

“For years I have wondered, how can the solution to a problem that is so spiritual be left in the hands of people who are so political? In their book *Colorful Connections: 12 Questions About Race That Open Healthy Conversations*, Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith and Lori Stanley Roeleveld take the issue of race and, with incredible wisdom and surgical precision, bring together all of the different dynamics and weave them into a balanced, biblical solution. I can say with certainty that this book is the way forward!”

ISAAC PITRE, president of II Kings Global Network and IPM Ministries, and author of *The Divine DNA*

“Saundra and Lori have done a masterful job stepping into a vital subject. Their wisdom, wit, candor, and grace can help each reader explore and grow in themselves and their relationships. Thanks to both of these wonderful women for giving us such a timely and helpful resource!”

SARAH BOWLING, founder of Living Genuine Love, founder of Saving Moses, author, speaker, and TV host

“If you only read one book this year, make it this one! Authors Dalton-Smith and Roeleveld have done a masterful job of helping us to face important issues. Their invitation to join the conversation about race, ethnicity, justice, disagreement, and differences will challenge you to move in the direction of positive change. *Colorful Connections* will give you the tools to make a lasting impact on the racial relationships of future generations.”

CAROL KENT, speaker, founder and executive director of Speak Up Conference, and author of *When I Lay My Isaac Down*

“I’m so proud of Saundra and Lori for unapologetically and straightforwardly tackling such a crucial subject. Just when it seems we have made little progress over the decades, here comes *Colorful Connections* offering more than mere hope. These women offer unblinking advice

and model strategy that goes way beyond wishful thinking. They open a door to authentic cross-cultural friendships that lead to true understanding.”

JERRY B. JENKINS, novelist, biographer, and founder of
The Jerry Jenkins Writers Guild

DR. SAUNDRA DALTON-SMITH
AND LORI STANLEY ROELEVELD

COLOR
FUL
connections

12 QUESTIONS ABOUT RACE THAT
OPEN HEALTHY CONVERSATIONS



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*We dedicate this book to everyone
trying to be part of the solution.*

Colorful Connections: 12 Questions About Race That Open Healthy Conversations
© 2022 by Sandra Dalton-Smith, MD, and Lori Stanley Roeleveld

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To Our Readers

BEFORE WE BEGIN THIS conversation, we want you to know that we are just like many of you. We love Jesus Christ. We believe his Word and seek to apply it to every aspect of our lives. We struggle. We're imperfect. When we fail, we try again.

Saundra is a wife, mother, doctor, writer, speaker, Southerner, and black woman. Lori is a wife, mother, grandmother, crisis worker, writer, speaker, Northerner, and white woman. But of course, like you, we are also each much more than our roles, geography, and skin color.

Within these pages there are also voices of men and women of other ethnicities adding their thoughts to ours. Together we are the body of Christ, sons and daughters of the Most High King.

We have been impacted, just like you, by the events and debates about race and ethnicity raging in our times. We aren't experts at racial reconciliation, but because we are writers, that's what we offer to God in the work toward racial healing. We committed to have this public conversation in writing in the hope that it would inspire other Christians to begin (or continue) their own conversations.

We did this because we love Jesus and believe that, in him, we have the power and the love we need to heal and move forward together. We did this because we believe God when he says we need one another and that we are one body. We did this even though it was

uncomfortable, scary, and made us vulnerable. We offer this work to you with love, tears, and prayers.

As hard as it is to hold on to hope for change in our times, we believe we have every reason to hope in Christ. May this book ignite, reignite, or further fuel your hope as well, in the name of Jesus.

—Mercy and grace, Sandra and Lori

How to Get the Most from This Book

Lori

You may not have planned to read a book about racial conflict and healing. Sandra and I never planned to write one. But here we all are, by God's grace.

In our customary modes, Sandra writes and speaks about the value of sacred rest and freedom in Christ. I write about persisting in faith and having hard conversations. But through several incidents we describe in the book, God invited both of us into this written conversation. Our hope is that this book will encourage you to initiate your own conversations and make colorful connections.

When Sandra and I started this project, we were acquainted with one another, but we weren't close. We were friendly, but we weren't friends. We'd encountered one another at writing conferences, were aware of each other's work, even shared a literary agent, but besides admiring her writing, I didn't know if she had a family, where she lived, or what church she attended for worship.

We both approached this project with a desire to use our gifts to make a difference, to move closer to racial healing. We initially experienced fear, but we elevated our fear of the Lord above all other fears and agreed to have a transparent, public conversation on race, not knowing what we would encounter from one another.

