



The Damascus Road
Anti-Racism Process

Damascus Road Newsletter

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Uncovering racism's power to destroy white folks

by J. Daryl Byler

In the Damascus Road training we have learned that racism harms white people because it robs them of their cultural identity. As the argument goes: To gain privileges under the rules of racism, what matters most is simply being white. Whiteness, not culture, is the currency that creates privilege and status. Without even realizing it, many Europeans have cashed in their rich cultural heritage and settled for a shallow identity as white people.

There is truth to this argument. But perhaps it's not fully convincing for many Anabaptists who have preserved and nurtured some rich cultural traditions, such as four-part singing, shoo-fly pie and quilting.

Still, I agree with the analysis that racism destroys white people. The biblical story of Jonah helps us understand better how racism can harm people with privilege.

Jonah is an eighth-century B.C. prophet, a contemporary to Amos, whom God calls to go preach to the people of Nineveh. Nineveh is part of the barbaric Assyrian empire, Israel's archenemy, a threat to Israel's security.

Jonah resists God's call, runs the opposite direction, becomes captivated for a time with deep-sea fishing, only to eventually discover that he prefers preaching to keeping company with fish. So he reluctantly goes to Nineveh and preaches. The people repent, and Jonah prays.

Jonah is part of the Israelites, God's chosen people. The Bible makes it clear that the Israelites have done nothing to merit this special status (see, e.g., Deuteronomy 7:7). They are not the greatest in number or the most powerful or those with the highest moral values. God has simply chosen them because God wants to work through a people who will become a blessing to all the nations.

The Jonah story analogy to racism or white privilege breaks down in two ways: (1) White privilege is not God's special selection or blessing upon white people; (2) people of color are not the wicked folks of Nineveh.

But here is where the story seems relevant: Jonah is a person in a privileged position who wants desperately to hold on to his privilege. When Jonah receives God's call to go to Nineveh, he resists. Jonah doesn't want to see God's family expanded. Jonah doesn't want God's blessings to extend beyond the Israelites. Jonah likes things just fine the way they are.

And this is precisely the situation for many of us in the white community in America. We find it easy to resist becoming anti-racist for many reasons:

1. The problem of racism is not really so bad, we say. After all, we've made improvements through civil rights legislation.
2. The journey is too long. The issues are too complex. How can I ever change anything? I didn't create this problem, and I'm not going to waste my life feeling guilty.
3. The status quo is not so bad. In fact, it's good for us. Frankly, we're not at all convinced that racism destroys us as well.

But what happens to Jonah as a result of his attempt to hold tightly to his privilege?

1. It distorts Jonah's relationship with God. God has called Jonah to be a prophet-one to proclaim God's messages to the nations. But Jonah ceases to be obedient to God's call. Protecting his privilege (and the privilege of his people) becomes more important to Jonah than following God's call.
2. It distorts Jonah's understanding of God's vision and plan. Jonah can only see privilege as something to grasp, not something to share. Instead of seeing God's blessing as an instrument to bless the nations, Jonah seems to believe that God can only bless Israel by cursing others. Jonah is comfortable with a world of winners and losers.

God wants Jonah to preach to the Ninevites so the enemies of God's people will be saved and transformed-resulting in a more secure world for everyone. Jonah wants God to destroy his enemies. The idea of survival of the fittest is fine with him.

3. It distorts Jonah's self-understanding and identity. As an Israelite, Jonah has come to believe he is superior to the surrounding nations-and perhaps especially to the hated Assyrians. Jonah has bought a pack of lies: (1) that he is worthy of God's grace and mercy but the Ninevites are not, (2) that he is deserving of special status and (3) that he has somehow earned this privilege.

4. It distorts Jonah's view of the Ninevites. Jonah's attempt to hold on to privilege leads him to care more about his personal comfort than about the survival of other human beings in God's family. At the sad end to his story, Jonah is more concerned about the death of his little vine than about the possible destruction of the people of Nineveh.

Jonah knows that God is gracious and compassionate. But Jonah doesn't think the people of Nineveh deserve any of that compassion (Jonah 4:2).

By the end of the story, these distortions have destroyed Jonah. He is an angry, pouting, shriveled-up little man fully out of touch with God's desire for the world (Jonah 4:1-11).

