



The Damascus Road
Anti-Racism Process

Damascus Road Newsletter

Vol. 1, No. 3 – December 1998

In this issue

Two Decisions of the Damascus Road Steering Committee

by Tobin Miller Shearer

The Core Commitments of Damascus Road

Core Commitment #1

by Phil Bergey

Core Commitment #2

by Rachel Yoder

State of the Network

by Regina Shands Stoltzfus

What is a Listserv?

Quotes of Note

Racism and Sexism: The Age-old Debate

by Iris de Leon-Hartshorn

Accountability. . . to Whom?

by Zulma Prieto

Resources

Two Decisions of the Damascus Road Steering Committee

By Tobin Miller Shearer

During a September phone conference, the Damascus Road Steering Committee made two decisions that will affect the network as a whole. After considerable discussion, the committee decided to remove all specific oppressed group references from the continuum tool. Originally arising out of discussions about the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the continuum tool, the change was initiated in order to allow each team to define oppression in their context.

Also central to this decision was Damascus Road's accountability to the African-American Mennonite Association and the Hispanic Mennonite Convention in particular. Both groups have made statements about homosexuality that

influenced this decision. Members of the committee expressed their hope that this decision will allow teams to define what oppression means in their context while moving forward with the work of anti-racism. Any team desiring a copy of the revised continuum may request one from the Akron (Pa.) Damascus Road offices.

The committee also acted to affirm the creation of a new Damascus Road staff position. The new position, to be located in the Akron Mennonite Central Committee offices, will center on organizing new trainings and providing resources to the current Damascus Road network. A particularly important component of this work will be to initiate a check-in process with all Damascus Road teams that have been in place for two or more years. The process will serve the dual purpose of learning from teams' experience and deciding how Damascus Road staff can best serve teams as they seek to live out Damascus Road core commitments (see below).

In order to make this new position possible, Tobin Miller Shearer will move to a half-time position. Regina and Tobin proposed the staffing change in order to (1) broaden the staffing base of Damascus Road, (2) to free up time for Tobin to spend on anti-racism writing and resource development, and (3) to give Tobin more time at home with his family. Regina and Tobin will continue in their co-coordinating roles and in leading Damascus Road training. Recruitment will begin shortly with a projected hiring date of spring 1999.

Feel free to contact Regina, Tobin or any member of the Damascus Road steering committee if you have questions, concerns or feedback about these decisions.

The Core Commitments of Damascus Road

The following statements provide the central foundation for all teams in the Damascus Road network. While recognizing that not all teams currently match every statement, we expect all to be actively working to that end. The core commitments are designed to call Anabaptist congregations, conferences, denominational offices and other church-based institutions to effective and faithful anti-racist action. These statements will form the basis of regular check-ins between Damascus Road staff, teams and oppressed communities for purposes of nurturing, renewal and revisioning.

1. At the center of our work is the person of Jesus Christ and the healing, transformation and salvation that he brings us.
2. We share a common language and analysis: key phrases like racism, anti-racism.
3. We work with issues of white privilege and power and internalized oppression.
4. We are biblically based and focused.

5. We maintain an Anabaptist priority and focus.
6. We are about anti-racist education and organizing, about transformation, not just clarification (changing the way power is distributed, not just the way ideas are discussed).
7. We are made up of teams balanced by race and gender.
8. We are working to dismantle racism in the context of acknowledging the linkages of other forms of oppression.
9. We have set up accountability structures with oppressed communities.

Approved by the Damascus Road Steering Committee, April 18, 1998, in Cleveland

Core Commitment #1

By Phil Bergey, Souderton, Pa.

The story of blind Bartimaeus found in Luke 10:46-52 provides a good context to reflect on the Damascus Road anti-racism ministry's first core commitment, that "at the center of our work is the person of Jesus Christ and the healing, transformation and salvation that he brings us." Bartimaeus knew his physical limitation and approached Jesus in humility and hope, twice crying out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus was touched by the appeals and asked Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus replied that he wanted to see again, to which Jesus responded, "Go; your faith has made you well." Bartimaeus received his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

This story is not a perfect parallel with the hard work of our anti-racism ministry, but the analogy is this: Racism is a disease, a disease that affects all of us. It blinds us and limits our seeing the vision glimpsed in Revelation 7:9-10, where "there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. . . . They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" God wants all of us to see the beauty and the strengths in each other and to see God's intended richness in our diversity.

