



Who I Met in Avondale

Reverend Sharon K. Dittmar
First Unitarian Church
536 Linton Street
Cincinnati, OH 45219
(513) 281-1564
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The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice. It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, 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. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

-Reverend Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed

All our lives we struggle against our singular, independent brokenness. The Sufi's (Islamic mystics) tell us that life is separation from wholeness and Allah, that as humans we live behind the veil of a beautiful connection to the divine. I believe I am that way in my own mind and body. I believe you are that way in your own mind and body because we struggle to be connected to one another.

At some point in my utterly homogenous upbringing (gay people, who were they? Hispanic people, hadn't met one) I began to realize there were human stories I knew nothing about. I am still entirely taken with stories I know nothing about, particularly from people in America, particularly from my neighbors. It took me years to realize that I have gone out of my way to live and work with people unlike me, for which there is a less than perfect demographic match. Not only am I curious, but it is my attempt to reach past the veil of separate brokenness to find human connectedness.

I use our UU faith to unveil the bonds that bind us to all, and this theology continually drives me in my work at this congregation. It is one of the reasons I was attracted to this congregation. It is one of the reasons one of my three goals last year was to do more work in Avondale. By our very location in a poor, black neighborhood, you have placed us, me, among neighbors from which I can learn. I have never looked back. Not when I was the only white person in the room. Not when I was the only woman in the room. Not when I was the only non-Christian in the room. Often I am all three (woman most difficult).

Sometimes it is embarrassing, such as the shocked silence after I tell a clergy person I am non-Christian. On a regular basis I am not asked to pray.

I am often the strangest stranger in the room of my chosen urban ministry, but what has sustained my social justice ministry is my sincere interest in everyone else, particularly those most different from me. On a regular basis, I have to leave my comfort zone and familiarity to learn how to act with others, and the majority of people in Avondale are African American, with experiences and life stories different than my own. I go out, look people in the eyes, ask questions, and then listen in gratitude to whatever I hear. I learn a lot. In search for our connection I am have walked many an accommodating, awkward, long mile. I often say to people that social justice work is a marathon. It's not a sprint. The uncomfortable journey is awkward but worth it.

Years ago Reverend Paula Jackson said of her work in the city "You have to stand with people when you can." I took that to heart. I never agree with my Avondale colleagues all the time. We are too different. But we do agree now more than when I arrived her 13 years ago. In all honesty, the influx of younger pastors, who are more liberal, has been helpful. Whereas their parents thought homosexuality was a sin and told you so, their children aren't sure and don't talk about it as often. I suppose a walk on the diverse side requires standing with people when you can.

My sincere work to get to know people, to build real relationships, has won most people over, and there is plenty of distrust in Avondale (bad feelings about disagreements over the zoo, the work of the Avondale Community Counsel, anger at the Uptown Consortium), so relationship building (finding our connectedness) takes lots of time, but it pays out. Saturday a group of us had lunch at a fish fry at Carmel Presbyterian Church in Avondale, where I met the General Manager of the Florida Marlins. Apparently he grew up at Carmel Presbyterian, and whenever he is in town, he visits. I also learned Reverend Wallace there does a mean deep fried turkey, and I do believe we should have him fry one of our Thanksgiving turkeys this year, since I learned that Carmel has a Thanksgiving dinner the same Sunday we do. It never occurred to me to deep fry a turkey. I wonder what else I don't know. So I build relationships.

Other things I have learned, it is not always proper etiquette in the black community to call someone by their first name. We are "Sister Shirley," "Miss Smith," "Pastor." I tend to call people by their first name, so I always ask individual people to make sure it is acceptable. Generally it is, but sometimes it does not seem appropriate, so I follow the larger group culture. There is a dignity to referring to people with a title, and I do not want to be the rude outsider, outlier. I must listen to find the tenor of each group I attend before I know which names to use.

Likewise, the black community in Avondale cannot be rushed. The Avondale Clergy Group works with a gentleman named Paul Graham from the AMOS project. He is one of the most committed and talented community organizers I have ever met. We worked with him on fair hiring for individuals with criminal records. Lots of insight and follow through. But, sometimes he pushes the Avondale clergy too far, by not letting the elders in our group talk (even when they are going on a bit) and he is too direct for some of the clergy. I can get

business done in Avondale, but I can't be too direct. It appears impolite to the Avondale Clergy Group.

