

# A promise to treat all races fairly

This new series explains why racial discrimination is wrong and how to fight it.

When Michelle was a young child, she and her two sisters were taken on a long drive by their mother. It should have been a fun family holiday. Instead, it was full of bad memories.

Michelle remembers how they stopped to fill petrol at a station along the way. There was a toilet there, which they needed to use. It was locked, so Mother asked the staff for the key. They refused to give it to her.

She was so angry that she told Michelle and her sisters to pee in the open, in front of the petrol pumps. "We did not disobey, but I started crying — and my sisters bawled, too," Michelle remembers.

But, why were they not allowed to use the toilet? The reason sounds unbelievable. It was because the toilet was reserved for one race, and Michelle and her family did not belong to that race.

This was South Africa in the early 1960s. The whole country was run in an extremely unfair way. Most people in the country were dark-skinned Africans, or "blacks", whose ancestors belonged to that continent. However, the people running the government were fair-skinned people, or "whites", whose forefathers had come from Europe.

The whites of South Africa needed the blacks to work in the farms, mines, factories, and homes. However, many of the whites did not want to share the country's great wealth with the blacks. So, they created rules that divided the country by race.

That was why that petrol station had a toilet reserved for whites. Michelle and her family were considered black and could not use it. In fact, they were lucky, because they actually lived in a neighbouring country. They were just visiting their mother's family in South Africa.

For South African blacks, every day was like that bad memory. While whites could live in nice neighbourhoods, go to good schools and get good jobs, blacks were forced to live apart. They were given poor education and health care.

This horribly unfair system was called "apartheid" (say "ah-par-tayt"). The whites tried to convince everyone that the system was actually fair. They argued that whites were superior to blacks, and so whites

deserved to be on top. This kind of wrong thinking is called "racism".

Of course, blacks were angry about all this. There were also whites who sided with them. But, whenever they tried to fight against apartheid, the government would use its strong army and police to crush them.

The horrible situation in South Africa was one of the main reasons why many governments got together to discuss racism and how to fight it. In 1965, they came up with an important document called ICERD.

ICERD stands for the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. It is basically an agreement among countries that they will work hard to make their societies fair for all races.

## An old problem

The white government of South Africa did not invent racism. The problem has existed all over the world and throughout history. When countries conquered or colonised faraway places—like when European empires took control of many parts of Asia, including Singapore—they always treated the local people very unfairly. Racism told them that it was not wrong to treat other races badly.

The worst case of racism in history probably took place in Germany before and during World War Two. The German leader Adolf Hitler and his gang, called the Nazis, believed that Jewish people did not belong in their country. Incredibly, they built factories to murder Jews. Around six million died this way.

After Germany and Japan were defeated and World War Two ended in 1945, countries got together to form a club called the United Nations (UN). They wanted to make sure that the awful crimes of the Nazis would never again be repeated.

The UN came up with an important document called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or UDHR.

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," the UDHR says. Everyone must be treated with respect—and everyone means everyone, no matter what race he or she belongs to.

Unfortunately, even the awful events of World War Two did not teach the world a lesson. There was still racism in many countries, including

apartheid in South Africa. This was why, 20 years after the UDHR, the UN realised it needed a stronger agreement, ICERD.

## Against racial discrimination

ICERD fights racial discrimination (say "dis-kri-mi-nay-shun"), which means treating some people worse than others because of their race.

Of course, there are sometimes good reasons to give different groups of people different treatment. For example, it is good that buses and trains have seats reserved for elderly passengers and those with disabilities. Another example: a good society will not force poor people to pay the same amount as rich people for medical care.

And, it is a good idea to have separate toilets for males and females. However, why should there be separate toilets for different races? There was no good reason for what Michelle and her family had to endure. It was just a way of saying they were inferior. It was racist.

Fortunately, South Africa got rid of apartheid around 25 years ago. But, there are many other countries where racial discrimination exists. ICERD is still a very important agreement. You can read more about it on the next two pages.

Singapore is a multiracial republic. Its government and the different communities worked hard together to make this happen. In 2017, the country agreed to make the ICERD pledge. International experts will advise Singapore how we can improve.

"Racial discrimination of any kind has no place in Singapore," said government minister Grace Fu when Singapore joined ICERD. "We encourage everyone to do their part in making Singapore a home for citizens of all races, religions, and backgrounds."

In our next issue, we will take a closer look at racial discrimination and how it affects people. In future issues, we will explore why some people treat skin colour so seriously even though it is just a colour; and whether it is all right to say bad things about another race if it is just a joke. Reading these articles will help you join the struggle against racial discrimination so that nobody needs to suffer its effects.

— By CHERIAN GEORGE

