

# RACISM

*has no place in*

# MULTICULTURALISM

Coleen Martin Williams

*Photographed by* Enfocus Production, H. Warren

Since 1971, the elimination of racism has been a mission of the YWCA. In the fight against racism, the YWCA knows that it will need the involvement of people from many walks of life. This is why the cornerstone of their campaign to end racism is *THE GOAL OF REACHING* as many people as possible *AND GETTING* them engaged in ways that support the YWCA mission.

The Rockford, Illinois branch of the YWCA is currently centering their campaign on public service announcements (PSAs), elementary school presentations, and adult workshops.

Kris Kieper, CEO of the Rockford branch, said that the indicators of campaign success boil down to three ifs. “If our campaign makes a person ask themselves questions about racism and answer them honestly, if our campaign generates conversations about racism, if our campaign brings about a feeling of wanting to do something about racism, the campaign has been successful.”

To date, three different PSAs have been shown to the Rockford television viewership. These PSAs have a lunch room setting, an office setting, and a scenario of a couple being denied the opportunity to rent. The ridiculousness of racism is conveyed through a short, ad length video of images and clever dialogue.

*The YWCA elementary school program* has been presented to more than 800 Winnebago and Harlem school district students in grades one through five. The program – *What’s Wrong With Different?* – gives insights into reasons skin tones are varied. The highlight of the presentation is when students are asked to create a recipe for his/her skin color. This is accomplished by having each student mix colors until a match to his/her skin color is produced. By sharing recipes, each child discovers that other skin tones are made with some of the same colors he or she used to produce his/her own. This awareness helps emphasize the point that our differences also contain likenesses.

“Teachers call to tell me that their students are still talking about the recipe,” said Kieper. “One teacher had a student who said of another student, ‘I always thought my best friend was my brother, now I know he is.’”

The YWCA adult workshops on racism bring people together from different ethnic groups, backgrounds and varied experiences. The YWCA selects a person to facilitate who has the necessary skill base and topic familiarity. The workshops are dialogue driven. Participants do most of the talking that includes sharing concepts of what racism is and personal experiences with it.

“I am surprised whenever people say that they didn’t know racism was still around,” said Kieper. “Some have never had a prior conversation about racism with anyone. If you don’t talk about racism, you can’t do anything about racism.”

The YWCA hopes the workshop experience establishes a desire in participants to do something about racism *after* the workshop concludes. That some workshop attendees now meet on their own – regularly – is evidence that the desire to diminish racism has gone past workshop participation and the efforts of the YWCA.

**Pastor Kenneth Board**, spiritual leader of Pilgrim Baptist Church, was born in Mississippi where he was exposed to acts of racism. He currently lives in Rockford where he is exposed to acts of racism. “It is racism,” said Board, “that keeps us divided.”

Board is grateful that the YWCA sponsors workshops that place a focus on the specifics of racism. He attended two; one was for ministers only. Board described the sessions as ones that led to some lively and engaging discussions. He went on to say that he came away carrying the following impressions:

“Among white people in the group, there seemed to be a disconnect that they had even ‘seen’ racism or had ‘feelings’ about it. White clergy, male and female, seemed like their heads were in the sand. Some acknowledged the existence of racism, but didn’t see that they had the power to do anything. Some acknowledged that they had the power to do something, but choose to avoid using that power due to fear of reprisal, rejection, and/or loss of the status and influence.”

Board believes that the role of the church “is to be a headlight not a taillight. The church is an institution that gives vision, places the right focus on anything that keeps a person in darkness economically and emotionally. If the church and society would practice the psychology of multiculturalism [understanding and respect for differences], we would value people for what they are . . . not what we want them to be.”

When it comes to the persistent existence of racism, Board is of the opinion that racist beliefs and behaviors are passed down from generation to generation, and, in that sense, become a tradition of racism.

