Sacred Conversation on Race
The journey continues

O God, we pray for your presence and wisdom, as we begin to look carefully at the realities of RACE and Leadership. Amen.

Leadership Disparity

Statistics in June 2012 showed that people of color made up 36% of the labor force in the U.S. and 20% of business owners. These numbers correlate with census data that 28% of the general population are people of color.

Yet, only about 4.2% of Fortune 500 CEOs are people of color. In 2012, less than 4% of the U.S. Congress were non-White Senators. Nonprofit organizations are guided by boards made up of roughly 15% people of color on the average, and headed predominantly by White executive directors.

A White Prototype

Mainstream U.S. society measures leaders by a "[W]hite prototype," which leads to the rating of White leaders as more effective than non-White leaders.

In one study, employers were half as likely to invite interviews from job applicants with common Black names as those with same qualifications and common White names.

A narrow norm or prototype for leaders effectively causes a racial disparity of access to career advancement opportunities. And such disparities are further exacerbated by a belief in meritocracy.

Meritocracy

Meritocracy believes that regardless of race, all people have the same opportunities in career advancement through their individual work ethic, talent and efforts.

It assumes that our society is already a proverbial "level playing field", in which the legacy of racism has no impact. It dismisses racial realities as barriers to leadership opportunities.

Such "colorblindness" (1) overlooks the historical struggle for racial equity, (2) ignores the evidence of continuing racial disparities in access to leadership formation.

Crucial leadership formation factors include access to excellent schools, safe, well-resourced communities, and connections to people or institutions with power, social influence and hiring capacities.

This "meritocracy" assumption compounds the accumulative legacy of racism experienced, through job discrimination, unequal pay and other disadvantages.

At its root, meritocracy turns a blind eye to the given cultural capital of Whiteness in the founding of American society – an unearned privilege that is not accessible to everyone else.

Football coach Barry Switzer once described unearned and unrecognized privilege this way: "Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple."

> U.S. society measures leaders by a "White prototype"

> "Some people are born on third base and ... [think] they hit a triple."

Sacred Conversation on Race

Prayerful reflection

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. …Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.
                1 Corinthians 12

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the early Christians affirm a vision of church that benefits from embracing its diversity. The whole is strengthened, rather than diminished, by the differences found within the group.

From a faith perspective, the diverse cultures, heritages, wisdoms and experiences that we bring together as a multi-racial nation can be counted among our great strengths. Affirming diversity is a testimony to the God who created a rich tapestry of people with a variety of gifts.

Yet this vision is hindered by stark disparities that exist between the racial makeup of our communities and those who are counted among their leaders.

As people of faith, we are called to affirm God's vision and to examine the assumptions, fears and practices that hinder our ability to live into it fully.

By so doing, we have a chance to be purposeful and intentional in our thoughts, actions and decisions around leadership. Ultimately, the whole church and its community benefit from the diverse leadership gifts that come with racial and ethnic diversity.

Questions for discussion

The National Community Development Institute advises, "As we build the global community, we can choose to build it the way nations have been built in the past: as conquerors, imposing a worldview and cultural perspectives on the communities we encounter; or we can collectively discover new ways of respectfully engaging with and learning from one another around issues of difference."

1. Where in your life does such an opportunity – to "choose" how to build community – exist?

2. Where have you seen or experienced "meritocracy" as described here?

3. What resources exist in your community to support or model new ways of embracing leadership?

Sources:
Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change. June 2004. *"Structural Racism and Community Building."*

Leadership Learning Community. July 2010. *"Leadership and Race: How to Develop and Support Leadership that Contributes to Racial Justice."*

Rosette, A. S., Leonardelli, G. J. & Phillips, K. W. (2008). The White Standard: Racial Bias in Leader Categorization. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **93**(4), 758-777.

God is still speaking,
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST