

# Shalom!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

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## Political Activism and Systemic Racism

**I DON'T KNOW** about you, but I am exhausted from the last number of years of political turmoil and polarization. And now we're just a few weeks away from another presidential election here in the US, the campaigning for which will undoubtedly add to the exhaustion we all feel. The stakes seem particularly high this time, although it seems like that is always the case.

We Brethren in Christ have historically been suspicious of politics and wonder whether and how we should be personally involved. We have been concerned, rightly so, that political involvement can easily compromise our primary allegiance to Christ and his Kingdom. Originally, our forebears did not participate in political activity, but that has changed. In the most recent denominational survey (2014), 84 percent of respondents said that it was acceptable to do so. (For an historical survey of Brethren in Christ involvement in politics, watch John Yeatts's talk at the Historical Society's Annual Heritage Service: [tinyurl.com/y88htgxz](https://tinyurl.com/y88htgxz)).

If so many of us are now politically active—whether by voting, holding political office, campaigning for the candidate(s) of our choice, writing letters, engaging in political protests—then it seems appropriate to revisit this topic in an election year as fraught as this one. Especially this year, as people who base our lives on the life and teachings of Jesus, it's important for us to consider how we can participate in the election and still maintain our Christian witness and core values.

At the same time, we are not only facing a consequential presidential election, but we are also in the middle of a national reckoning on systemic racism sparked by the murder of George Floyd last May. Besides paying attention to the election, we also need to think, read, watch, listen, talk, and act so that we can become truly antiracist and do our individual and corporate part to root out the systemic racism that has been endemic to the United States for 400 years.

This edition of *Shalom!*, therefore, seeks to address both issues—political involvement in an election year and racism. It's not hard to combine the two topics, because both are about being active in some way in the public sphere and intentional about how we do that effectively. Personal stories of experiences with racism are interwoven with calls to be faithful followers of Jesus as we not only prepare to vote but also as we think about how we can become proactively antiracist. And since these issues are not unique to the US but relevant whatever the national context, a former pastor in the Be In Christ Church of Canada reflects on his desire to serve God and promote his Christian values as a Member of Parliament.

These are difficult times, and it is easy to give up in despair in the midst of our exhaustion. Now is perhaps a good time to remember Paul's word to the Galatians: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (6:9).

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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# The Mangled Witness of the Church

By Drew G. I. Hart

**THERE IS NO** shortage of Christians ready to fight partisan battles. It is hard to distinguish Christianity's commitments from the political parties of our day. Christian ethics appear at times to be nothing more than the current platform of Republicans or Democrats. Partisan politics seems to determine our ethics and social witness. When entering a new church, it usually takes only a few minutes to tell whether the congregation is Democratic, Republican, or some kind of wishy-washy political moderate. The unspoken clues are everywhere. And by "moderate" I don't mean politics that have escaped from mainstream political mindsets; I mean a church that tries to play the middle-ground fence and avoids risking critical con-

versations about how systems and policy affect their neighbors. These congregations are no more courageous than partisan churches. They believe that being centrist is the answer to polarization. For a brief second they may almost seem right, until you realize they like to go halvesies on very serious social concerns and want to meet in the middle between the conservative and the progressive. They are likely to say that "truth always lies somewhere in the middle."

To recognize the problem in this logic, imagine if someone wanted to go halvesies on the Holocaust, or to be centrist about Jim Crow segregation, or to meet in the middle on allowing children to be molested. Those things would not fly for anyone with a meaningful moral compass. There are many social issues for which being centrist ends up being neutral to the violation of the inherent dignity of people made in the image of God. Silence on the challenges of our day is not courageous. Some policies are death-dealing. At different points in American history each party has endorsed extremely oppressive and unjust policies that have devastated the lives of vulnerable people. However, very rarely does either party get close to aligning with the kind of justice and shalom depicted in our sacred texts or with the kind of life Jesus lived.

I am not pointing out partisan battles and how they shape our political imagination for the purpose of calling the church to equivocate on everything, as if all politicians are equally bad or good. The goal of a disciple amid a partisan and polarized society is not to pretend that policies don't affect one's neighbors differently in very significant ways. The problem is that we are discerning what is good and righteous by allowing the powers and political parties that run society to dictate our sociopolitical agenda, instead of cultivating an imagination birthed out of the revolution of our Messiah and the new world God is bringing from heaven to earth. Rather than adopting a mainstream way of thinking or building our convictions from predetermined partisan presuppositions, we need Jesus-shaped imaginations that have been de-

livered from their captivity. Jesus-shaped imaginations provide a robust and multidimensional way of knowing in Christ.

There are elements that ought to shape the kind of world we hunger for as Christians. A Jesus-shaped imagination must, through Scripture, wrestle with God like Jacob. We must know the stories of Scripture and see their culmination in the life and teachings of Jesus. A Jesus-shaped imagination that is delivered from captivity yields to the Holy Spirit to guide and teach us as we face contemporary problems, and makes the resurrected presence of Jesus available to us. It is an imagination that flows from participating in a local congregation seeking to organize its collective life, in both its gathering and scattering in society, in awareness of the reigning presence of Christ. Such imagining will inevitably cultivate dangerous eschatological (God's future for us) dreams of God's delivered world, a world that has come and is still yet to come.<sup>1</sup>

This new society of God was ignited by Jesus, the true revolutionary, who subverted our sin and death-corroded ways of living that stand against God's desire for us. When we join this revolutionary way of Jesus that flows like a river, we see that it runs through history from below. We learn what freedom and justice really mean. Eventually our taste buds for the world as it is begin to change because we have tasted and seen God's deliverance firsthand. If we have indeed glimpsed God's just and righteous society and are yielding to the Spirit in our discipleship, then we have an opportunity to join the tradition of dreaming in Christ. Our dreams are threatening to those who hoard riches and slaughter innocent people.

Christians ought to be the first people to know that there is an option for humanity other than dominating one another, and we also ought to be the ones risking our lives embodying the counter-community that is possible right now, from below, even as global corporations and paid-off politicians seek to recodify their power as permanent.

