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Mission and Anti-racism by Laura Cheifetz

(Keynote speaker)

Anita / February 16, 2016



Laura, Cheifetz, our keynote speaker delivered an interactive presentation that was not only powerful but still has some of us talking about it. I am still waiting on Kelsey Law, our generous volunteer for some video clips, but in the meanwhile, here is the complete text and handout. [Laura's handout \(pdf file\)](#)

Greetings from Louisville, KY and greetings on behalf of the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, one of the six agencies of the Presbyterian Church (USA). I work with the denominational publisher, home of the Glory to

God hymnal, and the Feasting on the Word commentary series. We are completely self-sustaining, a medium-sized religious publisher, better known by our major imprint Westminster John Knox Press.

My name is Laura Mariko Cheifetz. Cheifetz is my family name, from my Polish-Ukrainian-Lithuanian Jewish family members who fled persecution in Eastern Europe over 100 years ago. If you know my parents, serving in San Francisco Presbytery, you know that I pronounce our name differently. I have no tattoos or body piercings and never snuck out at night to joyride or get high. Instead I pronounce our name differently. I'd like to think in the realm of things children do to their parents, that's not a bad deal.

My middle name is Mariko, from my Japanese American ancestry. My great-grandmother was the first Japanese American girl born in the town of San Juan Bautista, CA over 100 years ago. My Jewish Polish great-grandmother who lived in Hemet, CA wanted my parents to call me by my Japanese name, and please know how grateful I am that my parents stuck with Laura. It's an easier cross-over name for my Spanish-speaking relatives, and explaining my family name is already a lengthy process enough.

Why We Do Mission

I am very grateful to be here with you to talk and learn about mission. I grew up assuming that mission is what we do as Christians, even who we are. Growing up, I went along on pastoral visits sometimes, had friends from different class backgrounds, helped deliver Christmas gifts to families who didn't have as much, served meals to people experiencing hunger. I knew larger churches that went on trips to reservations and to other countries to help run Vacation Bible School, or build houses. I have many friends who served in the Young Adult Volunteer program and now as mission co-workers, telling me stories of being present to communities surviving on garbage dumps in the Philippines, of young people receiving an arts education in Palestine, of spending time with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo protesting the disappearances of their children during Argentina's Dirty War, or the former "comfort women" who were sex slaves to the Japanese military during Japanese occupation of Korea.

The Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith affirms that God "calls women and men to all ministries of the church... to witness among all people to Christ as Lord and Savior... to strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks."

Acts 20:24 says, "But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace."

We worship a God who sent Jesus to heal the sick, love the tax collector, and make the woman with five husbands an evangelist.

In this tradition, we are called to reach out, provide assistance, engage with those the world disdains. But there are a few things that shape our mission work besides Biblical mandates to share the good news and care for the least of these, including our own programmatic intentions and goals, and the history of European and U.S. mission. Mission, as you well know, is far from a pure endeavor.

The Single Story of Mission

Author Chimamanda Adichie has a great TED talk on what she calls the Single Story – when she became an adult, she realized that the British literature she grew up reading as a child in Nigeria had given her a single story of what all literature was, and when she came to study in the U.S., the single story her white American college roommate had in her head about "Africa" did not resemble Adichie's lived experiences as a Nigerian.

Often, we in the U.S. in a mainline Protestant church tell a single story about mission. Our single story is that mission means leaving our church building and our neighborhood, and going somewhere else to people who are wholly different from us, who are in some place of need and don't have as much as we do, and we give them what we have out of our Christian generosity. This single story casts English-speaking suburban teenagers as the people who are qualified to provide Vacation Bible School to children in another country, or willing and eager urban and suburban seminarians as the people qualified to build a house in another country, or gainfully employed hyper-educated me capable of making a decent meal for the men's homeless shelter in my own uninspected kitchen. This single story says we are surprised and #blessed every time it is we who are transformed after interacting with these other people. And while I'm oversimplifying this a little, I think you may recognize elements of this single story. This may be familiar.

Context for Mission

This single story has a deep and complicated background. The history of Christian mission is, at best, checkered. Until very recently, mission has long been associated with simultaneous military conquest and the acquisition of land and wealth.

