

Race and Violence: What Does Religion Have to Say?

A toolkit for Holding Community Consultations



Religions for Peace 
USA

Introduction

There are seldom times when a nation comes together to collectively attend to what sort of country it wants to be. For the United States, moments such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Feminist movement, and the Abolitionist movement were points where the public collectively engaged in a conversation on its moral framework and standing. Those watershed moments loom large in the history of social justice. We are entering another moment such as those, and religious leaders of all traditions have a vital role to play in bringing about such a reawakening. Yet, unlike previous moments in our history, the forces fighting for peace and justice in our society are more polarized and isolated from our neighbors than before. If religious voices are again going to be a positive presence in the public sphere, we need not be hindered by religious community boundaries and political ideologies. Our foundation must be the reality that one community's well-being is deeply interwoven with the fate of others'.

In March of 2015, Religions for Peace USA brought together its Council of Presidents with leading national activists and stakeholders in the Interfaith Organizing Initiative to hold a consultation on race and violence. This curriculum is a toolkit providing you with the know-how to continue this movement in your own community. The videos and steps that follow are meant to help guide you to hold one of these meetings in your house of worship or meetinghouse.

Peacebuilding is a term that is typically relegated to the international field of social justice work. The general sense of the term calls to mind situations of all-out war, with highly trained mediators as the peacebuilders who intervene with key representatives from opposing sides to bring about a truce or agreement. What is missed in this understanding is the reality that domestically marginalized and oppressed communities have been experiencing increasing militarization and forms of structured violence for decades. For some, understanding this reality of structural racism and prejudice as a form of violence requires a shift in how they view of our current national life. But for many others, this reality is all too clear. With the advent of the Black Lives Matter movement, and clergy of all faiths coming to the streets in New York, Missouri, North Carolina, we are witnessing once again a renewed call for a just peace. Our consultation on Race and Violence was a beginning – a gathering of the best and brightest religious and moral voices in our nation coming together with some of the strongest organizing in the country seeking to outline the crucial elements in a 21st movement for peace and justice.

Religions for Peace USA and the Interfaith Organizing Initiative are going to carry this message forward into our own member communities, and will hope that you'll stay up to date with our work. For now this curriculum is adaptable for congregational, cluster, or district programming for adults of all ages and life stages, for campus groups or young adult groups, or for cross-generational groups.

Pre-Meeting

The goals stated below are intended to provide a framework for the planning period before the meeting. They are meant to help facilitate an honest and safe conversation.

- Those present at the meeting will strive
- To begin discussion around issues of structural racism and religious prejudice for a broad diversity of religious and racial voices.
- To begin a contextualized conversation on the creation of a network of relationships that bridge racial and religious divides.
- To lift up and provide public acknowledgement of the stories that testify to the dismemberment of our communities by systems and structures in our society.

Preparation

We have provided a few items here that we think are crucial to the planning process. We hope these guidelines serve to send you off in the right direction; you need not follow them exactly. Besides general planning logistics, we also distributed a media covenant to all attendees prior to the meeting that ensured everyone was on the same page when regarding media and outreach at the meeting. We did this because we wanted our conversations to be honest and safe.



1. Prepare a proposal that commits attendees to open and trusting discussion. See example in appendix A.
 - a. There are a few good basic principles in communicating your intent of the meeting. They include but are not limited to:
 - i. We agree to listen respectfully to the opinions and experiences expressed by others.
 - ii. We agree to speak from personal experience and personal perspective without speaking on behalf of entire groups of people. We agree to not ask others to represent, defend or explain an entire group of people.
 - iii. We agree to use this time to discuss opportunity for working together in peacemaking and justice, rather than debating politics or theological differences
2. Prepare materials and logistics:
 - a. The room is to be set up with attendees sitting at circle tables (not in rows etc) in order to provide open and clear lines of communication.
 - b. Attendees are to be provided with notepads/pens OR writing materials provided on tables
 - c. Note-taking materials are needed in order to facilitate the community report-back at the end of each session.

Agenda

The following process is intended to provide inspiration for how the meeting may run; depending on time and community needs, the process can be altered and tailored for different spaces and discussion formats. We found that our format allowed for the most natural conversation around the topic at hand: structural racism and religious prejudice. The agenda for the meeting followed this basic structure:



1. A speaker offering personal experiences and/or a call to action;
2. A moment of reflection, either self-guided or led by a religious leader;
3. A session of discussions within table-groups, led by a discussion leader with pre-formulated discussion questions provided to them in advance by the meeting's organizers; and
4. A time for each table-group to report back to the community what they discussed, learned and were challenged by. Appropriate facilitation skills ensured that each discussion and report-back were productive and added to the meeting's overall purpose.

Below are a few suggested guidelines for creating the meeting's agenda. Please consider as you see fit.

