



A History of Racism in the United States

SESSION 2

| 1790–1954: U.S. Apartheid, Colonialism, and Neocolonialism

Goal for the Session

To explore how racism impacted multiple groups of people of color throughout the period from 1790 until 1954, and to examine U.S. policies on citizenship and migration in order to gain a new perspective of the history of racism.

Preparing for the Session

- If participants are keeping journals with definitions of terms relevant to racism, read this session and make note of terms you will want them to add to their journals. Have a dictionary available so participants can look up the word *neocolonialism*.
- Over the next section of the time line begun in the previous session, put the heading "1790–1954: From the Naturalization Act to *Brown v. Board of Education*" and make white poster-board strips with the major heads "Forced Migration" and "Apartheid." Have two colors of self-stick notes available (or colored index cards and tape).
- Read over the session and decide if there are discussion activities where it would be productive to use Eric Law's Mutual Invitation. See session 1 for directions.
- Make copies of the next session's Participant Hand-out to distribute at the end of the session.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Sing a national song
- Pray together

EXPLORING

- Examining citizenship
- Confronting examples of apartheid
- Three more examples from history

RESPONDING

- Journaling

CLOSING

- Read Scripture
- Pray together
- Preparing for the next session

Materials Needed

- Bibles and hymnals
- Newsprint sheets and markers
- Prepared newsprint sheets and index cards
- Two sheets of poster board and colored felt-tipped markers

- Time line (see preparation)
- Paper and pencils or pens
- Copies of session 3 of the Participant Handout to distribute at the end of this session.

Teaching Tip

For groups of participants who are all white, some aspects of the perspective on history presented in this session may come as quite a shock, especially the use of the term *apartheid*. Most of us who are white have accepted a perspective of our own history that emphasizes the greatness of America, a view that borders on reverential. Encourage all-white groups not to back away from a deeper examination of our national story. See the “Additional Teaching Tips” document at the end of the Leader’s Guide for session 1 for suggestions as to how to further incorporate other voices in the conversation.

Opening (5 minutes)

If participants have begun a journal of terms, invite them to look up and write down the definition for *neocolonialism*. They might also scan the Participant Handout and record short definitions for the terms *apartheid*, *Jim Crow laws*, *forced migration*, *manifest destiny*, and *restrictive covenants*.

1. Sing a National Song

Invite the group to sing “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” or “America the Beautiful,” both of which can be found in most denominational hymnals.

2. Pray Together

Pray the following, or a prayer of your own choosing:

Eternal God, in our national hymns we call on your name and invoke your powerful presence. We call for you to bless our nation, we name you as author of liberty, we entreat you to mend our every flaw. We love our country passionately, and that’s a necessary and a good thing. It is easy to sing of amber waves of grain and pilgrim’s pride, but not so easy to truly examine our flaws. Be with us now as we explore more fully the deep wound of racism on which we were founded and that continues to bleed into our national life. **Amen.**

Exploring (25 minutes)

3. Examining Citizenship

Divide the group into pairs. Ask each person to describe to their partner how they became a citizen and the first voting experience they had. Also ask them to relate how their parents and grandparents became citizens. Many participants will probably say they were born citizens, but some may have parents or grandparents who were immigrants. Allow about five minutes for them to share.

On a chalk or whiteboard, print the phrase “free, white, and twenty-one” and ask the group to respond to it. Discuss the following:

- What is the meaning of this phrase? Who is included? Who is left out?
- How do you respond to African Americans’ designation until 1870 as three-fifths of a person?
- What are the implications of being taxed as property rather than paying taxes?

Ask them to scan the information about the two Supreme Court rulings on the status of Takao Ozawa and Bhagat Singh Thind. Again in pairs, ask each person to briefly summarize one of the cases to the other. Invite a volunteer to summarize each of the cases for the total group. Ask:

- What was the “citizenship bind” for persons of color?
- Imagine that you are Takao Ozawa or Bhagat Singh Thind. How would you feel about being in the position of trying to make the case that you are white rather than of your own cultural background?

Discuss how after one generation or so many Americans of European ancestry are able to “assimilate” into the American scene if they so desire, whereas persons of color are unable to do so as easily just by virtue of their skin color.

4. Confronting Examples of Apartheid

On a chalk or whiteboard, print the word “apartheid.” Invite the group to respond quickly, popcorn style,

with words or phrases that come to mind. Then add the adjective “American” preceding apartheid. Ask a volunteer to read his or her definition of the word from the journal. Then ask: How do you respond to the use of the word “apartheid” to describe what has happened in our country’s history? Is it shocking to you? Does it make you angry? Is the word appropriate to describe the effects of racism in the United States?

