

# “8th Anniversary of the Interfaith Sacred Conversation on Race & Diversity” by Sandra Miller, Trish Nemore, and Rev. Maybelle Taylor Bennett

May 22, 2016



## Trinity Sunday

Sandra Miller

Good morning. As I always do, as did Kate Cudlipp, and in her honor for the years she was part of the Sacred Conversation, let me start with this prayer from Psalm 19:

*“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Holy One, my rock and my redeemer”*

Today is Trinity Sunday, and so it is rather humorous that there is a trio of intrepid travelers bringing you the Word as we have heard it.

Maybelle, Trish and I comprise the current makeup of the Interfaith Sacred Conversation on Race & Diversity Planning Committee. (We would happy to welcome other committed members. Talk to one or all of us.)

On May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008 I stood here for the public initiation of the Sacred Conversation, and introduced you to Maybelle Taylor Bennett, now Rev. Bennett, and Rev. Paulette Imani, who so graciously shared part of their personal stories around issues of racism. That was 8 years ago. It was the start of an incredibly rich journey that began with my answering an opportunity Pat offered to Seekers in response to one that the United Church of Christ issued to its churches, in turn a response to Obama's March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008 campaign speech on race that he delivered in Philadelphia, to be community, to talk with each other.

I felt called to an impossible task, even at a local level, yet moved forward. When I invited Maybelle to be one of the two people of color to tell part of their story they were willing to share, she said we needed to talk in person first. Suddenly we were a committee of two, and after that first worship service Kate Cudlipp joined our little committee that still misses her and still draws on her wisdom. The committee has ranged in numbers from 1 to 7 members, and has held steady at 3 for several years. Thank goodness we are all in this together.

Over the course of the past 8 years we have initiated dinner conversations in peoples' homes hosted by mixed race partners; gone to museums; hosted monthly movies to stimulate conversation about topics as diverse as race in America, LGBTQ issues, class distinctions, and the morality of how we live our daily lives; and we've explored the differences and similarities of our faith beliefs through shared worship. Maybelle, Trish and I have gone to lectures, documentary and relevant film showings, and plays together, sometimes accompanied by others. We have forged a relationship with the Muslim Women's Coalition of Greater DC, and brought dinner and conversation with them right here to Seekers, and several of us have gone to events with them and heard astounding stories that broadened our horizons and understanding of Islam.

Uzma Farooq, the local leader of MWC, has an outreach call to educate communities about the Sublime in Islam through a quarterly or tri-annual series about the beauty of Islam, and chose the Sacred

Conversation to partner with in the endeavor. Uzma sends her apology for not being well enough to bring you her story today, followed by a Q&A session as scheduled. The Sacred Conversation and the Seekers' Eyes to See, Ears to Hear Peace Prayer Mission Group are sponsoring the launch of this exciting project on Saturday, June 4<sup>th</sup>. We do hope that all of you will RSVP to attend the tea, and be part of this leg of the journey as we hear from Nur Muhammed, a gifted calligrapher. Thank goodness we are all in this together.

For those of you who are too new to be aware of the history, and for those of you who have lost sight of the fact that the Sacred Conversation is still a cohesive and relevant program, though we have not been as up front and publicly active as we were in past years, I hope I have filled in a compelling, if incomplete picture.

As an introduction to my own story in this I want to go to Obama's speech for a moment and offer two brief quotes of what drew me in:

*"But I have asserted a firm conviction – a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people – that, working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union."*

*"In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more and nothing less than what all the world's great religions demand – that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother's keeper, scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well."*

I've said "Thank goodness we're all in this together" a few times already, not solely because it is the theme for the season, but because I believe it. I can affirm that in a big way here at Seekers, with Covenant, and with the Muslim Women's Coalition, when I use a very personal context/viewpoint. When my viewpoint enlarges to encompass Jesus' edict to love one another applied to the whole world, our nation, our city, our communities, I and we have a long way to

go. We have not yet created that more perfect union. The fact remains that if we don't talk and really listen to one another we will never resolve the issues that comprise the elephant in America's living room, and reconcile as the human race I believe God intended.

From our reading in Romans 5 today, I go to the end of the chain that tells us "hope does not disappoint us." Hope is the element in my life that I try hardest to hold onto, along with faith. Hope that my small actions in the world will in fact make a difference, hope that racial justice will come to pass – if not in my lifetime, then in that of my children's and grandchildren's, and hope that justice, love and peace will be found in abundance in every corner of this world.