However, my directness can be an asset, when used appropriately, and even an asset to the group. This past February the Avondale Clergy met with City Manager Milton Dohoney to discuss the fair hiring of individuals with criminal records. These individuals have served their time, reformed, and are qualified for the job. The city has been discriminating against them for years by doing background checks earlier than necessary in the interview process, as well as randomly. This happened to Gene Mays and became a legal case against the city. This discrimination continues the cycle of poverty. I spearheaded this issue among our group, and I was very pleased when it finally passed City Council last week. I wrote letters, attended Council meetings, and had this meeting with City Manager Dohoney.

During our meeting I had the sense that he was trying to put our group off, so I asked many questions based on research I had done previous to the interview. Eventually Mr. Dohoney agreed to ask CIRV (Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence) to send the Public Works Department 10 names to consider for employment. Since that time three CIRV clients have been hired by the Public Works Department, and I feel very good about this. I am also grateful to Mr. Dohoney for following through on his commitment.

When I told several of you that I had become friends with Pastor KZ Smith, minister at Corinthian Baptist Church, the first thing you said was "THE MINISTER WHO LED THE CHARGE THAT ENABLED THE CITY OF CINCINNATI TO DISCRIMINATE AGAINST GLBTQI PEOPLE?!" Yes, that KZ Smith. We have never had a full conversation about his involvement with Article X. We did speak about it once and he said to me "Well, I was young and I was used. I learned some things." That surprised me. It is not what I expected him to say. I am waiting for an opening to hear more.

KZ looks like a dark Malcolm X. He is very intimidating. But you can tell him anything, and people do. In our conversations he told me that used to be a much more judgmental person, but that all changed when he divorced ten years ago. At that point his personal life fell apart in a big way. One of my favorite things about KZ is that he will tell you all about the rumors and the bad times. I called him before this sermon to ask him if I could tell you. He said "Yes, I have preached about them." After his divorce a rumor went around that he had an affair with a congregant and she had his baby. It was the rumor that would not end. He told me about being in Africa on a missions trip when someone visiting Africa, who knew about him, came up and asked him about the "new baby."

Later, "the baby" was baptized, and when people there saw that the baby was light skinned, they began to believe that it was not his. KZ is also one of the funniest people I know. Even Adam thinks so. He tells a hilarious story about breaking up a fist fight between two congregants in the church kitchen.

Here is something else KZ does very well. He writes grants for projects. He does excellent outreach with black men, a significantly underserved population in Avondale with deep needs. He does his work, he is very loving, and he doesn't need recognition. He also knows people (he has been at Corinthian for almost 30 years) so he will call up people to get a job for someone or get medical care or legal help. He is indispensable to the positive functioning of Avondale and I just found out last week that his congregation is moving to the closed

Showcase Cinema property in Bond Hill. It will be a few years, and it's going to be felt as a big loss.

His congregation is moving because sometime in the next decade their congregation will be paved over to make way for a new interchange off of I71 that will get traffic off city streets and onto highways and to local institutions faster. I have been keeping an eye on this project for two years, and interest in it is how KZ and I became friends. I attend meetings on it, and generally work with Councilmember Qualls and her office. (Last meeting)

Most of the clergy I work with are totally maxed out and exhausted. Pastor Stephanie Johnson works a part time job along with her part time ministry. She is the only other female clergy person I know in Avondale. In fact, many of the Avondale clergy are "bi-vocational," working a job along with doing ministry. I can not imagine how this is done. There are supposed to be over 50 congregations in Avondale. I know 8. I suspect this is because so many of the clergy are bi-vocational. They have day jobs, and are swamped with meetings on evenings and weekends.

Actually, a strange part of being a clergy person in Avondale is that people ask me and every other clergy to do, write for, attend, and represent issues on a constant basis. As our Avondale Clergy group just began to form last year, we were inundated with requests from other groups, many which we could not do. The ones we did do, we could often not sustain. When Pastor Johnson told Pastor Tait and I that she would no longer be able to come to Avondale Clergy meetings because she was starting a full time job, it was like a wake-up about the stresses Avondale clergy are under. We are talking about downsizing what our group does, offering more support to one another, and trying to find ways to reach out and meet our bi-vocational colleagues.

