

A Step Toward Racial

BY DAVID WHITFORD

LESLIE EDWARDS BELIEVES IT WAS A “MIRACLE,” that’s the word he uses. A miracle that he was even in the sanctuary to hear the sermon that day. “A lot of times I didn’t come to church,” he says now, nearly four years later. “In fact, during that time I was bouncing in and out of church. Maybe I may miss church for two months. And how it happened I came that time in *May*, you know.” He just smiles and shakes his head.

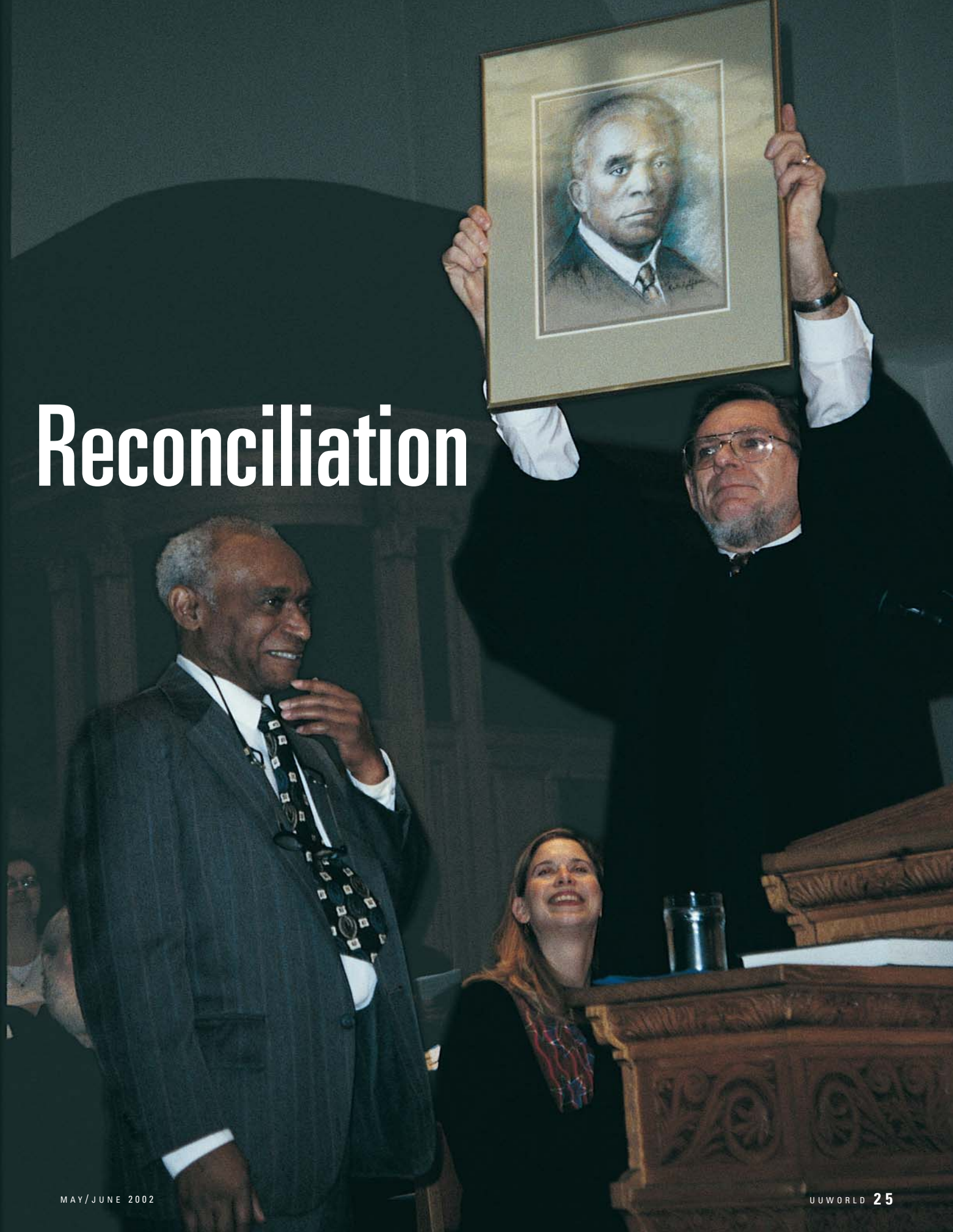
The Rev. Sharon Dittmar’s year as interim minister at the Northern Hills Fellowship in Cincinnati, Ohio, was almost over. In the fall she’d be moving downtown to the pulpit at the historic First Unitarian Church, some of whose members founded Northern Hills in the early 1960s. The sermon was on her list of things to do before she left. The idea for it arose from a class she had taught on Unitarian Universalist history—specifically

the section on the African-American experience in Unitarian Universalism. “The members of the class were surprised, concerned, and fascinated by what they learned,” Dittmar explained by way of introduction. “One member said, ‘You have to share this with the congregation. They need to know.’”

