

Racial Justice & Religion Initiative: Concept Note

Subject to change

Executive Summary

Over the past two years, our nation's attention has focused on racial justice. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed how health and economic inequities disproportionately affect people of color. People around the country watched videos of police officers murdering George Floyd. Race and racism have returned to the center of our cultural discussions, driving change in corporate, civic, and educational institutions. While we appreciate this cultural shift, we are also aware that most analysis and organizing on racism overlooks the critical role of religion and faith.

Given our embeddedness within the Aspen Institute and our commitment to addressing inequities on the basis of religious difference, we understand our unique position to usher these conversations forward and to help cultivate the next generation of leaders who work at the intersection of racial justice and religion. Our hope is that investing in these leaders will have long-term impact, both for those already engaged in this work and for the general public.

The Racial Justice & Religion (RJR) Initiative will focus on strengthening the capacity of entities working on behalf of marginalized communities through: (1) leadership development that will equip practitioners in this field, (2) partnerships that will create outputs for public engagement and offer new resources and skills for members, (3) media engagement and public programming that contributes to enhanced dialogue and public knowledge, and (4) sub-grants to further the work—or even seed new work—of Collective members or relevant organizations.

The work of racial justice is an ongoing effort in dismantling systemic oppressions that have been entrenched in the US for several hundred years. This work requires a commitment to funding over multiple years and we are actively seeking funding to support this work.

Religion & Society Program's Work on Racial Justice

Over the past five years, the Religion & Society Program has focused on understanding and sharing how religion can be leveraged to address social inequities and strengthen social cohesion. We have helped build the field of religious pluralism by fostering multi-stakeholder and cross-sector connections. In bringing people together and equipping them with skills to grow their reach and impact, we have contributed to creating a culture in which all people thrive.

As part of this journey, and in recognizing a need, the Religion & Society Program partnered with faith-based activists, organizers, scholars, and practitioners to create the Racial Justice & Religion Collective in mid-2021. We convened the Collective to explore how multi-faith engagement could support the fight for a more racially just and equitable society. Collective members represent a diverse range of faith communities and ideological viewpoints, including leaders from historically underrepresented faith traditions. Our shared value is a commitment to understanding and leveraging

religion in the pursuit of racial justice. We are especially eager to develop interventions that center, support, and uplift leaders from historically marginalized communities.

Significance of Racial Justice and Religion

The fields of theology and religion have new energy around developing and researching faith-based responses to racial injustice. Some new projects develop public theologies that speak to racism, hate, and inequality in the US. Some multi-faith mobilizing efforts address particular social issues such as mass incarceration, poverty, or immigrant rights. The collaborative work of the RJR Collective fits well within the context of this work because it is adding a needed element of high-quality public scholarship and leadership development on racial justice and religion. Given the Aspen Institute's long history of multidisciplinary thought leadership and cross-cultural relationship building, we are well situated to foster broader movement cohesion by connecting the field of theology and religion with those working to combat racial injustice from other perspectives.

We believe that helping leaders develop these skills will advance their work and advance the cause. Equipping them with these capacities will enable them to show up confidently and effectively when their leadership is needed most. Using the model of "Liberating Leadership," we accompany leaders to tap into their own strengths and the strengths of the group. In addition to "freeing the concept of leadership from its conventional use or practice," this approach also calls on us to connect with one another through developing and sharing stories.¹ We know that storytelling is an effective vehicle to cultivate connection, empathy, and care, and we also believe that stories of faith have a unique capacity to help us imagine different possibilities. It is for these reasons that we have prioritized storytelling within our work with the Collective so far, and it's why we hope to continue this work as we seek to advance racial justice together. Storytelling will also help our Collective members reach and connect with broader audiences, creating opportunities for mutual benefit: Collective members will increase the impact of their work, and the public knowledge they produce will support general audiences, too.

Outcomes

The Racial Justice & Religion Collective serves as a premier resource hub for high-quality racial justice scholarship. This initiative is an intentional effort to bridge the gap between theory and praxis. The Collective, with its robust and diverse constituency, is posed to advance racial justice and religion work that results in impactful and embodied work in society.

The Religion & Society Program will organize virtual and in-person convenings for faith and moral leaders, scholars, community leaders, and activists. Participants will include members of the Racial Justice & Religion Collective and its partners. These convenings will provide an opportunity for thought partnership, network building, and the development of resources that address how religion can contribute to upending racism and white supremacy.

¹ Stephen Lewis, Matthew Wesley Williams, and Dori Grineko Baker. *Another Way: Living & Leading Change on Purpose* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2020), 132.