

[00:00:01.040] - Lisa C. Qualls

Welcome to the Adoption Connection podcast, where we share resources by and for adoptive and foster moms. I'm Lisa Qualls.

[00:00:08.460] - Melissa Corkum

And this is Melissa Corkum. Don't worry, we get it, and we're here for you.

[00:00:14.620] - Lisa C. Qualls

Welcome to Episode 96 of the Adoption Connection podcast. Today, we want to share with you a conversation that took place in our Facebook group. We had a panel discussion on race and adoption, and the conversation was so rich that we thought it would make a perfect podcast episode for you to listen to. The panel is comprised of two adult adoptees and an adoptive mom, and I was the moderator. So this is a rather long conversation, so we are going to jump right in.

[00:00:49.140] - Lisa C. Qualls

So we are going to start by having our panelists introduce themselves. And I'm going to be the moderator. All right, we're going to start with Ligia. Would you like to introduce yourself?

[00:01:02.300] - Ligia Cushman

Yes. Hi. Thank you, everyone, for having me. My name is Ligia Cushman. I am an Afro Latina daughter of immigrants who has been married interracially for 21 years. I'm also an adoptive mom, and I'm really excited to be here and share some of our stories with you.

[00:01:20.270] - Melissa Corkum

And you're also an adoption professional. Did you say that?

[00:01:22.080] - Ligia Cushman

I did not say that. I always forget to say that. I'm also the director of Adoptions here in Tampa, Florida.

[00:01:29.600] - Lisa C. Qualls

Great. Derek, would you like to introduce yourself?

[00:01:32.480] - Derek Hamer

Yeah. Hello, I'm Derek Hamer, and I'm adopted from Kenya. I was adopted in 2004. So I've been in America for a while. I'm also... I've been doing community college the last couple of years. And so the next year in the fall, hopefully, the virus holds up, I'll be going to school in Pennsylvania, where I'll be studying social work and communication.

[00:01:59.020] - Melissa Corkum

Dude, you're coming to my neck of the woods, Derek. We're going to have to hang out.

[00:02:01.220] - Derek Hamer

I know. It'll be close.

[00:02:02.980] - Lisa C. Qualls

You're going to get roped into all kinds of projects, Derek

[00:02:04.220] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah.

[00:02:07.330] - Lisa C. Qualls

Be ready. All right. And you probably all know Melissa, but, Melissa, will you introduce yourself? This is a different role than you often take.

[00:02:16.230] - Melissa Corkum

I know. So I'm Melissa and I co-host the Adoption Connection podcast with Lisa. And I was adopted as an infant from Korea in the 80s. And I'm also an adoptive mom. We have six kids by birth and

adoption. One of our kids was born in Korea. So I guess that's not a transracial adoption for me, but it's for my husband because I'm married to a white guy. And then our three oldest kids were born in Ethiopia. So we're a multi racial family in a lot of ways.

[00:02:47.740] - Lisa C. Qualls

And for those of you who don't know me, I co-host the Adoption Connection podcast with Melissa. I live in north Idaho and I have children adopted from Ethiopia. But today I am the moderator of this panel. So can we start with you, Ligia? Am I saying your name close to right?

[00:03:04.670] - Ligia Cushman

Yes, you are. You are absolutely right.

[00:03:06.390] - Lisa C. Qualls

Okay. Would you please start? How do you discuss race? Oh, let me back up and say one thing. All of the questions today came from our listeners and people who watch things on our Facebook group, the Adoption Connection. So our first question was, how do you discuss race without it becoming political?

[00:03:26.580] - Ligia Cushman

That's a really good question. When I first saw that question, I was surprised and I was like, Well, I think the answer is in today's day and age, it's probably going to feel very political. And that's okay. I think that we need to make space for hard conversations so that the kids that we're serving and the kids that we parent experience what other children are experiencing. I feel like when we have real conversations about race, it may feel political, but really it feels uncomfortable. I'm also married to a white guy, so I think we in our family, we have lots of uncomfortable conversations about race and more so now than ever because of what's happening in the country. I just think if it feels political, it's probably because it feels uncomfortable. But being uncomfortable is okay right now because I think until we're uncomfortable, we're not going to really change the narrative for the families and children that we're serving and for our own families.

[00:04:34.010] - Lisa C. Qualls

Yeah, that's a great answer. All right, Melissa and Derek, this is for you as adoptees. How do you suggest parents balance supporting their child's healthy racial development and showing that they have their backs as anti-racist parents without putting their kids in a position of feeling tokenized or having their journey feel too public?

[00:04:56.460] - Melissa Corkum

I say this about a lot of things in adoption, and I think race is another area, and that is to follow your child's lead, especially as they get old enough to start having these conversations with you and let them tell you how much of their story that they want to be made public. I think some of our kids will be okay with it, and they'll be okay being the face of what it means to be a multicultural or transracial adoptive family, and some will not. And I don't think that our kids stories have to be necessarily at the forefront in order for us as parents to be considered anti-racist and to be pushing the conversation and having uncomfortable conversations. Even our experience as parents raising kids of color is an important... Our own personal experience brings something to the conversation. And so I think don't devalue what you have to bring if you're a white parent of a parenting kids of color, that your experience is completely valid in this conversation, and we don't have to necessarily bring our kids to the forefront unless we have their permission.

[00:06:15.390] - Lisa C. Qualls

That's important. Derek, do you have any thoughts about that?

[00:06:19.900] - Derek Hamer

Yeah. Melissa, you're talking about just following your child's lead. And I think that is so important. I think that one of the things that I've learned in my family is that we have to be able to create a space in our house where we really can talk about anything, where I can bring up a conversation and I'm not going to be judged for it. I'm not going to be chastised. And sometimes it comes from someone being

called out and saying, Hey, that isn't an okay thing to say. Something that just recently happened that it's honestly a minor thing, but it got me thinking. We were getting ready to watch a movie with our family, and one of our family members, one of our white family members, said something like, You should watch this movie because it's important as a black person to learn the history. And my brother actually didn't like that. He was upset by that. I was like, Okay, but as I thought about it, I was like, Well, that actually didn't mean that. I don't think they realized what they meant to say. But as I thought about it, I was like, But I think as a white person, you have to be careful not to be the person saying, Oh, as a black person, you need to do this, or You have to do this.

