

Examining White Privilege in the Anglican Church

SUSAN SMANDYCH

Photo: [Matt Artz](#)

Within Christianity, scripture prompts us to respond to oppression and injustice; for example, Isaiah 58:6 asks us to consider “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” and Micah 6:8 clearly highlights that the Lord requires us to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” In today’s world, we are inundated with headlines and stories of oppression and injustice, which are often related to racism. Within the Body of Christ, we are called to respond to oppression and injustice, including racism, at an individual and institutional level. At an individual level, we make a lifelong commitment to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being” in our baptismal covenant. At an institutional level, the church has made a public commitment to eliminate racism, through *A Charter for Racial Justice in the Anglican Church of Canada*, which collectively promises that:

As members of the Anglican Church of Canada, we strive continuously to be faithful to our life in Jesus Christ that we embraced at our baptism. We are learning that one of our strengths as a church lies in our diversity and in our commitment to eliminate systemic and individual racism, whether intended or not. We are called to be a church where people will have the assurance that they will be treated with dignity and respect, and where they will find a community that is determined to be free of racism.

This Charter was approved by the Council of General Synod (CoGS) in March 2007 and endorsed by General Synod in June 2007 as its official anti-racism statement. However, it has since been recognized that despite the church’s commitment to anti-racism, racialized persons (clergy and laity) continue to experience systemic racism within the Anglican Church of Canada. In 2020, there was an intentional effort by the church to renew its commitment to grapple with ongoing systemic racism through the establishment of a national ‘Dismantling Racism Task Force’. During the March 2022 CoGS meeting, this Task Force presented its draft recommendations (available [here](#)). During the CoGS discussion of the recommendations, a hope was expressed that the church would adequately promote participation in anti-racism programming not just at the national level, but the Diocesan level. (Prior to these recommendations in 2022, in his Charge to Synod 2020, Bishop Geoff Woodcroft had called for decisive action within the Diocese of Rupert’s Land against all forms of discrimination, including racism. In response, the “Noon Day prayers and Conversations Dismantling Anti Black Racism” committee was established and subsequently provided recommendations to the Bishop in Spring 2021.)

But is anti-racism programming enough to finally dismantle racism within the church as a whole, and within the Diocese of Rupert’s Land itself? And what may have limited the church from dismantling racism up until now?

Diana Swift, in her review of the book

[“Cracking Open White Identity towards Transformation”](#)

quotes an assertion in the book’s foreword that “dissection of white privilege is a fundamental requirement for the success of anti-racism efforts [since] it is impossible to do anti-racism work without examining white identity and the unearned power and privilege that flow from that identity.”

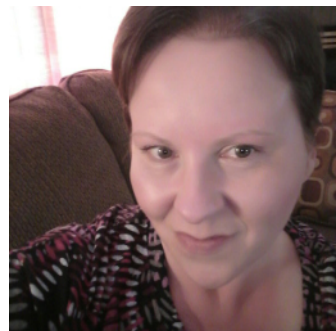
Based on this assertion, I discerned the following hypothesis for an MDiv dissertation, in an attempt to understand why progress on dismantling systemic racism in the church has been limited: “There is a passive, persistent presence of white privilege within the Anglican Church of Canada (ACoC)—and a lack of awareness, acknowledgement, and/or action to address such white privilege is inherently limiting the ACoC’s commitment to the Charter for Racial Justice, and thus its ability to dismantle systemic racism.” To test this hypothesis, over 1000 entries associated with journal articles and official statements published between June 2007 and December 2020 were examined in the General Synod Archives of the Anglican Church of Canada, to look for evidence of white privilege.

Findings were categorized into six key areas:

1. Assumption of British norm (i.e., white people see their views as normal, central, and rational),
2. Visual imagery (e.g., prevalence of white Church leaders in stained glass windows),
3. Tone and language (e.g., assumption of homogeneity of racialized persons, and sense of ‘otherness’),
4. Denial of racism (e.g., ‘Letters to the Editor’ in the Anglican Journal ardently denying systemic racism exists, and defense of residential schools’ intent/impact, and the Doctrine of Discovery),
5. Limited momentum (e.g., time lag between General Synod commitment to Charter for Racial Justice and Diocesan action e.g., anti-racism training), and
6. Representation and voice (e.g., key criteria of those elected or appointed to Standing Committees does not include racial diversity).

Based on evidence of white privilege in the Church, perhaps anti-racism programming may not be enough to dismantle racism; perhaps efforts also need to be made to raise the awareness of, and address, white privilege. As theologian Nathan Todd notes, there is a “positive association between greater awareness of white privilege and greater racial justice action.” So what could we do within the Diocese of Rupert’s Land, to increase awareness of white privilege, to seek greater racial justice? During this Eastertide, as we celebrate the Resurrection of Christ and God’s love for humanity, perhaps we could revisit our commitment to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being” and consider:

- Examining the extent of one’s own privilege using a self-assessment tool such as the [‘ladder of empowerment’](#), the key focus of which is to help white people understand their identity and privilege within a racist society, and to replace it with a positive, anti-racist identity
- Participating in [‘My Work To Do’](#) online affinity group which provides opportunities to learn about white privilege, its indicators and implications
- Exploring the imagery, norms, language and tone used in a parish, and ask, “Who is not here in this community of faith from the broader parish, and what prevents them from joining us? Who holds the power, and what perspectives are missing when decisions are made?”



R. Susan Smandych is a Postulant in the Diocese of Rupert’s Land and has served at both St. Paul’s Fort Garry and Holy Trinity in Winnipeg. She completed her MDiv at Trinity College at the Toronto School of Theology, including a dissertation entitled, “The Luxury of Indifference: White Privilege in the Anglican Church of Canada”. Susan is the Diocesan PWDRF representative, and a member of the Diocesan Resource Team, and of the Anti-Black Racism Committee.