

# **Intercultural Communities of Practice A Facilitators' Guide**

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## Introduction

During 2021 and 2022 Urban Life<sup>1</sup> have initiated and hosted three online intercultural Communities of Practice (CoPs) focused on racial justice. These groups came about as participants in the Black Light course<sup>2</sup> (both black and white) felt that they needed reflective space in which to process and reflect on the information they received on the course with others. This with the hope that they could identify daily practices, ways of being and specific actions through which they could challenge racism and work towards racial equity in their contexts.

Having previously run an online Community of Practice focused on mission in marginal contexts Urban Life developed the model to address the specific task of intercultural conversation about racial justice. This guide offers what we have learned about facilitating such groups throughout the process. While we are still very much learners in this field, we hope that this can equip others to do similar work, avoiding our mistakes and seeing the rich fruit of human connection across racial difference, healing and repenting of the wounds of colonialism and white supremacy. We engaged in a process of qualitative, ethnographic research throughout this project, looking at the potential for online Communities of Practice to enable lifestyle change in relation to racial justice. This document is one outcome of the research, alongside a Research Report and a reflection on the journeys of participants, Stepping Stones towards racial justice for black and white Christians, both of which can be accessed online here: [www.urbanlife.org](http://www.urbanlife.org)

## Intercultural conversation

Emmanuel Lartey uses the term intercultural to describe the ‘complex nature of the interaction between people who have been influenced by different cultures, social contexts and origins, and who themselves are often enigmatic composites of various strands of ethnicity, race, geography, culture and socio-economic setting.’<sup>3</sup> Engaging thoughtfully with this complexity has been key to developing the communities of practice and their approach to conversations on racial justice. In response to cultural complexity Lartey offers three principles of interculturality: ‘contextuality, multiple perspectives and authentic participation.’<sup>4</sup> Contextuality involves paying serious attention to the frameworks and environments from which beliefs and behaviours emerge to gain understanding. Prioritising multiple perspectives requires giving significant weight and space to different voices, experiences and conclusions in a process of dialogue in which all perspectives are ‘equally deserving of attention’.<sup>5</sup> By authentic participation Lartey means having ‘mutual concern for the integrity of [each] other’, ‘affirm[ing] the right of all to participate in discussion and examination of an issue on their own terms’.<sup>6</sup> These features of interculturality have been evident in our approach to facilitation and in the conversations within Communities of Practice themselves. They have offered a framework for honest struggle with the challenge of racial injustice and toward

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<sup>1</sup> [www.urbanlife.org](http://www.urbanlife.org)

<sup>2</sup> A content-led course exploring black presence and experience in the bible, church history and UK church contexts. Find out more at [www.blacklightcourse.uk](http://www.blacklightcourse.uk)

<sup>3</sup> Lartey, Emmanuel Y. *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counselling second edition*. Jessica Kingsley. 2003. (Kindle Locations 70-73).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. (Kindle Locations 287-288).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. (Kindle Locations 291-292).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. (Kindle Locations 295-298).

insight, self-awareness and a liberating seeing of ourselves, one another, and our Christian faith as part of God’s incoming Shalom, shaped by racial equity.

## What is a Community of Practice?

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are “Groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner).<sup>7</sup> Characterised by a shared ‘domain’ (or field of interest), a relational bond developed together and the impact of their reflections on their practice, Communities of Practice offer a mutual and collaborative model for ongoing development in a specific area.

As with any model, Communities of Practice are often interpreted differently in different contexts. We resonate with Jennifer Courduff in her emphasis on the ‘compassionate’ potential of CoPs as sites of ‘radical inclusivity’<sup>8</sup> and have shaped these Communities of Practice as non-hierarchical and focussed on peer-to-peer learning. Offering or hosting a Community of Practice therefore requires a clear understanding of how such a space might best be facilitated.

## Theological Accompaniment in racial justice work - a specific kind of facilitation approach

Facilitation is a term used in a wide variety of contexts and can mean hugely different things. Often it means guiding or managing a conversation as an expert, sometimes accompanied by delivering training from the facilitator’s expertise. In intercultural communities of practice about racial justice, and in our broader work in relation to mission in marginal contexts, a different approach to facilitation is required, we call this *theological accompaniment*.

Theological accompaniment means *journeying alongside people in honest, diverse, and hopeful conversations in which participants can bring their whole selves and grapple with the big questions arising in their situations, playfully experimenting with experience, theology, and prayerful wisdom. It involves being willing to sit with the pain and hope of unanswered questions and find courage together to continue.*<sup>9</sup>

Features of this approach include:

- **Co-creating the space**  
The facilitator role is to take responsibility for holding an appropriate ‘container’ in which group members can each participate fully and together can do the work of the conversation or task themselves.<sup>10</sup>
- **Prioritising questions over answers and an openness to undefined outcomes**

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<sup>7</sup> [www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/](http://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/)

<sup>8</sup> Courduff, Jennifer. *Community of practice foundations in Scripture: a model of vocational preparation*. in *Practical Theology* 11(4): 334-346. 2018.