This Lamb, Jesus Christ, is at the center of our anti-racism ministry. It's in the person of Jesus Christ that we can truly be healed of the blindness that limits our vision on earth. It's in Jesus Christ that we are transformed into new creations that value each other because of our similarities and our differences. And it's in Jesus Christ that our faith makes us well. Like Bartimaeus, we must be willing to cry out for mercy. Then we see that anti-racism ministry is not a new program. It's central to the salvation story.

Core Commitment #2

By Rachel Yoder, Fort Wayne, Ind.

When our congregation first decided to get serious about dealing openly with issues relating to race, Anne Stewart from Crossroads gave us this advice: "Make sure you have a common understanding of the definitions for words like racism or prejudice." This surprised me since I was thinking more along the lines of fostering honesty or dealing with prejudice.

Since then, I have attended several workshops where clear definitions were not established and an analysis of racism was not presented. Many people left more frustrated and confused than when they arrived. Damascus Road training provides a carefully developed analysis of racism as well as definitions for key terms like white privilege, internalized oppression and institutional racism. The training begins with surprising intensity, as key terms are clearly defined with the historical perspective of how racism began in this country.

The Damascus Road Steering Committee embraces the analysis of racism and anti-racism that has been presented at our training sessions with Crossroads. This provides a foundation for all the work we do. Any group that hopes to make an impact must have a common understanding of its vocabulary. Our steering committee recognizes the importance of having a common language and analysis and affirms this as one of our core commitments.

State of the Network

By Regina Shands Stoltzfus

It wasn't that long ago that the first group of Damascus Road teams prepared for the training held in Kansas City in March 1996. We were still reeling from the success of Restoring Our Sight in Chicago the previous spring. What a blessing it had been to meet over 250 church folks from across the country who wanted to work together to end racism!

We moved into the next phase—a process (still evolving) that would work with our church institutions to educate about and organize to end racism. At this point, 35 institutions are involved in the process. In 1999, a double round of trainings will add 16 new teams. We are on the move. Building and strengthening the growing network is a top priority for us as co-coordinators. Many of you know how important it is to witness and learn from how other teams struggle and celebrate as we learn to walk this road together. Please give us your good ideas on how to do this.

The relationships I've formed with folks in the network these past four years are a significant part of this work. It keeps me going. I hope that at each event we plan-

whether training or organizing work, reporting at meetings or introducing the process to our institutions-to build in time to simply be with each other, to talk about our families, to say aloud our dreams, to go out for a movie and dessert. We are a movement of people, a movement of God's creation in all of our colors, languages and nationalities. Let's celebrate that.

What is a Listserv?

A listerv is a way for a large group of people to communicate with each other using email. When individuals who are subscribed to the list send a message to the list's email address, the message is sent to all other subscribers on the list. It is a great way to share ideas, have discussions and meet people.

Who is on the list? Anyone who has participated in the Damascus Road and has access to email is invited to become a part of the Damascus Road listerv. How do I sign up? To sign up for the Damascus Road Listerv, send this message:

To: requests@listserv.goshen.edu

Subject: [blank-not required]

Body: subscribe drlink-l

Once you subscribe you will receive more information about how to use the list: how to send a message, how to unsubscribe and where to get more information.

Quotes of Note

- Whiteness purports to be nothing and everything. It is the race that need not speak its name. -Judith Levine
- If you put your underwear in a washer without an agitator, all you get is dirty white drawers. -Dick Gregory
- We are not yet what we shall be, but we are moving toward it. -Martin Luther
- I will act as though what I do makes a difference. -Williams James
- Oh, you probably said that because you think I'm white. That's a mistake people often make because I look white. -Noel Ignatiev
- As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized. -Paulo Friere
- Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn. -Charlie Parker
- There is no hierarchy of oppression. -Audrey Lourde
- Privilege. . . spreads a thick layer of adipose tissue over our sensitivity. -Chinua Achebe

- If the holocaust comes and a small tribe deep in the New Guinea forests are the only survivors, almost all of the genetic variation now expressed among the innumerable groups of 4 billion people will be preserved. - Linda R. Maxson and Charles H. Daugherty

Racism and Sexism: The Age-old Debate

By Iris de Leon-Hartshorn, Lancaster, Pa.