“When racism is passed on as a tradition,” he said, “each generation thinks it would be disrespectful to ancestors if they would go against ancestral teachings. To have any success in eradicating racism, people have to love their fellow man. Jesus gave the mandate to love one another. Racism is one of the biggest obstacles standing in the way.”

**Pastor Annie Davis** is the spiritual leader of Greater Emmanuel Pentecostal Church. Davis cites the Rockford Barmore case [a case that involved a police shooting death of a black man] with lighting a fire inside of her that made her want to find out what others were thinking about racism.

She welcomed the opportunity to attend two YWCA workshops on racism – one that was for pastors only.

From the workshops, Davis got the distinct impression that “white people have no clue as to the extent of racism. Some are prejudiced to the fact that Black people have even experienced racism. Some are ashamed of the acts of racism they are told about. Some ‘get it’ and will pass the information along; others ‘don’t get it’ and won’t.”

At the end of the second workshop she attended, Davis and some other attendees decided that they would meet on a regular basis to explore ways they could address and help eliminate racism. The group (made up of Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, males, and females) has been active for one year and meets twice monthly.

“Initially,” said Davis, “the group decided that the focus would be that of getting better acquainted with the diverse backgrounds represented in the group. We are talking about how we grew up and our experiences with racism. The information we share can be used to teach those we have an opportunity to teach.”

Pastor Davis has long held the belief that friendship, getting to know someone, forms a deeper bond. “It takes effort to really know a person and become friends,” Davis said. “I have a white girlfriend and we can talk about anything – including racism.”

When it comes to the church and its role in the elimination of racism, Davis thinks that churches could have an impact just by “looking like a church should look like. When a church looks like it should look like, it is multicultural. When a church looks like it should look like, it is a good forum for encouraging the elimination of racism.”

**Reverend Matthew Johnson-Doyle** is the senior minister for the Unitarian Universalist Church. “The Unitarian church was founded by a white abolitionist in the 1840s,” said Johnson-Doyle, “and has a long history of addressing issues of racism, segregation, desegregation, inclusion, rights, fair housing, and immigration rights.”

That history, of which Johnson-Doyle speaks, is enhanced by current programs and initiatives his congregation has embraced. The focus is tri-fold: education, networking, and advocacy.

*Tutoring and Support* – Unitarian volunteers tutored at Jackson Elementary School during the 2010-2011 school year. Because Jackson school has closed, they will be tutoring at Nelson Elementary during the 2011-2012 school year. Nelson enrollment is made up of Hispanic, Black, and Caucasian students.

*Public Policy Advocacy* – The goal of this group is to make sure that at-risk youth have access to resources necessary for a quality education. The work will include phone calls and letter-writing to elected officials.

*Connections Program* {external} – This group will plan and schedule opportunities to fellowship with other churches that share the goals of racial justice and equal education.

*Connections Program* {internal} – The purpose of this initiative is to help church members become more informed about racism in its various forms and to encourage volunteering for community work. An assessment of the congregation’s experiences and concepts will be the first activity. Information from the assessment will be used to guide choices for topics, written materials, and audio visuals, including movies and documentaries.

Like Pastor Board and Pastor Davis, Johnson-Doyle participated in the YWCA workshops on racism and said that the information and comments pretty much touched on what he already knew. “When it comes to racism,” he said, “I have come to believe that a lot of white people think racism is an individual act by an individual person or group such as the Ku Klux Klan. I try to talk to those who think that way; try to make them aware that a system, a society was built through racial injustice.”

Johnson-Doyle is of the opinion that a person doesn’t have to be a racist person to get caught up in a racist system that harms everyone and limits the whole of humanity from benefiting from the contributions of all. He also takes the position that if racism is to be eradicated, the key word is connect, something that can be realized by something as simple as talking to people or sharing a meal.

When it comes to connections on church and denominational levels, Johnson-Doyle states that this needs serious improvement. “Even though the church holds up a vision that all people are brothers and sisters, Sunday morning continues to be the most discriminating hour in America.”