

02-034 INFO

The Special Committee on Racism, Truth, and Reconciliation is not required to report until the 225th General Assembly (2022). Therefore, this report has been relabeled as an informational item that will be resubmitted with the full committee report for the 225th General Assembly (2020).

“[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” [Micah 6:8 (NRSV)]

The 222nd General Assembly (2016) action approved as amended:

2. Establish and convene a “Racism Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)” that is charged with conducting a churchwide listening campaign to hear the voices of peoples long silenced regarding the state of institutional racism and oppression within our church.
 - a. This commission shall report the result of its listening campaign to the General Assembly meeting in Baltimore in 2020. The report shall include a statement of findings and recommendations to be voted upon by the General Assembly. Approved actions shall begin implementation within the following year.
 - b. The commission shall consist of twenty persons (ten ruling elders and ten teaching elders); fifteen of these persons shall identify as people of color. In addition, every effort should be made to achieve geographic representation from every synod. The commission shall be appointed by the Moderator and shall be constituted no later than December 31, 2016. It shall be chaired by a former Moderator or Vice-Moderator of the General Assembly who will serve as a member of the commission. The commission shall be resourced and funded through the Office of the Stated Clerk.
 - c. The commission shall meet twice annually beginning in 2017 and shall conduct the work of the listening campaigns on a regional basis. The commission shall determine strategies to carry out its work and present these strategies in a report to the 223rd General Assembly (2018) for their approval. (*Minutes*, 2016, Part I, p. 719)

The 223rd General Assembly (2018) approved reconstituting the Racism Truth and Reconciliation Commission as the Special Committee on Racism, Truth, and Reconciliation, and

- that the Special Committee on Racism Truth and Reconciliation be composed of fourteen members;
- that no less than four members of the special committee be persons of color; and
- that the special committee hold its first meeting no later than September 30, 2018, bring a progress report to the 224th General Assembly (2020), and a final report and recommendations to the 225th General Assembly (2022). (*Minutes*, 2018, Part I, p. 1105)

Background

The Racism, Truth, and Reconciliation Commission was approved as amended by the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in response to an overture from the

Presbytery of Baltimore and approved for recommendation from the Assembly Committee on Social Justice Issues. At the 223rd General Assembly (2018), the Racism, Truth, and Reconciliation Commission was reconstituted as the Special Committee on Racism, Truth, and Reconciliation (“special committee” or “SCRTR”) from a recommendation of the Co-Moderators of the 222nd General Assembly (2016) and Vice-Moderator of the 218th General Assembly (2008). This reconstituted recommendation was approved for consideration by the Assembly Committee on Social Justice Issues and subsequently approved by the 223rd General Assembly (2018).

Byron Wade, Vice-Moderator of the 218th General Assembly (2008), was appointed moderator of the special committee. He convened the first meeting of the SCRTR via video conference on September 28, 2018. The special committee met for their first face-to-face meeting on March 24–26, 2019, in Atlanta, Georgia. The purpose of this meeting was to introduce ourselves and become familiar with the approved mandate of “... conducting a churchwide listening campaign to hear the voices of peoples long silenced regarding the state of institutional racism and oppression within our church.” (*Minutes*, 2016, Part I, p. 719)

Getting Started

Commencing the work, the SCRTR was given a presentation on exploring the intersection between personal and institutional racism as well as the implications of these on our work from Crossroads Anti-Racism Training. The special committee engaged in conversation with the Office of Research Services for possible assistance. Much of the following time was spent in developing a process going forward in forming four work sub-teams, listing upcoming denominational events, and assigning teams to conduct listening sessions. At the request of the special committee’s moderator, Marta Pumroy was appointed co-moderator by the Co-Moderators of the 223rd General Assembly (2018), Ruling Elder Vilmarie Cintron-Olivieri and the Reverend Cindy Kohlmann.