For me the story is that in and through the Sacred Conversation I have built enduring and close relationships across many boundaries that have invited and challenged me to look deeper at my own privilege, and societies issues far beyond what I had done in the past. I have hurt others along the way in action and words, and have been hurt by others, but because of our commitment to be part of something bigger than ourselves we have found ways to learn from those hurts and forgive one another truly and deeply. I've also had FUN, made possible because of the strong ties forged between friends of such differing life circumstances. I've had and have friends of color, different faiths, sexual identities, financial backgrounds and circumstances, and levels of educational and career accomplishments all of my life, but the quality of what happens between those of us in the Sacred Conversation is richer and deeper, and has an element which I do not have the capacity to articulate other than to say, truly I can't live without them, and thank God we're all in this together.

I can't imagine not being part of Covenant's worship from time to time. I can't begin to say how much bigger my understanding of God has become since my participation in the last Covenant Retreat on the Cosmic God. I can't imagine having participated in the Church of the Saviour book group on Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, and subsequently being part of the ongoing group that brought panel discussions to a number of churches on the topic. I can't imagine becoming part of the antiracist groups made up of people from several

Church of the Saviour communities that has distilled into the Racial Justice and Healing Collective without my grounding in the Sacred Conversation. I can't say that any of these are easy commitments, but my world is so very much larger than ever before. Thank God we're all in this together.

Who I am in Seekers has been changed by the Sacred Conversation, and at least in subtle ways I hope that Seekers has been changed by my being part of the Sacred Conversation. From my perspective, thank God we're all in this together.

As John says in the Gospel reading for today:

*"When the Spirit of truth comes, it will guide you into all the truth."*

My hope is that one day the world will know the truth and shout out in unison, thank God we are all in this together. And hope does not disappoint us.

### **Trish Nemore**

I missed the opening event of our Sacred Conversations in May of 2008. Pat and I were on a wonderful road trip to the Grand Canyon. I was very sorry to miss the event but loved our road trip. The first Sacred Conversations event I recall involved a very large sort of circle in the conference room downstairs with members from Seekers, Covenant and at least one other worshipping community from the building. We each spoke something into the circle and, perhaps a little later in the meeting, we went off in small mixed race groups to answer specific questions. Covenant offered us the hospitality of a buffet meal; we met during their regular worship time, so they had given that worship time over to creating this community across racial lines. I'd never had such an experience in my life. It felt important.

Sacred conversations has involved a lot of getting to know each other better. While I do not subscribe to what's often referred to as "normalization" – if we just get to know each other better, all the

bad stuff will fall away – as a way of undoing the many “isms” that afflict our society, I do believe that getting to know each other matters. Sharing meals together matters. Discussing a film together matters. Taking a class together matters. Worshipping together matters. Sacred Conversations has created opportunities for each of these things.

My life until about eight or ten years ago was lived in a very white world. In many – but fewer – ways, it still is. (Maybelle and I have noted the parallels of our respective black and white worlds – hers as an employee of Howard and a resident of Anacostia.) As I’ve mentioned from this lectern before, the man who was my boss for twelve years – who is also a dear friend – is a black man . I’ve been invited into his home on several occasions, and into his sister’s home in Amarillo, TX, as well as into the home of our friends, Glen Yakushiji and Deborah Sokolove. But otherwise, I have had few opportunities to experience the hospitality of people of color. I cherished an evening with others from Seekers and Covenant at Mildred Mitchell’s house as part of one of the Sacred Conversation events. I cherished a July 4 celebration of wonderful food and rich conversation at Maybelle’s after a Sacred Conversation-organized visit to the Anacostia Museum to look at an exhibit of Africans in Mexico. Being invited into other people’s homes matters.

Not too long into the life of Sacred Conversations, I became aware that probably a lot of the best discussion and energy occurred in the process of planning the various events. The planning group was quite large with members from Seekers and Covenant gathering regularly over a pot luck meal for conversation leading to ideas for additional activities. I wanted in. The planning group is smaller now – most typically, Sandra, Maybelle and I gather monthly for a shared meal and conversation. We are faithful to the process and meet for fellowship even when no group activity is emerging. I cherish the deep friendships and shared three-some outings that have developed from this faithfulness. In my still fairly white world, intentionality with respect to crossing boundaries is very important.

So, Sacred Conversations is about intentionality, about relationships,

about working and playing at getting to know each other. It's also about being a part of a web of interconnections that expand our individual worlds by linking us to the worlds of others in the circle – the world of the Muslim Women's Coalition, with which we'll sponsor an event about Calligraphy in Islam here at this building on June 4; the world of the Emergence Community Arts Collective, a vibrant entity in the Howard University neighborhood that Maybelle is involved with; the world of Interfaith Action for Human Rights, whose Rabbi Chuck Feinberg, together with a returning citizen, brought us the Word some months ago about his own faith journey and about IAHR's advocacy against solitary confinement; the world of undoing racism workshops that some of us in Seekers and in Covenant have attended, among others.