<sup>9</sup> This is one of the Values guiding Urban Life’s work, see the Appendix for more information.

<sup>10</sup> We have been deeply formed by the values and approaches of participatory leadership as practiced within, for example, The Art of Hosting. For more see: [www.artofhosting.org](http://www.artofhosting.org); <https://www.chriscorrigan.com/parkinglot/the-four-fold-practice-meeting-design-and-facilitation/>

Accompaniment does not aim to provide answers, 'fix' a situation or neatly conclude a conversation. Rather it enables the group to accept complexity and unanswered questions in hope. Similarly, facilitation does not have a fixed goal or end point for the conversation in mind. It is not our role to get participants to understand, accept or act on anything.

- **Trusting the Spirit at work in the process**

In theological accompaniment we hold an explicit and implicit awareness of God's presence in and between us. Expressing spirituality in moments of prayer, contemplation or reading trust the conversational process, and the Spirit at work in it, to move people on in their own journeys.

- **A shared approach to pastoral care**

Accompaniment seeks to engage the whole group in taking responsibility for creating a caring environment for each other, for navigating conflict and for bringing ourselves to enable learning together.

- **An intercultural participant-facilitator team**

Facilitators work in intercultural pairs, engaging in the conversations as participants and learners not as experts, or claiming to have 'completed' their racial justice journey. What we do have is a commitment to the process and an understanding of some of the journey to offer. This gives space to hear the wisdom in the *whole* room.

- **Attentiveness to power**

Facilitators notice and help to navigate both the different, and racialised, power dynamics in a group and especially their own power. They need to be critically aware of the power their role affords them and intentionally step aside to make space for group members to create their own outcomes and each bring their gifts.

In the following sections we explore the practice of theological accompaniment in intercultural Communities of Practice, offering guidelines and reflections from our work in six chapters: Co-creating the CoP space, Conversational dynamics, Spirituality, Pastoral care, The participant-facilitator team and concluding with some Reflections on planning.

## **Chapter 1 Co-creating the Community of Practice**

What are the elements that shape a 'container' for enabling intercultural conversations about racial justice?

➤ ***Introduce and demonstrate the Community of Practice model and theological accompaniment approach clearly at the start.***

Taking the time initially to make clear what kind of space the CoP is, both articulating it and modelling it, helps people know how to be in the space and gives them confidence in the process. Facilitators need to reassure groups that uncertainty and awkwardness is ok, a necessary part of the process.

**Reflections from our work:** For most of our participants a Community of Practice was a new idea, and, along with the promise of an intercultural conversation about racial justice they were unsure, curious and/or nervous about what they were coming to. This meant that explaining the approach and our aspirations for working together, while also modelling it and inviting them into participation, was vital from the outset. We offered a simple definition of a community of practice and named the

space as intercultural, highlighting the nature of intercultural work as rooted in mutuality, trust, and vulnerability.

➤ ***Address vulnerability and name safety through co-creating group 'ground rules'.***

Inviting the groups to devise and agree on some 'ground rules' for good conversation is an important aspect of modelling the accompaniment approach to the group. It is an opportunity to name the vulnerability of conversations about racial injustice, experienced differently by participants depending on their life experiences. Ground rules establish a foundation of shared responsibility, mutual care, and concern, helping to create a safer space for our risky and vulnerable conversations about racial justice.

**Reflections from our work:** We find that people are often surprised or unfamiliar with such a process. Nonetheless, with encouragement participants contributed ideas such as hearing and valuing one another's experiences without judgement, and permission to challenge. Facilitators also offered their thoughts such as keeping confidentiality and allowing ourselves to think out loud. We reminded the groups of this set of agreed ways to be together at the start of each subsequent gathering and they provided important touchstones to come back to in times of tension.

➤ ***Use checking in and out at the beginning and end of each session.***

Checking in and out involves a simple question which every participant is invited to answer at the beginning or end of a session. It enables every voice to be heard in the room and so helps participants ease into sharing themselves. Although we are coming from diverse experiences, checking in means that we all start *this conversation* on the same level, and participants can choose what they share with the recognition that everyone has something to contribute. It allows participants to hear how one another are at the start and end of a conversation, giving space for different responses and accepting that we all come into a situation carrying the different circumstances of our days. A simple example might be "offer a word or two to describe how you are feeling as we finish this conversation today". There is no obligation for every participant to share, but as this process becomes a habit which helps people get to know one another and transition into the conversational space it is rare for people to consistently opt out. Within intercultural conversation our aim is to connect with one another as humans made in the image of God, checking in and out was one simple way to broaden our view of one another, building another reminder of our shared humanity into our approach.