Members of the Special Committee are Marta Pumroy (co-moderator), Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Byron Wade (co-moderator), Raleigh, N.C; Stanley Bhasker, Bath, N.Y.; Amy Busse Stoker, Spring Hill, Tenn.; Carlton Johnson, Atlanta, Ga. (resigned July 2019); Kate Jones Calone, Setauket, N.Y.; Ryan Landino, Geneseo, Ill.; Fran Lane-Lawrence, Portage, Mich.; Hiram Pérez-Cordero, Atlanta, Ga.; Miguel Rosa-Morales, Trujillo Alto, Puerto Rico; Pam Tajima Praeger, Spokane, Wash.; Angela Ryo, Bloomfield Hills, Mich.; Joe Scrivner, Tuscaloosa, Ala.; and Stella Webster Farmington, N.M. Denise Anderson and Valerie Izumi provided staff services to the special committee.

Planning Our Listening Sessions

To fulfill the mandate, the SCRTR set out to conduct our listening sessions. After much discussion of questions and procedure, we ended with a set of questions designed to get at the larger, more institutional presence of racism, not limited to personal attacks, so we could also identify the operative systems at play. The resources that the Office of Research Services provided did not seem to fit what we were looking for, as stories and insight are not necessarily “data.” We sought to humanize our mandate as much as possible, being sensitive to avoid objectifying personal stories and narratives.

In our effort to be efficient with our resources, instead of us going out to regions, we went to events where people from a variety of regions would be attending. The process team had a list of evolving

questions. Sometimes we would ask these questions using Powerpoint presentations and at other times by distributing paper handouts. Here are the questions that were asked:

POWER + RACE PREJUDICE = RACISM

- When you've experienced or witnessed acts of racism and/or microaggressions within your church or presbytery, how did you or others respond?
- What training or resources on anti-racism and/or cultural competency does your congregation and/or presbytery offer? How have you and others taken advantage of them? How have they been effective?

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH STRIVES FOR REPRESENTATION OF ALL OF GOD'S PEOPLE.

- Have you been invited to serve in leadership roles with your congregation, presbytery, synod, or national level of the church? Please share experiences you have had in leadership roles at your church, presbytery, synod, or General Assembly level.
- How does your church practice mutual respect, genuine fellowship, and meaningful representation and inclusion?

A FOCUSED GOAL OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IS TO DISMANTLE STRUCTURAL RACISM.

- Please share ways in which racism exists within the institutional church.
- Please share ways you have witnessed the impact of the church's policies, actions, and commitments in dismantling racism?
- If the Special Committee could take away one important idea or concept back in regards to reconciliation to our General Assembly on your behalf, what would it be?

Our Listening Sessions in Action

June 27–30, 2019, Atlanta, Georgia | [National Black Presbyterian Caucus](#)

Committee members in attendance: Carlton Johnson, Marta Pumroy, and Joe Scivner

We experienced pushback just by introducing the mandate and topic of our sessions. We received questions of “What is different?” “What will be done?” “How long will this committee be listening?” No one wanted to share stories and the first session was empty. After some more promotion, our second session was full of participants. There were stories of personal experiences and some with themes on a systematic level, i.e.: the difference between having a seat at the table and being able to participate at the table. We noticed feelings of weariness from participants, hearing such things as, “We tell you these stories but what is getting done?” and “Not again. ...” It was expressed that intersectionality was not being addressed.

July 12–14, 2019, Seattle, Washington | [Native American Women's Gathering](#)

Committee members in attendance: Marta Pumroy and Stella Webster

The women who were attending were thankful we, and other members from the PC(USA) including the Presbyterian Women Moderator JyungIn “Jenny” Lee were in attendance. It sent a message PC(USA) knows the value of these amazing women. There appeared a reluctance to tell their stories as well. People did not want to bring up negative experiences when they were at a place of gathering for fellowship. All of the women at the listening sessions expressed comfort at their own churches, but negative experiences in participation with the larger church happened for a few. The verbal asking or body language expressed to them, “why are *you* here?” It is evident that indigenous women have life stories interwoven with racism. The PC(USA) continues to work to make things right with our indigenous siblings in Christ. The work that has gone into the Doctrine of Discovery report by the 223rd General Assembly (2018) is enlightening.