The debate between racism and sexism is an age-old debate. My first encounter with the collision of the two issues came in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This was a time when many "people of color" groups were asking for their civil rights here in the United States. The Chicano movement in California, where I was living, was strong. Many historical documents tell us about not just the struggle for civil rights as Chicanos but the struggle of women within the movement for a voice and equal standing in leadership.

Some women stayed in the movement hoping that sexism would be worked on within the Chicano movement. It happened in some groups, but not many. Some women left the movement and joined white feminists, hoping to find liberation. But soon they found they were considered second class among the white feminist movement. Issues identified in the struggle were those of white women. Writings that shaped the movement and direction were written by white women. Writings from white feminists often assumed they were speaking for all women. Yet the needs of women of color are not universally the same needs as white women. Racism within the feminist movement was obvious.

Now in the 1990s we are often asked to choose whom we will align ourselves with in this continuing struggle to be heard as "people of color" and as "women of color." I believe it is fair to say that many women of color are skeptical that our needs for liberation are taken seriously by either struggle. Thus far, anti-racism has shown the most promise in its analysis of racism. It has given women of color a handle on the issue that we can speak to and challenge if needed. The fact that all those born in the United States are socialized to racism by age 2 puts a burden on parents of either male or female children of color. Before our children ever enter a classroom they are classified by the color of their skin. I hate living with the reality that my son could end up another statistic because of the color of his skin.

I must face the internal pain my father suffered. My father died at the age of 57 due to self-destructive behavior while at the same time trying to prove himself in a society that really didn't care about him. And of course the simple fact is unless "men of color" are liberated, women of color will never be free.

bell hooks says: "While those feminists who argue that sexual imperialism is more endemic to all societies than racial imperialism are probably correct, American society is one in which racial imperialism supersedes sexual

imperialism." She argues that even though in the 19th century and early 20th century both white and "black" women were victims of sexism, black women were subjected to oppressions that no white woman had to endure. bell hooks also goes on to say that "the first white women's rights advocates were never about seeking social equality for all women; they were seeking equality for white women."

So where do women of color go from here? I want to be able to move ahead in our work on racism and sexism. I will not support an anti-racism movement that is sexist. In the same manner I will not support work on anti-sexism that is racist. The big question is how do we work at racism and sexism together?

I believe there are times we must intentionally work on racism only and/or sexism only. This is particularly true when we are trying to work at understanding the historical context of racism or sexism. We need to be clear when we are working on paradigms and analyses of particular forms of oppression that we don't use other oppressions to deflect from the reality of the particular oppression we are working on. When doing racism training, white people tend to want to talk about other oppressions. And I am sure that when sexism is discussed, people find ways to deflect from the issue of sexism, by bringing other "isms" or exceptions to the floor.

Women of color, who are concerned about sexism, are well aware of white feminist paradigms. It's time for white women to be aware of women of color paradigms of sexism, which always includes an analysis of racism. And because we have an analysis of racism connected with our analysis of sexism, we are quite aware that if they are not both worked on, women of color will never be free. Power, privilege and freedom for white women has never meant power, privilege and freedom for women of color.

I am on a journey looking for freedom. Will you walk that journey with me?

Accountability. . . to Whom?

By Zulma Prieto, Goshen, Ind.

I have been asked to write about accountability. So I will take this opportunity to ask several questions that may open to further discussion the delicate matter of what we do, how we do it and who we live with. I have carefully selected the verbs "to do" and "to live." In my opinion what you do and how you live reflect your thoughts and your heart. It is important to establish that there is a big distance between what we say, read, reflect, discuss and whether we do something about that process. For the sake of clarity I am going to establish three spaces for accountability (notice I am not saying levels).

On space (&) I would say that we have some degree of responsibility toward the people that share the same kind of thoughts and actions (organizations, church, committees, groups, teams). These groups are probably the space where one

may feel more comfortable. It takes enormous amounts of energy, time and a continuous reading and processing of data. You also have to learn how to manage the respective language indicated for each context. If one fails at this, one is automatically disqualified by the white, middle-class orientation of most groups. This extra load is something that every minority person has to acknowledge in order to function properly. The minority person has to be a dexterous, multicultural individual, the reason for this being that it's expected that this person has accountable relations to the people of color in the community. That takes me to space (@).