**Reflections from our work:** Groups meeting online made small talk more difficult, this combined with the weighty nature of the conversation meant that a light-hearted check in in which we learnt something about each other's lives helped to balance our conversations and build rapport. For example, in a January session we checked in with "tell us something special or unique about your Christmas dinner", this evoked stories and laughter which aided us in seeing one another as whole people beyond the distinct space of the CoP conversation.

➤ ***Invite groups into a moment of stillness after a check in at the start of a session and before a check out at the end.***

Moments of stillness remind us of God's presence with us and provide a moment to gather ourselves, becoming present to the conversation, to God and one another. They may be simply an invitation to hold silence for one another for a minute or two concluded by a prayer. Alternatively use a brief thought or simple quote to provoke reflection or lead the group in a short prayerful activity such as a visualisation or breathing prayer. Along with check in/outs, moments of stillness

enable people to transition into the space from the activities of their day and offer reflective space to distil learning and let the conversation 'land' before a session finishes.

➤ ***Use online spaces mindfully to maximise their potential.***

Online gatherings require commitment from participants to stay present, resisting getting distracted by their home surroundings or phones. It also raises confidentiality concerns, recognising that other people may enter the spaces behind us when online. Facilitators need to help the group name and navigate these issues. Making good use of chat and breakout room functions can be an important way to include different voices and perspectives, and to enable participants to engage with one another in more informal ways.

**Reflections from our work:** For some, the chat function was a helpful way to chip into the conversation whereas for others it was a space to add a link to a book or video resource which had just been mentioned. Most of our conversation happened in one shared Zoom room, but we used a breakout room for breaktime to allow facilitators to check in with one another and participants to chat further if they chose to. Coming close relationally and honestly without the steer of facilitation created some important moments for participants. This was the closest we could get to a 'chat over coffee' dynamic and participants talked more personally and took the conversation in different directions during those times. For one participant, one such moment of connection was the highlight of the CoP, describing it as 'a human moment'.

## **Chapter 2    Conversational dynamics**

➤ ***Stay open, holding, not grasping, the space.***

Working in a participatory and exploratory way means that conversations and sessions cannot be structured too rigidly, and outcomes cannot be fixed or pre-empted. The focus instead becomes what we are learning together through the process.

*The conversational process as a ball of wool:* If you try to untangle a knotted-up ball of wool by repeatedly pulling on one loop or end it tends to simply tighten the tangle. Instead, by teasing out several loops gently and gradually the tangle itself becomes clearer and a way to undo the knots opens up. This is the nature of facilitation in Communities of Practice. Sessions have a loose framework including the elements described above but they do not need prescribed outcomes. Hold the space gently, open to an unpredictable outcome, trusting the process of the conversation that chewing over questions and sharing relevant experiences together will lead to increasing insight, being attentive and teasing out significant themes or moments for the group to reach a place of revelation.

**Reflections from our work:** While this is undoubtedly a vulnerable and risky facilitation strategy, we have found it to be reliable, not only for ensuring transformative conversations but for contributing to the flourishing of all the participants in those conversations, such is the richness and gift of human persons made in the image of God.

➤ ***Give priority to conversational space, using information or resources minimally as reminders, prompts and anchors where needed.***

'Facilitation' is often used within training organisations to describe a scenario in which the facilitator is the 'expert' and part of their role is to deliver new information to participants. As noted above we

are using the term facilitation differently here and so the balance of information and conversation is also changed. In accompaniment the facilitator's knowledge is not centred, rather the shared information the group is working with (in our case the Black Light course content) and their insight is centralised. This approach means that facilitators need to be immersed in the topic of conversation themselves so that interactions can be handled with insight.

Where the Community of Practice is gathered in response to a course, presentation or book its purpose is to remind and to offer reflective space in response to that content, allowing groups time to process and work through its implications for their lives. Rooting conversations strongly in shared material gives the sessions a starting point and moves the conversation toward depth rather than surface engagement with the issues. This may take the form of quotes, key ideas, or a simple resource (for example Sylvia Duckworth's Wheel of Power and Privilege<sup>11</sup>) with a question for reflection sent out to the group beforehand. These act as invitations, starting points for conversation rather than 'teaching'. In using resources facilitators must be deliberately open-handed, inviting participants to critique and grapple with them rather than presenting them as necessarily normative.

Conversation starters support the group's work by:

- Providing some shared language as a starting point. Developing shared language and using it together is part of the process of a diverse group becoming intercultural. Asking one another about meaning when we are uncertain and using the same terms to mean the same things.
- Giving the group agency, they choose what they focus on or extend into a longer theme for discussion.
- Enabling participants to contribute to the conversation without involving self-disclosure. Giving space for participants to choose how much of themselves to share enables more vulnerability in the longer term as rapport and trust are built.
- Rooting the conversation, giving something to stay with or to come back to if necessary. Nevertheless, a part of the facilitator's role is to recognise when a different thought or approach is needed and hold any resources lightly, willing to set them aside should the occasion require it.

