



*A Joint Anti-Racism Venture*

*Repositioning Ourselves In Hope:*  
A Retreat on Anti-Racist Community Building Work  
Children Defense Fund's Haley Farm in Clinton, Tennessee  
March 3-6, 2005

*A Comprehensive Report*  
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A joint initiative of the Institute for Democratic Renewal and Project Change

*“This is a crossroads moment. We’re standing between isolation and interdependence; poised between drift and advancement, between despair and hope – in our nation, and certainly in the racial justice movement in this country.*

*We’re gathered together now to reposition ourselves in hope.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> John Maguire, from his welcoming statement at the opening of the retreat, Friday March 4, 2005.

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## *Précis*

Following the 2004 United States presidential elections and approaching the second anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, many individuals in the national anti-racist organizing community were feeling a need to “reposition themselves” in relationship to the ongoing urgency of our work as well as in connection to a more comprehensive vision. In response to that need, the Institute for Democratic Renewal (IDR) and Project Change (PC) jointly invited twenty-seven remarkable community activists, trainers, consultants, scholars, religious leaders and cultural workers from around the country to Clinton, Tennessee for three days of conversation at the Children’s Defense Fund’s Haley Farm.

From the outset, the organizers and facilitators of the retreat established an extraordinary atmosphere of deep commitment to the work, warm collegiality, and trust that allowed participants to discuss the state of their labors as well as the state of their spirits; and to be fundamentally encouraged in both realms. The gathering combined sustained, thoughtful analysis and passionate concern through a mixture of personal stories, small group reflections on lessons and challenges, and collective considerations of broader thematic issues.

### *Introductions: Who and Where We Come From*

On the first evening, Pat Harbour and Lynn Walker Huntley, our facilitators, asked participants to assemble into small groups and start the process of introducing ourselves to each other. They asked us to imagine speaking to our grandmothers, in a manner they would understand, about the work we do and why it is important to us. Beginning in this way opened an important emotional space for many participants and allowed us, early in the process, to understand some of the “backstory” of each other’s lives and vocations.

“*Kaqu*, one of my favorite things was to sit around you,” **Laura Harris**, executive director of Americans for Indian Opportunity, started her reflections; calling her Comanche grandmother by the term of endearment. “I remember you reading the dictionary when you were eighty years old – still loving to learn new words. I remember the Comanche values you taught my mother, which are the basis for our leadership work. The four **Rs**: relationship, reciprocity, redistribution, respect. We help emerging Native leaders to recognize their abilities. Our organization was created through your teaching. Thank you so much for everything you gave us.”

Laura continued, describing AIO’s leadership development work. “We have a process designed to find underlying causes of social problems and injustices and addressing the causes rather than the symptoms. We’ve used this process with Russians, Koreans, Japanese, Maoris and Indians. We’ve developed the term *indigeneity* to describe our values and philosophies. Our new mission is to share the vision that there is another value system available, an alternative to the Euro-American value system.”

**Tammy Luu** called her grandma “Popo,” which is Chinese for grandmother. “Popo said I was her last child. My mom was like the father in the family because she worked seven days a week and wasn’t home much. So Popo was like a mother to me.”

“I grew up in a white working class neighborhood,” Tammy said. “Our sponsors used to take me to a Presbyterian church with a lot of Republicans. I remember that when I came home afterwards I would feel so much hate. And my grandmother would cook me great Chinese food and make the hate go away. My grandmother gave me that grounding in love as the basis for all my work; profound love for oppressed people – even though she probably wouldn’t be thrilled at my life as an organizer. She wanted me to be financially successful.”

“I have two grandmothers,” **John Maguire** told his small group. “One was Sarilda Munday who was a full-blooded Cherokee who was married to an alcoholic blacksmith. She is all mythology to me. ‘Mother Dear’, Lilla Merrill, is the grandmother I grew up with. She was married to a short-time governor of Alabama. On the day we were involved in the original Freedom Ride through Alabama, her minister, who knew I was one of the riders, came by the house to pray with my grandmother for her grandson, ‘John David’, from the missal for the dead. Later, she told me she thought any kind of prayer at that moment was good.”

“She lived in Heflin, Alabama. And she was a *lady of her time*. I mean, she was a segregationist, but she was not a bigot. She didn’t say ‘nigger’. By the time I was ten years old, the world became divided for me between those who would show a modicum of linguistic respect and those who wouldn’t. She was big on fairness. At her house, we had to read passages from the Bible such as *in Christ there is no East nor West...*, those roaring passages. I’m convinced she had more in her than she was able to express.”

“In 1964, Martin Luther King was in jail in St. Augustine, Florida. My parents were in Jacksonville. My grandmother said to me, *John David, I told your mother that Martin Luther King looks exhausted. I said to her, why don’t you invite him to your house so he can get some rest? She* wasn’t going to do it, but she wanted my mom, her daughter, to do it!”

