

Reflections on We Need To Talk About Race from some of those who took part

Dorothy Oxley:

I must admit I was in two minds about joining this course. I'd read about, and heard about, 'diversity and inclusion' training courses which seemed to actually be quite divisive, or simply didn't work. But I was encouraged when, in the introduction to his book 'Let's talk about race', on which the course was based, Ben Lindsay wrote 'This book is not meant to produce white guilt or a 'them and us' mentality. Instead, I want to start a conversation'.

And that's just what happened during the course – conversations which were very thought provoking. I'm hugely grateful to everyone in the group, but especially to my black sisters-in-Christ, who shared their thoughts and experiences so openly and honestly, and never once made me, a white woman, feel judged and found guilty. Mind you, I did a bit of judging of myself. Am I covertly or even unconsciously being racist? Yes, to be honest, sometimes I think I am, and my sheer ignorance appalled me.

For example, I knew that the 'Windrush' generation of Caribbean immigrants, who'd come to Britain at the invitation of the British Government to help get the country back on its feet after the war, often found themselves turned away by landlords. No blacks! But I'd never realised they'd also often felt very uncomfortable and unwelcome in some churches. It humbles me that some of their descendants still worship with the traditional 'British' churches – that's forgiveness.

The course also got me googling a lot, which made me realise how sometimes things have been watered down over the years. Remember the 'black and white' song, 'The ink is black, the page is white, together we learn to read and write'? I'd sung it, but I hadn't realised that the original version, recorded in 1956, had begun with a verse that says 'Their robes were black, their heads were white, the schoolhouse doors were closed so tight. Nine judges all set down their names to end the years and years of shame'. The song celebrated a successful court action fought by black parents who wanted their child to go to a local school, not be bussed miles away to a 'black' school. But by 1972, when it reached the charts, that verse was dropped to give it a more general appeal, so by then it was just a nice happy song about how good it was to have integration. I wonder if it felt very different to black parents still struggling to get their child a truly inclusive education.

I don't know, because perhaps the most important thing the conversations we had in the course taught me was that I need to learn and listen. I don't want to play the 'white saviour', spotting some course of action that I think would make St John's more racially integrated, and doing my best to drive it forward. I might get it totally wrong, because I only have experience of being 'white English'. So I'll stick with Ben Lindsay's advice: 'White people need to become better listeners to their black brothers and sisters, that is, listening without always offering solutions or making assumptions.'

We need more conversations!

Caline McIntosh:

I decided to join this group because I was curious to see who would be there and I wanted to hear the ideas and perspectives contributed by others.

Reading Ben Lindsay's book just confirmed most of what I already knew about racism today and racism experienced by the Windrush generation. This book triggered a lot of hurt and sadness in me, especially when I think about the rich legacy and contributions of the Windrush generation to the UK, eg rebuilding this country after the destruction of the war.

However, despite these efforts, the Windrush generation faced difficulties. Some companies and landlords openly said they didn't want to employ Black people or have them live in their property, by displaying racist and upsetting signs in windows. Some Black people were also victims of racist attacks and there have been protests and riots in different cities about the way Black people have been treated.

Serving God is very important to most people from the Caribbean; when they came to Britain, the churches did not welcome them, but this did not deter them, as they built the church regardless, which started in living rooms. Over the years, through hard work, financial support of their congregants, they were able to expand and as a result, these churches are now self-reliant and independent.

I know that the Church has taken steps towards being racially inclusive, especially within hyper diverse communities. I also know that people at St John's might think we do not need to talk about racism because we all get on and have mutual respect. But it needs to go further than that: there are more steps needed towards reducing racist behaviour and discrimination.

I think it is great that we are having a conversation about racism. It can be a challenge to talk about race sometimes, as it forces us to look at our own cultural bias. There are many misconceptions and generalisations that need to be deconstructed when talking about race.

I think, so long as we have the heart to listen, have a level of empathy and grace, remember the power of prayer, have mutual respect and patience, then diversity and inclusion can thrive. Whether we are black or white, or however we choose to identify, we are all amazing in God's eyes.

Eloise King:

I joined this group because I was intrigued as to what it was about and what direction it would take us, in the sense of race, both amongst us and in the church. I wanted to hear other people's points of view, to see whether there was anything to gain from the group, for me and for us all. I also wanted to support Brenda and Sian in these complex issues.

Our discussions brought many things to the front of my mind, first and foremost the fact that racism is as natural as jealousy, and therefore we must all acknowledge that it is in all of us-we cannot deny it. At times it can be very blatantly demonstrated to you, and confronting it can lead to emotional discharge in the form of rage, denial or embarrassment.

We are all at different stages in our attitudes, and that affects how we respond when we are either afflicted by it, or confronted as a result of it. But it must be addressed, and how we do that is very important: we need to acknowledge our actions, examine our behaviour and be mindful and observant of the effect of language used and body language. From our discussions I got a sense of grounding and of the struggles that need to be addressed. There is segregation that is taken for granted, and a lot of work to be done in order to feel valued and respected.

