Position Statement on Reconciliation

A central dilemma in the work of racial reconciliation is that of language and how it is often unintentionally used to blur, divide, and polarize what are essentially similar efforts. Without working definitions of the seemingly familiar terms of "justice" and "reconciliation," progress is hindered. As theologian Stanley Hauerwas agrees, "we literally lack the language to recognize ourselves across the divisions our history names." The fixation on creating false stereotypes that marked the Jim Crow era—the effective "othering" of people of color—continues to haunt current efforts toward reconciliation. It is important to be transparent with our definition of terms, and mindful of their usage in the context of this work. It is not our aim to perpetuate the meaningless rhetoric that does little more than elevate high ideals with no basis in the everyday experience of individuals. Being mindful of this empty exercise in self-aggrandizement, the Institute seeks useful theoretical frameworks as well as partnerships with institutions and individuals who are interested in the process of restorative justice. Thus we have attempted to develop a working definition for what reconciliation encompasses on a practical level.

"Reconciliation" involves three ideas. First, it recognizes that racism in America is both systemic and institutionalized, with far-reaching effects on both political engagement and economic opportunities for minorities. Second, reconciliation is engendered by empowering local communities through relationship-building and truth-telling. Dialogue between individuals and groups that have been historically divided encourages action based on redressing historical wrongs. Lastly, justice is the essential component of the conciliatory process—justice that is best termed as restorative rather than retributive, while still maintaining its vital punitive character. (Restorative justice is a theory of justice that emphasizes repairing the harm caused or revealed by criminal behavior. It is best accomplished through cooperative processes that include all stakeholders.) While reconciliation ultimately seeks to restore what Hauerwas terms the "living tissue of connection that has been cauterized," it does not simply deign to "forgive and forget," eschewing the responsibilities and culpability of both perpetrators of historical wrongs and those who continue to benefit from the cyclical nature of oppression.

Reverend Will D. Campbell has noted that we are all victims of a racist system. This assertion describes the first concept in reconciliation. Beyond the clear and documented inequities and violence experienced by blacks in this country, racism has also tainted whites. This "double-oppression," wherein whites are unable or unwilling to recognize their roles in history as perpetrators and beneficiaries of white privilege, makes for what writer Wendell Berry terms a sort of "schizophrenia within." Berry writes that with this lack of critical self-knowledge, as well as recognition of the humanity of others, there exists a moral and verbal disconnect, and a lack of racial awareness. This inheritance is best understood as systemic racism, to the extent that copious amounts of individual and collective energies must be expended to maintain a racist infrastructure that is both implicit and
explicit. As Berry states, this "erosive psychic tension" is endemic to white mainstream society.

Human rights activist and scholar Michael Ignatieff makes clear that no human difference matters until it becomes a privilege and, therefore, a basis for oppression. "Systematic overvaluation of the self results in systematic devaluation of strangers and outsiders," increasing intolerance. What is essential about ethnicity, he asserts, is its plasticity. "It is not a skin, but a mask, constantly repainted." What Ignatieff understands is the tenuous, yet powerful, hold that race and ethnicity have on the human psyche, one whose alleviation calls for determined work of progressive minds and hearts to undo what has been centuries in the making. Yet it takes more than the simple recognition of acts of individual oppression in a historical context; rather, it requires a thorough, holistic understanding of the complexity of systemic racism and the ways in which it pervades American life.

The second idea is that reconciliation is engendered through the empowerment of local communities for purposeful change. This positive change comes from the creation of truthful dialogue that encourages action to redress historical inequity. Reconciliation at the local level can be highly contested; each community must decide together how to "bury the past" in a just and constructive way. The debate is often stymied around the extent to which collective "forgetting" is essential to the task of moving forward. What seems applicable in a national or international theoretical framework may not always fit neatly into local understandings of reconciliation. Thus, it is imperative for each community to define for itself what reconciliation will look like. The Institute encourages this local determination and offers the following conceptualization of what may stimulate a local reconciliatory process.

Theologian Donald Shriver notes that "forgetfulness is the enemy of justice, unless one takes refuge in that untrue truism: ‘There is nothing we can do to change the past.’" On the contrary, Shriver challenges us to change our relation to the past. "The first step for doing so is uncovering its dreaded secrets. There can be no final burial of the past before an inquest." He urges communities not to forgive and forget, but rather to remember and forgive, noting that a tangible way of doing so is to have one’s unjust suffering entered into a public record as an increment of justice. Others encourage communities to be experimental in their approach. Historian Charles Maier posits that "reconciliation is not a monument but a process, not a museum but a growing inventory of an active memory, not a theory but an experimental practice." Thus the dialogue among community members must be persistent and mindful always of including others in the quest for truth and consensus.

Finally, we assert that justice is a prerequisite to reconciliation. Michael Ignatieff has suggested that, "justice entails the naming of specific individuals and not the wholesale blame of history." Questioning whether a nation can ever be fully reconciled he suggests that the aim of justice should be to “narrow the range of permissible lies in the argument that is the past.” Because truth is dependent upon
identity and therefore is interpretive, he insists that justice must be separate from reconciliation, and that truth does not always heal. Reconciliation must respect the emotions that sustain vengeance, Ignatieff writes, which means honoring the dead together. He suggests the enactment of public rituals of atonement between individuals, thus breaking the "spiral of intergenerational vengeance." It is this public atonement that most aptly characterizes restorative justice—the repairing of that which is damaged between individuals, damaged on an individual and local level. This repairing leads to the healing of communities.

An integral part of the process of restorative justice is the punitive aspect of the oppressor’s responsibility in perpetuating of systemic racism. We are aware that any discussion of monetary compensation can elicit anxiety. One concern is that it is not the responsibility of the current generation to accept responsibility for past wrongs. Thus, we believe that communities must forge a collective memory to promote healing in meaningful ways. This process, which allows every individual to speak openly and honestly about past wrongs, ultimately promotes a healthy model of communal healing. We encourage discussion of the benefits and privileges that minorities have been excluded from for nearly three centuries, for discussion of sensitive issues reflects a maturing culture. There are several models of reparation that address the inequities inherited by people of color, including scholarships, public museums, enterprise zones, etc. While the debate over financial reparations will continue, we must not allow different perspectives on it to prevent our communities from making good faith efforts to right past wrongs or move forward together.

It is with this understanding of the process of reconciliation—ultimately rooted in interpersonal dialogue that moves beyond rhetoric—that there is hope for change. We must move beyond the culturally-encoded language of remembrance and guilt and strive to supplant mere co-existence with the reality of reconciliation. We can overcome distrust and animosity by restoring not only the dignity of the victim, but also that of the perpetrator. The end result must maintain a vision that sees a way out of the cyclical nature of this social disease. As theologian Charles Marsh suggests, new activists, "working in rural and urban areas remind us of the sobering fact that the difficult work of achieving equality awaits more difficult work, indeed the daily disciplines and sacrifices required to sustain the beloved community." It is that beloved community to which we aspire.