

Every month since February 1987 the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation has produced one-hour TV programs on issues related to peace, social justice, economics, the environment, and nonviolence. The Olympia FOR's program airs several times every week for the entire month on Thurston Community Television (TCTV), channel 22 for Thurston County's cable TV subscribers. You can see TCTV's schedule at www.tctv.net.

You can also watch the program described below (**and many more than 100 of our previous interview programs and special programs**) at the Olympia FOR's website, www.olympiafor.org. Simply click the **TV programs** link, scroll down, and click the program you want to watch. Many of our website's TV program listings also include links to documents describing the program in Word and/or .pdf format.

AUGUST 2015

“Racial Justice Insights for White Folks”

by Glen Anderson, producer and host of this TV series

Within any very large group of people – such as an entire nation – power is not distributed evenly. Some kinds of people have more political, economic and social power than other kinds of people.

In the United States, a big factor affecting the unequal distribution of power is a person's race. The historical roots go back 400 years to the early 1600s when white European people came here and stole the land from Native Americans and – also in the early 1600s – started bringing African people here to work as slaves. Injustices still continue 400 years later.

Also, over the years, many immigrants – especially those with **non**-European backgrounds – also have been experiencing discrimination and injustice based on race and ethnicity.

Imbalances of power is experienced **both** as overt discrimination and violence **and also** in more subtle ways that the dominant white majority might not even be aware of, but that the people of color do experience on an ongoing bases.

This month's TV program explores problems and also solutions. We explore them at both the systemic level and the personal level.

We explore especially these more subtle kinds of racial injustice that occur in the U.S. and even in our local community.

Our local community in the greater Olympia area is overwhelmingly white, so we have four white guests who will share insights that can help our white majority community become more inclusive, more fair, and more just.

This month's TV program features four guests who have long experience working to create a more racially inclusive and fair society.

- Laurie Rasmussen
- Alec Clayton
- Kathy Baros Friedt
- Jim Bamberger

National and Local Contexts

As soon as Barack Obama was elected in 2008, some people proclaimed that now the U.S. is “post-racial,” despite 400 years of racial oppression. That is one misconception. Another misconception is that racism is

mostly limited to the South and overt behaviors such as flying the Confederate flag. Actually, racial injustice occurs throughout our entire nation – and often in subtle ways that white people do not notice, but that people of color do notice – painfully – every day.

After civil rights laws ended legally enforced discrimination, informal discrimination continues. Racial bias is built into ways the US deals with how we fund schools, how people get hired for jobs, how people get access to home mortgages, how the police and courts and prisons work, how people get access to decent food and health care, how long people live, and even where toxic waste dumps are located.

Alec Clayton tells about growing up in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. During the height of the Civil Rights movement he was a teenager and young adult. He remembers significant events in Mississippi. He was a distinct minority in supporting civil rights.

Jim Bamberger grew up in the Northern city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which was much more segregated than outsiders would imagine. Milwaukee's white power structure refused to accept African-Americans' grievances about zoning and segregation, so riots occurred.

Throughout the U.S., African-Americans are disproportionately stopped by police, disproportionately prosecuted, disproportionately incarcerated. But research shows that white people actually commit more crimes but have lower rates of police stops, prosecutions, and incarceration.

Overall, people of any race other than white are treated adversely. Native Americans especially suffer very grossly disparate outcomes compared to whites – in virtually every area of social, economic and political life.

People in Washington State tend to think that we are better than other states, but racial injustice exists here too. Although Olympia, Washington, enjoys a self-image as progressive and inclusive, problems exist here too. In a variety of ways, we do not “walk our talk.”

The Peace and Social Justice Committee of our local Quaker congregation, the Olympia Friends Meeting, wrote a thoughtful statement about the May 21, 2015, police shooting of two unarmed black teenagers in Olympia. See this blog post at <http://olympiafriends.org/blog>

Many African-Americans who work for the state government choose not to live in Olympia, but rather to commute from Tacoma. We need to explore why, and we need to become more welcoming.

Also, hate crimes are committed in Olympia, just like in other parts of the country.

In a great many ways – largely unnoticed by white people – a person of color is treated like the “odd person out.” People of color have a daily grind of systems that are against them.

While racial injustice is correlated with economic injustice, white people tend to feel uncomfortable talking about race, so whites tend to change the subject from race to class. Although correlated, race does operate independently from economic class.

White Privilege

A very useful concept for Americans to understand race is that of “white privilege.” People grow up within a given culture and see things from that perspective without questioning it. Our culture is dominated by systems in which white people have more power than other people, so whites assume it's “just the way things are.” (Likewise, males and straight people have privilege of which they are unaware.)

White folks can go pretty much anywhere in their community and be around people who look like them. They can go to a retail store, government office, courtroom, recreational site, etc., and be surrounded by other white folks. Generally, whites on the street are not suspected of being dangerous, and whites in stores are not suspected of being shoplifters or robbers. People don't look at whites differently. Black parents have to tell their kids about staying safe by being deferential to police and other people in authority. For black families, this is a more serious conversation than whatever white parents tell their white kids.

Recently a white friend told me that he saw a black friend across the street in downtown Olympia. When my white friend jaywalked to connect with his black friend, my white friend saw the look of horror on his black friend's face. My white friend told me that this was an eye-opening experience for him about white privilege.

White privilege is just a part of the society that they've always been a part of. When a white person sees a black person, the first thing we see is "Black."

