

## Presbytery of the James Antiracism Policy –approved at the October 19, 2024, Stated Meeting

Approved unanimously by the POJ Antiracism Committee, June 25, 2024

**Motion:** To approve the Presbytery of the James Antiracism Policy

### Purpose:

The Presbyterian Church (USA) requires each council to have an antiracism policy in place (2023-2025 *Book of Order* G-3.0106). The purpose of this policy is to involve the congregations, leadership, and people of the Presbytery of the James (POJ) in ongoing work of identifying, rejecting, and repenting of racism in our society, congregations, and interpersonal relationships; and to equip antiracism action. Further, the POJ pledges, through this policy and its initiatives, to:

- listen to People of Color, including members of historically Black Presbyterian congregations,
- repent of past sins against People of Color in our Presbytery,
- identify and forswear the legacy of enslavement/Jim Crow laws and its fruit,
- pursue restorative justice and repair for historical harms,
- promote racial harmony and mutual respect,
- foster and strengthen interracial relationships and understanding.

Our presbytery and the Commonwealth of Virginia bear the stain of a history of expropriation of the land of Virginia's indigenous peoples, of being a slave trading center, a perpetuator of southern plantation culture, being the former capital of the Confederacy, the incubator of Lost Cause mythology, a key plotter in Jim Crow, and the originator of Massive Resistance. Given this history and, as members of the Body of Christ, the POJ takes seriously the need to deal frankly with and repent of our history of racism and its harms and to commit to antiracism education, advocacy, and action.

Building on the work of the denominational policy, *Facing Racism* (2016), this policy is a formal commitment to enable and better equip congregations and leaders in the difficult, uncomfortable, valuable, life-giving, and liberating work of antiracism. A policy is only as good as the hearts that follow it. Led by the Spirit, the people of the POJ are invited to examine and confront issues of racial injustice, systemic racism, restorative justice, and racial healing and to move towards *antiracism as a way of being*. We all have blind spots; we will make mistakes along the way, but the God we follow is gracious. As disciples of a forgiving Savior, we shall aim to offer grace to one another as well.

### Rationale:

The Belhar Confession<sup>1</sup> states, “*Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church... ; that **unity** is, therefore, both a **gift and an obligation** for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a **binding force**, yet simultaneously a **reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought...**”*

While race is a social construct, racism is very real and damages the fabric of the beloved community that God intends—where, “*There is no longer Jew or Greek... slave or free... male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*” (Galatians 3:28).

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<sup>1</sup> The Belhar Confession was written in South Africa in 1986 and included in the PC(USA) *Book of Confessions* in 2016.

Racism is more than individual acts of bigotry or prejudice; it is any system, institution, or cultural practice or tradition, which protects or prefers the lives, property, and status of White people—or any group which takes power over another—at the expense of siblings of color or other marginalized persons or groups. The conscious *or* subconscious idea that whole groups of people are inferior because of their skin color and/or national origin defies the scriptural assurance that all persons are created in the image of God: *“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness....”* (Genesis 1:26a) White supremacy not only oppresses People of Color; it also causes internal damage to White people and separates them from their humanity. The work of dismantling racist systems is liberating for *all* who participate in it. Therefore, this transformative activity is a gift not a burden.

