



Dear friends,

Events of the last few months have brought to focus the urgency to address systemic racism intentionally and effectively in all aspects of our society, including in our churches and in our conference. We have been complicit, knowingly and unknowingly, in allowing racism to shape many of our structures, processes, and practices. It is time for us to take more direct action. This season begs us to go deeper, to speak more bravely, and to act more intentionally and consistently to identify and root out manifestations of racism in our personal and community behaviors. Our United Methodist Social Principles explicitly state that “Racism, manifested as sin, plagues and hinders our relationship with Christ, inasmuch as it is antithetical to the gospel itself.”

I have given considerable thought to how we will respond as the Rio Texas Conference. Several groups in our conference have already initiated serious conversations about significant changes necessary in the church. I have also consulted with a variety of conference leaders, staff, the Cabinet, laity, and pastors. In response to those conversations, I will take steps to initiate the following conversations and assessments across our conference.

- I will ask the **Cabinet** to undertake an intensive analysis of institutional racism as it is manifested in appointments, salary structures, and leadership development. I will invite outside, third-party leaders with expertise in matters of personnel and patterns of racism to help us identify places to implement change that we might overlook ourselves. I will also ask the Cabinet to engage clergy and laity in intentional conversations about racism, using a variety of resources that help us lean into the hard conversations in a manner that draws people in rather than shuts them out.
- I will ask the leadership of the **Board of Ordained Ministry** to examine and report back to me on issues of racism, internal and external. Our purpose will be to ensure that people anywhere along the track toward clergy credentialing, from candidacy to licensing or ordination, are not victimized by unspoken assumptions that categorize, profile, or limit full consideration of their gifts for ministry. I will request that the Cabinet and the Board of Ordained Ministry participate together in deep work on intercultural competency to heighten awareness of preconceptions and practices that shape supervisory decisions. We will work together to provide all future pastors with experiences that sharpen their skills for intercultural, interracial work.
- In the Rio Texas Conference, we have seen the fruit of many positive **cross-racial/cross-cultural appointments**, but I will ask the Cabinet and Board of Ordained Ministry to initiate a more intentional process of preparation and support for pastors, SPRCs, and other church leaders, to give these appointments the best start possible and nurture effectiveness going forward.

- This comprehensive reappraisal of our work together as a conference will also include a rethinking and restructuring of our process for **nominations** for lay and clergy members to positions of conference leadership. I will also ask for a careful **communications** audit that reviews and makes necessary changes to the many ways our conference connects to our members, churches, and the public, so that our websites, news, and social media efforts reflect the full diversity of who we are as a conference.
- As part of this thorough assessment of our life together, we will also examine the fruit and effectiveness of our **unification** now that we have experienced five years together. What have we learned, what has worked, and where do we need to correct course?
- Finally, I will work with conference leaders to form an **Anti-racism Working Group** shortly after our October annual conference session, composed of diverse lay and clergy representing a range of ages and experiences. Their charge will be to dig deeper into specific action steps our conference leadership can take to seek substantive change on all levels and to dismantle racism in our processes and practices. This is no short-term task. The efforts of this Working Group will be ongoing and will offer further recommendations for action as well as regular evaluation and feedback to me about the initiatives outlined above.

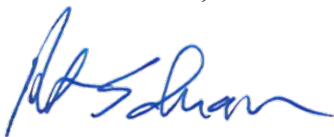
I believe these represent first steps toward a conference that is more just and that assures greater inclusion, access, and human dignity in our life together in Christ. These are steps we have to take as a conference. Our overall goal, however, must be to witness as a church against the racism so prevalent in our communities and to dismantle and prevent the grievous harm it inflicts. This work will be hard and will require humility and courage. It is work that belongs to all of us. I welcome being held accountable for the results and hope you will as well.

Paul writes, “So, brothers and sisters, because of God’s mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. Don’t be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God’s will is—what is good and pleasing and mature” (Romans 12: 1-2 CEB).

I invite you to be in prayer about these efforts, and I welcome your ideas. Some will feel these steps are unnecessary, and others will believe they do not go far enough or act fast enough. Nevertheless, I covet your willingness to join with me in substantive work for lasting change. May we be continually transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we can figure out what God’s will is for us.

I give God thanks for every one of you and for all you do for the mission of Christ and for the United Methodist Church.

Yours in Christ,



Robert Schnase

