

Fourth Annual Carter Sunday
January 18, 2004
“Truth + Forgiveness = Reconciliation”
Guest Celebrant: The Very Reverend James Diamond
Dean of Christ Church Cathedral
Service by First Unitarian Church Racial Justice Task Force

Rev. W.H.G. Carter, with assistance from his wife Beulah, operated a storefront Unitarian Church in the West End from 1918 into the 1930s. The church received little support from local Unitarian congregations or from the national denomination. The story of Rev. and Mrs. Carter was described in *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination* by another African American Unitarian minister, Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, currently serving a congregation in Toronto. Rev. Sharon Dittmar discovered the information while reading the text in Divinity School and preached about Rev. Carter at First Unitarian Church in 1999. Two years later, congregations at First Unitarian Church and Northern Hills Fellowship invited Carter descendants to a service of reconciliation.

The Very Rev. James A. Diamond is Dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati. His work with racial reconciliation spans the globe as the president of the Community of the Cross of Nails in the United States. As such, he is one of five members of Coventry Cathedral's (London) world council on international reconciliation. Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati is known as a center of reconciliation. Within days after the racial distress related to the death of Timothy Thomas, Dean Diamond led his church in forming a Committee for the Cathedral and the City, and later the Cathedral Racial Reconciliation Initiative. Their work has the potential of being a national model for turning racial conflict into interracial trust. We are extremely honored to have Dean Diamond with us today.

Let us begin with prayer. Almighty God, you have committed us to a ministry of reconciliation. Give us the confidence in your power to forgive. Bless us and enable us to be witnesses of your forgiveness at work and where we live. Unite us in a sacred fellowship to heal the hostilities we see. Give us the grace to love one another and to rejoice in the fellowship of those who hunger for justice and seek for peace. Amen.

It is an honor and it's a privilege to be here this morning to honor W.H.G. and Beulah Carter and your congregation's commitment to reconciliation with the Carter family. I appreciate the opportunity to be here at First Unitarian Church and to be with members of the Carter family. I had hoped to be here with a fellow seminary alumna, but Sharon is not able to be here this morning. You know this without my telling you that I preceded her by more than 25 years at divinity school.

Truth Plus Forgiveness Equals Reconciliation

Truth plus forgiveness equals reconciliation. It's a wonderful formula and it comes from the most mundane of circumstances. I was sitting one day in my office with the Cathedral publicist. She said, "You know, Dean, what we need is the whole concept of reconciliation on a banner."

Well, of course, I have volumes to say about reconciliation. So I was doodling on my pad and I came out with this formula: truth plus forgiveness equals reconciliation.

It comes out of an inspiration of 60 years of ministry of the Community of the Cross of Nails of Coventry Cathedral. It comes out of the work of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's leadership of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. It comes from the witness of all those who embark on a path towards reconciliation.

Reconciliation Defined

It's probably useful at the outset to make a distinction between reconciliation and mediation. In mediation, two or more parties come together, lay some facts on the table, and try to find common ground. That's an important way of compromising differences and moving on.

Reconciliation is another matter altogether. With reconciliation, two or more parties need to come and sit down and tell their best and their whole truth. We don't often do that. It requires us to say everything we have to say. The hurt. The anger. The disenfranchisement. All that is our truth. As well as joy when it occurs.

And the other side of truth telling is the listening to other people's truth. Do we form a rebuttal in our own mind as we hear someone saying her truth. Do we find ourselves thinking of other things, or of simply saying, "No."

Hearing the truth itself is a great challenge. But it is nothing, nothing, compared with giving forgiveness.

Now anybody can give forgiveness. Quick, superficial, therefore cheap. If you've really forgiven something, you know already that forgiveness costs. It takes time. It takes an effort of the will. But in the end, I would suggest to you, that forgiveness is also grace, that is, a gift from God.

I hold out to you Desmond Tutu's book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, as a primer on the depth of what forgiveness means especially in a political context for interracial relations.

Community of the Cross of Nails

Coventry Cathedral is a cathedral in England about 60 miles north of London. On November 11, 1940, the German Luftwaffe (air force) came in and bombed the city of Coventry to the ground, including the medieval cathedral, St. Michael's Cathedral. A few days later the dean of the cathedral gathered his congregation into the shell of the ruined cathedral. He took a piece of charred timber. On the back of the sanctuary where the altar had been he drew a large cross. Under it he wrote the words, "Father, forgive." Not "Father, forgive them." Not "Father, forgive us." But, "Father, forgive." Because there is so much forgiveness that is needed in our world.

During that same time period, someone found some of the large medieval nails that had fallen from the timbers and wired three of them together as a cross, a cross of nails. That cross of nails has become for some an emblem of Christian reconciliation efforts throughout the world. But the most extraordinary thing that the dean did that morning was to sound a high calling for people whose lives had just been destroyed, a call to pray for those who had bombed them.

As it was a high calling for my congregation to pray for Osama on September 11, 2001. As it was more recently to pray for Saddam.

To pray for all our enemies, for those who wish us harm. My friends, if we cannot pay for those

who oppress us and hurt us and anger us, then we risk becoming like them. We risk becoming them.

Out of the Coventry experience came the Community of the Cross of Nails. Sixty-plus years later, it has chapters in 60 countries throughout the world. Each is involved in local efforts of reconciliation and also sponsors international projects in reconciliation in Africa, in the Middle East, and in Eastern Europe.

Alexandria Declaration

My own international work is based primarily in Jerusalem and comes from the Alexandria Declaration, which was signed almost two years ago to the day. Gathered in Alexandria, Egypt, were the religious leaders from the Israeli Jewish community, the Ashkenazie Chief Rabbi Lau and the Sephardi Chief Rabbi Bakshi-Doron; from the Islamic Palestinian community, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the Sheik of the Al Azhara Tantawi and Ali El - Samaan; and from the Christian community, the Greek Patriarch Iranaeus, the Latin Patriarch Michel Sabah and the Armenian Patriarch Mongoolian. The Archbishop of Canterbury served as moderator.

