



SOS ART Cincinnati

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ISBN: 978-17321135-8-9

Greater Cincinnati **RELIGIOUS PEACEMAKERS**
Saad Ghosn

Greater Cincinnati

RELIGIOUS PEACEMAKERS



SAAD GHOSN

Greater Cincinnati
RELIGIOUS PEACEMAKERS

*Stories of
38 Greater Cincinnati Religious
Individuals whose diverse
Faith serves as a Promoter
for Peace and Justice*

A book of SOS (Save Our Souls) ART

written by

Saad Ghosn

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ISBN: 978-1-7321135-8-9

Book design; front and back cover art; photographs: *Saad Ghosn*

Special thanks and heartfelt gratitude to:

All the Religious Peacemakers included in this book who were generous of themselves and of their time in sharing their story

SOS ART is a 501c3 Organization whose Mission is to:

Encourage, promote and provide opportunities for the arts as dynamic vehicles for peace and justice

Encourage artists to use their art as their voice on issues of peace and justice that concern them, their community and the world

Facilitate the creation of a local community of artists who network and collaborate together using art as a means to impact issues of peace and justice in the community where they live

Use the arts to speak about, inform, educate and create a dialogue on issues of peace and justice and thus to bring about positive change

Use the arts to introduce basic values of peace and justice in the youth

SOS ART is very grateful to the McLane Foundation for all its support



***To all Individuals
who use their Faith,
whatever it is,
to promote
Peace and Justice
in this World***

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Throughout human history, wars and violence have often been waged in the name of religions and in the name of diverging religious beliefs and belonging. Ironically, though, all religions in their teachings speak of nonviolence and have in common the promotion of peace and justice, namely the respect of human life and dignity, the institution of human rights, the protection of the poor and vulnerable, the freeing of the oppressed, the active elimination of injustice... It seems therefore, that violence and wars would be antithetical to religions; yet they are so frequently used as their justification. Are we then speaking of different "religions"?

"Institutional religions," the ones structured by humans and that are brandished to lead violence and wars, become in fact quite foreign to the essence of the religions as they were established by their founders and that they intend to represent; they actually contribute to their destruction.

Wanting to reflect on that point, I embarked, a few years ago, on giving voice to local religious individuals, whom I called "Religious Peacemakers," and who, each by living the essential teachings of their particular faith, contributed by their actions to peace and justice. I wanted to prove that their path, irrespective of their original religion, would be similar, and that their diverse faith, instead of separating them, would on the contrary end up uniting them.

My intention was then to identify 50 Greater Cincinnati individuals, from different faiths and religions, who were religious and adhered to the spiritual teachings of their religion, and to feature them and their path in biweekly articles published, in agreement with Justin Jeffre then the editor, in *Streetvibes*, a Cincinnati Street Magazine; also, to post them simultaneously on the SOS ART website: sosartcincinnati.com.

Each article would include, in addition to the information pertaining to the particular individual, a short insert about the religion itself, or a text from that religion as quoted by the featured individual. The 50 articles would be included, at completion, in a book to be disseminated to the Greater Cincinnati community, thus sharing the voice of our local “Religious Peacemakers,” illustrating their similar peace and justice path as guided by their faith, and showcasing the endpoint commonality of their religion.

Unfortunately, at my 32nd article, Justin Jeffre suddenly resigned from his position as Editor at *Streetvibes*, and due to technical difficulties with the new Editor, I had to interrupt my articles in the Magazine. I continued, however, posting them on the SOS ART website. A couple of months later, regrettably, I had to discontinue the project altogether. After a year and a half of continuous activity and the publication of 36 articles featuring 38 qualified individuals representing close to 30 main religions and faiths, it became quite difficult to locate, identify and meet with new local “Religious Peacemakers” representing additional religions. As a result, some religions and faiths ended up not being included. This, of course, had nothing to do with the importance or the impact of the omitted religion; it was simply due to circumstantial and/or logistical reasons. These at the time unavoidable omissions are regrettable, and I sincerely apologize for them to the members of the non-represented faith.

The last posted article dates to the end of December 2018, more than two years ago. I reneged then on my initial plan of including them all in a book, and over the past couple of years somewhat forgot my original intent. It is only recently that, prompted by the latest religiously motivated violence worldwide, the idea of publishing the articles already written in a book surfaced again, even though most of them not anymore current in their personal information. I felt, however, that their content would stand by itself and would prove, without any doubt, the commonality of all the featured religions toward nonviolence, peace, and justice. Also, that the disseminated book would serve as a good community builder, spreading and empowering the voice of all our participating local “Religious Peacemakers”; and providing information, even if only limited, about their religion.

Due to feasibility and/or logistical reasons, I opted neither to update the articles nor to expand the information they each include about the represented religion; also, not to add new articles to the already existing series. Instead, and in order to provide a sense of time, I decided to only include at the end of each article, and in a note, its date of original publication/posting.

Two of the included “Religious Peacemakers” recently left us. Father Thomas Bokenkotter, a seminal Roman Catholic priest, an Academician, and a wonderful friend, passed away July 11, 2021; and Deb Simons-Reeves, a Christian Scientist Practitioner, loved by anyone who had met her, passed away few days later, July 21, 2021. Father Tom and Deb, you will be missed; but know that your voice, your faith, and your impact on peace and justice in this world will continue to live through all of us. May God smile to you and have your soul at peace!

Before closing I would like to say that this project (and book) was started part of my involvement with SOS (Save Our Souls) ART, a non-profit organization I founded twenty years ago and whose mission is to promote all arts as vehicles for peace and justice and for the building of a peaceful and just community. The faith-based art of living of our local “Religious Peacemakers” certainly fits SOS ART’s mission and it is hoped that their voice and contributions for a better world would remain eloquent and strong forever.

My sincere thanks to all the local “Religious Peacemakers” who, generously and freely, donated their time to meet with me; shared with me their faith and their path; educated me about their religion; and for all that they did and still do to better this world. Also, my many thanks to all “Religious Peacemakers” throughout the world who daily put the loving word of their faith into peaceful and just actions.

With heartfelt gratitude,

Saad Ghosn

Founder and President, SOS ART

TALA ALI

For *Tala Ali*, a Muslim, Spirituality Cannot Be Separated From Her Social Justice Work

Growing up in the US, Tala Ali, Muslim Chaplain at the Dorothy Day Center for Faith and Justice, Xavier University, Cincinnati, OH, experienced what many emigrants currently face in the country. She and her family, undocumented for few years, lived in fear and need, trying to survive day by day, and her mother was once arrested by an emigration raid at her workplace but luckily not deported. This increased Ali's sensitivity to the suffering of others and forged her determination to fight for everyone's rights.

Ali was born in the United Arab Emirates to a Jordanian father and a Palestinian mother and came to the US at the age of two, initially to Tennessee for her father's Master's degree, then to Cincinnati for his PhD in American Literature at UC. After her father's graduation, the family remained in the States with no legal documents, until he was sponsored for a work visa which, eventually, led to permanent residency and naturalization.

Ali's family was not religious. Her father almost never spoke of religion to her, but rather of political activism, especially of the Palestinian Liberation struggle in which he was involved on campus. As a kid she would accompany him to demonstrations and protests, idealized him and his friends activists, and wanted to be like them. Her mother was culturally a Muslim, but not a practicing one, and would occasionally tell her children stories about Islam.

Ali attended the Academy of World Languages, part of CPS, where she learned Arabic; then Walnut Hills High School (HS) from which she graduated in 2000. It is in HS that she became curious about Islam and started learning about its faith and its practices.

"I would pick up books relating to it from the school's library," she says. "I also started visiting the Clifton Mosque and the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati in West Chester, participating in their classes and services and learning how to pray."

Thus, Ali became familiar with the bases of Islam, discovered its traditions and its feasts, and joined in its Ramadan Fasting.

MUSLIM

TALA ALI



While growing up she had already repeatedly questioned her parents about why, as Muslims, they were celebrating Christmas and not Ramadan, and she had assumed that it was in order to blend and not feel different.

"But I was on the contrary increasingly asking myself: Who am I? What is my identity? Where do I belong?" she says.

Discovering and affirming her religious background was, in addition, an issue of identity for Ali. In HS and following the influence of her father, she also pursued her activism for the Palestinian cause, reading books and writing papers about it, attending conferences relating to it, also being active in Al Awda (i.e., The Return), the student Palestinian activist group of her school.

In the fall of 2000, Ali registered at UC to study International Relations. A couple of months later, inspired by other women on campus wearing the hijab (the head-covering scarf worn by certain Muslim women), she decided to also wear it as a sign of intimate relationship with God and of servitude to Him. She has been donning it ever since.

At UC Ali joined the Muslim Student Association but was disappointed, finding the Association mostly political and judgmental, foreign to the Islam that she got to know, the Islam that focuses on bettering oneself, on fighting one's ego, on serving God and taking care of other people.

Less than a year later, following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and due to her looks, Ali was exposed to repeated physical and verbal attacks. "I was waiting once at a bus stop, downtown Cincinnati, and a passerby threw scalding coffee at me," she says. "I was also verbally abused by many customers at the Goldstar Chili where I was working at the time."

By then she had joined the UC antiwar group actively protesting Bush's new policies regarding the War on Terrorism, also his preparation for the invasion of Iraq. In 2003 Ali's application for a permanent visa was denied twice, for no clear reasons, and in 2004 she found a tracking device hidden in her car. She was also bullied by one of her UC Professors who repeatedly refused to acknowledge her and her questions in class and who bluntly admitted it to her when she confronted him.

By then disillusioned and disheartened Ali dropped her studies and took a few months break to visit her father's relatives in Jordan and backpack through Syria.

Upon her return to the US, she spent more time at the mosque and decided to resume her college studies but this time at Cincinnati State for an Associate degree in Liberal Arts and International Relations, then at Xavier University for a BA in Post-colonial International Studies and Political Science (2011).

Ali's years spent at Xavier University (XU) were life changing to her. She resonated very well with the holistic spiritual approach the school espoused, its focus on the entire person, its high moral values, and the support it provided its students. She also discovered right away the on-campus Dorothy Day Center for Faith and Justice (CFJ) which helped her grow in her faith and strengthen its link to social justice.

While in her Junior year, she served on XU Interfaith Executive Cabinet. The following year she chaired the Lecture series for the University, helping identify and invite significant individuals to come and speak on campus. She was thus able to feature Franklin McCain, the American civil rights activist and member of the Greensboro Four who staged a sit-in protest at the Woolworth lunch counters in Greensboro, NC; also to show Howard Zinn's documentary "The People Speak" that gives voice to everyday Americans who, by insisting on equality and justice, spoke up for social change throughout US history.

Ali was also all along involved with the Holy Land club facilitating films and teachings for justice in Palestine.

In 2011 and in her last student year at XU, Ali founded, along with other women and men friends converts to Islam she had met at the Mosque, Salaam (i.e. Peace) Community, a safe third space for Muslims who had felt rejected, for converts who had had a traumatic experience, a spiritually enriching space, also a cultural one. "The Mosque was intimidating to some," says Ali. "In many instances the leadership had kept the mentality of Islam vs the West, and for many of us who were American we did not feel at ease."

The space, based on a model the Ta'leef Collective from the Bay area had established, is in the Starfire locale in Oakley. It welcomes everyone and has been functioning like a support center for Muslims, also like a cultural center with monthly meetings learning from a book, a movie night, a gay night, a social meeting place.

Ali also attended and graduated from a mentorship program offered by the Ta'leef Collective in Fremont, CA, which qualified her to become a chaplain. When in 2016 XU decided to hire a Muslim chaplain to tend to its increasing number of Muslim students, also to do social justice coaching work, they invited her to join their team. She has been since affiliated to the CFJ, providing spiritual support and guidance to students, taking them on immersion and discovery trips to rough areas, such as for instance South Chicago, opening their eyes and increasing their sensitivity to various social problems. In the summer she also leads an internship program connecting the students with local, mostly non-profit, Cincinnati agencies, exposing them to the social work these agencies do, teaching them how to identify systemic forms of oppression, how to become aware of privileges, how to give voices to the people without monopolizing their space...

When the Dakota Access Pipeline protests started at Standing Rock in the summer of 2016, Ali decided on the spot to go there and provide her solidarity and support. She spent there 7 months on and off, a transformative experience for her, one that merged social justice with her spirituality.

"At Standing Rock, we were defending the sacred," she says. "We were asked to leave our 'isms' behind, and to not judge the Natives by our western colonial standards, rather support them in their spiritual and justice quest. This resonated very much with me as a Muslim living in the West."

Standing Rock actually strengthened Ali's faith, connecting her with the Great Spirit, with God, and giving a spiritual sense to her social justice activism.

Ali remains an active member of the Clifton Mosque and participates in its many services and social justice activities. She is a supporter and collaborator of Black Lives Matter and of the Palestine Solidarity Coalition that she would like see become a sustainable organization.

"I always ask God to be gentle with me," says Ali, "to guide me, to help me do the right thing and not get short of my responsibility for others."

Ali does not know where she will go from there, but she knows that her faith will show her the way and that her spirituality will always be an intrinsic part of her social justice work against oppression.

Quotes From the **QURAN** and **HADITH** (Prophet's Saying) About Peace and Justice

"Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice..." (Quran 15:90)

"In the wealth of a rich person, there is a portion which belongs to the poor..." (Quran 51:19)

"Have you thought of him that denies the Last Judgment? It is he who turns away the orphan and has no urge to feed the destitute." (Quran 107:1)

"Worship Allah..., and be good to the parents and to the relatives, the orphans, the needy, the neighbor who is your relative, the neighbor who is not your relative, the fellow traveler, the wayfarer and the slave." (Quran 4:36)

"O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm for Allah, witnesses in justice, and do not let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to righteousness." (Quran 5:8)

"On the Day of Judgment, God will ask a person, 'Oh my servant, I was hungry, but you did not give me food.' The servant will say, 'Oh my Lord, how can I feed You, You are the One who feeds the whole of mankind'. God will say, 'Didn't you know such a servant of mine in your neighborhood was hungry. If you had served him food, you would have found me there.' Then God will ask, 'Oh my servant, I had no clothes, but you did not clothe me.' The servant will answer, 'Oh my Lord, how can I clothe you, you provide clothes to everyone.' God will say, 'Didn't you know my such and such servant needed clothes? If you had provided him clothing, you would have found me there..." (Hadith)

"Whoever removes a worldly grief from a believer, God will remove from him one of the grieves on the Day of Resurrection. And whoever alleviates the need of a needy person; God will alleviate his needs in this world and the in Hereafter... And God will aid His slave so long as he aids his brother." (Hadith)

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on **sosartcincinnati.com** on **August 10, 2018**

AARON BLUDWORTH

For Aaron Bludworth, a Mormon, Discovering & Sharing the Humanity of the Invisible Other, Namely the Homeless, & Helping Wherever He Can, Is Living His Faith.

Aaron Bludworth was born in a religious family that belonged to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormon Church. Both his parents were members of the church, and he grew up attending services regularly, participating in Sunday school and became himself one of its official members when, at the age of 8, he got baptized.

Growing up he also received religious teachings and good values from his parents. They would have regular family evenings when they will all meet, pray, read the scriptures, and address their various needs.

"This is something I still do now with my wife and five children," says Bludworth. "It gets us closer together and strengthens our faith."

Bludworth also participated in the church's youth program, meeting socially with others his age, learning from retreats and conferences; also helping others whenever possible.

He attended public school in Salt Lake City, then went for college to the University of Utah, graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Political Sciences and Business Administration. While in college, he continued his involvement with the church, but also became interested in politics, standing on the conservative side, helping Republican campaigns, and supporting conservative candidates locally and state-wide.

"I am a conservative in beliefs," he says, "and one with traditional values."

Right after college, Bludworth decided to take two years off and joined one of the missions of his church, in North Carolina. "Our church has 400 missions throughout the world," he states. "Their purpose is to spread the word and faith of our religion, proselytize, convert and recruit others to it."

CHRISTIAN, MORMON



In fact, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints encourages its young members, men, and women, ideally ages 18 to 20 but no older than 25, to devote two years of their life as missionaries, working side by side along another mission companion, to teach others about their religion. At the same time, they would provide charitable services, where they are, to help individuals and organizations whenever needed.

"These are two very tough years," says Bludworth, "but also transformational. You learn to live in a different unfamiliar context, with companions you did not choose, who sometimes do not speak your language. You learn to accept and love them and rely on them in your day-to-day work. You learn also to deal with rejection and hurt feelings..."