➤ ***Be attentive to group members as people, to the interactions between them, to ourselves as facilitators and to God at work in the situation.***

Attentiveness in Communities of Practice is the art of noticing the interaction between the difference in the room with the aim of seeing more clearly one another's humanity, and our shared humanity across difference, enabling participants to forge connections as persons and acknowledging the image of God in each other. Double listening, to the conversation and to the Holy Spirit gives facilitators the confidence to at times stop at others pause, and at still others let a scenario play out. Facilitators are listening to what is unsaid, noting and naming that which may become a theme and holding it up for the group to look at afresh, seeing whether they will grab hold of it and what they may forge from it. Making ideas or musings explicit is important for the collective learning process as we face and then grapple together with our assumptions or reach for new ways of being together.

Intercultural conversations need facilitation which offers helpful prompts, deep listening, and recalling of previous points (even from previous sessions and course content) to give the sense of an

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<sup>11</sup> <https://kb.wisc.edu/instructional-resources/page.php?id=119380>



ongoing conversation. This is particularly important online, and when the conversations are only monthly with people gathering from very different contexts. Being attentive in this way is an expression of faith in the process, noticing the information and insights being shared, knowing that something is being uncovered all the time. In this, facilitators model a practice of attentiveness which participants are invited into, being attentive collectively to see, hear, understand, and receive from one another.

➤ ***Receive the wisdom in the room by committing together to listen to and honour lived experience and to prioritise the voices and perspectives that are usually marginalised.***

For intercultural conversation to flourish facilitators must be aware and help group members to become aware if they aren't already, of the different cultural starting points present in the group. Wanting to listen and learn is key.

Intercultural conversation works toward the acceptance and celebration of difference through which we co-create a new norm together in the space that we share. However, given the reality of racial oppression experienced by black people there is a need for role reversal in terms of who speaks and who listens. Voices that haven't been heard need time and space to say words that haven't been spoken out freely into an intercultural space. This kind of expression can be healing for the speaker, it also honours the wisdom and knowledge of black people.

Those who have had their voices heard and their experiences centralised need to understand the importance of this role reversal. For white participants it is important to recognise when to lean in, listen and learn from black participants raising and inviting response to such questions as: *Who is in the room? Are others more equipped to answer this? Where, and from whom, does wisdom come? How do we acknowledge and celebrate wisdom outside of ourselves?* In our social worlds often unspoken but normative, and racialised, codes of conduct dictate how we interact. For example, what kind of person is expected to speak confidently here and who is expected to be self-deprecating, or whether interjecting into the conversation is acceptable in a particular scenario. These social norms mean that it can feel uncomfortable to engage in this kind of role reversal. Facilitators need an awareness of any defensiveness or other strong emotions in themselves or in other participants and to be able to recognise when comments are coming from an underlying conscious or unconscious insecurity. It requires skill, courage, commitment, and time to name and begin to unravel these kinds of reactions which will result in a new openness among the group. It may be that within a group the extreme priority given to white voices needs to shift to the other end of the spectrum with extreme priority given to black voices before the group can find intercultural mutuality. This may be uncomfortable for facilitators used to working towards equality of voice, however it is an important dynamic within racial justice work and therefore facilitators need to practice self-awareness and assist the group to notice the importance of these dynamics in reaching towards racial equity.

**Reflections from our work:** In our Communities of Practice, it was noticeable that white participants were at times uncomfortable, trying to find the words to say what they wanted to communicate. Learning a new, intercultural rather than White-centric way of relating meant that in the moment they lost their fluency. This highlights the white privilege of speaking freely in most conversational spaces, whereas black participants more often feel the need to consider how to frame their words. Within these Communities of Practice, we saw this shift as part of forging a redemptive reversal of roles through which, in time, a more mutual intercultural conversation can be formed.

## Chapter 3 Spirituality

This approach to facilitation is infused with a Christian theology of a God at work in the world and the image of God within every person.

- ***Adopt a gentle spirituality in the sessions, giving space for the spiritual diversity in the room and recognising the gift of the different languages of spirituality in different Christian traditions.***

Part of the challenge of racial justice work for Christians is the discovery of the role of Christianity (both Christians and their theology) in shaping and perpetuating white supremacy, slavery, and colonial oppression. This is not simply a historical fact but the slowness to dismantle colonial structures and reluctance to recognise systemic racism within Christian denominations and theologies represents a current complicity in the oppressive construct of Whiteness. This realisation can be profoundly destabilising for participants, leading to questioning: *how is this gospel good news? What can I trust in the faith tradition I have inherited?* Given this, there is a need for naming God's fundamental opposition to any form of domination and oppression and for gentle engagement with this liberating God who prioritises the oppressed.

