

**Date:** June 19, 2019

**To:** Colleagues in the Covenant Ministerium

**From:** Rev. David Swanson & Dr. Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom

## **1. Letter to the Covenant Ministerium**

To our colleagues in the Covenant Ministerium,

President John Wenrich's May 31, 2019 [letter](#) to Covenanters notes the "unique difficulty" of this moment. He concludes that if we continue our public disagreement on human sexuality in the ways we have, "we will continue to devote time, energy, and resources to conversations we have held now for more than 20 years, diverting our focus away from topics such as immigration, mass incarceration, justice and evangelism - matters that have never needed the presence of the faithful more than they do now."

The intention of this letter and subsequent resolution is to name specifically and exclusively the reality and impact of white racism within our ministerium, denomination, affiliate partner organizations, and local congregations. This has contributed to diverting attention away from the justice issues that our president names. The letter and resolution is also a response to the biblical call in the [2008 Resolution on Racial Righteousness](#).

We, the authors of this letter, confess that we have each personally been too slow to take on the work of racial justice. For too long, we have outsourced this work to our colleagues of color when the responsibility to address our racism has always been ours. We mean for this letter and resolution to be part of our personal repentance.

While the ongoing discussions about human sexuality and the flourishing of LGBTQ members in our churches are of importance, the root of our having diverted focus away from immigration and mass incarceration is much deeper than human sexuality. The human sexuality discussions that have taken place within the Covenant including the framing of narratives, agendas, and decisions on all sides are almost exclusively voiced by white people. Our discourse on a matter that we whites disagree is a window into how race - and racial whiteness specifically - has reinforced power differentials within the Covenant. Regardless of how the current debates about human sexuality are resolved, the racial status quo remains undisturbed.

The time is right for white clergy to attend to the sins of our own community and make a public commitment to prioritize antiracism work within our ministerium. The church's evasion of racism has blinded us to the depth and breadth of suffering that members of our body are enduring. The devastating hardships inflicted upon people of color in the current crises of immigration and mass incarceration have convicted us that we must address our racism as it contributes to these crises. A solidarity within our ranks that aligns more with racial whiteness than with our racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse denomination reveals our misunderstanding of the gospel's call to justice for all people. We have allowed racial work to be relegated to a secular agenda. This

reduces racism to a cursory issue to the gospel, rather than a perpetual sin to be overcome through Christian discipleship.

Therefore, this resolution is an invitation for the whole ministerium to voice support for the antiracist work ahead of our ministerium and church. It is also an invitation for white clergy in particular to take responsibility for the ways we have consented to racial reconciliation in word but have not demonstrated reconciliation in our actions and especially in the ways we engage conflict. Rather, we white clergy have perpetuated deeply held cultural assumptions about our own superiority and the priority of our agendas.

## **2. Resolution on Antiracism**

Be it resolved that the members of the Covenant Ministerium support the following:

1. Invite white members of the Covenant Ministerium to sign the public Relational Covenant below affirming one's personal commitment to anti-racism and increased cultural competency. The covenant includes recognizing, naming, and engaging the laments and committing to specific and measurable steps to resist racist and divisive behaviors.
2. Members of the Covenant Ministerium call on the Executive Board of the Ministerium and the executive boards of the conference ministerial associations to promote the Relational Covenant and encourage white credentialed ministers to prayerfully consider signing it.
3. The Covenant Ministerium requests that denominational and conference boards receive implicit bias training and that the conference superintendents collaborate with Love Mercy Do Justice to make available antiracism and cultural competency training for white clergy.
4. Guidelines be formulated by a working group who will 1) identify structures to ensure an equity of voice and agenda across race, ethnicity, and culture in conference ministerial associations and the ECC ministerium and 2) provide suggestions about how boards and associations can be more hospitable to all the cultural expressions of Covenant clergy and implementing changes to eliminate white cultural dominance. The working group will be comprised of a representative from each of the ethnic associations, a representative from the Executive Board of the Ministerium, the Director of Racial Righteousness, the authors of this proposal as affirmed by the ethnic associations to collaborate in this work, and other credentialed ministers as identified by the working group.
5. The Covenant Ministerium submits for action to the Board of Ordered Ministry that they identify a process in consultation with the ethnic associations, the Director of Racial Righteousness, and the Executive Minister of Develop Leaders in which conflicts related to this antiracism work can be resolved if necessary. A person with less authority may need structural assistance in bringing up an experience of racism related to a person with more organizational power.