Drawing from the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed’s *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, Dittmar traced what she described as Unitarian Universalism’s long “history of dis-ease” on matters of race—a history all the more troubling, she argued, for there being so many genuine Unitarian Universalist heroes, from famous abolitionists like the Rev. Theodore Parker to civil rights martyrs the Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo. She pointed out that in 1998 African Americans filled a mere 1 percent of UU pulpits, and roughly the same percentage of UU pews. She recalled the bitter rupture a generation ago over funding for the Black Affairs Council, which led to a walkout by several hundred delegates attending the 1969 General Assembly in Boston. And she gave vent to her own “great frustration” with Unitarian Universalism: “I love and believe

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Reconciliation



what it stands for: The dignity and worth of every person, acceptance of one another, and encouragement of individual journeys of spiritual growth. Then I read about our history with African Americans and I am ashamed.”

Flipping through her copy of *Black Pioneers* while preparing for the sermon, Dittmar continued, “I came upon a section I had never noticed before, a paragraph about an African-American Unitarian church that formed in Cincinnati in 1918, probably the only one of its kind in America at the time. The church was called the Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood.” Other Unitarians in Cincinnati knew about the church and its founder, the Rev. W.H.G. Carter, but turned their backs. They made no effort to forge personal connections, and offered no material support to the struggling congregation beyond a box or two of old hymnals. For two decades no one even bothered to inform the American Unitarian Association (AUA) in Boston of its existence. When the AUA finally did find out, in 1938, it sent the Rev. Lon Ray Call to investigate. Call’s official report captured perfectly the tone and substance of mainstream Unitarian attitudes at the time toward blacks. It described Carter as “a kindly man, quite intelligent.” It noted, however, that the neighborhood surrounding his storefront church was “poor and characterized by rowdiness” and that two local Unitarian ministers (one from First Church) who had spoken there agreed that the response they received was “not very intelligent.” Call’s conclusion: “I do not recommend Unitarian fellowship for Mr. Carter, or subsidy for his movement.” Shortly afterwards the Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood closed down and its sixty or so members dispersed. Race and class trumped a genuine spiritual bond.

Many who heard Dittmar’s sermon were powerfully affected, but none more than Edwards, seventy-six, a retired meat inspector and now a member of the Northern Hills board. Edwards says that before joining Northern Hills, in 1993, he spent two decades searching for a spiritual home, a place where “if I needed to express myself in any way about how I truly felt, I would not have any problem whatsoever.” But until that Sunday in May 1998, he had no inkling that the roots of his quest were buried deep in family history.

“That’s my grandfather you were talking about,” Edwards said to a hushed congregation during the discus-

Other Unitarians in Cincinnati knew about the storefront Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood and its founder, the Rev. W.H.G. Carter, but turned their backs.

sion period after the sermon. “I never thought I’d hear his name mentioned in a Unitarian church.”

It was “a moment of grace and awe,” says Dittmar. But unlike other such moments that can flare and fade on Sunday morning, this one is still glowing. It sparked an extraordinary act of reconciliation involving two mostly white UU congregations, five generations of a remarkable African-

American family, a city scarred by recent incidents of police brutality and race riots, and a liberal religious movement struggling to live up to the promise of its principles and purposes. And while it would be saccharin to suggest that this story holds the cure for racial and economic dis-ease within Unitarian Universalism, much less the wider world, there’s hope in it, absolutely. It represents, says Morrison-Reed, who is black, “a great model of what’s possible.”



First Church was among the first wealthy institutions in Cincinnati to abandon the inner city. The majestic stone-and-slate Victorian sanctuary, with its warm oak paneling and rich stained glass windows, was dedicated in 1889, following “the movement of population of the class from which the congregation was likely to be drawn towards the cleaner air and wider spaces of the hilltop suburbs,” according to a 1917 church history. But what was once Cincinnati’s wealthy outer rim (former church member and U.S. President William Howard Taft was raised in a nearby mansion) today qualifies as an extension of the urban core—a racially mixed though mainly black neighborhood, dominated by high-rise medical buildings, low-income housing, and empty lots.

Taft is not the only presidential name on the membership rolls of First Church. The current UUA president, the Rev. William Sinkford, remembers being “dragged kicking and screaming to First Church when I was fourteen years old by my mother, who believed that we needed a religious home.” Sinkford, the first African American to head a traditionally white U.S. denomination, did find his religious home at First Church but left it temporarily in response to the racial upheavals of the 1960s, from which both First Church and Unitarian Universalism have yet to recover fully. “The history of the last thirty-five years is part of our history too,” Sinkford says. “That was a history

of retreat from racial justice, and there was a price to pay, spiritually.” Today First Church, like most UU congregations, has more racial diversity in its religious education program than among its mostly white, mostly upper middle-class members. It’s a sad fact that no one currently attending First Church lives close enough to walk to services on Sunday morning.

