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*Part 1*

# HISTORY OF RACE RELATIONS







## Chapter 1

### Smooth Sailing on the Ocean Blue?

Being an ethnic minority can be difficult when there is an entrenched majority. Elmer Lapp was the founding pastor of a mission outreach congregation. In August 1965, his family moved to an area that as of the early 2000s was still 99 percent of an ethnic identity not shared by the Lapp family. Members of the church erected a playground for neighborhood children but let them know it was only to be used during daylight hours. One night after going to bed, Elmer heard teenagers jangling the chains on the swing and went out to try to identify them. The teens ran away, and Elmer followed until he could identify at least one. This is part of the story as it appeared in the local paper:

Elmer “turns toward home. Two young men approach. As they pass, one reaches over and punches him in the stomach. The punch hits hard enough to make the reverend, already winded, bend over and gasp for air. The young men make their getaway. Recovered enough to continue walking, Elmer sees good neighbor Leroy out in his yard. ‘I just got my first sock in the chest,’ Elmer tells him. Leroy’s reply isn’t direct, but its subtext is clear: Well, you’re [an ethnic minority] out on the streets . . . after dark. What do you expect? The reverend continues home and crawls back into bed. The next day church workers don’t need to hear from

Elmer about his mishap the night before—the playground is already alive with the news. They hear a phrase buzzing around, something about ‘Don’t mess with the Bible man.’ Neighborhood kids fill them in—that the teen who dared to hit Mr. Lapp was shot and killed later that night in a seemingly random act of violence up on busy Kenilworth Avenue, not more than two blocks from the scene of the punch. ‘Don’t mess with the preacher; God’s got his back,’ the community decides.”

Due to historic segregation patterns, there was little racial diversity in the community where these teens lived or the public schools they attended. But the lack of significant interracial interactions does not necessarily mean that those interactions need to be hostile. Where does racial mistrust and tension come from? Has the modern climate of racial tension always existed?

Before the late fifteenth century, most people did not travel. Land travel was extremely slow, and people were not crossing vast oceans. If a person did travel a great distance, the long and tedious journey meant that he would see other people as being on a spectrum of physical features. For example, if I were to travel from Northern Europe to sub-Saharan Africa in the 1480s, I would notice only very gradual changes in the dominant skin tone on my journey. In Northern Europe, I would see many blond-haired, light-skinned individuals. Upon reaching the Mediterranean after several weeks, I would likely notice that more people had a bit of a darker complexion. However, the gradual shift would not be as striking as it would be if I were to leave one port in Denmark and suddenly arrive in North Africa.

The voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492 brought about a significant change in travel experiences. Leaving a European port and arriving in the Caribbean, Columbus and his crew

saw clear-cut differences in the appearance of the people they met in Cuba compared to Europeans. Since they had seen no other humans on the journey, there was no gradual shift. Thus they perceived the differences they saw as much more stark. In addition, the advent of cross-Atlantic voyages also introduced increasing contact for many people with those who looked very different from them.

Teenagers in the Lapps' new community in the 1960s would have had some interactions with people of other ethnicities, just not usually as residents in their community or classmates in their schools. Television news featured many issues related to race relations, but such interactions would have seemed distant and abstract. When the Lapp family moved in, racial issues became real in the neighborhood.

When one particular ethnic group dominates a community or an institution, members of that group may still use racial physical characteristics to create advantaged and less advantaged groups. Howard University is a prominent historically black university located in D.C. Photos of past Howard University presidents reveal a strong trend favoring lighter-skinned African Americans. This is consistent with trends found at other historically black colleges and universities. Without the significant presence of an "other" group, people who share an ethnic identity do not necessarily all view each other as equals.

In a majority black country like Nigeria, people do not bother identifying each other as "black" so much as "Yoruba" or "Hausa." In a country like Cuba, where blacks are in the minority, blacks have not historically identified themselves as members of tribal groups or by countries of origin. This is partly