

Policy of The Presbyterian Church in Canada for Dealing with Allegations of Racial Harassment



GROWING IN CHRIST

Seeing the image of God in our neighbour

PREAMBLE

God calls us to bear witness to God's love in Christ. Part of bearing that witness is learning to see the image of God in our neighbour. Unfortunately, our vision is often blurred or distorted, and we end up judging one another. When that judgment is based on the prejudice of race we become unfaithful to the gospel we proclaim.

Racism exists in our communities, including the church. Yet we know that the kingdom of God includes all nationalities and all races. In its calling to be a signpost to the kingdom of God, it is imperative that the church oppose racism and intentionally work toward acceptance and inclusion of all people. In a desire to challenge racism and in an attempt to provide a way to handle racial harassment when it occurs, The Presbyterian Church in Canada prepared the following policy (approved by the General Assembly, A&P 2008 p. 221–27, 20). In doing so, The Presbyterian Church in Canada states that racial harassment shall not be tolerated, and all allegations shall be dealt with seriously and fairly.

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF INCLUSION

In his letter to the church at Philippi, the Apostle Paul offers this prayer for the congregation: "...that your love may grow ever richer in knowledge and insight of every kind, enabling you to learn by experience what things really matter" (Philippians 1:9–10a [REB]). Paul's prayer is a reminder that no person or congregation arrives at living out the fullness of the gospel. There is always the need to be open to growth and the change growth creates.

The gospel is not something we possess. It is always bigger than we are. The church is called to proclaim the gospel in the world. This confession, however, is translated into the culture in which we live. This act of translation entails risk since something is usually lost in the translation. "Cultures try to bring the gospel under their control, attempting to fit the person and work of Christ into their patterns of accepted religious practices."¹

Even the early church encountered this challenge of translation. In a God-given dream, Peter is confronted by the very gospel he proclaimed and realizes, for the first time, that Gentiles are to be welcomed into the grace of Christ (Acts 10). In a different account, Philemon is challenged by the return of his runaway slave, Onesimus, who has become a Christian and who now returns as more than a slave; he is a brother in Christ (Philemon). These stories illustrate the radical challenges faced by the early followers of Christ as, by the Holy Spirit, they learned to give new answers to the old question, "Who is my neighbour?"

In John's gospel we read that God loves the world God has created (John 3:16). This includes everyone without exception. All are made in the image of God. As the wisdom writer states, our relationship with others is to be determined by the reality that God is their creator: "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honour him" (Proverbs 14:31). The dignity of all human beings is not something that is achieved or earned; it is God who gives it (Isaiah 42:5).

Racism, therefore, is a violation, a trespass against God's purposes. Racism defines the comparative worth of a person as a human being by characteristics of race, over against a person's value as one made in the image of God. It assumes, explicitly or implicitly, that one human group is superior to another and lives out that belief in ways that harms or even exploits others regarded as inferior. Racism is often a combination of prejudice and power.

Seeing others in a new way is central to the gospel. Our reconciliation with God is meant to lead us to reconciliation with one another. Thus Paul writes, "For he (Christ) is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Ephesians 2:14). In Paul's time, the dividing wall was a cultural, racial and religious boundary that separated the Jews and the Gentiles. This separation created hostility between them, divided the church and destroyed the unity. The New Testament reminds us that in Christ we enter a new covenant whereby, through God's grace, we are made children of the living God. In Christ we are also brought into a new community, the body of Christ, in which we are united.

Racism divides the church and slanders Christ by stating that we are not all equally treasured in God's covenant or that we are not all one in Christ's love. Paul vigorously contends that, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). This does not mean that these differences ceased to exist in Paul's time. But it does mean that these distinctions are no longer barriers to God's grace in Christ—a gift which removes human barriers and human boasting. Instead of being divided by race, culture and gender, the church is to be understood as a household:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God (Ephesians 2:19–22).

