



RACISM IS EVERYWHERE BUT SO IS HOPE

Reud Dr **Joel Edwards** was the General Director of the Evangelical Alliance from 1997 until 2009.



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Prior to this he worked as a probation officer, a church pastor and general secretary of the African and Caribbean Evangelical Alliance. He is

You have been very much involved in Church ministry, and your story seems to me to be inspiring because of your achievements. How would you describe God's guidance through your life?

God has guided me quietly ever since I was a kid. And he has always allowed me to serve and support other people. Even though I was only one of about four Christians I knew in my school of 1,200 boys, I became a house captain and then school captain. Even people who disagreed with my faith seemed to trust me because of my faith in Jesus and the personal values which came with that. I guess you could say that all the things I have been able to do for the past 50 years have been based on that same principle.

When you were a teenager, what was your experience of growing up black in Britain, and how did you begin to think about racism and anti-racism?

I grew up in the 1960s when words like 'racism' and 'anti-racism' weren't used at all. People spoke more about prejudice. But it was all around. The thing which sticks out in my mind is that I had a best white friend called Martin and a best black friend called Errol. Errol always came into my house and I went into his house. But Martin never ever came into my house and I was never ever allowed into his house.

When you were a teenager, what was happening in your life and the country around race and racism?

There was lots of tension between black people and the police. Even black people I knew well in my church were often arrested by the police or had drugs planted on them as an excuse to arrest them. Black people found it hard to get the best jobs.

British society remains racist in many ways. What does the teaching of Christ offer to those who want to reduce racism?

Racism is everywhere, but so is hope. Jesus taught a lot of things which help us respond. Perhaps the best known is the story of the Good Samaritan, which shows that God expects all of us to cross cultural, racial and religious barriers to protect even those who may be regarded as our enemies.

The churches are too often complicit in racism. Can you give an example of racism in the Church that you have experienced? My own example of racism is unusual. For many years I was a member and leader in a black majority church here in the UK. The truth is that this movement in the UK is linked almost exclusively to white leadership from the USA. The structure has no intention of allowing people from other cultures to exercise global leadership. I find this very sad.

How can racism in British society and our churches be reduced? Is there any kind of 'four-point plan' or is it too complex for that? I think there are four steps for people in society and church:

- 1 Have a safe space where people can speak honestly about their experiences of racism – and their participation in racist behaviour.
- 2 Have everyone in that space identify why there is racism. There will be many reasons for this.
- 3 Decide together: what should we do about it?
- 4 Most importantly, how will we keep an eye on things in the long term? What safeguards do we need to reduce racism – like an annual MOT?

Your spirituality emphasises the power of prayer. How would you say prayer and activism, spirituality and politics are best balanced as we respond to racism?

Don't pray in a vacuum! Pray about real issues of racism, either in the news, in politics, in church – or in our lives.

Could you share a scripture that means most to you in relation to the gospel of liberation? I love Luke 4:14–19. It's a dramatic reading where Jesus refers to the prophet Isaiah and applies the words to himself. He promises to set people free from bondage:

Jesus announces good news to the poor

Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news about him spread throughout the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (CEB)

This part of the interview is for teachers.

Racism is a many-tentacled monster. What are the key challenges for understanding why it is so persistent and malignant?

- 1 It starts with self-evaluation – a willingness to recognise in-built ideas of privilege or supremacy.
- 2 Everyone needs to educate themselves. Read the right stuff – and there is a lot of it around!
- 3 Avoid crippling guilt. We need to take responsibility, not be immobilised by guilt.
- 4 Everyone in the conversation has to be honest with their experience of racism. White people need permission to say the wrong thing and be corrected without being put down. Black people must be free to talk about their pain.
- 5 Everyone has to participate. Dealing with racism needs black and white people working together to create just communities.
- 6 Differentiate between personal behaviour which needs changing and institutional behaviour which involves power dynamics and is often harder to deal with.

The trigger to global protests from the killing of George Floyd was huge – but not new. Do you think we are at a key moment for anti-racism, or are we repeating a cycle?

As many people have said, we are in a new place. What we saw was a younger black and white uprising against racism across the world. Sadly, radical extremism was a part of what we saw on the street, and we need political discernment to avoid radicalism taking place in the name of justice. The most important issue is to ask what are the safeguarding fixtures which will keep us on track and avoid going back to square one in another two years.

Most teachers of RE are white – but most are eager to play their part in anti-racist education. Advice and insight for them?

Without playing games – all of the above! But remember too: you are in a good place at the right time and it's likely to get harder before it gets better. But your engagement in education is the most strategic place there is. It's also important to design teaching material which challenges kids and (by extension) their parents. Radical attitudes

which alienate people won't help. Lasting change involves winning minds in order to change minds. You can't change everybody, but I am guessing that the more minds we win, the more we change. White folk have a workable responsibility to win minds. (*White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo [Beacon Press 2018] and *Brit(ish)* by Afua Hirsch [Vintage 2018] make good reading on this.)

A decolonised RE curriculum remains more of a future hope than a definite plan. How do you think the RE curriculum could change to embody an anti-racist agenda?

Building from the previous question, I am more inclined to talk about race than racism or anti-racism. I am not keen on antithetical models for progressive behaviour. There is scope here for uncompromising enlightenment which shines a light on injustice.

- 1 As a Christian I want to show that racism is what Christians call sin (or moral ineptitude), and so this is a journey for a higher morality.
- 2 Racial injustice happens everywhere so it is a human condition. White isn't right and black isn't better!
- 3 But it does exist and really hurts people. So, we will turn the spotlight in those places where racism is causing most harm: in children's minds, where whiteness is regarded as normative superiority and black kids feel bad about themselves. What we teach kids needs a level playing field in terms of human dignity. Educational institutions should help kids see the evidence for racial disparity in education, work, health, criminal justice.
- 4 Our educational process should deploy transferable positives. Black and Asian people are heroes in sports, music, film and politics. These positive and deeply respected icons should become lighthouse examples of everyone's potential.
- 5 History needs to be retold honestly! For example, the abolition of the slave trade was much more than [William] Wilberforce. The material of Black History Month should be made normal, getting kids to meet with successful black and Asian people in business, politics, science, etc. There is a sense in which the successful black people should not be heralded as big heroes. They should be presented as really quite normal!