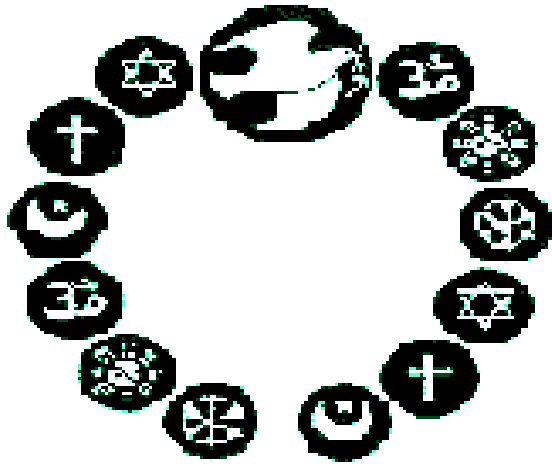


The Story of

THE INTERRACIAL INTERFAITH COMMUNITY

of Savannah, Georgia

By Lee Alexander and Rev. Audrey W. Vincent, D. Min.
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Mission Statement

The Interracial Interfaith Community takes an active role in exposing and confronting both personal and institutional racism. To be a catalyst for healing and spiritual growth within Savannah and surrounding communities, IIC will offer a variety of educational and cultural programs to promote appreciation of our diversity and sameness.

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THE STORY OF THE INTERRACIAL INTERFAITH COMMUNITY (IIC) OF SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

To tell the truth, we were all a little uptight. Our church, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Savannah, had just hosted The 1993 Thomas Jefferson District Dismantling Racism Conference, an event bigger than our church could handle. We turned to a nearby Congregational Church, a historic synagogue, and an African-American educational center for space for workshops and the Sunday service. The conference was a success; more so, it had a galvanic force that propelled its participants into an expressed need to meet and to explore further the potentialities it presented. A rabbi who had attended the conference called some leaders of the community and attendees of the conference together. We were excited yet apprehensive. What to do now? How to proceed?

We began by listening to one another about what we envisioned for Savannah, then by working on a mission statement, a full-page statement later shortened to a sentence. We chose the name, Interracial Interfaith Community (IIC), and agreed to meet monthly. Defining the structure of the leadership was important. Some months later, we formally adopted a partnership style of leadership with co-presidents: one African-American and one white. Early on we met at the Unitarian Universalist Church; the next year at a nearby synagogue; the following at an Episcopalian church at noon and every third meeting at an African-American Catholic Church in the evening. More recently, the meeting venue has alternated between the

fellowship hall of a white congregation for one year and then an African-American house of worship the following year. Meetings were and, to this day, are built around a meal in the realization that none of us ever before regularly broke bread with others beyond our own racial group, and that providing a meal would serve to attract and keep regular attendees. Above all, the consensus of the group was that it was time for positive things to begin. And begin they did.

CAN WE TALK?



In October 1995, with a \$2000 grant from the Unitarian Universalist Whitney M. Young, Jr. Urban Ministry Fund, IIC produced a daylong citywide series of workshops under the title "Can We Talk? A Conference on Multicultural Issues" held at a large United Methodist church. The list of issues grew out of local concerns but as the conference came just days after the O. J. Simpson verdict, there were inevitable national implications and heightened sensitivities. The event attracted about 120 people and could not have been timelier in bringing diverse groups to the table. Among participants and facilitators for the workshops were representative students from local high schools, Savannah clergy, academics, government administrators, the media, and social workers. Liaisons were made and a community advisory panel to the city newspaper was formed. The success of this first big event

gave status to IIC and pride, self-confidence, and enthusiasm to its members.

The following spring, a Baha'i member of IIC who had gone through prejudice reduction training with the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) of Washington, D.C, persuaded the leadership to turn to two NCBI leaders to conduct the second "Can We Talk?" event. The day workshop was held at a Jewish community center and attracted a number of people from the business community. The total aim was to empower individuals to combat discrimination, facilitate conflicts based on prejudice, and develop coalitions across ethnic lines. This event received positive attention from the local media, and overall was particularly gratifying to IIC in that it attracted participants from other ethnic groups in addition to African-Americans and Euro-Americans.