I just mentioned Pastor Tait, minister of Church of the Living God. He is the hardest working minister I know, and about twice a year I call him to make sure he is OK. Generally after I have watched him fall asleep in a daytime meeting. Pastor Tait is a man on fire with the calling of God and he is a leader. He is President of the Avondale Clergy. I am the Secretary of the Avondale Clergy, and he and I do much of the strategizing and agenda setting. Those of you who brought school supplies in over the summer – they were distributed through his congregation and non-profit organization. He organized the HIV/AIDS Day service we participated in last winter. It was the most progressive black church HIV/AIDS service I have ever attended. Pastor Tait is so talented I would not be surprised if his denomination taps him for a higher position in a few years. I will be so sad to see him go.

As much as we can't do everything, sometimes we are also utterly indispensable. Last spring, Duke Energy cut off electricity to an apartment building in Avondale that owed several months worth of unpaid bills. Unpaid by a slum lord. Into our clergy meeting that day, poured desperate local residents. The elderly diabetic who could not take her medication because the refrigeration had gone out. The mother of an infant with no food because the refrigeration had gone out. Until a trash company stepped forward, the clergy were going to pay for dumpsters so that people could throw out rotting food before it became a health hazard.

That meeting frightened me because it was the closest I have ever been to human desperation. It was panic and fear like you hear about after a natural disaster or among fleeing human refugee populations. I was glad we were there and I found it sickening, that this was the plight of my neighbors. In that moment the veil was ripped off and we were all wretchedly naked and I was so angry at the systems that allow a situation like this to happen. And I was grateful for all the agencies, local institutions and people that stepped in – Project Connect tried to find all the displaced children to get them to school. Outreach workers searched the building for people in need. The Avondale Community Council provided resources. Carmel Presbyterian fed residents. It was amazing how fast Avondale came together, faster than our city business or political leaders. This may be a blighted neighborhood, but it is not empty. Many of us dropped what we were doing to help our neighbors in dire need.

If it seems like Avondale lacks human resources, it does. Which is why I was so glad that Pastor Baines moved to town from Dayton. Pastor Baines is the new minister of Southern Baptist, where our former Music Director, Kenny Smith was raised. Pastor Baines has the unenviable job of pastoring at the congregation that Pastor Milton served. Pastor Milton was one of those tremendous 1960's freedom marching clergy.

Pastor Baines is a Myers –Briggs ESTJ, and praise God for that. When our meetings are lengthened by someone telling a story at one end of the room, Pastor Baines says “What are you whispering about over there?” When we are stuck on an issue he backs us up to see which policies are in play. He is funny when he does it. I wish he attended every meeting I attend. At our last clergy meeting he said “I can't get my folks to help out during the week or come to committee meetings. Last Sunday I asked someone ‘How come I only see you on Sunday? God and I need you all week long.’ The congregant replied, ‘I don't know Pastor. See you next Sunday.’”

This past year, I attended a “call-in” at Riverside Correctional Facility, to learn what the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) and the Cincinnati Police Department are doing to reduce crime among repeat offenders they believe will offend again. I have the deepest respect for CIRV workers, male outreach workers who themselves have criminal records, so they understand the allure of the street. I don't know what their criminal records entail, by Rashid served twenty years and Peterson Mingo (now a pastor) served eight. Mingo told me he was known in his street days as “The Enforcer.” He told me he was sent when someone disobeyed the rules of the gang, and that no one wanted to see him coming. I have a fascination with people who do great wrong, have the courage to face their actions, learn, and change their path for something good. This is the story of human redemption, and it is rare. It also comes at an awful price, especially for the victims of crime.

It was a remarkable experience to enter a correctional facility (lock up your purse, pager, and keys) and sit in a room with 100 incarcerated men. When I looked at the men I had two thoughts: there are only two men here who look 35 - everyone else is 18-24 - and my second thought was worse, “This is where all the black men are.”

It is astonishingly sad to see a room full of 20 year old incarcerated black men. What is their future, and the future of their communities? Instead of wage earning they are here. CIRV put on a great program about going straight, how to get help, and what happens if they don't. But I know the statistics about getting a job when released from prison. Forty – sixty percent of individuals with a criminal record are unemployed.

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Here was my other thought at the CIRV “call-in.” The inmates looked like people, young people, but just people. They don’t look like 100 mug shots. They look like young men who are sad, indifferent, angry, tired, dispirited. They had been convicted of crimes and they looked like you and me. It is just a veil between us. Our fantasy is that it is a wall. If we take down the bricks we might yet find God in one another.