

Christian Unity and Anti-Racism: A Panel Hosted by the TST Roundtable

Amber Tremblett, the Co-President of the TST Roundtable, began the event by welcoming attendees, and acknowledging the land. She recommended that attendees visit <http://indigenous.utoronto.ca> to learn more about the Indigenous community at the University of Toronto. Amber then went over some housekeeping rules and introduced the topic for the evening, which is Christian Unity and Anti-Racism. She highlighted the fact that the event was held during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and that the topic of anti-racism is important for the Church as a whole. She hoped that the question posed to the panellists would be the start of a fruitful discussion. The question is listed below:

- How can your particular denomination/congregation use John 15:5-9 as a foundation in working towards anti-racism in your denomination/congregation? How do we overcome denominational, congregational, and theological differences to address anti-racism together as a Christian community?

Amber introduced Dr. Pamela Couture as the moderator for the discussion and invited participants to pose their questions using the chat feature, which Dr. Couture would be sifting through as a way to continue moderating the event. Amber reiterated the importance of creating a safe and respectful space through the discussion and ends her introduction by praying a prayer from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr. Pamela Couture first thanked the TST Roundtable for organizing the event and the work required to create a conversation around a difficult topic. She checked to make sure that all panellists were present. Dr. Couture then talked about the selection of John 15:5-9 within the discussion question, saying that it was the passage selected by the World Council of Churches that organized the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Finally, she formally introduced each panellist. For reference, a brief biography is listed below.

- **The Rev. Alison Hari-Singh:** Honorary Assistant at St. Martin-in-the-fields Anglican Church
- **Alvyn Joys:** Seminarian for the Archdiocese of Toronto
- **Bill McCormick, SJ:** MDiv Student at Regis College; Contributing Editor at America Magazine; Research Fellow at St. Louis University
- **Kate McCray:** PhD Student at St. Michael's College
- **Néstor Medina:** Assistant Professor of Religious Ethics and Culture at Emmanuel College
- **The Rev. Vernal S. Savage:** Alumni of Trinity College; Member of the leadership team of Black Anglicans of Canada; Assisted with the formation of the African Canadian Christian Network (ACCN)

The Rev. Alison Hari-Singh spoke first. She is a priest in the Anglican Diocese of Toronto, where she has recently begun working in anti-racism training and development of policy. She highlighted that the topic for the panel was a growing interest of hers, both academically and spiritually. Like Dr. Couture, she found the choice for the passage strange, but realized that “God always gives the reading, I’ve realized through preaching.” Dr. Couture then interjected to read John 15:5-9. Alison then interpreted the text in a way that could be used to address anti-racism in the Anglican Church of Canada. She reminded attendees of the foundation of the Anglican Church in the English Church, which was involved in British colonial expansion. This global expansion brought Christianity, capitalism and civilization across the world. Today, the Anglican

Church is no longer just a British or a white church, but a global church; however, the power structures still keep the power dynamics. Nonetheless, things are changing, though with some difficulty. Alison recommended William L. Sachs' *The Transformation of Anglicanism: From State Church to Global Communion* as a resource for this topic. She argues that the image of the vine is appropriate, in light of the English church's participation in colonization, and the lingering effects of colonization. She then discusses how appropriate it was to have the image of the vine for this topic. She talked about different types of vines, and how each type requires a different type of support or placement in order to thrive. She talks about two types of vines, the English ivy and the Virginia creepers, both of which do not need help to grow. She quoted a gardening blogger, who said that the vines need to remember that they "don't have dominion over the earth." These vines could smother other plants, collapse fences, and destroys homes, and thus are powerful plants. Vines have an extensive root system, which contributes to their strength and ability to grow. However, extensive growth eventually becomes unsustainable for vines, and eventually, the ends of the vine get so far from the root that they begin to get damaged and die. To keep a vine healthy, Alison stated, one has to remove any dead, damaged, diseased or unproductive stems, remove overly tangled stems, arid stems and direct and limit its growth. In other words, one has to prune the vine, which doesn't reduce the vine, but increases it. Through pruning, further growth is encouraged.