In the territory that became the state of California, missions began this way: competition between Spain, England, and Russia for land meant in order for Spain to hold on to its holdings of land (claimed despite the presence of indigenous peoples already on it), Spanish colonies needed a population that was literate in Spanish and paid taxes. The Roman Catholic Church and the government of Spain established missions to convert the indigenous peoples to Christianity, teach them Spanish, and make them citizens who could pay taxes. Until 1800, the colonial economy was largely dependent upon indigenous labor.

While many in the missions were genuinely concerned for the immortal souls of the indigenous persons, that concern was not the primary motivation for the establishment of the missions.

This, and other colonial enterprises began after the Papal bulls of the 15th century, forming the basis for what we call the Doctrine of Discovery, beginning with Pope Nicholas V's *Dum Diversas* in 1452, addressed to the King of Portugal, who was concerned about Portuguese trade rights. This gave Portugal the right to attack, conquer and subjugate "Saracens and pagans." The document says:

"We grant you [Kings of Spain and Portugal] by these present documents, with our Apostolic Authority, full and free permission to invade, search out, capture, and subjugate the Saracens and pagans and any other unbelievers and enemies of Christ wherever they may be, as well as their kingdoms, duchies, countries, principalities, and other property... and to reduce their persons into perpetual servitude."

In 1455, he issued the bull *Romanus Pontifex*:

"The Roman pontiff...seeking and desiring the salvation of all, wholesomely ordains and disposes upon careful deliberation those things which he sees will be agreeable to the Divine Majesty and by which he may bring the sheep entrusted to him by God into the single divine fold, and may acquire for them the reward of eternal felicity, and obtain pardon for their souls. This we believe will more certainly come to pass, through the aid of the Lord, if we bestow suitable favors and special graces on those Catholic kings and princes, who, like athletes and intrepid champions of the Christian faith, as we know by the evidence of facts, not only restrain the savage excesses of the Saracens and of other infidels, enemies of the Christian name, but also for the defense and increase of the faith vanquish them and their kingdoms and habitations, though situated in the remotest parts unknown to us..."

In 1493 Alexander VI issued the bull *Inter Caetera* stating one Christian nation did not have the right to

establish dominion over lands previously dominated by another Christian nation, thus establishing the Law of Nations.

In sum, these papal bulls “gave Christian explorers the right to claim lands they ‘discovered’ and lay claim to those lands for their Christian monarchs. Any land that was not inhabited by Christians was available to be ‘discovered,’ claimed, and exploited. If the ‘pagan’ inhabitants could be converted, they might be spared. If not, they could be enslaved or killed.” This led to the global slave trade we are familiar with in the 15th and 16th centuries, and the Age of Imperialism.

This might feel far away from us. After all, the U.S. is young. My family has only been here for 100 years, 450 years after this period. But this is a huge shaping force in how we all came to be here.

The missionary movement in the U.S., which was booming at the turn of the 19th century, overlapped with a period we might call U.S. nation-building, with military and thereafter trade expansion into Asia-Pacific and Central America. Follow a war or an acquisition, and you will find missionaries from American mainline churches. Americans followed European imperialist patterns, too, sending missionaries to the rest of the world.

My mother once told me that the wife of a couple who were rather conservative missionaries from the church my father served, who were placed in the South Pacific, once complained to her about how the women they worked with all wore long sleeve shirts and long skirts, even in the heat, and so she had to dress like they did, and it was so uncomfortable. My mother said, “blame the missionaries.” The missionaries the church sent around the turn of the century brought their own Victorian mores with them, enforcing white American modesty norms from a completely different climate onto Pacific Islanders living in a hot and humid climate.

Why We Need Antiracism

I don't think I need to give you all the data that demonstrate the very real impact racism has on all our lives. You can see it. And that little historical overview should give us a partial explanation for the structural and cultural and theological ways racism has developed.

