

## From Racism to Reconciliation: The Peaceable Kingdom Here and Now

The mission of The Memphis School of Servant Leadership is to raise up a critical mass of Christian servant leaders for the church and the world and in doing so recall the church to its vocation to participate in the transforming prophetic work of Jesus in the world. Classes are designed to challenge persons to be, say, and do the Gospel - for the sake of the world. In this way, we believe we become what the prophet Isaiah called, “repairers of the breach and restorers of the streets to live in.”

In keeping with that mission, Memphians have met since 2005 in covenant groups that have focused on an examination of racism and reconciliation in our community. Memphis, as a significant repository of the history and as the soulforce of the black liberation struggle in the south of the United States, provides unique opportunity for this inquiry. The martyrdom of Martin Luther King, Jr. here and the failure of the city to brazenly embrace his message of non-violent resistance to bring about social change in the face of racial injustice have contributed to a pervasive Black underclass.

The covenant groups have adhered to servant leadership principles of prayer, scripture, study, and community action. The conversation and commitment have been forged across barriers of race, economic class, neighborhood, culture, education, social position and faith tradition. The experience of the groups has been that the pain of race is ever apparent and that models and ideals of reconciliation are not as evident. More difficult still has been to fashion a model of reconciliation that will engage, preserve and hold sacred the past. Yet, for those who have participated in the spiritual discernment and transformation of servant leadership, a commitment to non-violence, community action and resistance to injustice in Memphis has evolved.

The panel discussion will focus on the principles of servant leadership, the process of forging bonds that develop trust and commitment, the process of identifying community ills that result from racism and the process of servant leadership discernment of non-violence that responds to community ills. The panelists will discuss the covenant principles of servant leadership and their experience of transformation in this process of seeking the reconciliation of racism. Some panelist will share reflection papers that articulate their experience of the journey. Others will describe community efforts that have represented significant markers and witness of peace along the way.

The covenant group continues to dream a *Building of Beloved Community* that redistributes power and restores justice such that those made poor are not in isolation, without voice, health care, communities of peace, education or recreation. Thus far, the covenant groups have gathered Memphis talent, including the commitment and participation of artists, various faith communities and civic groups to establish a process of discernment to identify and remember in prayer and memorial Memphis Martyrs to Murder. The effort began on the Feast of the Birth of Martin Luther King, Jr. on 15 January 2007. The Memorial was erected at Pentecost with a sculpture on the lawn of The Caritas Village. There were one hundred sixty (160) martyrs in 2006 more that 80% were people of color as were those suspected of the murders. Because the Memorial became a destination of pilgrimage for some families of martyrs, the servant leadership community has committed to maintain the memorial and to continue the process of prayer and discernment until no stark reminder, like the memorial, of institutionalized racism has to stand in Memphis.

**Debra Nell Brittenum** daughter, sister, mother of two and grandmother of three, is Catholic and a member of St. Patrick's. She practiced public interest law for twenty years, concentrating on the civil rights of persons with psychiatric diagnoses in the context of family, housing, employment and public benefits. She now writes, facilitates retreats and preaches as called.

**Dixie Fletcher** is a retired School Psychologist from the Memphis City Schools. She teaches part-time at a massage school and does counseling and energy healing work. She attends Holy Trinity UCC and is very concerned about environmental issues and reconciliation. She is new to Servant Leadership.

**Carolyn Head** lives in Memphis and works in Mississippi as an Assistant Director for Public Services with the First Regional Library System. She is a founding board member of Diversity Memphis (formerly NCCJ). She attends Prescott Baptist Church and has been active in a number of diversity, literacy and peace and justice issues since moving to Memphis in 1974. She is new to Servant Leadership

**Onie Johns**, retired medical administrator, is the co-founder & resident host of the Caritas Community & the founder & Director of the Caritas Village, a community center, coffee shop and cultural arts center in intercity Memphis. She is a member of Everett Memorial UMC as well as the Memphis School of Servant Leadership support community.

**Brooke Sarden**, new to the Servant Leadership Community, is a painter, writer and works on the support staff for the Memphis Area Legal Services.

**Art Sutherland** is a retired cardiologist who is now working in public health advocacy with the Healthy Memphis Common Table, Physicians for a National Health Program, and numerous other community groups including the Church Health Clinic and the Methodist Healthcare Foundation. He is a member of the MSSSL's Racism and Reconciliation working group.

**Fred Terry**, recently retired after 40 years teaching at CBU, is an elder in the Presbyterian Church, a member of Idlewild and affiliated with the Rivendell Community. He has facilitated numerous workshops and classes on topics technical, secular, and faith based. He is married with two grown children and a granddaughter.