



Chains, Edward Biberman

DisGRACE The Church Addresses Racism

BY IRENE PAK LEE AND MINDY DOUGLAS

Racism diminishes each of us and the world we live in together.

This reality prompted Montreat Conference Center to offer the DisGRACE conference, October 10–13, 2016. Approximately 400 people registered for the event to explore structural racism in the church and in the United States. Since people of color¹ and people who are white experience racism in different ways, and want or need to have different conversations about it, two tracks were available—one for people of color, one for white people. Participants in the two tracks explored

different topics and held different conversations, then all gathered to listen to keynote speakers and to worship.

In keeping with the framework of the conference, *Horizons* invited two participants—Irene Pak Lee (a woman of color) and Mindy Douglas (a white woman)—to write about their experiences of the conference. They framed their reflections as letters to women of color and to white women, sharing their personal take-aways, as well as suggestions from the conference on how each of us can work to dismantle the crushing effects of racism.

Dear Women of Color,

It's a little daunting to write to you as a group because I recognize that our experiences and lives are different in so many ways. And yet, I want to try this approach because at the recent DisGRACE conference, one of the primary things I came away with was how much we hold together.

I don't necessarily mean that we hold in common specifics of our lives, but that we hold together shared experiences and stories of navigating a racialized society and being part of a predominantly white denomination.

Many of us are isolated; we live, work and/or worship in communities where we are one of the very few people of color. Going to a conference like this one—that created intentional space and community for people of color—was almost like breathing a sigh of relief. We were provided spaces to be together, time to breathe a bit easier, time to sing, share, cry, dance ... and simply *be*. It reminded me how much we need those spaces in our lives, and how we need to seek or create such spaces, even if it means going outside of our own traditions and immediate communities.

Having spaces for people of color to debrief systemic racism—and how we navigate that in society and the church—was enriching and life-giving. At the same time, it was difficult and exhausting. It was exhausting and difficult because we recognized how tired we are of living within, navigating and then having to describe those painful systems of oppression. We are tired of adapting, changing and losing parts of ourselves to “fit in” to majority culture. We are tired of trying to make people feel better about their lack of understanding and blunders with us. We are tired.

But I seek to follow in Jesus' footsteps. So, along with confessing these realities and fatigue, I also write with what Martin Luther King, Jr. would call an “audacious faith.”

I want to offer a word of gratitude. I, a woman in my late 30s, know that being a teaching elder does not come from my story and my experiences alone. My ability to pursue and live this call owes a great deal to many of you. You took those first steps before women of color were in leadership roles, speaking and walking courageously, and facing a lot more opposition than I can

imagine. I recognize that, and I want to honor that my path has been made easier because of your story and courage. Thank you.

One of the things that stood out to me at DisGRACE was the ability of people of color to come together so quickly. It was different at this conference than at any other conference I have attended—perhaps because of the intentional space that we were provided in which to be together. We could see and affirm one another throughout the conference. We formed bonds with women and men that expanded beyond racial constructs and the assumptions we all have about one another. We embodied a beloved community that recognized that we cannot keep fighting over the same slice of pie. Kinship formed immediately with other participants, giving me renewed faith and a hope that we do not need to fight systems of racism and oppression alone.

Through speakers, new friends and time together, this conference was, for me, personally, another call to courage and challenge.

Here are some personal lessons and courses of action that I'd like to share:

1. **Internalized racism is a constant battle.** I was humbled by the realization of how much continued work I need to do. Scripts and practices I have been taught and trained into make me belittle my own capabilities and self-worth. Fear still lives there. The heart, mind and soul of oppression is hard to overcome. We need to continue to be aware of and dismantle how internalized racism plays out in our lives.
2. **We need to affirm one another.** This goes back to the internalized racism piece. If you're a woman of color, pay attention to your own self-image and the ways we minimize ourselves; pay attention to assumptions about and treatment of others. We need to embrace each other, not hold each other at bay because of the possible barriers of language, class or culture.
3. **We cannot keep fighting over the same piece of pie.** Let us not divide and conquer among ourselves. We know this, but we need to continually be aware of how we might be doing this. Recognize your own reactions and dynamics between different racialized groups and how that might continue to reinforce systemic racism.

4. **Build relationships.** Strengthen ties with your own communities *and* other communities of color. If you know little about other communities of color, now is the time to learn.
5. **Find ways to continue to engage and challenge systems of oppression.** Audre Lorde writes, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."² Use all of the gifts you have been given and trust them.
6. **Read, especially, books written by people of color.** Consider *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2015); *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology* edited by Rita Nakashima Brock, Jung Ha Kim, Kwok Pui-Lan, & Seung Ai Yang (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007); and *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair* by Otis Moss III (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015). The resources are out there. Find them.

