

## An Open Letter to My White Christian Friend

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## AN OPEN LETTER TO MY WHITE CHRISTIAN FRIEND ABOUT RACISM

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### ABSTRACT

As human beings, our world revolves around relationships. As Christians, we are charged to have positive relationships that can grow into friendships. The importance of friendships is infused throughout scripture, because they allow us to bring others to Christ, encourage and uplift the soul and bear each other's burdens. Without deep discussions, relationships cannot grow. As an African American, when I consider my friendships, I am finding an emotional need to share my feelings more deeply with White friends, who sincerely want to know the truth about my views on important social ills, particularly racism. Given the state of race relations today, I believe it is essential to be honest and live in a state of integrity, regardless of the circumstances. So, when my White Christian friend, who leads a religious organization wrote a letter asking "How can we make race relations better? What can we do?" I responded with a letter to her.

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### INTRODUCTION

As a leader and member of organizations that have a number of races and nationalities, it seems that European-American (White) leaders and members identify me as an African American they can ask sensitive questions, particularly about race. One White friend shared that she viewed me as an approachable, Christian person who is honest, yet does not intentionally try to hurt or accuse them of *Heaven Forbid*, racism. I find her statement interesting, because I believe in Derrick

Bell's (1992) theory about racism, namely that it affects every person in America (and possibly the world), and people are steeped in it from birth. I believe White people benefit from institutionalized racism, even unknowingly, making them inherent participants in racism. While I believe racism is a sin, I should also share that I believe Black people can sin by being prejudice and bias, but not racist, because of the power dynamic that is associated with racism and its institutionalized, systemic nature. I say this because I think my White friends would be shocked to learn I think of them as racist, based on Bell's theory. Would I call my friends racists? Certainly not, because I do not desire to be offensive. But, how do I share the truth of what I think and feel, while maintaining a valued friendship, a heart of forgiveness and unconditional love?

This letter to my White friend is an effort to do just that as I respond to her sincere question.

#### *Polly's letter*

*Hello!*

*First of all, I hope each of you is enjoying the summer break! The bright side of the Pandemic is that you might find time to do some of the things you enjoy!*

*More importantly, I wanted to reach out to you as African American members and fellow sisters in-Christ [in the organization]. I am so thankful for each of you, and I value your time as we serve the Lord together.*

*My prayer is for us to be a diverse organization that represents our community well – a place that’s warm and welcoming for everyone, regardless of their race or background – a place that gives us a glimpse of what heaven will look like as we spend eternity together with believers of every tribe and tongue.*

*To help us get there, will you let me know if there are areas where we are currently falling short – whether in our administrative team, staff or organization as a whole? If there aren’t ways we fall short, are there ways where we could do better?*

*I am hopeful to hear from you so that I can see our organization from your perspective. I don’t want to remain ignorant about anything that’s happening right in our midst, merely assuming that it’s someone else’s issue.*

*Love,  
Polly*

## **MY FRIEND**

My friend Polly (I use the pseudonym “Polly,” not her real name) is an interesting person. She is a Christian, and was a professional in the work world, but is currently a stay-at home mom who has a husband and children. She uses the term stay-at-home mom, but in actuality, she leads an all women’s Christian organization that has administrators, staff and several hundred members. In my world, I would refer to her as a working mom.

Polly and I became friends because we live in the same neighborhood and have mutual friends who introduced us. As Christians we both had commonalities as believers although, our political views continue to be quite different. When she learned of my experience in administration, she began to ask questions about group dynamics and soon we were emailing and texting about the role of leadership.

When the Pandemic hit and then the George Floyd tragedy, she asked if I would take a look at a letter she sent to African American women in her organization, because she received some negative feedback about her letter and wanted to know what she did wrong. When I asked what the letter was about she said it was to determine if African American women in her organization had ideas about how to make things better from their perspective. I asked Polly what she meant by better, for example, better in terms of what? She said better in terms of race relations. I told her to send the letter and some of the responses to me and I would try to share some insights. Here is the letter she emailed to the African American women in her organization and excerpts of some of the feedback she received.

