

Stepping Stones toward Racial Justice for black and white Christians

Black Light Communities of Practice

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This reflection has come about as a result of facilitating conversational spaces for black and white Christians seeking to understand and overcome racism in church and society. As part of Urban Life we facilitated Communities of Practice for participants in the Black Light course, a content-led, online, eight session course for Christians which uncovers the diverse racial context of Christianity through an exploration of ‘the presence and contributions of black people in the bible, in church history and in Britain today.’¹ Communities of Practice are “Groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner)² These are conversational spaces shaped by mutuality and partnership in learning together by listening well to one another and reflecting on our own experiences. We ran two online Communities of Practice for Black Light participants who wanted to talk more and reflect further with others on their learning from the course. The groups were funded as a research project into the potential for Communities of Practice to resource people seeking to make changes in their lives toward the goal of racial equity. Our approach to the research was to have a participant-observer researcher (Anna) in both groups feeding back reflections after each session which participants then critiqued and developed. We, Natalie and Anna, as an intercultural research team then analysed and reflected on the data as researchers, facilitators and participants. You can read the full Research Report and a Facilitators’ Guide here: www.urbanlife.org

In doing this research, and in our own personal and professional grappings with Whiteness and systemic racism, we have noticed patterns and rhythms in how people process these issues. While never uniform or predictable, the responses of our individual participants’ learning, processing and challenging issues of race and equity seemed to have common features. Equally, in our analysis and reflection we have found ourselves constantly noting the differences between black and white participants’ perspectives and responses. We offer this reflection on what we have observed, wondering whether there are discernible ‘stepping stones’ for both black and white Christians as we seek after racial equity.

In what follows we firstly address the question of metaphors, offering our own struggles with language and tentative conclusions in the hope that it will resonate with others. We then explore stepping stones firstly for black Christians and then for white Christians in the process of addressing systemic racism in the church and in wider society, drawing on the data and our own experiences. The work of the Communities of Practice has been an intercultural undertaking both in the facilitation, the groups themselves and in the writing

¹ <https://www.blacklightcourse.uk/>

² <https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/>

up of this research. We, Natalie as a black woman and Anna as a white woman, have worked together to identify these themes and hone our ideas. We have written these stepping stones, both embodying our own positionality and thankful for the gift of one another in the process. We have found the increasing awareness of common features in the landscape of anti-racism³ work helpful but also hold our categorisations lightly, this is only an initial exploration and there is scope for much more work to be done. Nonetheless our hope is to offer this as part of a wider conversation about how we can support and encourage black and white Christians in their efforts towards intercultural engagement and racial equity.

Metaphors of progress and process in the personal and relational work of racial justice

Racial justice work is both deeply personal and deeply relational. Each individual faces the task of delving into their own conscious and unconscious assumptions, and challenging themselves at the level of thought, word and action. Black people are engaged in this process daily and bear the burden of it. For many white people the realisation of the realities of racial injustice is a shock. Should they be open to it, a whole new world is opened to them in which they see that their experience is as a white person in a world of white supremacy, profoundly different to the experience of a black person in that same world.

As we noticed common features of individual's responses, we sought language to speak about these as part of a process of change. I, Anna, began to talk about a 'journey', which seemed to reflect the white experience of a cumulative series of realisations. For example: Accepting the existence of white supremacy, then enables a White person to acknowledge the daily privilege they experience. However, 'journey' suggests a linear and defined path which is not usually the case for processes of change. I, Natalie, leant towards 'spectrum' as a metaphor, which better expresses the breadth of elements that make up an individual's engagement with race. Having a clear awareness of one facet, for example intersectionality, does not necessarily guarantee the same degree of sensitivity to another. Equally, as with some of our participants, a theoretical connection with the issues is very different from a practical understanding of everyday white privilege or racial prejudice.

