

Why is racism a priority for peace churches?

By Rosemary Crawley, 1 September 2020

Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.¹

Words spoken by Reverend Martin Luther King Junior as part of his, now universally acclaimed “I have a Dream Speech”, delivered in front of the Lincoln Memorial on 28 August 1963 at the March on Washington DC, for Civil Rights

Dr King emphasised the absoluteness of the need for justice for black people, linking it quite explicitly to peace. “now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God’s children..... .. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundation of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.” He demanded again and again the security of justice and liberty as promised in the Emancipation Proclamation signed by President Abraham Lincoln a hundred years earlier and still not delivered.

And still not delivered fifty seven years on...

How can there be justice and peace when black people still can’t breathe?

There can be no peace without justice. Racism is unjust and it is violent.

The three aspects of racism touched upon here include, the micro aggressions of every day racist behaviour, systemic institutionalised racist abuse and the racism inherent within the causes of climate change and the global responses to it. Be in no doubt that all of these forms of racism damage, and in many cases kill people of colour whether directly or indirectly.

The numerous micro-aggressions of day to day to day racism occur as commonly within faith organisations as they do anywhere else in our communities. However, experiencing them within a faith setting is so much more hurtful and damaging, if only because it severely compromises what is potentially a place of refuge. Just like everyone else in a worship space, people of colour need the joy of validation, uplifting and spiritual renewal. Everyday racism comes in addition to the constant fear of public verbal abuse and/or physical attack, and combining that with living in constant fear and expectation of being ‘othered’ and reacting to it when it happens is exhausting and debilitating and plays itself out in our increased vulnerability and susceptibility to so many stress related conditions. A young Friend wrote only too movingly and very recently of her hurt and fear of the opinions and expectations of others about and towards her, a young woman of colour.²

Numerous and varied injustices are perpetrated through the criminal justice systems and asylum and immigration systems of many European countries and the UK and the USA. Such systems are built on racism and hostility towards people from the global south, constructed as they are, popularly and democratically on the basis of institutionalised racial biases and racially constructed projects. For the large part, popular support for this racially biased legislation has gone unchallenged by faith organisations.

The hostile environment of the UK has developed over many years. As far back as 1947 the recruitment of labour from the West Indies was being opposed for a range of racialised reasons. The hostility of the environment was demonstrated in so many ways throughout the early decades of settle-

1 Amos: 5: 24.

2 Bonnie Gibberd: The Friend: 26 June 2020

ment, not least in the national failure to properly accommodate newly recruited migrants. During the second half of the 20th century the growing inadequacy of housing and social services for the entire population led inevitably to increasing resentment of incomers, who were perceived to be depriving the indigenous population of what they considered to be rightfully intended for them.

Neither were the churches free from hostility towards incoming black Christians. There were many stories of an unwelcoming approach which came as an unexpected and genuine shock, and the repercussions of it have played out over subsequent years in the large scale development of black-led churches across the UK. In black worship spaces people are able to feel the sense of community and family that we all need. They can “exhale, relax and breathe together”.³ The legacy of that early hostility lives on in what are now predominantly white churches where the absence of people of colour is at last being seen as a loss and an exclusion, though still without any real understanding of how and why it came about.

The so-called race riots in 1958 in Nottingham and in Notting Hill in London triggered the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrant’s Act which restricted immigration quite specifically from the new or Black Commonwealth, leaving it largely unaffected for immigrants from the old or White Commonwealth

In the years since we have been swamped by a complex and impenetrable mass of legislation: a further acts 14 followed the 1962 Act, culminating in the 2015 Act, which openly introduced itself as setting out to create a hostile environment as though this were a new agenda rather than a continuation and intensification of what had gone before. What was new was the recruitment of health workers, landlords and employers into its enforcement framework.

Few churches have actively opposed the hostility and exclusion explicit within this long term legislative programme

Thirdly climate change; clearly a concern for faith groups, but in Europe and the UK still discussed largely in terms of a future event which is likely to have an impact on the lifestyles that people have come to expect and aspire to. In other words it is seen as a threatened apocalypse which we still might manage to avert, with little recognition that its impact is already with us and has been for many years. The impact of climate change is manifested in the numerous typhoons, hurricanes and floods that now regularly beset communities in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East (the global south) and marginalised people in the global north.

“We don’t need to read the latest scientific reports to know that those least responsible for causing the climate crisis are usually the most vulnerable to its effects, including displacement. And that those people are overwhelmingly poor, black or brown, and in the global south.”⁴

All of these factors threaten peace and security across the world and the idea that churches can effectively work for peace without attention to the racism that underpins and underlies them is clearly absurd.

³ The Outgoing Epistle of the 2020 Virtual Pre-Gathering of Friends of Colour and their Families

⁴ Stop asking people of colour to get arrested for climate change: Tatiana Garavito 7 Nathan Thanki