## **EXCERPTS OF FEEDBACK FROM AFRICAN AMERICAN MEMBERS OF HER CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATION**

*...Understanding the hurt experienced by our African American community is the first step, and in my opinion, the inability to listen and show empathy is a heart issue. ...how can you talk about enjoying the summer?...where have you been? This was one of the worst summers for many people, especially African Americans.*

*...The silent and/or dismissive behavior exhibited by other believers is especially disheartening to say the least, and further deepens wounds.*

*...your letter was vague and did not mention anything about the pandemic and how it is impacting our community or the murder of George Floyd which should be heartbreaking for anyone who has a heart.*

*...are you really serious about what needs to be changed...you never asked before...did current events bring this on...I don’t know, because you didn’t say in your letter. ...I am a Christian and must be honest...I am here, but I still view this organization as segregated...there are no African Americans in administration, staff or leadership...why?*

*...I think [this organization] is wonderful...I don’t see anything you need to do better.*

*...I am happy to be a part of [the Christian organization]...you don’t fall short that I can see...*

*...everything is great! No improvement needed...*

...such a wonderful letter to us.

I have to admit, I was surprised at what I will call the “shallowness” of Polly’s letter. I was encouraged to see many African American ladies challenge the content of her communication to them. When I saw the “happy notes,” I thought of hegemonic mindsets.

Polly asked if I would please give her some basic information about race relations and share some insights she simply does not understand. She also asked for suggestions that would help her organization, because she wants to show love and earn the respect of African

American. Her final statement was “what can we do?” I sent her the following letter, which was the first of many communications.

**THE LETTER** (I use the pseudonym “Polly,” not her real name).

Dear Polly,

Thank you for having the heart and mind to reach out to me as your friend to ask serious questions. I am eager to communicate with you because I believe we have a special relationship that allows for love, heartfelt honesty and personal vulnerabilities, as sisters in Christ.

I feel it is important to share some foundational positions, before honoring your request for ideas or suggestions about your organization. Often people use the same words, but have very different meanings in their hearts and minds. So, I want to be clear as I share my thoughts with the intention of mutual understanding and dialogue. These are my thoughts and they do not always represent the way all Black people think or feel.

### **RACE: FROM TABOO TO UNCOMFORTABLE**

As one of your responders stated, your letter was vague, and I will add to that by saying you did not mention race relations or anything pertinent about the racial tensions happening all around us. The issue of race in our country is complex and shrouded in a painful, hidden history. Clearly, history is experienced differently by various racial groups. But in fact, race impacts everyone. This was not God’s plan. Malachi 2:10 says *Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?*

(*New International Version, 1978/2011*). We are all God’s children. God wants us to see each other as sisters and brothers, inclusive of skin color and physical features. The enemy has used race to separate and divide us along racial lines and we see it everyday of our lives.

If you are going to have good communication, race cannot be taboo, although it might be uncomfortable for you. You should talk about every and all issues of race with your members. In my experience, Blacks talk about race every day, but often only to each other. Often, Whites try not to talk about race, and some think it is taboo, or at the very least, uncomfortable. Author

DiAngelo (2018) writes “...most White people raised in the U.S...[were] not taught to see [themselves] in racial terms...therefore they have discomfort in being seen racially, ...[and] of having to proceed as if our race matters (which it does)” (p.7). I agree with this author and believe

your White worldview has caused something DiAngelo calls *White Fragility*, meaning any mention of race causes “anger, fear or guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence and

withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation” (p. 2).

Yet, there is an ongoing reality that race and racial issues are very present. So, those who want to be so called good people, speak about race in codes as a way of being polite (or devious), while conveying racial messages (Samuels, 2018). Some think being “color-blind” or trying not to see color is a way to avoid the issue of race and pretend it does not exist (Carter and Vavrus, 2018). The only way to conquer the uncomfortable and make progress in building positive race relations is to talk about race with openness and honesty. This applies to friendships, so I appreciate you

Polly, for asking the question, “what can we do(?)”

## RACISM

You want to talk about race relations, but in my opinion, you need to address racism. Let me share my thoughts, feelings and opinion about racism. I accept the definition of racism as showing favoritism based on a person's race and having the power to demonstrate or manifest distinctions. Prejudice on the other hand, is a personal bias based on race and like racism, is a sin. God hates prejudice and racism, because we are all HIS children. Romans 2:11 says God does not show favoritism. HE loves each and every one of us (Matthew 18:12-14). He does not want division among us. Nobody, not even non-believers, want to be called a racist or to be viewed as a racist (except those with a mission of hate and unfortunately, they exist). There is overt racism, which is very blatant and open. There is covert racism, which is more subtle and subdued. Both are very powerful and reflected in a myriad of ways. We see it blatantly in the shooting in South Carolina and the public killing of George Floyd. We see it in segregation in communities, churches, schools and yes, your organization. We see it in the confederate flag. We see it in institutionalized racism, reflected in the structural fiber of our nation in the form of laws, policies, rules, customs and subtly in White privilege.