### *The Conversations*

#### *I. From Anti-Racism to Beloved Community*

Our gathering shared two-and-a-half days in discussions and exchanges, waking to the fog and near-frost of early spring in the eastern Tennessee hills, and working late into the evenings. Many insights arose from the collective wisdom of the retreat. Perhaps central among these was the concern expressed by many participants that *anti-racism*, in and of itself, is an essential but insufficient construct for organizing a new vision of radical social justice. There was general agreement that we need a way to talk about the historical injustices of slavery and Jim Crow, the dispossession and genocide of Native peoples, the foreign and domestic policies of our central government based in assumptions of white superiority, and the continuing economic and social disparities experienced by people of color. However, while *racism* certainly is a word that speaks to the nature of those contextual realities, the term *anti-racism* is limited in its ability to articulate and embody an alternative vision of just and compassionate social relations.

As elder, Detroit-based, activist and philosopher, Grace Boggs, put it, “The world has changed a lot. The concepts of racism, sexism, and heterosexism were created in movements of the late twentieth century.” Grace echoed the observations of several other participants noting that the

language of civil and human rights struggles has been appropriated by right-wing political and economic interests and is often used to scapegoat people of color and divide working-class whites from people with whom they would otherwise share important connections. “We need new ways to think and speak so that we can act in new ways,” Grace urged.

In a variety of formats, we spent significant time discussing how to conceptualize the positive stand of *anti-racism* work. That is to say, what are we in support of? What direction are we working toward? What we are *for*? When asked to address these questions, individually and in small groups, responses ranged from evocative single words, like “inclusion,” “justice,” “liberation” and “peace,” to specific, well-considered statements such as “More space for the complexity of people of color and LGBT communities to be validated and the insights that come from their visions to be honored,” and “The idea that another world is possible; the acknowledgment and creation of Beloved Community.”

Nelson Johnson, leader of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Greensboro, North Carolina reflected that “We are called to bring our own regime, the United States government, back into democratic context. We have to recover a deeper sense of possibility. There is not a real shortage of analysis. The capacity to believe it and act on it is what we need more of.”

*Beloved Community*, as a model for anti-racist activism, was introduced early in the retreat by Shirley Strong<sup>3</sup> and emerged through our discussions as an concept that might serve to open organizing networks toward a larger meaning and a wider kinship; a way of “acting on” our commitments to substantive social justice. Most participants found this notion intriguing, even inspiring, in spite of challenges related to its embeddedness in Christian language and its association with the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement. Participants in one small group discussed the need for a construct that is more responsive to the challenges of the current situation. “Beloved Community is a Christian-identified concept,” group members maintained. The changing demographics of the country reflect that the dominant religio-cultural backgrounds of new immigrants are Catholic and Muslim, not Protestant. “The Protestant Christian focus of the term, Beloved Community, may not resonate with many of these folks, but the ideas of inclusivity, cooperation and compassion do.”

### *The Conversations* *II. The Web of Concerns*

In a sense, the central conversation of the retreat became that of re-envisioning anti-racist organizing in terms of wider implications of responsibility, connection and potentials for radical, compassionate, social change. At the same time, there were other imperatives that interlaced themselves through the days’ dialogues. These included:

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<sup>3</sup> “Beloved Community” is a concept popularized by Martin Luther King Jr. and participants in the Southern Freedom Movement of the 1960s as a way to talk about the community-building and humanity-affirming aims of the movement. These aims were understood as resonant with the goals of ending segregation and discrimination against African Americans. More recently, in the context of IDR/PC initiatives, Shirley Strong has developed a working definition of “Beloved Community” that includes the following language: “An inclusive, interrelated society based on love, justice and compassion, shared power, responsibilities and respect for all people, places and things that radically transforms individuals and restructures institutions.”

**A. The necessity to transform and heal ourselves as we work to transform our communities and nation.**

“We need long-distance runners,” Tammy Luu said. “Racial Justice organizing, to quote a certain president, *is hard work*,” quipped Jacqueline Berrien, smiling. “It is important work, but it is also debilitating. We have to take care of ourselves and take care of each other.”

Nelson Johnson remarked that, “The movement is tired. People are pulled in so many different directions. There is no cultural mechanism in the base of the community to discuss these issues.” Some within our gathering perceived the malaise as related to a hunger for genuine experiences of community -- among participants as well as in the larger society. This general urgency for renewal and community-building is related to the need to redefine anti-racism organizing in broader terms.