Once we agreed to try this, we met face-to-face virtually and discussed ground rules for our work. We weren't working in the dark with these ground rules. I'm experienced at having hard conversations

and leading individuals and groups through them. These are guidelines I've tested in my personal life, work life, and church life. Now, Sandra and I are testing them here in a new arena.

We each initiated certain chapters, and we responded to each other's specific questions without "pre-discussing" them. We just wrote and sent the raw material on to the other writer. That was scary, but it most closely mimics the conversations we're encouraging everyone to have. There was an advantage in that we'd be exploring this topic as we got to know one another. That is precisely the situation with many of you, making new connections and entering this conversation with people you don't know well.

Like you, we faced our own fears on this project; you will see glimpses of this along the way. Sandra responded to the project with a gutsy enthusiasm that inspired and frightened me at the same time. She had immediate ideas about transparent modeling, open dialogue, and being hard to offend, which made me believe we could do this.

In one of our first conversations about ground rules, I blurted out one of my many concerns. "We have such a shared vision for this project, I'm half afraid we'll have to work through disagreements along the way and half afraid we won't, and the book won't be of any use."

She responded with unhesitating confidence, "Oh, don't worry. We'll have disagreements."

I gulped and asked God to supply me with courage moving forward. I plowed ahead for these reasons:

First, God opposes the proud, and I desire to cultivate a humble spirit. As my blind spots, prejudices, and wrong thinking are exposed through this conversation, it will provide more fuel in my spiritual battle against pride. As uncomfortable as that is, humility pleases God.

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To love is to listen.

Second, while like many of my friends, I don't believe that I'm a racist, I do believe I have much to learn about brothers and sisters of

color and their experience of Jesus, the church, and life on this planet. I'm confident there are ways I can grow and change to be a better representative of Christ in their lives and to demonstrate love in ways that are meaningful to them. I trust that God will use this process to show me attitudes and sinful mindsets I won't see if I don't bring my thoughts into the light.

Third, to love is to listen. Part of our ministry as believers is to witness one another's lives and, in love, listen to one another's stories. I want to hear Sandra's experience as a Jesus-loving woman of color living and raising sons in the South. I want to be present with her and hard to offend out of love for her. I want to lay down my self-defensiveness the way Jesus laid down his life.

Listening is one step forward we can all take. One simple way we can be part of the solution. I'm also excited that Sandra is willing to listen in love to what it's like to be Christian and white in these times of racial tensions. If she and I can help to alleviate fears and open doors for others to have these conversations, then I want to present myself for the challenge and trust God to help me rise to it.

What you'll see in the following chapters is the dialogue Sandra and I had in writing, wherein we discussed twelve questions leading to twelve steps every Christian can take toward racial healing. We created ground rules for our conversation that you'll find toward the end of the book. There's a reason for presenting them there. Sandra will explain.

Sandra

It may seem odd to present the seven keys for hard conversations in the next to last chapter of this book. Let me share with you some of the reasoning behind this decision. Let's look at treating bias, stereotypes, and prejudice in the same way one would approach treating a medical problem. How can you develop a medicine to treat an illness if you do not know what brought it on in the first place? If you don't know the foundation for the problem, it's impossible to treat the core issues at the heart of the problem. Only then can you develop solutions with the potential for long-term healing and transformation.

.....
*We must not fear exposing the biases and
prejudices we harbor in our hearts.*
.....

When Lori and I started our conversations, key areas we addressed were the biases and stereotypes we believed. In my research during the process of writing this book, this is always shown as a needed first step. We must not fear exposing the biases and prejudices we harbor in our hearts. Bringing them into the light is part of the healing process. This requires vulnerable and honest self-reflection. And it causes you to answer the question: Do I associate negative qualities to specific groups of people?

From here you are then able to reflect on why you may have an easier time associating with certain groups of people but struggle with building relationships with others. Being aware of your own biases does not mean you should feel bad or see yourself as a bad person. Rather than making you feel condemned, it should instead raise awareness of these issues and motivate you to address them. Stereotyping is a learned behavior, and as with any behavior, it can be unlearned with the renewing of our minds. This is the hope we have for overcoming hatred, injustice, and prejudice. What has been carried over through past generations and the current cultural climate can be redeemed when minds are aligned with the mind of Christ.

In a study on how to reduce prejudice, it was found that after the initial awareness to the problem, the next phase is cultivating concern.¹ When we care about the outcome, we are more likely to become engaged in being a part of the process. We move out of apathy into participation. We become part of the solution.