During these missions, the two companion missionaries try to meet people on the street, through friends or on social media, to introduce them to their religion. They may be rebuked or even insulted. They also live with very little money and few means, away from home and with very limited contact, allowed only two phone calls to their family a year, on Christmas and Mother's Day, and no dating.

"This experience did me a lot of good," says Bludworth. "It changed me, helped me grow and mature. My oldest son, 19 years old, is right now on such a mission in Guatemala and I like to think that he will be getting 20 years of life experience out of these two years. He is very happy despite his homesickness and all the encountered adversity."

After he returned from his mission, Bludworth married his wife, now of twenty years, who had also returned from a similar mission, but in Scotland, and he pursued professionally a career in trade show business that he had started while in college. He worked for the same company for 15 years in Salt Lake City, then spent a year in Las Vegas before moving to Cincinnati where he bought his own company in the same field. "I am President/CEO at Fern Exposition & Event Services," says Bludworth. "We provide the infrastructure for shows and events of trade associations and we have 400 employees in offices throughout the USA."

Because of his job Bludworth travels extensively both throughout the United States and worldwide.

"My travels have opened my eyes," he says. "I have been exposed to different people who live differently, many on the streets who are poor and homeless. I make a point to talk to them whenever I can, to learn about them, their situation, their experience, and to help them in any way I can. A couple of years ago I also started photographing them."

Interested in photography for a long time, Bludworth started using it to document the individuals, mostly homeless, he would encounter during his trips, and to tell their stories. His conversations with them would bring visibility and recognition to them. And sharing their pictures and stories through social media, primarily Instagram and Facebook, would help draw others into their circumstances, open their eyes to their existence, and possibly encourage them to understand them and see them differently.

"In a recent comment on homelessness, our Church leadership stressed that its causes were multiple," says Bludworth, "and that our response to those in need defines us as individuals and communities."

And when asked what prompts him to do this, he is quick to answer that it is his faith and that, as a follower of Christ, he believes that everybody is a child of God and that, in a similar situation, "Christ wouldn't just drive by."

"We have an individual obligation to help those in need when we have the ability to do so, whatever the circumstances, and not only those who are like us," he adds.

Juggling family, work, and social life, Bludworth continues his committed involvement in the church, filling daily responsibilities such as meeting with families he has been assigned to, and helping other members whenever needed. He is an ordained priest and performs many of the temporal religious tasks. He serves also on the high council of the "stake" (diocese) of his church, visiting other congregations and addressing their needs, also helping organize, a couple of times a year, spiritual and educational conferences. In 2015, with leaders from Thomas Moore College, Hebrew Union College, and other local religious and educational institutions, Bludworth, representing his church, helped found the Institute for Religious Liberty with the aim to celebrate and educate others about the constitutional privilege and right to freely worship and practice religion. The Institute, based at Thomas More College, organizes regularly academic symposia and lectures featuring internationally renowned speakers to address various issues that pertain to religious freedom. Bludworth is also one of the initiators of an ongoing dialogue between his church and the greater Cincinnati Jewish community in order to foster deeper understanding and exchange.

Outside the church, Bludworth continues his many charitable and humanitarian activities, often involving both his family and his business. He helps, for instance, cleaning after tornadoes, helps homeless individuals he encounters and lends a hand at homeless shelters, gives food distribution with his family, supports financially, and provides services to various organizations, such as "Be Concerned" and "Isaiah's House"... During the recent homeless crisis on 3rd street downtown Cincinnati, when he heard of a need for transportation to help relocate the homeless, Bludworth immediately offered the trucks and drivers of his company. The relocation, however, did not occur.

"If I can use the ability and resources of our company to help our community, and if it is the right thing to do, I would not hesitate," he says. "I always try to involve others in the decision but in case of emergency, I use my prerogatives of CEO and make the decision myself."

Last year, for instance, following the devastating hurricanes that hit Florida and Texas, the trucks of the company were used to drive collected goods from Cincinnati to the affected areas. And in Indianapolis, where there is a big tent city next to the Fern's office, the company allows the tapping of its water and electricity to benefit the residents.

As for politics, Bludworth who once ran for chairman of the Utah Republican party and almost won, says he is now nonpartisan and anti-party. He has been drifting away from the today Republican party disagreeing with its current leadership and with some of its values. "I am still very much a conservative," he states, "but regarding emigration, for instance, I would personally welcome bringing more people in our country as we are a rich country with a lot to offer; we can help many others improve their lives." "Within security limits, of course," he adds.

Thinking of the future, Bludworth has no specific aspirations except to help where he can. He would like to continue meeting and helping those in need, especially the homeless, learning about their story, photographing them, and sharing who they are and their humanity with others.

"This also affects me directly," he says. "Every conversation with someone else changes me, expands me and adds a new human dimension to me."

More important, however, for Bludworth, this will be living according to the principles of the Gospel and in the steps of Christ and His disciples. "If I see someone struggling in the street and do not stop and help I would not be living my faith," he concludes.

What Is the MORMON RELIGION

*The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), aka the **Mormon Church**, is a Christian church which is neither Catholic nor Protestant. It does not embrace the creeds developed in the third and fourth centuries, now central to many Christian churches. It believes that God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to save all mankind from death and their individual sins, but it is **non-trinitarian** considering Father and Son as two separate beings who, nevertheless, along with the Holy Spirit, are one in will, purpose, and love. It is **restorative**, considered by its members to be the restoration of the original church founded by Jesus Christ.*

Jesus Christ is central to the lives of the Church members who seek to follow His example by being baptized, praying His holy name, partaking of the sacrament of Eucharist, doing good to others, and bearing witness of Him through both word and deed.

LDS Church maintains that without the sacraments of the church, salvation is impossible, but also that the Church is universal and timeless, simultaneously open to anyone, living or dead. It also stresses community as an element of salvation, members establishing a web of eternal relations with other human beings and with God.

LDS Church was started by Joseph Smith in Western New York in the 1820s. It takes its original name from the Book of Mormon, a religious text that Smith published, and which he said he translated from "golden plates," with divine assistance, after the angel Moroni appeared to him. The Book contains writings of ancient prophets and gives an account of God's dealings with the peoples on the American continent. For LDS Church the Book of Mormon stands alongside the Old and New Testaments of the Bible as holy scripture. After Smith was killed in 1844, most Mormons followed Brigham Young, his successor, to the area that became the Utah Territory, and changed their name to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church).

Joseph Smith, founder of LDS Church, wrote, "The fundamental principles of our religion are ... concerning Jesus Christ that He died, was buried, rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it."

LDS Church believes unequivocally that:

- 1. Christ is the Savior of the world and the Son of the loving Heavenly Father*
- 2. Christ's Atonement allows mankind to be saved from their sins and return to live with God and their families forever.*
- 3. Christ's original Church, founded on "one faith," as described in the New Testament, had been gradually undermined after the death of Christ's apostles, that it needed to be restored, and that LDS Church is its restoration in modern times.*

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **October 5, 2018**

Father THOMAS **BOKENKOTTER**

A Minister to the Poor: *Father Thomas Bokenkotter* Is an Academician Turned Activist

“Growing up I couldn’t help being religious,” says Reverend Thomas Bokenkotter. “My parents were deeply religious and greatly influenced me, as did the general climate of our household. For me a big part of religion is how we respectfully relate to each other, accept each other... and this I was taught from a very young age”.

Bokenkotter was raised Catholic, one of seven children. As a child he served as an altar boy, showing up to mass early every morning, learning liturgical Latin, in constant contact with priests. “I grew up with religion; it was part of my genes...,” he says. When he graduated from his Catholic High School, he decided to become a priest and entered the seminary. “It was an easy decision for what seemed a natural path. I had no questioning about my vocation and enjoyed the studious, spiritual, and pious atmosphere of my new setting.”

Bokenkotter’s religious education took him to Rome and to the prestigious University of Louvain in Belgium where he earned a doctorate degree in history; it deepened his understanding of Catholicism and of other religions.

Back to the States, he taught for many years at the seminary, then at Xavier University, and spent most of his time writing religion-based books among them the bestselling “A Concise History of the Catholic Church”.

At the beginning Bokenkotter’s orientation and activities were purely academic. His writings owed him the label of “liberal”, a term of reprobation by some, due to his critical views of the conservative Church. His studies and research, however, quickly proved to him that, even if conservative in many ways, the Catholic Church, thanks to the teachings of Christ and the gospels, remained at the forefront of social justice. He found that throughout centuries and various revolutions, many Catholics played an important role in the struggle for democracy and social justice and thus indirectly shaped the Church’s social doctrine.

CHRISTIAN, ROMAN CATHOLIC



In his book “Church and Revolution”, he traced the steps of fifteen of them from the last two centuries. He started with Lammenais, the French priest who during the French Revolution, countered the position of the Church, siding with the people against the monarchy, and included portraits and stories of other determining figures, such as Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero; Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement; Emmanuel Mounier, leader of the Personalism movement; Konrad Adenauer, the German Christian Democrat statesman.

When the 60s arrived and with them the Vietnam war and the widespread civil turmoil in the country, Bokenkotter left his academic ivory tower. One of his students, Father John Bank, introduced him to the United Farm Workers movement, and to the injustice the migrant workers in California were facing. Bokenkotter studied their condition and convinced of their cause started picketing at Kroger stores across the city, urging buyers not to purchase California grapes. This passive resistance action soon succeeded in forcing negotiations for better working conditions of the farmers and ultimately led him to participate, through the mid 70s, in various antiwar and antiracial demonstrations, including, among others, protests against the shooting at Kent State University, and against Nixon’s visit to Wright Air Force base in Dayton, Ohio.

"I spent the late 60s and 70s working as an activist for various peace and justice causes," says Bokenkotter. "But when the war ended, the climate in the country changed and it became difficult to get young people to demonstrate. I thought I needed to serve in a different way."

Visiting a Dorothy Day House in NYC and experiencing the soup kitchen it was offering the homeless and the poor, Bokenkotter returned to Cincinnati where he assessed a big need for such a service: "I found out that in Over-The-Rhine (OTR), downtown Cincinnati, 80% of the people lived in poverty, often malnourished. This was 1976."

The Over-The-Rhine Kitchen, the oldest Soup Kitchen in Cincinnati, was then established with the help of few volunteers and just \$700 in the bank. Located in the heart of OTR, it serves currently over 77,000 free hot meals per year and has received, not too long ago, a several million dollars bequest from a supporter woman.

In 1980, appointed pastor of the Assumption church on Gilbert Avenue in Walnut Hills, Bokenkotter converted the then empty old catholic school across the street into a transitional living facility for homeless women and children in crisis. It also had a food pantry and a soup kitchen in its basement for the residents of the facility and individuals and families of the neighborhood. Renamed The Tom Geiger Guest House in 1984 after a student of Bokenkotter who was instrumental in the operation of the first kitchen and who died suddenly at age 33, it now includes 42 apartments. The Walnut Hills Kitchen serves in excess of 65 000 free hot meals a year and the pantry provides grocery and food for more than 5000 individuals and families.

Throughout the years, Bokenkotter has also been involved, with his racially diverse parish, in numerous community activities. "I am on the side of anyone who wants to make things better," he says, "and that's what I encourage in my parishioners." He always wanted to create a support Center for black youth to gather, exchange, learn, find needed help; unfortunately, he has not been able to realize his dream project due to a debilitating health and an advanced age.

All along Bokenkotter maintained as well his writing and other academic endeavors. For several years and until 2 years ago, he held regular monthly educational meetings with a small group of faithful individuals discussing theology, church history, and contemporary issues. One of their topics was the crisis of authority facing the church due to a fast changing world.

"The church has to adjust to the 21st century," he says. "It has to listen to its members, be less rigid, and more accepting when it comes to issues of sexuality, role of women, other religions... Opposing opinions from revisionist theologians should be given due consideration and not just silenced and censored."

Bokenkotter must have been thinking of the condemnation of his own book "*Dynamic Catholicism*" by the previous Pope because it listed divergent viewpoints on some controversial matters. He is, however, ecstatic at the progressive position and open attitude of the current Pope Francis on many of these contemporary issues.

Bokenkotter's life has always been permeated by the gospels' teachings and examples of the saints; they dictated all along his actions for social justice and peace and led him to dedicate his ministry to the needs of the poor. Now ninety-two years old he is no longer in charge of a parish, also less socially active. He remains, however, strongly committed to a better, equal, and just world.

What Is ROMAN CATHOLICISM

Roman Catholicism is a Christian religion based on the teachings of Jesus Christ and his disciples. Its members and churches, spread all over the world, comprise the Roman Catholic Church, led by the Pope considered the "infallible" successor of the apostle Peter. It is the largest Christian church with over a billion adherents, half of all Christians worldwide.

Catholics believe in the Holy Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the inspiration of the Bible. Their worship is centered on the sacrament of the Eucharist, whereas the blessed bread and wine are transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ.

Important teachings of Catholicism are love, forgiveness, charity, peace, and justice, as instructed by Jesus in the gospels: "I give you a new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you." (John 13:34); "Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." (Matthew 5:6-9)

Fr. Thomas Bokenkotter (1924 - 2021), passed away July 11, 2021

Note: Article published in *Streetvibes* and *Online* on *sosartcincinnati.com* on **July 14, 2017**

PAUL BREIDENBACH

Rejecting Hierarchical Divisions, *Paul Breidenbach*, an Atheist, Uses His Knowledge of Spanish to Help Immigrants Regain Their Equal Rights

Paul Breidenbach grew up in a Catholic family, one which had to relocate frequently, mostly in South America, due to his father's employment at the State Department. As a child, he went to church every week and participated in various religious activities. He became, however, quickly disillusioned with religion, and rejected the hypocrisy of its followers who did not live according to its teachings, teachings that he, himself, was not ready to adopt. In addition, Breidenbach did not believe in the presence of a God. When he reached college, he decided to cut all his ties with the church and declared himself a convinced atheist.

This, however, did not take away his concerns for the other. On the contrary, he developed a strong sense of equality and of respect for everyone's rights.

"My principles are simple," he says, "not to do things to others that I do not want done to myself. Also, to fight injustices, protect people, make sure their basic needs are met, and help them improve things in their lives."

For college, Breidenbach attended Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT and studied American History, mentored by Henry Abelove, the radical Marxist historian who influenced the way he looked at things. He was also introduced to E.P. Thompson's thinking about class formation in capitalism, also to his concept of moral economy. He ended up graduating with a PhD in US History from the University of California in San Diego.

"During these years, I was not a real activist," he says. "I participated in the recycling Co-op of the university, helping collect recyclable material all over campus; also joined a rally and was vocal against institutionalized racism; and raised money in solidarity with El Salvador... But this was practically it," he adds.

Breidenbach's studies and the fact that he was fluent in Spanish thanks to the many years he had spent abroad in Hispanic countries, affected, however, the future orientation of his life. In 1996, married

ATHEIST



and with two kids, he relocated to Cincinnati and there, with his egalitarian and progressive values, he connected right away with the increasing Latino immigrant population. He started meeting with refugee individuals, listening to their complaints, interpreting for them, helping them find solutions to their problems. He did it voluntarily and most of the time without compensation. He also taught part time Spanish and History in a local private school.

These activities, however, not being financially sustainable, he decided to join the social justice-oriented union side law firm of *Kircher, Suetholz & Grayson*, a firm that represented organizations in the labor movement and which tried to empower workers in order to obtain mutual aid and protection in the workplace. Breidenbach served there as an interface with the Spanish speaking workers. Few years later he became the interpreter and office manager of Brennan Grayson, the lawyer who had hired him initially in the firm, and who had since become the president of the Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center (CIWC, which aims to mobilize, educate, and organize low wage and immigrant workers to achieve positive systemic change) and then the current Executive Director of the Workers Center derived from it.

In the meantime, he also worked at United Way for Housing Opportunities Made Equal, a non-profit organization that deals with inequities and injustices affecting low-income renters, addressing the illegalities that arise in rental housing. He served there as the advocate for the Hispanic tenants, representing them face to management, moving forward and officializing their demands, helping them fill out escrow forms that legalized their complaints.

Breidenbach got thus associated with *The Willow*, 400 units low-income complex apartment in Springdale, mostly inhabited by immigrants from Guatemala and Senegal, also by some African Americans. In response to tenants' complaints of lack of security and of neglected maintenance problems, the management of the place, in a gesture of good will, created and offered an educational space to be used by the tenants and other low-income residents of the neighborhood. Breidenbach has been intimately involved with the operation of the space, now used, among others, by *Su Casa* and *Trihealth*. "We can teach there English as a Second Language, teach kids music, hold art activities...", he says. "It can be a fertile ground for mutual understanding."