Others also talked about the sense that not only we, as social justice activists, but the nation as a whole, are in a period of profound change – Donna Bivens used the metaphor of a chrysalis in the state of vulnerability, conflict, and ambiguity before it's reemergence as a butterfly. “In many ways, she said, we're in a dying culture. ‘We need to be hospice workers to the old, and midwives to the new’.”<sup>4</sup>

**B. The importance of imagination and creativity in envisioning new meanings of anti-racism work.**

Tammy described the grassroots campaigns of her organization – the Labor Community Strategy Center in Los Angeles, California – that use art, music and unconventional strategies to get people to “think outside the box.” “We focus on transformational organizing, counter hegemonic organizing,” Luu said, offering the example of the “Bus Riders Union,” a collective of people in southern California who use mass transit and who are connecting the need for affordable transportation to struggles for access to health care, jobs, and education.

Rachel Harding also talked about the effectiveness of art, music and ritual in opening up new ways of thinking about, and new ways of experiencing, racial justice. She described a ritual of racial reconciliation that her father, Vincent Harding, recently proposed to colleagues in Goshen, Indiana – a small Midwestern town with a difficult history of racist exclusion dating from the nineteenth century. The ritual, based in part on a model of theatre-in-activism developed by playwright-philosopher George H. Bass, would involve a pilgrimage on the part of religious and civic representatives from Goshen to Elkhart, Indiana (a nearby town with a more welcoming history toward African Americans); a symbolic act of apology and contrition at the base of a tree in the yard of a local church or community center; a response of forgiveness and

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<sup>4</sup> Bivens is quoting Will Keepin, Ph.D., President and Executive Director, Satyana Institute, who has been developing gender reconciliation work for the Institute since the early 1990s.

a joint pilgrimage back to Goshen with whites literally carrying some of the black marchers on their shoulders in a gesture of welcome and responsibility.

### **C. The applicability of strategies from right wing politics, particularly models used by Republicans and conservative Christians.**

Observing the apparent success of the base-building work of the Right, some participants wondered if there were lessons that could be gleaned in our own efforts to build capacities for more just and inclusive institutions and societies. “It seems they’re able to impose more discipline on the way they build their base. They set clear parameters,” Keith Lawrence suggested. “Is there something we can learn there?”

Suzanne Pharr responded that the accomplishments of the conservative movement in this country are due to “having a very long vision with a multi-pronged approach based in fears and beliefs. They also have lots of powerful institutions to work with.” Bruce Occena’s response was that “They’re clever, they’ve learned and they have money. And they’re sitting on white privilege.”

Others at the retreat were uncomfortable with the idea of using the Right as a model for building an alternative social justice movement. Recalling that so many of their tactics have been based in violence, deception and the exploitations of insecurities and fears, some of us were hesitant to follow in their footsteps. At the same time, all recognized the importance of finding new and creative ways to strengthen the vision and strategy of the Left.

### **D. Correlations among racial justice work and organizing for economic, educational, immigration, gender and sexual orientation rights.**

Bruce remarked that we need a way to talk about capitalism, about deep economic injustice and its relationship to racism and other inequalities. “We don’t use the word ‘capitalism’ anymore,” he noted. “It’s considered politically impolite, but we need a way to be able to talk about that.”

In one of the small group discussions, participants explored the increased economic polarization among communities of people of color – particularly within the African American community. That stratification has increased the vulnerability of public education in urban areas with many young people now feeling that “America doesn’t have a place for them.” Grace Boggs said in the larger circle, that for many of our young people, dropping out of school is a way of “boycotting the dysfunction of a public school system that is essentially preparing them for prison.”

Several participants talked about the importance of people in anti-racist organizing networks “struggling with each other around issues.” As Hilda Zacarias said, the power dynamics among us “are just as hard to deal with in here as out there, and if we can’t deal with them here we won’t deal with them outside.”

**E. The need to understand race, racism and racial justice organizing in the United States beyond a black/white paradigm.**

For those of us whose anti-racism roots are in the southern freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s, it is often a challenge to think beyond the centuries-long history of black/white dynamics in American race relations. But the contemporary reality of race and racial injustice in our nation requires a more expansive view with greater shades and distinctions. In fact, even the historical perspective is compromised and incomplete without a full appreciation of the experience of Native Americans, Asian Americans and Latinos in struggles against racism. In order to understand manifestations of racism beyond the black/white paradigm, it is often helpful to look at the role of the United States in international politics – both in terms of “Manifest Destiny” and earlier wars of imperialism as well as in the current climate of global economic and political intimidation.

As Tammy reminds us, understanding the fullness of this history and perspective – and incorporating it into anti-racism and Beloved Community work – is essential to organizing successful multiracial anti-racism movements.