That said, even before Dittmar arrived in the fall of 1998, First Church was looking for ways to capitalize on its setting and redefine itself fully as an urban church, with all that implies. When it came time to call a new minister, the search committee went beyond the list of candidates provided by the UUA to snare Dittmar—despite her youth (she’s thirty-five) and inexperience (she graduated from Harvard Divinity School in 1997)—because of her passion for urban ministry. “We were ripe,” says church member Linnea Lose, “we were ready. But she came in and just ignited us.”

The catalyst was Dittmar’s sermon of February 17, 1999, “Get Back on the Bus,” in honor of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In it she retold the story of W.H.G. Carter and his Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood, this time adding Leslie Edwards’s miracle; and she challenged First Church, having once turned its back on Carter, to finally make good on the promise of urban ministry. “We all have a role in affirming and supporting a vision of an antiracist, multicultural Unitarian Universalism,” she said in closing. “I came to First Church to get back on the bus. Will you join me?”

Part of the answer lay in closely reexamining First Church’s past. That summer, after learning about the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center (set to open in Cincinnati in 2004) some parishioners began researching how members of First Church had responded to the moral challenge of slavery in the nineteenth century. As expected, they found many outspoken abolitionists, as well as evidence of involvement by some church members in the Underground Railroad. But it soon became clear that many of First Church’s most respected members at the time had profited, at least indirectly, from the slave economy. A mixed legacy, in other words, exemplified by the parishioner who made his fortune selling salt pork to the Southern plantations, even while his wife was venturing out at night on horseback, presumably to aid runaway slaves. But nothing galvanized First Church like the story of W.H.G. Carter. “My feeling was, ‘My God, where have

The Rev. Sharon Dittmar challenged First Church, having once turned its back on Carter, to finally make good on the promise of urban ministry.

I been?” says Walter Herz, who has been a Unitarian since 1958. “Here I am the church historian and have published work on the church’s history, and I knew nothing about this.”

You don’t have to be a member of First Church to feel shame at the way Carter was rebuffed by Cincinnati church officials and the AUA. Even Call, more than half a century after filing his report with the AUA, expressed

his remorse to Morrison-Reed in a letter written shortly before he died. “Sorry if I kept a good man from fulfilling his mission,” Call wrote. Which begs the question, What kind of response could an uncredentialed black minister trailing an impoverished congregation expect from the UUA today?

When I posed the question to President Sinkford, he was silent for several moments. “I wish that I could tell you it would be a completely enthusiastic one,” he finally said. “Since the 1980s, we have tried to support—have in fact supported—congregations built around particular ministers of color. None of them have proved to be self-sustaining over time. If I were talking to a Carter today, and what he or she said was that we need support but we’re going to make this work ourselves, I would say absolutely, welcome in. The problems we’ve had have been creating dependent relationships with ministers of color and congregations that were formed around them. And that’s a dangerous place for this largely white institution to travel. Things aren’t quite as simple as we would like.”

Morrison-Reed agrees. “It would be tough for us,” he says. “I can’t predict the outcome because it would cross so many of our taboos as far as what we expect in ministry and education and such. But I think what would happen now is we’d take it seriously.”

Which, it happens, is precisely the task that concerned members of First Church assigned themselves, all these years later: to take Carter seriously. To not turn their backs on him, not again. “We can’t let this drop,” Herz remembers thinking. “We ought to find out more about this family.”



What is known about W.H.G. Carter comes from his self-published autobiography, Call’s report, and the recollections of his descendants, interviewed over many months by Edwards, Herz, and Richard Bozian. By all

accounts, Carter was larger than life. Light-skinned, six-feet-two, a man of charm, energy, imagination, and learning, he towered, literally and figuratively, over his wife, Beulah, who was only five feet tall, and their fifteen children. He trained as a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal church, following in his father's footsteps, but never served the denomination owing to deep theological differences, beginning with his disavowal of the divinity of Jesus. He supported himself variously as a photographer, a mural painter, a teacher, a postal worker, a fun-house operator (on Beale Street in Memphis), and a real estate speculator. He sold a tip sheet to horse bettors, kept a roulette wheel in his church (to make the point that gambling in and of itself was not sinful), and operated a friendly neighborhood pool hall (no swearing allowed).