As Rev. Dr. William Barber suggests, we need a moral imagination and message for



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our society.<sup>2</sup> It is not acceptable for half the church to concede moral language to status quo religionists. It is not enough to draw on the abstract modernist language of rights. Instead, we must allow the Spirit to whisper restorative ideas into our ears before we speak of right and wrong. We must learn to speak truthfully and with integrity. We can and must name sinful and evil practices as such. Christians have a unique language to diagnose our world. Sin, when it is not reduced to superficial religiosity and inner piety, can comprehensively unveil our fallen structures and powers, relationships, practices, and identities. And we should not only

describe the world as it is; we should be inspiring others with the world God has dreamed up for us, and what ultimately will be. Moral imagination and prophetic imagination go hand in hand. A prophetic word encourages us to remember that oppressive empires will not last forever. It offers everyone an opportunity to repent from domination and to live into God's new world that is emerging from the margins of society. The question is, Can you imagine God's deliverance?

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political*

*Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>Ched Myers et al., *Say to This Mountain: Mark's Story of Discipleship*, 1996 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

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## Following Jesus in the Most Important Election in 150 Years

By Ronald J. Sider

**THREE HUGE PROBLEMS** collide to create a perfect storm: many people believe that 2020 is the most important presidential election since 1860; COVID-19 is devastating our health and economic life; the massive response to the murder of George Floyd is creating the most serious wrestling with racism since Dr. King and the civil rights movement. Any one of these three developments would pose intensely difficult questions for this election year. Colliding together, they drive us to our knees in desperation.

Some Christians, unfortunately, think that politics is so complicated, messy and corrupt that good Christians should simply forget about it. I believe that is fundamentally mistaken for two reasons: one practical, one theological.

History demonstrates that political decisions affect the lives, for good or ill, of literally hundreds of millions, in fact billions of people. Because the United States plays such an influential role in the world, the political decisions of the American president and American congressional leaders truly affect the lives of billions of people around the planet.

Just think about the way that political decisions in the past have affected millions and millions of people. William Wilberforce was

the great eighteenth century evangelical politician converted in the Wesleyan revival. He worked for more than 30 years as a member of parliament, eventually persuading his colleagues in the British Parliament to outlaw the slave trade and then slavery itself. That did not make the lives of former slaves anywhere near what God desired, but it certainly improved the lives of millions of people in powerful ways. Or ponder the fact that in the 1930s, German Christians played an important role in electing Adolf Hitler to the leadership of Germany. Think of the incredible evil that could have been avoided if German Christians had made a different political decision. Politics is simply too important to ignore.

But the theological reason for engaging in politics is even more significant. The most basic Christian confession is that Jesus is Lord. We confess that he is Lord of all of life and that obviously includes our politics. So if we are to live out our central Christian confession, we must ask how we can let Jesus Christ be the Lord of our politics.

In numerous writings over the years (for example my book, *Just Politics: A Guide for Christian Engagement*), I have tried to think about how Christians can act biblically in their politics. Most people don't think about it carefully, but in fact every political deci-

sion has four parts: 1) normative framework; 2) information about the world; 3) a political philosophy; 4) application to each political issue.

**Normative framework.** It is impossible to make political decisions without some assumptions (however unconscious) about things like the nature of persons and justice. I want to let Jesus and the Bible be the primary source of my normative framework about economic and racial justice, the sanctity of human life, peacemaking, marriage and family, care for creation, etc.

**Study of the world.** The Bible says nothing about COVID-19 or whether global warming is happening. We need to study science, history, economics, politics.

**Political philosophy.** Since we cannot spend five years studying the Bible and the world every time we want to make a political decision, we need what I call a political philosophy. A political philosophy is a roadmap, a short handy guide. Christians should not unthinkingly get their political philosophy from family, friends, and secular sources. Rather, it should come from a careful combination of our normative biblical framework and our careful study of the world.

**Application.** Then we have to apply that political philosophy to every political decision. The Brethren in Christ are part of the

National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), the largest evangelical network in the United States. The NAE has unanimously approved a public policy document called *For the Health of the Nation*. That document says that “faithful evangelical civic engagement and witness must champion a biblically balanced agenda.” Then the document goes on to develop eight major sections to show essential areas that must be included in a “biblically balanced agenda.” The eight areas are: the sanctity of human life, marriage, justice and compassion for the poor, racial justice, peacemaking, care for creation, human rights, and religious freedom. The NAE is

clearly saying that a biblically balanced agenda will be concerned with this whole range of issues, not just one or two. I think that studying this important document would be very helpful for every Brethren in Christ pastor, church leader and congregational member.

I am doing a series of free webinars this fall to help pastors and every Christian think about our current situation. The pastor’s webinar is: “The Pastor’s Dilemma in an Election Year.” And for everyone: “How do You Talk to Family and Friends Who Hate Your Politics?” I will be doing a number of these webinars in September and October, and I

invite you to join me. For dates and how to participate, join my free blog ([ronsiderblog.substack.com](http://ronsiderblog.substack.com)) where I will be announcing times and links.

**Ronald J. Sider’s** family has been active in the Brethren in Christ Church for more than 240 years. He has been an ordained Brethren in Christ minister since 1978, and is the author or editor of many books. He and his wife live in Philadelphia, PA.

## The Challenge of Dealing with Social Justice Issues in the Local Church

By Bob Verno

**IN THE EARLY** years of my life, the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement gained momentum under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. and other Black pastors. The cruel oppression and humiliation of African American people was being confronted but in a peaceful way.

When King called for ministers around the country to descend on Alabama in 1965 to support Black voting rights, the National Association of Evangelicals demurred, stating that the association “has a policy of not becoming involved in political or sociological affairs that do not affect the function of the church or those in the propagation of the gospel.” Ironically, though basic principles and values of the New Testament were at stake, large portions of the white church resisted or outrightly opposed the Civil Rights Movement.

In retrospect, I don’t see how this can be viewed as anything less than a major failure. The church, to be true to its calling, must not shrink when faced with matters of social justice. But we must be prudent and considered in how we handle them.

