

Recommendations from the LifePath Task Force on Racial Justice

Submitted to the LifePath Pastoral Team, Vision Team, and church community on March 15, 2022

On November 8, 2021, the LifePath Pastoral and Vision Teams charged the formation of a time-limited Task Force on Racial Justice to carry out the following tasks:

- “investigate areas of possible racial inequality within our church and our work in the community and the world, as well as areas where our church can better embody God’s multicultural kingdom of love and justice”;
- “systematically initiate conversations with LifePath stakeholders as well as members of our greater community”;
- “gather information about our current structures and practices and how they might be racially biased or create racial injustices in the life of our church”;
- “review and analyze the information to find themes and patterns that emerge”;
- “make recommendations that will address these opportunities for growth and racial justice”; and
- “write specific recommendations for LifePath Church to implement that would move us toward a fully anti-racist culture.”

We, the LifePath Task Force on Racial Justice, attest that we have carried out all of the above tasks, having regularly convened since January 18, 2022; gathered input from 34 LifePath stakeholders and 6 non-LifePath stakeholders; and synthesized all stakeholder input to inform the recommendations presented in this document.

We, hereby, present our recommendations to the Pastoral and Vision Teams but assert that these recommendations are intended for all LifePath stakeholders — that is, everyone who considers LifePath to be a home church — to take and own collectively:

Recommendation #1: LifePath should concertededly foster, encourage, and maintain conversations on race.

Notably, these conversations should...

- **...be held in a church that holds, declares, and protects its conversational space as open, safe, and sacred.**

Conversations on race can be difficult, not in the least because there is often great uncertainty surrounding whether:

- one’s voice is valuable or able to contribute to a conversation on race;
- one feels prepared, ready, or learned enough to discuss such a challenging subject;
- one feel safe to discuss such issues within a specific community, particularly if it involves challenging others and being challenged; and
- what one says about race could be (unintentionally) harmful to others, misinterpreted, or used to retaliate.

This uncertainty can both seed and hold people in fear.

As Christ-followers, we affirm Christ’s teachings on grace, mercy, forgiveness, and perfect love that casts out fear (1 John 4:18). If the entirety of our lives is committed to these elements of our faith, then they can and should be applied to how we carry out conversations on race.

Cultivating and holding our church as a space that is both open and safe to talk about race does not mean creating an echo chamber where everyone must believe and say the same thing. Rather, this type of space is simply a manifestation

and expansion of the environment that God has already cultivated within LifePath: Spaces where people can speak openly but with a humble heart towards learning and unlearning, spaces where we can turn toward wonder rather than judgment, spaces where people can make gracious assumptions about intent and effect of words and actions, spaces where people can express hurt but also find ways to forgive, and spaces where guilt can be processed apart from shame. As such, LifePath's conversational space must not only be held as open but *declared* as open, as well, on a consistent, public basis.

Because open and safe spaces exist outside of the Church, LifePath will not be able to realize the fullness of conversations on race unless its conversational space is also held and declared as sacred. Creating sacred conversational space does not inherently mean implementing ritual; rather, at its core, it means putting such conversations before God: seeking and dedicating oneself (and one's words) to God's wisdom, prudence, judiciousness, discernment, and love — even and especially in times when there is uncertainty, ambiguity, and discomfort in the conversation. To move toward this intent, LifePath may benefit from collective learning about what "sacred" and "sacred space" means, not only in the context of conversations about race but also in the context of overall Christian living.

- **...simultaneously acknowledge and confront discomfort.**

As humans, we do not like discomfort and may even go out of our way to avoid it. Yet, even for those of us who are willing to wrestle with the discomfort, we must acknowledge that we are prone to *only wanting to experience discomfort in the ways in which we are comfortable*.

Conversations about race are uncomfortable. That is a fact, and it is both okay and important to acknowledge this. However, we should also acknowledge that conversations about race are often uncomfortable in ways that we do not expect — particularly because they may challenge long-held worldviews on what is "normal" or "true" based on life experience.

Having conversations that both acknowledge and confront discomfort will mean anticipating being uncomfortable in ways that may be difficult to process. It also means being willing to accept such a feeling, not as an indictment of having done something "wrong" but rather as a part of the learning and growing process.

- **...come from a place of humility and learning, particularly around worldviews that could affect one's view on race.**

As Christians, we are on a constant, lifelong journey toward better understanding God and the ways we can express God's love towards others. Oftentimes, such a learning process includes *unlearning* unhelpful, untrue, or unloving thoughts or tendencies.