Let me suggest that seeking to perpetuate and hold on to white privilege will do the same to us:

1. It will distort our relationship with God. For seeking to hold on to privilege can become a god that keeps us from being obedient to God's call.
2. It will distort our understanding of God's vision and plan. Our view of God's family-that family that is to be gathered from every tribe and language and people and nation (Revelation 5:9)-will be far too small.
3. It will distort our self-understanding and identity. We will become trapped in the myth of superiority and have little sense of our own need for God's grace and mercy.
4. It will distort our understanding of the value of people of color. We will become more concerned with the comforts of life-with maintaining our privileges-than with the well-being of fellow human beings.

In the end, like Jonah, we will become small, shriveled-up, angry, pouting people-fully out of touch with God's grand vision for the world.

To be anti-racist is a difficult calling, to be sure. We are not naturally wired to name and let go of privilege. The fears are many that attend extending the table. Chief among them: Will there still be a place for me?

But to resist the work of anti-racism is to flee from God. And to choose to not be anti-racist has a high cost that surely will destroy us in the end.

Paul writes: "Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8).

Jesus laid down his power and privilege for the benefit of all humankind. It is in this path that there is hope and life for each one of us.

Violeta Ajquejay: A quiet strength

by Gordon Houser

Violeta Ajquejay, a member of the General Conference Mennonite Church (GC) Damascus Road team, says that when she was asked to be on the team in 1996, she was interested, but "I didn't know what I was getting into."

An administrative assistant for Hispanic Resource Ministries, she is a vital part of the GC team but is the only person of color on the team who is in the Newton, Kan., offices.

When the team is asked to give a presentation, which happens several times each year, she is glad to be involved, to help bring awareness of racism to congregations. But she is often asked by other teams in the area to help as well, since she is one of the few persons of color in the Newton area who is trained by Damascus Road. Sometimes she feels overused.

Violeta was born and grew up in a small town in Guatemala with her older brother and younger sister. Of Mayan ancestry, she says she felt sheltered from the racism that exists there against indigenous people. Mayan society has been oppressed for many years. The situation is changing some now, she says, and there are more opportunities for Mayans in various jobs.

Violeta came to the United States in 1983, eventually graduated from Bethel College, North Newton, Kan., and the Pastoral Ministries Program at Hesston (Kan.) College. She began working at the GC offices in Newton in 1988.

Her Damascus Road training helped her look back and identify experiences she'd had as instances of racism. "When I was forced to come up with examples of racism," she says, "I realized I had some [experiences]."

The training has also helped her in her current work with Hispanic Mennonites, many of whom are new to the United States. She emphasizes to them the importance of learning English so that they can communicate effectively with people in our American systems.

Although her Mayan background leaves Violeta noticeably short, her stature belies her great strength. She speaks truth to people about racism, yet she does so in a disarming fashion, quiet but firm. The GC team is delighted to learn from her and work with her.

Reflections from West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship DR team

I have a dream

Before our Damascus Road team went to Tel Hai (in Honeybrook, Pa.) in March 1998, I recalled the "I have a dream" speech Martin Luther King gave to the nation. It was an inspiration for me because it gave me a purpose and, more importantly, hope for our congregation, our city and my family.

I was an angry person who did not understand where my intense feelings came from. I thought Damascus Road would help me understand these feelings. I now see they stemmed from being a victim of many forms of racism over a period of 34 years. I also saw my inability to accept love unconditionally for fear of being a victim again. Thus, I raised walls to defend my fragile existence, insecure being a person of color (POC).

That March, our DR team met in Tel Hai to participate in anti-racism training. This four-day training was exciting and fun for me because it felt like someone switched sides, as whites were asked to identify and defend their white privilege while POC listened.

Furthermore, it outlined the history of racism, defined racism, provided types of racism, ways to dismantle racism and gave an analysis of racism. Finally, my suspicions were confirmed on why I was passed up for promotions at work, why I was so angry with life and why I had built so many walls to protect myself.

It felt great to be part of a team that could identify racism and to be considered valuable in this analysis of racism. I felt privileged.

Before our DR team went to Chicago, I kept telling my wife how excited I was to be participating in anti-racist work and how it will affect our congregation. I had become less angry with life because someone was listening to me as I expressed my concerns about racism-I felt important and felt privileged to be a POC.

Last June, our DR team met in Chicago for five days of anti-racism education and organizing. This second part of our training was frustrating, exhausting and depressing. I left several meetings with my group because I was so angry with the material/process and with the other members who were also POC. I was unable to process the information as a POC because it made me think for the first time, I was not white.

For 34 years I thought I was white in order to fit in and ultimately to be viewed as successful.

In contrast to the first training meeting, I felt lost, confused and unsure with this new information. My thoughts then turned to how would I be able to communicate with my wife because my anger returned. My feelings toward whites changed for the worse. I wondered if I could trust my wife with these new feelings of hopelessness.

