

# Marquette University Racial Injustice Town Hall

*Opening comments of President Michael R. Lovell*

June 17, 2020

I would like to thank everyone for joining us today to discuss the important topics of racism and injustices. I believe we are sitting at a pivotal moment in our country's history.

As I mentioned at last week's Town Hall, we have three national crises hitting us all at once:

- a health (Covid) crisis,
- an economic crisis, and
- a racial justice crisis.

Although they are all distinct, they are also all interrelated. The health pandemic spawned the economic downturn; it also highlighted many of the injustices and disparities that exist in our city and country based on race.

These disparities include healthcare, job losses and economic opportunities, lack of access to resources and personal protective equipment, transportation issues, food insecurity and educational challenges with moving to distance learning.

The brutal and horrific murder of George Floyd initiated a movement for social justice in our country. His death broke open wounds of inequities that have existed for decades and it became a catalyst for highlighting the racial injustices that exist. Protestors are demanding change and have called on us to no longer tolerate racism and the inequities.

Make no mistake, these demands should have happened a long time ago and it is unfortunate that it has taken so many lives for us to wake up to the reality of the hard truths.

In this time, we need to recognize that many in our Marquette community and beyond are hurting, and they need us to stand with them, hear them and act to make things better.

As a society, **we must demand better.**

As a university, **we must demand more of ourselves.**

This Town Hall will not rectify the ways in which our university and society have fallen short. Rather, it is meant to be a mechanism for taking actions to address structural inequities that exist on our campus. We need to make Marquette the best version of itself. We need Marquette to be a place where our black students, faculty and staff feel welcome and supported.

As I sat down to prepare remarks for today, I really struggled. Speaking about race and injustice is hard. I know that no matter how hard I try; I will never be able to say all the right things, I will not be able to correct our flaws fast enough, and I will not be able to address all of the challenges we face. All I can do is promise you that I will do my best to help our university move forward in this difficult space.

As I reflected and prayed about my words, I was drawn to sharing some background around my personal journey to understanding racism and injustices. Although I have a long way to go, I believe my own personal experience can serve as a context to how we might start moving forward as a university. There are many things that we cannot control, but we can control our own actions and the way we interact with others at Marquette.

Eliminating racism and injustices must start within each of us, and I ask you to commit to doing your part.

Up until about four years ago, I never considered myself as racist. I grew up in a small town in Western PA. I was taught that racists were people in the KKK and white supremacists who waved the Confederate flag. Racists were bad people who explicitly celebrated their misinformed beliefs – it was that simple.

Since I was never outwardly racist in these ways, and I believed I was a good person – being racist never crossed my mind. In addition, my family had many authentic relationships with black people.

- My mom was an elder in the primarily black Baptist Church in my community.
- My best friend growing up was black.
- I was always surrounded by diverse people and ideas. Clearly, I was not racist...or so I thought.

That perception of myself all changed in 2016 when I read the book *'Racial Justice and the Catholic Church'* by Father Bryan Massingale. Until that moment, I had been blind to my privilege for 48 years.

In his book, Father Massingale made the compelling argument that the systems on which our country are based are inherently unfair and racist. He correctly ascertained that the chances for success in life for someone like me, a white male, were much greater than for people of color. So, as someone who had privilege and had benefitted from unfair systems, I was *tacitly racist* because I accepted the systems that were in place. I had never thought about or tried to change those systems. I had never considered how unfair these systems were to others in society. I had never stood up for my best friend when he faced injustices and was mistreated by others because of the color of his skin.

This brought about an internal struggle within me because I equated racism with bad people, and I now had the knowledge that my inactions were in fact racist. It became clear to me that unless I used my position of influence to make changes to systems that were unfair, that I was enforcing my privilege and I was not promoting an equitable society. I had to realize that being racist did not make me a bad person. I had to come to accept that thinking you are not racist can cause more harm to black people than being outwardly racist. This is a hard thing to process but this truth is what motivates change.