We encourage you to read the book on your own or to invite a friend or small group along for the journey. Each chapter begins with the questions we asked one another and that we challenge you to ask. Then Lori and I respond. This will sometimes feel like you're listening in on our conversation, but that is our way of keeping this real for us all.

Then, following our dialogue, you'll read how another person of a different ethnicity responded to the topic of that chapter. Finally, each chapter ends with a practical step we can all take, Scripture to consider, and starting places for taking action.

When doing this with a group, we recommend asking the following five questions for every chapter. We've also included additional discussion questions specific to each chapter at the end of the book.

Five Questions to Ask for Every Chapter

1. What resonated with you most about what Saundra or Lori shared? What sparked the most response from you? With what did you agree or disagree? How has your experience been either similar to or different from what each of them shared?
2. How would you respond to the primary question being asked in this chapter?
3. What are your thoughts on how the Bible passages mentioned relate to the topic of this chapter? What other passages would you consider in exploring this question?
4. What would you like people in your discussion group to know about you regarding the topic of this chapter?
5. What do you see as your next step in responding to this chapter?

You've likely chosen this book because, like us, your desire is to serve God and to be part of his ministry of reconciliation. We are not experts in this but we serve a God who is, so we move forward in faith that he is with us. "If God is for us, who can be against us" (Romans 8:31), yes?

Chapter One

COMMIT TO THE CONVERSATION

IT'S HARD TO KNOW where to begin.

They say the first step is always the hardest, and that's never been truer in our times than in conversations about race, color, and ethnicity. Most Christians feel a desire and a biblical mandate to be part of a healing process and to engage in the ministry of reconciliation in these conversations. Many of us are convinced of God's love of diversity, and we long to cultivate it in our relationships, congregations, and communities. But where do we begin?

We suggest that you begin the same place we did. First, we each explored our "why." Why would we do this? Why put ourselves out there with each other? Why put ourselves out there in front of readers? Why take the risk of exposing ourselves, of pushing past fear, and of opening ourselves up for possible hurt? Once we answered our why, we committed to engage in a conversation about color, ethnicity, and race.

You, our reader, will also explore *your* why and consider making the commitment to engage in conversation. Knowing our why helps us keep talking even when it gets hard. Making the commitment keeps us accountable before God and one another to see the conversation through.

In this chapter, we each tell the story behind why we chose to commit to having a conversation about race and ethnicity. At the end,

you'll have opportunity to explore your why and also to commit to engage in the conversation.

But first, it's important to define terms so we all have a clear understanding of what exactly is being discussed. Biblically, we don't believe there is more than one race. We recognize and celebrate variations in skin color, countries of origin, and cultural ethnicity, but we only recognize one race—humanity. However, in modern vernacular, *race* is a term often used as a synonym for skin color, ethnicity, or nationality. For clarification in our book, we will most often refer to ethnicity or skin color, but for ease of communication, we may also use the word *race*. When we use the term *racist* or *racism*, we are referring to the practice of judging or discriminating against someone based on their skin color, nationality, or ethnicity.

WHY ENGAGE IN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE AND ETHNICITY?

Saundra

“Did you see the video?”

I didn't have to ask my son which video. There was no need for further clarification. We had all seen what can only be described as an inhumane way to die.

Regardless of the man's innocence or guilt. Regardless of what you do or don't believe about the person in authority inflicting the pain. You could not unhear the sounds of distress as he pleaded for his life. You could not detach yourself from the cries of the onlookers trying to negotiate assistance for someone they saw in trouble. This was not a Hollywood movie scene, where we could all walk away at the end of the show and know everyone was safe, healthy, and at peace. No, this was real life.

And for the first time, my brown-skinned son was an eyewitness to what it can look like to live in a world where prejudice can be fatal.

“I can't understand why someone would do that to another human being. Why would anyone do that?” he asked.

There are questions for which there are no answers or at least no satisfying answers. There is a time to share further with him the realities of prejudice and injustice in our world. There is a time to elaborate on the history of all those who have paved a way before him, a time to educate him on the life of black and brown people that his school textbooks fail to disclose. There is a time to share with him my concerns about how this may affect him in the future, so he is not blindsided if one day he comes face-to-face with injustice and discrimination. But then there is also a time to comfort in the moment until the pain of what has just been experienced has lessened enough for us to be able to move forward into a place of healing.