- ***Trust that the Spirit of God is at work in the process, in us and between us to enable a transformative encounter.***

For facilitators and participants there is a need for faith to engage in this kind of conversation. The incremental, faulting, and seemingly small nature of such groups draws us to an awareness that this is God's work. God is on mission in the world, and we are playing a tiny, partial but significant role in it. As facilitators we do what we can in the time we have and we must entrust the ongoing journeys of participants to the God who remains with them before, during and after the Communities of Practice.

Accepting this, facilitators can develop awareness of the Spirit at work in the conversation. Sensing when to come in, interject, allow, support, name and notice is an act of discernment. Furthermore, prioritising sensitivity to the Holy Spirit above the immediate subject matter directs us to notice what is happening in people through the conversation. This is what will impact their practice beyond the CoP. As facilitators, finding and recognising that flow can unlock the full potential and purpose of the gathering.

- ***Create explicit moments of encounter with God and one another.***

Listening to a piece of music together may provide a change in mode which helps participants sit with their thoughts and notice what is being stirred within them. Praying for one another offers a way for participants to express their care for and appreciation of one another, their recognition of one another's personhood. Reading scripture together as a deliberate attempt to notice and disrupt our colonial readings of the bible can be challenging and liberating. Facilitators need to be attentive and responsive to what is happening for participants in these moments.

**Reflection from our work:** These elements contributed to the learning of the group in the moment but also offered ways forward as group members considered their own spiritual practices and church communities in the light of racial oppression. We began together to find different ways to be with one another before God, giving a taste of what could be created in participants' local churches.

## Chapter 4 Pastoral care

### ➤ *Establish and maintain a shared commitment to mutual care.*

Within sessions, reminding groups of their 'ground rules' for good conversation and inviting all to share in the task of caring for one another helps to create an environment of pastoral care. Participants will be more or less inclined to act on this responsibility depending on their own engagement at that time and so the task of facilitators is to become aware of how the comments and opinions of others land in ourselves and with others in the room. Listening and watching carefully for signs of response or recoil as people share together. Undoubtedly these conversations, and therefore facilitating them, will be intense. Naming this, and the courage needed to stay with an uncomfortable conversation is important in setting up the group and in reminders throughout when weariness or apprehension is evident. Racial injustice is a deeply personal issue, far from being an abstract concept it is identity-forming and embodied within our whole lives and histories as well as in the Community of Practice sessions themselves. Therefore, our responsibility is to journey with people within and outside of the sessions. Offering a pastoral conversation to all participants after each session with their choice of either a black or white facilitator can enable people to stay with the CoP process and manage the challenge and opportunity that it brings.

**Reflections from our work:** We found that participants came to the Community of Practice with a wide range of experiences and degrees of personal pain (particularly among black participants) in relation to racism which had been brought to the fore by their choice to attend the Black Light course. They brought this to the conversations. Witnessing pain was a part of the ministry of the group to one another, but disclosure of such experiences can bring pain back to the surface, both healed and unhealed. There was a need to respond carefully and consistently to ensure participants were protected in the process.

### ➤ *Ensure that emotions are named and accepted while countering the dominance of Whiteness which centres white people's feelings and perspectives.*

Conversations about racial injustice will have an emotional impact on participants. Responding well to the different kind of emotional response from individuals, and the difference between black and white participants is important. Fundamentally black people have been wronged, and intercultural space where black people can feel free to express their anger, grief and pain is their right and could become part of a healing process. For white participants grief, frustration, defensiveness, shock, and anger all played a role at times and for different individuals.

**Reflections from our work:** Caring for one another online, and particularly on Zoom has distinct challenges. It is more difficult to read body language and impossible to subtly offer a hug or a tissue. There were times in our conversations when Zoom felt wholly inadequate and there seemed no way to offer a right response to the significance of what had been shared. In these circumstances we held one another as best we could, mindful of any vulnerability hangover that might result from sharing and offering pastoral support beyond the session. Nonetheless these felt like lonely moments.

### ➤ *Be honest and courageous to acknowledge tensions when they arise and encourage people to show care for one another, reminding the group of their ground rules where appropriate.*

Tension and conflict are likely experiences in this kind of conversation. As participants we all need to hear things we don't like, don't agree with, or may not have considered before. Enabling this also requires creating space for people's reactions and clashes, acknowledging that they may express themselves in different ways. Equally facilitation may also involve challenging participants at times

while remaining sensitive to their stage of the journey. Discomfort, defensiveness, or distraction may be evidence of the transformative process groups engage in together.

