

Shepherding Christians who want to pursue racial justice

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For Christians desiring to pursue racial justice—particularly white Christians—the time is ripe.

As a minister, you likely have different groups of people in your church—those who are just learning about racial injustice, those who don't believe there is racial injustice, and those who want the church to do something about racial injustice.

There are the unaware, the ashamed, the angry and the vocal. The angry often demand less attention to racial injustice; the vocal often demand more attention.

Many ministers find themselves caught in the middle. They are learning as they lead. They want to address matters of race but may not be sure how, or how to do so productively.

How can ministers shepherd those seeking answers, those feeling guilty, those who are angry and those who want the church to seek justice?

The unaware

Many white Christians have never heard or read a preacher or theologian who isn't white. Theologians like [Esau McCaulley](#) and Richard Twiss, while making harsh criticisms of white Christianity, are important voices for congregations to hear from the whole body of Christ about how the gospel relates to racial justice.

Book studies of works by McCaulley, Twiss or others such as Howard

Thurman can help bring awareness to the unaware. The following books also are helpful: *Rediscipling the White Church* by David Swanson, *White Too Long* by Robert Jones and *Be the Bridge* by Latasha Morrison. Phil Vischer—of Veggie Tales fame—offers a short video titled “[Race in America](#).”

The ashamed

When I and others became aware of the church’s involvement in racial injustice, a sense of guilt was common. It is natural and good to lament injustice. However, when dealing with racial injustice, it is important for ministers to keep conversations from centering on what white people are feeling.

Focusing on the discomfort white people feel about racial injustice moves attention to soothing white people instead of toward repentance and pursuing justice. It also does the double harm of alienating people of color, pushing them to the periphery of the conversation, while negating their pain.

It is vital to give people space to grieve over injustice while also allowing lament to push people toward righteousness.

The angry

There also are white people in your congregation who are angry and confused. They believe racism is a thing of the past and are frustrated by protests in the street, the attention it is paid by professional sports leagues, and social media debates about Black Lives Matter.

They are indignant about being called a racist, because their idea of a racist is someone who doesn’t have Black friends. They have had only good

experiences with police and are angry about people painting the police in a bad light.

Some are mad because their places of worship have given space to social discussions they see as dangerous. They wonder why nobody wants to pay attention to what they view as the real problems, such as abortion, crime and broken families.

For some ministers, it is tempting to argue with an angry person when he or she comes to the office seeking council. However, arguing will not change a person's mind; it will position you as the opponent.

Instead, seek to listen and understand the underlying issues. This person could be experiencing fear over changes in the culture or in their personal life. This fear could be manifesting itself in resentment toward racial justice movements.

Perhaps this person is afraid of being called a racist; so, they refuse to accept any view in which they might fit the description of a racist. Or perhaps they are afraid of admitting they are wrong and damaging their pride.

Ministers should seek to understand the underlying cause of the problem and help counsel individuals through those issues before tackling any racist ideas a person may hold. If the underlying problem is that the person is racist, it is necessary to continue to meet with him or her for discipleship and education, unless it is actively harmful to do so. It is important not to let this person's opinion or concerns dissuade you from proclaiming the gospel that includes freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18).

The vocal

What do you do when someone comes to you and expresses pain over his or

her church's silence?

First, it is important to hear the complaint, rather than jumping to the church's defense. Chances are, the complaint extends beyond merely the local church and beyond you.

Second, help the person regain perspective about the goodness of God. The church has been justifying racist beliefs and practices based on misreading of Scripture for centuries. People can become disillusioned by the church and God, whose name is used to condone the church's involvement in racism.

It is important to help people seek the true God, and not racist caricatures, by pointing them to the person of Jesus Christ, the full image of the loving God. This should be coupled with calls for justice within the church on Sunday morning.

The long, hard road

Navigating issues of racial justice is not an easy task. You will not be able to please everyone within the congregation. But a pastor cannot just preach about the issues on Sunday and hope things work themselves out in the congregation.

Pastors and other ministers must engage the congregation and help people process how racial injustice has been perpetuated by white churches against minority churches in America—despite how much we might not want to acknowledge it. This means listening to the pain of those who have felt the church has been silent too long. It means pointing them to the God who hears the cry of the forgotten and sees them.

This means helping people harness their lament into action for God's kingdom. It means having difficult conversations with people who oppose

racial justice due to anger or confusion, while not catering to their harmful belief systems.

And remember: This is not a process that happens overnight. It requires consistent hard work and vulnerability, but it is work worth doing.

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