Take, for instance, the concept of repentance. While it may be tempting to define repentance as simply the identification, conviction, and confession of wrongdoing, the Biblical definition is more holistic. According to *Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, "In its fullest sense [repentance] is a term for a complete change of orientation involving a judgment upon the past and a deliberate redirection for the future." In other words, repentance is more about consciously learning and unlearning for the sake of "redirection" (i.e., change) than it is about finding wrongdoing and scrubbing away the error.

This same posture of learning and unlearning can be applied to conversations about race. Given the value-laden and -charged semantics surrounding the words "race", "racism", and other derivations of those words, it can often be tempting to assume that conversations surrounding race must necessarily focus on finding blame, fault, or wrongdoing. Yet, in the same way that repentance can and should be framed in the context of a holistic "redirection" more than just finding wrongdoing, conversations about race can and should be more focused on a reframed perspective of how race impacts our world (and the people in it) more than just pointing fingers.

Conversations on race must be taken from a learning (and unlearning) perspective because the issue of race itself is highly linked to the worldviews and values we hold. In the book *Divided by Faith*, sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith study why black evangelicals and white evangelicals view the issue of race differently. Emerson and Smith conclude that white evangelicals typically don't see racial injustice stemming from a "social issue," but rather from "personal defects of some individuals in some groups as they [attempt] to relate to each other." Black evangelicals, on the other hand, largely see racial injustice as a consequence of how structures and institutions in society (e.g., governments, laws) were and are designed and run. The reason for these differences, the authors point out, has to do with the fact that the white evangelical cultural worldviews place a stronger emphasis on approaching issues and problems from a more personal, relationally based perspective.

There is no one "right" or "wrong" way to view the world. However, beginning and continuing conversations on race will require us to give up the notion that our individual view of the world is the "normal" view while another's simply differs from the "ordinary." Getting to this point will require a commitment to humility, both individually and corporately as a church. However, such a foundation will give us the ability to learn about different worldviews without triggering the need to defend our own worldviews as "correct."

Recommendation #2: LifePath should directly address statements that may be a hindrance to cultivating productive and meaningful conversations on race within the church.

We have listed some statements below and our recommendations for how LifePath Church can address each statement.

- **Statement:** "The best way to confront racism is to be 'colorblind' in our treatment of others. We simply need to treat everyone the same."

Recommended response: Taking a "colorblind" approach to the treatment of others, while good intentioned, is rooted in the "personal, relationally-based perspective" noted earlier. This perspective, while neither inherently right nor wrong, is linked to a predominantly white evangelical worldview. Thus, to uphold a "colorblind" approach would affirm a white worldview without allowing for conversations about whether other worldviews also affirm this approach.

- **Statement:** "As a white person, I do not have a meaningful voice, perspective, or contribution to a conversation on race."

Recommended response: At its core, conversations about race are all about learning and sharing perspectives and worldviews. Everyone has a worldview, so everyone has a "seat at the table" when it comes to conversations about race.

- **Statement:** "Race is not an essential part of our faith. We as Christians don't need to talk about race."

Recommended response: Again, at its core, conversations about race are all about learning and sharing perspectives and worldviews. It will be difficult to love our brothers and sisters, as Jesus calls us to do, if we do not make the effort to understand their worldviews. For many Christians in our world today, race and racism make up a big part of their life experience — including how they view and understand grief, loss, sadness, anger, injustice, and hopelessness. Having conversations about race can help us gain a richer understanding of people's stories and perspectives, which can also help us love others more fully.

- **Statement:** "Thinking and talking about race makes me feel intimidated and overwhelmed. I have no answers to the big questions and problems surrounding race. Because of this, I'm not sure I am able to engage in these conversations."

Recommended response: Yes, conversations around race are hard and uncomfortable. This is why we recommend looking at conversations about race being, at its core, about learning and sharing perspectives and

worldviews. We cannot and should not think that conversations about race are useless if they do not ultimately solve “big” problems. Willingly taking a posture of learning is an important and significant first step that leads to more positive change than people may initially realize.

- **Statement:** “I don’t like talking about race because I am always made to feel like I’m at fault or to blame.”

Recommended response: Conversations about race can oftentimes go in the direction of finding blame, but these are not the types of conversations we recommend. As noted above, we strongly advocate for open, safe, and sacred spaces to have conversations about race, where blame and shame should not permeate, overshadow, or undergird conversations that are ultimately meant to be edifying and restorative. If negative emotions arise in conversations about race, space should be allowed to share and wrestle with those feelings in a safe environment. This is the only way to have honest yet productive conversations about race.

- **Statement:** “I don’t know that much about race, so I’m not sure I can engage in conversations about it.”

Recommended response: Given that conversations about race are about learning and sharing, having a lack of knowledge should not exclude you from these conversations. Like any approach to learning, we not only need to admit that we don’t know some things but also that we don’t know what we don’t know. This is completely okay and actually the best place to start.