Divide the group into two smaller groups. Assign to one Jim Crow laws and to the other Indian reservations. Give each a sheet of poster board or newsprint and colored felt-tipped markers and ask them to prepare to briefly present their topic to the total group. They can outline the topic using relevant words or phrases or events, draw symbols to represent them, or otherwise use the sheet in whatever way seems best for presenting the topic. Allow about five minutes for preparation and then have them present their topic for the other group. Discuss:

- Did you find anything surprising? Was anything new information to you?
- What would you say was the difference between how Jim Crow laws were lived out in the South and the North? What were restrictive covenants?
- How does this view of forced migration square with what we were taught about westward expansion or settling our land?

Invite each group to use the colored self-stick notes to add both the traditional view of history and this new perspective of events to the time line.

5. Three More Examples from History

Read the following quotes about the Alamo, the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, and Puerto Rico from the Participant Handout:

Americans continued to cross the border as undocumented migrants . . . barricaded themselves in the Alamo and fought an illegal war with Mexican troops.

In contrast, the only people of German and Italian descent imprisoned within the United States were also charged with specific acts of espionage.

The limited representation of Puerto Rico to Washington, D.C., including ineligibility of Puerto Ricans living on the island to vote in U.S. presidential elections, allowed any opposition to policies regarding

Puerto Rico by those most affected to be ignored. . . . This laid the groundwork for pharmaceutical companies to enter and test drugs on the population. This testing included involuntary sterilizations of many Puerto Rican women.

Ask: How do you respond to these observations? Is there information here you did not know? How are manifest destiny and neocolonialism operating here?

Responding (10 minutes)

6. Journaling

Tell the group that this session has presented a different perspective of our history than most of us are accustomed to hearing, one that shines a light, not on the accomplishments of which we can be justly proud, but on the underlying currents of racism of which we may have been unaware or from which we often turn away. Distribute paper and pencils or pens and hymnals. Invite the group to turn to the national hymn you used in the opening activity and to choose two or three lines from one of the stanzas as a writing prompt. For example, the lines “O beautiful, for pilgrim feet whose stern impassioned stress a thoroughfare of freedom beat across the wilderness.” Ask them to respond to the lines in light of the information in this session. After allowing time for them to respond, invite those who are willing to share what they wrote.

Teaching Tip: Journaling can be an intensely private activity, as well as a fruitful spiritual practice. If discussion has been intense in this session, be prepared for participants to be reluctant to share what they have written. Don’t push them to do so, but encourage them to continue to journal for the next two sessions and to take the journal home at the end of the study for continued work. Antiracism work is exactly that—hard, ongoing work that will take a lifetime.

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Read Scripture

Ask two volunteers to read Genesis 1:26–27 and Galatians 3:28 aloud.

8. Pray Together

Call to the attention of the group that the writers close with the observation that this session has provided some context for how patterns begin and how they become

entrenched. Even though most of us as individuals do not wish to live into systems of racism and oppression, they are built into our policies and culture. Invite the group to use the uncomfortable words from the first session as the basis for a prayer of confession.

God of history, we acknowledge that underlying our culture are realities that have shaped us all. Whether we wanted them to or not, these aspects and outcomes of racism have been a part of our national life. Forgive us, gracious God, for our national sins of genocide . . . slavery . . . land theft . . . conquest . . . systematic destruction of culture . . . and dehumanization. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. **Amen.**

9. Preparing for the Next Session

Distribute copies of the Participant Handout for the third session and have members commit to reading it prior to the session.

Teaching Alternatives

- **Gallery of resistance:** Begin a gallery of resistance. Assign small groups to read the information in the text boxes and then to do further research on the Seminoles and the Cherokees, the Harlem Renaissance, and John Brown. If the group already researched John Newton, add that information. Then have them create posters with the information and post around your space.
- **Hear the Supreme Court cases.** Do a reenactment of the court cases of Takao Ozawa and Bhagat Singh Thind. Divide the group into two teams, and assign one case to each. Then have the groups choose a main counsel and a support team, and prepare to present the cases before the court. After presenting the cases,

discuss whether each case was compelling. Then discuss how the court ruled.

- **Compare perspectives on the Alamo.** Invite participants to do some Internet research on the official accounts of the siege of the Alamo. Information can be found at www.thealamo.org. Using the information in the Participant Handout, ask participants to compare and contrast perspectives. Ask: How do we appropriately honor the sacrifices of the men in the Alamo, while at the same time acknowledging the concept of manifest destiny underlying the events there? What is the other perspective on those events?
- **Role-play another perspective.** Invite participants to take the roles of Mexicans and reenact the stand at the Alamo. You might ask them to take the role of a Mexican soldier, a general, and members of a family living in the territory of Texas. Or role-play a Japanese American family being taken to detention, using the anecdotal information in the Participant Handout. If you do these activities, emphasize to participants that really “getting into someone else’s skin” is impossible, but role-play can help give us a glimpse by using another lens to view events.
- **Research the research.** Invite participants to do further research into the work of Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark about the effects of segregation on black girls. One site is www.landmarkcases.org/brown/home.html.

About the Writer

Martha Bettis-Gee is associate for child advocacy for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).