Soon after moving his family from Memphis in 1918, he became a fixture in Cincinnati's West End. Like his maternal grandfather, William Henry Gray—a free-born African American who seconded the nomination of Ulysses S. Grant at the 1872 Republican national convention and served briefly as Arkansas land commissioner during Reconstruction—Carter was a political activist. He was a four-time candidate for city councilman on the Republican ticket (never successful), the founder of a fraternal organization called the Grand Order of Denizens (G.O.D.), and a dedicated provider of food, money, clothing, and advocacy to poor blacks in Cincinnati.

With his own family he could at times be playful (carving carrots at the dinner table into hearts, spades, diamonds, and clubs) and generous (he took the whole family to the 1934 Chicago World's Fair), but also strong-willed, uncompromising, and severe. "You were supposed to come up to a certain standard," says Edwards. "And he'd make you know." Among the forbidden phrases in the Carter household were "I don't care" and "It's not my fault." Carter's son Andrew, seventy-nine, a retired postal worker, remembers the day that he and his brother discovered an anatomy book in their father's extensive library. They found the book so absorbing that they didn't hear him coming until it was too late. "We slammed the book together," says Andrew. "He came in. He said, 'What are you looking at?' We were a little reluctant, but we told him. He said, 'I'm going to give you a whipping.' So he whipped us." And then he told them why: "He said, 'I did-

A painting depicting the evolution of man, from the apes all the way to Jesus, decorated the window of the storefront that served as church, community center, and home for the Carter family.

n't whip you because you were looking at it. It's because you thought you were doing something wrong. Now open that book up and look at it!"

Carter discovered Unitarianism on his own by reading and thinking, and discussing his ideas with anyone who would listen. He was especially fond of drawing ideas out of others by use of the Socratic method. He viewed Jesus as an exemplary man but no son of God (and was offended by lyrics that suggested otherwise in the hymnals he got from the Unitarians). He had faith

instead in the divinity of all creation, exemplified by a painting depicting the evolution of man, from the apes all the way to Jesus, which decorated the window of the storefront on West Fifth Street that served as a church, a community center, and a home for the Carter family. When Call arrived in 1939, he found "a vacant store in which Mr. Carter has assembled a small coal stove, hat rack, bookcase, other shelves of books, radio, piano, clock, two printing presses, architect's desk, bulletin board, about thirty chairs, some of them old pews, and a crude drawing of Jesus. Mr. Carter rents this himself and lives in the rear. He pays \$18 monthly. Outside the store in vivid paint is 'Unitarian Brotherhood Church.'"

Much of Carter's preaching fell on deaf ears, even among the members of his family. Beulah, who played piano during services and was his constant partner in charitable works (though she is never mentioned by name in Carter's autobiography), was a Christian who worshipped elsewhere. And while many of the Carter children inherited their father's skepticism toward received religious truth, only one, Daniel, who became a lawyer, embraced Unitarian Universalism as an adult.

Carter died in poverty in 1962. He was buried in an unmarked grave. As the years went by, even the knowledge of which Cincinnati cemetery contained his remains was lost among the living members of the Carter family.



"I know you, Andrew, and James are curious about what we plan on doing with all the information [about W.H.G. Carter] once we have exhausted all potential sources," Herz wrote in an early letter to Leslie Edwards, thanking him for arranging a meeting with his uncles. "We are curious, also!"

There was talk among the members of the ad hoc Carter committee at First Church of starting a memorial fund, of writing an article for *UU World* or making a presentation at General Assembly, of posthumously welcoming the Unitarian Brotherhood Church into the UUA. But the keystone, they decided, should be an apology to the Carter family, some kind of formal admission, as Herz put it in a letter to Dittmar, of the “stain on the Unitarian Movement and on our local Unitarian Churches occasioned by our rejection of Carter’s Brotherhood Church sixty years ago.”

Dittmar agreed. “At some point [an apology] became very important to me,” she says. “I felt like the AUA was prevented from seeing Carter in the fullness of his person because of his color, because of money, because of his location in the city. And I just thought, ‘That’s not our values.’ I know we didn’t have our principles and purposes then, but we had similar values, and it pained me that we had not lived them. I honestly thought it was a chance for the descendants to redeem the association. I think we have the potential and the ability to make a better ending to stories when we see wrongs.”

Edwards embraced the idea from the start, but other Carter family members were hesitant. Indeed, in planning the event, the energetic, guilt-ridden, well-intentioned Unitarian Universalists of First Church blundered into a half-century-old reservoir of bitterness toward their new hero on the part of those who had known him best—his surviving children. “We learned it had been difficult at times for some of the children of Carter to see the father be so strict and tough, especially with Beulah,” says Dittmar. “Not that he was abusive but he was demanding, and their mother was the one they felt closest to and they felt the love for.” It took a while, but they worked it out by listening to the Carter family, by taking pains to honor Beulah’s role in the family saga, and by bestowing on the Carter family the gift of their own fresh perspective on the life and legacy of a complicated man.