7. **Pray.** We know the power of prayer to get us through the hills and valleys of our lives. Trust that center of who you are. Keep praying.

Above all, I left DisGRACE knowing that we need to be each other's safe spaces. We have to rise, love and protect one another. Our collective work toward justice and how we embody this faith we call Christianity is more important now than it ever has been. We are still being called to testify to the resurrection, and where resurrection isn't happening, we will continue to persevere until "thy kingdom come." As scripture tells us, it is by our endurance that we will gain our souls. Let us endure.

Thank you for sharing the journey with me. I am glad to be walking with you.

Irene Pak Lee is associate pastor at Stone Church of Willow Glen in San José, California.

A colorful option for prayer and reflection.

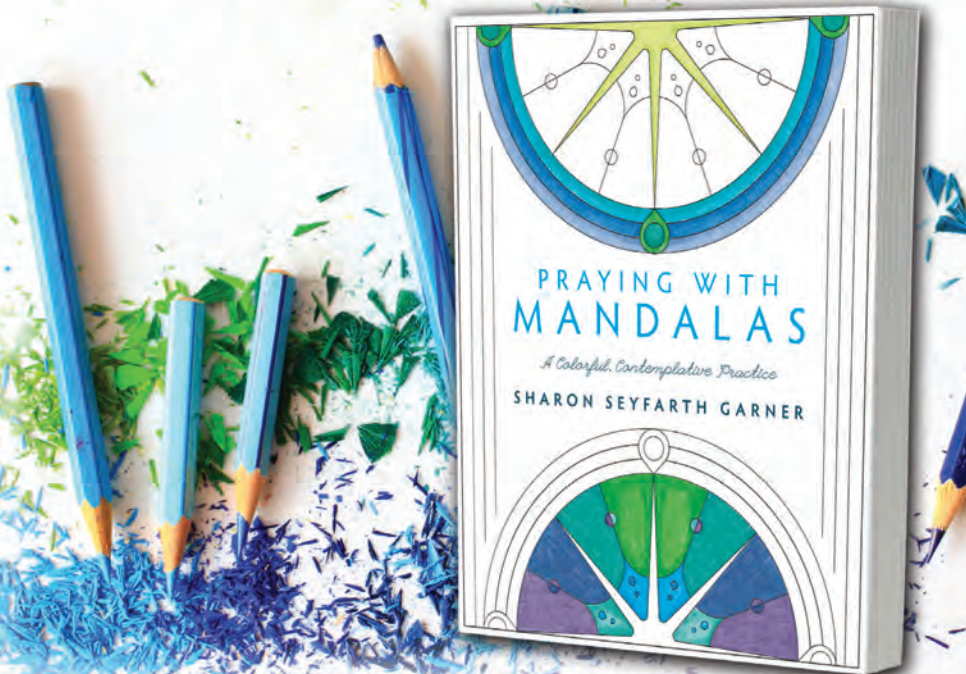
Contemplative coloring offers a simple, enjoyable, and tangible way to spend time with God.

Praying with Mandalas guides you through a heartfelt, hands-on experience of prayer, helping to create a visual prayer journal. It blends the practice of coloring mandalas (circular designs) with four ancient prayer practices.

Praying with Mandalas
A Colorful, Contemplative Practice

978-0-8358-1634-2 \$9.99

Bookstore.UpperRoom.org | 800.972.0433



Dear White Christians,³

If anything was clear by the end of DisGRACE, it was this: we've got some listening to do. Our sisters and brothers of color need us to know that racism is not a problem of the past. Racism is alive and well in every institution, in every town and (whether we acknowledge it or not), in each one of us. We all know racism still exists in the blatant white supremacy of the KKK that roars loudly in hatred of anything non-white. But racism also operates invisibly, silently. Racism infiltrated our country's systems many decades ago and has affected generations of people through quiet and unending discrimination.

In many ways, systemic racism is more difficult to deal with. It is harder to see and easier to deny. While it may be difficult for white people to see, any person of color could easily provide dozens of examples. They know it exists. They have experienced it first-hand. This is what we heard at the DisGRACE conference. We all need to hear these realities and join in the fight against racism.

Before I go any further, I want to recognize that antiracism work is not new to many of you. Many of you have been involved in antiracism work in meaningful, powerful and transformative ways. In the '50s and '60s many of you were active in the fight for civil rights. Some of you gave of your time, energy and resources to stand with our African American sisters and brothers in the fight for equal rights for all and the end of Jim Crow laws. Some of you have joined in Black Lives Matter marches or stood in solidarity with immigrants and refugees when legislation targeted people of color.