The structure of race in the U.S. is not something we can opt out of, because it isn't something we do or don't do, claim or don't claim. It is a structure of laws, culture, history, and economics in which we have become enveloped as players, regardless of when we or our ancestors came to this country. We became participants upon entry, or if we were already here, upon invasion. Even if we opt out of checking the box on the form, the government assigns us a race. Census-takers are trained to evaluate certain markers in a household, and assign a race. The Department of Education requires schools to get or assign a race to each student. The structure of race in the U.S. is also not something we leave when we go to another country. We are so deeply enmeshed with our own national culture that we will carry it with us wherever we go. This is not necessarily all bad. Structures help us make sense of the world. They organize our thoughts. The problem is that these thought organizations are tied up in how some people are allowed to live their lives, the opportunities they face, the stories they get to live.

I was a small group leader on a church trip to Israel/Palestine, and no matter how much one tries to orient a group to going to another country (or countries), especially one so vivid in the national and religious imagination, things happen. Two of us led the group through a brief cultural competency conversation, and upon our arrival, within a day in Jerusalem, it became clear that we had missed something. We heard that some group members, excited about being there, and really wanting to get to

know the place, had downloaded a Hebrew language app on their phones, and were trying to speak Hebrew with some of the local shopkeepers. We realized they were trying to guess who spoke Hebrew. This is sort of bad because we were in the Palestinian area, and while many Israeli Arabs speak Hebrew, it's really awkward that people were trying to guess who spoke what language based on their own U.S.-based evaluations of people's ethnicity or religious group. It's poor form to take our own frameworks and impose them on a place we don't know, that we are not a part of.

It was good intentions, but bringing U.S. racial and religious and ethnic categories to another country really doesn't work. And unfortunately, it's not something we can avoid. We can't not see the world that way. We cannot escape ourselves.

But our contemporary mission is not all a series of awkward and inappropriate moments.

Even the historical mission movement was, of course, not all negative. And I highly doubt that the intent behind all of the papal bulls and laws and assumptions was to hurt non-European Christians, that damage was just the consequence of the European Christian assumptions of superiority and greed. Christians really did care about the spiritual and material lives of the least of these. Presbyterians in particular were intentional about building girls' schools in areas of the world where girls found access to education prohibitive, or built hospitals to provide much-needed medical care to populations with little access to health care.

It isn't now just Europeans or white Americans doing mission, and it isn't just people of color or people in other countries being on the receiving end. It is no longer so simple. Antiracism helps us see that it isn't about the race of people doing the mission, or the race of the people receiving the mission, it is about the structure that set up how we do mission, its origins, what it does to each party, and how we perpetuate old patterns, instead of living the gospel.

Using an antiracism lens might help us see the problematic aspects of mission, even mission that was ultimately positive. The northern and southern Presbyterian churches divided up the countries of the world for mission between them, with, for example, the southern church taking Brazil and Congo. Mainline denominations divided the Caribbean amongst themselves for mission work, each taking an area for their work. A Presbyterian report entitled "Mission and Ministry with Native American Peoples: A Historical Survey of the Last Three Centuries," points out the pitfalls of this approach, however efficient it may seem: "The government assigned separate denominations to different Indian reservations, attempting to avoid denominational conflict on any one reservation. In 1872, out of seventy-three agencies assigned, the Presbyterians had nine, including a census of 38,069 Indians. Hence, Indian people by and large did not have a personal choice about denomination, theology or polity. If they decided to accept Christianity, they had to select the denomination assigned to their reservation."

What is Antiracism?

I have worked in the past with Crossroads Antiracism and Organizing, and am aware of a lot of different antiracism organizations, working groups, training facilities, and the church's own antiracism policies.

James Addington of Crossroads has a helpful definition of antiracism here:

... antiracism as an intervention includes the reparation of community. The term antiracism is especially relevant in reference to collective, collaborative action. While individuals can certainly be antiracist, their antiracism is especially relevant in common cause with others. Antiracism in this sense is about the reparation of the fabric of community and the role that institutions can play in that process.

I know a lot of people don't like the term, because "anti" is so negative. But antiracism is an active positive process, much as an antibody helps keep our own bodies healthy and strong. Or antifreeze keeps our cars running when the temperature dips into the single digits, something you experience less than I do.

The powerful thing about an antiracist orientation is that it helps to keep us from getting bogged down in feeling guilty, but gives us something to do, and something to become. In the wider context of Christian mission, it is only very recently that our mission frameworks began to shift, from doing mission to, to doing mission with, in partnership and mutual accountability.

