

ICARE AND ANTI-RACISM

By Lois Hoeft

When I listen to that story relating the method that Rev. Barber used to bring people together toward a common goal, I feel like he learned the process from DART, the Direct Action & Research Training Center. DART trains organizers who then go to cities like Jacksonville and help to create Church Based Community Organizations like Jacksonville's ICARE, the Interfaith Coalition for Action, Reconciliation and Empowerment. The whole idea is bringing about change by gathering large groups of people together with a common goal. It does not matter if they are white or black or red or purple. Their self-interests will be more important than the shade of one's skin. Concentrating on the question of who is racist and who isn't would not help address the common goal.

Now I will go into a more detailed look at the workings of ICARE because that is where UUCJ is connected and has been for about 25 years.

I became involved in ICARE because I liked the process that they used to identify injustices in Jacksonville, research solutions, present them to leaders and hold those leaders accountable for implementing those solutions. I did not think of it as an opportunity to improve relations with black people. That slowly changed. Working for justice with like-minded people regardless of their religion or the color of their skin became an opportunity to learn about their stories and to build trust.

Early in my involvement, about 2009, I was asked to be on the steering committee to address the number of youths who were arrested in Jacksonville for minor offenses – about 4000 per year at that time. And a disproportionate number of those were Black. The steering committee consisted of four people, 3 women, 1 man, including 2 white, 2 black who stayed on that steering committee for about 10 years. We looked for ways to address this problem. We found out about restorative justice and looked for ways to implement that idea of justice, first in the schools and then in the neighborhoods. The black man on that committee was taking graduate school studies in restorative justice and was a wonderful source of information. He was very helpful when our spirits waned over the slow response to these changes.

Resistance from the school authorities came in the form of “there is already an entity to take care of those problems – Teen Court”. However, we knew that the youth processed through Teen Court still had a record. We wanted restorative justice in the schools before they ended up in Teen Court. We met quarterly with a group of school authorities, including the Superintendent, for years. At one meeting one of them said, “keep coming, hold us accountable and we will get this done”. With a change of principals we got more cooperation, a change in the code of conduct and real support.

More resistance came when we addressed neighborhoods. Sheriff Rutherford and State Attorney Angela Corey gave lip service to the idea of civil citations which would prevent the

offender from having a criminal record but resisted including some offenses. For instance, resisting arrest without violence. For example, a young person might be afraid and decide to run. The sheriff was adamant that that kind of resisting arrest should not be included. We knew that Black youth were more likely to be in that category and insisted it needed to be included. When Mike Williams and Melissa Nelson were elected as Sheriff and State Attorney, we actually made progress. Civil citations were included in a binding Memorandum of Understanding for the entire 4th District. Later we found out that many times Civil Citations were not issued when the young offender was eligible. Sheriff Williams then mandated that the officers had to issue a civil citation or give a reason why they did not. Then the rate of giving civil citations to those eligible rose to close to 90%. This has made a major systemic change in Jacksonville. Many young lives, both black and white have been given a second chance.

Civil Citations would not be given unless there was some sort of accountability. ICARE worked with the Juvenile Justice Department, the Sheriff's office and the State Attorney to set up Neighborhood Accountability Boards (NABs). These Boards would use restorative justice methods to hold the offenders accountable. Eventually the State Attorney decided that Civil Citations could be sent directly to Teen Court where they would be directed to Teen Court or one of the NABs. There are now 4 NABS in Jacksonville – Northside, Westside, Arlington and the Beaches.

The first one was at Ribault High School. I attended that Board for several years. That neighborhood is predominantly Black and many of the volunteers were Black. I was always welcomed. We had a common goal – changing the behavior of our young people and keeping them out of the justice system. And we rejoiced together when a young person came in after about 3 months to report on their progress. One example, a girl, almost an adult at 17, first came in very angry. Her family was very dysfunctional, her relationship with her father was toxic and now she lived with her grandmother. When she returned, she had signed up for military service, had addressed her father's attitude and was now poised and ready to face the world after graduation. I don't remember her original offense, but to think she could have ended up in jail instead shows the value of persevering at making systemic changes.

ICARE is made up of 38 congregations – about half and half, Black and White. It is part of a group of organizations under the umbrella of DART (Direct Action and Research Training Center). The DART network brings people together across racial, religious and socioeconomic lines to pursue justice. Their reach includes organizations in 10 states. Florida with 12, has the most. As a member of DART, ICARE uses the power of people to identify issues of injustice that have wide acceptance, are winnable, and are unifying. We challenge and work with leaders to accomplish those solutions.

Over the years, trust has developed. Unfortunately, none of the Black people I have met live in my immediate neighborhood. However, I have run into several when I am out in the community

where we comfortably greet each other. In my mind, the more this happens in the community, the more it will become the norm.

In his book, *The Third Reconstruction*, the Rev. William Barber gives 14 steps for moving forward together. To me, the first one exemplifies the work of ICARE in regard to improving racial justice. *“Engage in indigenously led grassroots organizing across the state. There is no end run around the relational work of building trust and empowering local people. A sustained movement depends on local people who know one another and are committed to working together for the long haul. ‘Helicopter’ leadership by ‘national leaders’ will not sustain a moral movement.”*

The sixth step describes ICARE. *Build a broad, diverse coalition including moral and religious leaders of all faiths who will stand against the divide-and-conquer strategies of extremists.*

I know that I have white privilege. I know that Blacks have been unfairly targeted in many ways. When I first read about white privilege it made me tongue-tied in many ways – yes, I was afraid that I might inadvertently use language that would offend. After working with so many Blacks through ICARE I have decided that if I goof, I will apologize immediately and believe that the trust we have built over these years will hold. I cannot imagine having a conversation with any of them where I would say “I am racist and you are not”. It would be counterproductive. It would negate all the good work we have done together over the years.

The idea that the UUA would now judge if our work with the people who are members of ICARE is sufficient to meet the anti-racist goals set by the UUA is absolutely scary. If, instead, the UUA was providing ways to develop more workable relationships with minority groups, I would feel inspired.

Restorative justice is based on changing behaviors, not amplifying guilt. I believe the same actions can be applied to decreasing racism.