

Are White churchgoers' perceived anti-racist practices truly anti-racist?

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Imagine a White minister preaching to a majority White congregation about the equality of all people. He says, wholeheartedly: "In God's eyes, we are all equal. God doesn't see color." Most people in the church nod in agreement. But for the Black woman visiting this church for the first time, his words land differently. Doesn't God see her experience? Her pain? Her history? By emphasizing unity, the minister unintentionally erases all of that. With the best intentions to affirm human equality, he ends up ignoring the daily reality of racism in her life. His words, though meant to heal, have the opposite effect.

In this paper I will present proposals for anti-racist practices by White churchgoers, and reflect on whether these proposals actually can contribute to racial justice or whether they might unintentionally be counterproductive, as illustrated in the little story I just shared.

To clarify the purpose of these reflections, I will begin by offering brief working definitions of **racism** and **whiteness**:

I understand racism as a multilayered system that normalises bodies, cultures, and ideas that are categorised as White while assignments social (power) positions to those categorised as Black or of colour based on their proximity to Whiteness, in intersection with other identity categories, such as gender and class. Racism not only manifests in explicit ideas and statements, but is also present in social structures and everyday practices.

Whiteness – the bodies, cultures, and ideas that are categorized as White - is the often-unmarked norm in Dutch society. Precisely because it is seen as "normal" or neutral, Whiteness frequently remains invisible—especially to White people themselves. Yet it shapes our perspectives, experiences, and participation in society.

This invisibility of our own position as White people is exactly why I want to zoom in on the proposals for anti-racist practices of White participants in my research. These are

White people who are willing to engage in anti-racist work. I focus on local congregants and their contributions to anti-racist practices, because I believe that they have important insights and their role is crucial for implementing anti-racist practices in churches.

In this presentation, I will discuss a number of anti-racist practices proposed by White participants in my research and bring them in conversation with three practical theological approaches to White anti-racist work.

Practical Theological Perspectives on White Anti-Racist Work

1. Katherine Turpin, *Questioning our Faith in Practice: Unlearning White Supremacy in Practical Theology* (2024)

In her book, Turpin explores thoroughly how Whiteness shapes the field of practical theology. She writes from a White US perspective. I want to focus particularly on her chapter on interventions, because anti-racist work can be seen as a kind of intervention, as an attempt to “fix” what is broken.

Turpin argues that the field of practical theology focuses too much on interventions as solutions that need to be implemented in local congregations. Turpin explains that these habits reflect a White tendency to want to save others, to presume to know what others need, and to claim authority and responsibility to fix situations of injustices that others are facing. In her words:

“these habitual ways of meaningmaking often fail to account for the reality of the limited and the tragic in human existence. The desire to be helpful and to fix things can be particularly harmful in situations where issues are complex, interests are competing, and there is no immediate solution.” “In these complex realities the logic of transformation can lead to interventions that are experienced as paternalism, embodiments of denial, culturally inappropriate, placing band-aids on deep wounds, and colonizing cultural invasions.”(p. 94)

Turpin doesn't reject the idea of interventions altogether. Instead, she proposes a reimagining of anti-racist praxis: one that moves away from a focus on control, efficiency, and results, and towards a relational and communal process.

In short, she reimagines interventions in three key points:

- Letting go of control. This does not mean to be passive, but to work for justice in humble actions, while accepting that the outcomes are out of our control and might not work in our favor. This requires recognizing that true justice cannot be orchestrated from a place of dominance.
- Ethical world-building. A process of collective imagination of just and sustainable futures of collective well-being, with shared investment in communal practices that embody those imaginations, however partially.
- Attitude of presence over fixing. Rather than trying to fix the problems of people of color, White people are called to endure with, accompany, and stay present in communities affected by injustice, doing anti-racist work together **with** instead of **for** others.

2. Anthony Reddie, "Reassessing the Inculcation of an Anti-Racist Ethic for Christian Ministry: From Racism Awareness to Deconstructing Whiteness." *Religions* 11, no. 10 (2020): 1-17.

The second approach I want to discuss, is that of Black liberation theologian Anthony Reddie, writing from a UK perspective. As the title of the article already suggests, Reddie advocates that an anti-racist ethic for Christian ministry must move beyond traditional racism awareness training and instead focus on deconstructing whiteness. Reddie himself has been an educator of racism awareness training in British theological education and this has been the dominant model for the last forty years.