[00:07:28.910] - Derek Hamer

I think that's one of the situations where if I want to watch a movie about a historical black guy, that's coming from me, not from my parents saying, Oh, come down and watch it. You need to watch it. You need to learn this. When in reality, it's like, I could watch every movie in the world about a black person. That's not going to change my experience, and everything's going to happen to me. And so it's important as a parent to be careful with what you're saying. I think you can create a space for kids to say what they want, but don't do it in a way where I don't know. I think for my brother, I think it just felt like he's being told what to do. And so you just have to be very careful about that.

[00:08:08.640] - Lisa C. Qualls

Ligia, will you comment on that, too?

[00:08:11.590] - Ligia Cushman

I think for us, I agree with Derek. You have to make space for those conversations for them to come up naturally, not just, Hey. I think because I'm a social worker, I also want to teach him things. When the movie Harriet Tubman came out, we took him to the movies to go see it. He loves to watch action hero movies. And I was like, Oh, we're going to go see a super, a SHero. So we're going to sit down and learn about Harriet Tubman. And I think for our family, making moments for that, but not... Always with his permission, always with his understanding of how he identifies. So I've spent a lot of time trying to get my son to identify as all of these things. And sometimes you lean more one way than the other, even if the world does it for you. And so we have to make space for him to... He's 14 now. He's been with us since he was born. But making space for him to figure out who he is, not who the world tells him he is, is definitely a challenge, especially now, especially today. But we make space for that, for sure.

[00:09:21.020] - Lisa C. Qualls

How do you balance the reality that racism exists without scaring your children or causing them unnecessary anxiety? I'm really glad someone asked this because I've been thinking about it.

[00:09:32.200] - Ligia Cushman

I really was very impressed by this question. I'm going to give you my honest truth from my own life experience as a woman of color. There really isn't a way to do that without heightening their awareness, heightening their realities. I'm raising a brown child in the south, brown boy at that in the south, who is looking less cute and more manly every day. And some of our realities about teaching him about driving, when a police officer pulls you over, the things you need to say so that you can get back home to us when we're not doing those things. I think our own traumas, we have to be careful as adults, that our own traumas, we're not passing them down to our children. But there are things that are just survival based that I have to teach him that does create anxiety, that does create some fears. And then we address it. And we create a system of support around that. But I don't think that being black or brown in America today is that there's space for you not to feel some anxiety. I mean, as a mother, I feel anxiety. With my son entering the phase of driving, I feel anxiety. And maybe one day we won't feel that way. But I think when you make space for hard conversations and everybody gets uncomfortable, that's where change is going to come. And I think that's what we are as a family. And I think that's what we are as a nation right now. So that's why I'm glad about conversations like these because they're necessary.

[00:11:11.400] - Lisa C. Qualls

Melissa, I'm going to hop over to you.

[00:11:14.060] - Melissa Corkum

Well, I think a little bit of what Ligia said is right. We want a healthy dose of fear and maybe not anxiety. I don't want my kids to be not able to live their life to the fullest. But it's the same thing. When we go hiking, we look for snakes. And it's not to freak people out, but it's because it's a thing and we need to know what to do if we come across a situation. If we're camping, we need to know what happens if a bear comes into our campsite. So if we are raising children of color, we need to teach them how the world is going to see them and how to handle that. And I think we need to empower them for those situations and then help them assume that as long as they do what we're talking about, that that's the most that they can do. We talk a lot about this in parenting that we only have so much control. And so I think helping our kids know what they have control over and what they don't and then taking it from there can be really helpful. I also think we have to talk to our kids about... Whenever something happens in life, we can choose the impact it has. We can take lemons and make lemonade, or we can complain about them. And so not to minimize what's going on from a racial perspective, but we as people of color, and I've had multiple situations where the people I interacted with were clearly a little bit ignorant about my race or my culture or my language, I can choose to internalize that and let it ultimately affect my identity, or I can recognize where that comes from, maybe even with a bit of compassion that maybe they've never been taught, they don't know, with recognizing that it's not okay without letting it destroy my life or my day.

[00:13:26.230] - Lisa C. Qualls

Good. Derek, I know your mom so well, so I know that there has been no shortage of conversation.

[00:13:33.650] - Derek Hamer

We do. We have plenty of conversations in our family just about race. But I think the biggest thing that I found for my parents is just like I talked earlier about creating that space is, you try to find the appropriate time and how to deliver. I think when we were younger, we could talk about race in a completely different way than we talk about now. And I think that like... I don't know. I think the biggest thing that I've learned from my parents, and just watching the way they do it, and I think as an adoptive parent, there's times when you have to take the lead in the conversations where it's actually more about, Okay, what am I doing to be able to help my child? It isn't always looking to your child. Oh, my gosh, Derek, what do you feel about what's happening in this world? What's your thought about it? But it's sometimes required you actually taking the lead and saying, Derek, I've been watching what's happening, and it's actually made me think a lot about the way I've parented, or some of the things I've said, and I'm actually starting to change what I'm doing. I think the whole conversation right now around this, how do you be anti-racist? And I think part of being anti-racist is finding a way to have a conversation. But it's a conversation of, hey, I'm breaking down my walls. And again, I think everyone assumes you have adoptive children, you have children of color. Oh, there's no way they can be racist. But I think that... Okay, we're finding out it's true. I think you can still be racist, regardless of what children you have. And so I think that the conversation needs to be that, Hey, there's things I'm doing there to be able to help. Is there anything else I can do? I appreciate when my parents say that to me, when they say, What else can I be doing? And that makes me think, Okay, wait. So first of all, you're paying attention to what's happening, and you want to help me out at the same time. I really appreciate that. That's been the biggest thing for me with my parents, in my family, really, because I think it's not just my parents. I've seen everyone in my family just realized, Oh, man. I wasn't racist, but I also wasn't doing anything to be anti-racist. And so therefore, I could be seen as racist. And so it's become something that our whole family has had to look at and say, Wow, I need to change the way I'm doing things. And it obviously was different. It was different when we were younger. But now that we're all the same, we're all older, we aren't going to be seen as... I could explain a little later. I think it's a question that will be a little later, but I think I'll leave it with this. I think that as black children in our family, I think for the longest time, we were seen as whatever our parents are or whatever our family is. We've actually been given a little bit of that privilege. But it changes once we're older. And I can explain more later about with a different question.