In light of John 15, this all makes sense. "Jesus's love is the strong vine that is rooted in the source of all being." Jesus knows that when the branches or tendrils are given the power to grow and take off, they might and they will go astray and wreak havoc. If they go too far-off course, they wither and die, and if they are not pruned or cut off, they can bring down the whole vine. White supremacy in the churches, both historic and current, she argued, are the branches that no longer live in the vine. The branches of white supremacy and other harmful branches need to be removed in order to keep the vine alive. These, in the words of Jesus, need to be thrown in the fire and burned. "Abiding in love by pruning the vine of deep-seated beliefs that contravene the Gospel will naturally produce fruit that glorifies God... The Anglican Church of Canada, in my opinion, is just beginning to understand that the branches need to be tended on this front, and it's an easy task. Pruning is painful because it requires a redistribution of power, but I truly believe that, if we want to thrive as a church and not just the Anglican Church, but our churches, more broadly, we have to do this really, tremendously important work."

Alvin Joys, a seminarian for the Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto, shared the story of Fr. Augustus Tolton, whom he believed could help enlighten how Christians should approach the issue of racism today. Tolton was born into slavery in 1854. His father died when he was seven, fighting in the civil war. That same year, Tolton's family escaped using the underground railroad from slavery to Illinois. His mother tried to enroll him in the local school that same year; however, many parents threatened to withdraw their children from the school if Tolton and his siblings were not removed from the school. His mother withdrew the children out of the school due to the pressure, and Tolton decided to work in a tobacco farm to support his family. A group of nuns and priests, having heard of this situation, invited Tolton to another school. The nuns and priests faced the same criticism and threats as the first school, but remained firm in their decision to recognize Tolton's dignity as a person and allow him to study.

Joys noted that this recognition left an impression on Tolton and his own faith journey. Tolton grew as a man of genuine faith and integrity and felt a call to become a Catholic priest. Fr. McGirr, Tolton's mentor, wrote to every seminary in the United States to begin Tolton's formation to become a priest; however, every seminary rejected him because of the colour of his

skin. “When it felt as though the seminaries in America would stop Augustus hopes and his dreams of becoming a priest of Jesus Christ. God managed to work through it all, and it was the Vatican, who took on the formation of Augustus and for the first time in Augustus’s life, he would recall how he felt as though the weight of segregation was removed. He was treated as a person, and a child of God.” When he became a priest, he wanted to share the feeling he had of being loved and wanted in Rome to those who suffered racism in the United States. He worked tirelessly, even in the face of persecution due to the colour of his skin and due to his Catholic identity. In light of all of this, he chose to be a light and to bring the presence of Jesus. He did not let the hatred he faced to drive his actions. He turned to love and prayed for them, so that God may convert their hearts. He recognized the dignity of his enemies and saw Christ in them. “He understood so deeply in his own soul that if Christ is the vine that unites us, we, as the branches, have no choice but to remain united to Jesus and bear fruit. So today, whenever we see any forms of injustice, including racism as Christians, we must not let anger consume us and let it turn into hate. Just as the priests in the story who educated Augustus in spite of the backlash, we can only combat injustices in the world by comforting the afflicted and standing up for the truth.” Christ did not hate those who persecuted him, but prayed for them and for the forgiveness of their sins.

Addressing racism in the Christian community means holding on to what Christ said that, “Apart from Me, you can do nothing.” Joys argued that working towards anti-racism means working toward the conversion of hearts. “Our churches must become places of encounter where people can encounter Christ in the liturgy and in the other.” It is through learning to love Christ in the Other that we can overcome our differences. “If we who are called to be Christ’s hands and feet in the world cannot learn to love each other and respect each other’s differences, it will be impossible to tackle the evil we see caused by racism. If we allow theological, cultural, or spiritual differences to alienate us, we cannot begin to deal with the division that we see racism cause. And so change begins within, in our homes and in our Christian community. From this conversation and onwards, as we begin to foster this love and unity which would which Christ so deeply desired and work together to pray for the suffering and the conversion of hearts, we can work in a positive direction toward being united in Christ to Christ, and to be a light to the world.”

