

To White Churches at the End of Black History Month: Begin Now!

BLOG POST

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I was just doing what I thought I was supposed to do as a white pastor of an almost entirely white congregation: invite an African-American preacher to preach on Martin Luther King Jr. weekend. An assistant professor of black church studies at a nearby seminary had been worshiping with us lately, so I called her with the invitation.

“Thanks, Roger, for this invitation,” she said. “But I really don’t like to do white peoples’ politics for them.”

I stammered, apologized, stammered some more, and drew the conversation to an awkward end. Then I let what she said sink in. She was asking me in so many words: Can only black people talk about race? Why can’t *you* say to your congregation what needs to be said?

I’ve thought many times about that conversation in the years that followed, and not a few times during this Black History Month. At the end of January and in February we invite an African-American to preach, sing the few African-American spirituals in the hymnal, mention Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, and then head into March with clear consciences.

But do these gestures keep us from doing the work of self-examination, awareness-raising, and deep understanding we need to do as white Christians? Here are a few suggestions for white pastors and churches that might help us “do the politics” we need to do:

Learn to let issues of race and racism show up in your sermons throughout the year—not just in February or in response to a crisis. I had to learn as a pastor to let the language of race and racism become a natural part of my preaching. Could I preach about the sin of racism as easily as I could the sins of greed or gluttony? Could stories of civil rights champions past and present find their way into my sermons 12 months a year? Did I only mention race when race appeared on the screen of the nation’s consciousness? I’m thankful for a preacher’s honesty in pointing me to *my* job as the church’s pastor.

Create spaces for the church to engage in self-examination. I remember how surprised I was when I learned that our church had an African-American associate pastor in the early 90s. And how dismayed I was to learn he only stayed a year and few people remembered his name or the circumstances of his leaving. Together the staff and leaders of the congregation realized that we needed to create spaces to name our own church’s history around race as honestly as possible, spaces where we could remember and confess our own complicity in our city’s history of prejudice, discrimination, and violence. Discovering and confessing our own history was the first step toward authentic action.

Learn to engage in ministry “with” rather than “to” people of other races. When we began to engage in self-examination, we discovered that many of our ministries were ministries “to” people of other races. The neighborhoods around our church building were predominantly African-American, but we didn’t know how to be with them as neighbors. So we began a clear emphasis on getting to know our

neighbors—living, learning, and listening with them. We stopped thinking that we had the expertise and the resources to fix “their” problems, and learned that the pain and hope belong to all of us in different ways. We watched as friendships formed across lines of race, and celebrated the ministries that grew out of these relationships.

One African-American preacher’s encouragement (and rebuke) to me prompts me to offer this encouragement to white congregations: Now that we’re in a time of the year when no one else is telling us that racism, prejudice, and white privilege need to be topics of conversation—*now* let’s put these things on the table of our life together, and keep them there.