### 3. Conclusion

We offer these laments and commitments to the Covenant Ministerium humbly and with great conviction. We have been convicted by the Holy Spirit to offer these specific steps as one way toward a more just and reconciled ministerium. We thank our colleagues of color for their honest feedback and critique. This proposal has been significantly shaped by their wise suggestions. We invite any credentialed clergy with questions about the letter, the resolution, or Relational Covenant to contact us directly.

Submitted respectfully,

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### 4. Relational Covenant

We, white members of the Evangelical Covenant Church Ministerium, affirm the biblical call outlined in the [2008 Resolution on Racial Righteousness](#). A decade later, the structural and relational expressions of racism, racial bias, and white cultural dominance persist within our fellowship. We lament the ways we have maintained our cultural power while silencing colleagues of color. Our behavior has divisive impact on the body of Christ as a whole and colleagues of color specifically and has taken various forms such as:

- Centering our public discourse on white experience
- Diverting attention and resources away from racism and topics connected with racism, such as immigration, incarceration, and reconciliation
- Utilizing leaders of color selectively, for our own ends
- Not being aware of how both systemic and relational power imbalances specifically impact and threaten women of color from multiple sides
- Failing to help carry the particular work that women of color face in educational spaces, ministry contexts, the credentialing process, and positions of leadership
- Failing to have skin in the game on the particular sins of racism and cultural supremacy that we as white clergy struggle with
- Assuming we are prepared to deal with immigration, mass incarceration, racial reconciliation, and other expressions of injustice before dealing with our institutional racism
- Taking up emotional space by centering our own pain
- Asserting that our spaces for public discourse are safe for people of color and other marginalized groups without actually hearing from *them* that they are safe
- Responding to public feedback on white cultural dominance with defensiveness, argumentativeness, silence, or opting out
- Complaining when invited to respond to problems that have not been our priorities

- Using Covenant history selectively to determine which narratives can be used to set agendas and frame decisions
- Controlling narratives that support white superiority
- Defining respect, authority, and rules of engagement in ways that devalue constructive conflict, escalate hostility, and marginalize those from different cultural backgrounds
- Using secrecy, privacy, and culturally white communication styles to protect our cultural power
- Assuming that access to information and the ability to participate in public discourse is universal or equal
- Speaking in binary, either-or, all-or-nothing, and win/lose ways which obscures systemic issues and makes it difficult to understand the conflict clearly
- Protecting our own world view and failing to recognize its limits
- Pitting marginalized groups' interests against one another

For far too long our racism has made us lukewarm to the gospel imperative to pursue justice. We have allowed critical affairs of justice such as immigration, mass incarceration, and racial reconciliation to be perceived as merely secular issues, peripheral to our identity as the Body of Christ rather than central to Christian discipleship. By abdicating our responsibility, we have turned our backs to the lived realities and concerns of many of our brothers and sisters of color.

Our apathy and silence is a sin against God and our colleagues. It has damaged our witness. We therefore confess our racism and supremacy, asking forgiveness even as we commit to lives of repentance through the power of the Holy Spirit.

To our colleagues of color in the Covenant Ministerium, we commit to:

- Intentionally maturing in our personal racial identities so that we grow in awareness of how we have been impacted by racial whiteness
- Naming the strategies in the list above when they occur and committing to changing these behaviors in ourselves
- Refusing to engage in the business of our ministerial associations and the ministerium in a manner which reinforces white cultural dominance or centers white cultural norms
- Advocating for ongoing antiracism and cultural competency training in our ministerial associations, the ministerium, and our churches reflecting on these activities from our biblical center utilizing denominational resources such as Love Mercy Do Justice's forthcoming "Invitation to Racial Righteousness," the "Journey to Mosaic," or the "Sankofa Journey."
- Holding one another accountable for the life-long discipleship process of renouncing racism in all forms
- Submitting to the correction and encouragement of our colleagues of color when they identify patterns of systemic, relational, and individual racism in our fellowship
- Utilizing the Six Fold Test to plan and evaluate the annual meetings of each of our ministerial associations and the ministerium