

**THE SIN OF RACISM**  
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**Martin Luther King, Jr Day**

A Pastoral Letter  
From  
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(Original Document from House of Bishops Pastoral Letter of 1994)

For decades, The Episcopal Church and the Diocese of West Virginia have issued statements, passed resolutions and taken actions which have addressed many aspects of racism and racial justice. While positive changes have occurred at certain times in various situations, racism not only persists, but in many places is powerfully resurgent.

Cries for justice in our land and around the world inevitably confront us with the sin of racism. Those cries have not gone away – not from the far corners of the world, not from the communities in which The Episcopal Church ministers, nor from our beloved Diocese and Church itself.

Black Lives Matter, ethnic cleansing, riots in our streets and in our Capitol are all variations on the theme of racism.

Escalating violence in America illustrates the complexity of racism. At the heart of the matter is fear. We fear those who are different from ourselves, and that fear translates into violence which in turn creates more fear. Institutionalized preference, primarily for white persons, is still deeply engrained in the American way of life in areas like employment, the availability of insurance and credit ratings, in education, law enforcement, courts of law and the military.

A common working definition of racism sharpens the focus for us:

Racism [is the] abuse of power by a racial group that is more powerful than another group and the abuse of that advantage to exclude, demean, damage, control or destroy the less powerful group; a belief that some races are by nature superior to others; racial discrimination based on such a belief. Racism confers benefits upon the dominant group that include psychological feelings of superiority, social privilege, economic position, or political power.

The essence of racism is prejudice coupled with power. It is rooted in the sin of pride and exclusivity which assumes 'that I and my kind are superior to others and therefore deserve special privileges.' In our religious tradition the people of the covenant have frequently expressed this attitude. Often we have been challenged by prophetic witness to turn from a life of privilege to a vocation of responsibility and moral rectitude. Jesus, in his time, clearly called the people of God to lives of discipleship and servanthood without boundaries of race or class.

Racism perpetuates a basic untruth which claims the superiority of one group of people over others because of the color of their skin, their cultural history, their tribal affiliation, or their ethnic identity. This lie distorts the biblical understanding of God's action in creation, wherein all human beings are made 'in the image of God.' It blasphemes the ministry of Christ who died for all people. It divides people from one another and gives false permission for oppression and exploitation.

While our generation is not the first to experience it, racism has surfaced with particular intensity today because pluralism – the inevitable result of a shrinking world – exists on a scale not known before. The challenge of people with differing backgrounds having to live together has never been greater.

The sin of racism is experienced daily in our society, in our church and in its institutions. Our churches are filled with stories of racial prejudice and discrimination. Our communities and our country also.

God's response to human sin is to establish a covenant in Christ Jesus that overcomes division and isolation by binding human beings to God and to each other in a new way. Our Baptismal Covenant spells out a new way of living together in the Church, and becoming witnesses to the power of Jesus Christ.

Racism may be manifest in any race when it is in a position of power and dominance. In the United States, our primary experience is one of white privilege, even in places where whites may be a minority in the surrounding population. This comes as a surprise to many white people, because they do not think of themselves as racist. They may even see themselves as victims of various violent reactions against the dominant culture. Yet there are many in our society at all levels who seem to find a certain security in racially restricted communities, schools, clubs, fraternities, sororities and other institutions.

Questions abound. Can the old melting pot image of assimilation be replaced by a better metaphor that reflects the value of difference? How can the inherited privilege of unearned advantage of some people be used to bring about the reconciliation of all? How can the Church offer all people the 'supreme advantage of knowing Christ' when too often it is itself a bastion of separation? How can The Episcopal Church, which reflects the dominant culture, be a factor in changing destructive racial attitudes and behaviors? Are we ready to find new common ground on which all may stand together? Will we trust the grace of God to enable us to bridge our many unhappy divisions?

At this point in our lives, it is time that we all take a look at what we are doing, and why we are doing it. Flames have only been stoked in the recent past.

The silence is deafening. Words and action are needed. The Author of the Epistle of James reminds us that faith without action is dead. (James 2:17)

Please begin with prayer, and let the prayer lead us all into action for equality for all.

As Martin Luther King, Jr prayed to his Montgomery congregation, as he left them:

And now to Him who is able to keep us from falling, and lift us from the dark valley of despair to the bright mountain of hope, from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy; to Him be power and authority, for ever and ever. Amen.

In Christ,

The Rt Rev W Michie Klusmeyer  
VII Bishop of West Virginia

NB Much of this Pastoral Letter was lifted from a Pastoral Letter from the House of Bishops to The Church, in 1994 and revised in 1999.