[00:16:28.920] - Lisa C. Qualls

That's good. Thank you. All right. This question has multi parts to it. So I'm going to try to ask it in parts. We'll see how this goes. So Ligia, how do you define black culture? And I'll give you the next

part of the question because I don't know how you want to put this together. When do we use terms black, brown, people of color? Is this a personal preference or is there a right and wrong way to use them? My daughter prefers the term black and hates the use of the term people of color. So basically tell us how we use proper language and tell us a little bit about what black culture is.

[00:17:11.020] - Ligia Cushman

So I'll start with language first. I grew up in New York City and black people were referred to as African American. And then I moved to Tennessee where black people wanted to be referred as black. And that was the first time in 25 years of my whole life where I had to figure out, this doesn't feel right, but this is what you're asking me to say. And so for me, I will tell you that it's really what people want to be called in a lot of ways. I think you'll see more and more people say, no, I'm black. You'll hear more and more of that. Nowadays, I think when we're talking about people of color, I usually hear that from social workers, and I usually hear it about research and data. So it's when we're grouping a group of people together. That's usually when I hear people of color. I use them all interchangeably when I'm speaking, when I'm doing public speaking engagements. It's just whatever comes out is what I say. My son will tell you that he is interracial, so he is black and he is white. And I think that it's really what the person wants to say they feel most comfortable with. I think the deeper in the South you go, in my experience, the more I hear people saying, I'm black, I'm not African American, I'm black, I'm a black American. And so I lean more on that as well.

[00:18:38.110] - Ligia Cushman

When it comes to the first part of the question, which was, what is black culture? I think when I read the question, I know it in my mind, but I had to do a little bit of digging to figure out how do I explain this in a way that resonates. But really, it's the stories of black people throughout the history of the United States that have not been shared. So I'll use Harriet Tubman as an example. I learned about her in school a lot about the underground railroad. I never fully understood the number of people that she set free. I never fully understood the history of her beyond that. So, for example, she was one of the first generals in the Civil War. No one told us that. First female black general. The first time I heard that was what, two years ago when her movie came out. And so it's that part of history that is not being told appropriately so that I, growing up as a child of color black girl in Manhattan, that I could see myself in a Harriet, not just as a slave, but as the liberator of slaves. So I think that when we talk about black culture, we're not just talking about... And I think we have to be careful. It's not just always about civil rights, but it's about art, it's about music, it's about history, it's about all of it. Are we as Americans ensuring that black history is told in the right way, that black artists are being shown in the right way, that black actors are given roles, not just of slaves, not just of activists or criminals, but mom, dad, wife, president. I think that's what when you think of black culture, that's what we're talking about. It's about being part of the story. I think black people for far too long have had to create their own culture because they weren't really allowed, and still in a lot of ways aren't, allowed in American culture. And I think that's what black culture means. I don't know what Derek would say about it, though.

[00:20:49.170] - Lisa C. Qualls

Derek, feel free to address that whole question. I also think people might like to hear your thoughts on the African, African American black person of color. You want to share your thoughts? Yeah. You're in the opposite side of the country, like literally.

[00:21:03.310] - Derek Hamer

Yeah. I'll add a little bit to the culture because you nailed it. I think that it is just the way you view the black people culture is, for instance, when you listen to rap music, it isn't, Oh, my goodness. How dare he say the N word? How dare he swear? It's more of like, Wow, there's a reason he's using this. He's trying to get a certain message across. When a black woman wears her hair super short, it isn't like, Why is her hair short? It's like, Wow, that's beautiful. So it's the way they're viewed that normally in a white culture, just because it wouldn't happen in a white culture doesn't mean it isn't beauty and it isn't cool in the black culture. And it's like, I guess the black culture is the way we identify ourselves. And it's a way for us to be able to say, Yeah, we're united. I don't know. For me, something that's always funny is when we were younger, we'd be walking down the road, and African American men or Black men would be walking by, and do the little head nod. And we were confused about that. And as I got

older, I was like, Oh, my goodness, look at the way we identify ourselves. It's like, Hey, how are you doing, bro? Good to see you. So yeah, you nailed it. But just a little bit of that.

[00:22:12.320] - Derek Hamer

And then for the black versus African American, that's been something for a long time been confusing to me because I think the... And for me specifically, because I've always assumed, Okay, I'm Black and I happen to be an American. I'm a Black person that's an American. I've never always seen myself as African American. But then as I grew older, I was like, Okay, actually, technically, you are African American. So that's always changing. That has always been confusing me. But I think the one thing that I always understood is when I grew up growing up, one thing people always said to me, and it always came from white people, is they would say, Well, Derek, you're not black enough. And I always get confused by that. What do you mean? I'm not black enough? And what it was is, what they were telling me is, Actually, Derek, the way we perceive black culture and what we've been seeing, and it's actually like you hit on it, the wrong ways, the wrong things, the media or white people have said about black people, you don't live up to that, Derek. So we don't see you as black. So wow, you don't stagg. You don't talk a certain way. And so I always was really confusing until one day when someone, when I got older, a black person that we became really good friends with looked at me and said, What do they mean you're not black enough? I mean, you're from Africa. You're from Africa, you're 100 percent black. You couldn't be any more black. What do you mean you're not black enough? And so when he said that, I was like, Oh, he's right. I am. There's nothing. And I realized that it made me realize I need to stop being upset by the way I'm being perceived because it isn't correct. It isn't okay. That's just not right. I don't know. So for me, I tend to see myself as like, Okay, I'm black. And when people say, Well, you're African American, or this... To me, I've always been like, Okay, I don't understand. But I think the thing that makes it more confusing for me is that I am black, and then I also live in a white family. And so the world is always going to be in those bad stereotypes we were just talking about. What the world is always going to see of me, it's going to see me outside of my family, it's going to see me within those stereotypes. When I leave my home and I leave my family, it isn't, Oh, look how cute he is. His white parents. It's, Oh, no. He's a criminal. He's dangerous. He's going to steal something. And so that has always made me think, I don't know. It's always been confusing for me. And I got to be honest, it's something that I still am confused by, and I'm really confused by.