I feel the need to go deeper into the intricacies of White privilege, a component of racism. To me, racism is *an advantage based on skin color*. White privilege does NOT mean life has been easy. We all have struggles as human beings, it simply means skin color does not make it harder. So, one may have grown up in poverty, or worked hard all during life and faced hardships and challenges, but aspects of Whiteness are benefits, purely because of whiteness. If you think about racism as a form of disadvantage, such as something that harms Black people, that discriminates against Black people or degrades Black people, then think of White privilege as the corollary opposite (Oluo, 2018). It is a public mind-set that benefits White people, gives opportunities, privileges and advantage, because they are White. This concept is crystal clear to Blacks, but hard to receive by Whites, therefore, many feel exonerated from racism, while receiving its benefits. When it comes to racism, participation is there, even if you do not think you are participating.

## SEGREGATION

Segregation is another form of racism most people don't seriously think about in their lives. Consider, these questions, who attends your church, who are your friends? Who do you share the Gospel with, who are your children's friends? How do children internalize segregation? What does it mean to them? How is the notion of segregation passed on from generation to generation? Did your responder have a reason to say your organization was segregated? These questions are not accusations, but considerations in becoming aware of circumstances around you and the impact we all experience.

## HEGEMONIC MINDSETS

Some African American women in your organization are happy and do not see a need for change. You should know, racism has another component called *hegemony*. It is an academic word, but simply means a person, in a subordinate or minority position, participates in their own discrimination. It comes from "slave mentality" and means people are afraid to speak truth for fear of punishment or rejection, or as an oppressed people, simply want to please the oppressor. For example, you can observe hegemonic mindsets reflected when you hear statements from Black people such as "I have never experienced racism" or "I have never been mistreated because of my race." Consider carefully the statements you received about "no improvements needed." Look for truth and God will reveal it to you.

## WHY THE GRIEF AND UNREST

Although you did not say anything in your communication about *why* you are asking race related questions, I am compelled to address a few reasons I believe inspired you to contact me. Some of my White neighbors and friends have been asking, why all the "grief and unrest in our country?" I imagine you are asking the same question. The daily news, the internet, and national media show pain in the lives of Black people due to racism. You did not mention the word, but in my way of thinking, (I will say it again) we are really talking about the realities of racism and not about race and race relations. Racism is oppressive and filled with micro-aggressions Black people feel everyday of our lives. Inequity is real, although many in our society attempt to minimize its impact. Equity is emphasized as a foundational piece of our society. Ministers, educators, media outlets and government officials promote it as the highest goal to achieve, yet we have a long history of inequities, unaddressed oppression and blatant racism (Love, 2019).

Look around you, Polly. Systemic inequities have been greatly highlighted by the spread of coronavirus. In fact, it has exposed the widening berth of inequities among poor and rich, Black and White. The economic impact of “pandemic forced” shut-downs and quarantines has a devastating impact on all public and private entities, but is having a catastrophic impact on marginalized populations. African Americans are disproportionately infected. In public schools and even higher education, these inequities have played out in the lack of access to reliable technology when students have to rely on remote learning.

To make matters even worse, George Floyd, an African American was killed by a White police officer on video. Black people have a long history of being killed by White police officers and other Whites, while the silent majority said nothing (Carter-Jackson, 2019). The resistance against police brutality and systemic racism resulted in protests, violence, and demands for justice across the world. According to Proverbs 24:24 *Whoever says to the guilty, you are innocent, peoples will curse him and nations will denounce him (New International Version, 1978/2011)*. The world is protesting. These incidents are among many reasons governments, corporations, institutions and organizations have been forced to examine their roles in promulgating and maintaining racism.

Why is the world protesting? I believe God is speaking to us through his Word, which may be challenging to some, but encouraging to others. James 5:1-6 says:

*Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. <sup>2</sup>Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. <sup>3</sup>Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. <sup>4</sup>Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. <sup>5</sup>You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. <sup>6</sup>You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you (New International Version, 1978/2011).*

I am encouraged by these verses. How does this passage make you feel?

Discomfort, violence and protests - are these among the reasons you contacted me? By the way, did you express sympathy to your organization about the George Floyd horror and denounce the tragedy? In case you did not, just remember, it is not too late.

