



## **DISCUSSION MEETING PROCEDURES**

### **Our Mission Statement**

*“Eracism” is the slogan of the group ERACE which was formed in New Orleans in the summer of 1993. We seek ways, through person-to-person communication, to show that we are committed to treating fellow human beings of all colors with love and respect. Join us.*

### **Welcome to ERACE**

ERACE provides a forum for people of all colors to talk to each other and get to know each other in an informal setting. At the meetings, we want people to practice the principles of Eracism in their conversations and thus to further the cause of Eracism. We are a non-profit, tax-exempt organization. Membership is open to everyone who believes in Eracism. There are no dues. You become voting member if you attend three discussion meetings during the current calendar year.

### **Our Mission Statement's Implications**

Our presumption, which we must strictly adhere to for the rest of the meeting, is that everyone in the discussion believes in Eracism and that we are working toward a common goal. This presumption, or benefit of the doubt, is extremely important for us to honor. It allows us to disagree about everything under the sun but it does not permit us to question each other's commitment to the Eracism mission.

We encourage people to think critically about the views put forth by all participants, and we expect that our conversations will sometimes become heated. Nevertheless, we insist on an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. Our purpose is to create an atmosphere in which people feel free to explore perceptions, assumptions, and biases without fear of ridicule or personal attack. If you have a disagreement with a person or a group outside ERACE, please try to focus on a particular issue instead of just calling names or attacking a person's character.

### **The Idea of Conversation**

In ERACE meetings, we attempt to approximate a good conversation, rather than an adversarial debate. The key elements of a good conversation are exchange and reciprocity, rather than competition or the attempt to impose one's views on another. During a genuine conversation, participants will expand their horizons by exploring perspectives that are different from their own. They will also be challenged to critically examine taken-for-granted assumptions about the topics at hand.

We should be aware of time and try not to take more than a couple of minutes when it's our turn. If we need more time to make a point, or we have additional remarks, we should hold our thoughts and save them for our next turn. (Taking notes can be helpful.)

The objective of our conversations is not to agree about everything, or to reach definitive consensus on each topic, but to provide common ground and enough understanding of other people's ideas and feelings to move forward toward our goal—Eracism.

### **ERACE Facilitators**

There will be at least one ERACE facilitator at each meeting to mediate the conversation. When you have a comment, signal the facilitator by raising your hand, and you will be taken in turn. Only one person talks at a time. Address yourself to the whole group or to the person in the group whose point you are discussing, instead of talking only to the facilitator.

The facilitator will not participate in the discussion as an opinion-giver or lecturer. His/her role is to keep order, to ensure that meeting procedures are followed, and to ensure that people do not monopolize the conversation by speaking too long or taking too many turns. The facilitator will also try to stimulate conversation by asking questions and by occasionally asking participants to elaborate on their remarks. \*

### **Topics**

Each week a facilitator is responsible for guiding the conversation around a topic (or two) that he/she has chosen. Usually the topic stems from a suggestion made at a previous meeting, a current event, a short newspaper or magazine article, or it is "formally" proposed by a member in the form of questions or a provocative paragraph or two. Everyone is encouraged to suggest topics for future meetings. Suggested topics should be submitted to any facilitator or member of the Weekly Meetings Committee. Topics are set ahead of time, although a very pressing issue can occasionally bump them to a later date. \*

### **Partisan politics**

ERACE does not endorse candidates for public office or engage in partisan politics. We are open to people of all political persuasions who believe in furthering the principle of treating people of all colors with love and respect. We recognize that "politics" is inevitably intertwined with any discussion of racism in our community and that current affairs are legitimate topics for debate and conversation at ERACE gatherings.

We urge our members to use tact and consideration in their remarks with respect to specific political figures, causes, and parties in the interest of promoting the free and courteous exchange of ideas that makes ERACE unique.

### **“Racism” and “Racist”**

We have agreed that: “For our purposes, ‘racism’ is any philosophy that is opposed to treating fellow human beings of all colors with love and respect. A ‘racist’ is a person who is opposed to treating fellow human beings of all colors with love and respect.”

- **Current exceptions:** Historically, Tuesday evening meetings have been smaller, and because we wanted to make them “looser,” participants are encouraged to suggest and to vote on the evening’s topic, and the facilitator is allowed to give his or her opinion occasionally during the discussion.

## **OTHER INFORMATION**

### **Introductions**

At some point early in each meeting, we introduce ourselves, saying our names, and, if we feel inclined, something else about ourselves such as what we do in the world, a comment about why we come to ERACE meetings, a personal experience with racism or Eracism, etc. This is especially important when new members are part of the group. Brevity (a minute or two) is a good idea at this point so that we can get to the heart of our meetings—the discussion/conversation time.

### **Announcements**

Sometimes we have announcements to make and sometimes “business” to discuss. This time will be kept to a minimum also. If you would like to put an announcement on the agenda or make an announcement, let the facilitator know before the meeting, otherwise we may have to postpone it to the following week. Or you may choose to use your some of your introduction time to mention some event or meeting that is important to you. If you have any written material you’d like to share, let people know that they can get a copy from you after the meeting.

### **30 Second Wind-up**

With about 15 or 20 minutes to go in the meeting, the facilitator will wind up the conversation and give everyone a 30-60 second period to say anything at all—make a final point, elaborate on an earlier comment, suggest a topic for future meetings, anything at all. Once we’ve gone around the circle, the facilitator will adjourn the meeting.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

ERACE meetings are not just rap sessions; they are focused conversations. The goal of a discussion is not to master a topic or to learn a lot of facts, but rather to deepen understanding. This occurs when people exchange views freely and consider a variety of viewpoints. The process—democratic discussion among equals—is as important as the content.

The following points are intended to help you (the participant) make the most of your meeting time, and to suggest ways in which you can help the group. Although this advice will be self-evident if you have experience in discussion groups, these points are valuable reminders to even the most experienced participant.

**Communicate your needs to the facilitator.** The facilitator is responsible for guiding the conversation, summarizing key ideas, and soliciting clarification of unclear points, but if you are confused, raise your hand. Chances are that you are not alone when you don't understand what someone has said.

**Help keep the discussion on track.** Make sure your remarks are relevant; if necessary, explain how your points are related to the discussion. Try to make your points while they are pertinent.

**Listen carefully to others.** Make sure you are giving everyone the chance to speak. Keeping a pen handy to jot down your thoughts may help you listen more attentively since you will not be concerned about losing the point you want to make.

**Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the discussion.** If you tend to talk a lot in groups, leave room for quieter people. Be aware that some people may want to speak but are intimidated by more assertive people.

**Engage in friendly disagreement.** Differences can invigorate the group, especially when it is relatively homogeneous on the surface. Don't hesitate to challenge ideas you disagree with. Don't be afraid to play devil's advocate, but don't go overboard. If the discussion becomes heated, ask yourself and others whether reason or emotion is running the show. Aim your criticisms at statements and view points rather than persons and their character. For example, if you think a statement has racist implications, focus on the statement and explain why you think it is problematical instead of attacking the person or labeling them a racist.

**Maintain an open mind.** Your understanding is not furthered by stubbornly sticking to your early statements. Feel free to explore ideas that you have rejected or failed to consider in the past.

EXTRA IMPORTANT:

**Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you.** Your own knowledge is not complete until you understand other participants' points of view and why they feel the way they do. It is important to respect people who disagree with you. They have reasons for their beliefs which are usually not dumb or unreasonable. You should be able to make a good case for positions you disagree with.