Bill McCormick, a first year MDiv student at Regis College, stated that the very fact that the panel itself was already a sign of unity in the church and across society. He thanked the panelists that have presented thus far, and particularly the reference to Fr. Tolton, who is from the US like McCormick. As a Jesuit scholastic, he brings “the gifts and heritage of the Ignatian family to this conversation.” He recognized the sin and the history of evil of the Society of Jesus, who owned slaves in the United States, and that the reckoning and reconciliation of this fact is something that is happening in the US. To him, John 15:5-9 was the perfect passage to address the topic for tonight and he was struck by how familiar the passage is, given that he has read and heard it many times. He used the teachings of St. Ignatius of Loyola to enter into the passage using St. Ignatius’ tools for contemplation and meditation. These tools allow one to enter into the passage in their mind’s eye, and compose the place where one is, who is there, what one is hearing, seeing, feeling and more. Prayer thus becomes a “multi-sensory experience,” and this was how McCormick approached this passage. He entered into the passage as a branch on the vine, which he recognized is a strange way to enter into the passage, but he imagined himself as a branch that is adjacent to other branches connected on that same vine. He recognized that, for him, it was a

challenge to recognize the Church, the United States as a vine, and his own connection as a branch to other branches.

He stated that it's likely that Christians do not always have a sense of "integral connection with the Body of Christ". We do not often feel dependent on other branches. He found this thought to be "alien," not because he has not experienced blessings and graces from the Lord, but because he (and perhaps other Christians) turn away from Christ. The surrender and desire to follow Christ sometimes only extends so far: "Lord, I'll follow you, but only this far. I love you, but only this much and that love won't extend to people who aren't like me." There is the false belief, coming from Satan, that states that the Lord's salvation does not extend to people who are like him. However, the Holy Spirit unifies and draws together. When there is a spirit of division and conflict, it is a sign that we are not walking with God.

In his approach to the question, McCormick does not desire to reduce the issues of anti-racism or Christian disunity to a personal issue. He recognized that there are a lot of institutional and systemic issues; however, "it's not enough to not be actively engaged in racism. We have to recognize the way that we are quite engaged and complicit in all sorts of structures of sin." This is what he drew from his prayer with the passage. Through his meditation, he learned that "there is no substitute for encounter in the work of anti-racism and the work of Christian unity. There is no substitute for heart speaking to heart, for faces seeing faces and recognizing the dignity of the human person in another."

The Society of Jesus in the United States has worked in reconciliation with descendants of slaves that the Jesuits owned by being in a room with those descendants. They began by listening to them, learning their story, and allowing them to be part of the conversation of reconciliation. He argues that this example from the Society of Jesus best explains what he learned in prayer and the need to see each other as branches on the same vine. McCormick argued that it is easy for him to forget the dependence he has with the other branches on the vine. "And when you do enter into the life of another person, when you enter into the suffering of another person, we all know it's scary because you're not in control, and you don't know what's going to happen next. But, I would just refer to the first verse of this chapter, when Jesus says, "I am the true vine and my father is the vine grower...we are branches of that vine, we need to keep that sense alive, and we need to keep following Jesus, who is the true vine."

Kate McCray, coming from the Eastern tradition, began by speaking about how the Eastern Christian Church did not experience European colonialism, and thus have a different history of and experience with race and bias. In the North American context, the Eastern Church is often associated with a particular cultural label and emphasizing these cultural labels over the traditions. The distinction between religion and race are not made. However, the Orthodox tradition views cultural superiority as a sin and is a heresy known as phyletism. Many converts to the Byzantine tradition have felt that there is a divide between them and the Community, due to being from a separate culture. This is a major issue within the North American Orthodox context, due to a lack of understanding of culture and identity markers within the culture. Chattel slavery was not something that happened in Orthodoxy, thus meaning that supremacist theologies around the categories of black and white are not part of Orthodox theology. Many oral histories have highlighted the shock that Orthodox Christians felt in hearing other European Christians theologically justify slavery. Though there is no history of chattel slavery in the Orthodox tradition, they still experienced the nationalism that motivates supremacy.

