

What Your Church Must Do to Help Undo Racism

I was born in Hong Kong; my family moved to the United States in 1973 in anticipation of Hong Kong reverting back to the Republic of China in 1997.

In my desire to assimilate, I neglected my own language and culture in order to be accepted in white society. I still remember being taunted in elementary school: “Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these ...”

In Shreveport, Louisiana, we lived in a declining middle-class, integrated neighborhood; my parents sold their house in that neighborhood in 2001 for \$10,000.

We never had any problems with our black neighbors. Yet, one summer evening, we heard a knock on our front door; it was a black man whose car had broken down and just needed a phone to call for help.

Yet we pretended we weren't home and waited quietly until he left for another house.

Looking back, it is so clear to me that even as a 12-year-old first-generation immigrant, I was already fully conditioned by whiteness, sharing the same thought patterns of fear and distrust of black men who were literally our neighbors.

I might not have hateful thoughts toward blacks, but I harbored implicit bias against people of color.

Years afterward, I wrote a devotion on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, comparing my family to the Levites and the priests who encountered a neighbor in need and intentionally ignored him and walked on our way on the other side of the road.

Growing up, I willingly allowed the white culture to mold me into its preferred image of the model Asian immigrant: smart, hardworking, always smiling and not making waves.

When you hear me speak, you probably won't hear a Chinese accent, and that confuses people sometimes.

When I told an acquaintance I grew up in Shreveport, his eyes lit up with recognition and he said, "Oh, so you're Cajun!" I am not a Cajun, but am I an Asian?

In college, I first encountered big groups of Chinese peers. They invited me to their clubs, but I didn't join. I identified more with whites.

Looking back, I have benefited by assimilating into white culture. I have a bachelor of arts from Rice University, a master of divinity from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and a doctorate from the University of Virginia. I haven't been discriminated from housing or jobs.

**<https://ethicsdaily.com/what-your-church-must-do-to-help-undo-racism/>
June 10, 2019 Michael Cheuk**

I distinctly remember asking the search committee of Farmville Baptist Church in Farmville, Virginia, whether they thought it would be a problem for them to call a Chinese pastor. They assured me it wouldn't be a problem, and for the most part, they were right.

However, I do remember a church member telling me he had a hard time understanding my sermons because of my Chinese accent. So, I guess there's always one in every crowd!

Farmville is the seat of Prince Edward County, which closed its public schools for five years (1959-64) and diverted tax money to establish a white academy.

Some Farmville Baptist members supported that move. Another church member serving on city council opposed it, and he paid a big social price.

Later, the church erected an informal policy of not allowing blacks to be on the property.

And in 1969, it led to the arrest of civil rights protesters, including J. Samuel Williams Jr., an activist and pastor of Levi Baptist Church in Farmville.

In my time in Farmville, I befriended Rev. Williams and offered [a public apology](#) to him at a [symposium on the Prince Edward School closing](#).

I was able to do that and not get fired because I had several church members who

had my back.

Even so, I did not have the courage to lead Farmville Baptist to officially examine our own history, to have congregational conversations around our racist policies and to reveal stories we had spent decades hiding and denying from our communities and from ourselves.

During my time at Farmville Baptist, the church partnered with several black churches in town for meals, pulpit exchanges, Easter services and even joint Vacation Bible Schools.

We were anxious to show the community just how much we've changed. We told people how we now had a black couple as members, how we now welcomed black people into our space to eat our food, to sing our hymns and to read our liturgies. We were happy these exchanges took place at Farmville Baptist.

But if we're honest with ourselves, we should have also admitted we were much less open to attend events at black churches as guests.

My members told me black worship services were too long, too loud, too different than what we were used to.

But at least we could tell ourselves that we're welcoming, that we have black friends, that we weren't racist.

And yet, I'm deeply grateful for the members of Farmville Baptist for helping me learn and grow as a pastor - not only in my church, but also in my community. And I know they - like me - have continued their journey of growth.

It was only after coming back to Charlottesville, Virginia, that I began to learn that undoing racism is not just about being nice to one another.

It is also about dismantling the racial power dynamics in our systems, institutions and culture that privilege white people.

Through conversations with other faith leaders within the [Charlottesville Clergy Collective](#), I'm learning that "church integration" isn't the goal of our work.

We can have congregations "integrated" with diverse races, but once worshippers leave our buildings, black people still experience the disparities of worse education and health outcomes, of lower employment rates and salary incomes, of higher rates of arrests and incarceration.

In fact, in our dangerous and oppressive white supremacist society, black churches may be the only place where black people feel safe to cry out their sorrow, to sing their joy, to dance with the movement of the Spirit, to be free from the shackles of a European understanding of time or propriety.

It is with this understanding that I say, "Thank God more white people aren't worshipping in black churches. Because if we did, we might very well ruin a good

thing for black people!”

Sunday mornings will remain the most segregated hour of the week as long as our society is unjust and oppressive for blacks and people of color.

Having said that, during these past years, my wife and I have had the privilege of worshipping in black churches, of going into their spaces, eating their food, singing their songs and not reading any liturgies. We have been welcomed with open arms and with gracious hospitality.

I’m learning that instead of asking black people to come to our churches, or even to events like this so they can “teach” or “perform” for us, we should, with their invitation, simply show up humbly to their places, where they have the power, where they have control of whether or not they want to speak about their experiences.

In the meantime, we have the responsibility for teaching ourselves about the “black experience,” learning about our own racial history through books, internet resources, podcasts, workshops and so much more.

Black people are not at our beck and call to teach us about what we could and should learn for ourselves. And I still have so much to learn, so much to grow.

I’m grateful for the patience and good humor of my black brothers and sisters who have allowed me to show up again and again in their lives to experience their strength, their wisdom, their resourcefulness and their resiliency.

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My journey of learning and growing is not over, and I'm grateful for the company of any other pilgrims along this path. Thank you for listening to my story.

Editor's note: A [version](#) of this article first appeared on Cheuk's [website](#). It is used with permission. This article is adapted from his remarks delivered at a "[Conversations Toward Reconciliation](#)" gathering hosted by the [Charlottesville Clergy Collective](#) on May 23, 2019.