At *The Willow*, and at *The Colony*, another low-income apartment complex also in Springdale, Breidenbach offers tutoring, and homework help with English and other assignments to youth living there. He is now helping a 22-year-old immigrant student succeed in passing courses toward his graduation.

Breidenbach has also been going to local elementary schools to teach Spanish, encouraging kids to acquire early on a 2nd language. He does it with the hope to facilitate communication and cultural exchange from a young age, away from the rigid stereotypes and prejudices easily developed with age against immigrants. He envisions also achieving the same through the practice of group sports, which have been proven to create bonds in the youth, transcending discrimination.

Breidenbach is also working with the *Immigrant Dignity Coalition* against bullying in the schools, in anticipation of what could happen in the current intimidating political climate. And thanks to his command of Spanish, he has always served as a facilitating resource to many union organizations, including the *Cincinnati Federation of Teachers* (CFT), the *United Food and Commercial Workers* (UFCW) and the *Service Employees International Union* (SEIU), in their dealing with labor issues pertaining to Latino immigrants.

Breidenbach's involvements all along have also remained with the *Workers Center* and the *Labor Council of the AFL CIO*, which

represent the interests of working people, promoting safe workplaces and practices, protecting workers' wages, fighting for their rights, and advocating for social and economic justice for all—regardless of race, color, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, ethnic or national origin.

Commenting on the current times, Breidenbach is quick to state that they are apocalyptic, controlled by greed, power, and money. He thinks that we should look for solutions outside the classical norms of the democratic structure, and that we need, instead, to take our voice to the street. He would like to promote alliances between oppressed people who have a lot in common, and bring together those who face similar problems of inequality in order to impact a change. "We are all human beings and equal," he states. "We all have similar rights and should be given equal opportunities. I do not believe in hierarchy or that some are better than others because of birth. We need to fight injustice wherever it is and empower workers everywhere and whoever they are."

What Is ATHEISM

Atheism, in the broadest sense, is the absence of belief in the existence of deities, i.e., gods. The term emerged first in the 16th century; and the French Revolution of 1789, which witnessed the first major political movement in history to advocate for the supremacy of human reason over the notion of gods, was the first time atheism became implemented politically.

The difference between atheism and agnosticism is belief of God and knowledge of God. An atheist (a-theist) does not believe God(s) exist and an agnostic (a-gnostic) does not know if God(s) exist. There can be many combinations of atheist, theist, gnostic, and agnostic to describe people's approach to God.

There is no one ideology or set of behaviors to which all atheists adhere. Conceptions of atheism also vary and accurate estimations of current numbers of atheists are difficult. In 2015 WIN/Gallup International polled 64,000 individuals and found 11% of them to be "convinced atheists". In 2004, a survey by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), however, recorded atheists as comprising 8% of the world's population. Europe and East Asia are considered the regions with the highest rates of atheism. In 2015, 61% of Chinese reported being atheists; and in 2010, a Eurobarometer survey in the European Union (EU), reported 20% of the population not believing in "any sort of spirit, God or life force".

(From Wikipedia)

Note: Article published in *Streetvibes* and *Online* on sosartcincinnati.com on **April 20, 2018**

Reverend TROY BRONSINK

Inclusion, Contemplation and Action Are the Tenets of *Reverend Troy Bronsink's* Faith; They Help Him Manifest and Make Tangible the Presence of God

"I grew up inside a Christian bubble," says Reverend Troy Bronsink. "My parents, Evangelical Christians, raised me in that tradition, and all I knew growing up were the youth groups of the typical Bible belt megachurch I attended in Charlotte, North Carolina, and who all shared my same subculture."

Bronsink's parents were both very religious and his father, a generous and compassionate man, would read the Scriptures at the beginning and the end of every meal. He, himself, as a teenager, would have many existential questions, the answers to which he would often find in religion and Christian theology.

He was also very early on service-oriented, always helping others whenever needed.

"We would help widows and elderly near us with their yardwork, build playgrounds in inner city neighborhoods, and accompany my father most Saturday morning to feed the homeless downtown Charlotte."

Bronsink's first exposure to difference came through his church who decided to partner with an African American church in a low-income neighborhood of the city, and create exchanges between their respective members' families. Bronsink's family partnered with the Miller's whose son, Antoine, same age and same grade as him, would visit on weekends.

"I would also go to Antoine's house," says Bronsink. "I heard for the first time music by Stevie Wonder, ate different types of food... It surely helped develop why now I feel at home in different communities." "And for Antoine's parents and mine to find faith as common grounds for doing this cross-cultural work was fantastic," he adds.

Bronsink went to a religious school where emphasis was on excellence and on righteousness leading a good life, with the hope to create a safe container for growing kids.

CHRISTIAN, PRESBYTERIAN

"There was no emphasis on social justice per se," he says, "but rather a narrative that spoke of the love of God, of God's presence and Grace among us..."

For college, he selected Liberty University, Jerry Falwell's right-wing Christian college in Lynchburg, VA, to study religion. He had already decided by the end of high school to be in church ministry and wanted to excel inside the Evangelical spaces.

In his freshman year of college an awakening/conversion happened to him that changed his outlook on things and deepened his understanding of his faith. At a Washington, DC, political march for the right to life, he and other college Republicans were kicked, pushed, and injured by a group of angry counter protesters. "We felt vindicated, proven righteous that people did not like us," says Bronsink. "But this is also when my heart started to break, asking myself whether my feelings were consistent with the loving presence of God I had known all my life."

From that point on Bronsink associated less and less with the far right, feeling separation between the values of winning and his ability to remain in loving relationships with others.

He started then working with Young Life, a non-profit organization, to build rapport with kids who were not in Christian schools, appreciating diversity and associating with individuals outside his bubble. This led him to realize that God was everywhere and that what counted was to be open to God's presence.

He started at the same time to write and perform socially conscious songs that explored otherness. They told stories from underneath, of the unlikely folks, questioning who was accepted and included, and how we love.

After college, Bronsink continued working for Young Life, but rid of his earlier anxiety to win others over to Christianity. He had been reading Christian mystics, in particular Henri Nouwen and Frederik Buechner, and realized that the brave act is to vulnerably love someone and believe that this someone is loved. This is when he also married and moved with his wife to Spokane, WA.

In Spokane, Bronsink met and was confronted by others such as Buddhists, LGBTQ individuals, minorities, etc. whom he found, like him, connected to God and expressing God's presence in their daily life; also, to activists involved in local and international justice issues. He also came across a liberal Presbyterian tradition that he found much more generous and accepting of others.

"This changed my view that there always has to be one who is right," he says. "Instead, I learned a new approach on how to understand and include diversity, appreciating at the same time the strong connection to social justice of my faith. It was a radical shift from the bubble of Evangelicals I had known earlier."

In 2002, and after living two years in Spokane, Bronsink decided to join the Presbyterian Divinity school in Atlanta, GA, in order to become a minister. His studies opened further his eyes to a different and more encompassing reading of the Scriptures. His teachers, and in particular Walter Brueggemann, introduced him to liberation and Biblical theology, to the pronounced presence of the divine in places of suffering and oppression, and to the importance of seeing the many point of view stories embedded in each story of the Gospel.

In Atlanta, Bronsink and his wife moved to an intentional mixed income neighborhood and contributed to the building of the local community. They worked closely with an inner-city church attended by homeless, individuals with disability, chronically poor; developed friendships with

different people, vulnerable and oppressed; participated in various social justice marches.

After finishing seminary, Bronsink worked as a community developer, shared a co-living house with three other families, and organized regular meals inviting individuals across races, ages, and background differences to meet and get to know each other. Ordained a minister, he formed "Neighbors Abbey," a Presbyterian community development church, where he pastored for 4 years, living the Good Samaritan's life with others, engaged daily in social actions, visiting prisons, organizing with neighborhood associations to raise social and political consciousness. The area of Atlanta where he and his family lived, however, and after the economic crash of 2007, was becoming rough and somewhat deserted with houses boarded up, vandalism, drug and sex trafficking increasing. His family having been exposed to violence and funds shrinking, Bronsink decided to leave the area and to move to Cincinnati, OH. It was 2012.

For a while, he felt defeated and discouraged, and he somewhat retreated; but this is also when he discovered the Christian mystics, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, St Teresa de Avila, St John of the Cross. They brought him back to an interior and meditative practice, to non-attachment, to cultivating God's presence. "I wanted to be successful at changing the world," he says, "and it became very tiring. Growing more aware of the spiritual, it became obvious to me that the contemplative not only informs but also sustains the action, that they strengthen each other, and that they are both needed."

Bronsink started then thinking of a space that he would create to bring people together, a multi-faith, inclusive and across traditions space which will bridge contemplation and action, energize, and uncover creativity and provide individuals with the skills needed to discover themselves and unfold. With the blessing of the Presbyterian church which helped him take off, he founded this gathering space that he called The Hive.

"It is a place where people come to become and grow, where they find spiritual rootedness, connect to each other, work at the front of justice but also at the interior front of love," he states.

The Hive, which has now been in existence for two years in the Northside neighborhood of Cincinnati, offers classes, workshops, lectures, consulting services, retreats. They focus among others on art, poetry, yoga, resilience and trauma, community organizing and how to create change, finances, and budgeting...

The many other activities include exercises of vulnerability, learning how to be transparent, to share struggles; and various meeting opportunities... Recently a membership program was added in order to facilitate, for participants, continuity in their learning and an ongoing reciprocal support in their growth.

"While I am trained and ordained in the Presbyterian tradition, my passion for The Hive is deeply engrained in all traditions," clarifies Bronsink.

Bronsink still ministers as a pastor to a small Presbyterian church in Bond Hill, but he now most identifies with the mystic tradition, a wisdom lineage that understands a similarity between the Protestant and Catholic, a realization that we are called to a deeper consciousness, to a place where we actively participate with God in the world.

"This is a leap of faith from earlier forms of Presbyterianism that say that community begins and ends with like mindedness about God," he says.

Bronsink likes to quote Meister Eckhart, the 13th century German mystic theologian, who said: "*The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me.*" And for him, we need to always widen the aperture, letting love, generosity and grace flow for us and all others. This is what Bronsink himself practices in his daily life, but also what he would like to help all others achieve, irrespective of their religion, gender, age, background... Summing up his faith, he adds:

"The story of faith I am drawn to is not a transactional freedom from separation, but having "the mind of Christ," releasing my self-serving mindedness into more and more inclusion, social participation and connection to the presence of God, that is everywhere."

What Is the PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Presbyterianism, part of the Reformed tradition within Protestantism, became a distinct Christian movement during the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. As the Catholic Church resisted the reformers, several different theological movements splintered from the Church and bore different denominations. Presbyterianism was especially influenced by the French theologian John Calvin, credited with the development of Reformed theology, and by John Knox, a Scotsman and a Roman Catholic Priest, who studied with Calvin. The Presbyterian church traces its ancestry back primarily to England and Scotland.

Presbyterianism derives its name from the presbyterian form of church government, governed by representative assemblies of elders.

Its theology typically emphasizes the sovereignty of God, the authority of the Scriptures, and the necessity of grace through faith in Christ.

Presbyterians hold the position that there are only two sacraments:

- * **Baptism**, in which infants and unbaptized adults are baptized by Aspersions (sprinkling) or Affusion (pouring), rather than by Immersion.
- * **The Lord's Supper (aka Communion)**, in which Christ is present in the bread and wine through the Holy Spirit.

Presbyterians express their faith in the form of "confessions of faith," which represent a community rather than an individual understanding of theology.

They see education as necessary and put an emphasis on equal education for all people, so that they can serve the world in God's name.

In their decisions they follow a Majority Rule, believing that the Holy Spirit lives in individuals but works through the community.

Presbyterians generally exhibit their faith through acts of generosity, hospitality and the constant pursuit of social justice and reform.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **May 18, 2018**

RANDY **BRUINS****Moved by His Faith, *Randy Bruins*, an Environmentalist, Tries to Always Add Beauty and Justice to the World**

"Social justice is now linked to my understanding of religion," says Randy Bruins. "Growing up I was very skeptical about God and religion, and I was all the time searching for truth. In college I discovered Jesus and the Bible through a friend's church, and later the connection to social justice through a pastor in my church. It has been since an ongoing spiritual and engaged fulfilling journey."

Bruins' parents were not particularly religious; his father was even an atheist, but one who would quote Jesus Christ when teaching forgiveness to his son. To provide him with a religious education, they enrolled him, nevertheless, in Sunday school at the local Methodist church. Not convinced, Bruins walked away at the age of 13.

"I did not think that God existed, and nothing was supernatural to me," he says. "It may have been linked to the sudden accidental death of my father when I was just 11, and to the deep feeling of loneliness I experienced afterwards," he adds.

These were the 1960's, the prevailing talks of transcendence; the search for a just, truthful, genuine society; the existential questions raised by the Vietnam war... All still translated to some degree, for Bruins, in a religious question, one, however, that he did not know how to solve.

In 1972, Bruins joined Miami University, Oxford, OH, and, inspired by the movies of Jacques Cousteau he had been watching, decided to study environmental sciences. Miami University, a predominantly white college, triggered then his awareness of racism, and reminded him of his own concerns about disparity, having grown up in a separate, wealthy, privileged white Chicago suburb.

"I became very conscious of institutional racism," he says. "I realized it was systemic, continuous and not willingly recognized, and I decided to do something about it."

Bruins made up a sandwich board sign, front and back, on which he simply wrote "White Racism Lives". He carried it on his shoulders

UNIVERSITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

around campus and meant it provocative. But doing it alone and with no group support, he quickly felt isolated, and gave it up. He was not good then at creating connections, at forming coalitions; he was just a loner still searching for his convictions and how to express them. A couple of years later, and thanks to a Christian former friend who invited him to join his Christian fellowship, Bruins discovered them through religion and through his new belonging to a church community. "I met people who were pious worshipers, who were living a true and genuine relation with God, one not imposed on them but just motivated by their faith," he states. "It opened my eyes; inspired me to discover and learn the Bible and the Gospels; helped me, after deep and serious searching, find truth; and got me convinced to follow Jesus. I was 24, and it was the beginning of a new phase in my life."

Bruins joined then officially the non-denominational and independent Christian fellowship church that his friend had introduced him to, and thus became a welcome and active member of its family.

After graduating with a Master's degree from Miami University, he moved to Cincinnati, took a job at the EPA, got married and started a family. He found locally a church, like his previous one in Oxford, and joined it.

He is now, and for the past 15 years, member of the University Christian Church, also a non-denominational protestant city church which started as an outreach to the University of Cincinnati and more recently also to the broader community in the same area.

Ten years or so ago, Bruins added social justice activism to his own religious mission.

“Our previous pastor, Troy Jackson, had begun a PhD in history, focusing on the publication of Martin Luther King’s papers,” he says. “Through his teachings, he introduced us to MLK, to his stands against injustice, and helped us understand and realize the Bible’s general calling for social justice.”

Jackson also provided Bruins a venue for growing his social consciousness through the Amos Project, a federation of faith congregations in Greater Cincinnati, dedicated to promoting justice and improving the quality of life for all residents. The Project focuses on community issues that impact the poor and working families; it organizes and mobilizes with the most vulnerable, proposing and implementing solutions to their problems. Bruins has participated since in many of its actions: he has helped, for instance, previously incarcerated individuals integrate back society; campaigned actively for issue 44 in order to provide affordable quality preschool education to all kids, in particular those in poverty; worked to pass a levy benefiting senior citizens; protested to bring attention and justice to the case of Sam Dubose, an unarmed African American man, fatally shot by a University of Cincinnati white police officer, during a traffic stop.

Bruins is also now part of the Cincinnati Community Coalition which consists mainly of interfaith get together dinners started right after the latest presidential election by Ismaeel Chartier, Imam of the Clifton Mosque, and David Meredith, pastor of the Clifton United Methodist Church. Last year he hosted one such dinner at his church using as focus the work of an invited Moslem artist.

For many years he has also been working with youth through City Gospel Mission. He reaches out to kids in the transient community of Winton Place, picks them up every Sunday and provides them with a teaching program to help them with their studies.

Last summer he invited the youth of a Moslem organization to join the community garden where he lives, giving them plots to plant, and offering them educational programs linking gardening, the environment, and spirituality.