- ***Be aware of the colonial dynamic of exploitation of black people and intervene to protect participants from exploitation and re-traumatising in sharing their experiences.***

The aim of these conversations is to name and begin to shed our entanglement with colonialism and white supremacy. However, in the sharing of personal experiences, especially black participant's experiences of pain and prejudice, there is a risk of reiterating the pattern of colonial exploitation. Harvesting learning from a person's pain, disregarding their wellbeing is dehumanising and exploitative and unfortunately too common in white people's attempts at racial justice work. As facilitators we are responsible for being aware of the potential for harm in this way and for ensuring that in our questions we show sensitivity and humility. Some participants will be confident enough to enforce their own boundaries, offering what they are content to share and refusing to be extracted from. However, if it seems that such harmful extraction is occurring facilitators need to act quickly to protect participants and address it, reflecting on what is happening and prioritising safety for group members. Reflecting as a facilitation team between sessions can identify how such extraction can happen and make a person feel, and how we can prevent it. In time, the group needs to learn and understand this dynamic better.

**Reflections from our work:** Working online meant that communicating one-to-one was more difficult, increasing the risk of people being put on the spot and making it harder for facilitators to check their decisions with one another. Disrupting colonial patterns of exploitation which dehumanise was a central theme of our conversations and our experience of both the pervasiveness of white supremacy and of disrupting it during the Community of Practice was significant for the groups.

- ***Prioritise and put structures in place to care for yourselves as facilitators, most importantly as black facilitators.***

The need for pastoral care for participants is equally applicable to facilitators, in some ways more so as holding this space for others is intense and tiring work. The sessions invite facilitators to hold up a mirror to view our own racialised attitudes and actions. Engaging as both participant and facilitator allows us to look in the mirror at ourselves first in the process and offer what we see and what we have learnt and are learning. This may be uncomfortable, and it is more costly for black facilitators who will often already know the dynamics that they will see and experience in the group and have to sit with their white co-facilitators in their surprise or shock. Honesty within the facilitation team, and the opportunity to talk to someone outside of the process if necessary, can ensure that facilitators are cared for as well as participants.

## **Chapter 5 The participant-facilitator team**

- ***Work as an intercultural facilitation team of two, one black and one white, developing your own intercultural working relationship as a foundation for the group.***

Working in teams enables each facilitator to manage the vulnerability and intensity of racial justice work, supporting one another when each needs to breathe or process. Equally the team enables facilitators to also be participants, one can support the 'container' and be attentive to the room, while the other is offering themselves as a participant. Such partnership is a dance involving finding

the flow, preferring each other, overlapping, allowing, welcoming contributions, clarifications, questions, interjections, and interruptions. It requires trust and practice together.

Facilitators need to have built some foundation between them of the intercultural conversation that they hope to form within a group, this may only be a beginning and will continue as the CoP progresses. The task of racial justice work is to acknowledge and seek to redress the ways in which we, and in this case our facilitation practices, are dominated by Whiteness and, while privileging white people, are exploitative of the skills and insight of black people. As a team reflect on:

- The need to reshape facilitation roles and practices characterised by individualism and hierarchical power structures.
- The ways in which the use of power in facilitation can reinforce systemic racism, both in general and in your own training and experience. While doing this together also talk with others where possible, different people, with diverse forms of intersectional experiences will feel and embody this differently.
- Your aims for your co-facilitation.
- How the work of facilitating needs to be done differently to counter the influence of normative Whiteness.
- Make plans to experiment with this different way and reflect and review together through the process of the work, being honest when you face challenges and celebrating the moments of joy and revelation.

➤ ***Host yourself - Recognise your own state of mind, body and spirit in such a way that you can both care for yourself within the conversation and be able to offer of yourself appropriately with consideration for others' presence and participation.***

The starting point in hosting yourself as a facilitator is self-awareness and, beyond that, reflexivity: the awareness of your own power and particular impact on the situation in which you are participating. It requires a comprehensive appreciation of our own positionality and the complex relationship we may have to both privilege and marginality. Within racial justice work critical self-awareness and attention to who has and wields power is an essential part of the process. Facilitators need awareness of their own power to enable groups to identify the racialised nature of power among themselves. Therefore, facilitators need to begin with their own racial justice 'work' and develop awareness of the factors of difference that are unique to their experience. Gender, class, racial identity, wealth, dis/ability, and many more, and the power that these may or may not bring within our social and cultural context will mean that we each bring a unique perspective and personal power mix to the conversation. In terms of the wider context of racial injustice, facilitators need to be clear about some important starting points:

- Colonialism has fundamentally perverted the relationship between people racialised as white and people racialised as black, and its influence is still felt worldwide today.
- We all, white and black, have been raised within a social and cultural environment of white supremacy and will feel its influence in our values, attitudes, words, and actions.
- Our Christian tradition and contemporary expressions of it have both shaped and been shaped by white supremacy and by Christian participation in colonial oppression.
- Racism is in opposition to the kingdom of God, and work towards racial equity is an expression of the coming kingdom.