Recognising both need and desire to do this work personally and organisationally/ministerially is a good starting point. However, our participants came into the Community of Practice with different degrees of awareness of racism *and* different levels of self-awareness about their own engagement with racism. The conversations became richer when participants became more vulnerable. This took time and was

³ In our use of the terms 'racial justice work' and 'anti-racism work' we recognise two overlapping but slightly different concepts. We understand work for racial justice as activity that promotes and seeks to enable racial equity in all spheres of life. Closely allied to this is anti-racism work, the intentional effort to dismantle racism and white supremacy at the level of personal thought, interpersonal relationships, and societal systems.

dependent on the work participants had already done personally and their ability to identify where they are on the spectrum of racial justice. An individual's stage of life and the season they were in personally also significantly shaped their ability to engage and the nature of their engagement. For some it was time to reflect on difficult experiences, to face and explore them in a broader context of a racist society and racist Christian theology. For others it was a part of their personal growth to acknowledge the experiences of others and work for change. A pinball machine of anti-racism is another way of imagining this work, with individuals starting their engagement from different trajectories and hitting various touchpoints and barriers along the way, propelled forward by the Spirit of God.

In working with these concepts, each valuable in different ways, we have settled on 'stepping stones' as a frame for these reflections. These are stages of the process marked by specific realisations and involving deeper exploration into the ways that our lives are shaped by a racialised history, and the potential for redress and redemption for all the damage and injustice it has incurred. The image of stepping stones for us conjures up a slightly precarious journey, on which one can move backwards or forwards. Taking the next step requires a stretch and may feel unstable, wobbly underfoot, reflecting the fragility of our efforts towards racial justice. The insights encapsulated in these stepping stones are significant, layered with stories of the resilience, wrestling and suffering of black people in their struggle for racial equity. Progress is slow and we must be cautious of too quickly claiming to have 'arrived'. The costly insight of black experience is the foundation that we learn from and build on in our contemporary context and personal desires for change.

Stepping stones for black Christians

Every person's experience is unique, but there are commonalities, patterns and areas of resonance which can highlight some of the shared black experience when it comes to racism and its impact. Individual responses to this will vary and the Communities of Practice aimed to create a safe space where black participants could explore and express a range of emotions and issues alongside white participants. The stepping stones that we noticed among our black participants are:

- **Reclaiming our voice – naming and articulating racism in its systemic and personal forms**

We noticed the freedom that black group members found in sharing their truth and the reality of their lived experience in intercultural space. Crucial to this reclaiming is no longer feeling the need to centralise White feelings during this process. White people may have benefitted from hearing, but the telling of black experience from a black perspective was central. Another aspect of reclaiming our voice is the opportunity to take time and space to raise challenging questions. The Communities of Practice created a space in which black participants showed courage and confidence to confront the normative nature of Whiteness, and strengthened together their ability to name the ways that that normativity is framed in daily life.

- **Shining light – ‘hidden in plain sight’**

This involves uncovering the presence and practice of racism found particularly in theology, Christian spaces, and people. Sharing our experiences and what we have noticed in intercultural space is in itself a significant and necessary part of the progress that needs to be made. A further aspect of shining light is raising the alarm, helping others to see what they can't see, and hear what they haven't heard. This, as well as beginning to say what needs to be said, was transformative for both black and white participants. Fundamentally this stepping stone is about uncovering the harmful impact of failing to contextualise the gospel in relation to race. Where white supremacy exists within theology and church practices the gospel lacks good news for black people. Asking contextual questions that expose the realities of racism within Christian theology and communities offers the opportunity for lamentation, repentance, and restoration of the gospel as good news for all.

- **Decolonising – deconstruct and dismantle**

The roots and damage of white supremacy run wide and wild. Acknowledging this, repositioning ourselves, and in doing so finding healing and hope, become vital tasks for black people; tasks that need to be centralised for the fulfilment of God's redemptive purposes. For black Christians decolonising their inherited faith may begin by asking: *who's holding the pen?* This question begins the process of unravelling a Christian heritage steeped in white supremacy which can be unnerving, bringing a new disturbing yet undeniable awareness. This necessarily addresses those who hold power within church communities and theological education institutions. The power of the pen and the legacy of its inherited discourse needs to be recognised and scrutinised on every level, to begin the work of decolonising our sense of identity, Christianity, and society.