Here the image of household is not the traditional understanding of the nuclear family. Rather, it is the understanding of a larger extended family. Each family has its own traditions and personalities. They may not even enjoy each other's company but what brings them together is the fact that they are called into this family. What is important in the household of God is not the fact that we have come from different racial and cultural backgrounds but the fact that we have become one, the Body of Christ, sharing a common calling. The gospel, therefore, does not eliminate differences but rather transcends them.² We can recognize and enjoy our differences knowing that we are one in Christ.

Racism is experienced when respect of others is ignored or resisted. Racism happens when the only voice that is heard comes from the majority group. Racism happens when someone is not seen as a credible leader on the basis of his/her race. The challenge for the church, therefore, is to show an open love and respect for all, refusing to let the cultural traditions of any one group become a dividing wall for the full inclusion and participation by another.

DEFINITIONS

In order to clarify the policy on racial harassment, it is helpful to clarify the various terms often used regarding race and culture.

Race: Race is a social construct.³ It arbitrarily categorizes people into biologically distinct groups by the external characteristics such as colour of skin, facial features and other physical characteristics. "There is no biological basis for that. Races are a social and ideological construct. Humanity belongs to just one race: the human race."⁴

Culture: Culture includes the customs and patterns of behaviour, the worldview, values and beliefs by which a race or ethnic group engage with the world. Peoples of different cultures "see" and "inhabit" different "worlds" and have different responses to the same universe in which they live.

Ethnic Group: An ethnic group is a group that shares a common language, a common history, a common set of religious beliefs or some other cultural characteristic. Whereas race focuses on physical characteristics, culture focuses on behavioural or group characteristics.

Ethnocentrism: Ethnocentrism refers to the focusing upon and preference for one's own culture. It may be positive in that people genuinely appreciate their own cultural ways of engaging the world. It becomes destructive, however, when all other cultures and ways of "seeing the world" are judged with reference to this one culture, which is viewed as superior, either intentionally or unintentionally. It does harm when "the standards of one culture become the basis for making selections and determining opportunities for people from a variety of racial, cultural, and ethnic groupings. When institutions sanction and implement these standards, forced assimilation and/or exclusion result."⁵

Paternalism: "Paternalism is the claim or attempt to supply the needs or to regulate the lives of others, like a father does in the case of his children. Paternalism grows out of attitudes of self-importance and is frequently rationalized as an expression of Christian concern. To the detriment of healthy inter-group relations, however, paternalism tends to trivialize minority group persons, portraying them as incapable of caring for themselves or functioning responsibly."⁶

Majority/Minority Groups: While often used to express statistical groupings, majority/minority groups can mean more than statistics. The terms majority/minority can also indicate a form of status, an unequal distribution of power or a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority. They become a way of identifying who we are, how we fit into the world and how we are expected to behave. Often, we are born into these groups and do not, therefore, have the option to choose. Depending on the group in which we find ourselves, we experience certain privileges or liabilities.

Racism: Racism is the belief that one racial or ethnic group is assumed to be superior over another on the basis of characteristics such as appearance, intelligence, morality, human potential and social worth. It can be overt, deliberate and conscious, or it can be subtle, unintentional and inadvertent. Racism manifests itself in actions that adversely affect the lives of others by expressing attitudes as well as social structures of exclusion or forced assimilation.

Racial Prejudice: Prejudice is a prejudgement of another without or prior to adequate evidence or experience. It is based on faulty and inflexible generalizations and, unlike a simple misconception, deeply resists evidence to the contrary. Prejudice often emphasizes certain facts while downplaying others and, therefore, becomes a misjudgement and falsification of the facts. Prejudice is often learned from the prevailing attitudes that are expressed against a particular group.