We in the U.S. mainline church often believe a single story about Christian mission – that the middle class and wealthy – are the ones to bring the gospel and hope itself to marginalized communities.

We bring water to rural villages and temporary housing to homeless people. We bring good news to pockets of despair in our cities, rural areas, and other parts of the world.

Often we bring programmatic expectations to mission work. We want our young people to grow up with a wider awareness of the needs faced by other people. We want to feel we have contributed something helpful.

These aren't bad things. But they can be better.

The single story can result in the denial of the full humanity and agency of the people receiving mission efforts. Handing over a pre-packed bag of groceries doesn't allow people to choose what they really would like to eat. Giving toys to needy children doesn't allow their parents the dignity of being the ones to choose the toys and doesn't allow children to see their parents as the ones providing for them.

The single story positions us as those who have all the knowledge. we know what they need so they can have our standard of living. The single story sometimes means because we have people have capacities and gifts and abilities and frameworks, we think we can assess and determine what they need for themselves.

And the single story can result in those of us wanting transformation to come into a community with our desires and leave whenever we feel we have been transformed enough, we have learned enough, with little thought as to whether or not the primary focus of mission should be to learn about ourselves.

The single story may not take into account the structural issues at play, why some of us do mission and some of us receive it.

What an antiracist orientation does is take these real needs into account, and examine also the structural oppression behind them. The needs are the symptoms of something that is wrong. And we can think of mission not just in a way that focuses on treating the symptoms, addressing the immediate needs, but expand mission to consider what lies behind the needs. And we can consider how to make sure that mission is about those experiencing need, not just as a way to engage in individual and personal transformation.

Jesus didn't die on the cross so I could become more aware of my privilege and maybe give a little more to charity (although both are good things, in fact, absolutely essential). Jesus died on the cross for

restoration of order in the world, so that people would no longer be demonized for their life circumstances, or shoved to the margins of society. Many of Jesus' concerns were not only about a sick woman or a blind man, but about unjust structures, about a religious and cultural system that would render someone with a skin disease unclean, a complete outcast, reduced to begging for scraps. Antiracism has us ask the questions about the full picture and not just the parts. Antiracism is a way of thinking structurally.

If you look at your handout, you will see a framework for thinking about mission (three steps: Provide Services, Advocacy, Investment). Many of you probably already use something like this, if not in your own congregations, in your own thinking, and this is just an imperfect beginning. If we use an antiracism lens to look at the whole picture, we can see that many of us and many of our congregations put 100% of our resources into one of these steps. Most of us put it in the "provide services" category. It is entirely necessary to provide services. We know that children can't learn if they are hungry, and often have behavioral problems at school. We know that the quality of food matters. We know bad food leads to major health problems. We know that it's hard to work when you're hungry, and we know that food insecurity is a very real problem across the nation and around the world.

Using an antiracist lens, we know it isn't enough to collect canned goods for the homeless. What is the advocacy we could do to help change the conditions that cause food insecurity? People who are unauthorized immigrants are often stuck in low-paying, dangerous work, and until the system by which people gain the right status is fixed, they are more likely to experience food insecurity. Housing costs are rising around the country, and particularly in California, so until municipalities require, through zoning or other measures, that a certain percentage of its housing be affordable to lower-income people, some people will spend exorbitant percentages of their income to house their families and run out of money to feed their families. Some people experiencing homelessness and food insecurity just need a little boost, and maybe some help, that could be afforded by investment in supportive housing. Many people with low incomes live in food deserts, in which food is rare, healthy food is inaccessible, and what is there is expensive. Mission could mean working with businesses to bring further economic development so more people can find jobs, so that people can afford to live somewhere they like, close to work, near safe schools, and find a way to support themselves, and buy the food they need. It isn't enough to feed people through the food pantry without advocating for funding healthy school meals for hungry children.

How can this cycle be applied to mission in your context? Looking at providing services, advocacy, and investment, those three steps, could be a useful way to think about a particular work of mission in which your congregation engages. How does your congregation engage multiple pieces of the puzzle in which people find themselves?

I would guess that mission has been transforming for those of us who are here. That's not bad. But the way most of us in the US have participated in mission, this single story doesn't let the people receiving the mission tell their side of it.