- As Christians therefore, we have a responsibility as disciples of Jesus to become aware of our complicity with racial oppression and seek to change this in ourselves and in our world.<sup>12</sup>

Others may perceive our power differently. Recognising how we are perceived as powerful, or not, by group members (given their own experiences of privilege and marginality) and being able to freely name and discuss experiences of power supports the learning process for all. There is vulnerability and risk for both black and white facilitators in such conversations although this is undoubtedly more so for black facilitators. Systemic racial prejudice means that black facilitators are more likely to be judged negatively by participants and their facilitation to be less well received, particularly if they bring a challenge to the group. This imbalance in the experience of black and white facilitators makes working in a team an essential act of self-care, care for the group, and the work.

Whether black or white our personal journeys matter as they can either help or hinder the process. It is challenging, if not impossible, to host for others what you haven't first learned to host within yourself. Identifying the stages on our own personal journeys in relation to racial justice enables us as facilitators to recognise some of the steps others are taking. Hosting ourselves during sessions involves acknowledging our own inner state at that moment to give ourselves what we need as far as is possible. Having the awareness and ability to manage our own emotions, and understanding our own contextuality enables us to attend equally to multiple perspectives and make space for the emotions, voices, stories, and experience of others, working towards the authentic participation of all within the conversation.

➤ ***Allow yourself to both participate and facilitate within the community of practice.***

The dual role of facilitator-participant may seem complicated, but it is a truthful description of our positionality. As facilitators we name that we are on our own racial justice journeys and are passionate to enable others to continue with theirs. As participants we own that we are not 'done', and that our desire is for continued growth and learning for ourselves as much as for others. Discerning when our participatory voice is needed and when facilitation, framing, reminding, holding accountable is necessary is strengthened through practice and by working as a team. Transitioning from one mode to the other isn't always easy when the subject and your experience are so deeply and personally embodied. It is helpful to consider when your role as a *participant* is more important as it brings a necessary perspective that may otherwise be missed. Intentionality in this means that how we express ourselves as participants impacts what is received from us as facilitators. Black facilitators are at greater risk of prejudice and therefore may be more concerned with how they present themselves and what they choose to share. It takes fortitude for black facilitators to engage in this work, and white co-facilitators need to be aware and attentive to their colleagues' needs.

**Reflections from our work:** We have found that offering insight from our experiences and real-time reflections and questions not only made the CoP more meaningful for us as facilitators but also helped participants to express themselves more freely. At times our reflections have become

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<sup>12</sup> White supremacy and racism can hide in plain sight. They are so embedded in our society that we need to learn to become aware of them. Black people generally, although not always, have more awareness than white people but still there is a need for what Paulo Freire called 'conscientization' among both black and white to appreciate the subtle dynamics of white supremacy as it is expressed in our contemporary worlds. For our white facilitators books such as Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm no longer talking to White people about Race*, Akala's *Natives* and Robin Di Angelo's *White Fragility* have been especially helpful. For our black facilitators Willie James Jennings' *After Whiteness*, again Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm no longer talking to White people about Race*, Ben Lindsay's *We need to talk about Race* and Dennis R. Edwards' *Might from the Margins* have been key texts.

stepping stones to connect stories and shared experience. Offering ourselves gives permission for others to do the same - it's ok to bring that here. Both black and white facilitators can enable respective black and white participants to develop their thinking and express themselves more honestly through their own intentional participation, helping to guide others where we have journeyed ourselves. The potential for engaging in this way is that participants see facilitators as whole people, on the journey themselves. They receive our facilitation in the context of their growing awareness of our personal experiences, bringing a softness and companionship to the relationship.

## **Chapter 6 Reflections on Planning**

We have spent most of this guide introducing theological accompaniment and its outworking in intercultural practice. As we conclude we highlight some practical questions relating to engaging in this work in your own context.

### ***Considerations for you and your organisation***

- Where are you at personally in your relation to racial justice? Have you critically reflected on your own relationship to white supremacy and colonialism?
- Does the facilitation approach outlined above resonate with you? In your other facilitation work do you hold space for others or tend to fill it with information? Do you come as a participant or as the expert? What might this work require of you?
- How about your team? Do you have facilitators who can embody this approach? Is your team diverse? If not, why? What are the barriers within your own context to racial equity?

### ***Building a facilitation team***

If you find that you need to recruit facilitators this requires careful consideration and awareness of the power dynamics at play. If you are in a majority white organisation and you are yourself white seeking to recruit black facilitators, you are already working within a white supremacist frame. Black people in all spheres of life and expertise share experiences of being recruited late to projects to increase diversity with the assumption that they will endorse and assimilate to White Western ways of working quickly and on the job. This means that minority team members must work harder and perform to a higher standard than white team members.