“Gardening has an inherent spiritual value,” he says. “Looking at plants and getting in touch with nature connects one directly with what God has created.”

In his church, Bruins is actively involved in its interfaith engagement program, reaching out to other religious communities, and coordinating the exchange between them. He is also part of a justice team which meets monthly to read and discuss books about peace and justice and educate the rest of the congregation about the issues. Their focus recently was racism, also the “other” and immigration. Bruins’ church is actually part of the Sanctuary movement, providing solidarity and support to threatened immigrants.

Bruins is also involved in the Rohs Street Cafe that his church started within the building of its sanctuary in order to create a place for the community to meet, also to encourage fair trade coffee. The church in fact supports a coffee-growing community in Guatemala and has helped it establish a cooperative to improve the production and the marketing of its coffee and facilitate its sale in the US. Bruins visited that community, participated in the harvest of its coffee and in educational programs targeted to its growth. Every year the church also sends there students to help in different ways, such as digging wells for water, implementing sanitation projects, etc.

Working for Social Justice is now an integral part of Bruins’ Christian faith. He adds his voice and his hand to fight injustice wherever he sees it, addressing its causes, attempting to right its wrong for a better world. He does it, empowered and enlightened by daily prayer and by Bible studies, alone or in group, always asking himself what he can do to put in practice the teachings of Christ.

“We live in a fascinating world,” says Bruins. “God created it and infused it with love. As an environmentalist I always try to share with others the beauty of nature, plants, animals... that connect us to God; but also, as a humanitarian, the beauty of world cultures and places.” “We need to preserve that beauty and always add justice to it,” he states.

Now retired, this is what Bruins would like to continue doing with his wife when she soon retires, and possibly in different places of the world.

What Is the UNIVERSITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

*The University Christian Church (UCC) is a non-denominational Protestant church which has for **Core Beliefs** Jesus and the authority of scripture. The essentials of its beliefs are in the identity and meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It sees in everything else room for dialogue, with each other, our culture, the scripture.*

*UCC's **Mission** is to share the love of Jesus with everyone and to encourage and equip its community members to share it in their home, their work, their life.*

*UCC's **Core Practices** are:*

****Ritual and Rhythm of Life**, where a commitment to a lifestyle of faithfulness (within the congregation, the community, home), teaches the faithfulness of God*

****Submission to the Process**, where spiritual, personal, relational growth are an ongoing process, God being the one shaping us a little at a time.*

****Generosity**, whereby giving ourselves wholly, we're following Jesus' example and trusting God's abundance and generosity.*

****Hospitality**, whereby opening ourselves and our lives to each other, we're understanding the welcome that Christ extended to us.*

****Patience and commitment** in sharing love and developing relationships with each other.*

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **December 29, 2017**

Imam ISMAEEL CHARTIER

Worshiper & Servant of God: *Imam Ismaeel Chartier* Is Also Servant & Liberator of God's Creations

"To serve God properly we need to serve His creations and make sure they have freedom and a life worth living; otherwise, we're not doing our work as religious individuals," says Imam Ismaeel Chartier, adding: "In Islam, God commands us to join good versus evil, to side with the oppressed and those in need, to always push justice through and stand against injustice."

Imam Chartier is the Imam of the Clifton Mosque in Cincinnati, a mosque that serves the local Muslim community while remaining open and welcoming to all. Raised Catholic in his native Ireland, he came to the United States (Denver, Colorado) at the age of 17 when his father relocated for professional reasons. After college and going through a personal spiritual search, questioning his relation to God and what religion meant to him, he discovered Islam, studied it, deepened his understanding of it, and converted to it. He joined Cincinnati three years ago, chosen by the board of directors of the Clifton Mosque to serve as its spiritual leader.

Imam Chartier's upbringing was engrained all along in social justice. As a child growing up in Belfast, his grandparents constantly reminded him to fight, until independence, the English occupation of Ireland. When seeing freedom fighters on television, his grandfather, himself a member of the IRA, would praise them, commenting that they were fighting for people's freedom and liberation. His grandfather would also praise, for the same reasons, the Palestinian Liberation and American Civil Rights movements, comparing the plight of Palestinians resisting the occupation and of African Americans fighting the injustice of the Jim Crow laws to that of the Irish people trying to be free.

"I was raised with the ideas that freedom for me meant also for all the others, anywhere and everywhere," states the Imam, "and that I was equally responsible for both."

In college, Imam Chartier studied journalism and sociology and spent two years in Egypt researching a master's degree thesis in Near East studies. This initiated him to the Arabic language.

MUSLIM



Back to Denver, Colorado, he met his wife, also a Catholic Christian, and got married. Dealing, however, intensely, with the issue of his religious identity, after serious consideration and study, he felt Islam to be the most in tune with his values and beliefs and decided to convert to it. His wife fully approved and followed suit few days later. One year after, Imam Chartier, dissatisfied with the approach to Islam he was experiencing in the US, and wanting to demystify the perceptions Americans had of Muslims and of Islam in general, decided to become an Imam. And there he went, accompanied by his wife, on a seven year-trip to Muslim countries, including Egypt, Morocco, UAE, Kuwait, India, studying the Coran in Arabic, learning from scholars and spiritual leaders at their feet, obtaining permission to teach at his turn.

In 2009, at his return to the US, he worked for a short while at the Colorado Muslim Society in Denver, then joined a 3rd space mosque where everyone, irrespective of who he/she was, was welcome to freely worship God, with no formality and a liberal rather than literal understanding, connecting back to the spiritual essence of Islam, also to others. This mosque became very popular and attracted all kinds of people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. "This is the kind of Mosque I would like to grow in Cincinnati," he says.

While in Denver, Imam Chartier got involved in many social justice issues, supporting environmental movements, working actively to repeal mandatory sentencing for juvenile offenders, helping pass a wage theft law to protect fair pay for minorities, refugees, and undocumented workers. One of his big achievements there was helping found, and get the Colorado Senate to endorse, a new taxi company owned and operated by immigrants. These latter thus became free from the enslavement other taxi companies were keeping them under.

Since his arrival to Cincinnati three years ago, Imam Chartier has been constantly involved in many local and national social justice and peace issues. He is part of the Palestinian Coalition Liberation, the Black Lives Matter, and the American Indian movements, participating in their activities, supporting their rights, offering his Mosque to facilitate their events, making sure their voice is heard. When Sam Dubose was killed, he worked actively at pursuing justice. He recently married two leaders of Black Lives Matter, both non-Muslim.

"33% of our congregation are African Americans or Africans," he precises, "and 25% of Muslims living in America are undocumented workers. Our community consists mostly of blacks, refugees, immigrants... I personally strongly identify with them."

He is currently working on the cases of two Christian women, one from Kenya, the other from Lebanon, both threatened of deportation despite having lived in the US for more than 20 years. Actually, he has made the Clifton Mosque the 1st and only mosque in America and the West to be a sanctuary congregation, offering refuge for such individuals.

Imam Chartier wants his mosque, its members, and Muslims in general to reach out to their entire community, become socially and politically engaged, create bridges wherever they are and with everyone. During the recent presidential election campaign, he went on a six-city tour in Ohio, encouraging Muslims to vote. After the Orlando shooting, he was the MC of a vigil on Fountain Square stressing that not all Muslims were violent. With the support of Jonathan Cohen, dean of Hebrew Union College, he started there a Muslim-Jewish interfaith service and is planning on the ground of the College, a Muslim theological seminary, the 1st such located one in history. He recently invited youth from Temple Shalom to visit the Mosque and teach its own youth Hebrew. He is in constant exchange and dialogue with many of the local Christian churches and congregations and serves on the National Organizing board of PICO, a national network of faith-based community organizations which try to create innovative solutions to problems communities face.

"I am always trying to shatter the negative image people have of Muslims," he states, "shattering the boxes people build around Islam, but also the boxes we build around our own selves."

Imam Chartier believes not only in being an active part of the community but also in giving back to it. His mosque operates a food pantry, offers every Sunday 140 free meals to the homeless, and during the month of Ramadan, 400 free meals a night to anyone in the community.

"If we want to change the world we need to work where we are, be grass root workers. From Adam to Mohammad and passing by Jesus, all were grass root organizers," he says, adding "Real change starts locally."

Imam Chartier starts his day every morning with this verse from the Coran: "God is constantly inviting people to the kingdom of peace". It is his daily prayer reminding him of the better world in the afterlife, but also and as importantly of the kingdom of peace that we each need to build on this earth, by getting rid of our ego, our lust, our divisive nationalism; fighting for justice and equality for all; spreading love. For Imam Chartier, these two invitations are inseparable, sowing peace and justice in this world and harvesting them in the future one. This is how he strives to live his life and make a difference.

What Is ISLAM

Islam is a faith and a comprehensive way of life that literally means "peace through submission to God." Muslims worship the One God, Allah, and revere Prophet Muhammad as His last messenger. They also believe in all the prophets who preceded and the holy books which they brought, such as the Psalms, Torah, and the Gospel. Islam believes in the Day of Judgement, when all humanity will be recompensed for their deeds in this world; also in angels, and in predestination.

*Islam has Five Pillars of Worship which enable Muslims to cultivate their relationship with God. They are: **Testimony of Faith (Shahadah)**; **Prayer (Salat)**; **Charity (Zakat)**; **Fasting (Sawm)**; and **Pilgrimage (Hajj)**.*

There are between 1,2 and 1,6 billion Muslims across the world and around 7 million Muslims in the United States.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on **sosartcincinnati.com** on **September 8, 2017**

ADAM CLARK

For Adam Clark, Professor of Theology, Doing God's Work Is Righting Relationships, Healing Brokenness, and Showing Solidarity With the Poor & Oppressed

"One candle can light thousands of matches," says Adam Clark, "and we have to let the light grow."

Clark, a doctor in divinity and an associate Professor in the Theology Department at Xavier University, uses his Christian faith, along with his teaching and writing, to touch his students' and other peoples' lives; contribute to the Kingdom of God on earth by promoting justice, solidarity with the marginalized, the oppressed and the poor; and keep the light expanding and growing. Clark's influence is mostly through his academic activities, the courses he teaches, the lectures he gives to varying audiences, the books and articles he writes.

Born in Newark, NJ, he grew up in Syracuse, NY, in a religious family, and attended regularly, with his parents, a liberal multiracial Episcopalian church. His faith from the start was a quiet one, not the proselytizing type, but one more about character formation. And from a young age, he had already many unanswered questions about the meaning of religion and the significance of life.

For college, he attended Colgate University, a small liberal art college in Hamilton, NY, where, thanks to his mentors, mostly African American priests, he became increasingly interested and involved in religion. These latter exposed him to Liberation Theology of which he had not heard before, helped him learn historical criticism, and connected his faith to the liberation of the oppressed, in particular that of black people. It was at a time when many social and political movements and events around the world and in the United States were dealing with the black "Struggle." And the antiapartheid movement in South Africa, the Hip Hop and Afrocentric movements in the United States, the emergence of prominent black leaders such as Louis Farrakhan and Jessie Jackson on the US national scene, all had a great influence on him.

CHRISTIAN, THEOLOGIAN



"In college, I did not need anymore to put my mind at the door in order to believe with my heart," says Clark. "I learned how to synthesize and put a more rational approach to my religious faith." "Being black and seeing so many wrong relationships due to race, Liberation Theology provided me with a framework to think, analyze and imagine what right relationships could be and how to get to them," he adds.

Clark then started pursuing his spirituality rather than just an institutionalized faith, affirming it in his humanity, aiming at becoming more fully human, in tune with others, and this in the name of Jesus. He got also more involved in his school community, participating in various social justice activities. "I joined the gospel choir, connecting to others; and started a black male reading group, discovering seminal books we were not taught in class," he states.

The chosen books related primarily to black issues and included, among others, Steven Biko's *I Write What I Like*, reflecting on the need for South African blacks, in order to be liberated, to unite and break their chains of servitude; *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz

Fanon, the Afro-Caribbean revolutionary psychiatrist, addressing the dehumanizing effects of colonization; and *Price of the Ticket*, James Baldwin's commentaries on race in America.

Clark also served as Residential Advisor for an African American-themed dormitory, catering for individuals interested in African American history and culture. This required on his part weekly programming and the planning of presentations and discussions relating to black matters. Working at the same time for the college cultural center, he was busy all the time.

Clark's religious experience during college was decisive in the orientation of his faith toward social justice. He saw it through the lens of Dr Martin Luther King Jr. and through the eyes of people ostracized all over the world. It was also instrumental in his choice of pursuing theological studies at Colgate Divinity School, a small Baptist-oriented seminary, in Rochester, NY. The years Clark spent there were mostly focused on academics, working hard to learn and to earn good grades, both for his graduation with a master's in divinity degree and for his further enrollment in a doctorate program at the ecumenical Union Theological Seminary (UTC) in NYC.

At UTC Clark was taught and mentored by influential and renowned Professors such as James H. Cone, the father of black theology. Cone had formulated a theology of liberation from within the context of the Black experience of oppression and had interpreted the basic essence of the Gospels as Jesus' identification with the poor and oppressed, and the resurrection as the ultimate act of liberation. This resonated very much with Clark's ongoing understanding of Christianity, and he wanted to learn more about the social justice militant movements going on at the time. He joined many Marxist groups, Malcolm X grass root groups, Hip Hop and other underground movements going on in NYC, and participated in their membership and public activist meetings. Two issues were of particular interest then, the fight against white supremacy and the fight against aggressive capitalism; and how to resist them and come up with alternatives to them. Globalization, having already started, Clark perceived it as a globalization of capitalism and not of the good for everyone, also as suppressing solidarity movements across the globe, such as, for instance, between Palestinians and Blacks who, according to him, had a lot in common.

Clark decided to use his divinity degree for the classroom instead of for ministry within the church. He accepted a teaching position in the Theology Department at Xavier University in Cincinnati where he delivers courses on Black Theology, Jesus and Power, Faith and

Justice, Religion and Hip Hop. His aim is to educate students in both the service of faith and the promotion of justice, and to light up candles wherever he can. This is where he sees his main contributions.

"Teaching and doing the work of scholarship takes a lot of time," he says, "and one cannot, at the same time, engage the world by leading movements or being out on the streets, immersed in grass roots..."

Clark also tries to introduce spiritual practices in the lives of his students, not only training them into academics. He would like them to discover contemplative traditions, get in touch with what's happening inside them, develop their whole person and become better human beings. This would help them function more effectively in the world, using not only the intellectual but also the practical dimension of their Christian faith.

In the community, Clark has led his support to social justice movements as they present. He participated in Black Lives Matter seeing it as a faithful resistance to the unjust powers, and as a means to right the wrong relationships affecting the black community. He directed a six-week contemplative group at the Hive in Northside (a place where community and contemplation meet), considering the role of the Inner Life in the struggle for freedom, through the writings of civil rights icon Howard Thurman. He also gave presentations at Abundant Community on slavery, poverty, consumerism and on the Jubilee idea and how it brings us to the intersection of the Bible and economics.

Being Christian, for Clark, is not only to accept something that happened 2000 years ago on the cross, but more importantly to focus on the entire life and message of Jesus, and to try to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, making the conditions on earth reflect those in heaven.

"The good news Jesus gave the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed of this world, is that the Kingdom of God is at hand, among us, and that we're all invited to participate in it," says Clark.

When asked about his religious affiliation he says that he is a Christian with no denominational loyalty. He right now attends the New Prospect Baptist Church in Roselawn where he responds strongly to the ministry of its pastor.

Clark sees his future in continuing to develop his intellectual projects and to make a difference by his teachings and writings. He would like

to frame the debate about issues of religion and faith and disseminate his thinking and his message by all possible means. But what remains the most important to him is that he contributes to peace and justice on this earth, because, as he says, for him “Christianity is about healed brokenness and right relationships in God’s Kingdom.”

A Spiritual Text ADAM CLARK Likes to Quote

“Do you remember in the Book [Christian Bible] Jesus and his disciples were going through the hills and there appeared in the turn of the road a man who was possessed of devils as they thought. In the full moon when the great tidal waves of energy swept through his organism, and he became as ten men . . . screaming through the hills like an animal in pain and then he met Jesus on the road. And Jesus asked him one question: “Who are you; what’s your name?” and for a moment his tilted mind righted itself and he said, “That’s it, I don’t know, there are legions of me. And they riot in my streets. If I only knew, then I would be whole.”