In the 1800s, McCray explained, Orthodox bishops unilaterally declared ethnophyletism as a heresy. This heresy "is the belief that any culture could be superior to any other."

Ethnophyletism has helped fuel and rationalize triumphalism and the idea that one group has the right to overtake or conquer another, as seen in the current events in Ukraine. Russia's military actions were condemned by the Ecumenical Patriarch, for it asserted superiority and dominance over Ukraine. Such actions violate Orthodox unity, with the punishment being out of communion. This shows that ethnophyletism is anti-unity and anti-community.

In connecting this to being anti-racist in North America as an Orthodox Christian, McCray says that recognizing that "the central belief and human dignity should motivate solidarity with historically marginalized groups." She cites the example of Archbishop Iakovos, who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, as an example of this solidarity. There is also a need to remember that "white" is a racial category from the slave trade, and that during the Jim Crow Era, Greek, Arabs, Slavs and other Orthodox immigrants were considered "coloured." McCray argues that the category of white evolved to include those who identified with marginalized groups, because it was needed for white supremacy to survive. While anti-racism is "an imperative for orthodox people, the category of white included many of us eventually." Furthermore, the history of restorationism and European Christianity, namely the belief that Christianity should go back to the original apostolate beliefs, has further emphasized superiority for orthodox people. Theologies and appeals around becoming the first or second century church are restorationist theologies that encourage an idea that the Orthodox Church is superior. Some convert to the Orthodox Church because of their belief that it is the most apostolic version of Christianity. However, North American Christians need to recognize that "restorationism was a friend to white supremacy." The Church was diverse, with language barriers and differences and unity does not mean a historical monolithic church with the same race or theology. Orthodox unity ultimately refers to "prioritizing the other as having dignity created by God, as having ultimate worth. Unity for orthodox is conciliarity, which means the family of equals. This means we often disagree, but diversity includes difference. Today, the mission of young Orthodox scholars is to represent this history of assimilation and champion non-colonial Christianity. Unity does not represent a mythic past of people who all share the same ideas and the same culture, the same language or belief. Unity is the work of cherishing one another in our difference."

Nestor Medina, assistant professor of religious ethics at Emmanuel College, presented three points that focused on his thoughts on the passage, his experience in his church community, which is part of the Pentecostal tradition, and then his thoughts on the panel question. He started his presentation by discussing the passage. For Medina, John 15:5-9 prompted him to think about the "interconnectedness" of human beings and "the degree to which we human beings need each other." Medina recalls his time at Niagara on the lake over the summer and uses this experience to unpack the biblical passage. He says "we were walking around the vines and the great pines and we were looking at them and appreciating them and part of our tour was information on how the vines grow, but how different vines yield different fruit, depending on the type of soil, depending on the temperature of the weather, depending on the type of fertilizer, even depending on the type of care they receive. So I started to think about this passage and realized that actually it's important for us, when we think about this passage, to really think in the plural. Because otherwise we can run the danger of moving too quickly into bringing together and then that can yield homogeneity." Medina also reflected on this passage in light of our interdependence, which he described as "interdependence in terms of each other but also interdependence in relationship to God." He makes sure to point out that this idea would be considered properly Christian and spiritual in his Pentecostal denomination, but that the approval of this Christian approach "can potentially undermine other social and political aspects that are at play specifically in questions

along racism.” Medina moves on to discuss the verse “abide in my love.” He discusses how love is understood in the Pentecostal tradition and how it differs from his own understanding. He says “I was told that love was this mellow very passive, very, very non-threatening way of acting. And I kind of have come to understand loving, in fact, as a rather proactive move, as very forceful in the face of injustice. So, when I think about this passage in anti-racism attitudes I just have to think about my love: as it manifests as I resist injustice and racism, and that is the best way I can express my love.”