### Social justice: the work of God

As followers of Jesus, it is our privilege to represent the Kingdom that transcends all earthly kingdoms. This Kingdom, the King-

dom of God, advances in three ways:

- We proclaim the gospel and invite people into salvation by putting their faith in Christ.
- We demonstrate compassionate love by meeting basic human needs—feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, treating the sick, and so forth.
- We do all we can to secure justice for those who are oppressed, abused and unable to fend for themselves.

Some might question whether working for justice on behalf of weaker people is really a Kingdom concern. In response I would point out that one significant anticipation in the Old Testament forecasts of the Messiah is that he would bring justice to the world. A number of texts can be cited, but here we can look at only a few.

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight . . . I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on the earth (Is. 42:1, 3-4).

The days are coming . . . [w]hen I will raise up for David a Righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just

and right in the land (Jer. 23:5).

Some passages state explicitly that people of low social standing will benefit. This should not surprise us, for it is the weak of the world who are exploited by those who possess wealth and power.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; But with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth (Isa. 11:3b-4).

See also Psalm 72:1-4, 12-14.

Justice is both the character and the work of God. His Kingdom is about justice. In its consummate manifestation, it will be the home of righteousness with justice prevailing everywhere. In the meantime, alignment with God will mean sharing his concern for justice and partnering with God to eliminate social ills and human abuses.

### Political polarization: the complicating factor

This brings us to where we are as American Christians today. Issues of social justice are before us constantly. They include treatment of immigrants and political refugees, health care, national wars (Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan), enhanced interrogation techniques, measures relating to gun control,

abortion, capital punishment, voter suppression, disparate law enforcement toward Black Americans and persons of color, and global warming and environmental protections. In simply laying out a limited list like this, two reactions are unavoidable: many of these are hot potato items, and each has a political as well as an ethical overtone.

We live in a highly polarized society, and the polarization is reflected in most congregations today where you find people who fall on both the left and the right of the political spectrum as well as the middle. Whatever one's orientation, news media feed it. A good many people seem to receive all (or nearly all) of their news from a single source or perspective—and that usually accords with their personal biases.

When it comes to cable news, for example, several observations can be made: 1) There are conservative and mainstream networks. 2) The conservative networks are generally favorable toward our current president and administration while the mainstream networks are usually critical. 3) Two very different versions of the news are set forth. 4)

The tone of news reporting and commentary is often quite acrimonious. 5) The events in focus are often different. With the recent Black justice protests, the mainstream networks have accented the overall peacefulness of these while the conservative networks have highlighted rioting and property destruction.

A lot of people today are vehement in their views, and their views are shaped by how they are informed. In light of all this, our approach in addressing social justice issues is critical. To be honest, I struggle with this challenge and certainly don't claim to have all the answers. Here are a few ideas.

#### **Practical suggestions: guiding a congregation**

1. Work at creating a climate of openness. Cultivate within people a sense that within this fellowship of believers we don't all have the same opinions on current issues, but we strive to hear one another and to achieve mutual understanding.
2. Teach the precepts and values of the New Testament, and instruct people about the Kingdom of God. In the United States,

many believers understand spiritual salvation, but they have been taught very little about the greater Kingdom. Many are misguided by the God-and-country theology that is so prevalent in popular writings and media preaching. They need to see that our principal identity and allegiance as Christ followers must be with the Lord and his Kingdom. It can never be with an earthly nation or a political entity linked to it.

3. Always remain gentle, considerate, and respectful. Avoid derogatory references to political leaders or parties.
4. Where Scripture is absolutely clear, stand firm and unwavering. One pastor friend, after inviting a well-known Kenyan bishop to speak at his church, was approached by an irate member who warned, "You bring that . . . into our church, and I'm out of here." My friend did not budge, nor did he hesitate to allow that member to fulfill his threat.

*Bob Verno is on the pastoral staff of The Meetinghouse, Carlisle, PA.*

## **Articulate, Anyone?**

*By Nikki Grimes*

**WHEN I WAS** young, I was often bullied for "talking white." That's the way my precise enunciation, robust vocabulary, and polished use of the English language were categorized by others in the Black community. At the other end of the racial spectrum, several white teachers questioned the authorship of my compositions because they were "too well-written." As for my ability to speak, they would raise their eyebrows in utter surprise and say, "My! You are so articulate!" The left-handed compliment was never lost on me: as a Black girl, I was not supposed to be articulate. Whenever a white person would call me articulate, I'd think to myself, "and why wouldn't I be?" English was, by far, my best subject, I practically lived in the library, had a grandmother who got on my case every time I mistakenly said, "Can I" rather than "May I," both my natural parents were avid readers, as were the foster parents I stayed with the longest, my mother had or-

atory skills, and my father was no slouch in that department, either. Chances were pretty good that some of that would have resulted in my being fairly well-spoken. Just saying.

I went on to university, graduated with a degree in English, and a minor in African languages, won a Ford Fellowship to study in East Africa, and returned to the US to begin building a writing career. Strangely enough, I continued to be frequently "complimented" on my ability to string words together in a pleasing fashion. Now, 40+ years into a respectable career as an author specializing in poetry, and as a speaker, I am, apparently, still astonishing white people with my ability to be articulate. And I'm not the only well-read, well-traveled, well-educated Black person singing this song.

In all the years that I have given keynotes at major conferences across the country and abroad, or shared panels with white authors, or spoken at book festivals and literary con-

ferences, I can never once recall hearing a white author praised for being articulate, though most of them were. The difference, in case you haven't caught on, is that they were expected to be articulate, so there was no obvious need to remark upon the fact.

Mind you, I wholeheartedly appreciate someone telling me following an in-person or virtual keynote, or panel presentation, that my words moved them deeply, or that I said something that made them see the world in a new way, or that my words were inspiring or even powerful, or that you found my word choice exquisite. (No one has actually said that last thing, but feel free!) Who wouldn't love that? But that's substantially different from "complimenting" an author and poet who makes her living as a professional word-smith and speaker, by saying—always with a hint of surprise and emphasis on the last word—"You're so articulate." Imagine praising a tailor for sewing straight seams, or com-

plimenting a surgeon for deftly handling a scalpel, or congratulating a lawyer for knowing the law, or applauding a minister for familiarity with Scripture. Lord, give me strength!