**F. The sense that a combination of local/regional grassroots work, national networks and vibrant international connections is a sustaining formula for successful racial justice work.**

In addition to the importance of an international perspective in the creation of a multiethnic racial justice movement, global connections are valuable to strengthening and encouraging a sense that “we are not alone” in our concern for justice and the creation of authentic community. Because of the overwhelming influence of an increasingly xenophobic and uncritical mass media in the United States, networks of information and encouragement must be forged beyond the confines of establishment institutions. Local and regional grassroots networks as well as strong international relationships will help nourish our imaginations, strategies, visions and spirits.

Many participants expressed concern that if one remained focused solely in the United States it was easy to become discouraged by conventional media, politics and assumptions. Again, Suzanne offered, “I think our only hope is global connection. Our job is to resist and make the global connections.”

**G. Tensions and complementarities between “training” and “organizing” in anti-racist work.**

One of our most extensive discussions as a full group was about the disjunction that can occur between anti-racist training efforts and actual grassroots organizing against racism. John Maguire noted that anti-racism training has become a kind of “cottage industry” which, when based on the model of a one or two-day workshop with little grounding in local circumstances and no follow-up, is ineffectual and “can actually make things worse.”

Beyond the relative effectiveness of various training programs, some participants were disturbed at the notion of “training” itself, as divorced from activism. Shea Howell told the group, “There is something about the professionalization of the discourse about this thing [training] which I think is so wrong. The idea of coming in and training folks is wrong. Training is a way people make a living. It’s better than nuclear power, but I don’t want us to confuse it with creating a just world.”

“It’s not that I don’t think there should be transfers of knowledge and experience,” Shea continued. “There should be. But the form of passing ‘knowledge’ from the trainer to the community folks is inherently flawed.”

As the discussion continued, a kind of consensus understanding developed of the problem of doing anti-racism training “in a vacuum”, as Laura put it. In the absence of an active, broader movement, Bruce said that “trainers are trying to do a service that doesn’t have a container. It’s an awkward position.”

Suzanne suggested that in her experience, which includes years of anti-racism and anti-homophobia workshops, our emphasis would be better placed on “base-building” or “community-building”. The kind of consciousness-raising that happens in training sessions is no substitute for the creation of communities of encouragement where people feel connected to each other and committed to long-term relationships of struggle and support.

When Lynn asked the group to consider whether anything could be done about the “disconnect” between training and base-building, and what that might be, several people responded with specific suggestions. “I think we’ve already begun to do things,” Nelson mused. “Even sharing these stories with each other is part of it. If we’re trying to care for each other there are things we can do.”

“Let’s think about it a minute,” Nelson said. “How does a person learn to swim? They get in the water. How do people learn to talk? Just by being around people who are talking. The professionalization of anti-racism training is not necessarily wrong, but, I would say, it is out of balance with the way people do things in real life. The training should be linked directly to organizing, to making space for new possibilities, for more justice. Then the questions are real to you, not academic. And so are the responses.”

Peggy McIntosh offered a description of a base-building project she has been connected to called SEED, in which teachers or other staff members from primary or secondary schools volunteer to facilitate local discussion groups. Facilitators receive training and the groups start with reading material provided from the national offices, but the work of gathering local participants is the responsibility of the volunteer and the mode of conversation is “serial testimony.” “People are asked to speak from their experiences and the aim is not to make theory and analysis but to gather understanding from the patterns in our lives.” Peggy explained further that the basic

“rules” are that each group must meet nine times in a year and that there must be food at the meetings. “It is a model that avoids the problem of the ‘missing cowboys’ who ride in from outside to fix the problem” but then leave.

**H. Concerns for growing trends toward militant white nationalism in the aftermath of 9/11, in the context of the invasion of Iraq, and in the absence of a sustaining alternative vision of the United States as inclusive, compassionate and fundamentally connected to the rest of humanity.**

“It’s almost gotten too easy for whites to identify as racists,” said Mark George. Mark is a professor at Georgia State University and works particularly with white people on anti-racism organizing. “It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

Suzanne remarked that “the ground is shifting under our feet. There are great numbers of whites who are encouraged to see themselves as victims. There are great numbers of Christians who see themselves as victims worldwide. I think what we’re seeing is the deliberate construction of white nationalism.” Part of the problem as Suzanne sees it is that people want “simplicity” when in fact the world is very complex. “Instead, we need to take the complexity – not looking for unity of vision – and work our way through it.”

Aubrey Dent observes a similar problem in the emphases on scarcity and xenophobia in our national culture. The message we receive, Aubrey said, is that “you’re not going to get enough; that you have to constantly struggle with others out there. We’re not being taught of the abundance in which we live.” Also, the explicit and implicit effects of national arrogance are that “everything different from you is bad.”