January 13-14, 2001. Racial reconciliation weekend at First Church. Two days of sermon and song, food and fellowship, hugs and tears, among and between the parishioners of First Church and the more than one hundred

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descendants of Beulah and W.H.G. Carter and their families (including a one-year-old great-great-grandson, Santi Sander) who crowded into First Church on that cold, bright mid-winter Sunday, having flown in from all over the country. Among the other visitors were members from Northern Hills and Morrison-Reed, down from his home church in Toronto, who delivered the main sermon on Sunday morning, entitled “The Burden of Guilt.”

“Remembering the past with regret can strengthen the resolve to do the only thing we can do together to shape a more just tomorrow,” was the point Morrison-Reed landed on. “For in that moment when the one person feels hurt and the other feels sympathy, a bond is established. That connection can be built upon. And as the relationship grows, we can move beyond avoidance, guilt, and self-hatred, and let go of the anger and recrimination to embrace the only things that can sustain us over the long haul—the love of God, which we find in one another, and our shared vision of tomorrow. For alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done, but together our vision widens and our strength is renewed, and that is cause, as it is today, to celebrate and recommit with our souls.”

But the most memorable speaker that day wasn’t even listed in the order of service—a deliberate omission, says Dittmar, who thought it presumptuous to assume the Carter family would accept her apology before they’d had a chance to hear it. But when Dittmar stepped down from the pulpit, Starita Smith of Denton, Texas—mother of two grown children, graduate student in writing, practicing Baha’i, and great-granddaughter of W.H.G. Carter—took her place.

Smith admitted she was skeptical of “the recent wave of apologies to black people for everything from slavery to neglect of Africa.... We read the headlines and we say, ‘So what changes now?’” She expected more from Unitarian Universalists. “You are supposed to be the most liberal of the mainstream denominations,” she said. “It is very meaningful to me that you took the initiative to acknowledge a history that must be embarrassing for you, and to attempt to make amends in the present for what was wrong in the past.... But we must also acknowledge that racial reconciliation, true racial reconciliation, requires commitment.... I

hope you will reflect on this weekend often and let it galvanize you. I hope that it will cause you to go beyond the comfortable friendships you have with your black Unitarian friends to attempt to bring honesty, light, and compassion into the thorny arena of race relations beyond the boundaries of your church. We Carters encourage you to continue to look into your hearts, ask difficult and complex questions, and take action. We accept your apology.”

The silence in the sanctuary was broken by a sudden burst of applause. Smith found herself in Dittmar’s arms. The minister’s black robe enveloped them both. “When the hug seemed to go on a beat or two too long,” Smith later wrote, “it dawned on me that she was crying and leaning on me for support.”



The months that followed the Carter reconciliation weekend were trying ones for the citizens of Cincinnati, challenging all notions of racial progress. On April 7, 2001, Timothy Thomas, an unarmed black teenager, was shot and killed by a Cincinnati police officer. He was the fifth black male in the city to die while being pursued or taken into custody since the previous September. There followed three days of rioting, and a curfew that darkened Cincinnati on Easter weekend.

In her office at First Church, Dittmar stares at a photograph of W.H.G. Carter given to her by Leslie Edwards. “During the riots, it was really hard to know what to do, how to position oneself,” she says. “Cincinnati doesn’t like trouble. It’s a polite town, a kind town, but sometimes under that is a layer of, ‘We’ll just accept the injustice if we can get along on top.’ And I’ll tell you, I would look at this photo, and I’d look at W.H.G. Carter, and I’d think, ‘What did he go through? What did people think of him?’ He was a hero, he was a role model for me. I kept thinking, ‘What does this man call me to do?’ I felt like I owed him something. This is the guy who tried to minister in the West End. The riots were right next door. I just felt like I couldn’t completely let him down. He really called me to something better, a higher standard.”

Dittmar joined publicly with other concerned clergy, black and white, in calling for a deeper understanding of the roots of racial violence. She opened the doors of First Church to a series of citywide teach-ins, and participated in a pulpit exchange program with a nearby black church, West Cincinnati Presbyterian, which has led to an ongoing relationship. In October, members of First Church and West Cincinnati Presbyterian, marching side by side, were

among the several thousand Cincinnatians who participated in a six-mile walk to raise money for the National Conference for Community and Justice and the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.

All of which Starita Smith praised when she returned to Cincinnati this past January for the one-year anniversary of the Carter weekend. “So many people jump to condemn black people for rioting before they understand what drives them to express their rage in the streets,” she said in her sermon. “Destruction of property isn’t right, but then neither is destruction of human beings through neglect and oppression. The important thing to me about your work is that it continues, and you remain committed to a mission that sometimes has no big, dramatic victories in sight. I think that my great-grandparents would be pleased that you are willing to try to continue their ministry.”



