



# RACIAL RECONCILIATION: A Reconciliation To-Do List

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*The successful engagement of human differences.*

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*Slow down...we're in a hurry.*

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*In Jacksonville and around the country, racism results in disparities in virtually all areas of public and private life, disconnections among individuals and divisions between neighborhoods. It often produces confusion, anger, frustration, cynicism and rage.*

There is a way to build bridges across this divide: racial reconciliation.

It's time to walk directly into the things we most fear: the racism that exists in each of us.

Racial reconciliation has four elements:

**Deep dialogue:** Ordinary people engage in frank discussions about race and racism. Small groups on a massive scale can mobilize a critical mass of aware, engaged, informed citizens. The result of a well-funded effort: a coalition of the willing with political will to support real change.

**Structural changes:** Progressive policies and programs where institutions in the public and private sector focus explicitly on racism to end color-based disparities.

**Vision, openness and transparency:** A commitment to communicate with the public honestly, to acknowledge successes as well as failures, strengths as well as shortcomings.

**Courageous leadership:** It must be prepared to subsume personal ego and institutional turf to pool resources with others in service of a greater good.

Committed, visionary leadership is most critical to building trust and collaboration across racial lines. This is necessary to put the past into proper perspective, scale up present efforts and organize resources to develop a sustainable reconciliation initiative.

The private sector struggles with the glass ceiling for people of color, women, gays and lesbians - anyone not a straight white man.

Yet, our society has changed dramatically over the last 50 years.

While the South African model is not entirely appropriate for Jacksonville, it proves that committed leadership, political will, coalition mentality and sufficient resources can produce racial reconciliation in the most contentious environment and help to transform a society.

The 2002 study on race relations by the Jacksonville Community Council, Inc. searched nationally for cities that have successfully bridged the racial divide.

They found none. No city has applied the principles of the private sector, the military, athletics or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on a citywide basis.

Jacksonville is in a position to create a national model. There is more going on in our town than in most; the problems here are unusually severe; the disparities well-documented; the stakes extremely high.

What's missing is the synergy that brings together the various efforts across racial lines, and the commitment to break through racial divisions among those in leadership positions, both public and private.

Three strategies are needed:

## 1. Self-help and empowerment

Jacksonville's black community has a tradition of pride, self-help and leadership. It ranges from the work of the NAACP, Edward Waters College and Urban League beginning a century ago, to the black churches, fraternities, sororities, social clubs and organizations.

Today, there are thousands of initiatives in black, Hispanic and Asian communities striving to level the playing field from within. However, fragmentation and competition prevents successful collaboration on a large scale. Leaders need to surrender personal ego and turf.

Only a coordinated initiative from within can address the critical issues that many neighborhoods of color, and their weary, struggling, disheartened residents, face today.

Faith leaders have an opportunity to do the deep self-reflection that will lead them to surrender to a higher purpose, reduce differences and provide new, collective leadership.

Substantial resources remain untapped and fragmented, awaiting coordinated leadership with a shared vision. Once mobilized, I suspect that this leadership will find willing hands to do the work, including talented young professionals waiting for collective leadership to emerge.

## 2. White privilege

The effort among whites to understand the significance of unearned privilege is critical. It is barely beginning in Jacksonville. The Human Rights Commission and WJCT TV-7 have sponsored well-attended forums with Tim Wise and Jane Elliot, whites who address issues of white privilege. More of this is needed, especially for people in leadership positions.

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A commitment to explore personal and institutional racism should be a prerequisite for any white person seeking to lead any institution in our city.

Whites in Jacksonville have a rich history of working to end color-based disparities. They have joined with people of color against the strong tide of cultural traditions, joining a cadre of Southern whites who have taken a stand against racial prejudice at great personal cost to their social status.

One dilemma is the mind-set among many whites that it's preferable to be colorblind than to be color conscious.

Colorblindness is a form of politeness, walking on eggshells or sugarcoating. It denies reality and serves no one. In fact, it is often hurtful.

In the modern world, we advocate color consciousness, a thoughtful, affirming respectful curiosity about the life-experiences and feelings of people who are "different." In this way we learn from each other and develop authentic relationships.

Color blindness has the effect of rendering persons of color invisible. Whites who have participated in the city's Study Circles frequently discover that awakening to color-related issues is joyful and empowering.

### 3. Reconciliation begins within

In his 1963 "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. proposed that nonviolent social change involves four things: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation to address inequities; self-purification; and direct action.

What's missing in Jacksonville, and nationally, is the third step in the process: self-purification, the spiritual element.

We seem to have forgotten that the civil rights movement was, at its core, spiritual. Its goal was to move people's hearts. The civil rights laws were a byproduct.

As long as Jacksonville's leadership, both public and private, remains racially divided, there is no way the city as a whole can heal itself.

In self-purification, leaders involve themselves in venues such as Study Circles, that encourage them to explore how their attitudes and behaviors contribute to racial division. Such processes awaken what President Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature," and led to collaboration across racial lines.

How can we in Jacksonville live with ourselves given the enormity of the racial disparities? Self-reflection opens the opportunity for leaders and others to look in the mirror, be humbled by what they see, and change — change themselves and the institutions and people they lead.

Most whites cannot appreciate the daily pressures that come from being dark-skinned in our culture until they have personal contact with someone willing to share their story with openness and honesty.

Authentic, trusting bonds are the result. They create business relationships political alliances, social service strategies, educational approaches, criminal justice policies, police-community relations and interfaith cooperation.

Integration of the business world and military began as legal mandates; it will be sustained by visionary leaders and individual choice.

This serves to prove the wisdom of King's advice:

"All meaningful and lasting change begins on the inside."

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### Models of Success

Following are examples of positive action:

- The transformation in much of America's corporate sector over the last 45 years, from racially segregated to increasingly integrated and "culturally competent."
- The success of the United States military to create a racially integrated force.
- The evolution of athletics - high school, college and professional.
- The work of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

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