Medina then moves on to talking about his experience as an ordained pastor in the Pentecostal Church. He thinks the Pentecostal church is a very interesting place because, his specific community is a Spanish speaking community, which means that they experience discrimination and racism every day and to talk to them about anti-racism might seem hypocritical when they themselves experience racism. He also points out, however, for many, being a Pentecostal means not getting involved in political or social issues, which means “they shouldn’t be fighting against anti-racism or for justice and so on.” Medina goes on to say, however, that “in this attitude what gets caught in the way is the fact that they also don’t want to acknowledge that among latinos and Latinas there is racism. Latinos and Latinas also have their own discriminatory attitudes towards members of other communities.” At the same time, Medina points out, that there are no People of Colour at the highest levels of leadership in the Pentecostal Church in Canada, further highlighting the complexity of the tradition. Medina wants to stress that “as we think about anti-racism, we are past the idea of white against everybody else.” He points out that the panel question is problematic because it does not define what is meant by racism, especially in a context where there are racist attitudes “within specific ethno-racial communities.”

For Medina, the most troubling part of the panel discussion question was the part that asked the church to go beyond their differences. He insists that “overcoming denominational or congregational or theological differences is problematic because oftentimes unity comes at the expense of diversity. Oftentimes unity means homogeneity. Oftentimes unity means the status quo.” For Medina, being anti-racist means we need to “uphold diversity as the central criteria for church building, the central criteria for understanding Christianity and for understanding each church dynamic and structure.” Medina cautioned listeners that resolving differences can devolve into reducing differences all together.

The most important thing for Medina is that, because racism is so hard to identify in different contexts, the way we act as individuals toward anti-racist attitudes “sets up a pattern of the kind of person that [we] want to be” and that it is a “result of [our] faith.” Medina emphasizes that “questions of racism, our social issues, are also denominational issues, they are also institutional issues, and they’re also ideological and theological.” A crucial step is figuring out what made it possible for racist structures to make its way into theology. All of these thoughts must be explored while remembering our interdependence and preserving the integrity of our differences as different vines working together.

The final speaker, the Rev. Vernal Savage, began his presentation by emphasizing that the branches of Christ, the people of Christ, are found in schools, government, entertainment, and social media. He believes that the church “has a critical role to play to address systemic anti-black racism” both within our own denominations and wherever else the gospel is proclaimed. He points out that there are many programs within the Anglican Church that are fighting racial prejudice but highlights that this is different than facing systemic anti-black racism in our institutions. Rev. Savage says “Like Martin Luther King said, ‘I’m in Birmingham because

injustice is here,' I'm in the Anglican Church because injustice is here." He makes sure to emphasize that structural systemic problems are a huge problem, but "that Christ came into the world to save and redeem humanity." He quotes Deitrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote "new human beings live in the world like anyone else," to point out that **as these new human beings redeemed by Christ, we are to act out this call for redemption in the world, meaning the church is required to act with "greater zeal than the part they played in creating the problem in the first place."** Rev. Savage sees it as his anointing, and the anointing of the church to proclaim that something is wrong. He suggests that this was Christ's own mission as written about in the gospels. He says **"It was not because he was loved that Christ was put on the Cross. It was because he wanted to turn the world upside down and revolutionize and bring us to the awareness of our true humanity."**

Rev. Savage focuses on the fact that "racism is a sin that has been accepted and normalized by the church." He says that immediate action is required to "dismantle anti-black and all forms of exclusion and oppression from the church." This work cannot be done, according to Savage, without recognition, reconciliation, and healing. He highlights that this decade is the decade for persons of African Descent, and, while the government and other organizations have recognized the importance of the decade, the Diocese of Toronto has not. As a member of Black Anglicans of Canada, Savage calls on the Diocese to recognize it like other organizations in the country have. He also calls for an apology for the harm done to Black people. He points out that "all churches have a connection to Anti-black racism and, consequently, have a moral responsibility to engage these issues in various ways." He thinks that every church should "act with the hope that their interests can be coordinated with other well thinking churches to organize action to serve the common good."