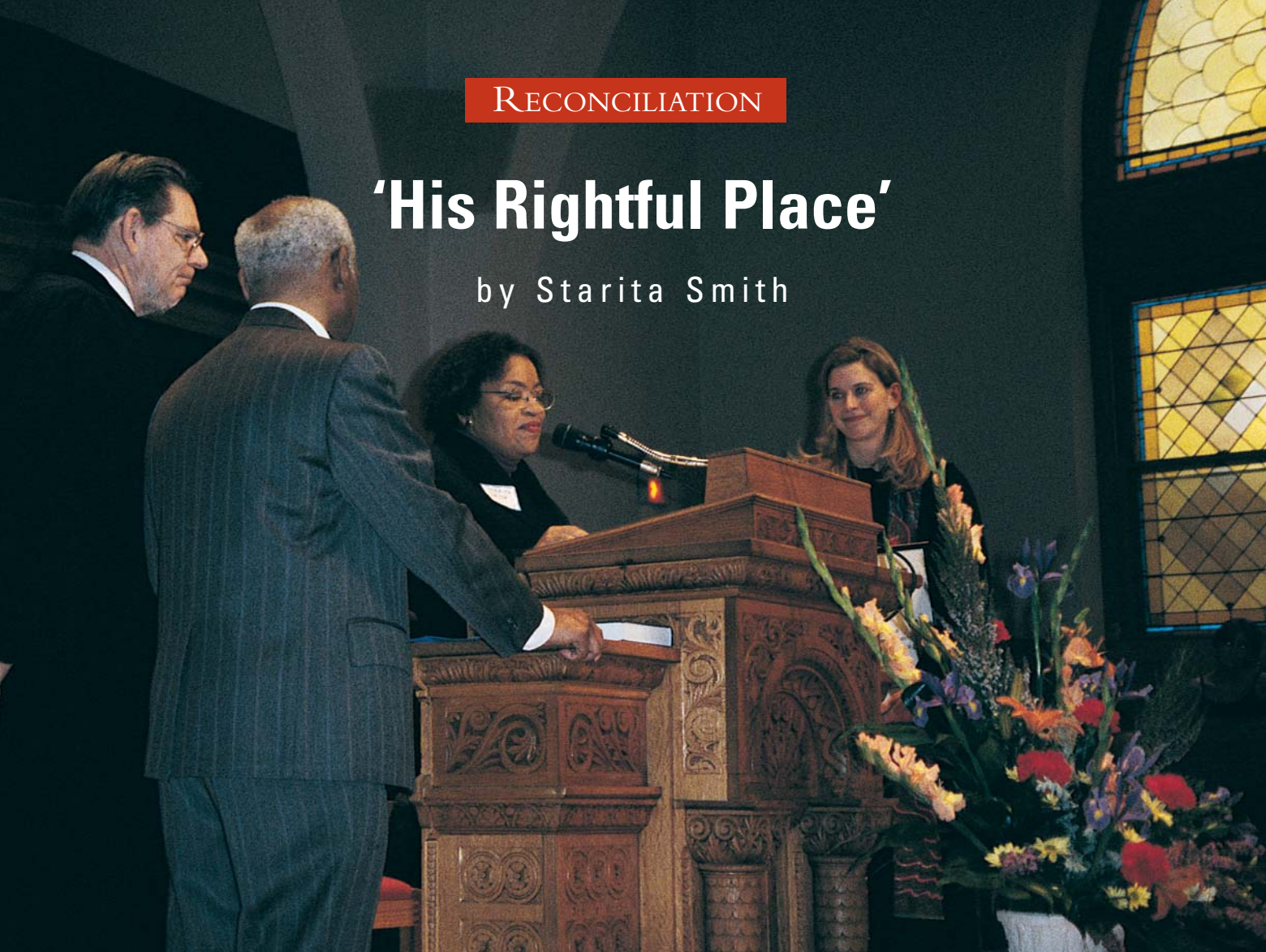
One afternoon last fall, I drove out to Northern Hills to meet Leslie Edwards. He greeted me in the parking lot wearing a red baseball cap with the insignia of the Tuskegee Airmen and carrying a folder stuffed with documents relating to his grandfather. Among them was a letter he’d received from Richard Bozian saying that he’d finally located the graves of W.H.G. and Beulah Carter in Beech Grove Cemetery. “That’s right next to Northern Hills!” Edwards says now, remembering the effect the news had on him at the time. “When I read that I almost collapsed.”

