**White Christians: Remember Black Power?**

By Rev. Dr. Jennifer Harvey

If you've spent much time in Christian circles, at some point you've heard someone say that Sunday morning at 11 a.m. is still this nation's most segregated hour. While probably true, I doubt it's the right complaint for today.

In fact, I'd agree with James F. Findlay, Jr. who writes in [*Church People in the Struggle*](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref%3Dnb_sb_noss_2?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=james+findlay) that interracial outreach and coalitions had declined by the early 1970s. By the end of the civil rights movement, he claims, black and white Christians were more alienated than they had been before.

Wait a minute. More alienated? That's opposite from how the story of race relations usually unfolds.

Here's what you might think. Whites despised blacks and oppressed them viciously through legalized segregation and the denial of basic rights before the civil rights movement. But then heroes like King helped us all recognize each other more by the content of our character and less by the color of our skin. As "colored" and "white" signs came down, so did the bigotry of white hearts. While the story remains unfinished because racial inequality still exists, we're basically moving in the right direction. Case in point: our first black president took his second oath of office on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

The basic paradigm here is that we'll advance racial reconciliation if we keep trying to embrace and celebrate our differences. Eventually, that will end the divisions that leave our churches so non-integrated and non-diverse.

But I disagree. This isn't the way we'll heal the divide. Why? Because it leaves out a significant part of our racial story: black power and white denial.

By the end of the 1960s many African American activists realized that segregation wasn't the fundamental problem, but merely a symptom. Power was the real problem. And even whites active in civil rights were unwilling to redistribute it. For example, they were willing to integrate schools but unwilling to challenge who controls decision-making power -- on everything from curriculum to hiring -- over and within school systems. Anger about how short the nation had fallen of realizing the hopes of the movement led to the rise of the black power movement.

What black power insisted is that political solidarity and economic development, not integration, should be the justice focus. Instead of focusing on our common humanity, we needed to see that blacks and whites hold different power. We needed not only to name the existence of black suffering, but to recognize white oppression as its cause. Singing "We Shall Overcome" wouldn't end racial alienation -- at least not in a way that genuinely made things better for African Americans. The black power movement asserted that we must take on the social structures that constrain and damage black life to truly heal as a nation.

Just to be clear, I use the word "we" here quite purposely. Black power activists were unapologetic about the fact they were speaking to blacks, but they had a critical message for whites too.

Black power manifested in Christian circles as the [National Coalition of Black Clergy (NCBC)](http://personal.ashland.edu/~jmoser1/blackpower.htm). That group's most powerful moment came when James Forman disrupted worship at New York's Riverside Church on March 4, 1969 to read [*The Black Manifesto*](http://www.amazon.com/Black-Manifesto-Religion-Racism-Reparations/dp/0836200802/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1359117937&sr=1-1&keywords=robert+lecky). The manifesto accused white churches of mass participation in slavery and in the creation of the oppressive systems that remain present today. It charged white Christians with profiting from the economic exploitation causing black poverty. It called whites to recognize they owed a moral debt, to repent and to repair the harm done by paying reparations to give back a tiny portion ($15 per African American) of the wealth they had amassed on black backs.

Black Christians publicly endorsed *The Manifesto*. In a number of public statements the NCBC repeatedly called on their denominations to show ["the authenticity of [their] frequently verbalized contrition of their faith in the justice of God"](http://www.aluka.org/action/showMetadata?doi=10.5555/AL.SFF.DOCUMENT.ydlwcc0138) by taking it seriously. In other words, they demanded the white church put its money where its mouth was. They described Forman as a modern day prophet. In response, white Christians fled. They refused to engage. They disparaged Forman. They raised money to alleviate "black suffering" but wouldn't give up control over how funds were used nor name structural relations that begged for white repentance. They repudiated the idea of reparations.

In a public letter to "white churchmen" the NCBC described these responses as creating their "[strongly held belief that you have chosen to reject us](http://books.google.com/books/about/Reparations_the_Black_manifesto_and_its.html?id=AzlCAAAAIAAJ)."

Findlay is right. Racial alienation did become the order of the day.

But white Christians needn't despair. In fact, we should do the opposite. As hard as the message might be for whites to hear, black power gave the nation a reparative paradigm to replace the reconciliation one -- a paradigm that might offer healing if only we'd embrace it. What we most share with our black faithful is not some abstract common humanity. What we most share is a relationship forged by historic and contemporary structures that devastate black communities and enrich and insulate white ones.

As white Christians, we're called to challenge and change those structures. Here's just a few places we can begin: police brutality, access to education, the prison industrial complex. What better way to show up this Black History Month, than as allies demonstrating that we understand that black history is white history too? A history we honor by committing to structural change for the long haul.

We should absolutely work for racial reconciliation. But we can only do that by working for reparation. And until we do, Sunday morning worship will never look (or feel) quite right.

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