**I. Recognition of the value of spiritual and cultural resources, especially those of indigenous and grassroots communities, in strengthening and re-conceptualizing racial justice work.**

In a panel presentation where several retreatants were asked to talk about specific resources for anti-racism organizing from their work, Donna Bivens, spoke to us about the Women’s Theological Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Donna has been co-director of the WTC for many years and helped formulate a process that identifies and compares various kinds of leadership, in terms of their value to social justice organizing. Problem-Solving Leadership is perhaps the most widely-recognized leadership style from among the three Donna presented. It is a management-based model that focuses on achieving a specific goal according to a step-by-step plan. Adaptive or Transformative Leadership is driven more by a vision than a plan and relies on a facilitator who encourages the development of others’ skills and gifts. Spiritual Leadership is distinguished by the fact that it is less a “role” and more “a way of being in the world... a way of acting in alignment” with one’s deepest purpose and desire.

Donna suggested to us that the extraordinary upheavals our society has experienced since the mid-twentieth century have deeply affected all of us. “We are all a part of the system we were dismantling in the sixties. At the time, we didn’t realize that we are all in this together. But now I’m kind of hopeful about it. Even though we have great problems with depression, extreme addiction issues in this country, across all our communities – those things are related to the system that was pulled down. We haven’t yet created anything sustaining, anything truly nurturing, to replace it.” And yet we can. In fact, that is what we are called to do.

“When I was growing up,” she recollected, “there was a lot of pain [in the family and in the wider community], but there was also something to hold us up. Now, it’s like *you better get well quick because there’s more coming.*” The stresses and unpredictabilities and traumas of the lives we live now, require us to look for different models of leadership, different models of attentiveness to each other, different models of relationship. And these models must be developed and applied within the context of our whole lives – including our organizing and activism work. “Whatever you can do to help, do it,” Donna urged. “If it’s tending the mind, tending the body, tending the spirit, tending the systems. We need so much healing. If you can do it, do it.”

### *The Conversations* *III. Interview with an Elder*

The coordinators of the Haley Farm retreat made a commitment to intergenerationality. Tammy Luu, an organizer in her early twenties, was the youngest of the participants in the retreat. Grace Lee Boggs, at age 90, was the oldest member of the community and has been a tireless organizer and philosopher of progressive social and political movements for more than sixty years. One of the highlights of this gathering was a “conversation with the elders” in which John Maguire, one of the conveners, interviewed Grace before the entire gathered community, and then opened the floor for others to ask additional questions.

Grace talked candidly about her lifelong work as an intellectual activist; her 40-year debate with her late husband about the role of religion in sustaining the humanity of those struggling for freedom; the need for new constructs for social justice movements; and Martin Luther King Jr.’s essential wisdom on connections among materialism, militarism and racism.

Grace described her personal history of connection to the northern Black Power movement in the 1960s. “We identified with Malcolm,” she said of herself and her colleagues. “I didn’t campaign for the King holiday. I thought it would make him an icon and other folks would be forgotten. Then we got the holiday and people began to ask me to speak. So I had to go back and study him. In King’s writings [especially after the Watts Riots], he was struggling very seriously with issues of materialism and militarism. Too many Black intellectuals don’t study King. I think it’s because they think it would betray Malcolm. But they didn’t understand Malcolm either. He was a very complex man, very profound and always growing.”

Grace was asked what it had been like to successfully maintain an interracial relationship for so many years (her husband, James Boggs, was a major Black organizer and “organic intellectual”). At first Grace seemed a bit uncomfortable with the assumptions of the question and responded, “Well, like Ossie Davis said, *that’s just what people did back then. They stayed together.*” Then she explained what an extraordinary person her husband had been and outlined the eras he lived through – he spent his childhood in the agricultural age in the rural south; became a young man during the industrialization and militarization of the north; and by the end of his life ours was an extremely technological society. “Jimmy was very much aware that he embodied in himself, in his personal history, all of these epochs of human development...Meeting him, knowing him, was something that affirmed your confidence in the evolution of human race. We are heirs to 30,000 generations before us,” Grace said. For those of us who knew Jimmy, he embodied so much of the genius, creativity and struggle of all that had preceded him – and he engaged it all, brilliantly.

In response to a question about the role of religion and spirituality in activism, Grace said, “I think the role of religion and spirituality is to reconnect us to each other, to the earth, to the rest of the world and to take us another step toward being more human. To reaffirm what our humanity consists of, to recognize how it is incomplete and to advance another step.”

She was also asked what she saw as the role of the intellectual in social movement. “My role?” Grace asked the questioner. “It’s to explain the process of change and give perspective. Helping people find new ways to frame the meanings of their acts.”

*The Conversations:  
IV. Homophobia and the Churches, a Late Night Assembly*

In addition to the coordinated discussions, there were a number of informal conversations that ultimately offered important discernments to the larger gathering. One of these was an exchange on homophobia and Christianity that occurred Friday evening after the close of our regular session. In a sense, that small, unplanned extended conversation was a light at the heart of the retreat.