Racism awareness training focused on creating awareness on racism among ministerial students and to train them in becoming White allies. Reddie writes that the problems with these trainings were first, that they were typically stand-alone sessions, not integrated in the core theological curriculum. As a result, they were often treated as marginal—an ethical add-on rather than a serious part of ministerial education.

Second, racism awareness trainings focused primarily on contemporary manifestations of racism, with little room for deep reflection on how Christian theology itself—especially White Eurocentric theology—has been entangled with race, racism, and colonialism. So in general deep reflection on the underlying framework or constructs of racism did not happen, which results in symptom management rather than real structural theological transformation.

Against this background, Reddie advocates for a model of anti-racist Christian ministry grounded in several key principles:

- Critical rereading of Christian tradition, particularly White Eurocentric theology. For Reddie, this starts with a historical reckoning with the complicity of White Christianity in the Transatlantic slave trade and colonial expansion.
- Genuine solidarity with people of color as they “wrestle with the continued realities of systemic racism.” This requires listening, taking their pleas for justice seriously and resisting defensive reactions of denial or indifference that often surface in White Christian contexts.

3. Boyung Lee, “Towards Solidarity-Creating Narratives: Anti-Racist Identity Formation in Korean Immigrant Churches,” in *Embodying Antiracist Christianity: Asian American Theological Resources for Just Racial Relations* (2023)

In her work on developing anti-racist practices within Korean immigrant churches in the US, Boyung Lee critically examines some White anti-racist practices as examples of what not to replicate. She critiques well-meaning approaches to racial solidarity as, and I quote:

“how-to anti-racism that sustains the tenuous promise that racism is something that one can challenge in **interpersonal relationships** and by **following specific steps** toward **individualized behavior correction.**” (p. 190)

Lee points out how such approaches, for example, became visible during peak moments of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, when White allies emphasize “doing the right thing”, which means learning and applying the “proper steps” to support

people of color. While often well-intended, this framework continues to center White agency and reinforces a paternalistic dynamic in which people of color are seen as helpless victims in need of rescue. Meanwhile, White anti-racist practices do not focus on the root issues of the racist system, such as ideas of white supremacy.

In contrast, Lee calls for a vision of anti-racist solidarity that is **structural, collective, and liberative**.

- Actively deconstructing white supremacy, (neo-)colonialism, and all oppressive systems and hierarchies, instead of focusing on individual behavior correction.
- Imagining “a new social order based on equity and equality for the liberation of all people.” Which Lee envisions as constructing or co-constructing new worlds in deep solidarity with each other.

Proposed anti-racist practice by White participants

What did the White participants in my research propose as anti-racist practices?

I will present the proposed practices that emerged from conversations with sixteen White participants. All participants signed themselves up to participate in the research. Among them were only two men and all but one were Dutch people without recent family history of international migration. The exception was a Finnish woman who moved to the Netherlands 30 to 40 years ago.

The practices emerged through group conversations, so I will not share what each individual participant proposed, but the practices are in itself a group-effort. Of course, some types of anti-racist practices were more supported by participants than others. I will start with the one that was most supported:

1. Building relationships

Building relationships across racial and cultural boundaries. Participants observe that Dutch society at large, including churches, is highly segregated. They argue that building relationships will counteract the segregation and improve acceptance. Elements of this proposed anti-racist practice include:

- Learning from each other or learning from someone's "otherness." Respecting others and seeing them fully for who they are. Some participants pointed out in this regard that especially in Christian mission White Christians have built relationships with people of color based on the intention to teach or bring them something. They argue that this attitude needs to be unlearned and we need to acknowledge that we can also learn something from others.
- Hospitality and initiative: participants stressed that invitations for relationship building should come from "our side" – which meant from those in less vulnerable positions, rather than expecting people of color to initiate contact.
- Possible joint activities: gardening, making music, cooking, inviting international students to church (Bridging Gaps)
- Suitable settings for building relationships
 - o Schools: participants hope that when children of all backgrounds grow up together there will be less segregation when they are grown-ups. Yet, participants also notice that White parents often send their children to majority White schools out of concern for educational quality of other schools.
 - o Churches: Nick, the minister of one of the participating congregations: "The dream would be a much more intercultural church in which we live together and practice, live together as people from different cultures, colors and see what happens; where we are victim when we are aggressor just to see how it works in practice."

