

2019  
February



WDN Regional Council  
Meeting Summary

Host: Monroe Place  
Topic Discussion: Virginia Blackface Controversy  
Group Discussion: Whitopia

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### Virginia Blackface Controversy

Our difficult topic discussion centered on the controversy that exploded in Virginia when it was revealed that both the Governor, Ralph Northam, and the Attorney General, Mark Herring wore blackface in college. After a full group discussion of the events leading up to the controversy, we broke into small groups and worked through the following questions and discussion points:

How do you feel about the situation involving Governor Northam? Are the reactions that people are having to him appropriate? Are they over the top? Have there been discussions about this in your circles? family, friends, work, faith, etc. Here are some of the reactions to this series of events that have appeared in the media. Pick two or three that engage you and write down your first thoughts about them. Discuss with your partner.

- Can't we move on? Are we expected to talk about blackface and minstrelsy, race and reconciliation, when there's so much work to be done?
- The only way forward is through courageously confronting the past. Difficult issues should be seen as gateways.
- The fact that these issues keep tumbling into public consciousness even as political weapons is not just a sign of a cynical system, but of a perpetually postponed reckoning, a long, unpaid tax.
- I can't help but wonder why there seems to be more of a rush to judgment than deep-dive discussions on the topic of racial insensitivity.
- But the general consensus is that we need to do far less finger-pointing over a photo that appeared more than three decades ago and more reflecting on our own biases today.
- It's not like these things are happening with any more regularity, we just have more vehicles to get them to the public.
- All the more reason, I say, to take advantage of an old-fashioned way of communicating — face to face, heart to heart. The conversations we have today — and they are indeed occurring in homes, classrooms and around water coolers everywhere — are how cycles are broken.

The discussions were animated and robust and could have gone on well past the time we had set aside for the exercise.

**Featured Group Discussion:**  
Whitopia

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African American writer [Rich Benjamin](#) spent two years living in — and writing about — America’s whitest neighborhoods. The response to his book (and TED Talk) was honest, raw — and sometimes misunderstood his purpose. Here, he responds to the response:

In 2007, I embarked on a two-year, 27,000-mile trip. My destination? The fastest-growing and whitest counties in America. I wanted to understand why communities in the United States are getting less diverse, and to explain why so many white-only communities are flourishing in 2015. What I discovered is riveting and sobering, compelling and ironic. In Whitopia, I saw a culture driven by conscious and unconscious bias; I learned that a country can have racism without racists.

Whitopia is a story-driven journey, a road trip of anthropology, with bold arguments and evidence and a cast of real-life characters I lived with for months at a time. The genre itself is not new; white researchers such as John Howard Griffin (*Black Like Me*, 1961) and Alex Kotlowitz (*There Are No Children Here*, 1992) set out to explain various aspects of predominantly non-white communities. From Daniel Patrick Moynihan to Jonathan Kozol, there’s a wealth of literature by white experts trying to explain “the ghetto” to America.

I had simply done the reverse. As a black thinker and writer, I interpret and explain mainstream white America back to itself. I wanted to do so in a fresh way that doesn’t recycle the racial gripes of decades past.

At our meeting on the 14th, we viewed the Ted Talk presentation by Benjamin and used the following discussion guide to inform our small and large group discussions about what he discovered on his journey, how it applies to our community and what we can learn from it.

#### Whitopia Discussion Guide

Relate Whitopia to our region. Substitute “Rochester region” for “Whitopia” in your discussions:

- *Are the statements still accurate?*
- *Do they apply here?*
- *What is being done to address them?*
- *What examples are you aware of here in our region?*

Use the following statements to prompt your exchanges.

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“America has delightful people who are perfectly comfortable with widening segregation and yawning socioeconomic inequality that often breaks along racial lines.”

“The reason our country looks the way it does is through social engineering that distinctly benefits suburban communities, exurban communities, and often white residents. And we are socially engineered in such a way as to, often unconsciously and unintentionally, but sometimes intentionally, perpetuate this divisive inequality.”

“Whitopian counties enact suburban land-use and zoning policies to promote larger lot development, to sustain private property values and to restrict suburban rental housing — all of which limit the influx of black and Latino households.”

“People in Whitopia would say, “Birds of a feather flock together. What’s the big deal?” But our government and businesses across the country make decisions every day that perpetuate segregation. When you say homes need to be built on a 1-acre lot, when you say apartment renters can’t live in your community — these concrete policies are what contribute to segregation. It’s not in our biology, and it’s not natural.”

“There is tremendous long-term harm when Americans accept ethnic and class balkanization as a de facto fixture of American life. It impoverishes our understanding of each other.”

“Our democracy cannot work optimally unless all people are integrated as full and equal members. Our collective freedom requires that.”

“Diversity isn’t the same as integration. Blacks and whites in New York are as segregated today as in 1910 [based on a sociologists’ segregation index that measures how much contact people of differing races have with one another.]”

“Interpersonal racism is declining. But structural racism--or, the policies and behaviors of institutions that perpetuate racial segregation and inequality--is not on the decline.”

“One black man is fine and will be treated very well, but what if I brought 50 of my black friends from New York City?”

“Throughout the 20th century, racial discrimination was deliberate and intentional. Today, racial segregation and division result from policies and institutions that are

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no longer explicitly designed to discriminate. Yet the effects are practically the same.”

“Structural racism endures in the absence of prejudice or ill will. Terrible outcomes result without evil intentions. Structural racism is baked into America’s national psyche and behavior. It is “the blind interaction between institutions, policies and practices, which inevitably perpetuates barriers to opportunities and racial disparities.”