

Racial Justice Advocacy Forum




*A response to the 2021
Commission on Race and
Ethnic Disparities Report.*

INTRODUCTION

The Racial Justice Advocacy forum is an ecumenical Christian entity that seeks to speak prophetically on behalf of Black and Brown Christians to government on racial injustice challenges and reparations. The forum comprises of representatives from various Christian institutions such as the Ascension Trust, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, the Evangelical Alliance, the Methodist Church, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the Salvation Army, the Sam Sharpe Project, and the United Reformed Church. In response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report (March 2021) this report seeks to make recommendations that will help churches to begin or continue engaging with racial injustice in the twenty-first century.

The 2021 commission is a response to the killing of George Floyd in 2020 and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that have shaped public conversations about racism, bringing to the fore once again the political and social divisions that impact the lives of Black, Asian, and other non-White communities in White majority states. The main drive of this “evidence-based” report is to gauge the state of race relations in the UK and understand why certain disparities still exist today. This is followed by recommendations supporting four major themes: BUILD TRUST, PROMOTE FAIRNESS, CREATE AGENCY, ACHIEVE INCLUSIVITY.

The report provides an opportunity for churches in Britain to confront the difficult conversation about racial/ethnic injustice and the church – not only its historic legacies, but sites of complicity and ongoing injustices present today in church life, ministerial formation, and community engagement. As we reflect on the issues raised in the BBC Panorama report on the Church of England (Is the Church Racist? 19th April 2021), remember Stephen Lawrence on Thursday 22nd April (Stephen Lawrence Day) and celebrate with George Floyd’s family regarding the conviction of his killer on 20th April 2021, we urge churches to confront issues of racial injustice head on with research, reflection, and reparation.



“The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.”

(Sir William Macpherson on Institutional Racism, 1999)

Summary of Report Conclusions

- The report does not deny the presence of overt racism in the UK, both relationally among communities and in the labour market, however, it does assert that the evidence shows that racism is no longer the main factor of statistical disparities between ethnic groups in the UK. As a result, the report questions ‘institutional racism’ as a significant factor; this argument is underpinned both by the consideration of groups within the White community that are under-performing statistically, and certain immigrant communities that are thriving despite the claims of institutional/systemic racism.
- The report acknowledges the complex relationship between ‘realities’ and ‘perceptions’ of racism. It particularly highlights the way in which social media has a major influence on society’s perceptions of events/reports that appear on the world stage, but frequently presents a variety of issues in ways which distort reality – for example, amplifying perceptions of racist attitudes through reports of racist ‘trolling’. The report asserts that this fuels the ‘distrust’ and ‘overly pessimistic narratives’ that some British ethnic minority communities demonstrate.
- The authors of the report suggest that the term ‘BAME’ is an unhelpful one, painting broad strokes over communities that present a variety of experiences, successes, failures, and disparities. It recommends that further work must be done to address these distinctions to generate more accurate evidence.

- The report identifies economic status, geography and family structure as key factors that affect the ability of any British citizen to thrive in various aspects of life. Although citizens from ethnic minorities may be demonstrating exceptional statistical data in many aspects of the report, it is the opinion of the authors that these disparities have less to do with race than they do with class, location, and family structure. Further to this it is posited that not all evidential disparities are negative, but may be shaped by the beliefs, levels of integration and preferences of the groups.
- One of the key recommendations pushes for communities to actively engage in actioning their own success (agency) rather than being reliant on heavy-handed government interventions. All people are encouraged to grasp every opportunity to realise success and to engage with the future activity that will stem from the recommendations of the report.

The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report (March 21) asserts that institutional racism no longer undergirds the disadvantages that people within British ethnic minority groups face in day-to-day life. Many would disagree with this. Whatever the case, can the same claim be made for our national and local Christian institutions? Is our service to one another and the wider community affected by the discrimination and prejudice that impact the ability of a person to thrive in leadership? Counselling? Teaching? Discipleship? Liturgy?

Proverbs 24: 23-26

These also are sayings of the wise: Partiality in judging is not good. Whoever says to the wicked, "You are innocent," will be cursed by peoples, abhorred by nations; but those who rebuke the wicked will have delight, and a good blessing will come upon them. One who gives an honest answer gives a kiss on the lips. (NRSV)

Initial RJAF Response

The Racial Justice Advocacy Forum (RJAF) has received expressions of serious concern from various constituents regarding the report – particularly its position on institutional racism. External advocacy bodies, social scientists, and academics in the relevant fields have offered critique and criticism of the report and its findings. Some argue that the report pitches the UK's different ethnic groups against each other rather than addressing the systemic issues contributing to statistical disparities and through its rejection of institutional racism as a key factor, has the potential to set back progress on racial justice by 20 years. The RJAF questions the report's ability to conclude that institutional racism is no longer a key determining factor in Black and Brown people's ability to thrive in various aspects of British life.