After weeks of processing this training, my uncertainty changed dramatically (due to prayer) to feelings of being blessed. I felt my prayers were answered by a huge weight lifted from my shoulders. It was OK to be Filipino. My life's work to become accepted was so overwhelming and consuming that now my future seems less daunting.

My shift from hopelessness to optimism may be attributed to a "kairos moment." It occurred in Chicago, when I left a DR group meeting and took a walk alone in Chicago and discovered that all the blank stares from white people indicated to me that I truly was not white. This had such a profound impact on me because I felt helpless and lost the passion to live. My feelings of depression were further affirmed in Chicago concerning systemic racism. In retrospect, this is where healing started; the burden of being white ended, and the more difficult task of finding my new identity started with the trust of Jesus Christ and the unconditional acceptance and support from my family.

Here is our team's vision for West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship:

"As a team, we will be a resource for West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship as it works toward becoming an anti-racist congregation. To that end, we will help provide opportunities and structure for the congregation to receive training and education that will enable us as a congregation to safely ask questions and work out answers that build up our relationship with our city and each other."

William Z. Foronda

We can't avoid the pain

From the beginning, I had mixed feelings about joining Damascus Road. I was excited, but also had the feeling that it couldn't really be true that my congregation wanted to do something about racism. Not knowing all the answers, I agreed to allow myself to be a part of this process.

At the first training (at Tel Hai in Honeybrook, Pa.), I felt supported by my white team members. They were willing to hear the message that we can't escape racism no matter who we are; it's part of our identities, part of societal structure (including our church), which has been constructed for whites and protects white privilege. I thought, Yes, this is great! It validated my existence. I knew it to be true. This validation made me feel freer but also hurt and angry. It was a lot to absorb and sort out.

Our second training (in Chicago) again exposed me to these intense feelings, without the time to sort through them and integrate them in my identity. I have spent a lifetime trying to avoid racism by working hard (for example, I had three concentration areas in my doctoral program when only one was required), acting like whites and telling myself I didn't really care. Those who worked close to me would tell me they thought I was like them (white). I didn't believe them, but sometimes I pretended I did. But after Chicago, it mattered more to me that the leadership of the church of which I was a member did not represent me as a person of color. I didn't want to come to church.

The Chicago training began a process of questioning, of sorting through what happened, what mattered, what were the purposes of DR and our team. This was a difficult time for our team because of the deep questions of individual members. We were affected by each other's questions of identity.

At the Shalom conference in Lancaster, Pa., in January, I experienced an "aha" moment. Through my discussion with Tobin Miller Shearer I recognized a simple truth: Questions involving identity are essential in developing an anti-racist identity, even though those questions are necessarily painful. We can't avoid the pain.

Racism may be systemic, but I have the responsibility and the ability to confront it, beginning in my personal relationships with others who share my commitment to Christ. This began a process of deepening my understanding of how we can recognize and heal racism's wounds.

This has been much harder than I anticipated. I felt free to care about the congregation, free to question leadership. My caring led to affirmation as well as to some resistance and fear. I continue to struggle. I ask for your prayers.

Deb Cantu-Hertzler

My journey

Before going to Tel Hai (in Honeybrook, Pa.) in March 1998 for our first intensive training session, I had no idea what to expect from the Damascus Road process. I have found the process extremely intense, personally and as a group. For me it has been relational at its core.

The training at Tel Hai opened up anger within me concerning the privilege that I have as a white person and the identity that the system of racism assigns me. It forced me to work at identity issues. I knew I had privilege, but to speak about white privilege in front of people of color raised my accountability level and my anger. Taking risks to speak has been hard. For several months I felt it was unsafe for me to speak in the group. Each person's voice sounds different. Yet the safety within the team is growing. I know I am less naive than I was a year ago.

I often feel sick inside as my understanding of the pain and the reality of racism for people of color grows. I also realize there will always be things I just don't get. As a receiver of privilege, I am numb to the reality of racism for people of color. Part of my task is to become aware.

I am struggling with the application of the Damascus Road training. I am angry because I do not see how the training we received adequately prepared us to return to a congregational setting. A local congregation seems different from an educational institution or a church conference. What I experienced was confusion in the team and the congregation about the team's role and purpose. As the team worked to understand its role and purpose, I experienced fear and contention within the congregation. I am excited about our vision statement. I believe it takes

the team's role out of the contentious realm and moves us to provide support for the congregation to investigate and engage racism at its own pace. I long for the team to be released by leadership and given freedom to explore racism and provide opportunities for dialogue and resources for learning within the congregation.