### **Implementation:**

1. **TIMING:** While antiracism work has been and is happening in the POJ, this policy makes formal commitments to specific actions. As such, it will take some time to “roll out” new initiatives. It will take time for the development of training and resources for education, advocacy, and action. Every effort will be made to make these events and resources easily available, conveniently timed, and low-cost. In pursuit of the purposes described above, through its Antiracism Committee, the POJ will publicize and offer the following.
2. **EVENTS:** These events will aim to address racism by focusing on one or more of these areas:
  - a. Repentance and repair of the ruptures in the Body of Christ caused by racism -- personal conversation, group encounters, worship services, and plenary sessions that hear of the harms of racism and offer concrete courses of repentance and reconciliation. Particular attention will be focused on repairing historic harms, particularly for Black, Asian, Native American, and Latinx Churches and peoples in the POJ.
  - b. Celebrations of the diversity of God’s people -- listening to the voices of peoples who have been marginalized and the gift of a variety of cultures, foods, worship styles.
  - c. Workshops on antiracism education, advocacy, and action.
  - d. Trips and online conversations to learn from others about the history of racism and antiracism work bearing fruit elsewhere.
3. **RESOURCES:** The Antiracism Committee (ARC) will identify and share educational resources for our congregations and individuals, some of whom may be just beginning to explore the issues of racism, racial injustice, and racial reconciliation while others have already begun to study and take actions toward racial healing.
  - a. **Resources on Website** -- ARC will share via the POJ website a compendium of trusted resources (books, online resources, trainings, etc.) to illuminate and guide this work wherever our congregations may be on this journey, including contexts where certain resources have been proven helpful.
  - b. **“Speakers Bureau”** -- In time, the ARC will have a list of individuals in the Presbytery who are willing and able to converse one-on-one with church leaders, and to lead congregations in short-term conversations around issues of antiracism.
  - c. **Advocacy** – ARC will share ways to advocate for antiracism within the bounds of the Presbytery and beyond.
4. **TRAINING:** Opportunities to understand our blind spots and unconscious biases can be a beginning or chapter markers in the lifelong process of learning to live faithfully in the Body of

Christ. No one-time training, required or otherwise, can change hearts without the Holy Spirit's help, but at least a theologically-based baseline of acceptable and unacceptable behavior can be articulated to all participants. Again, the goal is for antiracism to become a habit of the heart.

- a. **Once established, attendance at POJ antiracism training is required at least every 3 years** for all Ministers of Word and Sacrament actively serving (clergy who are not retired), Certified Christian Educators (not retired), Commissioned Ruling Elders, as well as staff of the Presbytery of the James..
- b. Frequency: The Antiracism Committee will decide on trainers and/or online options by January of 2025. **There will be at least 3 opportunities for training in any calendar year.**
- c. Deadlines: It is expected that people required to receive antiracism training will complete **at least one session within 12 months of the first offering of POJ Antiracism training** or within their first 12 months of joining the Presbytery of the James.
- d. Tracking: The office of the Stated Clerk will maintain a roster of those who have attended and have completed training and will report the list to the Antiracism Committee at least annually.

## 5. FINANCES

- a. As mentioned above, every effort will be made so that POJ Antiracism events, training, and resources are free or low cost.
- b. Financial assistance in the form of grants will also be available to congregations needing that help. Applications for financial assistance with antiracism work may be directed to the Antiracism Committee.

## Conclusion:

It is our mission in the Presbytery of the James to engage in a process of lifelong liberation for all through letting go of the sin of racism. In today's changing world, God calls us to stand together across false lines of caste we create to see siblings as "other" and, therefore, inferior—whether this is conscious or not. Not only is antiracism faithful discipleship, it is also pragmatically needed if the Church is to continue, and, better yet, to thrive. The Presbytery invites and encourages all clergy, leaders, and members to embrace this *liberating* gift and task of training, ongoing learning, and commit to forging and fostering relationships that honor the Image of God in all people. Training sessions and workshops will provide information and insights into antiracism efforts; however, these are only beginnings or refreshers. *Ongoing* prayer, study, conversation, relationship-building, discernment, and practice by and among POJ members and congregations will be essential to, again, make *antiracism a way of being*. The major work within the Presbytery of dismantling racism, of restoring right relationships with God and each other, will be done within the Presbytery's member congregations. The Reformed tradition used the language of sanctification to name this lifelong work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individuals—and in a church 'reformed and always reforming.' Let us not forget that we all have blind spots; we will make mistakes along the way, but the God we follow is gracious. As disciples of a forgiving Savior, we shall aim to offer grace to each other on this journey.