“I don’t know. I just don’t know,” I replied honestly as I wrapped my arms around my now-taller-than-I-am child and hugged him a little tighter than I had the day before.

There are things that a mother expects to worry about when thinking about the future of her children. Will they choose the right college? Will they make good decisions around their friends? Will they marry someone who loves God? Will they honor their wedding vows and raise a family? These are concerns that come with parenting, regardless of skin color. Red or yellow, black or white, we want our kids to have the best opportunities and the ability to have a good life.

And then there are the situations you worry about when your child has dark eyes, dark hair, and deeply pigmented skin. Concerns like—will people see him for who he truly is or will they stop with the outward observation, make a judgment call, and then act on their own biases rather than from a place of truth? Will the color of his skin be the deciding factor rather than his ability or his character?

Over the ensuing month, these were the thoughts that stood out most in my mind. Prayers for my children’s spiritual growth and the maturing of their faith alongside prayers that they would be treated justly. Prayers for them to experience and be given the same opportunities as those in the majority.

These feelings did not present for the first time during that wave of racial unrest, although the news of fresh violence and oppression did bring them to the forefront. Those emotions have been present from

the first time I stared down into the big brown eyes of my firstborn son. From the moment I realized I had the privilege and the responsibility to aid in the development and equipping of a brown-skinned boy in a culture rooted in a history of prejudice against those who look like him.

When I see new stories of racial injustice in the media, it reawakens a hard reality about the current state of equality. It reminds me of the chasm that yet remains and the great need for racial healing. It mocks my hoped-for improvement in society and taunts me to stop believing in the possibility of reconciliation. Despite experiencing my own past moments of prejudice, a part of me dares to believe things have changed. Certainly my children won't have to navigate the same terrain I did forty years ago. Right? But it seems the current climate is not in agreement with my desires and prayers.

Racial tension peaks and abates throughout each year, depending on the political scene, reported mistreatment, and recorded violence directed toward black and brown people. Each escalation comes to a pinnacle whenever there is a death.

Thousands take to the streets in protests. Some with a desire to peacefully gather to show solidarity and support. Others with the desire to unleash the anger and frustration accrued over years of feeling marginalized. Both trying to process pain. One doing so in a way that has the potential to build bridges, while the other in a way that generally only results in further damage. Damage to communities, damage to morale, and damage to the potential of changing the views of those who are actively displaying prejudice and bias.

I have never considered providing any type of training on what is prejudice, bias, or discrimination. I'm often perplexed by the request of well-meaning white friends to share my tips on how they can be more inclusive. It seems unusual for the one experiencing the injustice to be the one called to educate those perpetuating it. Yet, this was what I noticed in the days following news of another black person killed during an arrest, or jogging down the street, or sitting in her home, or while wearing a hoodie. Overnight my blackness makes me an expert in all things race-related. Let me assure you, this is not the

case. I am not an expert in diversity, inclusion, or equality training. There are many experts with excellent resources that I recommend you check out at the back of this book.

What I am is a black woman who sits every Sunday on a church pew surrounded by people of every race. We worship together and it's a beautiful sound. The lilting highs of the sopranos are balanced by the deep undertones of the altos as we join in declaring, "Lord, you're holy." The diversity creating a synthesis that is harmonious and echoes the voice of heaven.

It's a sound some churches have been able to enjoy within their four walls but have found challenging to take outside those same walls into their communities. It's a sound other bodies of believers have yet to experience because the faces filling the pews all look alike—lovers of Jesus whose places of worship still look like the segregated '60s, void of any signs of inclusion and absent the unity they profess.

Just in case you didn't catch this the first time, let me repeat it for those in the back pew: I am not an expert on race relations. What I am is a follower of Jesus, degreed, and trained in studying the body, mind, and spirit. I thrive on learning what makes people do what they do, feel what they feel, and act how they act.

I'm also a black mama who is tired of being afraid for my black children growing up in a world where their blackness is counted against them even before they open their mouths to demonstrate their intelligence and gifting.

Above all, I'm a woman who looks at what I see possible on Sunday morning at my church during times of worship and wonders why we can't take that same harmony of diversity out into the world. What would it look like to invite others into our experiences? What can we each do to be an ally to those of another race? What melody would arise out of the church and infuse the culture if we began to treat every occasion like a choral production? Where we look for the diversity that is missing but needed to birth a fuller sound within our relationships, our businesses, and our homes?

The body of Christ should be of one spirit, but we come in an array of beautifully colored packaging, complete with different

personalities, talents, and skill sets. It's impossible to expect those who do not know God to effectively practice equality and inclusion when those who proclaim to know him don't know how to practice it.