For its third time around, "Can We Talk?" returned to local problems and a local cast for the October 1997 conference. With the conviction that if we cannot truly respect each other's religious beliefs we cannot truly respect each other, IIC set about designing a workshop that would offer at least some basics in understanding and valuing the major faiths in our city. Many faith communities were represented by participating clergy. A particularly popular panel explained details of interfaith etiquette, with emphasis on the Islamic and Jewish faiths. In the post-conference evaluation the consensus was that this feature should be continued at intervals throughout the coming year. Another ongoing item was a plan for certain predominantly white churches to present African-American ministers as speakers

and forum leaders from time to time. Positive comments about this workshop are still heard from Savannah clergy.

PUPPET SHOW

As IIC moved into 1998 the planning for the annual conference gradually evolved into larger-scale, multi-year projects. One of the most gratifying was conceived in 1996 but only reached maturity in 1998. Savannah's having a first class company of puppeteers that created a successful children's show for the Martin Luther King Birthday observances inspired IIC to commission a puppet show emphasizing diversity and tolerance that would be designed for school children. The production developed slowly for reasons of financing, a lengthy production time, and sensitivity around choosing just the right content. IIC, with Unitarian Universalist assistance from The Fund for UU Social Responsibility and generous help from community friends, financed the project. City agencies and art groups made it possible for the show to be seen by wide audiences by not charging school children for the performances. The play, entitled "Friends", was based on the African folk tale about Frog Child and Snake Child becoming fast friends despite their differences and teachings. It has toured all public and some private schools in the city and county area and environs and was well received.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN MONUMENT



Savannah's first monument honoring African-Americans

In 1996 Dr. Abigail Jordan, an African-American educator and civic leader, came for the first time to an IIC meeting bringing her long held dream of having a monument of significance on the riverfront to commemorate the lives of slaves who were put ashore there and their descendants who survived, made families, helped build the city with their sweat, muscle, and know-how, and became members of Savannah's demographic structure.

Savannah is a city of park-like squares with some forty-three statues and monuments, but none honoring an African-American despite the fact that black citizens make up more than half the city's population and are clearly part of its heritage. Her efforts to achieve permission to proceed with the project were met by the city's leaders with foot-dragging and clever dodges for a period of ten years. Early

in 1997 IIC sent a letter of support to her for the project. Sometime later, two members of IIC addressed the council in support of the project. Other members wrote letters in the same vein to committees and agencies of the city. When permission was finally granted in January 2001 for the erection of the monument, several IIC members joined the African-American Monument Association to raise funds for it. IIC itself made a donation, as did individuals and faith communities. Dr. Jordan emphatically affirms that, of all the organizations that might have been expected to be supportive, IIC has been far and away the most helpful.

PARENT UNIVERSITY



In 1998, Savannah schools experienced a number of bitter altercations between teachers of one race and students and parents of another. IIC began considering ways it might be of help. One member had learned of a program specifically targeted for parents in providing communication skills and other training to assist them in parenting and in relating to school personnel. The program, called Parent University, had been very successful in the Atlanta area. As its purpose and scope were larger than anything IIC had attempted and would involve the enrollment and scheduling of classes for parents over a period of months, some members voiced fears that it was too big and complicated and would deplete our resources. Others envisioned how it could be done--by IIC's partnering with the Board of Education and business sponsors to provide venues,

teachers, supplies, and lunches, with volunteers providing childcare, and these were the voices that prevailed. After over a year of planning, in the fall of 1999, the program was launched with remarkable success, and to date is still going strong along with much acclaim in the community. Several members of IIC provided leadership and one--who launched the whole program--is now Dean of the University--with tenure!

SHORT TERM PROJECTS

Two single events deeply engaged several of the leaders of IIC in organizing and production: a powerful, moving Kristallnacht Interfaith Memorial Service (1999), and a January 2001 rally in support of returning to Georgia's traditional flag in preference to the Confederate "Stars and Bars" with its racial implications.

The most recent activity (Spring 2002) focused on providing an IIC presence at Tybee, a nearby beach community, in an effort to bring about a more cordial atmosphere between residents and visiting African-American "spring break" college students. In the past, this particular weekend was problematic with incidents of confrontation and discrimination that sometimes resulted in violence. This year the students were welcomed by IIC members on the one highway to the beach and this seemed to help establish an atmosphere of hospitality, which led to a peaceful weekend unmarred by disruptive incidents. Consensus was that the effort was definitely worthwhile.