[00:24:43.450] - Derek Hamer

Even going back to Kenya last summer, where I was super excited to be around people who looked like me, people who were the same as me, and being told, Oh, you're pretty white. You're a white African. They even had a word that described me as white African. And even that just confused me more, confused me even more because then I was like, What am I? Where do I fit in? I did the expensive therapy just to be able to talk about, Where do I fit in? What's happening? I see myself as this, but in America, I'm seen as this. And then even in Africa, I'm seen as this. Where do I fit in? What am I? And it's something that I'll be honest, I'm still walking through it. I'm still trying to just figure out. I think it's one of those things it's going to be different. You said it's going to be different for each person, each region of the country, the way you described. So for me, I see myself as Kenyan, and I'm proud to be Kenyan. And then I'm also just also proud to be part of the black culture in America. So that's really the way I see myself.

[00:25:39.800] - Lisa C. Qualls

That is actually a very complex answer, Derek. I was actually glad listening to you process that. Wow. This is what my... Well, your Ethiopian kids, my Ethiopian kids, Melissa, trying to find their way as Ethiopians adopted into white families who are perceived as African American, black, people of color, whatever. It's not a simple thing. I am glad to express that.

[00:26:12.430] - Melissa Corkum

Our kids express similar things. I've had similar experiences. Our kids were adopted as older kids, too, which I think further complicates it. They have really strong accents. They were adopted at 11, 13, and 14. Two of our kids went to Job Corps in a community that had a lot of black kids with a lot of more stereotypical American black culture. And they struggled to fit in there because they didn't speak the vernacular of the black culture. They were just trying to get a hold of English, but they didn't quite... At that point, they'd been home for three or four years, and they weren't quite accepted by the African

small group of Africans that were there either because they didn't remember all the language, a little bit of language. And so they weren't sure, are we African, are we black? Are we African American? Where do we fit into all of this? And so that was really the first time where they really had to face that head on.

[00:27:16.680] - Lisa C. Qualls

Okay, true confession. I was not going to say this, but I will. As a white mom adopting kids from Ethiopia, I remember when they came home and as they got a little older thinking, Well, they're Ethiopian. That's different. I wasn't thinking as much about how they really fit in to black culture, African American culture in the US. It's still something I'm really figuring out. I think it's going to be a long journey. All right, this can be for all of you. How does your faith intersect with your racial identity? So we could talk about the church and race and anything you like. Ligia, are you getting to start? Okay.

[00:28:04.870] - Ligia Cushman

I can start. Yeah, I can start. I was born Southern Baptist in Manhattan, New York City. For us, and it was a Spanish speaking church because my parents are immigrants from the Dominican Republic. So for us, race and culture and diversity was all part of God's Kingdom. So when I think of heaven, I think of all the things that are promised in Scripture, but I also think of all the different cultures and races and all of those pieces that will be there in harmony because I don't know that we've actually ever seen it on this earth in full harmony, if you will. So for me, I always take it from that perspective. So when people ask me questions like, My son is much lighter skin than I am. And when they ask him, Would you have preferred to be in a different family? He will say, No. This is my family and this is the family God gave me. And so for us, I think we're always navigating, what would Jesus do? I don't know what everyone else's faith is, but for us, we follow Christ. We saw Jesus embrace people of different cultures, different... I always think of him as breaking the mold. All these boxes that we want to check. Because even in these conversations we're having right now, we realize race is complex. I'm an Afro Latina, so I'm black and Hispanic all at the same time, and I navigate two worlds. I understand when Derek is saying, I don't really fit in either space. I have to create my own space that I accept fully. I think that that's one of the things that Jesus did. He came, He spoke to the woman at the well, and nobody else was speaking to. He brought disciples over that nobody else was really embracing. There were some strong characters there. I think that that's how we should be, too. Welcoming of all people. Scripture is also clear on welcoming people from other lands as a brother. I think that when we fail to do that, then we're failing to do what we were called to do, which is love.

[00:30:25.870] - Lisa C. Qualls

No, I actually am so tempted to ask you another question, but if we get time, we'll come back on back to it. Derek, do you want to talk about your faith and race and identity?

[00:30:33.740] - Derek Hamer

Yeah. I think for me, I think for growing up for the longest time in church, race wasn't something we really ever talked about because I think it's always just the assumption of, well, we're all Jesus followers. Race doesn't matter. Just as long as we follow Jesus and do what he says, everything will be okay. But I think now we're starting to see this, Wait, actually, race should be something that's talked about in the Church, because there's a specific reason we talk about God doing things for a purpose, right? Having a purpose for our life. And so if that's the case, then there's a reason he made us all different colors. There's a purpose behind that. It's something that I'm really... I started picking up on years ago, but I'm still trying to hone that in. I'm like, Oh, gosh, we are all beautiful for a reason. God didn't just wake up one day and say, Well, half of you here are going to be black, and half of you are going to be white just because I want it. He sees the beauty in it. Something that someone showed me the other day, and I was just super amazed by it. They said that there's not a single person in the Bible who's white. That just was like, It made me say, Wait a minute, hold on. That can't be true. And to maybe think that, Wow, even within that, Jesus' story could have been anywhere, but he chose to be really people of color. So that made me think even more. When the church doesn't talk about race, and doesn't... When I feel like the church isn't doing anything to stand up for racism, I think to myself, That's just so wrong. Because if you read the Bible, Jesus did exactly that. The story of the Good Samaritan. It's Jesus. Lots of different interpretations of it. But the way I look to that is, the way the Good Samaritan acts towards the man is that he actually is talking to someone who really would

have been considered of a different race. And so when I look at that, I was like, That's the interaction of Jesus calling us to get out and be uncomfortable and stepping into the other talking to people who look different than those people who might talk different than us. I don't know. I like this question. I could go on and on, but I'll just leave it at that.

[00:32:55.520] - Lisa C. Qualls

I like it. This is great. This is so good. Derek, I've never heard anybody say that before. And when you said it about there are no white people in the Bible, I was like, Wait a minute. You're right. Wow. For a long time, I've said Jesus was not white, obviously. But I never thought about that at all. Nobody was. Nobody was.

[00:33:17.690] - Ligia Cushman

I think it's really awesome, though, that a lot of churches, my church in particular, I'll talk about mine, has been doing a really good job about talking about race now. I have not seen a lot of churches do that in the past. It was just like what Derek was saying, like, oh, we're good. We get it, but we really don't. And if you want to see it, it's the best picture is families bringing adopted children that don't look like them into these churches. And then that's when you start to see, like, wait, we've got issues here. Let's get uncomfortable and have this necessary conversation. Yeah.

