

From the PES' Ending Racism Task Force:

A Response from Our Ethical Society to the American Ethical Union's Call for "Repairing the Harm of Racism"

by Nick Sanders

AEU's Call: "We [the 2017 Assembly of American Ethical Union] urge Societies, in addition to studying the overall problem [of racism], to find one or more areas to focus on where such injustice is experienced: educational opportunities, income and wealth, housing and food access, environmental racism, cultural erasure and exploitation, the criminal justice system including incarceration, and health care." From <https://aeu.org/resource/2017-toward-repairing-the-harm-of-racism/>

Considerations: Prior to this call, a couple of years ago our Ethical Society established a subcommittee of the Ethical Action Committee on "Confronting (revised later to "Ending ...) Racism." Its goals "include understanding and admitting to white privilege and ending racism, be it individual, group and/or systemic by motivating ourselves and our congregation to unlearn our personal biases and work to undo institutional racism throughout society."

These goals imply at least three directions: personal, congregational, and wider-world. For the personal direction, we have shared with one another racial issue materials that are personally meaningful, and have had potluck dinners at which we have explored in a comfortable, non-threatening environment our individual past experiences with, and current understandings of, racism. The number of us at these monthly potlucks has grown steadily over the year, and as individuals we have grown as well in our realization of the advantages of being white (which most at these gatherings have been).

As for the congregational direction of our group's goals, we have presented brief reflections (mostly from or about African American culture and history) during the Ethics-in-Action portion of Sunday platforms. In this regard, we have received feedback that some in attendance have felt unduly chastised, and as a result we have become more careful in our manner and in the content chosen, to convey a hope for positive change rather than a generalized blame for past behavior.

In addition to the Ethics-in-Action presentations, we have written columns (such as this one) for our Society's monthly newsletters. These columns allow us more words than the Sunday presentations, but the intent is the same: to inform and suggest actions by us together for ending racism. Also, we have sought to increase opportunities for members of our congregation to relate to members of a predominantly African-American congregation by visiting a prayer session of that congregation and hosting an interactive discussion for them at our Society. To build this relationship, we are exploring other cooperative activities, such as participating in their winter wear collection project for the needy. Finally, with regard for wider-world direction, our major involvements have been with the interfaith, social action coalition Pennsylvanians Organized to Witness, Empower, and Rebuild (POWER).

Our work with POWER has included meeting with government and other officials, joining demonstrations, and otherwise supporting actions on behalf of justice: For increasing the minimum wage and supporting organization of workers in lower-paid jobs (occupied disproportionately by people of color); for correcting the racial bias in the state's funding of school districts and returning local control of public schools; for ending de facto racial discrimination in the criminal justice system before, during and after incarceration; and for other types of injustice where persons of color are overwhelmingly represented. And not inconsequentially, our work with POWER has also placed us among a great diversity of other concerned congregations and given us experience in working under the general leadership of people of color.

Our Response to AEU's call for repairing the harm: Up to this point in time our Ending Racism subcommittee has been working on ending racism. The AEU call is for repairing the harm caused by racism. The former suggests that if we could just put a stop to what's happening now, everything would be all right, and people of color—especially African-Americans—could “just get over it.” However, as we have recently been learning from the impressive book *The Debt*, by Randall Robinson, and from other sources (including the AEU resolution from which this call is taken), it is hard to think of ending racism without some success in repairing the harm of racism. Thus, we have been seeking ways in which we can work meaningfully on that concern.

Because we believe that repairing the harm of racism deserves attention at the national level, we are considering support of the legislation that has been proposed in every session of the U.S. House of Representatives in recent years, “(t)o address the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery in the United States and the 13 American colonies between 1619 and 1865 and to establish a commission to study and consider a national apology and proposal for reparations for the institution of slavery, its subsequent *de jure* and *de facto* racial and economic discrimination against African-Americans, and the impact of these forces on living African-Americans, to make recommendations to Congress on appropriate remedies, and for other purposes.” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/40> Because the co-sponsors of this bill do not include some of our local representatives, we may lobby them to become co-sponsors to this or a similar bill.

If you are interested in joining us in this effort, please let us know how you would like to be involved and your contact information >>> ethicalaction@phillyethics.org