

## Report on Church and Peace Zoom Conversation on “*How to dismantle White Privilege*”

8 December 2020

“Racism must be a priority concern for peace churches” – this is what we clearly agreed at our first Church & Peace Zoom Meeting in early September, encouraging the Britain & Ireland network to arrange a follow-up meeting two months later, with the audacious title “How to dismantle white privilege”. Once again the event was well-attended, and we were pleased also to welcome Church & Peace members from Germany and Belgium, including our Chairperson Antje Heider-Rottwilm, who reminded us of the words of Rev Dr Sharon Prentis at our September meeting: “We meet God in another person when we move out of our comfort zone.”

To help us move out of our comfort zone and move forward in our thinking, we had turned to Rev Dr Jill Marsh, Mission Enabler for Northampton Methodist Circuit, whose recent PhD dissertation was on the impact of the norming of whiteness in the church. Jill led our conversation in a very practical and supportive way which was greatly appreciated. As a practical theologian whose life experience has been taken up with issues around ethnic diversity and racial justice, she was the ideal person to help us to move on in our thinking.

Jill first of all shared a prayer from the Methodist Worship Book: *Blessed are you, Holy God, for people of every language and culture and for the rich variety you give to life.*

In her doctoral research, Jill has drawn on the work of previous theologians, one being the White American theologian Gary Dorrien who said: *If you live in this society without being constantly reminded of your race, and don't have to worry about representing your race, and can worry about racism without being viewed as self-interested, and don't have to worry about being targeted by the police for your race, then you are a beneficiary of white supremacism.*

As Jill's research developed, she became interested in the impact of the White people in the church on the inter-cultural congregation she was observing. Her list of factors which made a difference includes an intentional decision to celebrate diversity as God-given, a commitment to speaking honestly through “misunderstanding stories”, and a recognition by White people of White privilege and a determination to relinquish that privilege. This last point is essential as without it, inter-cultural churches do not seem to grow healthily as the Body of Christ.

Jill told us that there were some White people (mainly older) who refused to engage formally but who really wanted her to know their views. She pointed out that it is often the gaps and the silences which are most helpful. In this case, the older White people did not know how to talk about ethnicity – they knew that they did not have the right words to express their opinion and this made them unable to express what they were thinking and feeling. Jill developed the concept of “havens” – the need for people to have a place where they can be themselves and can use whatever language and vocabulary they want to, where they can relax and know that they will be understood. While this concept has in the past been used with reference to people who were in a minority group, Jill realised that it is a human need which we all share. The White people in the congregation seemed to be completely oblivious to the fact that they had that need themselves – they had all the White privileges including holding the power positions in the church, having their first language being used in worship, the feeling that they could contribute and influence things. They were hanging on to this because it was their “haven” and they did not want it to change. Informally, they would say for example that they were afraid of becoming a Black-majority church and that they would lose control – but at the same time, they know that they “shouldn't” be thinking those things. Because of the society in which we live and the inherited ideas about Whiteness, the idea that White

people do have something to offer everybody else, that we do have the right to control things and that we probably do know what is best – they felt that they could welcome people, wanted to be friendly, felt benign, had been praying all their lives for people in other countries, supporting people who had gone off to do “good work” in other countries, being generous towards less-advantaged people – but when it came to welcoming those people as brothers and sisters in Christ, wondering what they might offer, allowing them to take some control – the privilege of White people and their lack of awareness mitigated against the church becoming properly multi-cultural.

With the actual question of the evening – *how to dismantle White privilege?* – Jill has focused on talking to White people not because she feels that Black people don’t matter but because White people haven’t spoken enough about this and now need to take responsibility for what is actually their problem. Willie Jennings, a Black American theologian, has posed the question: *Can White people be saved?* If White people refuse to see the problem, recognise that racism is a sin but continue to act in a way which is sinful, are we then limiting God’s ability to save us, are we refusing salvation?

One of Jill’s research participants said: “We do have lots of people other countries here, but that doesn’t make any difference to me.” Her mindset was that these people can come if they want to, she would even be friendly to them, but it wasn’t going to make any difference to how she lived her life or her church life. If however we believe that we are all made in the image of God, then every single time we meet anybody, there is something of God which we have not met before and from which we can learn. To refuse to acknowledge that and to refuse to learn is, in Jill’s view, a sin against the Holy Spirit.

White people need to begin to be honest about their racial identification. Jill has, for example, started to think of herself as a White theologian – all the theology she has been taught has been from a White perspective. Ibram Kendi has said that if we are not being anti-racist, then we will be racist. Jill shared with us some things which we can do, at the level of our local church and in the wider context:

- Recognise our own prejudice – *this is the most basic thing we need to do*
- Commit to being anti-racist
- Listen, read, watch ... other perspectives - *without putting people on the spot*
- Ask questions about anything you see as racist
- Challenge injustice – *we need to be allies wherever injustice is going on, even at the local level e.g. of church committees*
- Open conversations with (other) White people – *ask how diverse a particular committee is if you are invited to join, refuse if you recognise the need for diversity and explain why.*
- Seek reparations
- Check out with friends – *including those from other cultures*
- Introduce yourself as a recovering racist
- Use social media

How do we challenge the structures which perpetuate white privilege? Again, this can be at local level - for example – timing of church meetings is only convenient for certain people?

Some comments on what people have said in chat.

One participant had pointed out the difficulties of saying privilege in relation to other diversities – yes, it is really complicated and we need to be aware of intersectionality. Most of what Jill has said about ethnic diversity would also apply to other diversities such as gender, class, disability.

Missionaries and colonialists started to be aware of their whiteness in relation to other people's difference and began to make categorisations about which people were better than others, the right to take people's land, and ultimately leading to the current environmental disaster.

We need to keep on having conversations about this instead of just being vaguely aware of it.

Winnie Gordon, Unitarian minister, recommends that every one of us needs to look at our own actions – if you're not being anti-racist, then you need to put yourself into the "racist" category. Recommended book "Me and white supremacy". Winnie had been doing research into inclusivity in Unitarian movement. After George Floyd's death, the church organised a zoom conference to discuss their response. They set up a book group where everybody received an actual copy of the book and discussed it over eight weeks.

Jill mentioned Rugby Methodist Church which has recorded interviews "Walking in another's shoes" which are available on their Facebook page – this could be a good model for other churches to follow.

Jonathan Dale pointed out the link between prejudice and racism, and the importance of understanding power structures and our imperialist past. This is important for people in the UK as there are voices which want us to be supportive and positive about our colonialist past and thus undermine the anti-racist position.

Helen Horton reminded us that in all-white communities such as some schools, you often hear the view that "It's not a problem here", but she feels that these are exactly the places where work needs to be done.

Jill wonders about setting up a "Racists Anonymous" network so that we can support each other, hold each other accountable and measure any possible progress. She fears that the response to George Floyd's death will be passing and that we need to ensure that we keep it up.

Davorka Lovrekovic asked what the opposite of "racist" would be? As well as having to say "Yes, I am a racist" – she feels the need to nourish something positive by finding a term which could describe this. People need a vision of where we are heading to. Jill said that Ibram Kendi would say that "anti-racist" is the most positive thing you could be – the term is political and active. Although the Methodist Church has a strategy called "Inclusive Church", she feels that this implies that some people have the power to include other people.

At the close of the meeting, Church & Peace Chair Antje Heider-Rottwilm expressed the hope that we would be strong enough to take this concern forward in all its many dimensions.

*Report by Barbara Forbes, Board member of Church and Peace*