

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is a caucus?

The word "caucus" comes from an Algonquian word *caucausu* meaning counselor. A caucus is a group of people who share a certain mindset or similar concerns and gather to share counsel together. Caucusing occurs in many situations, from legislative bodies (the Republican Caucus, the Progressive Caucus) to our families (though we don't usually use the phrase "parental caucus"). In antiracism organizing, racial identity caucuses are common where People of Color and White People meet separately for a time to counsel together. Caucusing should be seen as a tool, not as a goal.

### **But separating ourselves from People of Color feels so divisive. Shouldn't we stay together so we can learn from them?**

Caucusing often feels divisive, especially at first and especially for White People. When a White caucus is meeting down the hall from a People of Color caucus, it isn't unusual for the White caucus to hear laughter coming from the latter. Coming to terms with our Whiteness is rarely a source of comfort, but we can find strength and support in those who share our struggle. Truly there is much to learn from People of Color, but they are often in positions where they must educate White People. Caucusing allows People of Color freedom from responsibility for White People's education, placing the responsibility instead on the White People themselves.

### What is the purpose of a White Caucus?

The purpose of a White caucus is to provide a space where White People can share struggles and challenge each other as they seek to uncover the depths of their internalized racist superiority (IRS) and build their capacity for solidarity with People of Color. As White People become more adept at challenging their own and their colleagues' IRS, trust is built with People of Color. As long as IRS goes unrecognized and unchecked by White People, its manifestations will at the least create unhealthy relationships with People of Color and eventually make solidarity impossible.

A secondary purpose of a White caucus is to provide a space for organizing when it is inappropriate or dangerous for People of Color to be directly involved. At times, People of Color may request that White People "do something" about a particular situation where People of Color may be at greater risk. Action by a White caucus separately from People of Color (but with their general permission) can be one strategy for White People taking on more risk. These actions must still be accountable, however.

### What is the content of a White Caucus?

A White caucus should never discuss issues about People of Color, but rather should focus on White People's issues (White privilege, IRS, their individual and collective history, White institutions, etc.). This is the primary principle for an effective caucus: always talk about yourselves, never "the Other."

More specifically, the following sorts of questions, topics, and activities are helpful:

- How did your racial identity develop?

- Where do you see White privilege in your life? ...in your church or organization?
- Who are White antiracists whom you respect throughout history? Why? Read books or watch films together to help recover the history of White antiracists.
- How is your identity tied to the acceptance of White privilege? ...your church's identity? ...your neighborhood's identity?
- Reading articles or books together, or viewing films, can spark some good discussion.
- Cultural sharing: talk about the culture associated with your ethnicity and your personal connection to it.
- What price have your people (European ethnic group, religious group, etc.) had to pay in order to become convincingly White?
- Learning to think through underlying needs (for approval, instruction, grace, ...) and how they can get met without relying on People of Color
- Practice feeling and dealing with the feelings associated with dismantling racism (fear, shame, guilt, anger, depression ... joy, relief, connection). Especially develop a sense of anger about racism: White People should be just as angry about racism as People of Color are.
- Mediate grace to each other for our growing pains, especially as we seek to be accountable.
- Learn and role-play individual and group resistance strategies.
- Name some recent experiences of being held accountable. What did you learn? What kind of process was used? How did you feel? How did you deal with the feelings? Did anyone mediate grace to you?

### **What is the structure of a White Caucus?**

We shouldn't separate the structure too carefully from the content of the caucus. A structure can reinforce a culture of white supremacy, or it can challenge it. A designated facilitator helps any group stay on track, watch the time, and coordinate meeting logistics. However, a facilitator does not have to talk a lot, and the role can be shared or passed around. Shaping your discussions using a circle in which everyone has a chance to speak, not just the loudest or quickest, provides a structure not just for speaking but for listening. Listening is a skill that many People of Color have said White People need to work on. Caucusing is a chance to do that. Some caucuses designate a note-taker so the wisdom that is shared can be more easily recalled.

Whatever structure fits well with any particular group, it's important to consider the ways that sexism and other oppressions play out.

Also give thought to creating a space where everyone can feel safe to share. Ground rules can help with this. Confidentiality is important, but define what that means (no repeating anything? Making it anonymous?).

Each caucus meeting might start out by recalling the ground rules and expectation of confidentiality, followed by sharing around the circle what issues each person is bringing with them from their lives. After this, there might be an agenda/discussion topic determined by the group (see content suggestions above). Of course, food always helps people talk. Don't forget to determine when and where the next meeting will be and what you will discuss.

## **How are White Caucuses accountable to People of Color?**

When speaking of accountability, we are primarily speaking about relationships. So, what relationships with People of Color will your caucus have? Often White caucuses develop out of multiracial groups, which allows for somewhat more obvious accountability relationships. A caucus that has developed independently has a more difficult time understanding its relationships to People of Color. It may be that the relationships of the individuals in the caucus provide a measure of accountability. Or, the caucus may seek out a group of People of Color for a more formal accountability relationship. There is a fine line between seeking accountability and adding another burden on People of Color. The most important thing is to listen to what People of Color are saying about how you should be accountable.

No accountability structure is perfect, and all are ambiguous. Again, People of Color should be the ones to determine what is appropriate:

- a summary report of each meeting provided to People of Color, orally or on paper
- periodic check-ins
- one or more People of Color as observers in the caucus meetings
- ongoing relationships between each caucus member and a Person of Color (i.e. the caucus as a group is accountable through its individual members)

## **When should we caucus?**

There is much value in being a part of a regular (every month or two) White caucus. In such a setting the group can determine when and how often to caucus. When working in multiracial settings, however, knowing when to call for a caucus requires some discernment. Sometimes People of Color will call for a caucus, in which case the White caucus follows their lead. A White caucus might be a good tool in these instances:

- When a multiracial group needs to make a significant decision, caucusing can give space for different perspectives that may not come out in the whole group.
- When a White person continues to act out of IRS, and it would be inappropriate to confront them directly in front of the whole group or in more subtle ways.
- When there is work that needs to be done or planned that relates specifically to working with White People.
- Once every day at multi-day meetings (or some other regular frequency). Sometimes we don't know that a caucus would be helpful until we are in the caucus. Even if the caucus isn't "needed," the skills used in caucusing can always be sharpened.
- When conflict happens in a multiracial group, processing roles and behaviors in caucus can be a wonderful time for learning.

## **What are some common pitfalls?**

- Talking about People of Color rather than focusing on White People's issues.
- Having only intellectual discussions and never uncovering the emotional and spiritual aspects of antiracist identity.
- Becoming an elite group of White antiracists who stand above those others who "just don't get it."
- Getting stuck in the ambiguity that surrounds being accountable. ("We can't start caucusing until we are accountable, but we can't become accountable until we've done some of our own work!")