



The time is now: Reckoning with racism in Oregon

by Jan Musgrove Elfers, Monday, November 2nd 2020

We are living in one of the most transformational eras of our lifetimes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on the clear inequities that exist in our society and highlighted the importance of a quality health care system that is accessible to all.

Likewise, the Black Lives Matter movement has brought thousands of people into the streets to demand systemic change, and it is time (way past time) for change.

Ijeoma Oluo, author of the New York Times bestselling book "So You Want to Talk About Race," says, "The beauty of anti-racism is that you don't have to pretend to be free of racism to be an anti-racist. Anti-racism is the commitment to fight racism wherever you find it, including in yourself. And it's the only way forward."

Fighting racism requires us to acknowledge the racism we have been socialized into, so we can recognize our role in it and interrupt our complacency and complicity. By confessing our part in the legacy of racism, we can interrupt its continuation and begin to make amends. The truth is, white people are living on land stolen from our Indigenous neighbors and participate in an economy that was founded on the slave labor of our African American brothers and sisters. But what does it mean to take responsibility for the sins we inherit?

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon is committed to fighting racism and to changing systems that perpetuate inequity, and systems only change when hearts are transformed. This fall, EMO will begin an intensive process of diversity, equity and inclusion training for our staff and board. The process will include using an equity lens to discover and remove barriers that exist for people of color to be hired and to experience satisfaction in their jobs, as well as a path toward advancement.

Our public policy initiatives will create more equity for communities that are particularly harmed by current policies. One of our ballot measure recommendations supports

Measure 110, which decriminalizes possession of certain drugs and establishes a drug addiction treatment and recovery program funded by the state's marijuana tax revenue. By decriminalizing most drug possessions, the measure will also likely reduce longstanding and traumatic racial disparities in Oregon's criminal justice system and direct much-needed funding to treatment programs.

Perhaps one of the most exciting projects that EMO is supporting is "Reckoning with Oregon's Racist History." The Common Table (commontableoregon.org), a project that EMO helped to found, is organizing a statewide, nine-month forum with faith leaders. Participants will meet twice monthly to learn more about past racist practices within Oregon and acknowledge ways they have been carried into the present day. They will listen to Black, Brown, Indigenous, Asian and other communities of color inside intentional cohorts, building bridges of respect and understanding in order to identify and remove the social and economic barriers to human flourishing. When we listen to others' experiences, memories and stories, it can foster understanding. When we support each other, seek feedback and encourage reform, we begin to create a better society and better outcomes toward restorative justice.

The first trimester of the forums will culminate in EMO's annual Collins Summit Nov. 18, "Shalom in divided times: Can we create just peace and real unity?" This year the event will be presented virtually. The keynote speaker will be Lisa Sharon Harper, an African American author, activist and artist. During the evening, several Common Table members will participate in a discussion about the complexities involved in engaging authentically with one another when we disagree. The timing of the event is two weeks after the 2020 election. Whatever the election's outcome, we expect there to be much conversation around how we heal a country that is deeply divided.

For those looking to address racism in their own lives, we would encourage you to seek out organizations that will connect you to people different than yourself. You can also give to or volunteer with organizations committed to restorative justice. In our own anti-racism work we use these three guiding principles: humility, vulnerability and perseverance. We ask the question, "can we create just peace and real unity?" With God's help, we pray we can.

Jan Musgrove Elfers is president of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, and is on the board of the Institute for Christian/Muslim Understanding and the board of advisors for WorldOregon.