So now we go for a little walk, to the end of the empty parking lot, through a narrow band of trees, emerging after a few steps on an untidy country burying ground, overgrown with weeds and tall grass, headstones glowing in the horizontal rays of the afternoon sun. Beech Grove Cemetery. We’re close enough to where Edwards sat listening to Dittmar’s sermon that day that in all probability, the dead were listening, too. And here it is, the grave of W.H.G. Carter, marked with a new stone paid for by the members of Northern Hills and the Carter family. The inscription reads: “Pioneer Unitarian Minister.”

“Often times when you see a flow of events, with music or even with writing, you see how it’s been done to do just the right thing at the right time,” Edwards says on the way back to my car. “This flow was not something that a human being had planned. But it flowed just the right way at the right time. And the flow that I’m aware of is based on the religious faith of W.H.G. Carter.” ■

'His Rightful Place'

by Starita Smith



THE WHITE UNITARIAN MINISTERS who went to check out my great-grandfather's ministry were appalled that the little storefront Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood was in the worst part of town, the West End, where I would be born and grow up. Great-grandpa had been raised by an African Methodist Episcopal preacher father and mother in Arkansas and had been educated and taught at a small black college there, but he had chosen not to be ordained in the AME church. He had embraced Unitarianism because he was a very independent thinker, yet he retained for the rest of his life his parents' dedication to helping poor black people. The white ministers who came to visit his church, which was active from 1918 to 1938, didn't care about all that. They said it

Starita Smith, after more than twenty years writing for newspapers, now teaches composition at the University of North Texas in Denton, where she is studying for a master's degree in creative writing. Above, she speaks for her family at the service of reconciliation.

The Rev. W.H.G. Carter's great-granddaughter shares a family's living tradition.

was wrong for a Unitarian church to be in a "rowdy neighborhood" and turned their backs on it, eliminating any chance for help for the poor of Cincinnati from the denomination and denying Great-grandpa his right-

ful place in church history.

In 1998, six decades after the all-but-forgotten little church closed, the Rev. Sharon Dittmar mentioned my great-grandfather and his congregation in her sermon one Sunday, setting off the events that led to the racial reconciliation weekend for the Carter descendants and the members of two Unitarian congregations in Cincinnati.

I was very excited about the event. I had gone to First Unitarian for about a year when I was a teenager in the mid-'60s, but I had been treated much like my great-grandfather. I lived in the wrong neighborhood for my Unitarian friends to attend my birthday party, even though the church building was located within walking distance of my house. It is that way with a lot of old churches, both black and white, in central city locations. The parishioners drive in from the suburbs, arrive at about 10:45 A.M. and

get back in their cars at about 12:15. The people who live next door to their churches could be people who live on the moon, for all some parishioners know.

Dittmar was trying to change that. She was looking for a way to bring her church into the neighborhood. With her urging, the congregation decided to make the Carter weekend the launching pad for a new commitment to better race relations.

This was all great to me, partly because I thought that someone else would be doing the work and organizing, and all I had to do was fly to Cincinnati from Dallas and enjoy myself. At the Greater Cincinnati Airport, I hugged my sister and niece from New York City, whom I had not seen in years, and we blissfully waited in the airport terminal for Cousin Leslie Edwards to show up and give us a ride to the home of the Unitarian couple with whom we would be staying for the weekend. Things were fine until Leslie turned to me as we were driving over one of Cincinnati's many bridges over the Ohio River and said, "Now, I want you to give the family's response on Sunday." Without thinking, I said I would. This was a family elder asking me to do this. It was a request for which there could be no answer but the affirmative.

Then I thought about what Leslie was asking me, and my stomach dropped. As part of the service on Sunday the Unitarians would give a formal apology to my family for what had happened to my great-grandfather. Leslie wanted me to respond to that apology. I felt honored, humbled, and terrified all at the same time. As if he could feel my feelings, Leslie added as an afterthought, "I know you can write something real good." That was it. My fate was sealed.

As we gathered at the church for a special dinner, I couldn't fully relax and enjoy anything. I looked into the faces of my relatives, who were, as usual, running around greeting each other, hugging and talking nonstop in everything from gentle southern inflections to clipped, brusque bursts. They didn't see me often, so there were emotional reunions, and there was too much confusion to get people's guidance about what to say on Sunday.

There was so much to do. I owed my sisters and niece time alone after we had been apart for years. I owed my



"All Carters share one Unitarian lesson handed down from Great-grandpa: Think for yourself."

grandmother a brief visit. She still lives in the apartment I had visited as a child, only now ruins surround her building. They are tearing down the old projects to make way for "mixed-use" housing. We had had mixed-use housing in those projects full of families and old folks when I was a child. The twenty-first-century incarnation of "mixed-use" housing would include single young professionals, families, old folks, and, for the first time in the more than sixty years my grandmother had lived in her apartment, lots of white people. I returned to discover that my childhood homes were about to be wiped out in the name of economic revitalization. Part of my life was being

erased. It made me sad.

