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OPINION

Race Chats: Walking upon Sacred Ground

Forming trust key to success

BY BENTLEY DE BARDELABEN

Recently, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz asked baristas at his 12,000 coffee houses to begin conversations about race with their customers. They were asked to inscribe the hashtag #RaceTogether on cups of coffee and engage in a conversation with customers as they awaited their beverage. While these actions may have been well intentioned, it elicited strong push back from people all across the



nation, particularly in the world of social media. One week later, the campaign was ended.

So what went wrong? One important component that was missing in this initiative was trust. Starbucks is known for selling high-end coffee and tea. Having conversations about a sensitive and sacred topic such as race, while extremely important, is something that requires relationships with more depth than your typical customer service interaction. Starbucks is not a respected authority or think tank on race relations. People do not enter their local coffee shop expecting to engage in challenging or "out of the box" conversations.

To his credit, Mr. Schultz initiated internal company conver-

sations about race shortly after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. His desire to start a conversation about something which affects and stirs up a range of emotions for many was honorable. Howard Schultz is a powerful man.

How he chose to use his position of influence was noble. But the decision to implement a conversation at the local store level was not wise, at least not in my humble opinion.

As a person who has facilitated many conversations on "race, racism, and reconciliation," one of the keys to having a successful discussion is establishing a form of trust. Without such a bond, the outcome will likely not go as planned.

More importantly, I do not

believe the burden to have this deeply personal and sacred conversation should have been placed on baristas who might fear losing their employment if they do not comply with company policy, or on the consumer who entered the store seeking to purchase a product. Hence, the mega tidal wave of displeasure from Starbucks consumers in the tweetersphere.

In 2008, when the debate about race and racism was injected into our nation's electoral debate, the United Church of Christ responded by developing a resource entitled Sacred Conversation on Race. It was developed for churches and organizations to utilize if they desired to have a conversation on race, but perhaps did not know how to begin.

We selected the word sacred

because we believed it was important to include prayer and make space for God in these discussions. We also believed each person's story was a sacred gift to be valued. I invite you to draw upon this resource as well. I, like Mr. Schultz, believe that this is an important conversation to have and can be healing for our communities. Perhaps our churches might be a better, perhaps safer, space to prayerfully engage these difficult questions than the morning coffee line.

Learn more about the UCC Sacred Conversations on Race at UCC.org/sacred-conversation.

The Rev. Bentley de Bardelaben is executive for administration and communications for the United Church of Christ's Justice and Witness Ministries.

Why I Applaud Levi Pettit for Confronting Racism

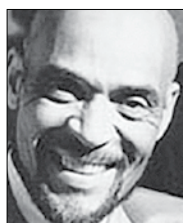
Important step against bigotry

BY EARL OFARI HUTCHINSON

Former Oklahoma University fraternity member Levi Pettit recently stood before a bank of cameras and microphones flanked by a bevy of black elected officials, ministers and civil rights leaders at a black church in Oklahoma City. He apologized for his racially insensitive acts and ignorance.

This was the act of a sincere young man who has been battered from pillar to post after the video surfaced of he, and his frat pals, carousing on a bus and shouting racist epithets. For speaking out, he has been the butt of snickers, derision, and flat out condemnation. The African-American leaders who stood with and behind him haven't been spared the vitriol either. They've been the object of vicious name calling and attacks for having the temerity to back him in his mea culpa.

Pettit though doesn't deserve condemnation, he deserves praise. He and his fraternity were boot-ed from the university. His name and that of his family has been dragged deep through the mud. He'll remain for some time the poster boy for offensive and disgusting frat racial antics whenever some wayward fraternity inevitably engages in them. He could have stood on the prior statement



of apology and regret that he issued after the tape went viral and set off a national howl. He could have easily melted into the student woodwork somewhere, completed his studies, and gone on about his business. But he didn't. Instead, he went very public with his apology and pledge to action.

Despite the lambaste of him and the racial put downs and myopia of the detractors, this is an important step forward. The public outing of the fraternity came the same week that a study was released on racial attitudes of the millennials. The study found that young whites under 30 are no more enlightened in their racial views especially of blacks than their parents.

For example, when respondents were asked, "How much needs to be done in order to achieve Martin Luther King's dream of racial equality?" There was a huge gap in how they answered the question as opposed to young respondents of color. 42 percent of whites answered that "a lot" must be done to achieve racial equality, which was almost identical to the percent that answered the same of white Gen Xers and 44 percent of white baby boomers.

The survey finding conformed pretty much to an AP survey on racial attitudes toward minorities that was conducted in October 2012. That survey found that in the four-year period from a prior AP survey on racial attitudes in 2008 a clear majority of whites (56 percent) expressed animus toward blacks. The jump in an-

ti-black racial sentiment came despite nearly four years in office of an African-American president.

It's been the rare day that's passed in the now more than six years that Obama has been in the White House that there hasn't been a racially inflammatory video, photo, a sign, or some public figure popping off on race that has made a headline somewhere. When it does, the predictable happens. The battle lines get quickly drawn, countless individuals jam websites and chat room and boards to downplay, or worse condemn the critics of the actions as being too sensitive, thin skinned, or slamming them for playing the race card with their denunciation of a racial dig or taunt. The Oklahoma University frat debacle was a near textbook example of that.

Levitt and his pals were properly condemned for their antics and given the boot from the campus. Yet they had legions of defenders too that accused the university of not giving them due process, violating their free speech, and for a rush to judgment in summarily expelling them. Many more even expressed sympathy with them for being harshly treated. And some even commiserated with their parents for their alleged suffering and ordeal.

The fact that you have one student offender who did not play to that gate, claim victimization, and accepted fully responsibility for his racial offensive action, is cause for much hope; hope that someone actually got it, and is willing to lend a public face, their face, to those who express their disgust at racial bigotry. It's even better that

this comes from a young person that legions of young people can more readily identify with than all the sermons on racial tolerance from those of the older generation, and especially civil rights leaders. Their sermons are like water off a ducks back to many of them. We don't need more surveys on race relations to know that they hav-

en't had much meaning too far too many young people such as Pettit.

Pettit did the right thing when he spoke out and so did the black leaders who stood behind him, encouraged and ultimately embraced him. For that, I applaud and will continue to applaud Pettit.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is an author and political analyst.



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