We need to acknowledge that we are like the many colours of Joseph's technicolour coat. God's blood runs through all of us whether we want to believe it or not. Racism is ugly and painful and should be challenged at all levels, hopefully by examining ourselves and learning how we can be kind to one another, regardless of skin colour, gender, social status etc.

Sian Conlon:

This book was challenging for all of us, in different ways. So much was recognisable and painful for our black members, but for white people who think they have already reached a level of racial acceptance, racial equality and non-racism, it challenges us to reach further into our understanding of the experience of black people, to share our thoughts, see each other more clearly and establish trust. That lack of trust is something that white people may be oblivious to.

I was intrigued by the notion in the book of racial reconciliation, and how it wasn't enough. It seemed to be saying that when a black person suffers racial abuse or injustice, the burden of the experience, of dealing with it, of brushing it off or moving on and forgiving is on the black person, whereas the white person normally expresses sympathy, but doesn't think about actively getting involved in making the situation-in the present and the future-better.

Ben Lindsay says we need to move from racial reconciliation-the status quo-to Radical Solidarity, a mindset and intention that is on a par with anti-racism and allyship. The Archbishop's Commission on Racial Justice and the Southwark Anti-Racism Charter repeatedly talk about anti-racism, this *active* commitment against racism.

One of the things our group achieved, I think, is described in Southwark's Anti-Racism Charter, as: 'creating safe and trusting spaces to have honest and open conversations about race and racism, racial inequality, power and privilege, and actively listen to the voices of those impacted and affected by the issues, from UK Minority Ethnic and white communities'.

One of the really difficult things about challenging a certain section of society is that they can feel attacked, or diminished, or ignored, especially when they believe they are decent and not prejudiced. Similarly, if you go out of your way to include a certain group of people, others automatically feel excluded. But we are all children of God loved equally by him, and when we are loved unconditionally, equally and without limit, it creates generosity and appreciation towards those children who on occasion need or deserve to have the spotlight shone on them.

My experience of being in the group proved to me that generosity that involves listening, self-examination and empathy is not draining or diminishing-it generates

positivity, warmth, energy and trust. And generosity that involves appreciation of others means that we can all join in the celebration-that is what inclusivity truly means. So whether we are listening to each other in our group, or admiring the portraits around the church, it benefits us *all*.

Karlene Watson:

I particularly appreciated the book's importance of open and honest conversations about race.

Ben Lindsay talks about the importance of confronting our own prejudices and engage in difficult dialogues to promote understanding and bring about meaningful change.

He encourages us to abandon our comfort zones and challenge the status quo to eliminate systemic racism.

The book made me admit that there is a degree of racism in our churches, but we have come a long way over the last few decades.

We must look inside ourselves myself included and confront our own biases and work towards having open conversations about race with a posture of humility, openness, and respect.

By listening to diverse voices and perspectives, we can broaden our understanding and begin to bridge the gaps in our society.

Overall, this book is a reminder that change starts with us, in our daily interactions and choices.

Louise Pollard:

As shared in previous weeks by the other participants from the book group, the book was a very thought provoking read. Our discussions in the group were grounding and helped to build on the stories and content coming out of the book. It was not always comfortable as a white person reading its content and participating in our discussions. I commenced the book club in the firm belief that I am not a racist, indeed that I am actively anti-racist, and that I endeavour to treat all people, regardless of their race, equally and with respect.

However, the writings of Ben Lindsay have challenged me to review my personal stance on being antiracist and to consider that my stance, along with that of many other white peoples stance, is in fact, put simply, not enough. It is argued that the idea of a colour blind society, while well intentioned, leaves people without the language to discuss race and examine their own bias. If we only use colour blindness as our stance as a white person, against racism and injustice, it is argued therefore that the concept that race-based differences do not matter, and ignores the realities of systemic racism.

I have taken away that as an individual and as a church that we must accept that to be colour blind is not enough, and can deny the person of colour's lived experiences

in the fight that they have had with racist behaviour, attitudes and their lived experiences throughout their lives.

Other aspects of the book that troubled me initially were that as white people we operate within a framework of white supremacy and white privilege. Put in a nutshell by one of the authors quoted in the book, this means that as a white person our race will almost certainly have positively impact our lives trajectory in some way, usually without us even noticing it. This privilege is not afforded to people of colour.

I understand that as a white person I have not fully appreciated this as the privilege that my white skin gives me.

The book offers points for our consideration at the end of each chapter. I am pledging to myself that I will play my part to further understand and support the dismantling of overt and covert racist structures in our society . I also want to further understand the church role in the transatlantic slave trade. I hope too that as a church we can engage proactively with the church of England anti - racist strategies both at a national and local level.

Thank you to Sian and Brenda for their leadership during the book group and for the important work on race and racial justice that they and our wider church will continue to take forward and champion in the months and years ahead. We have work to do and I hope that I can be part of our church vision to develop and change in the future.