I'm going to read you just a short bit at the beginning of that Alexandria Declaration. "We who have gathered as religious leaders from the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities pray for true peace in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, and declare our commitment to ending the violence and bloodshed that denies the right to life and dignity.

"According to our faith traditions, killing innocents in the name of God is a desecration of His Holy Name and defames all religion throughout the world. The violence in the Holy Land is an evil that must be opposed by all people of good faith. We seek to live together as neighbors respecting the integrity of each other's historical and religious inheritance. We call upon all to oppose incitement, hatred and misrepresentation of the other."

Speaking of high calling. It's one thing to say such extraordinary words to people who ordinarily cannot sit down at the table together. But of course it's quite another to live that out. And so our work in the last two years has been to keep alive the spirit that went on in Alexandria, and to keep those three parties talking to one another. Ultimately, our goal will be to settle the issues of the Holy Sites in Jerusalem. We know that we will not be the people who bring peace. We do know that there will be no peace in Jerusalem if the Holy Sites themselves cannot be shared among the various religious traditions. If this group had not been invented, someone would have had to call it together.

And so it continues that one of the fundamental aspects of reconciliation is presence with one another. Discussion with one another no matter how hard the truth telling is and no matter how far away forgiveness seems to be.

Racial Reconciliation in Cincinnati

I am a newcomer to Cincinnati. I suspect 25 years from now I still will be. I must tell you that my very first impression here in the early fall of 1999 was how many more Black people we interacted with, on the streets, in the stores, in the church. I remember quite clearly coming home from a Reds game in the evening and getting all sorts of greetings from all sorts of people on the streets. For us it felt like a step into reality. It was a relief in many ways from living in a New England town. It was not until I took a diversity training weekend in January 2001 and heard firsthand the frustration and anger of African-Americans in Cincinnati that I began to understand other aspects of our life together here.

I returned to the Cathedral and said to my colleagues the pursuit of racial reconciliation is going to need to be at the core of our ministry in this city. There can be no other. Three months later when Timothy Thomas was shot and the downtown disturbances occurred, I learned a deeper level of knowledge of who we are as I listened to the local media reporting on those disturbances and asking with a certain kind of urgency and anxiety, "When can we turn to business as usual?"

In the subsequent months as I traveled between Jerusalem and Cincinnati, I became aware that both cities were remarkably similar. Now, it's true that the violence in Jerusalem was more overt. But there's violence as well in Cincinnati.

The principals were not speaking to one another in either city. Honest public discourse was difficult at best. Growing fundamental distrust of the others was the primary thing that one could see, as well as hope faded that there would be any significant change. So I thought while doing this work in Jerusalem that surely there is something we could be doing in Cincinnati. This gave birth to the Cathedral Racial Reconciliation Initiative that former Mayor Roxanne Qualls and I have been guiding for the past 15 months. It is an ambitious effort to build a small community of trust across racial, age and class lines. We are trying to do with a group of people who are willing to be trained in political analysis in order to understand the racial situation in Cincinnati in a larger context than we normally see it. The tendency is to focus on Cincinnati, and say, "We are unique. This only happens here."

Of course, that's untrue. It happens in many places. We can learn both by the mistakes and by the victories of other places. The effort demands a level of candor not usually found in such gatherings.

It also requires that White people learn what it means to be White.

To that end, I recommend another book to you, *Privilege, Power and Difference*, by Allen G. Johnson. It's a book that the Cathedral Shop has sold about 150 copies of in the past couple of years. I have to tell you that most of my congregation picked it up, read the first two chapters, and came to me and said "I won't read any more of that." I said, "Come on, chapter by chapter."

It's not a comfortable book. It tells the truth. Remember, we've been told that it is the truth that sets us free.

One can only speak of such an initiative with great humility. As with any pursuit of reconciliation, our efforts demand tremendous patience and a profound measure of pain.

Rev. W.H.G. and Beulah Carter

I come to you this morning as one who wears the Cross of Nails to symbolize my commitment to reconciliation through my Christian faith.

I am nearly overwhelmed at your work at racial reconciliation. Not so much by the fact of it as by its authenticity. You know both the price of telling the truth and I think, by your own admission, not yet necessarily the cost of forgiveness. Your account is not about one man, W.H.G. Carter, but also about Beulah, his wife, and their children, and their children's children. Yours is also the story about the courage of Sharon Dittmar, the wisdom and faith of Leslie Edwards, the compassion of Starita Smith, and the will of this congregation to respond to the vision and hope of W.H.G. Carter and the Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood.

This Carter Sunday in the midst of Martin Luther King weekend, it is my privilege to bring you both greetings and respect from your allies down the street at Fourth and Sycamore, Christ Church Cathedral. We are proud to be in your city. Though I deeply appreciate, more than you may know, the great complexities of the symbol of the cross as a symbol of hope, and especially of course for Unitarians, nevertheless I invite you to consider membership in the Community of the Cross of Nails where you will find many like-minded people across the world. The modern history of Coventry Cathedral brings to us a lesson worth marking on this morning.

The founding event of an effort of reconciliation is a useful historical reminder only to the degree that it turns our attention not to the past, but to the present and to the future. To circumstances beyond the immediacy of our own experience.

The work of W.H.G. Carter lives on not just in your willingness to apologize, but also in your commitment to be a reconciling church, known for the quality of the truth you tell and for the depth of forgiveness you seek and you offer. Amen.

Note: for more information about the Community of the Cross of Nails and/or about the Alexandria Declaration, visit www.christchurchcincinnati.org