July 16–20, 2019, Purdue University | *Youth Triennium*

Committee members in attendance: Carlton Johnson, Hiram Pérez-Cordero, Marta Pumroy, and Miguel Rosa-Morales.

It again was a challenge to get people interested in sharing their stories, not wanting to take away time from an event, or bring bad feelings into a place of good feelings, especially with youth. We were thrilled the antiracism theme was prevalent throughout the week. This was the committee’s first experience with white people wanting to listen in on the sessions. Because racism affects ALL people, we determined prior to the session we would listen to their voices, but keep white people separate from people of color. We do not want to make trauma on view for others. The white people who attended exhibited they were thrilled the PC(USA) was addressing racism. At the same time, people of color were thinking “this is not the time or place.” The white people expressed they were impressed with the diversity of Triennium, while the people of color were wondering “where the diversity was?” or giving suggestions on bringing in more. The committee underestimated the desire for white people to listen to experiences of racism of people of color. The white people in attendance were wanting to take action against racism to “do better” and expressed wanting more training, information, and discussion. However, the structure of our listening sessions did not make space for those goals. Although, our presence did provide an outlet to express outrage, and the noticing of racism, from people with less exposure to people of color in their area.

August 1–3, 2019, Baltimore, Maryland | *Big Tent*

Committee members in attendance: Stanley Bhasker, Fran Lane-Lawrence, Marta Pumroy, Miguel Rosa-Morales, and Angela Ryo.

Our listening experiences at Big Tent continued to show similar partners as we noticed at Triennium: people of color not wanting to share, or being already weary of stories with no action such as mandates with wording, but not much action in the pews. Again, we had a lot of interest from white people wanting to be a part of the listening groups. As before, we separated out people of color from white people. As discussion occurred, our committee observed that some who would self-label as an “ally” demonstrated a need for more antiracism training, while at the same time those who were well-versed in antiracism concepts expressed wanting more implementation.

Checking In

In late spring and early summer, we had all-committee Zoom meetings to check in and give progress reports from the listening sessions. The listening sessions were helpful and the responses received were transcribed with the assistance of the Office of the General Assembly. Feedback from these initial listening sessions informed preparation for conducting future listening sessions and developing strategies for connecting with communities whose voices still yearn to be heard.

Inspired by the conversations with Presbyterians who shared during the listening groups, the SCRTR also engaged in a book study of *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation* by Jennifer Harvey.

Black and White Responses: Course Corrections Along the Way

It was important to us as a special committee that we gave ourselves permission to absorb, reflect, and make course corrections in our work, even as we were guided by the Spirit in directions we may not have anticipated from the start. It became apparent in the course of our listening campaign that different approaches were necessary, particularly depending on whether we were listening to people of color or white people.

In engaging people of color, we were struck by the reports of participants of color having a sense of déjà vu upon engaging our listening spaces. A clear pattern emerged of hearing “we did this before; why are we doing this again?” We interpreted a sense of caution and cynicism of what work our listening sessions could achieve that similar past efforts by the denomination have not.

At the same time, we have noticed when white people engaged our listening spaces, white people often exhibited a kind of excited fascination for the stories of people of color, as if by listening, there may be revealed “the answer” to solving racism. It was often the case that stories white people told about race represented misinformed or problematic interpretations of the phenomenon of race that changed the dynamic of the listening space, which took time and focus away from the stories of people of color and the very voices long-silenced mentioned at the heart of our mandate. It became more and more evident that a specific kind of conversation space needed to happen independent from the other: an undisrupted space provided for people of color, and a group space among white people that could share accountability for what is spoken. Ultimately, what has evolved is a shift from being *passive* listeners who only take notes, to *active* listeners who help manage the space in ways to empower the group hold itself accountable for misinformation and derailments. It is possible that one of the systemic factors at play in sustaining racism in our institutions is the way white people have been socialized to engage spaces that attempt to center voices of people of color; this is a challenge that the committee is navigating.

A “CoInspired” Turning Point

Committee members in attendance: Stanley Bhasker, Amy Busse Stoker, Kate Jones Calone, Ryan Landino, Fran Lane-Lawrence, Pam Tajima Praeger, and Stella Webster.

