

'I CAN'T BREATHE': We can defeat racism, together!

Government, churches, European and British society generally must intensify efforts to extinguish the effects of 400 years of racism and legacies of enslavement, i.e., grueling racial inequalities in our countries. White Americans in almost unprecedented numbers across their country are for the first time in decades emphatically calling for justice and an end to racism and racist police behaviour following the gruesome killing on May 25th of African American man, George Floyd, at the hands of Minneapolis police. Not since Civil Rights demonstrations of 1960s America have the world witness whites joining forces with black people in such diversity, States, and numbers to plead for justice and freedom. Floyd's ignominious death focuses the issue there, but black, Asian and minority ethnic people (BAME) in Britain continue to suffer the persistent indignity of racist hate, overt and subtle, and all the ills of systemic oppression, as the government's 'hostile environment', Brexit and Covid-19 have are testaments devastatingly revealed.

Racism in evidence

Indisputably, racism is rife in our country! It can be shown, perhaps metaphorically, that, indeed, we 'can't breathe'! BAME communities are:

- more likely to die in prison, police, and immigration custody than white British people;
- excluded from the number of clergy and staff when these positions should at least reflect the community they serve;
- failed by mainline churches for the history and today's rampant racism;
- twice more likely, to die from Covid-19 than white British people;
- high levels of unemployment (9% the highest in 2019, 4% white);
- over-represented at almost all stages of the criminal justice process;
- disproportionately targeted by the police;
- more likely to be imprisoned and more likely to be imprisoned for longer than white British people;
- nearly three times more likely to be arrested than white people;
- more likely to be stopped and searched than white British people;
- a lack of promotion and/or opportunity, education, housing;
- *Joint Enterprise – Not Guilty by Association* (JENGbA), is disproportionately used against BAME communities. Of 500 prisoners around 80 per cent are from BAME communities.

The need for increased political will in church, in government and respect in society is urgent and unmistakable to shatter the chain of injustice. Despite some progress in Britain's and Europe's community relations, e.g., following the racist murder in London of 18-year-old Stephen Lawrence on 22nd April 1993, among others, and publication six years later of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report, BAME people are victims of structural racism, discriminatory attitudes and policies as evidenced in BREXIT, the hostile environment and Covid-19.

Breaking the chains of injustice

White prejudicial and racist attitudes and practices, silently tolerated by some, hatefully perpetuated by others, fatally effected by police, have time and again been highlighted

across decades of violence and murder simply because we are black. The status quo has been challenged yet again by the call to action to defeat racism: speaking up and out without fear, preaching to hearts and minds, teaching and cultivating genuine respect; by enlisting political leadership with a moral outlook, by breaking the chains of injustice and developing morally-determined enforceable legislation; by prosecuting immediately such the actions as have led to the murder of George Floyd. Christians are compelled to respect the dignity and humanity of African Americans, and the African Diaspora everywhere. I join with the REAC and the ACWC of the Presbyterian Church USA to remind Christians across America, Britain and Europe that the defence of African Americans and people of non-white heritage is not an option for active Christians, it's a no-brainer!.

Lasting change: the power of white-black public demand

Lasting progress can only be achieved when white British people, *en-masse*, accept that racism prohibits their freedom too, at least psychologically, and join black and Asian people in the struggle for lasting change. No longer must our white counterparts fear that sharing power at all levels in society and defeating personal and structural racism equates with black-on-white retribution. Systems of oppression are built on greed, fear, and abuse over many generations, not on love, justice, and respect. The outpouring of love (not an affectionate emotion), but the call for justice and the moment of respect now witnessed across the world to George Floyd's last words, 'I can't breathe'... 'mama' ... 'mama', signals love as understanding, redeeming, good will. As Dr Martin Luther King reminds us: 'If we retaliate with hate and bitterness, the new age will be nothing more but a duplication of the old age' (James M Washington, ed., A Testament of Hope, p.140).

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