I entered the Damascus Road process in the fall of 1997 because I believed that in order to have integrity as a Christian I must engage the legacy of racism in the United States. Engaging racism and working toward becoming anti-racist are at the heart of who God created us to be. God created us as relational beings; anti-racism is relational at its core. The Christian journey is a journey toward becoming more fully human and growing in our capacity to love. To grow in love means to treat people as images of God and no longer as objects for our own security. Racism is dehumanizing; people of color are denied the status of being human, and whites lose their humanity through numbing themselves. Following God demands that I begin to walk the journey of love-love of God, others, the creation and self-the journey of becoming more fully human.

As we engage the congregation in this process, I am conscious of the Damascus Road covenant in which we commit to respect each person's place and pace on this journey. Am I accepting others who are not at the same place and who are not moving at the same pace as I? I am also cognizant that through it all we are called to love. Each member of our team and of our congregation is in the image of God, and I am called, by nature of being a follower of Jesus, to grow in love. How do I do this in the midst of intense feelings and great risk? What does this look like? Am I able to disagree passionately with others in our congregation and still pray together and play together?

Sheri A. Magness

Interdenominational collaboration and core trainer development

For the past year Damascus Road staff have been collaborating with other denominational/organizational bodies (Christian Church-Disciples of Christ, Christian Reformed Church, Crossroads Ministry, Greater Dallas Community of Churches, Minnesota Churches Anti-Racism Initiative, Unitarian Universalist Association) in the creation of an anti-racism Leadership Development Institute (LDI).

LDI will provide a means to train Damascus Road core trainers and develop other cooperative anti-racism leadership. Iris de León-Hartshorn and Brenda Zook will enter a 18- to 24-month intensive core-training process through LDI. At the end of that time they will be able to conduct 2½- to 3½-day analysis and team-building events.

As demand for anti-racism training increases, Damascus Road staff will look for others from the network to enter into core training roles as well. First opportunity will be given to those actively working in local Damascus Road teams to

dismantle racism and who demonstrate strong anti-racism educating and organizing skills. To register interest in this kind of role, contact Regina or Tobin.

New staff hired

Conrad Moore will begin July 1 as the new Damascus Road organizer. As a member of the Damascus Road staff, he will carry primary responsibility for the ongoing connection with, resourcing and support of existing Damascus Road teams.

Conrad comes to us from Liberty Ministries, where he worked with offenders in the prison system. For over two years, he has also been an active member of the Franconia Conference Damascus Road team. Conrad lives in Schwenksville, Pa., is married to Theresa Moore and is a member of the Word of Joy Congregation in Collegeville, Pa.

We are excited about Conrad's speaking and organizing gifts and his passion for the work of anti-racism in the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ family of churches. Conrad will work out of the Akron, Pa., Mennonite Central Committee offices and also carry responsibilities as the MCC East Coast peace and justice ministries staff associate. In the next months you'll be seeing and hearing more from Conrad.

Please welcome him with us.

Upcoming Damascus Road events

1999

June 17-21-West Coast anti-racism educating and organizing training, Oakhurst, Calif.

July 8-12-Great Lakes anti-racism educating and organizing training, Glenview, Ill.

July 22-adult and youth volunteer training, St. Louis 99

July 24-Damascus Road Reunion, St. Louis 99

July 26-Come to the River: an anti-racism forum, youth convention St. Louis 99

July 27-workshops at youth and adult conventions, St. Louis 99

Sept. 17-19-anti-racism analysis training, Goshen, Ind.

Sept. 24-27-anti-racism analysis training, MCC U.S. service program, Look-up-lodge, S.C.

Oct. 18-Damascus Road team resource event, Elkhart, Ind.

Nov. 6-Damascus Road 2000, team representative meeting, Cleveland

2000

Feb. 25-27-anti-racism analysis training, Franconia Conference, Philadelphia

March 9-12-anti-racism analysis training, MCC Central States, Newton/Wichita, Kan. (pending final date confirmation)

June 15-19-anti-racism educating and organizing training, Chicago

The Damascus Road Newsletter is published quarterly by the Racism Awareness Program of Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Edited by Gordon Houser. Contact Gordon with your comments, inquiries or submissions at P.O. Box 347, Newton, KS 67114, gordonh@gcmc.org.

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The Damascus Road Newsletter is for connecting, resourcing and growing teams and individuals in the Damascus Road network. The views presented here do not necessarily represent the views of the organization or all its members.