Racial Discrimination: Discrimination is not the same as prejudice. Prejudice is an attitude. Discrimination is an act. One may be prejudiced but not act on it and one may discriminate on the basis of something other than personal prejudice. However, prejudice and discrimination often reinforce one another. "Prejudice gives rise to and helps people rationalize discriminatory behaviour, and discriminatory actions often produce and/or reinforce prejudicial attitudes toward the objects of discrimination."⁷

Power: Power can be used for good or for evil. When power is used to exclude others from meaningful participation in decision-making or to advance one's own welfare at the expense of others on the basis of race, culture or ethnicity, it no longer serves the purposes of God. It is possible for such power to be at work even when individual prejudices or hostile attitudes are removed. This misuse of power can be both intentional and unintentional. Either way it harms not only individuals but also the entire household of God.

Expressions of Racism: Racism is manifested at different levels: institutional, structural or personal.

1. Institutional: Institutional racism or systemic racism occurs where the established rules, policies and regulations or practices of an organization result in the unequal treatment of different groups either within that organization or in the larger society. A result of institutional racism is that the laws, values and practices of society, which may appear to be neutral, in fact tend to benefit one dominant group over others.
2. Structural: Structural or cultural racism refers to the manner in which the inequalities of society operate to justify certain racial groups being allocated to particular categories and classes. It is strongly linked to institutional racism.
3. Personal: Racism often manifests itself at the level of the individual when an individual acts on the belief that members of a group, as a group, are inferior in human or social value simply because of their racial, cultural or ethnic differences.

RACIAL HARASSMENT

What is Racial Harassment?

Racial harassment is defined as unwanted or unwelcome verbal, written or physical conduct related to one's race, culture, nationality or ethnicity. It causes offence, intimidation and/or distress to the individual to whom it is directed. Such conduct may have the purpose or effect of interfering with an individual's full participation in the life and work of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

When is it Racial Harassment?

Racial harassment includes but is not limited to racial slurs and jokes; ridicule and insults; displaying racially offensive written or visual material degrading members of a particular race; name-calling; open hostility; unfair allocation of work and responsibilities; or exclusion from normal workplace conversation or social events. It may be linked to a person's place of origin, religion, citizenship or ethnic origin.

What are the Consequences of Racial Harassment?

Racial harassment causes pain to those who suffer it. It de-humanizes those who apply it, divides people from within, aggravates conflict and destroys the possibility of coexistence based on equality. Racial harassment renders Christian community incomplete and undermines our belief in fairness and equality to all.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The unity of the body of Christ is to be reflected in the church's structure, life and work. Inclusion in the body of Christ transcends every race and culture and is visibly demonstrated by full acceptance and inclusion of all people, regardless of race or culture.

Racism is a violation of God's purposes. The church, therefore, is called to face racism both within its own life and in the broader life of the culture.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada welcomes its cultural diversity. Both at the congregational and national level, The Presbyterian Church in Canada will actively involve the cultural diversity in its midst when it comes to decision-making, service on boards and committees, preparation for ministry in the church, representation of the church at all levels, and employment within the church.

All allegations of racial harassment will be taken seriously. Every allegation will be received, investigated and acted upon in accordance with the terms of this policy.

The person complained against is always presumed innocent until proven guilty. If the presbytery or Session cannot conclude from the evidence on a balance of probabilities that the actions did occur as alleged, then it must decide that the complaint cannot be substantiated. In simple terms, the person complained against will be found not guilty. Any allegation must be substantiated before censure can be considered.



If a person who is alleging to have been racially harassed takes their complaint to a Provincial Human Rights Commission, the church court should nonetheless proceed to investigate the complaint without delay.

There are good reasons why the church should proceed directly to investigate a non-criminal complaint. First and foremost, members of the church expect complaints to be dealt with in the timeliest way possible. The potential consequences of many civil cases are not as severe as for criminal cases, which reduces the church's level of concern about affecting the civil case. The church should feel free to proceed with complaints under the policy, emphasizing reconciliation, while related civil court cases are ongoing.

Racial harassment falls under the section of Judicial Process as outlined in the Book of Forms sections 345–380. Following is a flow chart that outlines the process if an allegation of racial harassment is made. It is imperative that these sections of the Book of Forms be read in full.