So, the burden of what I have to say to you is, “What is your name— who are you— and can you find a way to hear the sound of the genuine in yourself?” There are so many noises going on inside of you, so many echoes of all sorts, so many internalizing of the rumble and the traffic, the confusions, the disorders by which your environment is peopled that I wonder if you can get still enough— not quiet enough— still enough to hear rumbling up from your unique and essential idiom the sound of the genuine in you.”

“I don’t know if you can. But this is your assignment.”

*Excerpts from “**The Sound of the Genuine**,” Baccalaureate Address of Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman’s at Spelman College, Atlanta, GA, May 4, 1980.*

Note: Article published in *Streetvibes* and *Online* on sosartcincinnati.com on **April 6, 2018**

BAKHTAVAR & FRED **DESAI****“Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds” Has Been the Constant Motto of *Bakhtavar & Fred Desai* Throughout Their Life and One of the Essential Teachings of Their Zoroastrian Faith**

“We were taught all of our life to think good, speak good and do good,” say in unison Bakhtavar and Fred Desai, both Indian descendants of Parsi Zoroastrian priests, ancient Iranians who fled Iran after the Arab Invasion and the subsequent Islamic conquest of Persia in the mid 7th century, and who resettled in India. “India is a melting pot; and we grew up with people of all religions, free and respectful of each other, in good relations with all,” they add.

Partners in life and in faith, both Bakhtavar and Fred, growing up, were nurtured by their peaceful religion and by the Non-Violence ideals of Gandhi; also taught by their parents, at school, and through society to live peacefully together and to never look down at anyone else because of their different appearance, religion, race, socio-economic status...

Bakhtavar grew up in Nagpur, Central India, and attended a private secular school for girls founded more than a hundred years ago by a group of philanthropic Zoroastrian industrialists, the Tata family, at the request of the wife of one of their founding members, as she wanted to provide education and literacy to women equal to men. The school was open to all girls, irrespective of their religion, and they all had to attend classes on moral standing which taught them general values and good principles on which to base their life. Fred attended a similar school for boys but in Mumbai where he was raised.

Growing up, both celebrated with their family Zoroastrian religious events and festivals and participated also in feasts and holidays of the other religions of their city, in particular Hindu, Christian and Muslim. Nowruz, the Persian new year celebrated every 21st of March, was a Holy Day for them and marked the respect of their religious community for the creation of God, the birth of the spiritual and material world, the elements of earth, sky, water, air, plants, and

ZOROASTRIAN

animals. The festivities included visits to the Zoroastrian fire temple, prayers, reunions and meals with family and friends. They also participated, among others, in “gahambars”, festivals that marked seasonal changes centered around agriculture and farming activities, and that expressed their appreciation to God.

The Desai’s childhood and teen age were quiet and with no strife. Both, however, were critical of the Hindu caste system prevalent in their society and which gave less importance to the low caste poor “servants”, the “Untouchables”, than to the Brahman priests. “We were revolting among ourselves why would someone be called “Untouchable” and we would not miss an opportunity to befriend the workers at school, in residential settings, in public areas,” says Bakhtavar.

“And my parents would pay for the education of our maid’s children and facilitate employment for her relatives, in order to help them climb the ladder,” adds Fred.

After High School, Bakhtavar joined the local university of her town and studied business graduating with a Bachelor’s degree. And after working for a while and earning some money, she put it toward her personal interest pursuing degrees in English Literature. Fred graduated with a Bachelor’s in Chemical Engineering from the University of Mumbai, then with a PhD from the University of

Akron, OH, in the US. In the meantime, and according to the religious tradition of his family he had also studied to become a Zoroastrian priest, a function he practices until now, leading prayers and officiating at weddings and christenings.

While a student, Fred would also participate in various activities helping others, such as, for instance, raising money for earthquake victims, helping Indian fellow students adjust to their new condition in the US and insuring some of their basic needs, meeting with congressmen in Columbus in support of minority rights...

After obtaining his doctorate degree Fred returned to India, married Bakhtavar and both resettled right after in Ann Arbor for 4 years, Fred pursuing a post-doctoral research fellowship.

"Ann Arbor was very multicultural. We interacted with people from all over the world, learned about their culture and developed friendships," they say.

"People in Ann Arbor also had strong concerns for the environment, for nature and the earth, and this resonated with us and our religion," they add.

The Desai's started recycling, reusing, avoiding disposable and non-recyclable materials such as plastic bags and bottles, aluminum products, etc. They continue doing so now, and have engrained this ecological notion in their three daughters and in the youth they interact with. Recently, in an effort to reduce their reliance of fossil fuels, they installed solar panels on the roof of their house.

In 1993, the Desai's moved to Cincinnati where Fred had secured a job at Procter and Gamble. This prompted Bakhtavar's regular involvement with the Fairfield City Schools system that her daughters attended. For many years she volunteered her time every day from 9am to noon helping elementary level kids improve their reading, writing and math skills, raising their general literacy.

To increase cultural awareness and foster understanding and tolerance the Desai's also contributed to the creation of a yearly "Celebration of Diversity" day at the various schools of Fairfield, at which more than 20 different nationalities and spoken languages are generally represented.

For the past 10 years, both also have been volunteering as Girl Scout Troop Leaders, helping girls discover their strengths and empowering them to change the world. To raise funds, the girls would sell cookies; they would then be encouraged to use part of the money they earned to benefit others and local organizations. They have bought, for instance, a

refrigerator for a local homeless shelter; contributed money to "Global Giving," the non-profit organization that provides crowdfunding platform for grassroots charitable projects worldwide. They have also collected to be-thrown-away aluminum products and sold them to an aluminum recycler, instead of seeing them in landfills polluting the earth.

Bakhtavar serves as a trustee on the board of the local Fairfield food pantry and, thanks to her experience as a CPA acquired in the US, helps find/raise funds for its operation. Each year, the pantry provides food to close to 10 000 residents of the city, out of a population of 45 000.

Prompted by questions from their children about their religion and their cultural heritage, the Desai's founded the non-profit Zoroastrian Association of KY, OH and IN in order to share knowledge about their religion and keep it and its ancient history alive in the region. They lead their tri-state community through various activities, including regional gatherings, teachings, social encounters and community building, summer camps for the children... Bakhtavar presides the association.

Learning about the Amos Project's efforts for Criminal Justice Reform in Ohio, the Desai's collected signatures to put the proposal on the ballot. In this doing, they talked personally to potential voters, raised their awareness about the issue, explained how a needed Criminal Justice Reform would bring more justice and peace to our society.

For Fred two issues are of great importance: the protection of the environment, and righteousness and truthfulness. He engages all his friends and colleagues on these issues, providing educational information when appropriate and correcting false news and wrong data whenever he encounters them.

"We need to counter the negative and rely on correct information that leads to the right choice," he states, "and education, especially of the youth, in that respect, is primordial."

In fact, the Desai's would like to remain involved in promoting the literacy of young children and to continue serving as mentors in their city schools. They want also to get more involved in the Cincinnati community at large, expand their encounters, and work for secular issues.

"I am an activist by heart," says Bakhtavar. "I strive to do every day what I think is right for my family, my community and the world."

“And to us to be the best possible persons we can be, to lead selfless lives and help advance the efforts of others who want to make this our world a better place for all.”

Zoroastrianism, the Desai's religion, teaches them the brotherhood of mankind, and both Bakhtavar and Fred realize that in order to achieve it they need to be peacemakers and activists for a more just and fair society. And this is what dictates their daily actions and intentions.

What Is the ZOROASTRIAN RELIGION (aka Zoroastrianism)

Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest existing religions, with roots possibly dating back to the second millennium BCE. Zoroastrianism which entered recorded history in the 5th-century BCE, served as the state religion of the pre-Islamic Iranian empires for more than a millennium, from around 600 BCE to 650 CE. It was suppressed from the 7th century onwards following the Muslim conquest of Persia of 633–654.

Zoroastrianism is ascribed to the teachings of the Iranian speaking prophet Zoroaster (also known as Zarathustra), and exalts a deity of wisdom, Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord), as its Supreme Being.

It is monotheistic, with a single creator god, dualistic in cosmology with the concept of good and evil, and eschatological, predicting the ultimate destruction of evil. Some of its major features such as messianism, judgment after death, heaven, and hell, and free will have influenced other religious systems, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Zoroastrianism's purpose in life is to “be among those who renew the world... to make the world progress towards perfection”. Its basic tenets include:

- **Humata, Hukhta, Huvarshta**, which mean: Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds.
- The existence of only one path which is the **path of Truth**.
- The need to **do the right thing** because it is the right thing to do, and that all beneficial rewards will follow.

Central to Zoroastrianism is the emphasis on moral choice, to choose the responsibility and duty for which one is in the mortal world. Predestination is rejected and humans bear responsibility for all situations they are in, and in the way they act toward one another. Reward, punishment, happiness, and grief all depend on how individuals live their lives.

The number of Zoroastrians in the world is low and in decline. It is currently estimated at around 200,000, with most living in India and in Iran. In the Greater Cincinnati area they are close to 150.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **September 21, 2018**

Reverend ALAN DICKEN

“Divinity of Diversity” and “Multi Faith Enriching” Are the Mottos of Reverend Alan Dicken’s Ministry

“God is on the side of the oppressed,” says Reverend Alan Dicken. “In the Christian tradition Jesus came not as a ruler or a conqueror, but rather as a vulnerable infant, and he spent his time with the poor, the sick, the marginalized, the persecuted... That’s what his ministry is about.”

Dicken is the pastor of Carthage Christian Church, a Disciples of Christ Church founded in 1832 in the neighborhood of Carthage, North of Cincinnati. He has been ministering there for the past five years.

Born in a middle-class white family, he was exposed to religion from childhood, both his parents belonging to a long tradition of Disciples of Christ followers. He initially disliked going to church and attending services, but this changed when, at the age of 10, he and his family relocated to Cincinnati and joined the then Tylersville Road Christian Church in the Mason area.

“The new church had a youth group, a band that played upbeat music, a beautiful sanctuary with natural light; all was appealing to me,” he states.

With the youth group, Dicken went to church camps and on mission trips, discovering other parts of the world and other communities quite different from his. It sharpened his awareness of diversity, also his exposure to social disparity.

“These were informative and profound experiences,” he says. “They opened my eyes and made me feel better about my relationship to others, to my faith, to God.”

Dicken attended Sycamore High School and was there further exposed to diversity, not only the ethnic and racial one due to the large number of Jewish and Asian students, but also his first encounter with gay individuals.

“I sang in the school choir and befriended a couple of gay students who were slowly opening up,” he says. “I realized how difficult it was for them; also how little I knew about them and the discrimination they faced daily.”

DISCIPLES OF CHRIST CHURCH



This determined him not only to be accepting of them, but also to always be open about and supportive of LGBTQ issues and rights.

At age 16, a youth minister planted in Dicken the idea of joining the ministry. The suggestion appealed to him as he felt it was a field he would relate to and at which he would be good. He had already been enjoying the religious courses offered by his church and wanting to further his knowledge in that area, decided to go for undergraduate school to Bethany College, in West Virginia, a private, liberal arts college affiliated with his denomination. In 2009, he graduated with a BA degree in Religious Studies.

“At Bethany, my faith understanding expanded,” says Dicken. “I explored church history and learned critical analysis and nuanced interpretation of the Bible...”

During his three years at Bethany, Dicken had little to no engagement with peace and justice issues, other than openly supporting LGBTQ rights. He was, as such, an active part of the only Fraternity on campus which admitted and assisted avowed gay students.

Right after graduating from Bethany, Dicken did a one-year internship in Honduras, part of the international global ministry that Disciples of Christ and United Churches of Christ offer jointly. In preparation for it he took courses on white privilege, on the various models of missionary work contrasting those coming from above and imposing their values to those based on building relationships and working in partnership.

"In Honduras, I was part of 'La Comisión Cristiana de Desarrollo' (Christian Commission of Development) and partnered in mission with local people and organizations who already did work in this country and knew what was needed," he says. "I was a go-between between them and the community, serving as a facilitator to make programs happen, such as educational, medical, church mission-related, etc. I also helped translate whenever needed."

After Honduras Dicken joined Union Theological Seminary (UTS), in NYC, for his Master's in Divinity. An ecumenical, non-denominational and strongly academic school, UTS was also strongly focused on social justice. Dicken was exposed there to the teachings of James H. Cone, founder of the Black Liberation Theology; they helped him reframe and reshape not only what church is about but most importantly what it must be actively doing for social justice in the world. This was also compounded by a one-year school internship he did at a Disciples of Christ church located in the Upper East side of NYC.

"I loved the church which was open and welcoming to everyone," says Dicken. "It was diverse in gender, race, socioeconomic status, age, sexual orientation... and people attending were from all boards of society." "There was also a banner on the front of its building saying: Divinity in Diversity. This became my own motto as well," he adds.

When in his 3rd year of seminary, the 'Occupy' movement happened, Dicken participated in it, adding his voice to its various activities. It was, however, a year later, in 2014, with the fatal shooting of 18-year-old African American Michael Brown by white officer Darren Wilson, in Ferguson, that his real activist involvement materialized. With another ministry friend of his they drove down to Ferguson and spent 3 days affirming their presence and support of the protest going on.

"We just wanted to be present in solidarity," he says. "We wore our religious garbs and stoles, marched with the protestors, held signs, prayed with people, blocked highways..."

Dicken was disappointed, however, that there were few people of faith, especially few faith leaders, visible in Ferguson. He returned there two more times, wanting each time to intentionally manifest his support and his stand in the name of his faith.

Few months after his graduation from UTS with a Master's in Divinity, Dicken was ordained a Disciples of Christ minister and joined Carthage Christian Church as its pastor. He promptly made it open and affirming to the LGBTQ community and worked at increasing its diversity. Its membership is now quite diverse comprised of white and people of color, Black, Asian, Hispanic; young and old; openly gay individuals... The church also participates with other congregations of Carthage in inclusive services. Every Thanksgiving, for instance, celebratory events are held in partnership with San Carlos' Catholic Hispanic church, New Jerusalem Baptist Temple led by Damon Lynch Jr, and a Nigerian emigrant church in the neighborhood. Different preaching, different music, and different church experiences are all brought together for the occasion.

Carthage Christian Church is also increasingly becoming a community center for the area where different resident activities are held, and various services offered. A Seniors group and a Narcotics Anonymous one meet regularly there. It also includes a food pantry and serves free meals every Friday to members of the community or from elsewhere; this is done in rotating partnership with other churches of the neighborhood (New Jerusalem Temple, Wyoming Baptist Church, etc.), each taking responsibility for a given week; also, with Temple Shalom four times a year. All these activities include and are sometimes facilitated by lay members of the congregation.

The church is also involved in the Amos project, hosting its meetings, and supporting its activities; also, in MARCC, the Metropolitan Area Religious Coalition of Cincinnati.

When ICE decided to deport Maribel Trujillo Diaz, an Ohio Mexican mother of four and a Catholic lay leader who has been living in the US for 15 years, a candlelight service was organized in the church and was followed by a vigil walk throughout the neighborhood. This prompted a multifaith movement called JustLOVE that Dicken, in partnership with the leaders of Temple Shalom, the Clifton Mosque, the Clifton United Methodist Church and the Shiloh UMC in Price Hill, co-started. The purpose of the movement is to bring people together to share their experiences, connect by love, and work for justice.

Dicken and members of his church also participate in solidarity with the Immigration Sanctuary movement; they march every year in the local Pride parade; they held a candlelight vigil in response to the Orlando shooting; and after Ferguson, offered Black Lives Matter regular faith services to help its activists heal.

"We do our own individual work but also we plug in the various peace and justice movements in the city," says Dicken. "Social justice, diversity, multifaith sharing, and community building, are at the heart of our ministry."

Dicken's faith has evolved over the years. It is now strongly connected to and at the service of the "diverse" other. It also seeks enrichment from other faiths. Over the past five years as Pastor of Carthage Christian Church he has contributed to the building of a "congregation open and affirming to all of God's Children regardless of political opinion, economic status, educational background, cultural identity, age, race, mental or physical ability, gender identity, sexual orientation, or any other human division." Dicken has also embarked himself and his congregation on a constant path for social justice.

What Is the DISCIPLES OF CHRIST CHURCH (aka the Christian Church)

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a mainline Protestant Christian denomination in the US in the Reformed tradition with close ties to the Restoration Movement. It grew out of two movements seeking Christian unity that sprang up almost simultaneously in western Pennsylvania and Kentucky – movements that were backlashes against the rigid denominationalism of the early 1800s.