Christine Mallinson, professor of language, literacy, and culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, had this to say to *Business Insider*: “When a white colleague tells a colleague of color ‘You’re so articulate’ or ‘You speak so well,’ the remark suggests that they assumed the person in question would be less articulate—and are surprised to find out they aren’t.” Pause for a moment and take that in.

Black folk already navigate a world littered with loaded language, coded phrasing, and microaggressions. (And there’s a separate set of microaggressions women have to contend with that focus on things like body image, but that’s not my focus here.) “You’re pretty—for a black girl.” “Is that your real hair?” “Where are you actually from?” “You’re not like them.” “You’re good with your hands.” “Your English is so good!” (Yes, I’ve actually been told that.) Ouch!

There are always assumptions that I sublet my home, rather than own it, and that my

nice car is a rental. When I step into the priority lane to board a plane at the airport, my right to occupy that space is frequently questioned. When I enter a clothing store, or a boutique of any kind, I am automatically followed around the premises, merely based on the assumption—unspoken or otherwise—that I am there to steal, rather than purchase, merchandise. This happens no matter how meticulous my attire at the time. I won’t even begin to tell you the number of apartments I lost, back when I was a renter, simply because my skin is black. Occasionally, just for fun, I would have a white friend apply for an apartment after I’d been told it was no longer available. Every single time, the miraculously still available apartment was offered to that white friend. Sigh.

This is some of why being Black in America can be so tiresome. But I’m not about to give up my beautiful black skin, or the rich heritage of my people in the fields of science, mathematics, art, music, fashion, academia, sports, economics, entrepreneurship, medicine, literature, and beyond. Against all odds, Black people have survived and thrived in this country, and I stand among them.

I enjoy my work as a poet, author, and

speaker, and hope to continue this work for some years to come. As always, I look forward to meeting fans virtually, or in person once it’s again safe to travel, and to gather at conferences and book festivals. I will welcome any warm, kind words you choose to share with me following my presentations. That said, let me be clear: if you continue to find it shocking that I’m articulate, might I suggest you ask yourself why. In the meantime, should the idea of praising any Black person for being articulate cross your mind, please consider instead telling us what our words have meant to you, how you have been moved or touched by them, or how our words have inspired, challenged, or lifted you up. Those are true compliments we’d be more than happy to hear, any day of the week.

*Nikki Grimes is an award-winning author and attends Madison Street Church (Brethren in Christ), Riverside, CA. One of her most recent books is Ordinary Hazards, a memoir in verse (Wordsong, 2019). This article is reprinted by permission from her blog at [nikkigrimes.com/sounds-off/](http://nikkigrimes.com/sounds-off/).*

## Shine

By Nikki Grimes

News of another cross-burning  
singes my heart,  
paralyzing me where I sit.  
I drink my tears and read  
“God is light, and in him  
there is no darkness at all,”  
and I wonder  
how many of the deceived,  
professing Christ this time,  
lifted their torches in unison?  
How many made of no consequence  
Christ’s death on the cross for me?  
How many polluted this symbol of Life  
to threaten the death of my people?  
Jesus weeps, I am certain,  
though he does not spin in his grave  
but only because—Thank God—  
he isn’t in it!  
And so, in spite of all, I sing Hallelujah!  
Despite the revival of lynchings in this land,  
and sanctioned shootings past numbering,

I can continue to pray “Lord, have mercy,”  
because the heat of his pure, good light  
will one day burn  
every remnant of injustice to ash.  
Good Lord, may we be filled  
with your righteous fire.  
Bless us to be vessels  
of your undiminished Light.  
Help the true church burn bright  
for you.

1 John 1:5-2:2

*Nikki Grimes is an award-winning author. She frequently writes poems based on Scripture and shares them as part of the worship service at Madison Street Church, Riverside, CA.*

## Editor’s Notes

**Subscription renewals and contributions:** Thanks to everyone who has responded in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic to the 2020 subscription renewal letter. We depend on your subscription renewals and extra contributions. If you haven’t yet responded, please do so as soon as possible. The basic subscription rate is \$20 per year. Send a check payable to Brethren in Christ Church U. S. to the editor at the address on page 2. You can also subscribe and/or contribute online at [bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom](http://bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom).

**Fall 2020 topic:** Still under consideration for fall are creation care, economic justice, and criminal justice reform (including mass incarceration). Contact the editor if you are interested in writing. Your comments and ideas are also always welcome.

# Changing the Narrative

By Lisa Mays

**I WAS BORN** and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, so I love seafood, especially crabs. Some of my favorite childhood memories center around eating crabs together with the extended family in our backyard. We bought our crabs at a little shack with lots of picnic tables outside. My dad always went in to get the crabs while my mom and I stayed in the car.

On more than one occasion I remember asking my mom, “Why can’t we eat at the picnic tables like the other families?” She would always say no. “Can’t I just play on the playground?” Her answer was always the same, “No.” I wasn’t even allowed to get out of the car to play on the playground while we waited for my dad. None of it made any sense to my six-year old brain.

One day, when I was incessantly whining, my mom turned to me in the backseat and said, “You can’t play. You’re the wrong color.” I was six years old. It was 1964.

I knew I was Black (actually, colored, in 1964), but I didn’t know what that meant. That lesson wouldn’t come for another eight years. In 1972, when I was 14 years old, my family moved to an all-white community because my parents wanted me to have access to better schools. We were only the second Black family to move into that neighborhood. It was May, the weather was just turning warm, and I was walking home from junior high school. I had taken my jacket off and tied it around my waist so I could enjoy the sun on my two-block walk home. I had only gone about half a block when I became aware of some kids behind me who were yelling and shouting. I paid no attention to them, but when the yelling didn’t stop, I focused on what they were saying. As I listened, I realized they were shouting “Ni\*\*er! Ni\*\*er!”