In the US, whiteness is the norm, so our privilege is invisible. But people of color experience injustices – large and small – every day. One aspect of white privilege is that white folks can avoid dealing with race unless they choose to, but people of color do not have that option. They are confronted by it in many ways every day.

Institutional racism in jobs does exist, but it is hard to legally prove in formal complaints. People tend to hire people like themselves you rather than someone who is different.

Racial Injustice

Some people have defined "racism" as the combination of prejudice + privilege + power. Racial injustice is built into how our society functions. It is built into our social, economic and political systems. It is also built into our own individual selves because we grew up in a society that has racism embedded in it.

Fifty years ago Congress passed laws to protect civil rights to end legally enforced discrimination. Although those civil rights laws prohibit legally enforced discrimination, informal discrimination continues in many, many ways. Racial bias is built into ways the US deals with how we fund schools, how people get hired for jobs, how people get access to home mortgages, how the police and courts and prisons work, how people get access to decent food and health care, how long people live, and even where toxic waste dumps are located.

White people grow up in a racially biased society, so we absorb those biases even if we don't intend to and don't notice them, just like fish have no concept of water because they are always immersed in it.

The **Harvard Implicit Association Test** is a well respected assessment that flashes images of faces and asks us to make quick associations with words. It is an eye-opening experience revealing how we have been conditioned by the dominant cultural and political expectations.

When people of color talk about what they experience as people of color, white folks should listen more closely and with more openness. They experience cuts every day of their lives, but white folks are oblivious to this unless we listen closely and with openness to learning from them.

Imagine a leisurely time floating in a boat on a river. In contrast, racial minorities are having to struggle upstream all the time, constantly. It is not realistic to ask them to "just get over it." The dominant cultural society benefits from this, so when we tell them to "just get over it," we are grinding yet again against the reality that they struggle against every day.

White folks need to make efforts to become aware of racism within us and work to overcome our individual racism. Bigger patterns and problems exist within our society, so we also need to become aware of racial injustice at the larger level and reform our political, economic, cultural, and other systems to eliminate the bias embedded in those systems.

White folks need to take responsibility to solve society's racial injustices, and also to understand our own biases and behaviors. White people need to learn how to fix those systemic problems, and also learn how to become authentic allies with people of color.

Improving Our Own Selves and Our Society

White folks should not feel guilty for the problems that exist, but we should take responsibility to address those problems. White people can become more alert to recognizing our own privilege and recognizing injus-

tices. Then we can also become allies without being patronizing. It's important for white people to speak up when we detect racial bias – even unintentional. Stand up and stand out for fairness.

There are useful ways to respond when friends – or we ourselves – say or do something racist. Instead of imposing the label “racist” upon an entire person, refer to the specific thing the person said or did. This will allow the person to focus on the specific statement or behavior, rather than feel defensive about a bad label accusing the entire person. (Think of it as a simple matter-of-fact correction like pointing out a fragment of food caught between the person's teeth.)

A helpful 12-minute TEDx video by Jay Smooth – “**How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Discussing Race**” – is on YouTube at this link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdxeFcQtaU

White people need to take responsibility for ending racism. White people need to talk with other white people about this. It is not fair to shift onto people of color the task of explaining to white people the realities that white folks should address ourselves. (This is why we have four white guests on this TV program to talk to our overwhelmingly white viewing audience.)

White people can use their privilege to identify biases that we observe and also to lift up other voices and opportunities. All people can take more actions toward race equity. We can connect in neighborhoods, faith communities, non-profit organizations, businesses, etc.

Non-Profit Organizations Are Helping Now

An active local group that works against racial injustice is **Olympia Unity in the Community**. All four TV guests and the host are active in this group. See www.OlympiaUnityInTheCommunity.org

In response to the May 21, 2015, police shooting of two unarmed black teenagers in Olympia, the Peace and Social Justice Committee of our local Quaker congregation, the **Olympia Friends Meeting**, wrote a thoughtful statement. It is posted at <http://olympiafriends.org/blog>

The national **Fellowship of Reconciliation** (founded in 1915) has been doing significant work for racial justice since about 1940 – about 75 years ago. While largely a peace organization, the FOR also works on various other issues, including racial justice which is emerging again as an important priority. See www.forusa.org

A newer organization is called **Showing up for Racial Justice (SURJ)**. SURJ is a nationwide network of individuals and groups – including a new Olympia chapter – that especially organizes white people to work for racial justice. Their website is www.showingupforracialjustice.org

Many writers of various races and ethnicities have written books and other resources on these topics. Some white writers – notably **Tim Wise** and **Peggy McIntosh** – also have written extensively and produced videos designed to help white folks make progress.

We invite people to start racial justice groups within existing non-profit orgs, within faith communities, at neighborhood levels, and in other settings.

Conclusion

Racial bias is built into many aspects of our nation and our society, even here in Olympia. White folks who grew up anywhere in the U.S. have absorbed racism unwittingly, unintentionally, so it is built into all of us.

The very first TV program I produced and hosted for Olympia FOR in February 1987 featured a black guest and a white guest talking about racial justice, including experiences in Olympia. Our August 2015 TV program features four white guests, partly in order to model the intention that white people need to take responsibility for promoting racial justice.

This TV program has looked at both problems and solutions, and at both the systemic and individual aspects. We can make progress on all of these. Let's work to remove the systemic, institutional aspects of the problems. And let's also work to remove the unwanted racist residue that was programmed into us. Many non-profit organizations and other resources can help.