The emerging realization for differing kinds of listening work with white people (offering direction and deconstruction) and people of color (offering solidarity and healing), found footing at the CoInspire Conference held in Montreat, October 7–10, 2019, where members and staff of our committee were invited to present Digging Deeper Conversations as a part of the conference program. Fran Lane-Lawrence and Ryan Landino co-facilitated a session entitled “Sharing White Experiences of Racism: Listening to oOur Participation in White Supremacy Culture—A Session

for White People,” while Denise Anderson led “Reframing the Conversation: A Session for People of Color.” Creating independent spaces for white people and people of color revealed itself as an effective approach for engaging white people in listening to a shared need to dismantle racism and their participation in it, while at the same time lifting up voices and power of people of color in the midst of oppression. This approach has affirmed our understanding of how to approach our sessions engaging the topic of race and challenged us to reconsider different ways of listening to the larger experience of racism.

Old Patterns and New Questions: Have We Been Here Before?

Another illuminating moment from the CoInspire Conference came at the end of a session in which members of the special committee were able to engage Dr. Jennifer Harvey, author of our group book assignment *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*. In research for this book, Dr. Harvey interfaced with many of those who were at the heart of past PC(USA) efforts on truth, reconciliation, and reparation around race. She challenged us directly to consider what we were offering as a committee that previous efforts have not. This led to a number of questions about the implications of our mandate.

A first question had to do with how our special committee functions in relation to the past racism truth, reconciliation, and reparation efforts of our denomination. For example, are racial justice truth-speaking efforts mandated by the General Assembly building upon each other constructively, or is there a cycle of creating action, with recommendations, but with little follow-through and short-term institutional memory of the work that has gone before? Is there a cycle to be named? Might we have an opportunity to name the larger scope of the story of truth, reconciliation, and reparation work of the PC(USA)?

Second, Dr. Harvey’s challenge to us led to some thinking about who are “the voices of those long silenced” in our denomination? Are they those who have never had access to a platform to speak their truth, or may it also include those who have been a part of formal efforts to be heard by the General Assembly in the form of committees, task forces, and resolutions, but after their approval at the General Assembly, they were promptly forgotten and ignored?

These questions have opened up new areas of exploration for the special committee, which led to the constitution of new subcommittees in January 2020. One of them is to survey the presbyteries to see what responses have been made to the past actions of the General Assembly around antiracism truth, reconciliation, and reparation, and to document if any such responses manifested in the form of structural change.

Getting (Re)grounded in Montgomery, Alabama and Next Steps

The second in-person meeting of the SCRTR was January 9–11, 2020, in Montgomery, Alabama. The SCRTR met there because of the historic role this city played in the Civil Rights Movement in addition to the influence and legacy of the Rev Dr. Martin Luther King, Visits were made to the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, the National Museum for Peace and Justice, and the Equal Justice Institute. That evening the SCRTR had the opportunity to have dinner with members of the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley’s Anti-Racism Task Force, and viewed the Montgomery film premiere of *Just Mercy*, followed by theological reflection and dialogue.

Conclusion

Members have committed significant time refining the work of the special committee, including reconfiguring sub-teams and making preparations for submitting a progress report to the 224th General Assembly (2020) in Baltimore, Maryland.

Faced anew with the racial injustices of the past as well as the present, including the church's complicity in these injustices, the importance of the work ahead is to:

- dismantle and disrupt “institutional racism and oppression within the church,”
- to call the church to do the hard work of repair necessary for reconciliation,
- identify where that work is happening and where we have fallen short,
- commit in action to previous statements and recommendations approved by past General Assemblies regarding racism and God's call to live in a just and equitable community—an environment of equality and justice for all people in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The SCRTR has done considerable work building relationships among its members and fulfilling the commitment to the work of fighting racism in the denomination. The plans going forward include furthering and honoring the work of listening to the “voices of those long silenced,” in addition to reexamining our process to fulfill the General Assembly mandate with recommendations to the 225th General Assembly (2022) in Columbus, Ohio.