FUTURE PLANS

This coming fall IIC is planning an ongoing study of the death penalty in Georgia with emphasis on the disparity in numbers of black versus white persons executed, as well as a study and possible support of a program called "Drug Court," in which persons charged with drug-related offenses would be offered treatment and counseling in lieu of jail.

CONCLUSION

IIC's membership is primarily derived from individuals already committed to a faith community. This means that loyalties are probably stronger to the primary group. Once IIC moves from one house of worship to an entirely different faith community for its meetings, members from the former faith community sometimes choose not to continue coming. Given that fact, IIC has nevertheless attracted and for the most part held the dedication and creative resources of some two or so dozen members over the years and have gained new members with fresh energy and skills. IIC has proven a group does not have to be great in numbers to make a difference; it does not need to have great financial and other resources to plan and produce worthwhile events and programs. Time is a critical factor; things worth doing take time to plan well. IIC is blessed with good planners as well as good doers. IIC's future as an effective organization is bright indeed.

REFLECTIONS FROM A PAST CO-PRESIDENT CLERGY MEMBER

Several factors led to the ongoing life of Interracial Interfaith Community. They are very simply:

- 1) The sense on the part of those of us who gathered in the early meetings after the Dismantling Racism Conference in 1993 that there was little to lose and much to gain by carrying the idea of dismantling racism in Savannah forward. Never had there been an attempt to create a bi-racial organization committed to such an endeavor;
- 2) The dedication by several members who from the beginning were and still are constant in their attendance, pitching in to do such organizing tasks around bylaws and mailings and continue to maintain their activism by serving in various ways;
- 3) The persistence on the part of Rev. Audrey Vincent, the Unitarian Universalist minister, to make sure that a meeting occurred monthly and that the meeting would *always* be preceded by a meal together knowing that most, if not all participants rarely, if ever, broke bread with those of a different race. This meant on occasion that she arranged for the meal herself even if it meant bringing deli items from the supermarket;
- 4) The commitment by early leaders that the leadership must be shared, black and white together. This was articulated by Rev. Vincent who wanted to avoid at all costs an all white led organization; that the ideal was a black and white partnership with leaders striving to exercise equality in power, exemplified by co-presidents, and with the secretary and treasurer, both genders would also be represented.

- 5) The understanding that the meetings would move to different houses of worship approximately every year, reaching out to include new communities of faith as we grew.

Initially contacted by a rabbi to gather people together to continue the conversation begun at the 1993 Thomas Jefferson District Dismantling Racism Conference, Rev. Vincent saw her role as supporting the rabbi and providing hospitality at the Unitarian Universalist church where the early meetings were held. It was only after some months when the group seemed to falter that she began assuming more leadership along with Jacqui Anderson, a lay African-American Methodist social worker. The two created a partnership style of leading; one month one would preside, the next one, the other.



Jacqui Anderson & Rev. Audrey Vincent

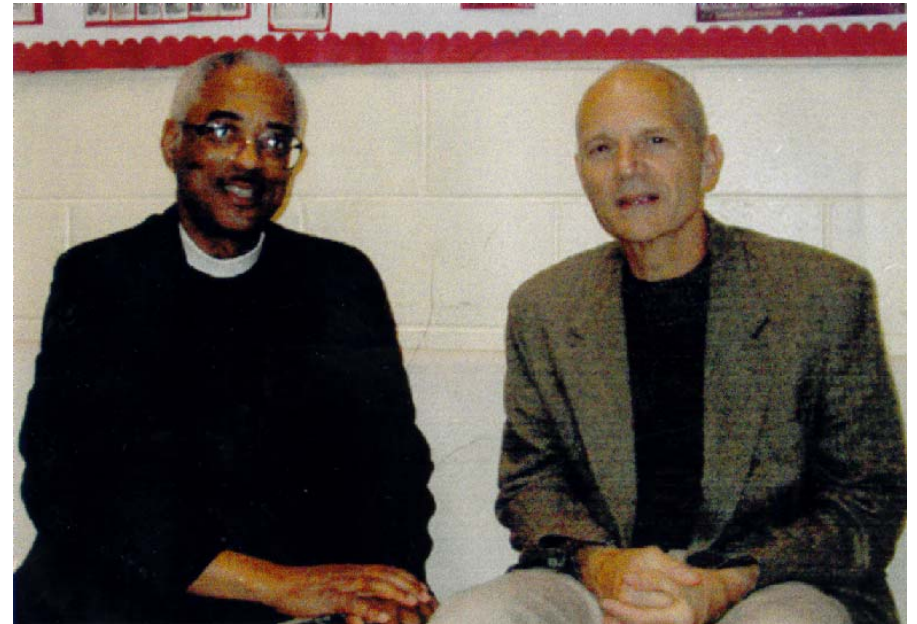
She offers, "My main fear was that I could not sustain my share of the work along with my responsibilities to the church. As it turns out, I was co-president four years, "keeping on, keeping on" until other clergy

