

**ANTI-RACISM AUDIT REPORT**  
**Gifts of the Red Tent: Women Creating**  
**Women Doing Theology Conference**  
**May 16-18, 2003**

Imagine attending a conference for “women doing theology” and hearing this announcement in the opening plenary:

There are eight of us from the Lancaster area of Pennsylvania who have planned this weekend, and it is immensely gratifying to have so many of you here. [We are] Moniqua Acosta, Michelle E. Armster, Debra Gingerich, Beth E. Graybill, Tina Hartman, Trish Haverstick, Mary Lou Weaver Houser and myself, Jane Hooper Peifer.

We learned some amazing things about ourselves, and the systems that we are apart of, in the planning process.

As we began brainstorming about the rich variety of God gifts that come to us in the rich variety of women in our church, we worked hard to include a “good mix” of women of color and white women for speakers—for workshop leaders—etc.

And yet we realized that as we moved deeper into the planning of this conference, we were falling into the trap of multi-cultural tokenism as it applies to racism—racism that continues to be real in our world and in our churches.

So we stopped. And we took a good hard look at what was happening. And we made some changes.

1. We decided that instead of following the academic model of having a presenter and one respondent, we would create a dialogue between two women of color and two white women following each presentation, with the speaker identifying one or two questions for them to “talk about” together (this is what you’ll see called dialogical response or dialogue in the order of worship. A fuller description of it is in your packet).

2. Secondly, we decided that we would invite two women to do an Anti-racism audit of this conference, and I want you to know who these women are: Pauline Aguilar and Sharon Williams. They will review everything from the planning process to all of the happenings this weekend. They are looking at: who was asked to do what, how decisions were and are made throughout the weekend, how money was spent, etc. And they are available for you to make your observations to, as well. Then their written audit will be included in an upcoming issue of *Women’s Concerns Newsletter* and the MCC web site.

3. We decided that I would tell you all, on opening night, about our desire and attempt to make this an anti-racist conference.

As a planning committee, we are letting you in on some of the process of our planning, confessing with you the ongoing journey of imaging and living out the gospel of Jesus Christ where indeed all things are made new and the old stifling and restricting human systems are pronounced dead by the One who came among us, preaching freedom and release, new sight for the blind, and just plain good news.

May God grant us the grace to stay on this journey of imaging a world where peace and justice are known by all.<sup>1</sup>

The goals for the conference were equally stunning:

The conference is to be a forum for Mennonite and Brethren in Christ women to work on theological issues and to provide a meeting place for women and men who are interested in exploring the theological voices of women. It is to be a place where all different women can come together to talk and learn with each other. The desire to be anti-racist came from the desire of the planning committee to have a conference where truly all women are welcome, and encouraged to use their voices.<sup>2</sup>

## **UNIQUE REQUEST**

As far as we know, no other Anabaptist organization has ever asked for an anti-racism audit of its public events. Racism was not the theme of the event, but the planning committee clearly desired to have the conference be as welcoming and inclusive of people of color as possible, looking for ways to raise awareness of the ever-present barriers that exist and ways to dismantle those barriers.

## **CONTEXT AND A CRISIS**

The Planning Committee was comprised of two women of color and six white women. Some are MCC US staff persons, others are on Women's Concerns board of advisors, and others are volunteers who agreed to help plan the conference. While women of color were being invited as presenters, responders and workshop leaders, a crisis arose when a white woman was asked to respond (publicly critique) a presentation by a woman of color. Due to the cultural context and personal content of the presentation, the committee was made aware that this arrangement was not appropriate. The committee began to struggle with this issue and other decisions that had already been set in motion. They realized that their work had fallen into typical patterns of tokenism and racist multi-culturalism. They were inviting a few women of color to bring leadership, but defaulting to patterns which maintained power and privilege for white people. The original plan actually called for a similar scenario with a second presentation. What appeared to be

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<sup>1</sup>Jane Hooper Piefer, opening remarks in plenary session for Gifts of the Red Tent: Women Creating, May 16, 2003.

<sup>2</sup>“Pre-Audit Information”, prepared by the Women Doing Theology Planning Committee, p. 3.

an equitable balance (two out of three presenters were women of color, one out of three responders was a woman of color) was giving inappropriate “last word” power and critique to white people.

The crisis was identified in February 2003. With only a few months before the conference, some members of the committee really struggled to understand the importance of the crisis. How could they make drastic changes midstream? How could they “uninvite” or reassign persons who were already preparing their assignments? The committee, having already set a course to explore different approaches to doing theology through the arts, turned to a dialogical approach for the response to the presentations, one that is more culturally appropriate in communities of color and that can model the inclusion of different voices.

The committee chose to acknowledge their dilemma to the presenters, dialogical respondents, artistic respondents, and worship leaders. With some struggle, the committee called for a time of caucusing as women of color and white women to work through the issues, personal concerns and changes. Most of the women chose to participate and found it very helpful.

The three original respondents were invited to form the Dialogical Table, and another woman of color was added to this group. Together, the responders interacted with all three presentations, using two questions provided by each presenter.

