

ANTI-RACISM & ANTI-OPPRESSION FACILITATION ISSUES

1. Acknowledge that this is difficult and challenging work.

Believing in the importance of social and personal change is one thing; doing it is another. Ultimately, anti-racism depends on acting on the belief that personal and social change is possible. Unless people act on their perceptions of themselves as having the ability and the power to impact systems, new knowledge and attitudes are impossible. The underlying goal of our work is for individuals and congregations to become self-motivated activists, able to apply their new consciousness to both their personal and their religious lives. It is tempting and easy for people to become stuck in commiseration about how bad, how pervasive, and how hard racism is to confront rather than focusing on taking responsibility for problem solving. It is also important to emphasize the transgenerational nature of this work, so that people understand that this system which it has taken more than 400 years to build cannot be dismantled quickly and easily. This is work for the long haul!

2. There is a tendency to view the issue as only Black/White.

A large number of people see this only as a black and white issue; ignoring all other people of color in their thinking and discussions. Our task is to use the most inclusive terminology possible and keep reminding people that, since our UU history has been largely an issue of black and white, these are the kinds of stories and examples that come up when we speak of our congregational and denominational experience. However, we are looking to the present and future, and our present includes a much wider diversity of people than in the past, and, of course, our hope is that our future will include far more. It is important to include targeted groups in readings, discussions, examples, and statistics. We also need to acknowledge the effects of color as well as culture and language on the treatment of targeted racial groups.

3. It is not useful to argue about a hierarchy of oppressions.

There is little to be gained in debating which forms of oppression are more damaging or which one is the root out of which all others grow. Each form of oppression is destructive to the human spirit. We can identify ways in which specific forms of oppressions are similar or different, and acknowledge that the dynamics of oppression are similar, even though the histories of different oppressed groups are different.

4. All forms of oppression are interconnected or linked.

Each person is a collage of many social identities. Encourage participants to explore the intersections of their social group memberships and also help them understand the similarities in the dynamics of different forms of oppression.

5. Confronting oppression will benefit everyone.

Even if we are not members of a particular disadvantaged social group, we all have friends, co-workers, and/or family members who are targeted by some form of oppression. When people are subjected to the effects of oppression based on their social group membership, their talents and gifts are lost to all of us. Another way we are hurt by oppression is that many people who are members of groups that benefit from oppression live with a burden of guilt, shame, and helplessness and are never sure if their individual accomplishments are earned or the result of advantages received due to their social group membership. Confronting oppression can free members of all social groups to take action toward social justice. The goal in eliminating oppression is an equitable redistribution of social power and resources among all social groups at all levels (individual, institutional, and cultural). The goal is not to reverse the current power inequity by simply alternating the groups in power positions.

6. Fixing blame helps no one, taking responsibility helps everyone.

There is little to be gained from fixing blame for our heritage of social injustice. We are each born into a social system and are taught to accept it as it is. Nothing is gained by feeling shame about what our ancestors did or what our contemporaries do to different groups of people out of fear, ignorance, or malice. Taking responsibility, in contrast, means acting to address oppression. Rather than becoming lost in a sense of helplessness, our goal is to enable people to understand how they can take responsibility in their everyday lives for confronting social injustice.

7. Learning to be anti-racist is difficult, anxiety-producing, and painful, requiring learning and change at many levels.

People, have for the most part, invested considerable emotional energy in maintaining and protecting their adaptations and accommodations to racism. Their self-identity is intimately tied to their solutions. Even if unresolved questions, confusions, and tensions continue to plague them, they have learned to live and work within the context of their adaptations and will not, in most cases, willingly give up their package of ideas and behaviors without a struggle.

8. Race and ethnicity.

The relationship between race and ethnicity is not a simple one. When we talk about racial groups, we talk about Asian, Black, Latino/a, Native American, and White. Within each of these racial categories are many ethnic identities which often become blurred or lost within the broader racial designation. For example, the Asian racial category includes ethnic groups such as Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Pacific Islanders. White people often do not think of themselves as members of ethnic groups and may not know much about their German, Italian, Irish, French, Polish, English, or Scottish heritages. One of the trade offs for white ethnics who migrated to the United States was to give up their ethnic heritage in return for unnamed racial privilege. The same process, of

course, does not occur for People of Color whose ethnicity gets subsumed under race. Understanding and identifying white ethnicity, especially European ethnicity, sometimes helps people understand how derivatives of Anglo European culture have come to embody the essence of what we mean by “American” culture. Identifying their ethnicity can also help white people affirm aspects of their white identities.

9. Participants with Biracial or Multiracial Identities.

Discussing racial identities and racism with the implicit assumption that all students can clearly place themselves in one racial category or another denies the experience of many people. In reality, most of us are a mix of various racial and ethnic identities. The already complex nature of racism is complicated further for people who identify themselves as biracial and whose families include both oppressor and oppressed. It is important to acknowledge the full diversity of experience with regard to racism, and to allow people to choose for themselves how they wish to identify.

10. Issues of Naming.

Deciding what language to use to refer to different racial groups is a challenging process. Self-chosen names preferred by different racial groups change over time and there is no unanimity in preference for one name over another among members of the same racial group. The rigidity of insisting that only one name is acceptable antagonizes participants and violates the need to name oneself rather than be named.

11. Learning to use emotional energy for constructive change.

Certain group dynamics are especially challenging. A group can get mired in an escalating spiral of guilt and anger, emotions that inevitably arise as participants face the realities and pain of racism. Our task is to help them acknowledge these feelings, understand their sources, and then move on to using their emotional energy for constructive change. Although uncomfortable, these displays of emotions in a nurturing environment are only a prelude to the far more threatening task of confronting oneself and creating change in the real world of work and community.

12. Confronting social injustice is painful AND joyful.

Most people do not want to believe they can harbor unfair prejudices about groups of people. Confronting those prejudices in themselves and others is difficult. Unitarian Universalists need to open themselves to the discomfort and uncertainty of questioning what is familiar, comfortable, and unquestioned. Facing the contradictions between what people have been taught to believe about social justice and the realities of the experiences of different social groups is complex. People learn that some of what they were taught is inaccurate. Some information was not taught at all. People need to be assisted through this process with hope and care. At the same time, most people find that understanding social oppression and taking action against it can be a joyful and

liberating experience. It is our hope that many people will find ways to act on their beliefs and make changes in their personal lives that profoundly affect their personal, professional, and religious lives.

Adapted with permission from *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, Adams, Bell, and Griffin and *Teaching, Learning Anti-Racism*, Derman-Sparks and Phillips.

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