

## **Ministry for Racial Reconciliation and Healing** **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**

### **Why is Session coming out with this Statement? Why now?**

This issue is obviously not a new one, not to VPC, and not to Session. Racism, and issues of racial justice, have always been present in our society and, therefore, in the Church. For example, in 1948 the Session of VPC was faced with the decision of whether to conform with the segregated Virginia society and refuse a Black pastor as part of the Presbytery pulpit exchange, or to stand apart and on principle--it chose the latter (Built by Faith Called to Serve, pages 66-67). Additionally the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) addressed this issue in the Confession of 1967, and we encourage you to review it. That said, we, like many in our country and around the world, have been affected by the killing of George Floyd, and other similar injustices, and we believe that this is a moment to address this pivotal issue. We hope that this Statement, and the creation of the Ministry for Racial Reconciliation and Healing, will help to amplify the many efforts that are already ongoing on this topic to help address the problem.

### **What is the Ministry for Racial Reconciliation and Healing?**

This is a group made up of leaders in our church who are empowered by Session to act resolutely to address this issue, including but not limited to the following:

- a. Assist Session, Leadership Team, and Staff to understand more fully how the sin of racism affects VPC and how it can be combated;
  
- b. Assist the Congregation in learning more about the subject, acknowledge corporate sin, and be invited and urged to implement specific actions toward reconciliation;
  
- c. Support VPC's learning communities and small groups in discussions on race and racial reconciliation;
  
- d. Conduct outreach to African Americans, and other marginalized groups, in the community to learn how we can be more invitational and be in more consistent relationship with them; and;
  
- e. Hold town hall meetings and host speakers and engagements on the topic, including with the broader community and with other churches.

### **What are the goals of this effort and of the Ministry for Racial Reconciliation and Healing?**

The Ministry for Racial Reconciliation and Healing has three main goals:

#### **1. Mourning With Those Who Mourn**

- The Ministry will share in the pain of the Lord's people through: prayer, listening, speaking, and acting.
- The Ministry will help all age groups within VPC take advantage of opportunities available to identify with those who are marginalized because of racism.

## **2. Becoming like Christ Together (VPC leadership)**

- The Ministry will assist VPC leadership, including Staff, the Deacon Board, and Session, in assessing the corporate organization of VPC, our rhythms, practices, and policies, specifically reviewing structures within VPC's governance and operations that may be improved to respond to a greater understanding of the effects of racism in our society (e.g., staffing, nominating leadership, hiring, church communications, etc.).
- The Ministry will assist in ongoing efforts focused on racial healing, serve to connect those efforts with leadership where needed, and generally help raise the profile of existing efforts, and where a need or opportunity is identified, lead new efforts.

## **3. Becoming like Christ Together for the World (Congregation and Community)**

- The Ministry should begin by understanding where our congregation is in regards to this issue of race and justice acknowledging the ways that we may be falling short in understanding each others' backgrounds and experiences that form our perspectives within the Body.
- The Ministry should help to create the space for ongoing conversations and connect the congregation with the larger Body of Christ and community in ways that may help create meaningful encounters that change hearts.
- The Ministry should work with existing efforts at VPC to help incorporate VPC into the greater community more deeply and richly, especially across racial lines.

### **Isn't VPC already doing a lot for racial reconciliation?**

There are already a number of fantastic initiatives that VPC has been a part of and we encourage everyone to enter into the conversation, as possible. For example, our Christ and Culture Adult Learning Community led a 12-week series this summer; those recordings are available. Our long-standing ministry partner, The Great Banquet Community, has been offering a substantive interactive educational series called "Uncomfortable Conversations." As well, our Friday noon prayer calls provide powerful witnesses and opportunities for prayer and discussion. The Ministry for Racial Reconciliation and Healing is not meant to be a substitute for these efforts, but is, instead, meant to amplify, assist with, and encourage new efforts along these lines. Additionally, the Ministry is to help the staff and leadership of VPC review our corporate practices and also see how we can do more.

### **What is meant by "systemic racism?"**

We define systemic racism as systems and structures that have procedures or processes that disadvantage certain racial groups. For example, such disadvantage may be seen in how laws are drafted or enforced (e.g., different sentences for similar offenses that lead to Blacks being incarcerated more often and for longer time than Whites), how economic processes are carried out (e.g., the effects on current home ownership based on practices like “redlining”), or that result in restricted access to employment or educational opportunities. These disadvantages may be the result of current overt or conscious racism, but they may also be the result of past racism or covert or unconscious bias.

### **How does this differ from “institutional racism”?**

Institutional racism is similar in nature to systemic racism, but just as it relates to a specific institution or institutions.

### **Isn’t “systemic racism” a politically charged word?**

We do not believe that this issue is a partisan issue, nor is the word itself indicative of any political leaning. It has also been used for some time in the Christian context.

For example, the term is also used by churches of all types seeking to address the sin of racism in society. For reference, you can see several representative statements here:

[PCUSA Facing Racism \(2016 Policy\)](#)

[Evangelical Covenant Order \(ECO\) Racial Reconciliation](#)

[Southern Baptist Convention Resolution on Racial Reconciliation](#)

[PCA Statement on Heinous Killings](#)

### **Don’t we need to change hearts and minds?**

Yes! Changing hearts and minds is crucial to the mission of VPC as we aim to become like Christ together for the world! It is also key to success in overcoming the sin of racism. A key part of that process is identifying the insidiousness of the sin itself, how it can affect our institutions and our everyday lives. As with all sin, the effects of racism ripple through time and across spheres of our lives. As we listen to our brothers and sisters who have suffered the effects of current and past racism at the individual, institutional, and systemic level, we further our understanding and take necessary steps in that process of becoming more like Christ together for the world.

### **Does hurtful racism ever happen within the walls and programs of VPC?**

This is one of those questions that seems to have an obvious answer to most of us—and depending on who you are—the “obvious” answers may be diametrically opposed! Many of us typically don’t see racism in ourselves, or our church, while others of us, especially VPC members of color, ask instead “how is it possible not to see

racism that still occurs in our society, and within VPC?” This divide in experience, and perception about other people’s experience, is one part of what MRRH aims to bridge at VPC.

Conversations that include people of multiple races and experiences help to clarify both of these companion questions because it allows us to share in each other’s lives in a way that can change perspectives. Simply hearing examples is probably not enough, we need to engage with each other as Paul instructed the Romans—we must be like one body and “[b]e devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves” (Romans 12:10 NIV).

Racism, like any sin, takes many forms. It can be silence in the face of injustice, and the inherent complicity that can go with it, or it can be active, even if thoughtless, comments or actions. As part of Session’s discussions on race we heard testimony from members of our church of color about some of the painful experiences they have encountered at VPC. In the end, our life experience shapes how we perceive the world around us, and we highly recommend three steps to take as a starting point to greater understanding.

First, we commend this article by David French, an evangelical Presbyterian, lawyer, and political commentator: <https://frenchpress.thedispatch.com/p/american-racism-weve-got-so-very>. It describes well, and from a personal perspective, the divergent experiences and resulting perceptions on this issue.

Second, please join the Friday Racial Reconciliation Prayer Calls to hear personal testimonies from brothers and sisters in Christ about how racism has affected their lives (link can be found at <https://www.viennapres.org/care-prayer/care-ministries/ministry-for-racial-reconciliation-and-healing/>) .

Third, we strongly encourage you to take advantage of upcoming opportunities to be part of conversations about racial reconciliation—opportunities that will happen as part of the plans spearheaded by MRRH.