On space (@) is where the real life of the process takes place. If there is no real connection that implies living, talking and receiving from the community there can be no real ground to move forward. If this connection does not exist, and even more if it has never existed, then people can imagine, talk and discuss about the situations or the problems, but there is no way of confirming whether their mental exercise corresponds to reality or not. Not only problems of the tools of the oppressor are to be evaluated but also the assets. An inventory of assets cannot take place in a vacuum, and it is there where you find the element of organizing and moving.

If I spend too much time on space (&), without living in contact with space (@) I will be forever spinning in circles. It is the people themselves who make you rectify, change or throw away erroneous actions. You cannot do that like social work visits or from behind a label or a desk. That is why I used the expression, Who do we live with? I cannot voice what I do not see or hear. Even more, it is not a real voice if I have no relation to the people who are suffering and pressing into my life with their real economic, social and political needs that become mine. The majority of movements in history have fallen short of their goals because that stage never happened fully.

Therefore, the history of humankind so far has been an exchange of those who have control of the situation by those who through years of being at space (&) turn this space into a class, the class of those who lead. They become the new oppressors.

On space (^) I have to acknowledge that I am accountable to history and to the great creator of all that has made that history possible. I have to acknowledge my power and my limitation. I have to recognize that I am only one note of a concert that began millenniums ago and will continue after I am gone, yet I have that note to play. If my spirit is not being comforted and guided by what I am doing, why do it? If I have to guide myself only by the current agreements of what is currently right or wrong, there is no love, and the spirit dies. It's in this (^) space where I recharge myself for the struggle and where I bow my head and I am sent for cleansing to the (@) space and go for more struggle to space (&). And in the middle of that movement I go out with people from spaces (^) and (&), and we have to face the other creatures on earth who are racist, sexist, capitalist, etc.

I wish I could explore more in depth cases and situations pertaining to these spaces, but I had to be brief so I will have to finish with more questions that I hope you can make to yourself.

How do I connect to the people that are suffering under racism?

How do I open, keep and value a real relationship with individuals and groups from other races?

How do I move out of the discussion and reading clubs and start reading what real life has to tell me.

How do I know if my spirit requires all this to be free, to be obedient and to live?

Questions, questions, questions. That is all I always have to offer.

Resources

Color Lines, new merger of Third Force and RaceFile, published by Applied Research Center, \$15/year, 1322 Webster St., #402, Oakland, CA 94612, 510-465-9577. While it may be too early to tell for certain, this new publication holds much promise as a place to discover a broad range of facts and analysis about the experience of racism in the United States. Not always a consistent power analysis, it does serve an important documenting function.

The African-American Travel Guide by Wayne C. Robinson (Hunter Publishing, 1998). It provides extensive information about historical sites, tourist attractions and general travel information about 17 U.S. cities and two Canadian provinces.

Praising in Black and White: Unity and Diversity in Christian Worship by Brenda Eatman Aghahowa (United Church Press, 1996). This is more theory and analysis than a practical "how-to" guide, but it lends itself to use in Sunday school classes or other settings where worship style is evaluated or has become controversial.

Black and Brown in America: The Case for Cooperation by Bill Piatt has excellent material about Hispanics and African Americans in the United States and how they have been pitted against each other to serve "white" agenda. It also has good information on our common bonds as people of color and ways we can work together in being anti-racist. It describes how people of color are competing for the "crumbs" offered in educational settings and how that pits people against each other. For every \$1,000 of federal assistance to education, \$.40 is designated for people of color. If you read it, let me hear what you think. - Iris de Leon-Hartshorn

Found a good book or magazine other Damascus Road members might find helpful? Send a note about it to Gordon Houser, P.O. Box 347, Newton, KS 67114, email gordonh@gcmc.org. The newsletter also welcomes stories about Damascus Road members or information about what your team is doing. -Editor

For more information about The Damascus Road Anti-Racism Process or the Racism Awareness Program of Mennonite Central Committee U.S., contact Tobin Miller Shearer at 21 S. 12th Street, PO Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500, 717-859-3889, tms@mccus.org.