came into the leadership. Clergy usually bring others in, so I reached out to them. During those years, I felt I had two ministries going at once. To the great credit of the church,

people were generally were supportive; in fact, about 12-15 people from the church were members in the early years.”

For the first “Can We Talk?” conference in 1994, she spent many hours on the phone and in visiting clergy of various faith traditions getting commitments from them to encourage a good attendance. The time spent was fruitful in contributing to the success of the conference as well as laying the foundation for future work such as the Third “Can We Talk?” which dealt with Sunday worship, “the most segregated hour of the week.” Also, eight years later in 2000, a second Unitarian Universalist District Conference was held in Savannah and the contacts in various faith traditions that had been well established resulted in broader representation by more faith groups. IIC contributed to the conference helping with hospitality and attendance.

She concludes, "After the 1993 District Conference weekend, I thought I had done ‘it’ regarding anti-racism work and could turn to other matters. I soon realized that I could not just do that one weekend and feel like I had done something. I began to develop a long view that the work has to be an everyday kind of learning and vigilance. I was grateful that others saw it in a similar way and persisted along with me. Their support made my work possible. It is with gratitude that I return to meetings cheering on the current co-presidents, a black Episcopalian priest and a white Episcopalian layman”.



*Fr. Joslyn Angus & Dr. James Maury
Current Co-presidents of IIC*

AFTERWORD

Since the original writing of this document, the African-American Monument has been erected and unveiled in an impressive ceremony. It is equally compelling from both the river plaza and from vessels passing along the river itself. It has attracted media attention throughout the United States and a number of foreign countries. In many cases help has been requested in launching similar projects.

Many Savannahians and even visitors in letters to the newspaper have commented on the warmer atmosphere that prevails across racial lines now.

There are still deep problems here that will take generations to heal, but there has emerged a lessening of tensions and less denial that racial problems do exist.

Members of IIC have gratifying and exhilarating experiences of interpersonal friendships that have come out of this cooperative effort. We fully expect them to last a lifetime.



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STUDY QUESTIONS AND RECOMMENDED RESOURCES FROM THE UUA OFFICE FOR CONGREGATIONAL ADVOCACY AND WITNESS

By Susan Leslie, Director

1. The IIC uses an approach that involves community building to cross barriers and dismantle racism. How does this approach differ from more issue driven forms of organizing? What are its strengths?
2. What were the ways in which the Interracial Interfaith Community intervened into the general climate around town regarding race and changed it? Where and how did they take some risks?
3. How did the IIC maintain accountable relationships with the larger community of color?
4. Identify how the IIC successfully used
 - education
 - advocacy
 - public witness
 - community organizing, and
 - serviceto achieve change in Savannah.

5. A striking component of the IIC story is its emphasis on intergenerational involvement. Note the real needs of the community that were met to elicit this involvement.
6. IIC's story demonstrates the rewards and challenges of interfaith organizing. What were the ways that they dealt with difference? What keeps them in relationship and sustains their work?

RESOURCES

Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue, edited by Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones. Papers and discussion transcripts from the UUA Consultation on Theology and Racism held in Boston in January 2001. Addresses such questions as: What theological or philosophical beliefs bind us together in our shared struggle against racism? What are the costs of racism, both for the oppressors and the oppressed? Includes ending chapters from Susan Leslie on anti-racist action and resources. (Skinner House) November 2002.

A Community Builder's Took Kit -- 15 Tools for Creating Healthy, Productive Interracial/Multicultural Communities-- A Primer for Revitalizing Democracy from the Ground Up. *This pamphlet provides practical hands-on steps for building interracial partnerships. To order contact:* Carole.Ferrell@cgu.edu