As a business professional, I've found many Christians who are willing to mentally join arms with me to take the kingdom of God and the message of Jesus out into the marketplace. But those same people forget that the kingdom is one of diversity when the time comes to pick the ones with whom they will physically join arms. The result is conferences where everyone is of one race.

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Creating diversity and inclusion is an intentional process of loving another as yourself.

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Sometimes there is a feeble attempt at allyship with a 90:10 ratio of majority to minority representation. Having one person of color on a board or on a stage is not diversity; it is an insult. Creating diversity and inclusion is an intentional process of loving another as yourself. It's making room at the table for someone who has never even been invited into the room. It's working toward a balance of representation so that everyone can see themselves in those standing on the platform.

When I was initially asked to participate in this writing project, my first thought was *Absolutely not! I'm not going to put my thoughts out there.* Race is not a subject the church does well, and I had no desire to get pulled into the dysfunction.

To make it more stressful, I didn't know Lori well enough to be sure we could have a real conversation about race without ending up hurting each other in the end. Before I could hammer out a quick email reply, I knew the reasons I had for not wanting to participate were the very reasons to do it.

Many of us shy away from conversations on race. We fear we won't know what to say or that we will say it wrong. In our avoidance, we keep putting bandages on a festering wound. We act like the world is

color-blind. It's not, and I don't want it to be. I want to live in a world that is color aware.

Maya Angelou said it best in her poem, "Phenomenal Woman." I want you to see my brown skin, full lips, and thick hips and not judge me any differently than a woman with white skin. I want you to be aware of the diversity I bring to a conversation due to the experiences I've had as a black woman. I don't want you to be blind to the diversity I bring. I want you to embrace it.

I joined Lori on this journey to walk through the process of having a conversation on race with another woman who doesn't look like me, who hasn't experienced what I've experienced, and who isn't someone with whom I hang around. We had been friends on social media for years, liking posts and cheering each other on in our writing careers, but we had never discussed deep things. She knew nothing about the details of my life. In fact, we had only met in person on a few occasions. We've shared a single meal together around a table of fellow authors with our mutual agent. We've come to this project as two women who have nothing to bind us together other than faith. The core thing we have in common is loving Jesus. At the beginning, I couldn't help but wonder: Will that be enough?

Can we bring our differences to the table and talk about hard things without taking offense? Can we share our raw emotions on racism, cancel culture, and life for minorities in America and do so in a way that respects the feelings of the other? Because this is the conversation that needs to happen in every church, every boardroom, and around our dinner tables. This is where healing begins, one-on-one. Neighbor to neighbor. Colleague to colleague. It's an internal process of binding up wounds, prejudices, and biases of individual hearts to create a foundation on which we can stand rooted in love, unity, and righteousness.

My prayer for this project is for the Holy Spirit to guide us through these hard conversations on race and to bring us out on the other side with more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I believe he can do this and so

much more when we come with open hearts and willing spirits. Let the conversation begin.

Lori

I stood in a national chain store accused of trying to pass three counterfeit fifty-dollar bills.

It was an uncomfortable, embarrassing experience that Sunday afternoon when the register clerk flagged the manager and asked me to step aside. The lines were long. Everyone stared as they held my bills to the light, gestured for store security, and eyed me suspiciously.

Security asked to open my bags. Awkwardly I endured strangers pawing through the undergarments I was attempting to buy with the cash my mother had slipped into my Christmas card. I trembled when asked to move into the office. They called the police.

By God's grace, I could use my bank card to cover the purchase. Uniformed officers arrived and questioned me about the origins of the suspect fifties. They recorded my answers and allowed me to leave, warning that the secret service would contact me. Outside, I fell apart.

But I walked away.

The manager was firm but calm, believing the bills were counterfeit but not quite viewing me as "someone trying to pass a bill." The police were respectful. And while the situation was excruciating, I never once imagined it wouldn't be worked out. Not for one second did I fear for my life.

Days later, the secret service informed me my bills weren't counterfeit. I could retrieve them from headquarters. "Store staff make this mistake all the time," he said.

Nightly, I see stories of other Americans suspected of wrongdoing—passing a counterfeit twenty, driving a possibly stolen vehicle, or running through a neighborhood where a break-in has occurred—that don't end like my story did.

The details differ. I was a middle-aged woman with no arrest history buying underwear in a small town. Some incidents involve people with arrest histories. Some occur in cities plagued with

unrest—citizens on edge. Some suspects respond calmly and cooperatively; others resist, argue, or run.