- The meeting is opened by a local community member who was involved in the organizing of the communion. This person sets the intention for the meeting by introducing the agenda, its goals, and ensuring that the communal space remains true to its guidelines. (~15 minutes)
- The first panel/topic/speaker presents. This section can vary depending on community needs. Panels surrounding a certain topic may prove to be the most effective way to communicate a message; individual speakers may be more appropriate for a different message, etc. (~1 hour)
 - Please see our agenda, appendix B, for deeper understanding of how these parts flow together. We stressed the importance of beginning the meeting with voices from the younger generation of peace and justice-makers.
 - This set the tone and establishes a precedent for the meeting: it is not= business as usual, but a meeting with an intentional focus on what's at hand.
- Each table is led in conversation by a pre-determined discussion leader. This discussion leader leads his/her table through a series of questions and topics related to the preceding panel/topic/speaker. This individual also ensures that the community discussion guidelines are respected and that every voice is heard. A participant takes notes in order to keep track of the discussion's highlights. (~45 minutes)

- Our questions are offered as appendix B. Feel free to use these questions in your own conversations, but know that they are specifically tailored for our panel discussions.
- After roundtable discussions, each table-group reports back to the community at large through a discussion session facilitated by a community member. (~20 minutes)
- A religious leader may offer a moment of reflection here by providing comments on the spiritual, religious or moral imperatives that ground the work at hand. (~15 minutes)

This structure can be replicated and repeated as necessary.

A note on topics, speakers and panels:

Community organizers are encouraged to speak about their work and their need. Our discussion focused on how the religious communities can play a role in building a new movement for justice. We found this question was wonderfully contextualized by our panelists, who functioned as exemplars of the sort of movement we are imagining and building. Each organizer spoke personally about his/her experiences, which reinforced the urgency for action in our communities.



A note on spiritual reflection:

Religious leaders are encouraged to speak about their personal experiences of race and violence issues as well to provide a theological basis for action and a time for spiritual reflection. At the NYC communion, this moment of reflection did the dual work of supporting our community's call to action and reminding those present of the spiritual significance of the work at hand.

A note on closing and reflection:

At our communion, several individuals were involved in the closing moments of the meeting. A community member acknowledged all that had been said, reflected on the meeting's central points, and suggested ways forward as a community. Closing remarks were offered by a religious leader; these were characterized by expressions of gratitude for attendance and motivation towards further work.



Proposed Topics and Discussion Questions

There are a variety of specific topics that panels can address under the rubric of structural racism and religious prejudice – we chose three: Listening to the Next Generation; Opportunities for Peace and Justice-making; and Re-imagining the Role of Religion. What follows is a general outline of how these panels were put together, and the roundtable discussion questions that followed.

Panel I: Listening to the Next Generation: Seeking to Resolve the ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ Between Generations

Key Elements:

1. Hear from panelists about their work : Panelists may speak about:
 - a. a recent action in which they have participated and the role their religious perspective may have played in that action
 - b. How their spirituality calls them into activism
 - c. What the opportunities and challenges are that their religious tradition brings to their activism
 - d. what they would ask of their religious communities to support their activism?

Roundtable Discussion Questions I:

Group facilitators posed the following questions to their tables:

1. Do the reflections of the speakers resemble what you’re hearing within your own faith community?
2. How are you helping to create intergenerational dialogue in your communities and traditions?
3. How does your community help to spiritually support young people confronting structural racism today?
4. How do you understand intergenerational gaps within your community work? How can this be bridged/resolved?



Panel II: Peacemaking and Justice – What Opportunities Exist for Collective Work in Crisis Situations?

- This panel focused on the opportunities to overcome crisis situations. We asked each panelist to address the ways in which societal structures are utilized to dis-member and sever our communities. By highlighting exemplars in multi-religious peacebuilding and justice work in the U.S., the panelists spoke to crucial strategies to re-member those who are marginalized and ostracized.

- Admittedly, in each context the voices will vary from work on Islamophobia to mass incarceration to immigration work. However, we find this framing to be broad enough to apply across context.

Roundtable Discussion Questions II:

For the roundtable discussion that followed, we asked participants to reflect on these questions:

1. How can your spiritual, moral or religious community participate in the project of remembering? What are the spiritual tools you offer? In what ways can those tools contribute to this work?
2. Given what you've heard, are there insights that have emerged or promising possibilities for collaborations to which you'd like to add your voice?
3. How can working across religious community boundaries inform our peace and justice work? What can you learn from your religious neighbors about justice-making? What are steps you can take to do so?

Panel III: Re-imagining the Role of Religion

For our meeting, we had the participants come prepared to discuss their boldest vision for the role of religion in creating a new movement for justice.

Roundtable Discussion Questions III:

1. What are the ways that your denomination or organization can support and grow the movement for racial justice? How can you incentivize, motivate, encourage and support engagement from your faith community with the movement for racial justice?
2. What message do you and leaders in your denomination or religious community need to be delivering now to your faith community about racism and violence and the role of religion? To the public sphere? What is something that we could all do together to make a profound impact and to bend the arc toward justice?