My perspective again changed two years later when I heard Professor L. Song Richardson speak at a Trauma Conference about implicit bias. Until that day, I had gone my entire life not realizing that I had implicit biases against people different from myself. I thought I treated everyone the same.

I found her research fascinating. One of her studies included running thirty years of CNN news feeds into her computer. Then, using artificial intelligence, she analyzed the feeds to determine what biases the media had been sending society. Not surprisingly, the news feeds showed significant biases, such as that black people were dangerous and lazy, and white people were smart and hard working.

She then spoke about taking implicit bias tests herself, only to find out that she was biased against Asian males, even though she is of Asian descent herself. This motivated me to undergo implicit bias testing, and to my surprise, I found that I have significant implicit biases towards many groups. Since implicit biases are subconscious, these biases were underpinned by 50 years of subtle messaging from media and entertainment outlets that enforced my white superiority.

It was diabolical the way implicit biases had been constructed in my subconscious. Armed with this knowledge, I knew that I had to genuinely listen and learn from others who were not like myself.

I also needed to carefully consider my actions and words. Because of my biases, I can only imagine how many times I have unintentionally offended others by what I have said and done over the course of my life.

Over the last two years, I've tried to continue to educate myself and learn how I can be an agent of change. Along this journey, I can point to so many positive experiences I've had, including

- Taking the YWCA's Unlearning Racism Course;
- Watching a play written by one of our students, Melaina Moore, called "*White Privilege*";
- Co-hosting the Fall 2019 Poverty Summit with the Milwaukee County Social Development Commission; and
- Reading the book "*White Fragility*".

All of these have made me better informed about the challenges we face and how I can be part of the solution.

I have by far learned the most in this space through my work with Scaling Wellness in Milwaukee (SWIM). To a great extent, my wife Amy and I started SWIM as a response to Father Massingale's challenge to promote system-level change. Our goal has been to heal generational trauma in our community and to work with community members to address the many disparities that exist.

I made many mistakes in the launching of SWIM. But through these mistakes, I have learned to listen to those who have the answers to the struggles they face every day. Because of this, SWIM is now positioned to elevate community-based organizations that are doing great things in Milwaukee. I have met so many amazing people who are impacting Milwaukee in positive ways – it is truly inspiring to partner with these individuals and organizations.

As we move forward as a university, I want to ask each of you to join me in working toward eliminating racism and promoting equity on our campus. We all have this responsibility -- we

must individually do our part. We can control our own actions. We also can control how we move forward as an institution. Individually, I would like you to consider committing to four things:

1. Educate yourself on the structural racism and injustices that exist at Marquette and in the world, and reflect on how you can 'Be the Difference' and make things better. Our Diversity and Inclusion web site is a great place to get started.
2. Our campus climate study showed that person-to-person attacks on dignity are one of our biggest challenges. If we see racist behavior, we must be brave and call it out – even if it means losing friends and putting ourselves in uncomfortable positions. We must also understand our own biases and carefully consider how our actions and words might negatively impact others, even when we have good intentions.
3. For those with privilege, use that privilege to break down and eliminate systems that are inherently unfair to others. Standing silent on these systems further supports racism and injustices.
4. Finally, we need to stand together and support each other, particularly the black members of our community. This month, I took part in my first march against racism and I was struck not only by the diversity of the protesters, but also by the comradery. We need to come together as a university in a similar way. Working together is the only way to promote true change.

In addition to what we can all do as individuals, there are many things that we need to do as an institution. Over the past weeks, Kimo and I have had numerous meetings and discussions with stakeholders across campus and in our community. These included talking with our students, faculty, and staff at the peaceful rally on campus last Thursday and having a nearly two-hour Teams meeting on Sunday with eight members of our Black Student Council.

We heard loud and clear that *now* is a time to *take action* and that transformational change is needed. They stated that the time for talking is over and they wanted to know how this moment in time will be different. They also wanted to be our partner and positively work together. Trust is built through time and evidence, and our campus needs to hold itself accountable for change.