Building relationships as anti-racist practice resonates deeply with the work of the theologians discussed earlier, in the sense that Lee, Turpin and Reddie all stress the importance of relationships and community. The emphasis on learning from each other and accepting that we as White people can also learn from people of color also seems similar to Turpin's emphasis on letting go of control and Lee's point that people of color should be seen as people with agency.

Yet there are also some critical remarks to be made building on their theories. The way that building relationships is presented to counter segregation, reminds of how Turpin describes that White people often come up with possible solutions that fix social

problems, without acknowledging power dynamics. Especially when it comes to the proposal of mixed schools. Anthony Reddie's critique is also relevant here: if building relationships remains disconnected from a critical examination of how White theology, power, and historical structures shape those relationships, then we risk reproducing rather than dismantling inequality.

2. Educating yourself

A second proposed anti-racist practice among the participants was the importance of self-education, by, for example, attending lectures and workshops, watching documentaries, and reading books on racism. This theme comes with a critical sidenote of one of the participants, Alida, who stresses that awareness and gaining knowledge about racism are important, but we also need to reflect on how racism is deeply rooted within ourselves. Therefore, education must be paired with ongoing critical self-reflection.

One important aspect of educating oneself that participants proposed is to correct own prejudices.

When bringing this in conversation with Turpin, Reddie and Lee, they all acknowledge that critical self-reflection is needed. They would emphasize the importance of doing this type of self-education in community, whereas for the participants it seems to be a more individual task. Reddie furthermore would stress that education can be worthwhile, as long as it critically examines the deep structures of racism.

3. Educating (White, Dutch) others

Several participants also mentioned the importance of educating others about racism. They particularly envision this as asking questions about prejudices others have or correcting their assumptions. While doing so, they stressed the importance of a **humble attitude**—not positioning oneself as morally superior or as someone who "knows better," but still being **clear and committed** to confronting injustice in everyday life.

From **Turpin's** perspective, this practice might carry the risk of becoming another type of intervention that assumes the White self as a fixer or savior, although she would probably fully agree with taking on a humble attitude, instead of a superior one. Thinking of both Reddie and Lee's emphasis in addressing the underlying structures of racism, rather than focusing on the interpersonal dynamics and behavior, educating others should also involve educating on underlying structures as White Eurocentric theology and colonialism, which was also the case with educating oneself.

4. Other Practices and Reflections

Some contributions of participants do not fit under the previous umbrellas, but are not less important. These include the following:

- Not looking away from racism
- Supporting refugees
- Media need to take more responsibility in their news items. Some participants noted that churches do not have a large impact in Dutch society anymore, so they think media might have a greater influence.

Bringing these proposals for anti-racist practices in conversation with Turpin, the second and third point again appear to fit in the tendency to find solutions for others. In light of Turpin's idea that White people should try to let go of control and not be so outcome-driven, I find it interesting that participants turn to the media, because they think the church doesn't have large influence. It appears that they actually downplay their own potential, because they are focused on the impact anti-racist work might have on a societal level.

The first seems to resonate with Reddie's vision on solidarity, in which White people do no longer respond with indifference or denial when they are confronted with the reality of racism.

Conclusion

In different proposed anti-racist practices of the White participants' proposals there is potential, with some critical remarks here and there from the three theologians that I introduced.

To conclude, I want to highlight one of the proposed anti-racist practices of the participants that I think is promising and one of the aspects proposed by the theologians that is largely absent from the participants' point of view, but might be fruitful to explore further in local congregations.

The participants proposal of building relationships I find especially helpful from a point of view that White people should be in these relationships with an awareness of the past of Christian mission in which we as White people initiated relationships with the idea to teach others and impose our religion on them. Awareness of this attitude actually will help to avoid paternalism in standing in solidarity with people who are oppressed by racism. To avoid saying: I know what you need, but to accept that the oppressed know what they themselves need.

What is largely absent from the theories in the practices, though, is what Turpin calls ethical world-building, collective imagination of just futures and what Lee calls co-constructing new worlds in deep solidarity with each other. This was not necessarily raised by participants as a possible anti-racist practice, but I think churches can be places for these processes, whereas this might be more difficult in 'secular' society'. So, I hope that churches can become a space for this type of anti-racist practice.