Here’s how naïve I was. I’m thinking, “Where have I heard that word before?” As I’m running through my mental file cabinet, I remembered, “Oh yeah. That’s the bad word some people use to describe a Black person.” But where’s the Black person?” Right then, I caught a glimpse of my arm,

and suddenly realized, “I’m the Black person. I’m the N-word.” I turned around, made eye contact with the kids, and they broke out in a full sprint toward me. I sprinted toward home, as fast as I could.

When I was safely inside the house, I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror with a mixture of disbelief, horror, and confusion. I kept repeating, “Oh my God, I’m Black. I’m Black,” touching my face, my arms, my hands, my skin. I kept having epiphany after epiphany. Suddenly, I understood why the guidance counselor at this new school said, “You won’t do that well out here.” I understood why my English teacher kept asking me, “Who wrote these papers for you? I know you didn’t write them.” And I understood why my science teacher kept accusing me of cheating on quizzes. They were convinced I could not be smart because I was Black.

As I’ve thought back on that incident, I’ve been both troubled and curious about my reaction. It wasn’t until I was well into my 50s that I began to understand that I had bought into the idea that as a Black person, I was “less than.” Why else would I have been so horrified at the sudden realization of my racial identity? I’d like to share some things I’ve discovered in my own journey about how I got there, why we are still there in 2020, and how we move on.

In 1776, when our founding fathers wrote in the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” they had already concluded that “all men” did not include “Black men,” who were considered nothing more than property.

By 1789, the justification for the myth of Black inferiority was clarified even further with the devaluing of a Black man to be equivalent to three-fifths of a person. Even though there was a brief period of reconstruction after the Civil War when Blacks enjoyed relative equality, this “equality” existed only because the federal government sent troops into the South to ensure compliance with the new policies granting freedom to

the formerly enslaved. However, when the federal troops were removed, the South immediately enacted policies that would bring back the pre-Civil War assignment of Black inferiority.

Years of enslavement were followed by Black Codes, Jim Crow, racial terror, and segregation. All of this played into the persistent idea that Black people were “less than.” This myth, coupled with sanitizing history to maintain intentional deliberate ignorance among Americans, guaranteed multiple generations who are unwittingly trained not to see racism.

But why, in 2020, is racism still a thing? One of the worst things segregation did to us as a country was that it kept white people from experiencing and understanding what you’re missing. If you can segregate yourself to the point that you don’t get to experience all the different cultures and people and the beauty that come with that, then you’re not just missing out personally, but you are also missing out on a piece of the image of God. You are not letting yourself see and experience the fullness of God if you continue to be okay with your world staying white.

One reason you may not have noticed a problem with racism or believe it exists is because you are not the recipient of it. Sometimes, it’s difficult to see something if it’s not happening to you. Nothing seems out of the norm, especially when things that have been said or done confirm a narrative you already believe.

For a white person, believing the narrative may manifest itself as racism. For me, believing the myth manifests itself as internalized racism. Being on the receiving end of racism is like experiencing emotional abuse and psychological trauma.

Here are some suggestions for how we move on:

1. Do not kid yourself into thinking that not getting involved exempts you. It does not. By not choosing a side, you have chosen the side of racism. You have chosen the status quo which allows racism to persist and flourish.

2. Recognize that this is not a Black issue. Fixing this is a white issue. We didn't get here because Black people created a myth. We got here because white people created the myth and hence created policies that embraced and protected the myth. So ask yourself, what is the next faithful step in obedience to God you need to do to walk into this together with other white people to determine ways to fix this?
3. Recognize that this is hard work and the more vocal you become, the more you will cause people to feel uncomfortable. Growth is not comfortable—yours or theirs. Remember, your comfort is not the goal. Equality is.
4. Understand that being able to step in or out of this struggle is an advantage of whiteness. I don't have that advantage. My sons don't have that advantage. My daughters don't have that advantage. My husband does not have that advantage. When we wake up in the morning, we're Black.

When we brush our teeth, we're Black. When we get out of the shower, we're Black. When we leave the house, we're Black. When we go to work, we're Black. When we go to lunch, we're Black. When we come home, we're Black. When we go to bed, we're Black. At no point during the day do we get to say, "I'm tired. I'm choosing not to be in the struggle today."

5. Know and accept that you will make missteps along the way. Don't get defensive and don't retreat. Stop and reflect. Understand the source of it so you can continue to be an anti-racist. Being able to say "I am an anti-racist" is a goal. "I'm not a racist" does nothing for me. When you can say, "I am an anti-racist," that means you are actively doing steps to end racism whether it is in your family, in your community, or in our country. Be an anti-racist.
6. Honor God through the process. Practice biblical lament.
7. Recognize the history you know is proba-

bly incomplete. Read books, listen to the complete history, listen to podcasts, watch movies. Do whatever it takes to shift your perspective from solely a white lens.

8. Consider God's words in Psalm 139: 23-24: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any offensive way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way." And consider Galatians 6:9: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for in due time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

*Lisa Mays and her husband are members of the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church, where she serves on staff as communications director. This article is condensed from a sermon she preached in June 2020 at Grantham; you can view it online at [granthamchurch.org/recentsermon/2020/7/7/sunday-june-28th-2020](http://granthamchurch.org/recentsermon/2020/7/7/sunday-june-28th-2020).*

## Racism and This Latina's Experience

By Carmen Dones

**"LOVE ONE ANOTHER,** as I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). The best place to start a heavy discussion of race relations is common ground. When it comes to believers in Christ, followers of Christ, our common ground is loving, serving, following and obeying Jesus Christ our Lord.

