

Sacred Conversations of Race + Action

Sponsored by RocACTS:

*Congregations from all over Monroe County are participating in Sacred Conversations on Race*  
Margaret Miyake

On two consecutive Saturdays in October 2018 I attended four-hour workshops on Sacred Conversations of Race + Action with participants from the Rochester Zen Center and 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East. Wilma Campbell and Jon Greenbaum lead the two workshops. In the first one, they focused on activities like “get to know you” to help break down barriers and facilitate conversations between the two main races represented, black and white. The second one focused on Action, what we can do to help dismantle racism on the personal level and the institutional level.

Why did I go? I went to the workshops to confront myself, to try to understand how widespread racism, individually as well as our country’s burden and heritage. With the current administration in the Oval Office, I am saddened, angry and fearful of what is happening in our country.

We were shown a chart with four circles to show how pervasive and systemic racism is today:

- Structural Racism: “where **public policies, institutional practices**, cultural representations work in various and reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial inequality.” Examples in health care legislation, education, housing, criminal justice, poverty
- Institutionalized Racism: where “discriminatory treatment, unfair practices, inequitable opportunities **within organizations toward race** that routinely produce unfair outcomes for people of color and advantages for white people.
- Interpersonal Racism: where “one expresses his sense of superiority to another person based upon his race.”
- Internalized Racism: probably the most difficult one to admit to one’s self—“an individual’s unconscious assimilation of beliefs, prejudices and ideas about the superiority of white and the inferiority of people of color.

Where I grew up in South Carolina, structural and institutionalized racism dominated the society. I went to segregated schools from elementary through graduate school, to a segregated church, attended a segregated summer camp, participated in segregated YMCA activities, ate in segregated restaurants, borrowed books from our segregated library, watched movies in a segregated theater. However, blacks were part of my life—Bell cooked and cleaned for us, Willie Mae worked alongside my mother in the yard; Frank and Leila Bell cooked and cared for my father. Did I think of them as servants, not equals? Did I feel I was superior? I honestly do not remember, but probably I did.

My first confrontation in the workshop was a one-on-one with Cassandra. We were asked to describe a best friend from another race. Cassandra had no trouble responding. She told me about a white woman who was her pregnancy coach and has become a good friend over the past nineteen years. I froze because I don’t have a black friend and finally said that my husband, of Asian descent,

is my best friend. Leila Bell or Willie Mae were not friends whom I would have gone out to dinner with or watched TV in their homes.

Other activities during that first workshop graphically showed how our lives have been different. Split into our racial groups, we were asked if there had been situations when our skin color had been a concern. For example, if we wanted to buy a house, could we pick any neighborhood and feel that we'd be justly considered for a loan, would we feel welcomed? Most in my group of whites, walked forward, but the blacks did not. Afterwards, we could ask questions, but those of us in the white group were quiet. Why were we so silent?

An important part of the first workshop was the presentation Shane Wiegand gave on Segregation and Redlining \*(1) Rochester. He showed how people of color in Rochester have been segregated through Redlining, housing restrictive/racial covenants, VA and FHA back mortgages, Racist Suburban zoning policy and Blockbusting.

*14. Racial Restrictions: No property ... at any time be sold, conveyed, rented or leased in whole or in part to any person or persons not of the White or Caucasian race. No person other than one of the White or Caucasian race shall be permitted to occupy any property in said addition or portion thereof or building thereon except a domestic servant actually employed by a person of the White or Caucasian race where the latter is an occupant of each property.*

Dr. Walter Cooper described his own experience: "I confronted the housing segregation in Rochester. In 1954, the wife and I answered ads for 69 apartments and were refused at all of them." In the 1936 Federal Housing Administration (FHA) Underwriting Manual stated: "*If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes. A change in social or racial occupancy generally leads to instability and a reduction in values.*" Then after World War II, the Veterans Administration adopted the FHA housing policies and helped banks give out millions of mortgages Whites.

In his presentation, Wiegand showed,

The government created the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) to survey and rate neighborhoods in northern cities including Rochester.

Rating scale: A-"Best"; B-"Still Desirable"; C-"Definitely Declining"; D-"Hazardous"

Areas shaded red and yellow indicated that the government was less likely to back mortgages because those areas were potentially dangerous, polluted or contained populations of immigrants and black people already living there.

In 1950 80% of the people of color in Monroe County lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Wards. These 'ghettos' contained 19.4% of all dwelling units with no private baths and 28% of all units with no running water.

No person of color in Monroe County was given a FHA or VA loan for a mortgage in any new suburban development. Sixteen families of color that moved into white neighborhoods faced abuse, ostracism and defacement of property. (Negroes in five New York Cities)

The above are examples of how most people of color are not beneficiaries of privilege as many are of “white privilege”—whites whose families bought houses through FHA or VA mortgages and used the collateral to make down payments when moving to a more expensive neighborhood. Or who could get home improvement loans through banks, backed with the collateral of their home. Or could rent an apartment in a suburban neighborhood if one existed.