It began when ten or so participants wound their way into an exchange of differing experiences with religion and spirituality as resources for, or impediments to, social justice movements. Three hours later, passing through territory both personal and historical, and more spiraled than linear, they had helped each other struggle through many complexities.

The conversation began following a screening of video footage of James Boggs and Ossie Davis, Jr. (Mr. Davis passed earlier in the year). Reflecting on Boggs’ and Davis’ great confidence, wisdom and commitment to justice, a small group of retreat participants began thinking together about the role of southern African American culture and religion in providing the atmosphere where those gifts could be nurtured – in spite of the harsh, outer structures of racism and oppression. The question for some of us became: Why, if religion and grassroots culture had often been such a remarkable source of sustenance for Black people, (and played such an important role in social justice movements led by people of color), was there resistance among many contemporary white leftists to embrace religion as a resource for social change?

Suzanne attempted an explanation saying, that in fact, prior to the development of the evangelical movement and the “moral majority” of the 1970s, the dominant white religious groups in the nation were mainstream, liberal, Protestant churches. “Those churches have just been decimated,” Suzanne continued, by right-wing groups within them as well as by “the exponential growth of conservative Christianity worldwide.” Furthermore, among the secular white Left, there has been a tendency toward Marxism. This combination has often meant that white social progressives find themselves in an ambiguous situation vis-à-vis mainstream churches. For white lesbians and gays the situation is even more distressing. The refusal of many denominations to recognize the full humanity of LGBT people has left them “spiritually dispossessed,” Suzanne said.

In any gathering of social justice advocates, Suzanne observed, “you almost always see a disproportionate number of lesbians and gay men who are doing anti-racist work in a lot of settings, not always visible, not always speaking from that point of view, but there’s that connection. So what do you do with the spiritually dispossessed people?” She started to answer her own question, “It’s not that we don’t have spirituality. It’s not that we don’t have connection with spirit. We’ve created enormous numbers of things in this movement since the 70s to create a *housing* for that spirit, but it has not been accepted within the church.”

As the small gathered group began to consider these matters and share more deeply from their own hearts, Donna reminded us that part of the difficulty for many people in addressing homophobia is that “there’s so much trauma around sexual history that’s never been dealt with...and you can’t heal from something that nobody’s willing to talk about.” The conversation then developed into a wonderful exploration of ways that the traditional inclusiveness and social justice emphasis of the Black church might become a resource for teaching against homophobia – not only in black communities but nationally.

We talked about the fact that a small but significant group of conservative African American ministers have embraced a very narrow set of moral and ethical concerns espoused by the white Christian right – essentially abortion and gay marriage. We also discussed the response to this phenomenon of other, more progressive Black pastors and community leaders during the “State of Black America” conference organized by Tavis Smiley in February, 2005. As we thought together about the implications of this tension in the African American religious community, Nelson offered a story from his recent experience with a fellow pastor. During a visit to upstate New York, to attend a conference on gender and sexuality in religious context, Nelson invited a friend to join him for the worship service and conversation that followed the conference. The friend was pastor of an average-sized, mainstream, traditional African American church. Over dinner, Nelson tried to engage his companion in a discussion. His friend hesitated, not wanting to be pressed to take a stand, but finally allowed there were many people in the church “for whom [the sexuality of lesbians and gays] wasn’t an issue; everybody was accepted, and the spirit of the Black church has tended to be that, but in some sense, we’re being put in a position where you can’t preach it as gospel. So you have to ‘politic’ it. And it’s bad when the preacher has to ‘politic.’ If you can’t stand flat-footed and say, *Here I stand, this is of God*, something profound like that, then you get caught up in a game...which is somebody else putting this on the agenda.”

Nelson explained that for him, and for many in African American churches who would be supporters of an inclusive stance toward LGBT people, there are two important guides to their solidarity. There are two ways to be able to “stand flat-footed” and avoid having to “politic” the stance. One is by “digging theologically” into an exegesis of the Bible that clarifies the Hebrew and Greek terms, the historical context and apostle Paul’s admonitions against same-sex relations – which Nelson believes are most likely about preventing the abuse of children and not a wholesale condemnation of adult intimacies. The other guide is “Jesus’ absolute prohibition against exclusion.”

Nelson told us that he preached a sermon at a special reconciling service at a Christian Methodist Episcopal<sup>5</sup> church in Rochester, New York. He chose as his scripture the ninth chapter of the Book of John which tells the story of a man born blind who was healed when Jesus rubbed clay mixed with spittle on his eyes. In the story, a group of religious leaders approaches the man and interrogates him, not wanting to believe he has truly been healed. They question his family (“Is this really your son? Was he truly born blind?”) and look for evidence to discredit the man’s account of his experience with Jesus. When the religious elders reject the man whose testimony they disbelieve, Jesus comforts him. Nelson used this scripture to demonstrate the tendency, in biblical times as well as now, to look for **some** basis, upon which to exclude people from the accepted community. Yet the consistent message of Jesus, in contrast to that of some other religious leaders, was that no one should be left out.