My experiences as a Latina with racism are common among people of color, from being made fun of due to my features to having a "For Rent" sign taken down from an apartment when I "inquired within." In 2007, I was first introduced to the Brethren in Christ Church. I had moved from the city to the country. Until then, I attended and was a member of a church that was 90 percent Hispanic in a mix of Latin cultures. The remaining 10 percent was of other ethnicities or races. Moving into the country threw me headfirst into culture shock—no noise, hardly any streetlights, and my backyard faced an Amish farm. The nearest church was

a Brethren in Christ Church. I attended in the winter of 2007 because I didn't want to drive in the ice rain 45 minutes to my church. What kept me at this church was the hospitality. I was welcomed and encouraged to become a part of the church.

At first, well-meaning people redirected me to the Spanish language service, without asking my preference, or they talked as though I didn't understand English and substituted synonyms. After a few weeks, I was encouraged to sign up for Habitat for Humanity so I could have a way to buy my home, although I already owned my home. I have been asked if my hair is real, if my eyes are real, if I'm "mixed," how long it took for me to learn English, and how long it took for me to get a visa. Because these are my siblings in Christ, I've often told myself it wasn't really racism, but ignorance. Maybe they didn't know that Puerto Ricans are US citizens; maybe they didn't know that I can speak, read, and write fluent English because it is my first language.

After a while, people got to know me, in-

vited me into their homes, and we began forming relationships that have lasted until today. So today when I see posts that reflect racism or prejudiced sentiment, I'm hurt. When I hear conversations and comments and I respond with a different point of view, it hurts when my comments are deleted or they tell me that I have been listening or reading too much from a certain news source. How can we get to a place where we aren't dismissing each other's ideas—a place where I may not change your mind but my point of view is respected.

Here are some action steps for change. First, ask God to examine your heart and show you where you can change your attitude about people of a different race. Ask God to soften your heart to the injustice people of color are experiencing. Ask yourself, "What is it about this conversation that frustrates me?" Many of our beliefs and ideas stem from preconceived ideas. Re-examine history as it was taught to you, because many times this history is an incomplete picture.

Second, make friends with people who

you normally don't engage with. The purpose is to expand your sphere of influences, sharing ideas and experiences so that the injustice becomes personal. Knowing how different policies affect real people helps you look past mere data. The hardest part for me is finding reliable sources of information, so fact-checking our point of view helps us have information that is accurate.

Third, attend or take part in racial justice discussions. It may be hard to find a diverse panel of trustworthy people; however, technology has made this easy for us. Many of our Brethren in Christ churches are hosting discussions via Zoom and social media live streams. I know that it is uncomfortable to be in a place where you are in the minority, but it is important to hear our stories, our ex-

periences, and how our lives have been affected by policies and protocols that are in place.

Fourth, watch movies, listen to audiobooks, or read to learn about racial justice. If you are unsure who to read or what to watch, an Internet search can give you some leads.

There are many scriptures where God directs us to defend the rights of the afflicted and the needy. Much of what was swept under the rug, American is now tripping over. So, what does this have to do with the church? Everything! America is looking for our response. In one of our recent services, we were reminded that we are one body. If we bang our pinky toe we don't say, "I'm so glad 98 percent of me is feeling fine." Instead, all of our attention goes to the pinky toe.

People of color are the pinky toe right now, and we are screaming in pain. The other part of this illustration is that the body's natural reaction to pain is to insulate itself, evident in the swelling around the injured part. I hope this article will motivate you to help insulate those who are in pain, and surround those who are hurt with love, care, and mercy so that true healing and justice can happen.

*Carmen Dones serves as the outreach pastor at the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church, an urban multi-ethnic congregation. Before pastoring, Carmen taught for 12 years, supervised a Head Start center, and taught parenting classes. She grew up and lived in Brooklyn, NY until she moved to Pennsylvania in 2001. She and her husband have five children.*

## "Do You See This Woman?"

By Zach Spidel

**IN LUKE 7**, Jesus goes to dine at the house of Simon the Pharisee. Simon clearly thinks little of Jesus. He offers no kiss of greeting, nor any oil to anoint his head, nor even a wash basin with which Jesus could clean his feet. Why has Simon even bothered to invite a man for whom he has such little regard? Apparently it was to prove what he thought he already knew—that Jesus was a false prophet.

Simon was sure he already knew everything he needed to know about Jesus and dismissed him on that basis. Simon's posture makes it all the more remarkable that Jesus chose to attend this dinner. Prejudged and demeaned, Jesus sits down to eat with Simon. His grace extends even to sinners so deep in sin they can't see it. In fact, the only hope we have when we fall that deeply into self-righteous sin is that Jesus will come sup with us anyway and reveal to us the truth we have rejected.

That is precisely what Jesus sets out to do for Simon when a woman, a notorious sinner, approaches his dinner table. Unlike Simon, this woman knew she was a sinner and had already tasted of the forgiveness that Jesus so freely offers. She draws near to Jesus at Simon's table with grateful love welling up inside her, overflowing in freely falling tears.

She kisses the unshod, unwashed feet of her Savior and anoints them with expensive perfume.

Simon—so sure of what he knew about who was right and who was wrong, who was worthy and who unworthy, who deserved his care and who his scorn—cannot see the beauty or the holiness of this moment. Judging both Jesus and this woman in his heart, Simon's blindness is complete. What help is there for such a sinner?

There is help in Jesus, as this story and my own life and your life all suggest if we pay close attention them. Jesus turns to Simon with a parable about two debtors, one debt great, the other less so. Their master forgives both debtors, and Jesus asks Simon who he thinks would have loved his master more. Simon admits the man with the greater debt would love more. Like the prophet Nathan did for King David, Jesus has crafted a parable to help a sinful person see his life clearly. Jesus is attempting to dispel the dark clouds of self-righteousness and prejudgment from Simon's spiritual vision. Jesus wants Simon to see that he and the woman are standing together as beneficiaries of the grace of God, and that if there is any spiritually significant difference between them it is only that the woman has the greater love and therefore is



closer to the heart of the Father!

Following this parable, Jesus faces Simon and asks him the crucial and climactic question of this passage, "Simon, do you see this woman?" Simon's eyes had passed over this woman and seen not a person but a collection of dismissible categories, foremost of which was "sinner." All he saw was the category; he didn't see the person herself. Hence, Jesus' question is a profound one. Simon dismisses this woman without listening to her, without bothering to get to know her, without compassion or even curiosity (which can be such a spiritual help in such circumstances).