This policy is the policy of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Church courts are expected to implement this policy as it is written. Changes to the policy will be made for the whole church by the General Assembly. In the interests of fairness and consistency, presbyteries, Sessions and other church bodies will refrain from implementing unilaterally procedures not outlined in the policy.

The church is called to implement this policy in the spirit of prayerfulness, love, affection and humility, under the continual illumination of the Holy Spirit. The guiding principles in this section are the basis of the policy. The policy can be properly understood only when read in the light of the guiding principles.

MOVING FORWARD

The Presbyterian Church in Canada is more ethnically and racially diverse than it was a generation ago, greatly benefiting from new voices and new perspectives. Nevertheless, there are many challenges facing The Presbyterian Church in Canada as it seeks to be more inclusive.

With this in mind we need to continue to seek the transformative work of God's Spirit as we learn to see the image of God in our neighbour. We need to take time to educate ourselves to the depth of racism and the tragedy of it. We need to engage in conversations that encourages understanding and re-examine our own practices and values that may get in the way of inclusion.

These are not easy changes to make. People from different cultures have different perspectives on how decisions are made. It requires a strong commitment to reconciliation. It is impossible to go forward without first going back in history when the church has hurt people. It requires the acceptance of collective sins. It means learning to listen to voices of people not like ourselves and learning to share in the decision-making process. It means recognizing that with the always-changing fabric of our society, someone somewhere is being excluded at any given time. There are always newcomers to embrace.



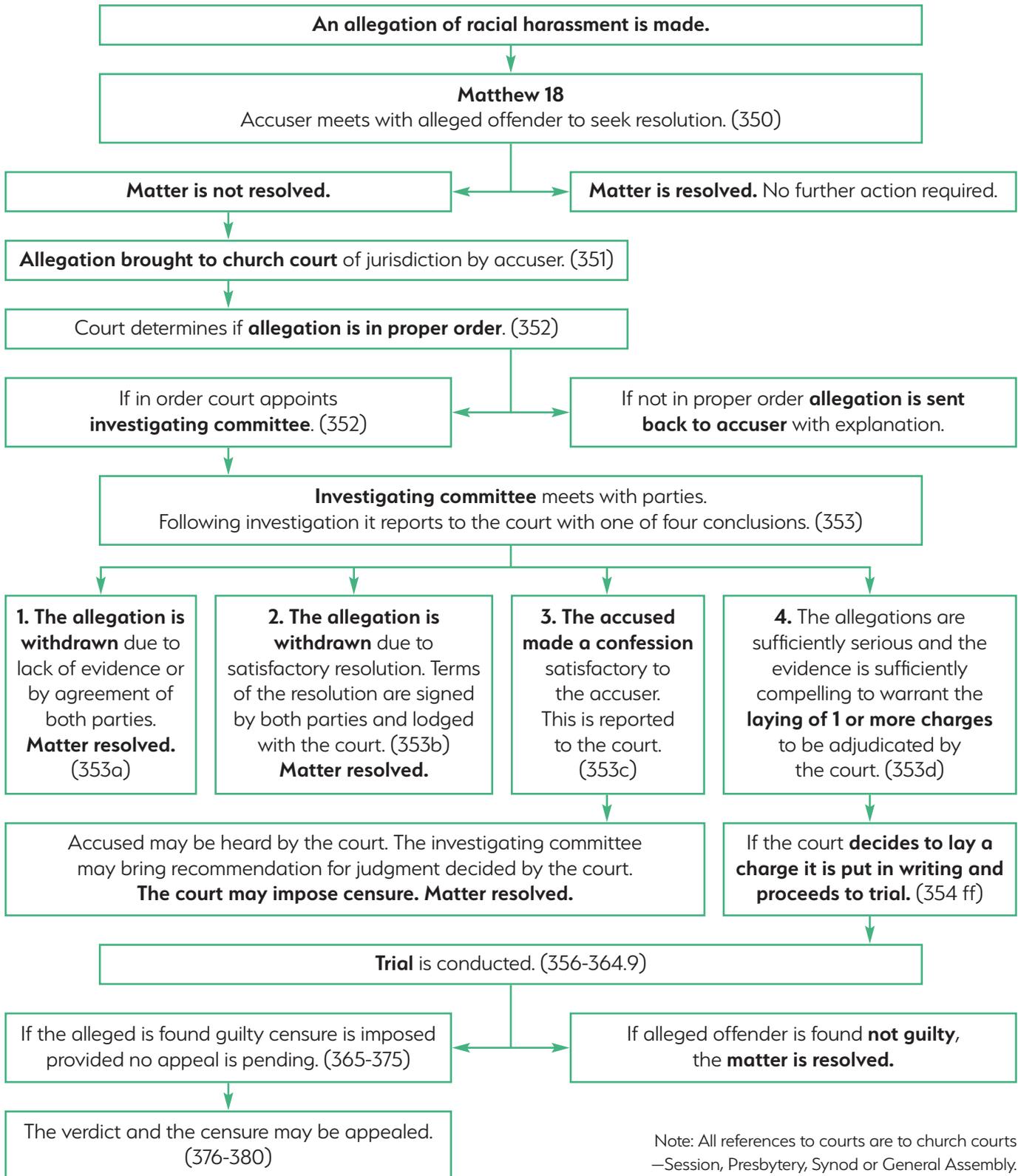
As difficult as these changes are, the fruit of moving forward as a truly multi-ethnic denomination brings us closer to the values of God's kingdom. We will learn to see Christ in our neighbour and be blessed by the new sight God gives us. It will lead to a more diverse, better-equipped Christian leadership at all levels. Standing against racism, therefore, is God's calling to every Christian, every session, every presbytery and to The Presbyterian Church in Canada as a whole.