Based on this feedback and ideas that we have received; we are proposing some Preliminary Action Steps to begin addressing our challenges. I want to be clear that these are *only first steps* – *we do not have all of the answers*. We need to have a much broader campus conversation on further actions that need to be taken in the coming weeks and months ahead. Right now, though, these are the action steps we are taking:

1. **Scholarship Support for Black Students from Milwaukee County.** While we are proud to have the most diverse student body, staff, and faculty in our University's history, it is clear we still have a lot of work to do. Despite raising the diversity of the student body to nearly 30%, we need to do more. The population of black students on campus has remained stagnant at 4% for the past several decades. We have also drawn few Black students from Milwaukee. To give us the best chance to increase the number of Black students from our local community, we

will institute a new scholarship initiative to provide need-based tuition scholarships to black students from Milwaukee County. These scholarships will fulfill all unmet tuition costs not covered by federal student aid. We will also undertake a fundraising campaign to cover room and board. We are determining an exact number of scholarships we will provide each year, but I promise you it will be substantial.

2. **Curriculum changes.** Our students have shared that they believe there needs to be more education about race and equity included in our curriculum. This includes both our core curriculum and throughout a student's entire education at Marquette. While we have made some changes to accomplish this, it's clear we must strive for more. We need all faculty to commit to increasing the race and equity education that our students receive. Such an effort will ensure systemic change within our student body. Kimo has already taken the first step by reaching out to the Faculty Senate Executive Committee to be partners in making the needed changes.

3. **Training for faculty, staff and students.** We need to provide additional training for faculty, staff and students around race and equity. We instituted a pilot training program for first year students this spring and will make that a mandatory part of orientation for all first-year students. We will continue to offer Unlearning Racism cohorts for faculty and staff, and will look at broader training opportunities so we all can become more informed. We will also use the year-long Marquette Forum and Mission Week in February to increase our knowledge on race and equity issues facing our campus and community.

4. **Representation in the Counseling Center:** Our students of color have been telling us about the trauma they have experienced and their mental health needs.

As we approach the fall semester, we need to offer more resources for their health and well-being. Our students have voiced a concern that there are no Black counselors in our Counseling Center. We have already approved hiring of a Black counselor and the job is now posted online. This is a start and we will look at how we can offer more resources for our students of color.

### **Presidents Commission on Race and Equity (CORE)**

Finally, this year we celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our Educational Opportunity Program. EOP was so innovative that it became a national model and ultimately led to the federal TRIO program which provides opportunities for millions of under-represented students each year. Due to the pandemic, we were not able to have a finish to our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration to announce how Marquette would innovate and again be a national leader in providing opportunities for first generation and students of color.

It is clear that becoming a national leader on inclusivity, diversity and equity is paramount to our future; it is also clear that it cannot be addressed by one person or one office. To this end, in honor of our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of EOP, I'm announcing the creation of a President's Commission on Racial Equity (CORE).

CORE will be an institution-wide effort consisting of dozens of students, faculty, staff, alumni and community members. It will be action oriented and focus on structural changes to combat

racism and inequities at Marquette and in Milwaukee. To ensure progress, we will have quarterly reporting, yearly tracking and an external evaluation after three years. It will build on the legacy of EOP and build on existing programs at Marquette and in our community.

The commission will report to me and look at issues such as hiring policies, campus climate improvements, retention needs - and many other topics.

We have a long road ahead of us and much work to do. It will be challenging and uncomfortable but that is exactly what we are called to do as a Catholic, Jesuit institution. None of us has all the answers, but I'm confident that if we work together, we can Be the Difference for our Black students and all our students of color.

We are in the beginning stages of determining how these action steps and Commission will logistically roll out. If you want to become involved, please visit our homepage, [Marquette.edu](http://Marquette.edu), and click on the CORE link.

Thank you for your time and attention today, and thank you for standing with me as we support our Black students, faculty and staff.

We all need to do our part to create a campus free of racism and injustice.