Jesus was willing to bear such things from Simon himself but he insists, on behalf of his dear daughter, that this powerful man look at her, really look and see. Look not at her manner of dress, her past sins, or her ability to measure up to the man's own standards, but to look at her as a fellow human being made in the image of God and loved by him. Jesus wants Simon to look at her not as a

righteous man regarding a distasteful sinner, but as one lucky sinner looking at another as they stand together in the presence of God's-grace-made-flesh.

Simon's salvation depends on his ability to listen to Jesus who was directing him to truly see the woman before him. We are no different from Simon. We make our prejudgments and we greet people so often thinking we already know what we need to know about them. We argue, we dismiss, we feel superior without even realizing that's what we're doing.

When we think and act this way, Jesus comes to us with a beautiful, but hard-to-accept grace. He places before us brothers and sisters whose pain we can't see through all our certainties, who we dismiss without much thought at all, and he asks us to look

at them—to really look.

In a summer when America has been rocked by racial violence, I can't help but think that Jesus is asking us to look. To my friends who don't believe America has a race problem: look and listen to your Black brothers and sisters. There is no shortage of testimony from these beloved children of God about the abuse, dismissal, and mistreatment they have suffered. Do not assume you already know their stories; do not attempt to explain away these problems; do not judge each protester by the acts of a violent few; do not even judge the violent few. Look—as Jesus asks us to—at our fellow image bearers. Do you see them? Nothing can get better until we look, until we set aside our prejudgments and our self-righteous certainties and really pay attention to the broth-

ers and sisters whose long abuse Jesus has set before us this summer in a special way.

To close I think it is wise to remind ourselves that in this passage Jesus' love extends to both the woman and to Simon. If we are Jesus' followers, then we cannot dismiss any person or class of persons, whatever their opinions, attitudes, or prejudices. We must regard people as more than the sum of their sins. We must never regard ourselves as the righteous relating to sinners, but always as forgiven sinners offering Jesus' grace to fellow screw-ups. When anyone stands before us, we must hear Jesus asking us to look, and really see, a person Jesus loves.

*Zach Spidel is pastor of The Shepherd's Table, Dayton, OH.*

## From Pastor to Member of Parliament

*By Harold Albrecht*

**I CAME TO** faith in Jesus Christ as my Saviour and Lord at age seven while sitting on the woodbox beside our stove in the kitchen on our farm. There was no struggle to take that step as my dad led me in asking for God's forgiveness. Dad and Mom lived out their faith with integrity and authenticity and I wanted what they had. Today, 63 years later, I still marvel at how they walked the talk! Observing their joy and generosity in providing for a family of seven children, welcoming many guests into our home (missionaries, evangelists, homeless wanderers, many neighbours), doing ministry at Rosebank Brethren in Christ Church in many capacities, pursuing vibrant relationships with neighbours—their godly example is one of the greatest gifts God has given me.

From an early age I knew that we had a duty to be good stewards of all that God has given us: the land, livestock, material possessions, education, natural and spiritual gifts—and yes, the life and ministry of the church both locally and globally.

My participation in ministry, beginning at a young age, included teaching Sunday School, participating in and leading youth group, serving on local and national church boards, and doing short-term overseas mis-

sion trips with the Christian Medical and Dental Society. All of these and more were avenues to serve people in the name of Christ. While I never anticipated formal political involvement for myself, through "stewarding" these early opportunities doors seemed to open for expanded service.

Coaching minor league hockey and baseball and serving on a local committee studying the need for better recreational facilities in our township led to the opportunity to serve as an elected trustee, and later as chair of the Waterloo County School Board, serving over 50,000 students. During this time I also served on the North American board of Brethren in Christ World Missions, the General Conference Board, and a number of Canadian Conference boards. I share this brief historical context because it is very clear to me that many small actions over a lifetime have opened doors that I would have never contemplated entering otherwise.

During my six years of pastoral ministry at Pathway Community Church, I encouraged our members to take a stand on the social issues of the day, such as protecting pre-born babies. We participated in prayer vigils and walkathons to raise funds for pro-life causes. I had preached and discussed the

biblical instruction to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, so it was time to put our talk into action. The same held true as it related to the Canadian government's intention to move away from the traditional understanding of heterosexual marriage. Would we as followers of Christ stand for God's timeless truth regarding sexual ethics or would we sit quietly and say nothing? We organized a prayer rally, with over 300 people in attendance, in front of the Member of Parliament's constituency office as one way to bring truth into the public square.

Then a few years later, out of the blue came an invitation to allow my name to stand for nomination for the Conservative Party of Canada for the upcoming federal election. Having tried to lead my congregation in active engagement, it seemed like God was saying, "Here is the next step."

I was elected four times to serve as the Member of Parliament for the Kitchener-Conestoga Electoral District (Riding). While I have engaged in many debates in Parliament, served as Deputy Government Whip and on many parliamentary committees (e.g., Environment, Ethics, Aboriginal Affairs, Agriculture, International Human

Rights, Physician Assisted Dying), I want to highlight a few key initiatives that I felt specifically called to address.

I introduced and influenced the passage of two pieces of legislation, both dealing with suicide prevention. These bills were the result of months of study, preparation, and collaboration across party lines to gain almost unanimous support. My desire was to find ways for governments at all levels to help prevent the hopelessness that too often leads to despair. While we need to acknowledge the physiological, psychological, chemical, and other medical realities, we cannot afford to omit the spiritual dimension of our human experience.

Another key initiative was co-chairing the Parliamentary Committee on Palliative and Compassionate Care. We developed a report called, "Not To Be Forgotten." Finding ways for increased support for those facing end-of-life challenges, those facing elder abuse and suicidal ideation is part of our stewardship responsibility!

My interest in and support for better palliative care options put me on the committee responsible to draft criteria for Canada's assisted suicide laws, now referred to as Medical Aid in Dying. This bill was brought to Parliament following the committee study. While I remain totally opposed to assisted dying or euthanasia, today there are more safeguards for the vulnerable in place.

