in worship that morning and we saw perhaps 15 people of color. As worship began CJ Kingdom-Grier (the African-American worship leader at Calvary and husband of Pastor Denise) got up to lead worship from the piano and was joined by a small group of singers including one African-American woman and her school-age daughter. They led worship that to me seemed very typical of “blended” Reformed-Evangelical worship that I am used to seeing in many RCA churches.

The one unique aspect of the service that stood out to me was a time of testimony. I don't know if this is a regular part of worship at Calvary, but the week we visited a Hispanic man had the opportunity to come up and tell the congregation about how he had been blessed by the help and support some of them had provided him as he struggled in recovery from drug addiction. This seemed to be a great opportunity to encourage the church in its outreach to people on the margins and to hear the voice of someone with a different experience than I'd expect most people in the congregation have had. As I browsed over some of Calvary's literature that was brought to us the following week, along with a plate of cookies, I noticed one of the emphases they mentioned was Arts in worship, including drama, music, technology, and visual art. This helped me understand the way the sermon was set up in the worship service I visited. The pastor came out in a purple robe to a stage (which isn't the word I normally use for the front of the sanctuary) set with painted scenes of stone, palm branches, and a throne, in the character of a Roman lawyer. It seemed very unusual to me, but setting it in a larger context of their goal to value arts and drama in worship it made more sense to me.

After reflecting on what I observed in that worship service I am left with some questions. The first is about worship style and format. This has been my perennial question about multicultural/multiracial churches. How do you create a worship experience that is welcoming for all?

This worship service seemed very much the same as one I could have gone to in another church that isn't consciously seeking racial reconciliation and neighborhood ministry. Frankly, it seemed like a very white, Dutch-Reformed version of Evangelical protestantism. Perhaps on other days the style of music is different or they intentional integrate some other elements of worship that I didn't see. But as I worshipped there I kept thinking about my conversation Pastor Denise when she told me that, though she invites her friends, she knows that Calvary isn't yet a place that most of her black friends would be comfortable worshipping.

The other question I am left wondering about is about racial representation in leadership. It seemed clear that Calvary was trying to make sure people of color were up in front of the congregation during worship, leading worship. I know that before Pastor Denise a Hispanic male pastor held her position. I wondered if there was intentional representation in other elements of church life, like consistory and planning for events. And I also wondered if having people of color as pastors or other leaders was “working.” Just because you have a black pastor and a black worship leader can you assume now black people will come? Denise told me some people seemed to think so when she started working there. She told me that the former pastor I mentioned above, had brought a significant group of Hispanic people into the church, but they left when he did. To me that indicates they probably weren't integrated into the community, but a separate group worshipping beside the established congregation. I think having diverse leadership is important, but it can't be the only thing. I wonder what other efforts Calvary is making that aren't reflected in the worship service I saw.