In the final analysis, I want you to gain a glimpse of what racism really means to both Black and White people, from the perspective of your Black friend. In my way of thinking, Christians have a duty to demonstrate anti-racist behavior, not as a box to check, but as a mindset. I would like to honor your request to make suggestions I believe necessary for positive progress based on my knowledge of your organization:

1. Add African Americans to your staff and administrative team. Currently, you do not have one. This way, you could have ready and immediate access to multicultural perspectives and model a diverse team before the entire organization.
2. The administrative team, staff and the organization as a whole should receive Christian diversity training based on God's Word and should learn to pass anti-racist behaviors on to others, as messengers of Christ.
3. When racial issues are perceived or occur, they should be bathed in prayer and addressed immediately and systemically, letting everyone know the organization is engaged in antiracist behaviors.
4. Begin to have guided dialogues about racism and racial issues, among the organization and leaders, particularly when painful incidents occur, such as George Floyd's killing. Do not allow the “elephant in the room.” Learn how to address racial issues from God's perspective.
5. Identify and communicate with Black leaders, in your area or nationally, who can become trusted partners in working through racial issues. They can help you write meaningful, sensitive letters and communications. I have a contact list of names.

I am sure my letter is more than you expected, but we can keep talking and growing in God's grace.

In the Grip of HIS love,

Norvella

I could not guess how Polly would respond to my letter. I was surprised when she sent an email the same day.

### **POLLY'S RESPONSE**

*Norvella,*

*Yet again, you demonstrate that you are God's gift to me personally and to my organization as well! Your response was so insightful, informative and so grace-filled.*

*With your permission, I forwarded your document to both my local and national team. I also want our administrators, staff and other leaders to benefit from your perspective, and to have it as a resource as they advise all members of the organization.*

*As a side note, I will never forget the phone conversation we had where you mentioned reversing the roles and imagining what it would feel like to always be in the minority of a group. That frequently comes to mind as I consider the African American members of my organization.*

*To one of your areas of improvement, I know my organization is working on developing diversity training for leaders. Would you have any interest in leading a training for our Administrators and staff sometime this year?*

*With a grateful heart,*

*Polly*

I have to admit, Polly's response impacted me several ways. First, I was surprised she responded so quickly, positively. I thought she would be very defensive. Her response made me hopeful about future conversations. Secondly, I did not expect her to send administrators the letter. I wondered if they read the letter and if so, how did it impact them? I have not received feedback, yet.

I was also surprised by her reference to *reversing roles* and seeing herself as a minority. I remember explaining to her how my White students were traumatized when they traveled with me on a university, study-abroad trip to Senegal, Africa. My students were surrounded, in mass, by Black African locals. I loved every minute, but my White students were anxious and did not want to leave my side, like children, although they were adults. If Polly could envision this scenario, she would empathize and add African Americans to her organization. Surely, for the sheer sake of bringing comfort and avoiding isolation among her African American members, she could add diversity. Additionally, she could gain valuable, fresh perspectives. Time will tell if our dialogue was helpful.

I have not heard about the group's diversity training, but Polly continues to communicate with me and ask questions. Will she grow, will things get better or will it all be forgotten after a short period of time? I wonder the same questions about our country and the issues we face.

### **CONCLUSION**

Given our country's history and current events that show the evils of racism, some of our relationships, particularly between Black and White friends, have been strained. How many Christian African Americans, exchange pleasantries with White neighbors, colleagues or even church members who could be potential friends, but do not engage in deeper relationships, because it is difficult to have a serious conversation about "the elephant in the room," racism?

Racial battle fatigue is real. It is very difficult to be patient when we know the capabilities of White Americans to understand and gain knowledge about serious undertakings. When "the Polly's of the world" reach out to me, my mind thinks it is foolish to engage in conversation, but my heart, as a Christian, says respond, challenge the status quo, show love, but definitely confront evil when necessary. We have to speak truth *in season and out of season*, which can lead to exhaustion. The key is joining other Christians and colleagues who are like minded and supportive in replenishing and energizing the soul (Carter, 2015).

In the final analysis, for me, it is important to be honest and have difficult conversations, trusting that engagement could lead to a richer and deeper friendship that is pleasing to the Lord. I have to admit, I had to pray for love, patience and wisdom in communicating with my Christian friend. I continue to wonder how White Christians view their responsibility for understanding the Social ill of racism and their onus to become anti-racists. If you are African American, what do you want your White friends to know about racism and your feelings? Are you honest? Can you speak the truth in love? What is in your heart?



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