

Vocabulary of Health Disparities

How Faith Leaders Can Understand Racism Injustice and Our Health Care System

We all hear about shorter life expectancy and higher rates of diseases among people of color compared to whites. Dr. Kendra Hotz of Rhodes College explains some essential concepts to help faith leaders understand why these disparities exist. This knowledge in turn becomes a foundation for changing the circumstances that perpetuate health injustice.

Jesus' ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing means he proclaimed the gospel in both word and deed. Our challenge is to examine our deeds as a society for the ways they too often fail to proclaim a healing gospel for people of color. A key learning point of racial injustice in health care is becoming comfortable with vocabulary that describes the big picture of a community's health. Here are some basic concepts.

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH are the characteristics of the environment people grow up in, live in, learn in, work in, grow old in. The stress of our environments, and how our bodies respond, correlates to how chronic diseases develop, how many babies are lost before age one, how many people die too young, and many other measurements of health and well-being.

STRUCTURES OF HEALTH are not only about making better choices. Some structures are built into the racial values of society:

- deny loans to people of color
- knock down Black neighborhoods to build amenities for white people
- tolerate generational poverty
- place hazardous waste sites in neighborhoods of color
- perpetuate misconceptions about racial differences in health care
- limit availability of health care, disproportionately affecting Blacks

MEASURING JUSTICE: Health disparities between white people and those of color include how easy it is to see a doctor, the quality of care patients receive, treatment options offered, and outcomes. Because social determinants contribute to structures beyond personal choice that affect these aspects of health, we measure our social values in the bodies of our people when we come face-to-face with the data of injustice.

As people of faith, let us proclaim healing good news not only in our words but also our deeds by coming to deeper understanding of what forms health and our willingness to help change underlying structures.

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