Still, there's one distinction that stands out. I'm white. The people in the headlines are often black. If my skin had been the color of theirs, would I have been afforded the benefit of the doubt or would the conversation have been relocated to the police station?

Did the way I responded make the difference, or did my expectation of fairness, respect, and reason impact the way I responded? Was it simply a matter of geography (I live in Rhode Island, not the South or in a major city) or a dynamic of ancestry because I descend from an Anglo-ethnic mix of Irish/English/French? Would a woman of color have been afforded the same respect? Would she have a story to tell, or might she have become a story on the evening news?

While I don't believe racism lurks within every white person, I believe there is sufficient statistical and anecdotal evidence to support the contention that prejudice and bias still impact people of color on multiple levels in our times.

That said, I never planned to write about racism.

Maybe, like me, you've never planned to talk about racism. Maybe, like me, you've used some of the same reasoning to watch from the sidelines rather than engage directly in the work. As I share what's held me back, consider what may have factored into your own hesitation.

We all have something to contribute to the conversation about racism, but it is wise, loving, and biblical to listen first.

As a white woman, I'm not anyone's first choice to hear from on this issue. What could I possibly have to contribute? Perhaps you've wondered the same thing. The message I take from the reigning voices of the day is that this is my time to be quiet, listen, and make space for voices that have not, historically, been heard. And there is

truth there, but it's not the whole truth. We all have something to contribute to the conversation about racism, but it is wise, loving, and biblical to listen first.

Also, I've reasoned with myself, the church of Christ is a body with many parts. None of us individually is called to do every task assigned to God's people. Individuals have a variety of callings, so no individual bears all the work. In the past, I trusted that some are called to be vocal activists in the war against racial hatred. Maybe, like me, you've wished you were one of them. While we work to eradicate hatred in our own hearts and raise our children to love others, we aren't sure what other action to take. So perhaps, we decide, tackling racism is "someone else's job."

Looking back, I wonder if the choices I made were because I wasn't sure what to do or if it was just because it wasn't easy. Worse, I wonder if I would have made different choices if my children's lives depended on it. That's a factor in this conversation, isn't it? That by virtue of skin color, some of us consider racial reconciliation an elective of the faith, not a required course. Like many of you, I wasn't consciously trying to disengage or avoid this conversation, I just didn't think I had the credentials to speak, and I didn't readily see the on-ramp for me to join. But it also wasn't a problem that stared me in the face every day or impacted my children's lives on a regular basis. If it had, I believe I'd have worked harder to find that on-ramp.

My worldview, shared by many Christians, contributes to my dilemma regarding what form involvement takes. Biblically, we don't believe there is more than one race. We recognize and celebrate variations in skin color, countries of origin, and cultural ethnicity, but we only recognize one race—humanity. Try bringing that up in an unnuanced conversation. But now I see that rather than using that as justification for remaining silent, I should seek out and/or create opportunities for nuanced conversations.

Many of us oppose what we call racism but see it as a manifestation of hate stemming from fear, ignorance, selfishness, and disordered values. Racism, ethnicism, and hatred are sins. Sin can't be educated out of a person, protested out of a community, or legislated out of a

society (although those actions have their roles). Humanity's sin was addressed on the cross of Jesus, and it is there that every individual must go to become free of it.

So rather than write about race, I continue to write about Jesus.

Many of us read and understand some accusers' indictments of the church, but in our thinking, not everyone calling themselves Christian is a follower of Christ. We dismiss some of this criticism because we suspect that those perpetrating the harshest narratives are only posing as believers. When people complain about racist believers, we consider the phrase an oxymoron. Racism, as is true of all hatred, cannot coexist with the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Admittedly, some Christians have come out of racist backgrounds and repented of this sin but still fight old mindsets. I also imagine Christians of every skin color may be tempted to hate, to yield to prejudicial stereotypes, to suspect ill of others who are different from them. But no one who embraces hatred or prejudice can rightly consider themselves to be walking in step with the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

So we invest in evangelism, discipleship, and biblical teaching about spiritual growth, trusting that others see this as our contribution to eliminating racism in the church. But while we approach the situation indirectly, those who are directly impacted by racism feel unheard, undervalued, and sometimes unloved.

This should not be, and it means our approach is insufficient for our times.

.....
*We need to be agents that cross divides
and ease tension. That is a calling given
to every believer.*
.....