If you aspire to doing this work, identifying your facilitation team is a step prior to any other planning or publicity. Without the intercultural team the work cannot happen or must happen very differently. Being honest about your current situation means that you can still contribute to the work of racial justice. For example, a majority white organisation recognising a need to work on its own barriers to racial equity to then offer an intercultural facilitation team might begin by employing black colleagues to help them identify the problem areas and work together to resolve them. In the meantime, and possibly as part of this organisational work, they might create a Community of Practice for white people to grapple with issues of Whiteness and racial justice. This will be a different experience but still important within the overarching goal of us all moving toward racial equity.

Preparation for a new facilitation team involves:

- Recruiting experienced facilitators on their own racial justice journey and who resonate with the theological accompaniment approach.

- Time to build their relationship, to explore their own intercultural conversation, and one another's perspectives on racial justice.
- The opportunity to observe a Community of Practice conversation as a participant or observer and reflect on their experience together.

The ongoing practice of reflecting and planning together, and with others working with similar groups where possible, while delivering Communities of Practice supports facilitators as individuals and the development of the work as a whole.

***Practical considerations: what, where, and when?***

*Would gathering online or in-person be most appropriate in your context?*

- Online working is convenient, enabling a wider range of people to attend.
- Online space is distinct from our day-to-day lives, enabling people to talk and listen in a different way.
- An online group may enable connection with a much more diverse group than might be gathered locally, creating an opportunity for conversation with people across denominational, demographic, and geographic boundaries.
- Meeting in-person may allow for deeper relationships to be built between participants.
- Local in-person groups may have the potential to continue for longer and develop into shared working in a local community.

*Could you enable longer-term peer accompaniment or a limited set of sessions to act as a catalyst?*

*What is the 'content' that people might be bringing to reflect on? Is it simply what they have learned in their own journey so far or is there a book to read or a course, even the Black Light course, which they might attend?*

**Reflections from our work:** Our groups ran for four monthly sessions via Zoom. Most participants had minimal relationship with one another beforehand due to the large group and online setting of the Black Light course. Being online brought gifts and challenges but was appropriate as a continuation of the Black Light course. Four sessions pass quickly and are clearly a drop in the ocean of each person's life and journey into racial justice. Some, particularly white, participants were keen to continue the conversation, recognising they did not have people in their local contexts with whom they could do so. We describe these Communities of Practice as a catalyst for people's engagement with racial justice and as 'redemptive rehearsals' both meaningful in and of themselves but also practice ground for thinking, speaking, and living differently in the whole lives of participants.

In this guide we have offered our learnings in facilitating intercultural Communities of Practice on racial justice. Having made initial progress, we are even more aware of our position as learners in intercultural facilitation and in work towards racial equity. We hope that in sharing theological accompaniment as an approach to facilitation, and the commitments, methods and tools outlined here we will enable others to reflect on their work and take steps toward engaging in these conversational spaces. Our experience suggests that there is a vast need for intercultural conversations about racial justice among Christians to process our complex history, theological frameworks and our cultural context and move more consciously into the goodness of God's equitable kin-dom. This guide is intended to assist others as they venture into this vulnerable, exciting and vital work of God.



## Appendix: Urban Life's Values

### *1. Theology on the ground.*

We do our theology in the messy and compromised realities of life and mission. We guard against sanitised narratives or neatening up complex lives. We believe that God is found in the reality of life in marginalised situations and hope to learn more of this God as we pay attention to life there.

### *2. Organic, permeable, and flexible.*

Because we are learners alongside our participants we hold our structures lightly, accepting the need for flexibility and openness in responding to the groups we journey with and the changing dynamics of marginalisation in our societies.

### *3. Accompaniment.*

We aim to enable space which is honest, diverse and hopeful where participants can bring their whole selves and grapple with the big questions arising in their mission, playfully experimenting with academic theology and prayerful wisdom. We are willing to sit with the pain and hope of unanswered questions and find courage together to continue.

### *4. Seeing difference differently.*

We have a deliberate focus on the margins, and therefore have to acknowledge our own standpoint, marginal or mainstream. We work to grow in reflective self-awareness, and in awareness of the different lenses through which we can view our communities. By offering new perspectives we can bring to light new ways of seeing and being. We acknowledge that our view will always be partial and therefore strive to be open to the word of God from people who see things differently.

### *5. Liberative participation.*

We are convinced that all people are made in God's image, and therefore there is a need for attentiveness to power and privilege in both learning and mission. We aim to be 'participative', acknowledging that in every room we each have a share of the wisdom and share in responsibility for our own and the group's learning process. We also aim to be 'liberative', acknowledging the voices and faces who are not present in the room and asking how we can hear their perspectives in order to more fully encounter God together.