The Disciples celebrate the Lord's Supper. Through Communion, individuals are invited to acknowledge their faults and sins, to remember the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to remember their baptism, and to give thanks for God's redeeming love. Communion is open to all who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, regardless of their denominational affiliation.

The Disciples practice believer's baptism in the form of immersion. Their one essential is the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and obedience to him in baptism.

The Disciples have three key beliefs that set them apart from other Christian groups:

- 1. Autonomy**, as they have no denominational creed, giving them total independence to determine their own doctrine. As a result, their local churches vary widely in their beliefs from liberal to conservative
- 2. Ecumenist Philosophy**, with a long heritage of openness to other Christian traditions having come into existence as a 19th century protest movement against denominational exclusiveness. They try to bridge gaps by reaching out to other Christian denominations. In 1977, they engaged with the Roman Catholic Church in an official international dialogue, to explore the possibility of realizing full visible unity in Christ. And in 2007 they were instrumental in the establishment of Christian Churches Together in the USA (CCT), an organization that brings together Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, Evangelicals and Pentecostal Christians to seek to make a common Christian witness in the United States.
- 3. Welcoming LGBTQ**

As they state, part of the Disciples' mission is to answer God's call for justice, particularly in the areas of care for the earth, the challenges for women and children, poverty and hunger and immigration. They seek to do this work in cooperation with other people of faith.

In 2015, there were 497,423 baptized Disciples members in 3,267 congregations in North America.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on **sosartcincinnati.com** on **July 13, 2018**

Rabbi SUSAN EINBINDER

JEWISH

Merging Morality, Ethics & Religion: *Rabbi Susan Einbinder* Advocates Justice & Rights for Every Human Being

A mentor of Rabbi Susan Einbinder, a Holocaust survivor, and a prominent Jewish activist, once told her: "If the lesson we derive from the genocide is that 'Never Again' refers only to Jews, it would be a wrong and terrible lesson; the lesson should be for everyone." This resonated and stayed with her ever since. It was not, however, foreign to the moral and ethical teachings she had received growing up, her parents having taught her to always care for the weak and vulnerable and to consider every human being equal and the same. Einbinder grew up in Wayne, New Jersey, in a Jewish family, her father and mother 1st generation Americans, both scientists whose own parents had settled in America coming from Eastern Europe. She was exposed to the Jewish tradition and faith very early on, participating in family Jewish celebrations, accompanying her father to the synagogue on the various Jewish holidays. She attended public schools and in 4th grade joined an afterschool Jewish religious program learning Hebrew and the history of Judaism.

As an undergraduate, Einbinder followed the steps of her scientist parents, majoring in mathematics from Brown University. Her real love for literature, however, took her later to Columbia University for a PhD in medieval literature; but before completing her degree, she followed the advice of her hometown rabbi, Israel Dresner, a prominent social activist she admired, to enter a rabbinical school. "I was confused and having a crisis of meaning," she said. "I felt rabbinical studies would offer me a path of spiritual inner growth, and would allow me, thanks to the spiritual emphasis, an escape from the rat race I had been part of for too long."

Very quickly, however, Einbinder realized the Hebrew Union College's rabbinical program consisted more of vocational training, with a curriculum primarily designed to produce congregational rabbis. Interested more in academics than in organized group-oriented activities, she felt she did not belong, but not knowing what else to do and wanting to affirm herself, decided to remain enrolled anyway and completed the five-year program.



From the beginning, Einbinder was always interested in human rights, justice, and the plight of the weak. As the oldest child of five, she was raised to take care of and look out for her younger sisters and brother; this transferred for her into taking care of and protecting the "littler." She was in high school during the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, and was exposed, at home as well, to the issues and upheavals of these agitated years. She identified with the images and figures of freedom and revolt in the news and wanted justice and right to prevail. In the summer of 1982 and in her 4th year of rabbinical studies she came across a protest stand against the then Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Shocked to discover that Israel was being criticized and depicted as the bad guy, she confronted those

staffing the stand and argued with them. When invited to join their discussion group she accepted the challenge. This opened her eyes and led her to learn more about the situation in the occupied territories, to want to raise awareness about the real causes of the conflict and to work towards a just peace for both Israeli and Palestinians.

From there on Einbinder committed actively for peace in the Middle East, connecting with a new community of peace activists, Israeli and Arabs, Jews and non-Jews, who shared her values; she spoke at various forums, wrote letters to the editor, signed peace manifests, and in a way became the activist American rabbi for a just peace in the Middle East and in the world.

In the mid 80's Einbinder lived in Jerusalem on and off for three years. Even though the primary purpose of her trip was to research and write a dissertation, her stay in Israel exposed her and linked her to the various local groups working for human rights, to leftists and resisters. While there, she participated in the weekly vigils of Women in Black protesting the occupation, in the weekly trips into the Occupied Territories organized by Dai le-Kibbush (End the Occupation), and helped translate into English documents for the trial of several journalists sued by the government for collaboration with the Palestinian "enemy"; also for the trial of the Romanian 7, the seven Israelis who publicly defied the ban on meeting with PLO members by flying to Romania to do so in October 1986.

Back in the US, Einbinder briefly worked part-time as a rabbi before completing her doctorate, relocating in 1993 to Cincinnati to teach Hebrew literature at Hebrew Union College. In Cincinnati, she continued her active involvement for human rights and peace and justice, locally, nationally, and internationally. She volunteered for ETAN, condemning Indonesian occupation of East Timor; served on the board of Prospect House, a local drug rehabilitation center; spoke at anti-death penalty events; joined as a Jew, Concerned Clergy, an ecumenical clergy group formed in response to the 2001 Cincinnati riots; founded the short-lived JAN (Jewish Action Network), a group to promote good relationships between Jews and African Americans; helped develop and participated in Christ Church Cathedral's program and workshops to combat racism in the city; facilitated opportunities and venues for her students to get engaged in Israeli-Palestinian dialogue.

All along Einbinder also continued to support human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Yesh Gvul, Physicians for Human Rights, Madre, etc. Until 2014, she served on the board of the Refuser Solidarity

Network, which supports conscientious objector groups in Israel. In addition, and for several years, she mentored homeless women at the Anna Louise shelter, when it was located downtown Cincinnati, helping them develop a sense of identity, also build strength to face and deal with their personal situation.

"I like to quote this verse from Amos 5:24: Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," says Einbinder. "That's what I believe in. I do not see 'religion' as something separate or separable from what makes up a moral or ethical outlook." "Religions should not divide and isolate people," she adds. "I find religious homogeneity claustrophobic and I personally do not think only of Jews or that I am different from others. My strongest belief is that we're all equal, and that every human being deserves to be treated with compassion, decency and dignity."

Einbinder will continue to use her beliefs, her moral and ethical values, to better this world and speak for the weak and the oppressed. She thinks that all religions have profound concern and beautiful teachings for peace and justice, but that the problem is that we do not listen to them. "Even worse," she says, "we often use religions to fulfill our own political agenda and self-centered interests, and thus end up condoning violence and wars."

Einbinder left Cincinnati few years ago to settle in Providence, RI. She is currently a Professor of Hebrew & Judaic Studies and Comparative Literature at The University of Connecticut.

What Is JUDAISM

*Judaism is a **monotheistic Abrahamic religion**, over 3,000 years old, with the **written Torah** (first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible) and the **oral Torah** (later texts such as the Midrash and the Talmud) as its foundation. Judaism is considered to be the expression of the Covenant relationship God established with the Children of Israel. Different from polytheism, the Hebrew God's principal relationships are not with other gods, but with the world, and more specifically, with the people he created. As ethical monotheism, Judaism believes in **one, unique and eternal God** who is concerned with the actions of humankind and knows the thoughts and deeds of men; who will reward the good and punish the wicked; that the Messiah will come; and that the dead will be resurrected. Judaism is in general more concerned about actions than beliefs. With around 16 million adherents worldwide, Judaism is the tenth-largest religion in the world. Its texts, traditions and values have strongly influenced later Abrahamic religions, including Christianity and Islam.*

Note: Article published in *Streetvibes* and *Online* on sosartcincinnati.com on **August 25, 2017**

Sister ALICE GERDEMAN

A Natural Path for Peace & Justice: Sister Alice Gerdeman's Faith Shows Her the Way

"Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel..." wrote the Bishops, in 1971, in their synodal document "Justice in the World". Their message prompted the Sisters of Divine Providence in Melbourne, Kentucky, to want to establish an office for peace and justice in their Community. They selected in 1973 Sister Alice Gerdeman to start it and be its coordinator and thus, indirectly, determined her path ever since.

Born into a Roman Catholic family, Gerdeman was exposed very early on to the Catholic faith. Her parents were devout Christians, and prayer, high moral values, kindness and charity permeated their daily life. She was also introduced since childhood to issues of social justice, her father, a farmer, hiring every year at harvest season, migrant workers for help.

"Texan and Mexican workers will spend few months with us every year," she says. "My father treated them well, equally and equitably, always concerned for their well-being."

After grade school, Gerdeman went to boarding school at the Sisters of Divine Providence, and at the end of high school, joined their order. It was a natural progression, one she did neither seek nor question.

"I had a strong consciousness of the presence of God in my life; a kind, generous, and forgiving God, one who is everywhere, who could be felt even if not always understood," she says. "I was also very drawn to the Eucharist, to the Catholic teachings, to the joy of faith, and to serving the poor."

After professing vows of a Catholic nun, Gerdeman taught for several years in schools staffed by her religious community and later was appointed principal of a Catholic parochial school. She was asked at the same time to become educated about issues of peace and justice and to inform and involve the Sisters whenever possible. What started initially as a hobby grew progressively more serious as she studied, learned, read, attended workshops about the various issues. One year spent interning at Global Education Associates

CHRISTIAN, ROMAN CATHOLIC

in New Jersey provided her with the administrative skills and the global vision needed to lead, upon her return, the Community's peace and justice office. Part of her role was to involve the Sisters to read about the various social justice issues as they presented, ask questions, receive informational material, pray and take a stand. She also catered her work around their various ministries: for teachers, helping them introduce in their teaching curriculum relevant peace educational information; for nurses, opening their eyes on justice issues relating to health; for cooks, on issues pertaining to hunger and to unfair trade practices... Well informed, the sisters often resorted to action, demonstrating, picketing, participating in meetings and discussions... Their focus was initially antihunger, then antinuclear because of the proposed Zimmer power plant in Ohio, against the death penalty, for immigrant rights, antiviolence and antiwar.

In 1992, and after 11 years of working at the Sisters Community office, when the Cincinnati Intercommunity Justice and Peace Center (IJPC) needed a director, Gerdeman applied and was hired. She succeeded Louise Akers, a sister of charity, who with 4 other orders,

had founded the Center 5 years earlier. The focus of the work, initially primarily educational and involving mostly women, became progressively more activist and more diverse in its audience. The death penalty having been reinstated in Ohio, working with prisoners on death row and with their families was a priority; IJPC provided education, training and needed support to advocate for loved ones and effect legislation. Immigrants' rights were also a big concern, a natural extension of the Sanctuary movement of the 80's which saw the flood of refugees from Guatemala and El Salvador. Promotion of women rights and their empowerment were also at the heart of the daily activities. Other issues were tackled as they became timely and prevalent; they included opposition to wars, food-based boycotts, antinuclear proliferation... Economic justice, the needs of the poor, and the establishing of an equitable society in the sharing of resources and in narrowing the wealth gap were always important considerations; they led for instance to IJPC's strong involvement in the "Occupy Cincinnati", triggered by the "Occupy Wall Street" movement. A branch of IJPC was also started in Northern Kentucky in order to address specific issues to the area, especially when targeting local politicians and legislation.

Even though the Center was staffed by individuals each in charge of a given issue, Gerdeman remained the moving force behind its operation. She strongly believed in community building and in the power of prayer for effecting a change, strategies IJPC also used in complementing its actions.

"I could not operate without my beliefs," she says. "God gave me the talents and the ability to be effective in ways I often do not expect. My faith, moral and ethical backgrounds prevent my discouragement and give me strength."

In this doing, Gerdeman also benefits from the Sisters of Divine Providence, the community of sisters to which she belongs.

"I am blessed to be supported by 100 sisters who share my views and accompany me daily with their prayers. Ours becomes a communal effort, essential for long term effectiveness. IJPC was also a community; we all worked together, cared for each other, nurtured each other."

For fourteen years Gerdeman also hosted a regular radio show on WVXU then part of Xavier University. Topics pertained to peace and justice, charity and community involvement, and featured individuals from the local community who were instrumental in promoting a better world.

When asked about the impact IJPC and her work have had, Gerdeman points out that, partly due to their efforts, people were more aware of

justice issues, attitudes were changing, respectful dialogue and peaceful exchanges were promoted, some executions were being stopped...

"We wanted to become smaller than larger," she says, "to see conditions get better, legislation that has the needs of the poor and working people passed, peace achieved... and, therefore, our work less needed."

Three years ago, Gerdeman was voted by the members of her congregation as the Provincial leader for all the Sisters of Divine Providence in the United States. She accepted humbly the responsibility and as a result left IJPC. In her new position she tends to the administrative and relational issues that her role demands, making sure that all the needs of her sisters - physical, psychological, social...- are daily met. Passionate about peace and justice, however, she also facilitates her sisters' engagement in these matters.

"We write cards to prisoners on death row; we take stands as a community in support of immigration and the sanctuary movement, against war and death penalty; we keep an eye on legislation and how to affect it; on how to eliminate poverty in the world... We put out petitions and go to marches....," Gerdeman says. "Our congregation has a deep commitment to peace and justice, and it is not just me."

In addition, and thanks to her leadership role, Gerdeman belongs to the national "Leadership Conference of Women Religious" an association of the leaders of congregations of Catholic women religious in the United States. She serves as the chairperson of its committee "Global Concerns" which has a special focus on peace and justice.

"As a group we try to effect change by working through legislation," she says, "but also by trying to change attitudes. For instance, we encourage our sisters and provide them the means to live a contemplative life, letting goodness seek into them and God be present in their spirit, so this will naturally come out when they deal with people, with war, with aggression..."

When she thinks of her role, Gerdeman likes to quote the gospel of Luke, 4:18:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free."

She is not sure of where life will take her from here and at the end of her mandate as Provincial Superior of the Sisters of Divine Providence. She knows, however, that wherever it is, it would be a place she would suddenly realize she needs to go to and that it would be part of her natural path.

A Christian Text Sister ALICE GERDEMAN Likes to Quote

*“Rejoice in the Lord Always. Again I say Rejoice!
Be gentle with everyone for the Lord is near.
Don’t worry but place your requests before God
with prayers and supplications with thanksgiving
and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding
will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.*

*Fill your minds with everything that is true,
everything that is noble, everything that is
good and pure, everything we love and honor,
and everything you learned to be holy and
worthy of praise. Keep doing all these things that
you have learned and heard or seen.
Then the God of Peace will be with you.”*

(Philippians, 4:4-9)

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on
sosartcincinnati.com on **March 23, 2018**

Reverend CHARLES **GRAVES IV**

CHRISTIAN, EPISCOPALIAN

Moved by His Episcopal Christian Faith, *Reverend Charles Graves IV* Uses Advocacy and Service to Right the Wrong and Help Those in Need

Reverend Charles Graves IV grew up, an only child, in a loving and religious family. He lived with his parents in a peaceful, upper middle-class neighborhood of Baltimore, MD, and attended regularly with them St Thomas, an Episcopal church, located, however, in a dangerous and crime infested area in the center of the city. "Every week I will go from an idyllic place to one where desolation and violence predominated, experiencing the pain, suffering and poverty of others," says Graves. "This was, from an early age, my calling and at the center of my faith."

Graves' father, a city planner, will often talk to him of various city issues, particularly of those pertaining to poverty and the needs of the disadvantaged; and his mother, a professor of English and reading at a local college, of education, the support needed for those who cannot afford it, and the inherent inequality its lack creates in them.

His early awakening to peace and justice issues was reinforced by the Friends (Quaker) school that he attended and where anti violence and antiwar protests were common and the notion of public service prevalent.

"There were frequent demonstrations in which parents, teachers and we, students, participated," says Graves. "Around the invasion of Iraq, for instance, the school had a banner up in front of the meeting house at the edge of the major street in town. It rejected war, calling for peace."