Are we only concerned with the most extreme forms of racism? Do we not want to root out any form of division that might take root in the church? Do we not want to stretch ourselves to love one another the best we can in every way we can? We need to be willing to admit

that there is more to this conversation than simply denying we are racist, and be willing to seek God's strength and power for change. We need to be agents that cross divides and ease tension. That is a calling given to every believer.

But we all have excuses. Have you ever felt as if you'd like to contribute to ending racism, but your reach seemed too small, your gifts and skills felt irrelevant and inadequate, and even your location seemed to make it a challenge to make any contribution of worth? Those are the times we need to remember how much God can do with what little we offer. The lesson of the loaves and fishes is relevant to our struggle in committing to invest what little we have to offer in the face of such an extensive and widespread conversation.

I certainly don't say this from a lofty perch of "I've always done it right." There was a long time when I believed I wasn't called to write about racism, and I tried to "stay in my lane"—writing about Christ. This wasn't because I didn't believe firmly in treating others with respect and love. I think mostly it was because I wasn't seeing racism in my direct experience.

But then, after a summer of explosive headline events, one of my blog readers emailed a simple request: "Lori, we need you to write a post sharing your wisdom on how to have the hard conversation about race. Hope to read it this week."

He follows my writing and referenced my book *The Art of Hard Conversations*. I care about meeting the needs of my readers and have considerable experience with hard conversations, so, at last, my on-ramp appeared. Here was something I could contribute to this conversation—guidelines about how to have hard conversations about race.

Several blog posts followed, one of which would eventually become the outline for this book. Still, the Holy Spirit, readers, godly friends, and an editor challenged me to go further. Did I have the courage to have and document a hard conversation with a black author? Was I willing not only to instruct about hard conversations but to have an authentic one publicly?

I don't know. Was I?

That sounds like a great idea, but again, here I am a middle-aged white woman with no significant track record of ministry in this area. I believe the right things, but where I live, that's seldom put to the test. Still, that makes me like many other white Christians who want to be part of the solution but don't know where to begin. I decided that perhaps I could make a worthwhile contribution in this way. It's one thing to string words together in a clever post; it's quite another to make myself vulnerable to another Christian with the plan of allowing others to see my missteps, questions, blind spots, and revealed sins.

We know from Psalm 139:15 that God knew each of us when we were being formed and we know from Acts 17:26 that he chose this time and place for us to live. We know from 2 Peter 1:3 that he has provided everything we need for life and godliness. Whether we feel like it or not, we have all we need to enter this conversation and to do this work. The hardest step is the first one.

You see, I am afraid of what others will think of me, of discovering in front of people that I have places to repent and change. And, like many other Christians, my greater fears are missing out on all God has for me in Jesus Christ and of leaving any of what he's given me unused in the work to which he's called me. I know many of you would also list this as your greater concern, and that's why you've picked this book up and made a commitment to consider having this conversation.

As I wrote this chapter, I thought about the parable of the good Samaritan. A man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho is assaulted, robbed, left for dead. A priest and a Levite see him, but they pass him by. The Samaritan, who should be his enemy, has compassion on him, tends to his wounds, and helps him to safety.

I hear my brothers and sisters of color saying that an injustice has been done to them and they are wounded. You and I may not be the ones who assaulted, robbed, or committed an injustice against them, but if we satisfy ourselves with just not being the robber and walk on by, we're no better than the priest and the Levite. If there's some way that we can have compassion on our brothers and sisters, tend to their

wounds, and support them to a place of safety, then we are living as Jesus asks us to live.

And what if we're also a victim? What if we've been beaten and robbed by a sinful, biased culture into thinking our hearts are free of hatred? Maybe we've been left in a hole, blind to our own failings. If so, Saundra and other people of color may help us to a place of spiritual healing and truth.

There's nothing special about me. I'm an everyday Christian doing my best to follow God in challenging times. I'm like the stained-glass windows in my church. In the dark, those windows are useless. You can't see through them. They're unimpressive as artwork. But when light shines through them, they're breathtaking.

Yes, I'm just a middle-aged white woman from Rhode Island living a fairly unremarkable life of faith. But when the light of Christ shines through me, stand back, baby.

So here I am.

Will you join me?

COLORFUL CONVERSATION WITH PATRICIA RAYBON

“Can racial conversations open the door for friendships?” is a great question for a couple of reasons. It implies that conversation draws people together, but it also suggests conversations around the race issue can be more than about race. So I would answer it this way: I am sure that, during my lifetime, especially in the course of giving workshops on race, I have seen people's hearts and minds change. But I am more aware of how conversations about everyday life and where we find commonalities in our challenges—that is, common experiences in our families, our work lives, faith lives, all of those things—are often where people connect the deepest. And then after that connection, we can talk most effectively about race.