Savage discusses Ubuntu reconciliation, created by Desmond Tutu, which is a concept of community embraced to "provide a corrective hermeneutic for Western salvation theology that focuses on the individual." Instead of being Individuals, says Savage, we are first and foremost, a community, but we are not homogeneous. He highlights that differences have always existed in the church and, as a result of "being part of that entire community, we get to appreciate our Latin American brothers and sisters or white or Indian... and we serve each other and look after each other's interests."

He goes on to discuss the origin of Black Anglicans of Canada, which emerged from "conversations over the years," in which him and his colleagues recognized that "as people of African descent that we are commissioned and called to be ambassadors of reconciliation, we are called to create opportunities and space for courage building, healing, fellowship, and empowerment." He says that "this special calling is both a reminder and a challenge to ourselves and to the whole church that we are no longer destined to just suffer and witness, but to disrupt, heal, and lead." He lists the tactics and tenants of the organization which are empowerment, participation, and representation. He acknowledges that the Diocese of Toronto has started the process of listening and setting up hubs that can "carry the process of dealing with anti-black racism within the church."

Savage returns to the heart of the matter which is that "the church has failed on many fronts. He points out that "blacks outstrip other members of incarcerated communities," which he points out is highlighted in Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow*. Savage says, "racism is not only for the victor, it is for the victim because it corrupts human beings in its full sense... it destroys both of us." He highlights the work done in the Episcopal Church and in the Diocese of Montreal, which have produced an action plan to address anti-black racism. He ends by

acknowledging those who have gone before him in the fight against anti-black racism in Nova Scotia, Sierra Leon, whose experiences reach through history to speak to us “to stand up and address these problems.”

Following the presentations by the panelists, Dr. Couture thanked everyone for their comments and the diverse array of responses to the questions. As a response to the discussion, she asked everyone in attendance to answer the following question using the zoom chat function:

- What one action should your denomination do first to begin to dismantle racism?

The panelists took turns highlighting some of the answers from participants that they thought were applicable to their churches:

Alison Hari-Singh: The Anglican church needs to form, mentor, and lift up racialized young people within the church in order for them to become leaders within the church, which might mean investing in better education. Clergy need to take anti-racism training. The final thing would be that the Anglican Church needs to make reparations, and firstly, figure out what those reparations would look like.

Alvin Joys: The Catholic Church needs to get to know diverse community organizers in order to combat the unknowing or lack of understanding, which allows us to see Christ in the other. They need to appoint people with personal experience with racism to leadership positions to help teach and lead meaningful change.

Bill McCormick: We have to acknowledge racism, examine our own participation in it, and then act to change. Listen to the people whom we have injured by our actions in the church.

Kate McCray: We should read histories outside of our own histories and outside of your norm.

Néstor Medina: People of diverse ethnic and cultural groups need to hold leadership positions at the highest levels in our denominations. We need to stop telling the church what the church should do because we are the church, so we need to do something. There should be more training for people of other cultural groups.

Rev. Vernal Savage: Reparations are necessary. There should also be mandatory educational training on ant-racism. We need a public apology. We need to take a further look at the relationships between first world and third world countries and why first world countries and understand how these relationships encourage racism and white supremacy.

After the panelists finished highlighting the suggestions from some of the participants, Dr. Couture thanked the TST Roundtable for organizing the event. She expressed that the event was a great demonstration of the type of ecumenical event that TST hopes to hold.

Andrea, the Co-President of the Roundtable closed the event by saying a prayer adapted from the US Catholic Bishops about Christian Unity. The zoom meeting then ended.