In Seekers' language, Sacred Conversations is a lot about the outward journey. Learning, connecting, sharing stories, expanding horizons, crossing borders. But it is also about inward journey. My understanding about Journey Inward/Journey Outward is that they feed each other: our outward journey gives us experience that changes us; as we reflect on that experience as part of our inner journey, we seek to integrate it with whatever else we know about the world and we get recharged to again engage the outer world. In the past few years, as part of both an inner and an outer journey, I have intentionally confronted my own whiteness and what it means for me as an actor in the world and, more specifically, as a citizen of the United States. This is hard and painful work. I have **not** done that work primarily in the context of Sacred Conversations. But the intimacy we've developed in our relationships in Sacred Conversations gives me a place to process out loud and in the company of others.

The planning group meets the first Monday of each month at 6 pm in the kitchen to share a meal and conversation together. I hope you will join us.

Amen.

**Rev. Maybelle Taylor Bennett**

When I first became involved with Sacred Conversations, I remember thinking that my participation was more important as a vehicle for helping President Obama move America toward a more perfect union, than as a personal opportunity for growth. After all, I am black, was active in the Civic Rights movement on my undergraduate campus, helped to establish Africana Studies department there, which, at that time was 39 years old. I've been aware of racial inequities and injustices all my life. I know the joys of being young, gifted and black, and I am convinced of the value of all kinds of diversity.

So, okay, if participating in difficult conversations in a multicultural setting helps this black President propel us toward a more perfect union, I suppose this is the next phase of the struggle that I should be involved in.

The truth is, that sentiment carried with it a great deal of arrogance, as though there was really nothing else I needed to learn about race or diversity. Fortunately, this last eight years slowly revealed so much that I didn't know:

- that there were white people who were aware of and were trying to understand their whiteness and the assumption of entitlement that came with it; and
- that there were black people who preferred to just step back from all the sturm and drang of racial conflict and just BE in a multicultural setting;

There were other ways I had the privilege of growing over the last eight years as well:

- Our "We the People" film series and discussions showed me that there was a unique perspective to be had from the point of view of the maid's employer in the film "Imitation of Life" to which I had always been oblivious, even after all the times I had seen the film.
- There is something extraordinarily rich about viewing the films "Precious," "Invictus," and "Selma" in mixed company, not just with people from your own community.
- Some conversations come through the variety and energy of the language of music to which I was exposed in Carroll Café, and while she did not meet with Sacred Conversations, my talks with Marjory were most regular, and most lively on those sacred second Fridays as we sat together near the stage. Marjory has become a most precious and beloved mentor for me, and I have never had a white mentor.
- There is a whole body of scholarship, art, culture and



struggle revealed in the Islamic experience worthy of my understanding, appreciation, and reverence. Not that I had anything against it. That experience was just "over there."

- I had the opportunity to confront my feelings of insecurity when I am around white people, no matter how much exposure I've had to them in school or on the job. What I learned in the Anti-Racism Analysis Training was that many of the reasons for these feelings come from the internalized racial oppression and the generational conditioning that perpetuates it.

- I was already aware that there was a disproportionate number of people of color who made up our prison population. However, I learned that I have made, out of ignorance and a lack of exposure, a number of assumptions about people who are incarcerated, which bred a certain insensitivity to their conditions and experiences.

- I learned that there IS something I can do, no matter how ingrained in our societal ethic mass incarceration may be or how intractable the problems may seem.

I am emerging a better person for having met monthly for eight years with my sisters and (early on) my brothers from Seekers.

I am more open to diversity that goes beyond the binary black/white experience, but includes diversity in sexual relationships, gender identity, income, spiritual and intergenerational experiences as well.

I am more compassionate, more enlightened and more introspective about the value of all kinds of diversity.

These "Sacred Conversations" spawned many more connections between Covenant members and the Seekers community. We have ties that are closer than they were initially, because: we worship together; prepare Thanksgiving baskets together; we've enjoyed music together; we've attended lectures together; we've watched and discussed movies together; we participated in training together; and we've formed individual personal ties.

- when I could not participate in an activity we had planned, and my sisters came to my house to help me de-clutter my kitchen cabinet and my prayer room;

- when I spontaneously suggested we all attend a play at the Anacostia Playhouse and on the spur of the moment, they met me there the next day;

- when I've invited them to join me to celebrate the efforts of the Emergence Community Arts Collective and its director, Sylvia

Robinson, and they've made it a point to do so every year;

- when we celebrated the life of Mary Church Terrell in a forensics debate competition between Howard and UDC students; and
- when they joined Covenant in exploring the nature of consciousness at a retreat.

These very personal shared experiences have deepened my appreciation of and love for Sandra and Trish especially, but also for many many Seekers to whom I have become closer because of these conversations.

There has grown up among us a modicum of trust that allows for our differences to pale in comparison to the compassion we share for one another. That trust is what will make us in America a "more perfect union," and that will take a great deal more exposure, honesty and compassion among us so that we genuinely care about "the other," and indeed, come to know that we are one.

Amen.