[00:33:55.850] - Lisa C. Qualls

It is. It's sad what it took to get us here, but I'm glad we are having conversations. I live in North Idaho. We're not particularly diverse. I will say I live in one of the most diverse towns because it's a college town, but still it's very white here. Yeah. Melissa, how about you? Faith and racial identity?

[00:34:16.230] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. So I think if you're a family of faith, it gives you an underlying foundation to approach all of these things. And I think about other questions that we've talked about so far. How do we talk to our kids about race without making them anxious? Right at the end of the day, we have the conversations about what could happen. Like I said, we have to be prepared. But then we also talk about God's in control and there's nothing that can happen to us that's so scary or so big that he'll leave us alone or that he won't be able to redeem a situation. I also I think my faith has anchored me in those situations where I'm tempted to be swept up into the where do I belong? I was raised in a fairly diverse area but in a very white family. And Asian racism is different than racism with Blacks. And how does that interact? When we went back to Korea to adopt our youngest son, there was a lot of that weird disconnect where everyone expected me to be the translator for our party and I couldn't. And I don't speak the language. I think throughout my life, I've been an outside the box person. I got married really young. Most of my friends who are my age, their kids are like grade school and our youngest is 13. We have a big family which puts us in this other place. And we believe in Jesus but we also have a kegerator in our living room. So we have all these things that don't always fit the nice neat boxes that people want to put us in. We homeschool in an unconventional way. And so if I think about it too much, I can get really lonely and I can think I don't have a best friend that checks all the boxes. I don't have a best friend that's a mom in the stage of life that I'm in, that's an adoptive mom, that is a woman business owner that also loves Jesus. I have friends for all of those buckets. And so I think in our racial identity, race is important. We don't want to be color blind. We want to talk about culture, but we have to anchor ourselves in something or else we will float around forever wondering, where do I fit in? Where are my friends? Why can't I belong to that community in that community? I think filling our lives with diversity because of our faith and knowing that we serve a God who created all of us to be so different. We've incorporated as much diversity into our family, almost by accident, but I see it now and I see God's hand in it in terms of neurodiversity. Some of our kids have special needs. And color, we have people from all the continents in our family and people have intermarried in different ways. And we're a second-generational adoptive family. And so that's really even changed how we define family. A lot of families define family by blood. And really none of our family is related by blood. There's very few. If you're related by blood to our family, you're in the minority across two or three generations. And so it's changed really, I think, our sense of belonging and our definition of it. And so I think it can be really beautiful to be able to lean on our faith to anchor us when a lot of the world seems to be really rocky.



[00:37:38.610] - Lisa C. Qualls

As long as we're talking about faith, what do you think the church is doing well right now, or what do you think the church should be doing?

[00:37:55.850] - Ligia Cushman

I think what churches are doing well now is having conversations about race and not seeing it as a political issue necessarily. I think the churches, often I'm the granddaughter of a Pentecostal Minister, so church is in our blood. So I'm very used to church life, but I think that we have been silent on things that matter for a long time. And so I think when we take a stand against abortion, for example, but we don't take a stand on Black lives, that concerns me. So for me, I think that what we're doing well is having really hard conversations right now. I can tell you what my church did. We had a panel that we went live on Facebook live and had some of the black families in our church to really talk about their actual real life experiences and then come together and pray. I think that what churches are doing now requires action. We spent a lot of time talking and praying, and those things are great. But I think that are we going to become multi generational, multi ethnic churches where we can?

[00:39:01.290] - Ligia Cushman

I was in a small farming town in North Carolina for 14 years, so there wasn't a lot of diversity there. But I think that churches are expanding and becoming broader, just like what Melissa shared about in her family, not everyone is of blood. I think that churches need to embrace that idea. We are family. We're really good at that. But can my son date your daughter? Those are the things that... Honestly, that's one of the reasons why I relocated to Tampa from my small farming town in North Carolina that I adored. But the reality is things were changing and our church life needed to change too. I think that for us, it was really important for us to be in a more than whether there were more adopted kids in the church, I needed him to see himself in other kids in the church. That was really important. I think we just need to keep having these necessary conversations. I think people of color, what we need to do differently in churches is be honest. I think for a long time, we just sit back and we're quiet and we're like, No, we don't want to cause a scene.

[00:40:11.990] - Ligia Cushman

I don't need to be sounding like I'm crying or upset about it. But we need to be bold. And I think that's why I appreciate conversations like these, because we need to share our truth, live in it, and then together, all of us come to a solution. And the solution is really love. I love my husband. We've been married for 21 years, but we don't come from the same world. Our families don't either. And so it's taken time to develop those relationships. I think families who have adopted can change the world. And we have done it one child at a time. But now we need to follow that up with a lot of action in our churches, too, and hold our church members accountable and love.

[00:40:57.640] - Lisa C. Qualls

Derek, what do you see the church doing well right now or not well?

[00:41:07.500] - Derek Hamer

I heard someone say that you can't pray racism away. I thought that was impactful thing to say. Because I think for the longest time, I think in the church world, it always... I think the church oftentimes can really, in any issue, can get caught up with, Let's just pray about it. I think prayer is great. I think prayer can work all sorts of great miracles. But after you've prayed, after you've done your praying, I think there's a certain action that needs to be done. I think it's been super cool seeing my church, where for the longest time, we really weren't having those tough conversations about race. It felt like every once in a while, you'd have the one message where, Okay, everyone, we're right here. But then the next Sunday, you go back to talking about, Oh, this is what you need for spiritual healing, which again, those are great things to talk about. But I think there's got to be some component where, I don't know, whether it's maybe you're having groups meet or different things where you're talking about race, where you're being uncomfortable. And I think it's been super cool to see my church where I've seen elders and leaders of our church go to protest. When Ahmaud Arbery thing came out, we had long petition of church leader signed, which, again, those are the action steps. I think they've done the prayer.