A process of deconstruction necessarily leads to discomfort and discontent, further questions: Why aren't issues of racial justice prioritised by Christians, churches, and theological institutions? Most black majority churches engage in what Valentina Alexander describes as 'Passive Radicalism'⁴, racial justice is a serious pastoral concern and the focus of fervent prayer. The challenge is to translate this into collective social activism inspired by the good news of a contextualised Gospel. As one white CoP participant described their white majority church: *there is a growing awareness of the impact of racism on our members, community, and society but it still doesn't make the agenda somehow.* Therefore, stories of racism experienced within church life continue to create a collective source of disappointment, frustration, and indignation. In both contexts black Christians continue to ask how a gospel of hope and justice addresses the realities of black people's experience in the church and the world. Increasingly black Christians are reclaiming our voice in white majority spaces whether churches or society, shining our light and decolonising our tradition

⁴ Valentina Alexander, "Passive and Active Radicalism in Black Led Churches," in Michael N. Jagessar and Anthony G. Reddie (eds.), *Black Theology in Britain: A Reader*. Equinox, 2007, pp. 52–69.

asking along with God's question to Adam in the garden 'who told you...?'. In this way we are calling attention to the reality of a Christian theology co-opted by Whiteness which is perpetuated by theological education and practiced in local church communities.

Stepping stones for white Christians

Again, our experience in the Communities of Practice was that white individuals joined us for reflection at very different points in processing issues of race. They varied in terms of their levels of self-awareness and awareness of racism in their local contexts, their country and in the church. These stepping stones might be seen as identifiable features of the landscape of a white person's engagement with racial justice. They include specific concepts which, when grasped, allow people to move on towards racial equity. So, encountering each might be a penny-drop moment which can't be reversed and from which a person can exist in the world ever-so-slightly differently. While these might be construed as abstract concepts acquired academically, in fact they are formed from the experiences of black people testifying to the reality of race in our culture which may initially be invisible to a white person. Participants in our Communities of Practice noted the importance of hearing one another's experiences. White participants valued hearing the realities of daily racism experienced by black participants and in the process learnt how costly it was for them to share.

White people learning about racism, especially seeking to hear the experiences of black people carries considerable risk for black people. White people often experience shock or disbelief when hearing the extent of systemic racism, and horror if they realise their own complicity in the dehumanising of black people. It is important for white people to name and process these emotions, and even more important for black people to be protected from harm as they do so. Spaces consisting solely of white people in which they can talk about race and privilege and can be held through their questions and emotions are vital. Then, when white people join intercultural conversations, they have the awareness to listen and talk respecting their black sisters and brothers rather than mining them for information or centring their own white responses. We must find ways to balance the need for white people to learn and the vulnerability and risk of exploitation which such sharing involves for black people. The gift of black writers publishing their experiences is a contribution to this challenge. Stepping stones for white Christians might include:

- **Understanding white supremacy as the air we breathe**

Reni Eddo-Lodge and Robin DiAngelo both write helpfully about the challenges white people experience in conversations about race.⁵ Where racism is understood solely as specific,

⁵ Eddo-Lodge, R. *Why I'm no longer talking to white people about race*. Bloomsbury. 2017 and DiAngelo, R. *White Fragility*. Allen Lane. 2018.

intentional, explicitly racist words, attitudes or actions then white people are either 'racist' or 'not racist'. This fails to recognise the historical and social context of racism and limits conversations about race to personal accusations or 'bad apples' within organisations. Ultimately this approach perpetuates white supremacy and keeps the majority of white people from seriously engaging with discussions of race.

DiAngelo coins the term 'white fragility' to describe the defensiveness, anger and denial white people often exhibit in discussions of racism. In order to overcome white fragility, white people need to move past a reductive understanding of racism as specific actions by specific people to a truer appreciation of the landscape as shaped, layered and shot through with racialised superiority from which they benefit. White supremacy. This concept came for me, Anna, frankly as a relief. Reading Eddo-Lodge some years ago I was able to acknowledge the context in which I was born and raised. I did not choose it, but I am a part of it and have benefitted from it. Recognising white supremacy as the air in which we all breathe enables white people to talk about complicity without being crippled by blame and defensiveness.

- **Noticing and naming white privilege**

This involves becoming aware of the weight carried by black people that white people don't carry, and the way in which being white removes barriers and smooths our path as we move through society. In many ways to accept that white people are privileged is the logical consequence of accepting the existence of white supremacy. But noticing and naming the nature of white privilege is an ongoing process, uncovering the practical expressions of white supremacy in the lives of white people. It is likely that in a process of such noticing, a white person will circle back to some defensiveness and fragility, being willing to stay with the process, recognising the significance of the experiences of black people historically and currently can enable someone to continue.⁶ Around this stepping stone swirl reflections on other forms of marginality. A white person may not 'feel privileged' due to other facets of their identity or history, for example class, gender or dis/ability. Marginalisation is complex and each human being exists as a matrix of privilege and marginality within their social and cultural context. White privilege does not negate experiences of marginalisation due to other factors, but the intersectionality of blackness compounding other factors of marginality is the lived experience of many black people.