- **Statement:** “I don’t see LifePath doing anything wrong when it comes to racial inequality. So, I’m not sure why we need to talk about race.”

Recommended response: This may be true if we saw racial justice as only about identifying and stamping out blatant wrongdoing. But race is about more than just determining wrongdoing: It’s about understanding perspectives other than our own, including how others may experience hurt and harm in ways that we may not even realize. Talking about race will not only help us understand these perspectives but also show us how we can love others better as a result of having such an understanding.

Recommendation #3: LifePath should be intentional and creative about incorporating racial equity and justice into its leadership, operations, community, and work.

The Task Force received numerous ideas from LifePath stakeholders, and others across the state and region, about ways LifePath can better exhibit racial equity and grow in racial justice. We have listed recommended approaches below.

- **Define LifePath’s “community”.** More than 50% of the LifePath stakeholders who provided input noted that we are a predominantly white congregation. If we seek to be a church that is reflective of our community, it is imperative that we first define *who* our community is. This can be achieved through a variety of activities (i.e., community mapping, community outreach, needs assessment, etc.). It is important to note that these activities may not necessarily lead to more diversity within our church community. The goal of this journey is to: (1) be specific about who our community is, (2) identify if there are needs within our community that we can meet, (3) be intentional about our local mission and engage in projects that are reflective of the community and their needs.
- **Make racial equity a priority in church leadership and church decision-making.** Based on learnings from corporate America, there are three elements that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) experts note as being critical to enabling DEI in company work and operations. Adapting these elements to a church and racial justice context, they can readily apply to LifePath:
 1. **Buy-in from Leadership** – Church leadership (Pastoral Team and Vision Team) must be fully bought into intentionally and concertedly exhibiting racial equity and growing in racial justice. This includes committing both to the overall principles of racial equity and justice and creating a specific action plan

for how leadership plans to pursue them both. If such buy-in exists, it should be communicated to the church community. Silence or deferment of the issue (e.g., due to focusing attention on other issues) will communicate to the church community that leadership is not fully bought-in, committed to, or prioritizing racial equity and justice.

2. ***Diverse Voices in Decision-Making, Church Communication, and Culture Creation*** – Pursuing racial equity and justice also means cultivating racial diversity in the voices that influence the church. Numerous LifePath stakeholders noted to us that an all-white pastoral team and a near-all-white Vision Team will tend toward a white-influenced teaching and communication style and a white church culture. If LifePath is committed to racial justice, it needs to commit to encouraging, cultivating, and supporting diverse leadership (both formal and informal) as well as diversity in decision-making, the voices that speak to the church community (including from the front on Sunday mornings), and culture creation. This will help form a church community that is more familiar wrestling with diverse ideas and thus more ready to have open conversations about race. However, we urge LifePath to understand that the emotional labor and burden for enhancing diversity in decision-making, church communication, and culture creation cannot and should not rely solely or heavily on Persons of Color; the deferral of such responsibility to Persons of Color would only reinforce inequities. To avoid this situation, the church must share responsibility, which for a predominantly white church, like LifePath, will require ongoing conversations, prayerful discernment, intentionality in approach, an allying spirit, and creative thinking.
 3. ***Accountability Measures*** – Commitment to an action plan is necessary but not, in and of itself, sufficient. Church leadership must also have accountability measures in place to ensure that the plan is enacted, evaluated, and iteratively and continuously adapted to assess, reflect upon, and discern progress and growth. Accountability comes in two forms, both of which should be implemented:
 1. ***Internal accountability*** – This primarily comes in the form of standardizing a process that internalizes racial equity and justice into all of its decision-making. For example, if church leadership is considering a major, or even minor, decision, leadership could commit to always asking itself, “Is [DECISION POINT] consistent with our stated commitment and plan for exhibiting racial equity and growing in racial justice?” While asking oneself this question continuously may seem awkward and inconvenient, like any discipline that one enacts for the sake of becoming habit, this is one of the best ways for racial equity and justice to become second nature (i.e., normalize) in one’s decision-making.
 2. ***External accountability*** – This is accountability external to church leadership and thus includes accountability to both the church community and those outside the church community. For the church community, accountability includes sharing a racial equity and justice action plan with the church and providing avenues for the church community to keep leadership accountable to that plan. For outside the church community, accountability includes public statements of commitment toward racial equity and justice, such as statements on its website or in its mission statement. This will not only signal LifePath’s stance on the issue but also provide those outside the church with an understanding that LifePath is a welcoming, open, safe, and sacred space to talk about issues of race.
- **Build relationships, and carry out mutual ministry, with churches outside of LifePath, particularly churches whose community makeup and/or leadership are not predominantly white.** It is important that this action be pursued with an eye toward learning rather than an eye toward outcomes. By opening up communal relationships with other churches, both church leadership and the entire LifePath community can be exposed to diverse worldviews and viewpoints on faith and society. This includes opportunities for LifePath to learn from pastors and other trusted teachers in these churches as well as opportunities to interact with, support, and serve alongside the church communities. Such learnings may also open up opportunities to think more deeply on and/or have healthy dialogue (internally or externally) on race.