FLOW CHART

On the next page is a flow chart which provides an overview of the process involved in racial harassment. It cannot be overstated that it is critical that the section on discipline in the Book of Forms be read alongside the flow chart. The appropriate sections of the Book of Forms are noted in each stage of the process. It is also important to remember that the overall goal is to work toward and to provide an impartial and just process to the working through of any allegations.

Racial Harassment Flow Chart

See Book of Forms sections 345-380. (It is imperative that these sections from the Book of Forms are read alongside the flowchart. Specific sections are in the brackets below.)



Note: All references to courts are to church courts —Session, Presbytery, Synod or General Assembly.

RESOURCES

Report of the Assembly Council re. Policies for Allegations of Racial Harassment and Racial Diversity, (A&P 2008, p. 220–29, 20).

Overture No. 34, 2001 re racism and requesting a policy on racial harassment (A&P 2001, p. 571–72, 17).

Report on the Life and Mission Agency in answer to Overture No. 34, 2001 re racism and requesting a policy on racial harassment (A&P 2004, p. 382–89). This report contains an excellent bibliography for further reading on the subject, including the work of other denominations.

Transformative Justice: Being Church and Overcoming Racism, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2004.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada, Book Forms, Judicial Process (especially the Disciplinary Case, sections 345–80), Toronto, 2006.

David Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church, The Gospel and Our Culture Series*, Craig Van Gelder, ed., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000.

Racism and the Church, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, February 1994.

Endnotes

1. Darrel Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church, The Gospel and Our Culture Series*, Craig Van Gelder, ed., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000, p. 85.
2. According to Acts 2:5–6, the story of Pentecost, God honours our differences as each person present “heard them speaking in their own language.”
3. Race as a social construct was first defined in the mid-18th century. Prior to that race was used to describe animals.
4. *Transformative Justice: Being Church and Overcoming Racism*, Geneva, 2004, p. 45.
5. *Racism and the Church*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, February 1994, p. 14.
6. *Ibid*, p. 37.
7. *Ibid*, p. 16.



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