

SACRED GROUND

A FILM-BASED DIALOGUE SERIES ON RACE AND FAITH

INVITATION AND INTRODUCTION



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INVITATION AND INTRODUCTION: What this is and for whom it is designed

Set up road markers for yourself, make yourself guideposts; consider well the highway, the road by which you went. Return, O Israel, return to these your cities.

—Jeremiah 31:21

Understand that this is sacred ground and it hurts to walk here. But at the same time, I “need” to walk here, need the strength, the sense of purpose, the knowledge of self, that walking here imparts. ... What do I want from you? I want you to be my sister and to walk here with me. I know it’s a hard walk. I know it causes you pain. But this much I also know: If ever we learn to tread this ground together, there’s no place we can’t go.

—Leonard Pitts, Jr.

My commitment to racial justice is both on behalf of the other – my neighbor, whose well-being I desire – and for myself, to whom the gift of life has been given but not yet fully claimed.

—The Rev. Rebecca Parker

But the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. The type of love that I stress here is not eros, a sort of esthetic or romantic love; not philia, a sort of reciprocal love between personal friends; but it is agape which is understanding goodwill for all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of men. This is the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization.

—The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

What follows is a description of the Sacred Ground Dialogue Series curriculum and the thinking behind it, by way of extending a heartfelt invitation for you to either organize or join a dialogue circle in your community to participate in transformational conversation about race. The series is part of the Becoming Beloved Community initiative of The Episcopal Church, a long-term commitment to racial healing, reconciliation, and justice in our personal lives, our ministries, and our society.

This is a race dialogue series designed for these times. It is an attempt to be responsive to the profound challenges that currently exist in our society. It is focused on the challenges that swirl around issues of race and racism, as well as the difficult but respectful and transformative dialogue we need to have with each other about them. It invites participants to walk back through history in order

to peel away the layers that brought us to today, and to do so in a personal way, reflecting on family histories and stories, as well as important narratives that shape the collective American story. It holds the vision of beloved community as a guiding star – where all people are honored and protected and nurtured as beloved children of God, where we weep at one another’s pain and seek one another’s flourishing.

By way of overview, here are some key characteristics of the Sacred Ground Dialogue Series:

- It is built around powerful documentary films and readings, which we are pleased to bring you and which will serve as the jumping-off point for dialogue.
- The series brings participants’ attention to various key chapters in U.S. history of race and racism, as well some of the latest thinking by scholars and practitioners of racial healing, racial equity, and whiteness.
- It focuses on Indigenous, Black, Latino, and Asian American histories as they intersect with European American histories.
- It emphasizes personal story-sharing and deepening relationships.
- It invites exploration of how people of color have been harmed by racism, and how white people have been hurt in other ways, creating a shared – if deeply unequal – brokenness that compels us to overcome these legacies in deliberate partnership. This work can take various shapes.
- It strongly encourages people to constitute dialogue groups with socioeconomic and political diversity, which may involve partnering with another congregation or organization.
- It puts attention on issues related to race, while also examining how those issues intersect with family history, class status, regional identity (regional cultures, urban/rural divides, coasts versus heartland), and political identity (red states/blue states, Trump-related divides).
- This series, framed as a spiritual journey, is grounded in the Christian faith – in the example of Jesus Christ and the power of scripture, prayer, God’s grace, and the Holy Spirit to help us step closer to the dream of beloved community.

A critical consideration is the racial composition of your dialogue circle. So often, people of color are called on to do the heavy lifting around unpacking “race,” while whites take a more passive role (if any role at all). Therefore, please note that the Study Guide is written from the point of view of a white woman primarily for use by other white people, in the spirit of building a stronger foundation for whites to engage in ongoing interracial dialogue in other spaces. At this stage in American life and in the life of our Church, white Episcopalians and other white people could make an especially powerful contribution to the journey toward racial justice and reconciliation by entering into deep listening and dialogue with each other, some of whom may be significantly and uncomfortably different from themselves. These differences could be in terms of socioeconomic and political perspectives, and at root, differences in perception of what ails this country with respect to race and class.

Even with the emphasis on what may be termed “white work,” the curriculum is flexible and will work if the Spirit leads to the formation of interracial dialogue circles. There are many reasons to take this approach, especially if the congregation is at the stage in its racial healing and justice journey in which whites can be in open, responsible conversation with people of color, and people of color will not

need to “take care of” white peers as they come to terms with various dimensions of racism. If you are a person of color, please take a look at the Study Guide and see if it speaks to you, even with its tilt toward a white audience.

Congregations are invited to take the time for prayerful discernment around this question. What important conversations might flow from gathering a group of white people who are diverse in various ways? What healing work is best accomplished intra-racially, and what can be done best inter-racially? Or perhaps you wish to organize with a hybrid approach of some “together” time and some “affinity group” time. There is more food for thought on these tender questions in the “Organizing a Dialogue Circle” section of the Study Guide. This process of collective discernment is itself a valuable process, and we trust that the Spirit will lead.

However you constitute as a group, please use this resource to engage, with open hearts and minds, across a range of divides.

