

Sample Answers to Difficult Questions

As facilitators led discussion groups with our congregants, they were occasionally faced with questions that were difficult to answer. They asked Brenda and Lindy for some wording that would help them answer the difficult questions. So we prepared, and continued to add to, a document of questions and possible answers. This is a sample of questions from that document.

1. **“We don’t have a race problem in NH (or in Hopkinton, or at First Church) because we are primarily white.”**

Variants of the question:

- “What does this have to do with me?”
- (there must be other variants of this question ...)

Answer:

The problem of racism in America is not a black issue, it is a white issue. Race itself is a social construct not a biological reality. Racism is a systemic and cultural problem that advantages white folks at the expense of black folks. As a result, white people hold most of the power in our country. So if white people don’t seek change, it will continue to be an issue for our country.

Those who pass as white in our society and experience all the benefits, opportunities, and privileges that whiteness provides need to insist on change and racial justice. We are what needs to change. It is our opportunity and responsibility to seek change within ourselves and to find ways to grow and spread that change to our churches and communities.

Educating ourselves about the truth of the experience of being black in America and courageously looking inside ourselves to identify and confront inherent bias is imperative if change is ever to happen. This we can all choose to do, and it is important as people of faith to do it.

2. **“I am not racist.”**

Variants of the question:

- “I am not racist because I have a friend who is black.”
- “I am not racist because I totally disagree with white supremacists.”
- “I am not racist because I want the best for everyone, whatever color.”

Answer:

Our culture is racist. We have a long history of racism, which we’ll be talking about in our discussions in the next few months; a history which many of us never learned about. The history that we are taught in school omitted or minimized the importance of the violence perpetrated against black and brown bodies in this country for hundreds of years.

The attitudes that give rise to that violence are still very much alive in our culture. And just by living here, we absorb those attitudes. Our brains, especially as we are growing up, absorb everything we see and our brains notice patterns. We learn to avoid the hot stove even if we were never burned; we learn to avoid it by watching other people avoid it. So as we grow up in a racist culture, we absorb racist attitudes. They are not

conscious. They are just our understanding of the way things are. We notice when our mother crosses to the other side of the street when she sees a black man approaching. We notice when our big sister waits for the next elevator when there is a black man in the first one. We notice when kids in school pick on or say nasty things about the black kids.

If we were raised with the idea that the world was flat, that assumption would color our actions. But we would be unaware of the assumption of flatness because it would just be part of our unconscious knowledge about how the world works. And if we were told that that assumption were not true, we would feel upset and uncomfortable and we would probably defend our belief in flatness. And if the other person managed to convince us that the world actually is round, we would feel foolish and humiliated.

Some people are *consciously* racist. The rest of us, those who do not believe that white people are inherently superior, are *unconsciously* racist. White superiority is just part of our unconscious knowledge about how the world works.

One author likens racism to a hard rain. When we go outside, we get wet. Not because we are choosing to get wet, just because we are exposed to the rain. What we are offering people, in this Racial Justice initiative, is a way to not get so wet. An anti-racist umbrella.

We can't combat racism until we learn how to recognize it in ourselves. Once we do recognize it, we can choose other attitudes, other behaviors.

3. **“What can't we focus on the good, on the positive?”**

Variant of the question:

- “I'm exhausted by focusing on all this violence and hatred.”

Answer:

Though we can certainly acknowledge the positive changes and progress that have happened, we are very aware that there is still so much that needs to change. Racism is still very much a part of this country; our systems, opportunities, language, and bias are shaped by a racist lens. Until racist behavior and thought cease to harm marginalized people, and black and brown people, our work is not finished.

Focusing on the positive with the level of racism that exists in our country is like saying to someone, “You used to be abused and neglected 7 days a week, and now it is down to only 5. You should focus on the positive and accept the remaining abuse.” It is not okay. I hope that it sounds absurd.

You can refer to a plethora of data that makes clear the impact of this oppression.