- **Connecting theology to white supremacy**

For black group members the realisation that their Christian heritage had been filtered through a lens of Whiteness was profoundly destabilising. It required them to interrogate their tradition afresh and rebuild trust in scripture and theology, decolonising as they went. What does this same truth mean for white people? White supremacy, and its privileging of white people is incorrect and unfaithful to the God of the bible. What is more, the rich heritage of Christian theology from black and majority world theologians is still largely forgotten or rendered invisible in white majority church communities. A lack of diversity is always impoverishing, and a lack of diversity in our readings of scripture and ideas about God means that these things are one-dimensional, lacking richness and too vulnerable to

⁶ Saad, L. F. *Me and White Supremacy*. Quercus. 2020.

the idiosyncrasies of European, post-enlightenment, individualist, and capitalist societies. For white Christians seeking to be anti-racist in their expression of Christianity, receiving the decolonised theology of black and majority world Christians strips away the White Christianity which unduly privileges them. Making space for different cultural perspectives to be heard on equal terms within church life rounds out our image of God, adding texture and depth to our life of faith.

Conclusion – noticings about transformation

Change is incremental and rarely linear, involving repeated exposure to challenges to our existing ways of seeing the world, alongside enough affirmation to give us courage to embrace the required change.⁷ We hoped that the Community of Practice conversations would support an ongoing process of change for participants in relation to racial justice. We saw some of this, and we also gained a deeper understanding of the nature of this work as illustrated in the stepping stones described above. Observing the Community of Practice groups, including ourselves as facilitators and researchers, change can be glimpsed in several ways:

- Groups were overwhelmed by complexity at times but not paralysed. Through our conversations we found ourselves able to accept loose ends, making racial justice an ongoing work for us all, beyond the life of the groups themselves.
- The experience of seeing ourselves in the mirror of a diverse community conversation and understanding our perspective and experience within its wider context brought new insight. Furthermore, the ability and safety to verbalise a change in perspective was itself significant. This was a specific gift made possible and accessible through the Community of Practice.
- Reflecting on the process afterwards, white participants recognised an increase in their racial self-awareness in daily life.

This reflection is an invitation to notice features of the landscape in anti-racism work. Inevitably it is partial and limited, we hope that it can unlock further conversation, broadening our understanding and naming other stepping stones that will move us on. Within the Community of Practice conversations, the themes of power and privilege caused the deepest impact. The need for white people to actively 'lay down their power' or 'get out of the way for the gospel' to make space for black people to receive the opportunities and recognition they deserve was significant in much of our conversation. While it was a challenge to many white participants it was received and wrestled with in the light of society as a whole and each of our individual family, social and church contexts. Each of our stepping stones offers the next step, a brave if faltering movement forwards toward such a

⁷ Ruddick, A. *Reimagining Mission from Urban Places*. SCM. 2020, pp34-48.

redemptive laying down of power. It might be tempting as a white Christian for I, Anna, to look to a spiritualised idea of Jesus' laying down of power as my example here. In doing so I might find a comforting sense of 'rightness' that I am being 'like Jesus', and miss the pain, endurance, and reality of the cross. But, as Jennifer Harvey (and Barratt and Harley following her) suggest, perhaps I as a white person should not be so quick to align myself with Jesus, instead being humbled and dying to self, superiority, and privilege.⁸ Redressing the imbalance of power and making reparation are at the heart of justice, and the kind of upside-down kingdom which Jesus came to initiate. Therefore, white people's work of laying down power and black people's work of stepping into their power is the far-from-easy calling which lies at the heart of both Christian faith and societal change.

Further reading

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⁸ Jennifer Harvey, 'What would Zaccheus do? The Case for Disidentifying with Jesus', in George Yancy (ed.), *Christology and Whiteness: What would Jesus Do?* Routledge. 2012, pp94-5 and Al Barrett & Ruth Harley, *Being Interrupted: Reimagining the church's mission from the outside in*, SCM. 2020, pp 74-85.

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