

Quick to listen

By [Tim Graves](#)

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The first major decision I made was racist.

A young white man in his twenties, I was going to change the world. The new director of an urban early childhood program dedicated to providing services within a multiracial, multicultural, mixed-economic setting, I was passionate about the mission. I was not a novice to racial tensions, having given my confession of faith in a storefront church with a strong emphasis on inclusiveness, and educated in the St. Louis city and Ferguson-Florissant school districts.

Still, the first major decision I made was racist.

When you're white your journey through life assumed by our culture to be a worthy human being. My experiences with racial conflict in the late sixties and seventies, while upsetting and confusing for me, were still experienced through the lens of a white child. In my church I was blessed to have an African-American man, whose weekday ministry was about healing racial strife, mentor and help me to process and understand race during that turbulent era. Looking back more than four decades later, I see the divine breath moving in our weekly conversations. Still, the first major decision I made was racist.

Part of the problem is that I still understood racism in personal terms. I made a racist decision, not because I intended to favor a white employee at the expense of black employees, but because my white lens filtered out the experience of my African-American staff. Personal prejudice did not cause me to make a racist decision. Failing to understand the systemic and institutional nature of racism caused me to make a bigoted decision. The inability to perceive the whole picture, particularly the role of power and privilege within which I was operating, caused me to make a racist decision.

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I'd like to be able to report that I was able to effectively and quickly fix my mistake. I cannot. The damage was done. Early in my tenure I lost some credibility.

I was fortunate, however, to have a United Way representative—who herself was African American—help me to understand the significance of the mistake I made. I also was able to seek out an African American colleague, the director of a sibling early childhood program, a former professor specializing in racism, and several of my staff members. All were extremely patient with me. I am grateful for their help; they were under no obligation to teach me.

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As a result of that decision and other experiences I grew in my understanding and awareness of racism. I learned to accept the racist thoughts and impulses within me that are a part of growing up white in America. (Awareness of my shadow feelings helps me to guard against acting upon them.) I made better, though imperfect, decisions after that day. I continue to learn about the insidious character of racism.

More than four decades later, I am no longer an active early childhood educator. I am the pastor of a small church in a tiny frontier town in eastern Oregon. By my count, we have no people of color within the membership of the church and less than a handful of African Americans among the 650 souls who live in our town.

During my 19 months serving this progressive church, I have preached only twice about the injustice of racism. (This is a luxury that white pastors in white settings have which pastors of color do not.) The [first time](#) followed the verdict in the Trayvon Martin case and the [second](#) was in response to the shooting of Michael Brown by a white Ferguson, Missouri, police officer.

Two weeks ago when I preached about the sin of racism, a couple of individuals pushed back against my words with examples of individual African Americans acting in prejudicial ways. This is not an unusual response among whites. It reflects a personalizing of racism (which is really about power and systems) and a failure to hear the voices of our oppressed sisters and brothers.

A recent tweet that crossed my feed implied that progressive Christians are all talk and no action regarding racism. Sadly, I think there is too much truth in this perspective. In my case, I've *talked* about racism only twice in 19 months. No actions have been forthcoming from my community of Christians.

It is time for substantive action to end the institutional racism that results in the shooting of young black men. Those in the African American community cannot be expected to wait one moment longer for change.

Nonetheless, as a white pastor in a white community, I know that until whites admit that racism is real, they will not be a part of a solution. In ignorance, we will continue to make racist decisions until we listen to and believe the lived experiences of our sisters and brothers. We must pay attention to the teachings and modeled life of Jesus: we must hear the cries of the marginalized and oppressed! Then, we must confess our past sins, personal and collective. When that happens, I am convinced that we will respond affirmatively to the divine encouragement to let go of our control of the pie, of our privilege, so that all might live in safety and security.

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