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# Cross Cultural Communication in the Culture of the Cross

Jonathan J. Hutson

President Clinton formed his Advisory Board on Race in June 1997, calling on Americans to “begin a great national conversation on race and reconciliation.”

A survey by the nonprofit Center for Living Democracy (CLD) found that at the grassroots level, hundreds of thousands of citizens from all regions were already engaging in interracial dialogues. CLD cofounder Paul Martin Du Bois directed the yearlong survey, which identified eighty-five interracial dialogue groups representing at least thirty states. With support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, CLD researchers went on to interview over sixty groups that modeled sustained, community-based dialogue across the racial divide. The survey’s findings included the following:

- ⟨ Blacks and whites respond to media projections of black rage as a barometer of the state of race relations, which may explain the second finding, below.

- ⟨ Fifty percent of the interracial dialogues identified began in the past five years, prompted by alarm over racial polarization triggered by the Rodney King police beating trial and the O. J. Simpson murder trial.
- ⟨ Blacks and whites predominate in forming interracial dialogues. A majority of those interviewed rated improving dialogue between blacks and whites a top priority.
- ⟨ Latinos are the next most often included minority group in the dialogues, followed by Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Least often included are Native Americans.
- ⟨ Even when formed in a sense of crisis, groups quickly move from airing grievances to probing causes, such as perceived institutional racism.
- ⟨ Interracial dialogue groups are only now discovering each other and becoming aware of their po-

tential collective power as a movement.

- ⟨ Religious organizations were ranked first and national media, last in order of importance in fostering interracial dialogue.

My coauthor, Du Bois, and I released *Bridging the Racial Divide: A Report on Interracial Dialogue in America* on September 30. On October 9, the President's Initiative on Race invited us and several other academicians and activists to Washington to discuss "promising practices" in promoting interracial dialogue. I offered a working definition of "interracial dialogue" and a set of ten "guiding principles" based on our research.

### **Interracial Dialogue Defined**

When we say "interracial dialogue," we mean an organized, inclusive, facilitated forum (i.e., a diverse forum with a moderator trained in the skills of race relations, conflict resolution, and the dynamics of dialogue) for the face-to-face exchange of information, sharing of personal stories, honest expression of emotion, affirmation of values, clarification of viewpoints, and deliberation of solutions to serious civic concerns.

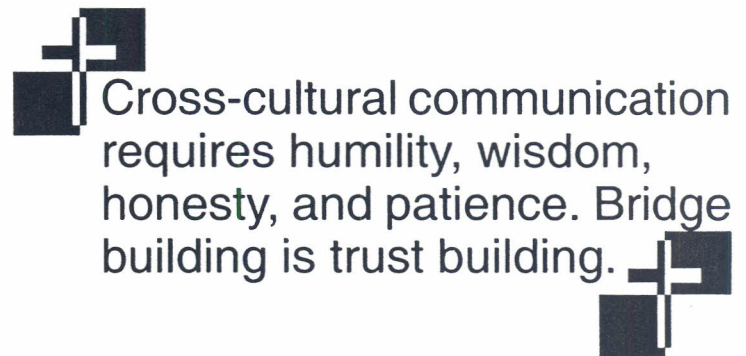
Of the dialogue groups contacted by the Center for Living Democracy, interviewees universally cited face-to-face communication as vital to their success. With that factor as a given (which is, after all, part of what we mean by "dialogue"), here are the top ten success factors most often cited by interracial dialogue groups:

1. Sustained commitment and consistent involvement
2. Cross-cultural collaboration in community service
3. Grassroots leadership by a variety of local "stakeholders"
4. Training and preparation of dialogue facilitators
5. Creation and maintenance of a "safe environment" for sharing personal stories, expressing the full range of emotions, affirming values, offering opinions, clarifying viewpoints, asking questions, and suggesting solutions
6. A focus on a positive, pluralistic, participatory vision
7. Honesty in airing "hot topics" and tackling "tough issues"
8. Building of trust by maintenance of a respectful, fair, and reasonable dialogue
9. Engagement of media support to reach the wider community

10. Overcoming of skepticism about the value of "just more talk"

Obviously, these findings indicate that interracial dialogue is not a "one-shot deal." Sustained commitment and consistent involvement require time to build relationships of trust at the community level. Cross-cultural collaboration in community service means that most folk will eventually want to take the dialogue beyond talk to collective action in solving community problems. Such problems are often serious, requiring grassroots leadership from a variety of community stakeholders.

That explains why we've found that success often means active involvement (beyond funding) of at least three of the following six key community institutions:



(1) media, (2) businesses, (3) government, (4) schools and universities, (5) community-based and national nonprofits, and (6) local and national religious groups, particularly interfaith organizations. A congregation will be more credible and effective if it links with other churches and community institutions.

What makes interfaith groups effective? The National Conference (founded in 1927 as the National Conference of Christians and Jews) maintains credibility because of its history of support for civil rights and because it demonstrates the value of inclusivity—women and men of diverse faiths working side by side on an equal basis. On social justice issues, Christians measure credibility in terms of Gal 3:28—in the culture of the cross, there is no room for racism, classism, or sexism, for we are all one.

Generally, to the extent that white Christians may experience difficulty in bridging the racial divide, they might find their biggest barrier to be a lack of credibility, due to (1) failure to fully integrate their churches and schools, (2) ignorance of racial injustice, including institutional



racism, and (3) failure to persist in attempts to initiate an honest, healing dialogue after initial overtures have been ignored or rebuffed. Cross-cultural communication requires humility, wisdom, honesty, and patience. Bridge building is trust building.

“That’s not fair,” you might be thinking. “I don’t knowingly discriminate. I treat everyone the same. I’m colorblind!” Yet in my experience, any person who claims to be “colorblind” on race is a white person. Further, the fact that one doesn’t perceive institutional racism in one’s church or school doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. Fish don’t see water either—not because it isn’t there, but because they’re surrounded by it.

What do I mean by institutional racism? Here is an example based on my experience and perception. Last July, black activists at the Race Relations Institute at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, challenged white allies to take stock of systemic oppression in our own institutions. So I drove across town to my alma mater, David Lipscomb University, a liberal arts school historically affiliated with the Churches of Christ. In thumbing through the latest yearbook, I found that Lipscomb employs four faculty of color, compared with over one hundred seventy white faculty. The board of directors includes one black and nineteen whites. Students of color constitute only 7 percent of the student body. Of these, blacks constitute only 3 percent. While Lipscomb recently hired one black dean, whites hold all other key administrative posts.

So I’m accepting my responsibility to ask my beloved alma mater, Haven’t we qualified many Christians of color, professionals with teaching credentials, who are willing to teach at Lipscomb? If not, why not? Have we failed to

recruit and mentor enough students of color? Have we failed to hire and promote from within? Have we failed to create a hospitable campus environment for people of color? Have we failed to network with qualified black professionals and other Christians of color? How can I help be a change agent?

While it is painful to recognize that racism surrounds us and permeates even the Christian institutions we cherish, racial reconciliation begins with honest appraisal and interracial dialogue. Therefore, I challenge every reader: Start where you are and take an inventory of the institutions to which you belong. Do most of your fellow congregants or students share your ethnic and cultural heritage? When you ask to speak with a leader, will you be facing someone who looks and thinks like yourself? If you see racial imbalance, think about why. Ask diverse people about their perceptions and experiences of racism within your faith community. By learning about your institution’s history and by putting those ten “guiding principles” into practice, you can begin to transform your community in the spirit of Gal 3:28.

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