Out of this crisis, the committee also began to look at other aspects of the conference that were falling into the trap of systemic racism. How could the presence, theologies, gifts, experiences and concerns of women of color be honored “under the red tent?” The planning committee decided to call for this anti-racism audit as a way to assess the journey towards anti-racism, to hold themselves accountable in their desire to offer an event that was inclusive of and collaborative with people of color, and to share their experience and learnings with their institution and constituents.

## **STRENGTHS OF THE CONFERENCE**

Two actions chosen by Planning Committee members greatly strengthened the event’s movement towards an anti-racist stance. First, the growing commitment of the committee to change their plans and ways of working in order to bring about a more anti-racist event was key. The call for and public acknowledgment of the need for an anti-racism audit demonstrated their deep commitment and courage. Knowing they could not stem the tide of systemic racism in one weekend event, they still willingly submitted their work to this scrutiny, acknowledging it as part of the journey towards seeking wholeness in the faith community. The committee is to be commended for taking the initial crisis seriously, and their willingness to make necessary correctives, even though it required more work and energy. The Planning Committee’s commitment to this process was also evident in the post-conference caucusing and debriefing time spent with the auditors. All but one member was able to arrange extra time to meet together around these issues at the end of a long weekend of hosting the conference.

The second action that impacted the movement towards creating an anti-racist event was the creation of the Dialogical Table. Participants of color and white participants expressed great appreciation for this innovation. The diversity of the responders (ethnicity, roles as church leaders, academic training and life experiences) began to “represent”, to give voice to the variety of participants at the conference. Their interaction with the presentations and with each other was a wonderful model of the “hermeneutical circle”. This practice of theological discernment is known well in many ancient and contemporary cultures. It is also an Anabaptist way of doing theology that, unfortunately, is often valued more in theory than in present-day practice. The Dialogical Table opened pathways of understanding and application to the three presentations in its rich cross-fertilization of scriptural interpretation, cultural background, and personal stories. By the second presentation, participants were eager to hear from the Table, even though the session was running longer than promised.

Several other things that contributed to the dismantling of racism were already in place.

- All members of the Planning Committee, (except one) have varying levels of anti-racism analysis training through the Damascus Road Anti-racism Process. Some of the Committee members have taken additional Damascus Road anti-racism organizing training and are active on DR teams with their respective institutions. This greatly enhanced the committee’s ability to work together through the crisis and to stand together in finding anti-racist ways to organize their work. A high level of trust was evident in the way they were able to work together and self-evaluate the outcomes.
- The Artistic Responses to each presentation included a monologue by a white woman, a drama by 2 white women, and a dramatic reading by a woman of color. A dramatic story read and sung by two women of color was also shared in the Saturday morning worship. These skillful interpretations seemed to speak to everyone and provided insight with which everyone could relate.
- The worship on Sunday morning received high compliments for its inclusivity. Led primarily by women of color and accompanied by an impromptu worship band, it featured a mix of hymns and spirited music, inviting spontaneous, worshipful movement. The Scripture passage was read in Spanish and English. People of color were visibly relaxed and fully participating. This worship time set the tone by inviting the Spirit to move and work among us, and opened “space” for everyone to respond in worship as they felt led.
- White committee members spoke later of their conscious determination to let leaders of color have control of the tasks they had been asked to fulfill. This came into play with the presenters, responders, worship and music leaders and workshop leaders. It meant letting go of the need to micro-manage details, such as requiring a printed order of worship for plenary sessions. Even when opportunities to close a session or have the final benediction were offered by leaders of color to white leaders, the white leaders supported the women of color to fulfill these responsibilities.

- Many participants expressed appreciation for the variety of workshops, reminders that everyone can “do theology” through the arts. Workshops were led by white women, African-American women and a Native American woman.
- Approximately 20% of the total group were women and men of color (some were international students who were studying at the university). The Planning Committee intentionally and creatively invited women of color to give leadership and provided financial scholarships as needed. This was the highest percentage of people of color to ever attend a Women Doing Theology conference. Some women of color remarked that they felt they were among friends, not just acquaintances.

## **EXPANDING THE TENT**

Even though 75 yards of bright red “tent” material suspended above us symbolized the welcome and embrace of everyone, this conference left room for expanding its full inclusion of all women. Several women identified times when it did not feel safe to think of themselves in terms of their ethnicities. These examples were noted:

- The use of language, unfounded assumptions, and white people’s propensity for perfection were problematic. References to “you people” and “dark spirits” were occasionally made throughout the conference. Assumptions about the freedom or prohibition around dancing were stereotyped by ethnicity. When it quietly but quickly became known that the knotting of comforters, a project offered throughout the weekend, had to be done “right”, most women of color chose not to participate. And although comforters are needed and distributed all over the world, it was proudly announced that the 6 comforters knotted that weekend were going to Russia.
- Music and worship styles were often cited as barriers to full inclusion, especially on Friday and Saturday. In these services, the contributions of women of color became token in the larger scheme of things. Saturday’s Communion service took on a multi-cultural dimension as six breads from different continents were offered by two women of color and four white women, and participants were invited to name our sisters from around the world who join us at Christ-Sophia’s Table. But the music and the imagery were unfamiliar and uninviting to some. Much lip service was given to the need to free ourselves to move and dance as an act of worship, but it was not included in the services. By contrast, the worship service on Sunday became the “day of color”.
- The location of the conference was identified as a barrier. An urban setting with a concentration of congregations of color would have encouraged more participation by people of color. The additional cost of transportation to and from a major airport was also a concern. (The planning committee noted that they did inquire about several urban locations, but Eastern Mennonite University was the only place available for this weekend.)