I have also been active in the Pro-Life Caucus, as we drew attention to the plight of those who cannot speak for themselves. I had the privilege to speak to thousands of participants in rallies, thank them for their ongoing work, and challenge them to keep up their effective advocacy for the pre-born. I also support local pregnancy centres as they give tangible support for prospective mothers and then journey with them through the early years with an infant.

Recently the "Gender Identity and Gender Expression" bill was passed into law. I spoke out in Parliament against this bill:

"A major concern for me . . . is that the terms gender identity and gender expression are very subjective terms, far too subjective to be used in the context of legal documents. Would policies protecting people on the grounds of gender identity and expression merely provide safety and protection—that

is, provide a shield against abuse—or would they be used to drive a broader agenda? . . . What would the impact be on immigrant groups and faith groups . . . ? Would they have the freedom to teach their children and practise their beliefs without being accused of hate speech or a human rights violation? . . . If freedom of religion is to be embraced, then it is of paramount importance that [this bill] not infringe upon that fundamental freedom."

The most basic freedom that any society can confer on its citizens is freedom of religion. Other freedoms, such as freedom of assembly, freedom of press, and freedom of expression are built on the foundation of freedom of religion and belief. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18, 1948 states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes the freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom either in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance."

As a follower of Christ, I have an opportunity to live out a dynamic faith that shows itself publicly in how I live and govern, and it has the power to transform. Jesus said that his followers were lights on a hill not to be hidden under a bowl. Living out our faith values in the public square is especially relevant in a pluralistic world where so many different world views and creeds are competing for favour.

Faith values do not in any way preclude us from being able to make tough decisions and grapple with the most challenging issues of the day. What should distinguish us is a willingness to temper our toughness with compassion and with a deep understanding that we are all flawed human beings living in a deeply-flawed world.

We are all called to be stewards of our resources. Each of us can make a difference, whether by writing a letter, making a phone call, serving locally, marching in a rally to support the most vulnerable, supporting a political candidate locally, provincially, or nationally, or even be open to fill that position yourself.

I have not achieved anywhere close to what I would have liked to, but I am confident that I have made a small difference in

the affairs of Canada. If followers of Christ avoid participation in stewarding the blessings he has given us, should we be surprised that our culture drifts further away from his principles?

I've always identified with Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5: "When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power."

*Harold Albrecht attends the Pathway Community Church in Kitchener, ON. He served for 10 years as a Member of Parliament in the Canadian House of Commons. You can read Harold's speeches by searching for his name at [openparliament.ca](http://openparliament.ca).*

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practical ways to understand, explain, and solve seemingly intractable problems of racial inequity and injustice."

Throughout the book, Kendi is very keen on creating clear definitions. Here are the basic two defining terms.

**Racist:** One who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea.

**Antiracist:** One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea.

Explaining and exploring racism and antiracism is the work of Kendi's book. Whether one is new to antiracism or a veteran, this book aids in our continuing education and doing the hard work of dispelling this power construct and empowering truth and the disenfranchised. Most people don't want to be a racist. The question is, "Are we willing to be antiracist?"

*Lois Saylor attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and serves on the Shalom! editorial committee.*

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## BOOK REVIEW

### Antiracism: Changing the Paradigm

By Lois Saylor

**LATELY I'VE BEEN** getting tongue-tied over racism. The modern idea of “race” is false, but racial issues are real. Using the terms of race seems to give credence to this false narrative, so I start tripping over the words because they hold a lie. To the rescue comes Ibram X. Kendi in his 2019 book *How to Be an Antiracist*. Kendi takes the reader into a personal, historical, and paradigm-shifting view of racism, giving the framework and the words to discuss the construct and examine the truth.

Kendi affirms that race is a construct, although he believes it to be a power construct, not merely a social construct. This construct rose out of an historical context of defending slavery, early science, and the Enlightenment. Even though false, our world is organized around this construct, so it must be addressed as it presents itself. Kendi helpfully points out that ending racial categories is the last step, not the first, in fighting racism. We must both reject and yet use the racial categories set before us. In that freedom, or grace, we can continue the discussion knowing we must start where we are to get where we want to go.

Kendi addresses racism with a searing honesty—both his own racism and ours. He

writes, “Being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination” (p. 23). As Kendi includes himself in this examination, he shares the stories of his own development and the embedded racist ideas he held about both Black and white people. He educates us by taking us through his own educational journey from his defiance of racism in elementary school to his college years of radical exploration and through his eye-opening post-graduate work. As we travel with him, he takes us through several racial paradigm shifts.

Two of Kendi’s paradigm shifts work in tandem. The first important shift demolishes the idea of neutral ground. He suggests that no one can simply say, “I am not racist.” Such a claim is an inactive position. We are either being racist or antiracist. We succumb or ascribe to racist ideas, policies, and activity or we fight against them. The inactivity of “not racist” allows racism to continue and therefore is complicit in racism. To this first idea he adds a necessary second point.

This second important shift is that we are not one or the other—racist or antiracist. Rather, we vacillate issue by issue and moment to moment. We are one or the other at

different times and in different circumstances. We are all both racist and antiracist in our actions or inactions. So the shift is twofold: 1) there is no neutral ground, and 2) we occupy both racist and antiracist ground. The major point of the book is to help us to be more fully and more competently antiracist.

Another major paradigm shift Kendi makes is that racism did not begin in hate and ignorance and then foster racist policies. He believes history shows that racist policies were put in place out of the self-interest of the policy makers, and then those policies fueled hate and ignorance in the populace. Hence race is a power construct made to keep the powerbrokers in power over others. Briefly said: The powerbrokers wanted slaves, so they constructed the framework allowing slavery to be a scientifically tenable and morally sustainable position.

Since racism starts with racist policy, Kendi sees the real work of antiracism as fixing racist policies. This is the hard and difficult work of dismantling racism. Kendi is the founder of the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University. Part of the group’s mission is “to figure out novel and

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