Sunday morning, I got up hours before anyone. I was counting on the deadline-pressure response I had cultivated for more than twenty years as a journalist to kick in. I had snatched moments riding in cars from event to event to write notes about what I wanted to say, far more than what I thought I needed for the service. Now it was just a matter of typing them out and cutting down the material. Had I waited too long? I was afraid I had. The fear allowed me to tune out everything except the writing before me.

All Carters—regardless of whether they are Muslims, Baptists, Pentecostals, African Methodist Episcopalians, Unitarians, Buddhists, Catholics, agnostics, atheists, or something I haven't heard about yet—share one Unitarian lesson handed down from Great-grandpa. It is: Think for yourself. I felt that every single one of them from the oldest to the youngest child could formulate a thoughtful response to the Unitarians, each of which would be eloquent and totally different. I love my family, but the clan is a tough crowd and loves debate. I soon closed those thoughts out of my mind and tried to feel their collective wish (at least the majority wish) for our response. I was saving my last version of my remarks on the computer when everyone in the house came downstairs fully dressed for church. I was in my pajamas! I jumped up with the speech hot off the computer printer and got dressed in record time.

Carters streamed into the church. About 600 people were there that morning, including 125 Carters, who made

up the majority of the black people present. The minister asked us to stand by generations. Only two of the original fifteen Carter children are still alive, and both were there. My mom's first cousins, beautiful yellow-brown silver-haired little women who look just like her, hovered over me all weekend. They gave me strength and the power of knowing that someone loved my mother when she was a girl and still remembered her as she was in all the stages of her life. One of them held my hand as I waited to say my piece.

Leslie, being Leslie, didn't tell me when I was supposed to speak. The service progressed, and I relaxed for a few minutes. Then Dittmar called Leslie to the podium and he called my name, "Starita" (with an implied, "you come on up here now"), just as if I was a little girl being called forth to recite her ABCs or a poem in school.

It felt good to be called that way, and it grounded me. I was doing my part for my family where I knew my place in the world. I felt my great-grandparents, as I often do, watching me, encouraging me. I looked up and through the glare of the lighting, I saw the Old Ones, their weathered dark African and American Indian faces shining with silent love and dignity, watching from above the crowd. Whenever they show up, I am attempting something important and difficult, and they know I need their support to accomplish it. Then I looked down at my sisters and niece and the little old women who look just like my mom and spoke for our family.

"Our shared identity as Carters has everything to do with the principles and struggles of W.H.G. and Beulah Carter," I said, invoking the names of my great-grandparents. "Being a Carter means something specific and life-affirming to all of us and helps determine how we see ourselves as human beings."

I touched on my family's European, African, and Native American heritage and said, "we are fifteen different colors, but we are all one family." Just then I heard some affirming *amens* and *hmphs* from the Carters, and that let me know I was doing okay by my family. This was good, because I was fully aware that it takes some nerve to stand in somebody's church and even suggest that I might be



Beulah Carter played piano during services and was her husband's constant partner in charitable works.

able to tell them what to do. Yet I had to do it, or I would let my great-grandparents and my family down. Great-grandpa would have done it forcefully. I knew that from the little books he had written. I took a deep breath and gathered myself from all the way down in my toes.

"In recent years, there has been a wave of apologies to black people for everything from slavery to neglect of Africa. The reaction among many blacks to apologies from groups like the Southern Baptists, a denomination founded on the support of slavery, has been mixed. We read the headlines and we say, 'So, what changes now?' Many black people know that race is still a factor in near-

ly every option we have in life—how we earn our living, where we live, what house or car we can buy, how our children are educated, where we go to church, or whether we eschew church altogether. I look at efforts like this W.H.G. Carter reconciliation weekend here in Cincinnati as different from the rest of the apologies, perhaps, because I expect more from Unitarians than Southern Baptists." The Unitarians laughed so long and loudly I had to stop speaking until it died down. I continued, "It is very meaningful to me that you took the initiative to acknowledge a history that must be embarrassing for you and to attempt to make amends in the present for what was wrong in the past."

Then I said that the Carter family accepted the apology, and this big sigh of relief came from the ministers gathered behind me. I guess they were worried that we wouldn't accept their apology until we actually said we would. I challenged the Unitarians to continue on their quest for reconciliation and to face the complex issues of race forthrightly. Then I heard applause, and I was enveloped in this gigantic hug from a black-robed Dittmar who had to lean over to do it because she is tall, and I'm short. When the hug seemed to go on a beat or two too long, it dawned on me that she was crying and leaning on me for support. I was pretty much a pile of emotional jelly myself. The male ministers, including the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, the black Unitarian minister from Toronto whose book first publicized my great-grandpa's ministry, bent over and hugged me, too. ■