

BUILDING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY IN YOUR COMMUNITY

In January each year the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday and Race Relations Sunday fall close together on our Presbyterian Planning calendar. Race Relations Sunday is traditionally the last Sunday in January and Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday is observed the Monday following January 15th. With the prophetic advent readings still ringing in our ears, proclaiming the message that Christ has come to announce good news to the poor, release to the captives and healing to the brokenhearted, both dates come at an opportune time to reflect on the ways that racism continues to impact our lives, to rededicate ourselves to resisting and dismantling the force of racism, and to celebrate the diversity of God's family in our midst.

One of the consequences of racism is that our communities and our congregations tend to continue to be divided along racial lines. Many communities across the country will celebrate the Martin Luther King Holiday with an ecumenical worship service. This is an excellent time to initiate a partnership with a community group or congregation to bring people together and work to build relationships across cultural and racial lines through a common project. The Martin Luther King Center encourages churches, organizations and individuals to celebrate the legacy of Dr. King and keep faith with the dream of an open and inclusive society that is not divided by racism through volunteering in our communities.

Bringing people together from different communities and congregations to work together--teaching English as a Second Language, tutoring children, or building housing with Habitat for Humanity, can build mutual relationships and be a tremendous learning experience for all of the participants. Team up with another congregation to do a little research into the needs of your community. Are there existing programs that need volunteer support, or is there an unmet need your congregations can respond to? The key is to have members of both congregations involved in the exploration, assessment, decision-making and planning. When the ultimate goal is community and relationship building, the process is as important as the project.

Congregational partnerships often involve pulpit and choir exchanges or joint services. Many congregations have hosted joint Vacation Bible Schools or youth retreats. Consider bringing a group of adults together from two or three congregations for Bible study for given period of time. It might once a week during Lent, or one Sunday evening a month, for a year. One of the tools employed in the antiracism training is a process for facilitating bible study by Mutual Invitation. In this model, first developed by Eric Law (*The Wolf Shall Dwell With the Lamb*), the emphasis is on sharing personal reflection and the leadership of the group is shared by inviting one another to speak. It is an excellent way to share personal experience and build mutual relationships.

If your congregation wants to address issues of racial justice more directly, find out if your Presbytery has an antiracism team, or consider forming a racial justice and reconciliation team at the congregational level. The Office for Racial Justice and Advocacy has training resources that are designed to foster open dialogue and a greater understanding of the systemic nature of racism. Presbyterian Women (PW) has also trained facilitators for antiracism training in each synod and developed a resource for fostering racial ethnic dialogue. Contact your PW leadership at the presbytery or

synod level, or call the Office for Racial Justice and Advocacy to find out who the facilitators in your synod are, or learn about training your own facilitators.

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