Many of you have fought against racism in its many forms, and count yourself as a friend to people of color. Over the years, you have broken down walls and built bridges. Your work has made a difference. We cannot, however, focus on the past when we realize how much work remains in the fight for racial equity.

In conversations and our work to dismantle racism, it's valuable to note a few things:

- Being white does not make you racist. It does, however, make you a part of a system that benefits you (i.e., white privilege).
- Defensiveness stops the conversation. When you feel defensiveness welling up inside you—because you know you have worked to combat racism or because you know you are a good person—push it down. This

conversation is not about you. This conversation is about people of color who are oppressed by a system—sometimes subtly, sometimes violently, never innocuously.

- Implicit bias affects people of every race at a subconscious level.
- Feeling guilty doesn't help end racism. This is not a time to wallow in self-pity. This is a time to act.

What then can we do? First, we must acknowledge that systemic racism is not something with a quick fix. We can, however, find ways to stand with our sisters and brothers of color in this fight for racial equity. We can find ways to act.

To begin with, we need to learn as much as we can about racial equity, systemic racism, implicit bias, and white privilege. We need to learn how to stand with our sisters and brothers of color in the fight to be seen as fully human. Many whites immediately turn to their black friends and say, "Tell me what I need to do." Though this seems appropriate, it is not the answer. This conference helped us understand that our sisters and brothers of color are tired of telling us what to do to fight racism. It is time we learned how to do this on our own. That doesn't mean we should not be in conversation with our friends and neighbors of color. It doesn't mean we shouldn't live and work with them, listen to them, and learn from them. We should! But as we learned in the conference, much of the work we white people need to do right now needs to be done among ourselves.

Here are a few suggestions of how to begin that work:

- **Read.** Read books about race written by people of color. Try *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander (New York: New Press, 2012); *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015); *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015); *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabella Wilkerson (New York: Vintage, 2011); *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum (New York: Basic, 2003).
- **Read.** Read books about race written by whites: *America's Original Sin* by Jim Wallis (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2017) and *Dear White Christians* by Jennifer Harvey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).
- **Reflect.** Examine your patterns of behavior and thought. How often do you have deep, meaningful conversation with someone of another race, socioeconomic group or political viewpoint? What stereotypes of race do you have?

- **Listen.** Listen to people of color. Resist the urge to direct the conversation. Don't ask people of another race to tell you what to do. They should not be asked to bear the burden of teaching you.
- **Learn.** Attend workshops in your area that deal with race and antiracism. Host a training in your church or presbytery. Encourage your workplace, school system or retirement community to host training or send staff for training.
- **Share your story.** Organize gatherings that invite people to tell their story by answering questions such as "What was your earliest experience of race?"
- **Be open.** Put yourself in situations where many races interact on an equal level. Attend lectures where you might be in the minority. Go to plays, movies or concerts that are out of your cultural comfort zone.
- **Act.** Be a bridge-builder. If you see a divide, figure out a healthy way to cross it and to make ways for others to cross with you.
- **Support.** Join your local NAACP branch or SURJ (Showing Up for Racial Justice) chapter. Attend monthly meetings. Attend marches and gatherings that they organize. Support them financially.
- **Persevere.** Do not be afraid to confront racism or classism in yourself. Do not be afraid to name and claim the white privilege that has been and continues to be a part of your life. Do not be afraid to change. 🍌

Mindy Douglas is pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Durham, North Carolina.

Notes

1. "People of color" is used throughout this article to represent people who are not white and who share the common experience of being discriminated against through systemic racism and implicit bias.
2. *Sister Outside: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Ten Speed, 2007), 112.
3. This article is not meant to exclude readers of color. It is meant to reflect the conference discussions and suggestions for white women and men who made up a majority of the conference attendees.



UNDERSTANDING THE GOSPEL *in All Its Dimensions*

"Fuller has a commitment to the gospel in all its dimensions: understanding what it tells us, how we live it out, and how we manifest that in the world," says New Testament Professor Marianne Meye Thompson.

She brings decades of deep biblical scholarship to this task—including a new commentary on the Gospel of John—along with a passion for sharing her expertise with her students, helping them mine Scripture knowledgeably and thoughtfully for insights to guide them in all of life.

At Fuller, learn from leading scholars in biblical studies like Dr. Thompson.

Fuller.edu/MThompson  FULLER