“I can’t preach on [just] this one issue,” Nelson said. “There is too much investment, too much time and energy put into this one issue by people who don’t really pay that kind of attention to other moral questions.” Despite the advancing hour, as Nelson began to recite passages that emphasized Jesus’ unwavering commitment to justice, compassion and reconciliation, the small assembly responded eagerly.

The conversation went on a while longer, and Suzanne, writing in her journal later that evening, said, “I felt that hope flew into the room and settled on us gently and surrounded us with its warm wings.” Shirley too was deeply encouraged. “I was excited and couldn’t contain myself. I rushed back to my cabin and kept Pat up until at least 1 a.m. I had watched the State of Black America conference on CSPAN a few weeks before. Since when did moral values get defined so narrowly that they only include abortion and gay marriage? It was wonderful, then and now, to see progressive Black ministers confronting the stance of conservative ones. Even [Rev. Joseph] Lowry said recently that we can find common ground.”

The richness of the late evening conversation is an example of the importance and potential of the *unexpected* in our work. Issues that were central for many of us, were parsed through in that small discussion circle – slowly, elatedly, sensitively. The next day, the shared reflections became a kind of love offering to the larger gathering. Retreat organizers agreed that the insights could be made available more broadly as one of several concrete discernments emerging from this process.

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<sup>5</sup> Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) is an African American denomination.

### *Closing Thoughts*

Among the final tasks of the retreat was the identification of anti-racism work in terms of characteristics of *Beloved Community*. A group of participants, led by Hilda Zacarías, board chair of the California Central Coast Region of the National Conference for Community and Justice, coordinated various elements of our discussion into a clear and nuanced synthesis. The group suggested that the concept of *Beloved Community* might serve as a re-imagined model for racial justice organizing. They identified the following primary elements of the model:

- Radical Inclusivity and Shared Resources
- Profound Justice-Orientedness
- Creativity and Flexibility
- Democracy
- Willingness to Struggle for Wholeness
- Mutually Transformative and Redemptive Action (that is, enabling us to name the power dynamics among us and to work compassionately with each other.)<sup>6</sup>

Hilda also coordinated a fruitful discussion about whether anti-racism work might be best understood as a “movement/mission,” a “field” or some combination thereof. And finally, this working-group explored a potential design for “learning communities” which could exist in relationship to a larger movement, serving to support and encourage participation, reflection, and rejuvenation/ retreat for anti-racist organizers.<sup>7</sup>

There are important ways in which the Haley Farm retreat represents a continuation and extension of earlier work of the IDC/PC collaboration. In fall 2004, Shirley Strong and John Maguire brought twenty-four activists to the Seasons Retreat Center in Kalamazoo, Michigan to consider the contemporary meaning of *Beloved Community*. Perhaps the single most enduring question from both the Haley Farm and Seasons gatherings revolves around the idea of *Beloved Community* and how it might be reconceived for the current moment. How can the concept of *Beloved Community* continue to carry the best resonances of its mid-twentieth century emergence in the Southern Freedom movement, and at the same time, be imbued with the new meanings, inflections and kinships required by the social and racial justice movements of the twenty-first century?

Answers to these questions can ultimately come only as they are wrestled-through in the day-to-day experience of grassroots organizing around a new, broader vision of anti-racist work. Nevertheless, it is clear that gatherings like the one at the Haley Farm play an especially important role in providing the space, the networks of community, and the resources of shared experience and inspiration to urge us toward a keener understanding of how to challenge racial injustice and simultaneously link that challenge to our great potential as human beings, as communities and as a healed and transformed nation.

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<sup>6</sup> Please see appendix for additional information on the model.

<sup>7</sup> Please see appendix for small group discussion summaries on these issues.

Rachel E. Harding, recorder for the Haley Farm Retreat  
and consultant, The Veterans of Hope Project

May 11, 2005  
Denver, Colorado

*Appendix A*

**Retreat Organizers and Participants**

Conveners: John D. Maguire and Shirley Strong  
Institute for Democratic Renewal/Project Change

Facilitators: Patricia Moore Harbour, Healing the Heart of Diversity  
Lynn Walker Huntley, Southern Education Foundation

Logisticians: Carole and John Coley, IDR/PC

Participants:

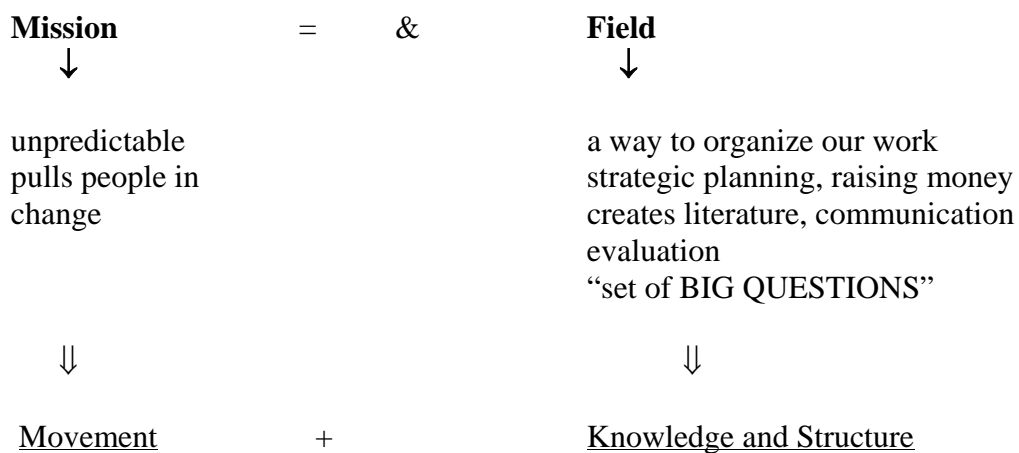
Willard Bass, Winston Salem Institute for Dismantling Racism  
Jacqueline Berrien, NAACP Legal Defense Fund  
Donna Bivens, Women's Theological Center  
Grace Lee Boggs, Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership  
Aubrey Dent, California Department of Corrections Medical Facility  
Mark George, Georgia State University  
Noah Griffin, Public Affairs Consultant/Writer  
Patricia Harbour, Healing the Heart of Diversity  
Rachel E. Harding, Veterans of Hope Project  
Laura Harris, Americans for Indian Opportunity  
Shea Howell, Oakland University  
Lynn Huntley, Southern Education Foundation  
Nelson Johnson, Beloved Community Center of Greensboro, Inc  
Keith Lawrence, Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change  
Tammy Luu, Labor/Community Strategy Center  
Peggy McIntosh, Wellesley College Center for Research on Women  
John D. Maguire, Institute for Democratic Renewal/Project Change  
Bruce Occena, BTW Consultants, Inc  
Suzanne Pharr, Highlander Research and Education Center  
Maggie Potapchuk, MP Associates  
Frances Reid, Iris Films Project  
Alice Rocha, Vanguard Foundation  
Shirley Strong, Institute for Democratic Renewal/Project Change  
Lori Villarosa, Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity  
Stephen Ward, University of Michigan  
Saadia Williams, Race Relations Center of East Tennessee

Hilda Zacarias, National Conference for Community and Justice (board chair, California Central Coast Region)

### Appendix B

#### Anti-Racism Organizing and Beloved Community: “Mission” or “Field”?

This chart represents a conceptual model for the way anti-racism and Beloved Community work can be understood as both **mission** and **field**. It was created by a discussion group, led by Hilda Zacarías. The group determined that a movement **is** a mission. The group understood the idea of “field” in the sense of *physics* as much or more than in the sense of *profession*.



#### Characteristics

- Radically inclusive – shared resources
- Profoundly justice-oriented
- Creatively flexible
- Fully democratic
- Struggle for Wholeness
- Mutually transformative and redemptive: naming the power dynamics among us and being able to work compassionately with each other.

#### Tensions

- Urgency of now vs. / and need for patience and perseverance
- Tolerance vs. authentic inclusion
- Particularities of abuse and injustice
- Local, regional, national and international

## **Creating a “Learning Community”: A Community of Support, Encouragement and Struggle that Exists in Relationship to a Movement**

Small Group Led by Hilda Zacarías

### **Opening Considerations:**

What is our energy level to take the next steps?

What are structures that have worked, not worked, and what might work?

Do we want to be a learning community?

How can we connect to the other gatherings?

REIMAGINE the movement to take it to next level

Going deeper into complexities and tensions that have been raised about how we work together

Finding time and space to do this in an ongoing way

How do we address the tensions between race and culture and class?

How do we address:

religion and spirituality and Christianity?

sexuality?

field and movement constructions?

male and female dynamics?

training and organizing tensions?

### **What Would A Learning Community Look Like?**

Essentially it would have the components of a Beloved Community Circle.

- radically inclusive
- profoundly justice oriented
- creative and flexible
- fully democratic
- transformation to wholeness

- redemption and wholeness

### **What Might A Learning Community Do?**

- Create opportunities to get involved in the movement
- Create support systems for
  - Self-assessment
  - Mentorship
  - Incubation
  - History/Analysis
  - Connect to other groups
- Respite and Renewal
- Identify emerging trends
- Share stories/lessons learned
- Build capacity to evaluate