At his church, Graves was also exposed, and since the age of three, to the teachings of bishop Michael Curry, the current presiding Bishop of the Episcopal church in the US, but then the pastor of St Thomas. Curry will always preach about the necessity of Christians to stand up for justice and peace in every way, in support of the poor and the downtrodden, as per the Gospels and the example of Jesus. After Curry, and under his successor, the church will organize every Palm Sunday, at City Hall, with invited city councilmen/women and



politicians, blessing, and prayers for the poor, the homeless, the sick, and for the end of violence. The church also ran an afterschool program for neglected kids, a support home for the elderly, and several other activities for people in need. Graves would usually lend his hand to many of them in any ways he could.

In 2008, after graduating from high school and after a short summer internship at the City of Cincinnati where his father had recently relocated as Director of City Planning, Graves joined Hampton University, a small predominantly African American college near Virginia Beach, VA to study political sciences. He felt then that, as a lay person, his vocation was to achieve public service to the community through involvement in politics and government; and that, as a legislator or a political officer, he would be able to implement broad changes and make a difference.

His years in college were ripe with activism for social justice. He was active in anti-racism advocacy and became president of the political action group of the College NAACP chapter. When the Affordable Care Act was being debated, he organized students to write letters to

congressmen urging them to vote for it. And when, in 2010, the Governor of Virginia proposed to make April a Confederate history month, he also organized successful student efforts to oppose it. In the meantime, he had also worked on various political and city council campaigns supporting politicians and causes he believed in, and after graduating from college, for senator Sherrod Brown in his Washington, DC, office. All along Graves was very interested in political advocacy to push elected officials and politicians to do the right thing; however, his experience overall, and in particular in Congress, was disappointing. "I found working in politics to be quite difficult, and the environment competitive, unhealthy and somewhat petty," he states. "I realized that it was not my vocation, and that rather I was called to serve in the church."

Graves prayed, reexamined himself and his feelings, spoke to various clergymen, and became encouraged to pursue his faith and deepen his knowledge of theology. He decided to apply to seminary.

Accepted at Yale's Berkeley Divinity School, he quickly realized, within his 1st year of studies, that God was calling him to his ministry, and in his 3rd year, the Episcopal bishop of Southern Ohio admitted him in the ordination process. Graduating in 2015 with a Master's in Divinity, and not sure of what to do next, he joined the "Young Adult Service Core" program of the Episcopal Church and served for one year, abroad, at St Paul's Within the Walls, in Rome, Italy. There he came in contact with a large population of Latinos from Peru and Ecuador, also with a large number of refugees, predominantly Muslims, from Central Africa and Central Asia. These latter were seen and served at the Joel Nafuma refugee Center, run by the Episcopal church, the only such daytime center in Rome. Graves helped teaching them English, find apartments, get organized, and mostly discovered their humanity and their horrendous personal stories.

"These individuals were foreigners just like me," says Graves, "and yet they had a totally different reality. They had been beaten up, tortured, had members of their family killed, had to face hunger and cold, to travel long distances across the sea... What they had to go through was unbelievable. It determined me to fight for their rights."

Upon his return to Cincinnati, Graves was assigned to Christ Church Cathedral where he worked for a while with the homeless ministry, lead worship services, preached, and served in the Cathedral's cafe, establishing a friendly and personal rapport with its various visitors. In June 2017 he was ordained transitional deacon and was reassigned to the Church of the Advent in Walnut Hills. A year later, June 2018, he was ordained a priest, serving in the same church.

"It is a smaller community and the church is very devoted to the neighborhood," he states. "We serve the poor, the hungry, all those in need. We operate a food pantry five days a week."

Graves also preaches every other Sunday, sits on the church's board, visits with the homeless, and is involved in many ministries around the city, in particular the Latino Ministry Commission of Southern Ohio. At the Episcopal ministry center in Price Hill, he tutors kids twice a week, connects with their parents - many of them undocumented immigrants -, translates for them, helps them fill out immigration documents, accompany them to court for hearings, etc.

He also participates in protests and marches for immigrants, women, and LGBTQ rights, for tax reform..., as well as remaining very active in political advocacy.

"I support many issues and groups and various causes," Graves says, "but i have decided to devote my ministry and services to immigrants, to fighting racism and poverty."

Being openly gay, Graves has also been all along very active in empowering the LGBTQ community and in fighting and advocating for its rights, and more recently helping students who are being bullied or who are just confused because of their sexuality.

Graves appreciates the diversity in people and the richness each of us brings to the world. He is committed to fight for everyone's rights and wellbeing irrespective of race, gender, age, socioeconomic status... It is in our differences that he sees our common strength. In fact, a text he loves and that he would like to be read at his funeral when the time comes is Paul, 1 Corinthians, in which St Paul speaks of all the parts of the body, different and diverse, yet coordinated, united and working together, necessary for each other, guided by the outside force of God.

A Text Reverend CHARLES GRAVES IV Likes to Quote

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

Unity and Diversity in the Body (Paul, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27)

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on **sosartcincinnati.com** on **July 27, 2018**

DANA GREGORY **GRIFFITH****BUDDHIST**

Through His Classroom and Public Teachings, *Dana Gregory Griffith*, a Buddhist, Disseminates His Own Religious Values and Those of Other Eastern Religions, Combating Intolerance and Injustice

"I was always more interested in the spiritual and mystical dimensions of religions," says Dana Gregory Griffiths, "and not so much in the morality aspect that many religious institutions stress and want to enforce on their members." "Growing up, I found myself easily attracted to the Eastern religious traditions that I learned, developed an expertise in, and ended up teaching," he adds.

Griffith, in fact, is a Buddhist who follows the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism and who has been attending, for the past seven years, the Gaden Samdrupling (GSL) Buddhist Monastery, a community center for Buddhist study, practice, and culture, located on Colerain Avenue, in Cincinnati, OH.

Born in Appalachian coal mine country, in South-Eastern Kentucky, Griffith moved at an early age, with his poor parents, to Warren County, north of Cincinnati, where his father could find better work.

"I was exposed very young to poverty, and I saw workers being abused and exploited for their labor," he says. "I developed as a result a very strong sense for social justice."

Growing up, Griffith was close to his mother, a religious Christian, who took him along to the various churches she attended. There, he took Bible study classes, received religious instruction, and thus became well familiar with the New and Old Testament. At the age of 15, however, he lost interest and stopped going to church.

He attended public school in the 60s and 70s, a period ripe in social justice issues nationwide, and experienced related changes in the type of education he received.

"Education became more focused on us, young students, who we are, and our differences. It empowered us." says Griffith.



"And at the same time our parents' approach became more permissive, treating us as full pledged human beings."

Even though living in a predominantly white working middle class area, Griffith was exposed to the few African American and Asian families residing in the community, and thanks to the boy scouts he had joined, he learned to question racial stereotypes and appreciate diversity. The boy scouts also opened his eyes to the importance of the environment, the plants, and animals in it, and to what negatively impacted them.

"We would go out along the Little Miami River, clean up sections of its riverbanks, and learn about nature and its vital role for all of us."

After High School, Griffith attended for less than a year ITT technical institute in Vandalia, OH, north of Dayton, studying to become an architectural draftsman. Realizing, however, that he did not have the necessary technical drawing skills, he withdrew and enrolled at UC. "I was also all along very much interested in writing and creative pursuits and wanted to be a writer and a poet," he says.

"So, I joined the English literature program, and remained at UC throughout my doctoral studies graduating with a PhD degree in English and comparative literature, with a strong component in creative writing."

It took Griffith more than 20 interrupted years to obtain his degree, but these years were the opportunity for him to learn and develop an expertise in the Eastern religions, also to teach them.

"When I joined UC, I was already fascinated with sacred literature from different religions," he says. "So, I took undergraduate courses in New and Old Testament literature, also a course on the effect of Eastern religious thoughts on American literature. Seeing religious texts as literature and not only as dogmatic teachings, understanding how they were constructed and how they came into being, opened my eyes to a different appreciation of religion and sparked my interest in mysticism and spirituality as a religious path."

Along the way Griffith had met many teachers expert in Eastern religions and had learned a lot from them and on his own. He also became very interested in the Hindu yogic tradition, not the one focusing on health and exercise practices prevalent in the US, but the one with deeper religious and spiritual roots. He discovered as a result sahaja yoga, a meditation only yoga that emphasizes awakening of the kundalini energy in the body leading to a feeling of enlightenment and bliss. He studied it, practiced it for many years, meditating, contemplating, and worshipping, but started also longing for a more traditional religious community and became more interested in Tibetan style Buddhism.

Griffith was still taking courses in the various Eastern religions and started developing deep knowledge of them, particularly Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. In addition to the classes he had been teaching in English literature, writing, and composition, he was asked to teach courses pertaining to religion, part of UC's religious studies program, the certificate of which he later directed.

"I taught courses on Buddhism and Hinduism, my forte," says Griffith, "but also courses around certain themes that I approached comparatively, for instance a comparative course on 'Suffering and Death in World Religions', one on 'Spirituality and Mysticism', one on 'Religion and Healing'..."

Griffith also designed and taught an honor course titled "Understanding Religious Intolerance." It was not only a theoretical course as his students were required to find real examples of religious intolerance in

the community, research them, explore their why and how, write essays to understand them, and propose solutions to how to address them.

"I use my teachings to reach students and the community and to promote and disseminate the values mostly, but not only, of the Eastern religions," says Griffith. "Also, to address misconceptions and inaccuracies about religions, particularly prevalent in today's era of social media, that do injustice to the religions and that could easily lead to intolerance."

Griffith's teaching spills outside the classroom, first through his students whom he prepares, giving them the tools and information to fight, wherever they are, religious stereotypes and injustice; but also, into the community where he is frequently invited to speak and teach, representing Buddhism, other Eastern religious traditions, their values, and promoting interfaith coexistence and tolerance. He was for instance invited to be part of a panel on anti-Semitism and religious intolerance when a swastika was spray-painted on the Hebrew Union College sign at the entrance to its Cincinnati Clifton Avenue campus. He also marched, demonstrated, and spoke when a UC Muslim student was nearly run down and harassed with anti-Muslim slurs at a road intersection near the campus. Griffith was also invited to serve on the steering committee of the 1st Cincinnati Festival of Faith that took place this past June at Xavier University. The goal of the festival was to promote visibility and exposure to the various faiths in the city, and to foster an interfaith dialogue.

"I would like to be part of any kind of work in the city that promotes religious tolerance," he says, "also get more involved in community outreach and social justice projects."

When asked whether his teaching and public speaking represent his engagement and activism, Griffith acquiesces, adding:

"When I participate as a speaker in an event that centers on social justice, when I teach or lecture about a religion or a religious topic, I am purposefully disseminating my knowledge and sharing my values, shedding light on what should or should not be. I prefer though to be invited to do so by fear, otherwise, of being perceived as chauvinistic or of imposing my own white male privileges."

Griffith just left UC and accepted a full-time position at Christ College of Nursing, where he will be teaching world religions and giving courses in writing to future nurses.

“Many religious issues relate to health and health is often influenced by religions,” he states. “Future nurses need to be aware of them and be prepared to deal with them should they present with their patients.”

Griffith remains a faithful member of the GSL Buddhist monastery where he goes every Friday evening for instruction and to listen to his mentor Jamyang Lama or to other guest Lamas. He participates also there in the Buddhist rituals that involve prayers, mantras, symbolical offerings (light, incense, flowers, water...); also mind visualization of and devotion to deities who each personifies a given value, for instance compassion, or a given universal energy beneficial to the world and to its beings, such as healing or sustainability.

Even though most of his actions are at the individual level, Griffith, nevertheless, reaches the many through his religious teachings which are all to promote peace, justice, interfaith respect, and coexistence. He aims at connecting others with the sacred in the world and thus, help to foster a better place for all.

A Text that DANA GREGORY GRIFFITH Likes to Quote

*All those who slight me to my face
Or do to me some other evil,
Even if they blame or slander me,
May they attain the fortune of enlightenment!*

*May I be a guard for those who are protectorless,
A guide for those who journey on the road.
For those who wish to cross the water,
May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge.*

*May I be an isle for those who yearn for land,
A lamp for those who long for light;
For all who need a resting place, a bed;
For those who need a servant, may I be their slave.*

*May I be the wishing jewel, the vase of wealth,
A word of power and the supreme healing,
May I be the tree of miracles,
For every being the abundant cow.*

*Just like the earth and space itself
And all the other mighty elements,
For boundless multitudes of beings
May I always be the ground of life, the source of varied sustenance.*

*Thus for everything that lives,
As far as are the limits of the sky,
May I be constantly their source of livelihood
Until they pass beyond all sorrow.*

*from Shantideva's The Way of the Bodhisattva,
Chapter 3 "Commitment," Verses 17-22*

Note: Shantideva was an 8th Century Buddhist monk at Nalanda Monastic College in North-East India. He is considered a great Mahayana Buddhist saint. The Way of the Bodhisattva is one of the best known and most highly revered works of Buddhist literature.

Note: Article published **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **November 16, 2018**

Father GEORGE HAJJ

Father George Hajj, a Maronite, Always Puts His Faith Into Action and Fosters Conditions to Allow Others to Become Holy Persons

"For me, social justice and faith are inseparable," says Father George Hajj, pastor of Saint Anthony of Padua Maronite church, located on Victory Parkway, in Cincinnati. "And faith without action is only echo."

Hajj was born in the country of Lebanon in a Maronite family where secular and religious lives were closely married and intertwined. Growing up, his parents will always refer to religious events as milestones for those of daily life, associating, for instance, in the summer, the Feast of the Assumption to a change in weather, or the Holy Cross Day to the onset of rain. His parents also raised him with strong moral values, teaching him not only to help the vulnerable and those in need but, as well, to be compassionate and nonjudgmental.

"We were always taught to hate the sin but love the sinner," he says.

Being the first grandchild, Hajj grew up very close to his paternal grandfather of whom he carried the name and whose unshakable faith strongly influenced his. This latter instilled in him his own good values, teaching him to have complete trust in the work of God in his life, and to always be thankful for God's mercy, giving back to others.

"My grandfather had a small cookie jar in his business store and would regularly put in it 10% of his daily income for the poor and the needy," states Hajj. "I learned from him this tithing and have been practicing it myself ever since my first earned income while at the university."

For schooling, Hajj attended three different Maronite schools where he strengthened his faith and put it regularly into action. As a student member of the Knights of Mary, a Christian youth organization, he would regularly do volunteer work for families in need and go to camps in poor villages helping with various needed chores.

CHRISTIAN, MARONITE



After high school he joined the Lebanese University, studying Archeology, and graduated with a Master's degree. While there he became a member of the Christian Students Youth and participated in their weekly prayer services and masses, in drives of goods and foods for students financially strained and for home shelters, in camps and spiritual retreats. He was not much involved into politics even though he participated in marches, for instance against the Syrian presence in Lebanon, and in defense of various human rights.

"Christian values were driving me rather than political affiliation," he says. "My goal was to be a good citizen, to become the light, salt and leaven of the earth, and to bring love and God's values wherever I was."

Twenty-five years old and with a degree in Archeology, Hajj was convinced by his parents not to pursue a doctorate in that same field but rather to travel to Detroit in the US, to live with his aunt and study Business Administration. He enrolled there at Oakland University and graduated few years later with a Master's degree. While at the University he continued practicing his faith, attending church, and praying, but his time was full, studying, and working. He was also dating, feeling successful academically, socially, and financially.

"I had had, however, and for a long time, a strong inner longing for a consecrated life in the church, but had always hesitated about it," he says.

Confiding in his girlfriend, "a faithful woman with wonderful values" as he describes her, she encouraged him to know himself and to make up his mind about priesthood or about committing to a family with her. Wanting to be certain, Hajj decided to join the seminary to test himself and get a clearer idea on where to take his life. He went to the Maronite seminary in Washington, DC, kept an open attitude, and immersed himself in everything the place offered, studying theology, reading the scriptures, praying, participating in various church activities.

"Everything was telling me to be there," he says. "I listened, stayed for four years, felt deeply fulfilled, was ordained priest and was assigned afterwards for one year to serve the Maronite church in Cleveland, OH."

There, Hajj shadowed and helped the pastor, learned from him, was in charge of the church's youth group, taught a class in Syriac and started a new group for the men of the parish, called the Sons of Mary.

"The purpose was to form the men by prayer, by scripture studies, by programs that helped them put their faith into practice, giving back to the church and to their human fellows, particularly those in need," says Hajj.