Pursuing mutual ministry may open up our LifePath community to a better understanding of how to love and serve our neighbors in areas where we are not actively engaged (e.g., Elkton, Wilmington). Mutual ministry may also give LifePath an understanding of how our predominantly white worldview may be framing our approach to church ministry and outreach; there is great potential benefit in being challenged to rethink how we do ministry.

It should be noted that mutual ministry may, at times, require LifePath to take the backseat in leadership and let others guide what we do and/or make decisions on how efforts and resources are deployed. This approach is reflective of LifePath's current MicroChange work, in which we support and empower other leaders who have a better discernment on how to best serve in their local context with local knowledge. Taking a backseat, at times, may be difficult to accept, but it is necessary to avoid the potential of LifePath taking a "white savior" approach to ministry.

- **Engage the LifePath community more in our relationship with Las Américas ASPIRA Academy.** We are a predominantly white church that meets in a predominantly Hispanic and Spanish-speaking educational institution. LifePath has several existing, meaningful touchpoints with ASPIRA, such as Fill the Packs and the Friendship Breakfast. However, most of these touchpoints exist in a realm where the majority of the church community's connection with ASPIRA is through intermediaries (primarily Pastor Keith and others with more direct connection to ASPIRA). Church leadership should commit to expanding opportunities for the church community at large to have more direct touchpoints with the ASPIRA community. This includes actively highlighting existing touchpoints (e.g., ASPIRA student mentorship, serving at the Friendship Breakfast) and encouraging ASPIRA to more actively ask LifePath for volunteers to be involved in their community (e.g., the recent connections made through the Aspira Food Pantry event on President's Day 2022).
- **Be creative and consistent in integrating more diverse voices, perspectives, and postures of worship into the interactions between the Pastoral Team and the church community at large. This includes Sunday Gatherings and churchwide communications.** LifePath stakeholders shared many ideas on this front, including:
 - Integrate more non-white perspectives into Sunday messages and writings – Use more videos, quotes, examples, and expressions from theologians and other people of color. This is a straightforward yet powerful way to recognize, value, elevate, and give platform to voices of color.
 - Invite guest speakers who are people of color to speak to the LifePath community.
 - Continue to incorporate worship in other languages and songs written by people of color – The introduction of different ways and postures of worship may be challenging for some, so it is important to thoughtfully consider how the church community can connect with and process such differences. For instance, if worship songs are sung in Spanish, create ways for English-only speakers to both connect with the song and appreciate the spirit and sentiment expressed in the song, even if the worship experience is different. Also, create spaces for open dialogue on the introduction of more diverse worship. Celebrating diversity is important, but it should not come at the cost of alienating members of our community.
 - Think and take advantage of every opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the image of God in every person, every body.
- **Encourage the LifePath community to explore issues of cultural diversity, racial equity, and racial justice both inside and outside of the "formal" church environment.** Ideas include:
 - Forming a Compassion Team, similar to the Prison Care Team, that explores and cultivates opportunities both for internal learning and external practice of racial equity and justice.
 - Host additional book studies on racial equity and justice. Titles recommended by LifePath stakeholders include *Be the Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Racial Reconciliation* by Latasha Morrison, *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* by Jim Wallis, *Drop the Stones: When Love Reaches the Unlovable* by Carlos A. Rodríguez, and *Dear White Peacemakers: Dismantling Racism with Grit and Grace* by Osheta Moore.
 - Activate SundayServe days more regularly and partner with organizations that deal regularly with issues of cultural diversity and race.

- Lead a corporate lamentation over racial inequity, including considerations of how white supremacy has shaped our culture historically and how it still affects us today.
- Encourage church members to get out of their comfort zones and immerse themselves in new cultural experiences outside of the “formal” church environment — and have the community share their experiences through stories and conversations that stir the church to both further dialogue on issues of culture and race and more regularly engage in such experiences.

In the spirit of love and hope for growth in racial equity and justice within our church — and the global Church at large — we, the LifePath Task Force on Racial Justice humbly submit these recommendations to the LifePath Pastoral and Vision Teams and to the entire LifePath community.

Sincerely,

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