- Typical of programs planned by white-dominated groups, the weekend was “too full” of things to do. One white planning committee member commented that white people measure success by how much they cram into a given time period. Women of color called for more time to relax together and build relationships.
- White women were clearly “in charge” of the event’s logistics and hosting, by virtue of their staff assignments within Mennonite Central Committee US (MCC US).
- It appeared that white theologians, scholars, professors and denominational leaders consciously or unconsciously chose to boycott this year’s conference. Those present had either been asked to provide leadership or live in the area. One person, while appreciative of the emphasis on anti-racism and inclusion, did not perceive that the conference had much to offer professionals.

## **THE PROCESS OF DISMANTLING RACISM**

Persons who have completed the Damascus Road (or other) anti-racism analysis training are familiar with the “Continuum on Becoming an Anti-Racist Church”, a tool used for discerning the progress of a white congregation or faith-based institution towards becoming anti-racist. Dismantling systemic racism truly is a process that can not be achieved in a weekend event or even a 2-3 year project. But thinking about this conference in light of the continuum was a helpful exercise.

The auditors and the Planning Committee placed the conference in “Symbolic Change” (the third of six stages). One person of color named a range of “moving from Passive (stage 2) to Symbolic Change,” and some white people saw glimpses of “Identity Change” (stage 4). This range of perception is not unusual.

The Planning Committee’s announcement in the opening plenary session definitely “gave notice” to participants that anti-racism was highly valued. It served to redirect the usual complaints of white people when efforts to be inclusive become uncomfortable. Tolerance of racial and cultural differences was accepted by the participants publicly. But habits of white power and privilege still prevailed, as well as tokenism. Individuals were naming their power, but the systemic realities were, and are, very prevalent. While the Planning Committee grew in its resolve to create a conference that lived out anti-racist values, a disconnect between intentions and results still remained in many ways.

The auditors commend the Planning Committee’s direction and actions, which strengthened the event’s inclusion of people of color. This single event does give hope that movement towards being anti-racist is possible! In the context of MCC US’s ongoing struggle to dismantle systemic racism in its midst, as well as prior Women Doing Theology Conferences, this conference stood on the edge of representing real change. Future events will be assessed by forward or backward anti-racist change, based on what happened this year.

## **THE WELCOME MUST NOT END: Recommendations for Moving Forward**

One of the biggest fears noted by the women of color was that when white people and institutions make a little progress around issues of racism, they cease to recognize the need to continue in the struggle. Therefore, we strongly recommend the following actions:

First, it is imperative for MCC and all its entities, including Women's Concerns, to continue to strive to dismantle systemic racism within the institution. The gains made at this conference would not have been possible without it.

For future conferences and events:

- Make anti-racism a high priority--that all voices are heard and included. Claim and work at an anti-racist emphasis from the beginning of the planning. Start with the statement made public on Friday night. Learn from this experience.
- Provide Damascus Road (or other) anti-racism analysis training for all planning committee members, presenters, workshop leaders, responders, and other key leaders. (We note the distinction between anti-racism training that focuses on individual and systemic realities of racism and "multi-cultural sensitivity training" or "diversity training.")
- Empower more women of color to be involved as planners and leaders from the outset. This necessitates that white people understand and live into the anti-racism analysis, learning to work together in collaborative ways and to share the power with people of color. Nurture your working relationships in ways that will help the group weather the inevitable crises in anti-racist ways.
- Continue to provide rich opportunities to learn from the biblical interpretations, hear the voices of and build cross cultural connections with different people groups. White theologians, scholars, pastors and other church leaders should be encouraged to participate and willingly learn from and lend support to people of color in the tasks of "doing theology" and ministry.
- Plan increased free time for relaxing and building relationships.
- Continue to provide scholarships for people of color in need of assistance.

## **CONCLUSION**

The accomplishments of this Women Doing Theology Conference are a positive beginning. But we must not stop here. Racism was named, steps were taken to own our part in it. Now we must find ways to continue the process. It is important to recognize that racism demeans everyone involved and we are in this together. As religious institutions, we too frequently hide behind

words and scripture passages that provide an escape from calling racism what it is, which is sin. Jesus exhorted the religious institutions of his time to move beyond the words and challenged the comfortable structures and systems that continued to perpetuate oppression. This is also our struggle and challenge.

Let us continue forward ... This work will pierce our hearts, challenge our theology and move us to experience redemption again. In the evaluations, several of the participants noted that this was a new day in their experiences with Mennonite events, to have work on racism woven throughout. It is a new day—we must continue making it anew for each other.

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