[00:42:26.400] - Derek Hamer

What do we do? And then the action steps followed, which I think was super cool to see. Even now, I think there's been different conversation happening within our church where it's like, Oh, I like we need to have this conversation about racism. We need to talk about it. It's going to be uncomfortable, but it's something that's super important. And it isn't, not even from a perspective of, Okay, let's have bring in a guest speaker, black person to do the talking. No, your pastor, whoever your pastor is, needs to be the one having this conversation. The first talk might be messy. It might be like, Yeah, listen, for the longest time, I didn't talk about anything, but here's what I'm doing now. I'm getting out of it, and I'm starting to do this. This is what I need to do. I think by doing that, by your church leader, whoever it is talking about their own experience, I think that's how you bring your church along with them, which I think it's something my church is starting to do, where leaders starting to speak up. I think you're right, Ligia, where you said that, where at the end of the day, as a black person, I could sit in my church and complain about everything that's happening and just be like, Oh, I can't believe it's happening. But if I'm not talking to the right people about it, if I'm not bringing up the issue, like, Yeah, listen, this is an issue. I think you're doing your church disservice. And I think I'm doing my church disservice because either they're just blind to it, or maybe they're just really... They might say, Oh, we didn't realize that was going on. And so by me sitting back, I'm doing a disservice to them. And that isn't to say that my job, or I owe my church something, I need to tell them. I think your church, wake up church, there's racism happening. You can't say that there isn't racism happening. But I can help along with that, too, by saying, Listen, this is experience. I can tell you about some kids in our ministry who this is what they thought. This is the feeling they've had about racism. But they come in and they're still alone. And they're not welcomed as some of the other kids. Just sharing even some of those experiences where people are like, Wow, I didn't even know that was happening. We're going to work. We're going to do better. It's something I think I'm seeing our church unite behind. We're doing it. We are going to do this together. We're all in this together. It's just super cool to see.

[00:44:44.800] - Lisa C. Qualls

That's great. That's great. Melissa, if you want to come in on that, you can. Then we're going to move into talking more specifically about transracial adoption.

[00:44:55.510] - Melissa Corkum

I'm a really big fan of organic micro churches. And I think because as I've wrestled with a lot of church issues over the years, and I'm a pastor's kid, so these things have come through trial by fire, is that a lot of our conflict in the arena of church gets smaller when we have smaller groups because it's really hard to be a lost voice in a smaller group where there's deeper relationship. And I think the conversations that Ligia keeps talking about where we have to get uncomfortable, those conversations are going to be the most productive when we already have safe relationship with the people that we're having them with. These aren't the conversations that we can have on Facebook feeds. And even from the pulpit, it's hard because it's a one way conversation. A sermon is a one way conversation. And so I think it's important for the church to remember that all of the people sitting in their congregation all have the same Holy Spirit and we're all equal in that we're all sinners and we all have access and this redemptive quality to this amazing Holy Spirit.

[00:46:51.350] - Melissa Corkum

And so I think sometimes because of the way our modern American churches are set up, there's a power structure that I think can add to some of the oppression that happens in systemic racism and other things. And so I think just going deep with a small group of people in your church community where you can explore these things and where voices can be heard and that there's not voices that are louder. Even for things like special needs and other voices that aren't always heard or the church isn't always meeting them where they are, those things are hard. It's much harder for them to fall through the cracks when you're a group of seven or eight people. If you're an adopted family struggling and you stop coming and you're this family unit of seven or eight families, you're going to be missed. Where you might not be missed if you disappear out of a congregation of 100 or 1,000. And that was part of our experience with some of these things. I think we need close knit, really deep, life on life community.

[00:47:34.910] - Lisa C. Qualls

Okay. Let's talk about... Somebody asked a very interesting question about transracial adoption. Do you feel that transracial adoption should continue or that it should come to an end? It's an interesting question. Yeah.

[00:47:52.150] - Ligia Cushman

Easy question. I'm going to say this. My adoption was a private domestic adoption, transracial adoption. I've been an adoption professional in child welfare for 18 years. Now I'm a director and I can tell you that for me, transracial adoptions, transcultural adoptions aren't going anywhere. I think if we're feeling anything, it's that there has to be... I wrote a piece once about in adoption, love is not all you need. In adoption, you have to follow your action of love, your steps of love with action. That includes race, too. I think that families who live in small communities, who don't have a lot of friends that don't look like them, who don't have a lot of friends at church that don't look like them, I think those families really need to do some evaluating. What can we do differently? I had to do it. I had to do it myself and relocate my whole family to give my son something different. When we moved to Tampa two years ago, it was the first time he had a black teacher in his whole life. I couldn't even imagine that growing up in New York City. I think that's one of the things that was so great for us.

[00:49:18.850] - Ligia Cushman

That's things that adoptive parents can do. But as adoption professionals, we really haven't done a great job of preparing families for the long term. I think 10 years ago, we really focused on skin and hair, and that's great. Focusing on that is great. Having natural hair is great. However, there is so much more to being black than skin and hair. And did we do a good job as adoption professionals to prepare families? So I will tell you that even in the light of everything that's happened now, we do the MAPP classes at our agency or the PPT classes and the cultural competency section. I took over the whole thing and added a lot of new things that we need to really talk about. And then when we're following up with families post adoption asking, how are things going with race? How are you guys navigating those transracial adoption issues that come up. I don't think that we have done a good job of that. And when I adopted our son, I was an adoption social worker. I was teaching MAPP. I did teach the cultural competency class, but no one could have prepared me for my neighbor across the street calling the police because she thought I stole a white baby.

[00:50:34.360] - Lisa C. Qualls

Wow. Can I just say wow? Because that's what we're all thinking.

[00:50:40.740] - Ligia Cushman

Yeah. I can tell you a ton of stories, but I think those are the things that we don't prepare families for. So when you know better, you do better. So now when we're interviewing families, we're asking, Mama and Papa, are they excited about you adopting Jamil? Are they excited about you doing this? And if so, how have they prepared for this? So I think it's things like that that we need to just be more aware of and be intentional. So families who are adopting children who say, I don't really know what it looks like to parent a black child, there's so much information now out there that the internet is a huge resource, but there's also families in our own communities that you can speak to. So I think for me, it's doing better as an adoptive mother, taking action, but then also as an adoption professional, really truly talking about race and getting uncomfortable as well with families.

[00:51:47.970] - Lisa C. Qualls

What do you think, Derek? What do you think about the future of transracial adoption?

[00:51:53.430] - Derek Hamer

Well, yeah. I agree with Ligia, which is actually, I don't think it's going to go away. And I think it's a way deeper, complex answer than just, I think, people are going to sit down here about whether it should happen or whether... Is it okay? But I can tell you that my own experience, and I think the word that keeps being thrown around right now is the idea of white privilege. I was just watching this video, and the video they were talking a lot about that privilege, that white privilege. And they talked about how in the transracial family, your child also has that white privilege, but until a certain age. Where it's like, Yeah, at a young age, I go into store with my mom and dad, it's like, Oh, how cute. You guys adopted. Wow, this is great. I get older, and as soon as I leave my parents' house, it's no longer as, Oh, man.