Further to this, the report says little, if anything, about reparations, which the RJAF considers to be a key priority and significant symbol for realising justice for Black and Brown people in Britain. The report's distancing from the 'Windrush Scandal', its off-handed remarks about slavery, and its tone of optimism raises significant concerns about any future progress regarding reparations for the descendants of enslaved Black and Brown people, even though Britain was undeniably complicit in and benefitted from the enslavement of those people.

The report makes little reference to the efforts of ethnic minority communities to make up for institutional deficiencies through supplementary schools and community-based entrepreneurship. Instead, the tone of the recommendations suggests that some ethnic minority communities, more than others, are waiting for governmental handouts. The RJAF rejects this position.

The RJAF accepts that any report of this nature will be subject to limitations and does not reject the report in its entirety. The RJAF welcomes the re-evaluation of the terms 'BAME' and 'race' and affirms the right of individuals and communities to determine how they would like to be identified.

Racial Justice Advocacy Forum

Recommendations

These recommendations are shaped by the scope of the RJAF's objectives – which are to speak prophetically on behalf of Black and Brown Christians to government on racial injustice challenges and reparations. The RJAF speaks not only to the wider British public, but to churches and Christian communities such as colleges and para-church services within which there are also issues of racism, prejudice and discrimination or resistance to engage with justice issues. Below are a few practical recommendations for churches and Christian communities who seek to be prophetic, present, and intentional in their responses to racial justice:

Evidence-based research

Churches should give serious consideration to generating evidence-based research about their local congregations which can provide better insights into the lived experiences of British ethnic minority communities and the intersections of the beliefs, politics, and ability to thrive in the UK.

- Simple surveys can equip leadership teams to be more sensitive to the cultural/ethnic diversity within their communities and congregations.
- More rigorous research can contribute to reports such as the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report (March 21), enabling the role of Christianity, religious attitudes, and social relationships within British church/community settings to be taken more seriously.

Theological Conversations

Churches and Christian institutions should engage with or develop theological conversations about ethnic/racial discrimination – particularly considering the colour-blind/anti-politics stances that affect a community's ability to action justice for those experiencing discrimination and prejudice.

- Congregations should develop well-considered biblical cases for their response to conversations about racial/ethnic discrimination and its presence in the church and wider society. It is this biblical response that is the prophetic voice for the wider society.
- Response teams are a good way of mobilising those who are keen and/or specialised in matters of racial justice and Bible teaching to be readily available to help church members and those in the community reflect and respond to key events such as BLM protests and the killing of George Floyd. Response teams may be a small group of two or three

church members, (including someone in leadership) who have undertaken racial justice training from a theological perspective.

Engaging with the recommendations

Churches should position themselves to be responsive to and participate in the various recommendations from the report. Although there are points in the report that may require clarification or challenge, it sufficiently provides direction for churches to engage actively with improving the lives of others, for example supporting families, local schools and providing spaces/opportunities for community cohesion with specific sensitivity to cultural/ethnic difference.

- Working collaboratively and ecumenically with other church groups/communities to lead as an example of communities that work through differences in love and seeking justice.
- Designing processes for challenging racial/ethnic discrimination within churches and Christian institutions (reprimand, mediation, and accountability).
- Engaging with training programmes that enable leaders, outreach workers and others to be sensitive to cultural/ethnic difference and develop ways of being genuinely inclusive.
- Developing an 'inclusive curriculum' for church teaching and preaching that broadens and deepens the theological imagination beyond western traditions (both conservative and progressive) and engaging with various Christian theological resources from within the British- Black and Brown communities.

The RJAF has only recently come to birth; its main catalyst: Black Lives Matter. Those inputting into its development include colleagues from the Ascension Trust, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, the Evangelical Alliance, the Methodist Church, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the Salvation Army, the Sam Sharpe Project, and the United Reformed Church. Aware of the impact of societal/racial injustice, increasing numbers of Black and Brown Christians would like the government to hear their concerns for structural and institutional change. The RJAF, in partnership with our churches and other relevant bodies is seeking to enable just that.

Written by Eleasah Louis (2021)
Researcher and Resource Developer