A FEW WORDS FROM SACRED GROUND AUTHOR KATRINA BROWNE ABOUT THE MOTIVATION BEHIND THIS SERIES

Some of you know me from my documentary film *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*. The film follows me and family members as we come to grips with our discovery that our Rhode Island ancestors were the largest slave-trading family in U.S. history. Our journey retracing the Triangle Trade, and the journey I’ve taken with the finished film for over a dozen years, have been profoundly humbling and transformative. These travels and encounters have given me windows into whiteness that were absent in my formal education. This curriculum is a reflection of what I’ve had the blessing to learn and consider over these years, and it is an honor to be able to pass on some of the great work of filmmakers, writers, and race dialogue practitioners who have impacted me. A wonderful group of advisors to this project have also left their valuable imprint on the content.

As you can imagine, I have had my eyes opened in countless ways with regard to the confounding, thorny, troubled terrain of black/white relations and equity issues in this country – the histories and legacies of slavery. It is a maze that cries out for our devoted, careful, steady walking. The work of repair is so incomplete. I have seen congregations and dioceses that are applying themselves faithfully to this work.

And the plot continued to thicken for me – with more and more layers coming into view, extending beyond black/white issues. First were the unresolved issues between white Northerners (or “non-Southerners”) and white Southerners. When the film came out, I had screenings in the South. I confess noticing right away my own deeply ingrained prejudice against white Southerners, often triggered the moment I heard their accents. Having steeped myself in the history of massive Northern complicity in slavery and racism, I was struck by the hypocrisy of this kind of white Northern self-righteousness. Who were we to look down our noses? The revelations then came fast and furious. If we aren’t all that we’ve cracked ourselves up to be (not only white Southerners, but black Americans have known this for a while, for example, referring to the North as “Up South”), then did I need to rethink the meaning behind the widespread resentment expressed by white Southerners when they

refer to “liberal elites” in Washington, New York, Boston, and Los Angeles telling them what to do and being, essentially, “know-it-alls”?

The white South, of course, has much to atone for still, but I’ll never forget the white Southern woman who came up to me in tears after a screening, saying essentially, “We’ve had to bear this shame alone. We’ve needed you to own it, too.” One of the readings that is part of this dialogue series helps put all this in even greater perspective. In *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*, Colin Woodard explains that the antipathy between New England and the South goes back to the British Isles.

Things in this country begin to make more sense with this longer view. Our red state/blue state divides aren’t entirely about history, but the strength of longstanding cultural differences and resentments (“my people” versus “those people”) shouldn’t be underestimated. Hence the importance of doing white work and getting one’s own house in order before, or concurrent with, showing up more broadly for racial justice.

Then, after the 2016 election, I read books and articles about white working-class Trump voters, many of whom reportedly feel ignored and left behind. Joan Williams’ book, *White Working Class*, forced me to take an uncomfortable look in the mirror. As a liberal who has spent her life in what Williams calls the “professional managerial elite” (by her reckoning, the upper 20 percent of Americans), I had attention for many aggrieved groups, but not for the white poor and white working class. The fact that the economic recovery since 2008 has been uneven – benefitting some parts of the country much more than others – is not on the radar screens of so many who, like me, live in more financially resourced urban centers. And this, of course, ties back to issues of race and racism because where you stand economically strongly shapes your views on these contentious subjects. Messy.

Americans of all stripes – religious, political, socioeconomic, racial/ethnic – are anxious that we’re coming apart as a nation. But if we’re honest, many of us also might feel we don’t need those “others” – those we deem our “enemies,” even if we don’t use that word. We feel most comfortable in a nation controlled by those who think like us. But as the Rev. Stephen Phelps says, “The dove, for one, needs its right wing and left wing to fly.” In his book *Beyond the Messy Truth*, Van Jones calls on liberals and conservatives to engage in a “politics of confession” rather than a “politics of accusation.” Humble pie.

Two more layers bear naming here: First, people of Asian American, Native American, and Latino heritage are understandably deeply frustrated by what they feel is the over-focus on black/white issues in race dialogues and policy debates. There is an intensity to the black/white mess that has a kind of centrifugal force to it. How can each of us grow to create ever more spacious attention in our heads and hearts for a broader range of communities and individuals? The diversity of this experimental nation can be dizzying, but the film *American Creed* reminds us of the core national values that can hold us all together, including the profound concept of *e pluribus unum*.

And, lastly, how do we grow in healthy, compassionate attention for ourselves, whoever we may be? We are asked to love our neighbor as ourselves. Perhaps we aren’t good at loving our neighbors

because we aren't good at loving ourselves, or at letting in the love of God. Grappling with race and racism can actually be deeply healing for white people as well as people of color. Hence the beauty of the Rev. Rebecca Parker's quote.

I invite you to join me, and the team that collaborated on this resource, in peeling away layers. If we enter the sacred ground of the labyrinth to walk back in time, see the markers along the highway showing where we went astray, ask genuine questions of our history, be humble students of our past, acknowledge the harms done and the harms endured – if we can do these things, then God willing, we can eventually come to some centered spot, take stock, see, sense, feel, mourn, pray, and then turn and walk back out, together.