

Call to courageous conversations about race

October 12, 2021

HOUSTON—Systemic injustice, implicit bias, educational inequity and historical reckoning should be part of the courageous conversations Christians must engage in as they confront racism, speakers told the No Need Among You Conference in Houston.

Avoiding overt racist acts are not enough, Pastor D.Z. Cofield of Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Houston told participants at the Oct. 6-8 conference, sponsored by the [Texas Christian Community Development Network](#).

“Will you commit to be anti-racist?” he asked.

‘No reconciliation without repentance’

Racism involves systems that benefit the majority culture at the expense of people of color, he noted. Too often, white Christians “put the cart before the horse” in discussions about racial reconciliation.

“There is no reconciliation without repentance,” Cofield said. “Is racism a sin? If it’s a sin, then it’s something I have to repent of. But I don’t want to repent of something that benefits me.”

Cofield pointed out how white churches in the United States historically endorsed racist systems, from chattel slavery to Jim Crow laws.

“When we look at our country, more atrocities and acts of terrorism have been committed in the name of Jesus than in the name of Allah,” he asserted.

Cofield participated in a panel discussion about “Church and Race” that also included Ikki Soma, lead campus pastor at Bayou City Fellowship at Spring Branch, and Sonja Gee, executive director of Memorial Assistance Ministries. Jim Herrington, founding executive director of Mission Houston and co-founder of The Leader’s Journey, facilitated the discussion.

Gee’s grandfather was a Chinese immigrant to the United States. He benefitted from growing up in Texas, rather than Louisiana or Mississippi, she noted. In Louisiana and Mississippi, Asians were considered people of color and attended schools for Black students. In Texas, Asian students were allowed to attend school with white students.

Gee’s grandfather went on to graduate from Rice University and the University of Texas Law School. However, after he completed his law degree, he was turned down by 40 law firms that only hired white men, she noted.

Somo recalled an effort after the killing of George Floyd to enlist white pastors to preach regularly on the sin of racism. Out of 200 who attended an informational meeting about the initiative, 150 pledged to participate. However, within a relatively brief time, only five continued to identify with the movement, due to the resistance they encountered in their congregations.

Reality of implicit bias

Elia Moreno, executive director of the Texas Christian Community Development Network, helped lead a workshop about an initiative seven women of diverse backgrounds launched to study the Bible and engage in “courageous conversations” about race every other week, via Zoom.

“I don’t know how to be at the table without being transparent,” Moreno said. “I want the conversation to get harder. It’s time to wake up.”

Moreno described how she has been treated because she is “a woman and brown”—sometimes discriminated against in overt ways and other times through more subtle actions that reveal bias.

“We all have implicit bias, whether we know it for not,” Moreno said.

Educational gaps

Ruth Lopez Turley, professor of sociology at Rice University and founder of the Houston Research Consortium, challenged conference participants to think about Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan as an indictment of religious people who deliberately avoid people in need.



Ruth Lopez-Turley uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate how some religious people avoid contact with people in need. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Like the priest and Levite who crossed the road rather than come into contact with an injured man who had been beaten by robbers, Christians in the United States have a similar “track record” when it comes to low-income non-Anglo children.

Historically, enrollment in private schools—particularly Christian schools in the South—“skyrocketed” in direct response to court-ordered integration of public schools, she noted.

Today, 76 percent of Black students and 80 percent of Hispanic students in Houston attend high-poverty schools with limited resources, while only 14 percent of white students attend high-poverty schools, she noted.

“This leads to enormous gaps in educational attainment,” she said.

The racial concentration of poverty has a serious impact on student achievement, she added. Based on test scores, Black students in Houston are 3.6 years behind their white peers, and Hispanics are three years behind Anglo students.

“It’s as if they were absent one-fourth of their K-12 academic experience,” she said. “And that’s not unique to Houston.”

‘Who gets to speak for the dead?’

Chassidy Olainu-Alade, coordinator of community and civic engagement with the Fort Bend Independent School District, insisted the past must be acknowledged before progress can be made.



Chassidy Olainu-Alade, coordinator of community and civic engagement with the Fort Bend Independent School District, talked about the discovery of “The Sugar Land 95.”
(Photo / Ken Camp)

When a backhoe operator was excavating the site of a career technology center for the Fort Bend school district in 2018, he unearthed a large

cemetery of unmarked graves. Archaeologists found the remains of 95 African Americans ranging in age from their mid-teens to 70, buried between 1878 and 1911.

Those individuals—who came to be known as “The Sugar Land 95”—were convicts from a labor camp that was part of the state-sanctioned convict-leasing system that provided cheap labor to plantation owners in the decades after the Civil War. Their bodies revealed evidence of repeated injury, disease and malnutrition.

“When Black history is unearthed, who gets to speak for the dead?” Olainu-Alade asked.

The Sugar Land 95 offers a case study in how a community can “consider the history of underserved, impoverished or marginalized communities,” she said.

‘We are 99.9 percent alike’

Michael D. Reynolds, who works in the Division of Education with the Church of God International, explained race as a social construction rooted in 18th century pseudo-science—not a biological reality.



Michael Reynolds described race as a social construction, not a biological truth. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Johann Fredrich Blumenbach in 1775 divided humanity into five races, identifying Caucasians as the primary race, with the other four representing degenerations of the original type.

Later, Samuel Morton studied skulls representative of Blumenbach’s five

racers and attempted to calculate brain size based on his measurements. He claimed his research proved Caucasians had the largest brains, while Africans had the smallest brains.

“He used his findings to justify slavery and the superiority of people of European ancestry,” Reynolds said.

In fact, modern science reveals a commonality transcending differences in skin pigmentation or other cosmetic differences, he said.

“Scientists can find no difference in people’s blood or bodily systems that reliably identify race. We are 99.9 percent alike,” Reynolds said, asserting that evidence points to the Creator of all humankind.