I'm going to add one more piece. Another way to think about the antiracism lens is to think about how mission allows for the people we seek to serve to have their own agency in the matter.

People coming to the food pantry could come to a place where they can "shop" for the groceries they need, at accessible and affordable prices,, instead of handed a fully assembled bag of goods. The book "Toxic Charity" has some excellent examples of how to do mission in such a way that everyone's dignity is respected.

Even we with our best intentions can fall into the single story. Many of us get really hung up on what we think we're supposed to do to be in mission: we're supposed to convert people to Protestant Christianity, share the gospel, we're supposed to build a school or a house, but how we do let go of the single story that has us trapped in models of mission that prevent us from discovering a different relationship across international lines or class lines or urban/suburban lines that feed both of us and challenge both of us. An antiracism lens blows this away and transforms this single story into a more complicated and beautiful and Christ-like set of stories.

Mission is, at its best, mutual. It is transforming for all. Instead of getting nervous that we are falling into the single story, and deciding to never do mission again, we should consider what it would be to shift the model. Instead of using mission for personal formation, we could use it for relationship building, for committing to see those who experience need or who are not Christians as people who are their own people, with insights and wisdom, and we can use mission to address the whole picture of need, not just the immediate, but also the structural.

With this lens, we might work with partners to create different roles in mission, or come up with new mission based on what is very much needed in a given place, which might be tied to our own policies back at home. We might listen to and learn from our partners what development we need, and what perspectives all need. We might need to be in mission with ourselves, or need our partners' help to be in mission with us.

With this lens, we can explore how mission work runs the risk of maintaining or exacerbating disparities in spite of our good intentions, and find ways to change what we do for the good. Tom's Shoes are very comfortable, and every time someone buys a pair, a pair is donated to a shoeless child in another country. The result has been the decimation of the parts of local economies that make and sell shoes. What about, instead of flooding the market with a free foreign product, we look for ways to support the development of a local economy, so parents can afford to buy their children locally-made shoes?

Reiterate: mission isn't bad. It's good. It's inherently part of our Christian calling. We can work for mutual accountability with our partners to make it better.

There is another way that an antiracist frame can shape our mission.

If we truly believe that God created each one of us beloved, mission work can mean siding with the marginalized and powerless. Mission work can mean showing up where people are oppressed and excluded – with deportations and detentions of immigrants without proper papers on the rise, and Native Americans and African Americans facing systemic violence from the hands of the state, with Sikh and Muslim Americans and their places of worship experiencing rising hate crimes, with low-income residents being evicted because they can't afford rising rents, with children of color disproportionately suspended from schools (beginning as early as pre-school) for behaviors that most children display at some point.

An antiracist orientation would have us ask questions like:

How does this work of mission repair community in the long term?

Does this create sustainable community?

How does this work of mission ensure the respect of each person's full humanity and agency?

How does this way of doing mission validate western dominant ways of thinking?

How does this way of doing mission disrupt old patterns and make space for other ways of thinking?

Mission of all kinds is important, and certainly meeting the immediate needs of members of our community is vital. But an antiracist orientation helps us, in the midst of mission, ask different questions, redefine how we serve, flesh out our mission so that we as congregations, as collective activity, are more fully accountable, more fully in partnership, learning together instead of imposing, finding new ways to serve that respect the agency of all, that respect that of Christ in all.

What does this make you think about? What are your ideas? How would these questions help shape your work?

Additional Resources

Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery

Mission and Ministry with Native American Peoples: A Historical Survey of the Last Three Centuries

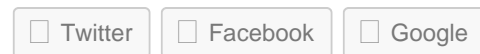
Practicing God's Radical Hospitality: Exploring Difference, Change and Leadership through the Spiritual Discipline of Hospitality by Teresa Chávez Saucedo. PWR #13060

Living the Gospel of Peace: Tools for Building More Inclusive Community, Eric H. F. Law, PDS #70-270-04-014

Becoming the Beloved Community: People of Faith Working Together to Eradicate Racism: A Study Guide for Presbyterian Women, produced by Presbyterian Women in DVD format, four 15-minute segments and accompanying study guide, PDS #PWR06120 (2007)

