

Dear White Christians: Study Questions

By Ashley Harness (modified)

Part One: Reconciliation? Where We Are and Why

Chapter 1

1. From your perspective, what are the components of reconciliation? What must the nature of the original relationship be? Who is responsible for seeking reconciliation?
2. What has been your experience with talk of “reconciliation” at church? Did you see any successes?
3. Harvey states “For many justice-oriented white Christians, our lack of racial mixing on Sunday mornings is a problem. If the premise of inclusion is that everyone feels welcome and that our congregations attentively create environments in which that is the case, separation must mean some have been made to feel they do not belong – otherwise they would be ‘here’.” (page 19)

What is the situation in your congregation? Who do you see in the pews? Primarily people who look like you? Something else?

Chapter 2

1. What feelings does exercise one and two (pages 43 to 45) elicit for you if you imagine trying it yourself? What kind of conversation would this exercise lead to in your church community? What is your reaction to this idea? Does it leave you relieved or frustrated, clear or confused, hopeful or despairing, and/or somewhere in between these poles?
2. “A particularistic ethic recognizes that there is no one shared standard against which we might measure or interpret our experience of race nor one to which we may all be held similarly accountable.” (page 59) Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

Chapter 3

1. Harvey states “Reconciliation is not the answer” Having read the chapter, what do you think about this? Agree? Disagree?
2. How can church communities become more active in disrupting racism and challenging the ways of white supremacy? (page 77)

Whether you identify as white or as a person of color, have you ever experienced a time when you knew that your identity or the identity of someone you were in relationship with was shaped by white supremacy? What did you do in response to this recognition?

3. In what ways is your community’s work on racial justice “reconciliation” focused? In what ways is your community’s work on racial justice reparative, or focused on repairing actual harm that has been done (pg. 95-95)?

Part Two: Reparations! Going Backward before Going Forward

Chapter 4

1. What have you experienced or learned about differences between Black Power and civil rights?
2. What surprised you about the history of black Christians arguing for Black Power and reparations (including the Black Manifesto’s history)? Where do you find yourself resonating with these Christians? Where do you feel frustrated?
3. What surprised you about the history of white Christian responses to the Black Manifesto and to the black clergy and laity who argued in support of the Black Manifesto? Where do you find yourself resonating with these Christians? Where do you feel frustrated?
4. Look at the list of demands made in the Black Manifesto on page 119. Do any of these specific demands still resonate today in terms of structural changes needed to empower black communities?

Chapter 5

1. Why do you think white Christians were so resistant to responding directly to the historically factual charges of the Black Manifesto (namely, white Christian complicity in oppression and slavery)? Is the same resistance present today in our church communities? What would it take to overcome this resistance?
2. How does whiteness show up in your life?
3. “It is relatively easy in our post-civil rights era for white Christians to speak with passion about the sin of racism and to morally condemn the ways structural injustice in the U.S. society continues to impact communities of color. But, it is very difficult for white people to sit still and tarry with and look squarely at the issue of white moral agency in the face of racial injustice.”
(page 156)

What is your response to this idea?

How can blacks help whites who are grappling with this?

Chapter 6

1. How does a reparations paradigm fill in the gaps that are missing or hidden in a reconciliation paradigm?
2. What spiritual commitments are needed to engage the work of repentance and repair? Can the work of repentance and repair offer us hope in either our all white, predominantly white, all black, or multi-racial parishes?
3. On page 186 Harvey exposes the truth about the “war on drugs”. There was an intentional shift away from white collar crime to “street crime” which was in essence an attack on communities of color. If this information is new to you, how do you feel about it?

Part Three: Stirrings of Hope, Pathways of Transformation

Chapter 7

1. What surprised you about the work of the Episcopal Churches on reparations for slavery? Were you already aware of this?
2. “Slavery alone is reason to engage in a serious conversation about reparations. But the ongoing, active legacies that have impeded the realization of anything approaching equity, let alone justice, make *not* engaging in a serious conversation unconscionable. . . . So whether white Christians are shocked because we are suspicious or hostile, or shocked simply because we are unaware how much work is being done on [reparations], even a cursory glance reveals there is no justification for white, justice-seeking Christians longing for reconciliation to not at least engage in an open-minded, genuinely inquisitive discussion of reparations for slavery.” (page 196 and 197).

What would a conversation about reparations for slavery look like in your congregation?

3. What would be required of congregations to move your denomination along in its reparation and repair work at the diocesan or broader church level?

Chapter 8

1. Do you believe a multi-racial exploration of reparations for slavery could lead to more meaningful and authentic relationships among Christians than an exploration of “reconciliation”? (Chapter 8)
2. What did you find most compelling about the work of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland Episcopalians? What did you find most unsatisfying about the work of the Diocese of Maryland Episcopalians?
3. What do you see yourself doing to become a “repairer of the breach”? What can your congregation do?