Dan and Kathleen's son, it's, Oh, man. I got to cross over to the other side of the street. I'm afraid what he might do to me. And so that white privilege is something that we as adoptive parents have to realize. But I think that when they're around us and they're around white people, a lot of times, it can be seen as like, Oh, look, Derek, he's no issue. He's fine. But as soon as I leave the nest, if you will, it's something that's super hard because the idea of it is that a lot of kids who are even being adopted into a black family, there's certain lessons and certain things that you just know, and you just know to teach your child that when you're in a white family, unfortunately doesn't happen. And so once you do leave, you're essentially behind. You're learning all these different things that someone in the black family has the advantage of knowing. It doesn't mean that just because they know everything's going to be okay, but it does help them to be able to understand. Even something like you were talking about, the idea of being afraid about your son driving. And those are things like the conversation, the talk, where I think in a white family, if you didn't know, you wouldn't have a conversation with your kid about, Oh, you get pulled over, put your hands on the wheel. You get pulled over, narrate everything that's happening, and allow the officer to tell them, Hey, this is happening. But again, in the white privilege, you just assume that, Well, they're with me. Everything's fine. But as soon as they leave, everything isn't fine.

[00:54:30.780] - Derek Hamer

So you have to understand that white privilege, actually being in the white family, I think, in some areas, does them a disservice for a while, because once they get older, the world doesn't no longer see them as Dan and Kathleen's son or whatever. And so I think that's something that I've been thinking about. Even me going on to school in the fall. I'm going to be the completely different area of the country, and no one's going to know who I am. I'm no longer associated with my parents. It doesn't matter what my parents do. That doesn't matter. I have to learn all these different skills and different things, I have to pick up all on my own. And there's probably skills and things that I don't know because I haven't been around enough black people to understand things that just happen on a daily basis for black people. But I'm going to have to learn. And yeah, it scares me a little bit to think that, yeah, maybe I'm going to have to learn it the hard way. A little bit of the trial and error. And so, yeah, I think that white privilege is something to really think about. My child has white privilege because they're associated with me. But once they get older and leave, that no longer applies.

[00:55:43.660] - Lisa C. Qualls

I've been thinking about that a lot as my boys are both teenagers now and it feels very different. I think about it a lot. They're 13 and 15, Ligia, so we're right in the same time.

[00:55:55.000] - Ligia Cushman

We're right in the same thing. My son struggles with that because he's white and he's also black. And so he navigates in both worlds, but he doesn't fit in either. My husband being white, of course, he has white privilege that he's instilled in our son. And I always get scared because I'm like, honey, no, once he leaves here, they're not going to see him that way. And so even as an adoption professional, I'm constantly battling as an adoptive mother, like, what is the balance in all of this? And none of us have it down right. There are still things our children will miss out on because we adopted them. And we have to live with that, too.

[00:56:40.590] - Lisa C. Qualls

What do you think about the future of transracial adoption?

[00:56:44.080] - Melissa Corkum

Well, we talk a lot here about family preservation, so I think that's an important part of the conversation. Obviously, the best place for our kids would be with their families of origin. I'm not opposed to it as a transracial adoptive family. I think, like Ligia said, it comes with an immense responsibility. But I also think with that responsibility, the diversity and the open mindedness that that's created in our family, I wouldn't trade for the world, even for all of the trials. And I think, like you said earlier, Ligia, transracial adoptive families. And I talked about earlier, having hard conversations with the safest, closest people. When we all live in one household, we all identify as one family unit, that's the closest type of relationship. And so pulling those relationships, transracial marriages and transracial adoption gives us the opportunity to learn better, to do better, to listen better. But I'll also

defer to... There's a set of books that Rhonda Roederer published, *in Their Voices*, and there's a couple of them, *Black Americans on Transracial Adoption*, just one that's all different races of transracial adoption voices and stories. They're also very research based. And so, statistically, from her research, transracial adopters don't fair any worse, statistically, in terms of mental illness, physical illness, professions, where they go in the world. And I think that's important to remember, too, that we can overcome these challenges of transracial living, but we have to do it with an incredible amount of intentionality.

[00:58:41.890] - Lisa C. Qualls  
Yes.

[00:58:43.200] - Ligia Cushman  
That's so good.

[00:58:43.930] - Lisa C. Qualls  
I think we only have time for one more question, but it's a big one, so get ready. I would like each of you to answer the question, what advice would you give to adoptive parents who are adopting children of another race? I know that can be a small question or it can be a big one, so answer as you'd like.

[00:59:10.960] - Melissa Corkum  
I think listen. And ask open ended questions that don't necessarily lead. I mean, you have to use your intuition. But also I always like to take the opportunity to tell families it is an immense responsibility to take on as a transracial adoptive parent. But also I think transracial adoptees have an extra peg to hang some of our grief on. It would be different if you looked like me. It would be different if I had been adopted into a family that looked like me. This goes back to this whole identity issue and for us, faith. Kids who struggle with identity issues would have struggled with identity issues even if they were in non transracial families. This is sometimes is a scapegoat to much deeper things. And we could do everything right as transracial adoptive parents and still have kids who struggle with racial identity.

[01:00:25.280] - Ligia Cushman  
I would say we train prospective adoptive families all the time. I would say research, read. Rhonda's material is great material to read. It is research heavy, but it definitely sheds a light on some of the things we're doing well and some of the things we absolutely have to work on. So I do believe families should be intentional. I think oftentimes in the old modern old adoption ways, we allowed our children to be the ones who told us what they needed when they needed it. And that it's not fair and it is not parenting, really. I think, of course, as they get older, you give them space for that. But when they're younger, I remember an adoptive mom coming to my office and saying, well, I'm having a lot of problems with her. And I said, well, when's the last time she spoke to birth mom? Back then it was birth mom. Now it's mother of origin. But first mom, when was the last time she spoke to her first mom? And she said, Well, she doesn't ask for her, so she's not really thinking about her. So I would challenge any adoptive parent to ask those questions, make space for that conversation, too, because that's where their identity is, too. It's held somewhere else for them sometimes. And I think for my son, that's one reason why we've made space for an open adoption. We make space for him to call and talk to her and ask her really hard questions that she's very rarely prepared for. But that all of us are his parents, and so we have to be intentional about answering those questions for them.

