

Reflections on Anti-Racism Work in Atlanta Friends Meeting 1997 – 2007

The Atlanta Friends Meeting has a long history of anti-racist work, beginning with the aim of becoming an integrated congregation in a segregated South in the 1950's. Many years after the Supreme Court decision in 1954 (*Brown vs. the Board of Education*), Quakers from all over the country invested in Atlanta Friends Meeting-assisted programs to help with the peaceful integration of Atlanta Public Schools in the 1960's. Memory of the civil rights years is alive in the Meeting today. Racism in the 2000's, however, is a different, often more hidden, problem, especially to whites, than was segregation in the 1960s. Led in part by people with lifetime commitments to bridging racial divides who were concerned about the current level of attention to the issues among Friends, the Meeting has undertaken a new era of anti-racist work.

This renewed anti-racism work with an emphasis on personal and institutional racism began with the formation of ORAIARH – Our Role as Individuals in America's Racial History. This support group formed in late 1997 under the care of the Social Concerns committee and met weekly or bi-weekly for many years. Started as a reading and discussion group, its focus evolved over the years, moving toward personal work among the white members of the group to recognize racism in their lives and to take action to undermine and change the patterns of racism within themselves and in their environments. At each meeting, white members held each other accountable for changing their racist thoughts, behavior, or inaction in working against racism that they see in themselves and their communities. A few people of color were crucial in the early life of the group in calling the attention of the white members to issues they had not noticed, and in pointing to the importance of a regular commitment to the work, just as people of color live every day with the consequences of racism in their lives. In the words of one of these founding Friends of Color, this is the work of "heart surgery" - to unlearn patterns of racism and relate to each other "humanity to humanity." It was a true gift for the white people in the group to have people of color willing to be frank and active on these issues. People of color also held the group accountable through an email list.

The members of ORAIARH also engaged in educational activities with the Meeting, providing a literature table every Sunday, a bulletin board with news items, and periodic film showings with discussion. They organized anti-racism workshops facilitated by both people from within and outside of the Meeting. They also pursued issues of concern in the neighborhood of the Meeting, for example, writing a pamphlet to raise awareness of racial profiling by community members in reports to the police.

In 2000, members of ORAIARH felt led to bring a minute of concern to Meeting for Business, asking for the Meeting as a whole to work harder on bringing its actions into line with its spiritual commitments. This began a period of growth through disagreement, with occasional conflict. The Meeting adopted a set of queries and asked each Meeting committee or group to consider them annually and report their discussions and changes for the annual report. Several committees actively took up changes in their processes and activities as a result. For example, the Administration Committee changed its name from Oversight and began to actively seek people of color as Meeting contractors. The Religious Education Committee sorted through its materials and intentionally included resources and lessons reflecting ethnic and racial diversity in the curriculum. The Meeting library expanded its resources on racism and on people of color, and featured these resources in a special section of the collection.

As anti-racist work moved forward, the Meeting was shocked and saddened by the resignation of a youth director who experienced racism in the life of the Meeting. One of the responses was the formation of a group of parents, religious education teachers, and college age students called "Raising Non-Racist Children," which met monthly for several years. A second response was that the Meeting formed an Ad Hoc group to explore how to make the Meeting environment safer for people of color, that is, educating all about hurtful comments and stereotypes, such as the assumption that all Quakers are white. The Ad Hoc group held a series of forums on issues of diversity that went beyond race, concluding that racism was the most difficult issue for our Meeting at that time.

Based on the work of the Ad Hoc group, Meeting approved forming a permanent Committee on Undoing Racism in Atlanta Friends Meeting (CURAFM). This group focused on providing a variety of opportunities for the Meeting community to develop as an anti-racist, multi-cultural institution. For example, this group has sponsored Meeting forums on this topic, which have proved valuable for plain speaking and increased understanding. In addition, it conducted a survey of Meeting members and attenders on how welcome they felt in Meeting. CURAFM also provided a volunteer as "Listening Ear" two Sundays a month to be a sounding board for any issue concerning racism that any Meeting member or attender wants to discuss privately.

In short, several groups effectively kept our dedication to fighting racism within ourselves and in society visible in the life of the Meeting.

In considering how similar efforts might be undertaken in other Meetings, we recognize that each Meeting must find its own way. Our work has grown out of specific concerns that arose in our lives and in the life of our Meeting, each of which challenged us in a different way and taught us different lessons. Over the years of work, we have taken up virtually all of the kinds of actions described in the literature on anti-racism, but only because we needed to in order to live our lives differently.

Our effort has been stimulated in part by the larger ministry on racism among Friends. Some of the founding ORAIARH members heard the stirring call for commitment from Deborah Saunders at the 1997 Friends General Conference Gathering. We have attended many FGC-sponsored events and participated in relevant worship, workshops, and discussions at the Gathering. Through FGC's work, we have been kept aware that our issues are very similar to those that arise in Meetings in many parts of the country. The higher percentage of African Americans in the South is not reflected to any great extent in who attends Atlanta Meeting, and our history with the civil rights movement has not translated automatically, without new effort, into making Meeting safe and welcoming for all.

Some of the lessons we have learned may be of use to other meetings, since our experience suggests that they are typical for Friends. First, white Friends need to learn to listen to the concerns of Friends of color without dismissing or minimizing them. Second, the word "racism" makes many white Friends uncomfortable and generates defensive reactions, often accompanied by (inaccurate) accusations that someone is "calling me a racist." Using "I" statements, speaking about a continuum of racism, or talking about why a particular action bothered the speaker may be helpful. In addressing these dynamics, we have tried to distinguish the variety of racisms, sorting out active white supremacy from unconscious stereotyping or exercise of white privilege. Third, because of the defensiveness about the issue, Friends are in danger of false consensus if those present in threshing sessions are afraid to speak because of their inner fears of "being called a racist." It is essential for growth to create an environment in which white Friends can speak frankly without saying things that are hurtful to people of color. All-white discussion groups are particularly useful in addressing the two needs together. Fourth, we found that if we wanted to make the Meeting a place that reduces burdens on people of color rather than increases them, that white Friends must take on the learning process themselves and not ask Friends of color to educate them, nor expect Friends of color all to hold one viewpoint on these issues. Fifth, we learned through painful experience that white Friends might express their discomfort with discussion of racism through actions directed at people of color in the Meeting community. In other words, the work might temporarily make the Meeting less comfortable or safe - in the sense we described above - for people of color. Sixth, we've learned the importance of intentionality, accountability, and long-term commitment in our anti-racism efforts. Without these, it's easy to fall into old patterns. Finally, both a small committed group and efforts to bring the whole Meeting into the process have been necessary. The queries to each committee were particularly helpful in broadening the circle of those involved in making the Meeting a more welcoming spiritual home for all. We feel that any Meeting, even small ones, could undertake similar self-reflection.

We are directing our efforts towards becoming a more multicultural community, with greater awareness and respect across a number of types of diversity. Many of us feel profoundly changed by the work, and we hope our change is helping to stimulate change in the Meeting and in our wider communities.

For a list of useful references (updated 2018), see Friends General Conference, Yearly Meeting Resources on Race and Racism:

<https://www.fgcquaker.org/resources/yearly-meeting-resources-race-and-racism>

Click on a yearly meeting list such as New England Yearly Meeting Healing Racism Toolkit or Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, which has resources divided by levels including "Beginning", "Intermediate", and "Well Along". Most resources are applicable nationwide.

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(Updated, 2018, by Karen Morris and Susan Firestone)