Race in a Post-Obama America: The Church Responds. Multi-author. Westminster John Knox Press, forthcoming 2016

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Definitions/Key Concepts

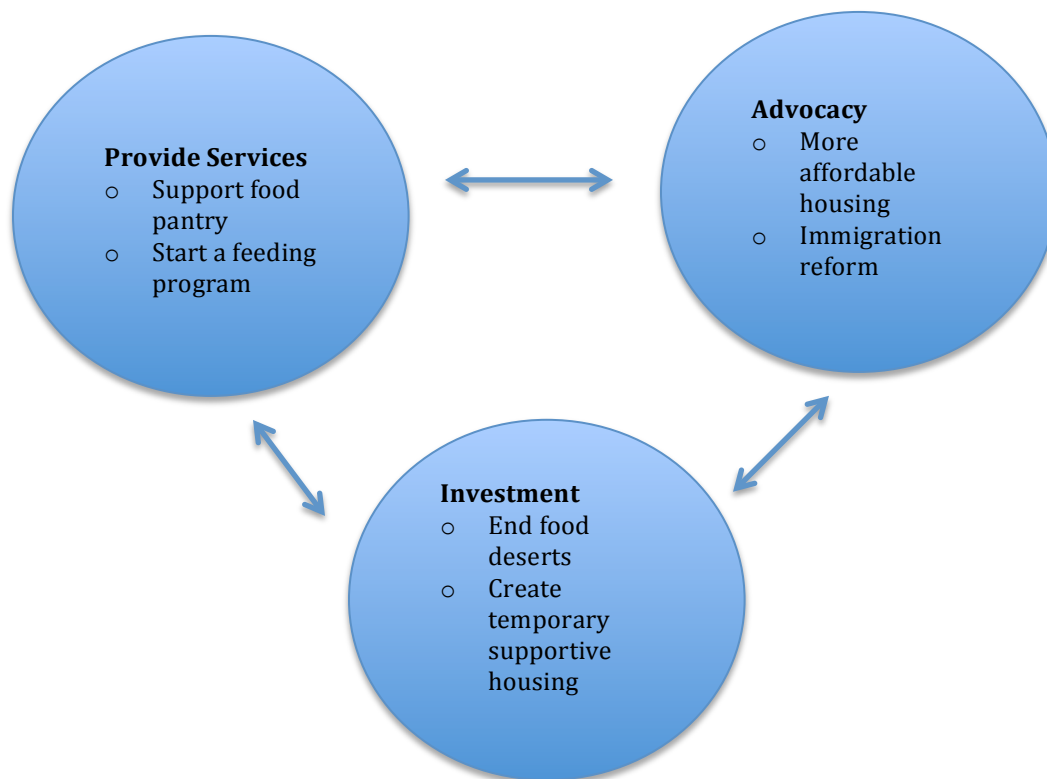
Mission: the church exists to do mission as a faithful response to the grace of God, sharing the good news of the gospel. An older version of the Book of Order stated: "the mission of the church is given form by God's activity in the world as told in the Bible and understood by faith."

Antiracism: "is about the reparation of the fabric of community and the role that institutions can play in that process." – Joy Bailey in <http://crossroadsantiracism.org/antiracism-analysis/what-does-antiracism-have-to-do-with-racial-equity/>

Structural oppression: when the structures of society prevent certain groups from equitable treatment and full access.

Full Cycle of Mission

Example: Hunger



February 6, 2016

Questions for Mission

- How does this work of mission repair community in the long term?
- How does this work of mission ensure the respect of each person's full humanity and agency?
- How does this way of doing mission maintain or exacerbate disparities in spite of our good intentions?

Resources

Website: *Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery*

<https://dofdmennno.org/>

Online article: *Mission and Ministry with Native American Peoples: A Historical Survey of the Last Three Centuries*

<http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/nativeamerican/mission-ministry/>

Study Guide: *Practicing God's Radical Hospitality: Exploring Difference, Change and Leadership through the Spiritual Discipline of Hospitality* by Teresa Chávez Saucedá. PWR #13060

Booklet: *Living the Gospel of Peace: Tools for Building More Inclusive Community*, Eric H. F. Law, PDS #70-270-04-014)

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