Wiegand’s presentation showed me how systemic and thorough racism has been bred in to our national character, well after the signing of the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> amendments in 1865 and 1868. With the government’s help via the FHA and VA; until 1956 the Real Estate Boards’ code of ethics was: “Don’t try to sell houses in white neighborhoods to black homebuyer;” how economic segregation continues to affect housing segregation which in turns affects educational segregation – on and on and on!

How to break the cycle? How to change views? How to have hope with such depressing data?

At the beginning of the second workshop, union representative Demond asked why there no questions about the activity where the color of our skin would be a concern. We had all lined up along a wall and were asked to walk forward if we had not been in situations where the color of our skin would be a concern. The group that did not walk forward had been in situations where their skin color had been a concern—like a group of young boys walking into a store with their hands in their pockets, like being stopped by a policeman, like walking alone at night in a suburban neighborhood. I think we were embarrassed to ask questions; to say something that might offend. I wasn’t ready yet ready to ask hard questions.

In a breakout session, Jon gave an overview of how the levels of racism are navigated through the four levels of racism: structural, institutional, interpersonal and internalized. He told us about a project focused on exposing the damage of a lead poisoning to the local community. First, the group working on lead poisoning approached the city housing authority and city government about the effects of lead in the paint and the damage (structural racism). They documented the effects of lead in children in the “hazardous” neighborhoods and their performance in school—lower iq’s, school dropouts, failure to graduate (Institutional racism). They worked with educators, lead coalition, doctors, Metro Justice, sisters of mercy, University of Rochester. In interpersonal racism, they documented lead’s effects such as lower impulse control, lower reading scores, lack of focusing skills, etc. In Internalized racism, they documented children’s sense of inferiority.

At the end of the second workshop, we were given a Commitment Sheet:

I, Margaret commit to dismantle racism in the following ways:

- At the Micro (internalized and interpersonal) Level, I will call Cassandra, whom I met at the first workshop, and ask if we can meet up for coffee and a casual visit
- At the Macro (institutional and structural) Level: I commit to working within the Roc/ACTS structure on voter engagement, drive to the polls.

However, we did not, as a group, either with the participants from the Zen community or the Union, formulate any commitments. The commitments were individual. The follow through depended upon each of us. I do not remember being directed to the RocACTS website where we might get more information.

How have we come to the place where neo-Nazism, white supremacy, the KKK, anti-Semitism and other hate groups are often incited in rallies and tacitly condoned by the leader of our country? For decades, the political right/conservative faction have been gaining ground and have now a front row seat in the running of our country from the selection of judges, congress, and even college professors. \*(2)

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*\*(1) In the 1930s, government surveyors graded neighborhoods in 239 cities, color-coding them green for “best,” blue for “still desirable,” yellow for “definitely declining” and red for “hazardous.” The “redlined” areas were the ones local lenders discounted as credit risks, in large part because of the residents’ racial and ethnic demographics. They also took into account local amenities and home prices.*

*Neighborhoods that were predominantly made up of African Americans, as well as Catholics, Jews and immigrants from Asia and southern Europe, were deemed undesirable. “Anyone who was not northern-European white was considered to be a detraction from the value of the area,” said Bruce Mitchell, a senior researcher at the NCRC and one of the study’s authors.*

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/03/28/redlining-was-banned-50-years-ago-its-still-hurting-minorities-today/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.506414e3becd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/03/28/redlining-was-banned-50-years-ago-its-still-hurting-minorities-today/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.506414e3becd)

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\*(2) The Federalist Society was founded in 1982 in order to advance conservative ideas in the legal academy and ultimately in the legal system as a whole. From 1985 to 1988, Reagan Attorney General Edwin Meese—an early supporter of the society—helped groom and credential young conservative lawyers by giving key positions in the Justice Department to early leaders of the society. Following a similar path, the George H.W. Bush administration gave responsibility for judicial selection in the White House Counsel’s office to Lee Liberman Otis, a founder of the society.

<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/01/how-the-federalist-society-became-the-de-facto-selector-of-republican-supreme-court-justices.html>

Leonard Leo has for many years been the executive vice-president of the Federalist Society, a nationwide organization of conservative lawyers, based in Washington. Leo served, in effect, as Trump’s subcontractor on the selection of Gorsuch....Leo, who is fifty-one, has neither held government office nor taught in a law school. He has written little and has given few speeches. He is not, technically speaking, even a lobbyist. Leo is, rather, a convener and a networker, and he has

met and cultivated almost every important Republican lawyer in more than a generation.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/17/the-conservative-pipeline-to-the-supreme-court>

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What is racism? According to ADL (Anti-Defamation League) definition:

“Racism is the belief that a particular race is superior or inferior to another, that a person’s social and moral traits are predetermined by his or her inborn biological characteristics.”