

Race Chats: Walking upon Sacred Ground

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Recently, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz asked baristas at his 12,000 coffee houses to begin conversations about race with their customers. They were asked to inscribe the hashtag #RaceTogether on cups of coffee and engage in a conversation with customers as they awaited their beverage. While these actions may have been well intentioned, it elicited strong push back from people all across the nation, particularly in the world of social media. One week later, the campaign was ended.

In looking at the discussion on Twitter, I began to wonder where the campaign went wrong. Here are a few examples: One disgruntled person tweeted, “*What I want to do: 1. Eat pizza 2. Pay off my loan debt... 895. Talk about race at Starbucks #RaceTogether.*” Another tweeted, “*Starbucks exec: Let’s have a convo about race! #RaceTogether Us on here: *begins tweeting about race to exec* Exec: *quits Twitter*.*” An affirming commenter posted, “*Proud of @Starbucks for encouraging people to talk about #RaceTogether Is this typical role for a company, a CEO? No. That’s why it’s brave.*”

So what went wrong? One important component that was missing in this initiative was *TRUST*. Starbucks is known for selling high-end coffee and tea. Having conversations about a sensitive and sacred topic such as race, while extremely important, is something that requires relationships with more depth than your typical customer service interaction. Starbucks is not a respected authority or think tank on race relations. People do not enter their local coffee shop expecting to engage in challenging or “out of the box” conversations.

To his credit, Mr. Schultz initiated internal company conversations about race shortly after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. His desire to start a conversation about something which affects and stirs up a range of emotions for many was honorable. Howard Schultz is a powerful man.

How he chose to use his position of influence was noble. But the decision to implement a conversation at the local store level was not wise, at least not in my humble opinion.

As a person who has facilitated many conversations on “race, racism, and reconciliation,” one of the keys to having a successful discussion is establishing a form of trust. Without such a bond, the outcome will likely not go as planned. More importantly, I do not believe the burden to have this deeply personal and sacred conversation should have been placed on baristas who might fear losing their employment if they do not comply with company policy, or on the consumer who entered the store seeking to purchase a product. Hence, the mega tidal wave of displeasure from Starbucks consumers in the tweetersphere.

In 2008, when the debate about race and racism was injected into our nation’s electoral debate, the United Church of Christ responded by developing a resource entitled Sacred Conversation on Race. It was developed for churches and organizations to utilize if they desired to have a conversation on race, but perhaps did not know how to begin. We selected the word **sacred** because we believed it was important to include prayer and make space for God in these discussions. We also believed each person’s story was a **sacred** gift to be valued. I invite you to draw upon this resource as well. I, like Mr. Schultz, believe that this is an important conversation to have and can be healing for our communities. Perhaps our churches might be a better, perhaps safer, space to prayerfully engage these difficult questions than the morning coffee line.

Learn more about the UCC Sacred Conversations on Race at [UCC.org/sacred-conversation](https://ucc.org/sacred-conversation)

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