4. **“I have friends (or colleagues, or neighbors) who are black and therefore I understand racism or I understand the experience of being black in this country.”**

Answer:

This statement equates racism with prejudice. Prejudice is an attitude based on stereotypes. Racism entails the policies and practices that uphold ideas of white people as superior and black people as inferior. Racism is prejudice plus privilege plus power.

You may not be racially prejudiced, but just knowing black people doesn't keep you from engaging in discriminatory behavior or failing to challenge racist practices.

5. **“Why is racism a white problem and why are white people the solution?”**

Answer:

As white people we have power and privilege. As white people, the implicit bias that enables the continuation of systems of power and oppression resides largely in us.

Even though black people bear much of the suffering that racism causes, white people are the only ones who can make the necessary changes to eradicate racism. It's like the struggle for women's suffrage. Women could not make the necessary changes; women could not give themselves the vote because there were no women in Congress. Women had to convince men that it was a good idea, because men were the ones with the power.

As people of faith, our journey to goodness and love cannot be accomplished without confronting all forms of hate and oppression.

Isabel Wilkerson, in her book *Caste*, reminds white people that our country dehumanized others to build our civilization and in the process we, too, lost our humanity. Racism has cost us the loss of compassion when we see another, particularly black and brown people, as competitors for limited resources, rather than as companions and sharers of life. Among the wealthiest nations, the US ranks highest in incarceration (even higher than Russia and China) and highest in gun violence and mass shootings. American women are more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth. Life expectancy is lower and infant mortality higher. American students score the lowest in math and reading. We all pay a price for racism, but the loss of our humanity, compassion, and soul is the highest cost.

6. **Why do we not say, ‘All Lives Matter?’”**

Answer:

I understand that this seems an obvious thing to say. Of course all lives matter. But we don't need to yell, “White lives matter!” because it is understood and white lives are not at risk. Black lives are devalued, oppressed, and very much at risk right now. We call it out because it needs attention now.

People say, “All Lives Matter” in response to someone else saying that black lives matter. They use that response in what seems to be a sarcastic and condescending way, to kind of dismiss that very real hurt and pain that black people have felt for generations in response to things that have happened in this country with some law enforcement officers. This isn't just about right now. We're talking about years and years. We're talking about ongoing problems through the country's history.

To say that black lives matter doesn't mean that other lives don't matter. No one means that your life doesn't matter. If firefighters respond to a house on fire, they do not focus on all the houses. They focus on the house on fire. This serves all in that community. The black house is on fire.

7. **“I'm colorblind.”**

Answer:

Folks often describe their approach to racism as colorblindness. “I just see people as people.” Though this sounds like a kind way to view the world, it disregards the reality that people of color in America have a very different life experience than folks who live life as “white.” To say that you are colorblind is to

minimize or even disregard the oppression, inequality, and abuse that has been a part of waking up in their skin every day.

It is a statement of white privilege to say that you are colorblind. As a person of European descent, you can ignore color and it will likely cost you little to nothing. A person of color has to factor skin color into their day, every day.

8. **“Nothing I can do is going to make a difference.”**

Variations of the question:

- “Are you asking me to become an activist?”
- “I don’t even see black people in my day to day life. What difference will it make if I change my attitudes?”

Answer:

Educating yourself to the truth of this country’s history, to the truth of the cultural biases that may have shaped your thinking and to the systematic methods of oppression and harm that impact black people today is an incredibly courageous and important act. Denial is seductive. But if we can bravely educate ourselves to the truth of past and present racism in this country, we can then partake in making real change. First making that change in ourselves.

As you deepen your understanding of the experience of people of color in this country, as you challenge the racism in yourself, you become powerful in your ability to model different understandings and responses to people of color, thus not participating in sending unconscious bias to the next generation. You can partake in the dismantling of the illusion of race.

This is an opportunity to bravely look for truth and decide how you can be anti-racist. Any way is a good way.