When I first started doing diversity awareness training, I would always begin with an icebreaker to help people feel comfortable before we start talking about the hard issue of race. One way I did

that was to invite everybody to sing a couple of choruses of “Amazing Grace” with me, because it’s a hymn almost everybody knows. Then I would talk about the background and history of the song. The author, John Newton, was a slave trader. In the middle of a storm on the ocean, on a slave ship, Newton asked the Lord to save them all. God changed his heart, and from that came “Amazing Grace.” The first stanza includes the phrase, “That saved a wretch like me.” All the words of the song describe what happens when it is time to change.

As we sang in those trainings, people often really struggled because they had a very deep connection with the song but were not aware of the slave-trading history. When confronted with this information, I’ve seen two reactions. The first is fear. But the second is people saying, “Wow, I never knew that, and I need to learn more about it.” But we couldn’t have that conversation until we sang the song together.

Of course, even after you’ve connected with someone, don’t expect your black friends to be your experts or your teachers. In light of the complexity of the history of this country, it is asking a lot from somebody to mentor their church, Sunday school, or book club through race issues because of the color of their skin. As my husband used to say, “Here are ten books. Read them. Then we can have a conversation.” We all, as the church and as a people, need to do some reading and learning.

But then we also need to be able to step back at times and breathe. I grew up under Jim Crow laws and came of age during the Civil Rights era. I was, in fact, born in a segregated hospital. I used to try to talk about these things all the time. But what I’ve learned is that I am better at it when I take some breaks from the conversation. When it’s time to delve into the conversation about race, God shows me who and where I need to engage. It may be a workshop at church, or it may be with a neighbor or a friend.

Here is my point to ponder: this topic is traumatizing in our country. People have been wounded in the deepest ways around race issues. What we can offer each other, especially in the church, is grace. When somebody says, “I am not ready,” we can say, “Okay.”

When somebody says, “I want to learn more,” we can say, “Here are some resources.” When somebody says, “Let’s go to a play together,” maybe the play will stimulate some conversation. But we should not ask any one person to take on all the burden of this work. It is too much. It is too hard. Two are better than one. And three or four are better yet. We have to do this together, in love and in grace, seeking the Holy Spirit’s help, because on our own we will fail every time.

PATRICIA RAYBON is an award-winning Colorado author, essayist, and novelist who writes stories of faith and mystery. Her debut 1920s mystery novel, *All That Is Secret*, is a *Parade Magazine* Fall 2021 “Mysteries We Love” selection and a *Masterpiece on PBS* “Best Mystery Books of 2021” selection “As Recommended by Bestselling Authors.” Her ethnicity is African American.

STEP 1: COMMIT TO ENGAGE IN THE CONVERSATION.

Maybe you’ve had thoughts and concerns similar to Sandra’s or Lori’s when it comes to engaging in hard conversations about race. You may have different reasons for holding back.

Some of us live in fairly homogenous areas, so people who differ from us are not easily available. Others live in places of intense unrest, where a misunderstanding can lead to explosive results in the community. There are as many reasons to hold back as there are readers. Or perhaps you are fully engaged in the work, but you’re not seeing other Christians around you participating. You’re frustrated and feeling alone. You’re looking for language to help others of your skin color see the “on-ramp” for engaging in racial healing. Like Sandra and Lori did, prayerfully consider your why. Write it down so you can refer to it when your confidence waivers.

The first step is to commit to engage in the conversation about race—about where we are and where we need to go, about what we each need to do to get there together. Do that. Commit. And ask God for the courage to take the next step.

Scripture

Reflect on Luke 10:25–37, the parable Jesus told about the good Samaritan and its implications for this conversation. Consider also this verse from the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 42:21, “Then they said to one another, ‘In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.’”

What light do these passages shed on how you should respond to the work of racial healing?

Starting Places

- Share your commitment to engage in a conversation about racial healing with one other believer and ask him or her to hold you accountable.
- If you have no friends from other ethnic backgrounds, talk with your pastor or another mature believer and identify someone in your congregation who may be open to having a conversation with you.
- You may enjoy visiting a church or a Bible study where there are people of other skin colors. Introduce yourself as a Christian wanting to get to know people from different ethnicities and perhaps have conversations about working together toward racial healing.