[01:02:09.380] - Ligia Cushman  
And like I said earlier, love is action. So if you love your child, then find spaces where your child can see people that look like them. I used to go to take my son to a barber shop in not such a pleasant part of town, but it was the barber shop that really resonated with him and where he had relationships. So I took him there every two weeks. I was there on a Saturday morning listening to... And there's such a beautiful rich culture there that I would have never experienced had I not taken my son to the barber shop. So just be intentional. And to become a transracial adoptive family means things have to change in your own family to make room for that child. And so we have to make room for them no matter what that looks like.

[01:03:01.520] - Lisa C. Qualls

Derek, what advice would you give to parents adopting transracial?

[01:03:05.000] - Derek Hamer

First thing I'd say is stop getting your information from CNN and Fox News. I'm serious, just don't do it. So my parents tell me to stop watching the news. They paint it and then they tell me don't do it. Don't do it. I tell them and I really think it's important to, first of all, listen to black voices, whether that's books, videos, whatever. Follow them on Instagram, listen to black voices, because the experience that... It doesn't make sense for a white newscaster to tell about what's happening to black people. You need to get it from their own experience of black people. So that's the first thing I'd say. Just do that. Also, adding on to what Ligia said about allowing yourself to be in communities, putting yourself in situations where you're being surrounded on a role model. The driving story I told you, the reason we learned about what to do when a police officer pulled us over was because one of our friends came over. And it's black man who'd been through that. And so we lined up in a row and said, I'm a police officer. You're getting pulled over. What do you do? And he goes, wrong.

[01:04:20.730] - Derek Hamer

So putting these different people in your life, people who... My parents wouldn't have known that. They'd say, Yeah, I think the assumptions is just listen to what the officer says. But there's more to it than just that. I think it's so important to put people in your life who have been through things. One of the biggest things to do that is just putting black voices around. Maybe finding someone in your church who is black and can just take you. Let your children hang around them. Because you're not going to always have all the answers. We know that you're not going to have an answer, especially as white family members. You're not going to have the answers. You're not going to know. One of the things my parents did, a younger age... I say younger age, I always say that, and she yells at me and says, Okay, you make it sound like you were five when you did this. But she'd let us listen to rap music when we were, I'll say 12. I'll be nice to her. Twelve. Yeah, she'll feel better about that. She'll feel better about that. But even that, listening to that music, that understanding, that helped me understand the culture. That was super important. Things that she said she normally wouldn't let her white children do.

[01:05:24.440] - Derek Hamer

So just different things that you can do to help out in that. And then just at the end, I think understanding that you aren't going to be perfect, but also that you are making an effort. I think it's super important for me to be able to see my parents are making an effort and knowing, Okay, let's be honest, they're going to make mistakes. They're going to say some silly things, but I have to just understand, look, they're trying. They want to do better. They want to do the best they can. And I think my whole family, actually, is just being able to see, even with everything happening, see how different my family members have become. It's been something that's super impactful for me to see. I think being in transracial family, I'll say it can be challenging, but it's also going to be very beautiful. Everyone just listens to each other.

[01:06:15.440] - Lisa C. Qualls

All right. Well, this has been a great conversation. I feel like it's the beginning. I feel like an episode two.

[01:06:20.800] - Derek Hamer

We could do so many of these. Yeah. So good.

[01:06:21.220] - Lisa C. Qualls

Yes, we could. Well, can you share where people can find you on social media if they want to reach out to you?

[01:06:34.470] - Ligia Cushman

Yes. So on Instagram, I'm @LigiaSpeaks, and I usually share a lot about transracial adoptions, transcultural adoptions, and some of the speaking engagements I have. And then I also have a

website where I blog a lot. I'm a big blogger, and it's LigiaCushman.com.

[01:06:53.790] - Lisa C. Qualls

Thank you. And if people don't know how to spell your name, it's L I G I A Cushman with a C. Yeah. Thank you. And we will put that for the podcast, we will put that in the show notes as well. Derek, if someone wants to reach out to you, how do they reach you?

[01:07:08.700] - Derek Hamer

Yeah. Instagram, @dham28. You can just find me on Instagram. And then I don't know, just email. I guess I could give you email and Instagram if you want to reach out and if you ever want me to speak or anything. I'd love to do it. I'm new in the speaking world, I guess. And so what comes of that is I'm free right now. So I'm just trying to get exposure.

[01:07:31.450] - Lisa C. Qualls

But you will be in Pennsylvania soon.

[01:07:35.430] - Derek Hamer

That's right.

[01:07:36.080] - Lisa C. Qualls

And, Melissa, you tell people how to find you.

[01:07:41.130] - Melissa Corkum

Sure. I'm on Instagram @corkboardonline, and my website is the corkboardonline.com. And then, of course, The Adoption Connection is the adoptionconnection everywhere, Facebook, Instagram, all the places. So we'd love for you guys to interact with us there and continue to ask questions. Let us know if this was helpful. We can always gather a panel, the same panel, different with other folks that we thought about bringing more voices in. And so if this is something that was helpful, let us know and we will continue to do these as we have time and space and as we remember.

[01:08:19.600] - Lisa C. Qualls

Well, thank you everybody for coming and listening and watching. We are so glad you were here. And I don't know about you, but I feel like I learned some really valuable things in this hour long conversation. Thanks for being here and we hope to see you again at the Adoption Connection.

[01:08:39.780] - Melissa Corkum

Thanks so much for joining us on this replay of our race and adoption panel. If you'd like to contact Derek or Ligia, you can find their contact information, along with a list of recommended books on all things race, at the show notes for this episode. You can find those at theadoptionconnection.com/96.

[01:09:01.500] - Lisa C. Qualls

Before you go, we'd love to connect with you on social media. You can find us on Facebook or Instagram as the Adoption Connection.

[01:09:09.290] - Melissa Corkum

Thanks so much for listening, we love having you. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave a quick review over on iTunes. It will help us reach more moms who may be feeling alone.

[01:09:19.400] - Lisa C. Qualls

And remember, until next week, you're a good mom doing good work, and we're here for you.

[01:09:26.160] - Melissa Corkum

The music for the podcast is called New Day and was created by Lee Rosevere.