After Cleveland, Hajj relocated to Cincinnati as the pastor of its Maronite church; this was four years ago. The Cincinnati church, which had been in existence since 1910, was the home of a large group of Christians of varying backgrounds and diverse cultures, most of them connected somehow to the Middle East. It was frequented not only by Maronites but also by individuals of other faiths such as Orthodox, Melkite, Coptic, Latin... Under Hajj's leadership it has seen its cohesiveness increase and functions now as one united family, enriched by its differences. Hajj maintains a good blending of the secular and religious lives of its parishioners, preparing them to be the best for themselves and for others, living their Christian values, and always putting their faith into action.

The church offers various classes in scriptures, Aramaic, art and social studies, also various activities geared to the different age categories of the parishioners. The MYA, Maronite Young Adults, ages 18 to 35, for instance, gather regularly, socialize, but also participate in programs of spiritual formation, of moral teaching, of various social justice activities such as serving in soup kitchens, helping the needy, doing actions of mercy.

A movie night, a book club, speakers from out of town or from the community, present them with meaningful topics and messages, followed by enriching discussions. A new group, the MYO, Maronite Youth Organization, does the same with youth ages 12 to 18. A supportive group of women also exists to meet and pray, visit the sick, provide material support to various charitable organizations. There are also religious education classes offered every Sunday to children.

The church recently bought 2 adjacent buildings to its sanctuary. It currently uses them as educational centers, but they may also become centers for charity works, even possibly living quarters for the needy elderly.

Recently, Hajj proposed to his congregation a new program, yet to be implemented, consisting of giving a certain % of the church income in charity.

"We are currently studying the structure of the program," says Hajj, "keeping in mind the importance of not only providing fish to eat but also a fishing pole to help survive."

With other Catholic and Orthodox local churches, Hajj founded the One Church of Mercy, a group of churches whose mission is to bring together the different Christian faiths in the metropolitan Cincinnati, to know each other, participate in common rituals, work through prayer, exposure and with government agencies for the persecuted, religious or otherwise, in the Middle East. The group, started in 2015, organizes major events throughout the year. Last year, for instance, it sponsored the public viewing of the movie "Our Last Stand" which told the story of an Assyrian-American school teacher from New York, who spent her summer vacation traveling to Iraq and Syria to help raise awareness about the plight of the Christian communities (Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac) threatened by civil war and ISIS. The movie was followed by a community debate.

Last March, a Lenten prayer service for unity and religious freedom, gathered Roman Catholics, Eastern Rite Catholics and Orthodox in appreciation of diverse, yet complimentary, rituals. The event was an effort to strengthen bonds and also pray for persecuted Christians around the world.

On Sept 14 also of this year, The Exaltation of the Holy Cross, a common divine liturgy also took place at the St Anthony of Padua church and included an educational program on religious persecution. It also addressed, in particular, the situation of the Christians in the Holy Land.

Hajj also heavily involved his church in the 1st Cincinnati Festival of Faith which took place recently at Xavier University, and at which the church choir performed.

“We are involved with various charitable organizations such as Soup Kitchens, Food pantries... and we provide various services according to people’s needs like visiting the sick, helping parishioners at their home, etc.” says Hajj. “We add our voice to those that already exist, thus being part of the Garden of Eden and contributing to it.”

Hajj does not see himself doing things differently in the future, but rather better. The Christian mission he follows will remain the same and his actions and those he will try to impart on his church will always be after the message of the Beatitudes, the blessings that Jesus listed in the Sermon on the Mount. He points to the fact that the Cross of the Maronite Church has 8 dots, 2 at each end, which represent the 8 beatitudes.

“We, disciples of Christ, are asked to take care of the poor, the meek, etc.” says Hajj. “We have to be reminded that we are also the poor, the meek, etc. and that we need to take care of each other, walk together on this bumpy road, and contribute to a better world.”

Many of Hajj’s efforts are devoted to projects and actions that form the human and make the human a holy person, able to improve and sanctify the other, thus adding peace and justice in the name of Christ. His inspiration is his Maronite faith, also the teaching he has constantly received, to always put his faith into action.

What Is the MARONITE CHURCH

*The **Catholic Church** is comprised of twenty-one Eastern and one Western (Roman) Churches. They all share the same: Dogmatic Faith, Seven Sacraments, Moral Teachings, and Unity with the Pope of Rome. Their worship, however, differs and each:*

**Encompasses a unique liturgy, theology, spirituality, and discipline
*Is characterized by its own cultural and linguistic tradition
Is guided by a Patriarch, Major Archbishop, Metropolitan or other Hierarchy, who along with their Synod of Bishops are in full communion with the Pope.

*The **Maronite Church** is one of the 21 Eastern Catholic Churches. It is headed by a Patriarch and has over forty Bishops who shepherd the many Dioceses in Lebanon, the Middle East and throughout the world. The Patriarch governs the Church in a synodal manner with his body of bishops. He resides in Bkerke, Lebanon.*

The Maronite Church dates back to the early Christians of Antioch. It uses Syriac as its liturgical language, a dialect of the Aramaic that Jesus spoke. It takes its name from the hermit-priest, Saint Maron, who lived an ascetic life in Syria and died in 410 AD. Within a few years after his death, over 800 monks adopted his way of life, built the Monastery of Saint Maron on the Orontes, Syria, center of their faith, and became known as the Maronites. Later, the Muslim invasions (7th -10th Centuries), coupled with conflicts from within the Byzantine Empire, caused the Maronites to flee the plains of Syria to the natural protection of the mountains of Lebanon. By 687, they organized themselves around Saint John Maron, whom they elected Patriarch of the vacant See of Antioch, and thus developed as a distinct Church within the Catholic Church. Maronites can attend and worship in any other Catholic church.

Today there are approximately 3 million Maronites throughout the world. Due to emigration since the 19th century, approximately two-thirds of them live within the worldwide Lebanese diaspora in Europe, the Americas, Australia, and Africa. Approximately 1 million live in Lebanon where they represent roughly 20% of the population. The Maronites played and still play an influential role in Lebanon’s politics.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **October 19, 2018**

ELIZABETH HOPKINS

Using Community Organizing, Bridge Building and a Holy Rage Against Injustice, *Elizabeth Hopkins* Aims for an Equal and “Beloved” Society

“For me, Religion represents hope, faith, love, and a belief that all beings are inherently good and worthy of love,” says Elizabeth Hopkins. “It also represents the value of the oppressed and of those overlooked by society, and a holy rage against injustice and towards those who proclaim being faithful yet turn away when they see people suffering.” “Religion for me represents the true Gospel of Christ,” she adds.

Hopkins was born and raised in Cincinnati to a single white mother and to an African American biological father. Until the age of 8, she grew up in Bond Hill, then, in the late 80’s, a low income predominantly black neighborhood. With her mother and grandmother, she attended regularly a white Southern Baptist small church, going to Sunday school and congregational services every Sunday and to Bible school and youth group every Wednesday.

At the white Baptist church, Hopkins felt prejudice against her for being biracial. She was struck by the constant portrayal of Jesus as a white man with blond hair and blue eyes. “As a child of color, this affected me a lot and prevented me from seeing myself as a child of God,” she says.

When she questioned the pastor about it, Hopkins was met with resistance and treated as if she did not have faith. “I did not feel accepted and started understanding how big an issue race played in our society.”

At the age of eight and benefiting from a section 8 approved housing, Hopkins moved with her family to Montgomery, near Indian Hill. It was an almost entirely White and very wealthy neighborhood, a complete opposite to the all-Black and impoverished one she had just left. Attending an all-White Indian Hill school, she also experienced discrimination, but this time not only for being biracial but also for being poor.

CROSSROADS CHURCH



“The lesson to me was clear, that our world was not equal and that there was a strong divide within our society, both racially and wealth-wise.”

Having grown in her understanding and at the rebellious age of 15, Hopkins decided to reject the religious teachings she had received until then from her Baptist church, which only wanted her to conform to rigid preconceived rules with no real consideration to race and inequality. She opted to leave the church.

“Once I came of age, I realized that religion was not the relationship,” she says. “I went on a journey of my own, trying to understand who God was to me.”

This is also when Hopkins became actively involved in social justice issues.

She had always been a fighter, confronting injustice even as a small child, standing up for her friends’ rights when abused or facing the administration of her school when her own would be trampled. She started protesting and marching.

At George W. Bush's first visit to Cincinnati, she and her friends made up signs and demonstrated against him and the war president he would be. And when the attacks of 9/11 happened, they protested the hypocritical response of the government that would serve the benefits of the powers to be.

At the age of 21, Hopkins returned to church, but this time to a white Pentecostal one. Now married, she founded with her husband and a group of people from her new church a house ministry, the Madison Miracle Center, in Covington, KY. It focused on people on the streets, drug addicts, prostitutes, homeless, to whom they would offer meals, housing, and fellowship, thus building community. "Sunday would be Pentecostal day, Saturday house church day, Friday night house church night, etc." she states.

Two years later Hopkins left Covington and her Pentecostal church and attended for the first time a service at Crossroads in Oakley. "I found it entirely different from my previous church experiences," she says. "It was welcoming and open to all, with no rigidity."

She has been a member of Crossroads since, pursuing at the same time her studies, attending Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, graduating with an Associate degree in Business Administration, Management and Operation; then the University of Cincinnati studying Organizational Leadership. This was also a period ripe with police and other violence directed at young African American males: Trayvon Martin, 17 year-old unarmed high school student, killed in Sanford, FL, February 2012, when visiting relatives in a gated community; Michael Brown, unarmed 18 year-old, shot and killed, in Ferguson, MO, August 2014, while fleeing police; Tamir Rice, 12 year-old boy, killed in Cleveland, OH, November 2014, while carrying a toy gun; Sam Dubose, unarmed man, fatally shot, July 2015, in Cincinnati, OH, during a traffic stop.

"I was realizing that Black people who looked like me were not safe in our society and that in today's America, African Americans were still experiencing public lynching," says Hopkins. "Also, that the response of the church to the racial prejudice and inequality was disheartening and practically nonexistent."

Living pain and brokenness and questioning the God whom she had faith in and who was supposed to protect her, she came across, for the first time, a sermon addressing racism and calling for reconciliation of races in the church. It was by Chuck Mingo, a black pastor at Crossroads who, right after, started a program called "Undivided".

In "Undivided" white and black individuals would learn about the history of racism, meet in groups to speak of race and share their experiences, go through a reconciliation process, and end up with a call to action into prison ministry, foster care, etc. The program, viewed through the lens of engaged Christianity, involved 4000 members of Crossroads and Hopkins was one of them.

"For me, it was the first time that I witnessed the church addressing racism," she reminisces.

This initiative prompted her and her friend Carolyn Heck to found and lead together, also at Crossroads, a Justice Team, with the basic goal to change hearts and minds, engage in leadership development, raise new leaders, and build a diverse community. From its start the Team engaged a base of 200 individuals who, working for justice, volunteered their time in the issue 44 campaign going on then and which had for purpose to offer Preschool to all children in Cincinnati.

A member of the Prayer Team at Crossroads, Hopkins organized, when Sam Dubose was killed, a prayer march around the Court house, downtown Cincinnati; 150 people of all faiths participated.

Also, as a Criminal Justice faith-based organizer she worked for the past couple of years at dismantling the Mass Incarceration system in the state of Ohio and at energizing people of faith to find themselves in the story of the oppressed.

"Jesus taught me how to organize," says Hopkins. "He was a revolutionary activist who never kept silent, and who always worked for the sake of others in the name of love."

Hopkins clarifies that her religious involvement is not only charity-based or to try to save others through prayer. It requires as well that she goes out in the streets, fight for the oppressed, and "set the prisoner free"... And, as importantly, that she trains and develops leaders to go in the public arena, speak, act and know how to spread their just message.

"Jesus was executed for being an organizer of the downtrodden peoples," she says. "He challenged and questioned those in ruling positions during his time and was not afraid to overturn, in rage, the tables of the moneychangers and of the sellers who had transformed the Temple, the house of prayer, into a den of thieves."

A year ago, Hopkins became the staff lead for the Amos Project, connecting all of its religious group members, coordinating their regular meetings and activities. She continues in addition to function as the community organizer and campaign manager for the statewide issue 1 Criminal Justice Reform Campaign in Ohio. She and another organizer also keep engaged in insuring the application of the previously passed Preschool Promise issue 44, and in the continuous organizing of the Sanctuary movement in order to protect threatened emigrants.

In the future, Hopkins will continue focusing her activity on police brutality and racism, also on trying to get people of faith more engaged in the public arena. She will remain involved, through Amos, in the ongoing development of a “beloved community” achieved by constantly building bridges. In addition, she will be very interested in creating a place for currently dissatisfied individuals seeking a change and whose interests are captured neither by the church nor by existing political parties. “It would be a community where everyone is welcome,” says Hopkins, “and one not based on faith but on a set of shared core values, moral and ethical.” “Possibly a new American party, not affiliated with either the right or the left...” she adds.

For Hopkins, time has come to “let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” in our world. She would do all in her power to make it happen and will always follow in such doing the example of Christ who never failed to speak, act, organize, fight for justice for all and in particular for the rights of the poor and oppressed.

What Is the CROSSROADS CHURCH

*Crossroads is an **Interdenominational Church** whose beliefs are shared by many different Christian denominations, and where everyone seeking God is welcomed, from those exploring whether or not God exists, to committed Christ-followers.*

It was started in 1995 by a group of 11 Cincinnatians who felt a need for a change and it “went public” in March 1996 as Crossroads Community Church of Hyde Park, a Cincinnati neighborhood. Crossroads has since grown significantly and has now sister churches in 14 locations throughout Ohio and Central Kentucky.

Crossroads believes that:

**The Bible, composed of the 66 books of the Old and New Testament, is the inspired word of God and the full and final authority on all matters of faith and practice.*

**There is only one God, Creator and Lord of everything, perfect, powerful, knowing and eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (The Trinity).*

**Any disobedience to God is a “sin” that literally separates from God; but also, that God re-establishes a personal relationship with the sinner and promises eternal life.*

**All those, anywhere, who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord make up the one true church; and baptism and communion are God’s ordinances to be observed by believers in Christ, but not to be regarded as means of salvation.*

**By adhering to God’s Word and seeking Him, one can best observe His greatest commandments, which are to love Him and others.*

An Interdenominational Church:

**Is an autonomous entity that does not ascribe to any denominational structure for leadership or accountability.*

**Usually bases its doctrines upon the non-negotiables of Christian doctrine, such as the Bible’s infallibility and Jesus Christ being the only way to salvation.*

**Follows freely the direction of the Holy Spirit without constraints of governing bodies who may not take into account the needs of a local congregation.*

**Can focus on the central issues of the gospel without becoming sidetracked by minor issues that cause division and strife.*

**Incorporates practices from various denominations and allows for varying interpretations and traditions that do not detract from the central mission of glorifying God and reaching people.*

Note: Article published **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **November 30, 2018**

Reverend DANIEL HUGHES

For Reverend Daniel Hughes “Leaving Egypt” Takes Courage but Leads to a “Promised Land” Where There Is No Oppression & Where Justice Prevails

Reverend Daniel Hughes’ personal faith was engrained in his family. Both his parents were ministers in the same non-denominational church they had established in a predominantly black neighborhood of Lima, OH. Even though growing up in a rural setting, on farmland 20 minutes away from the city, Hughes spent a lot of time, at least three days a week, at his parents’ church, attending services and participating in religious teachings.

“I grew up in a cross-cultural world,” he says, “navigating very early on cultural differences.” “I was Black in an all-White middle class rural community, but yet connected with many urban African Americans whom I did not talk or act like. I felt like someone with no place, someone who did not belong in the social arena,” he adds.

Organized religion also did not resonate with Hughes. He got, however, from his parents and the church, his spirituality and his deep faith which informed his identity. He became aware of social justice issues at home, his family always helping the poor and the oppressed, and constantly reminding him that everyone is called to be free and to also set others free.

“I always had an aversion to see people mistreated,” he says. “At school I would protect kids being picked on, and in the school bus I will leave an empty seat next to me for them.”

Growing up, Hughes also witnessed the gender discrimination his mother experienced as a female minister, churches then not being in favor of women in religious leadership positions.

After graduating from high school, Hughes left home and got a job in California. In 1998, and eight years later, he returned to Ohio to be next to his dying father. His parents’ church was then closed but, fulfilling his father’s wishes, Hughes helped reopen its doors, getting it back into operation and serving as its new pastor.

“I felt I was called to lead the community and serve its people,” says Hughes, “and they selected me as their new minister. I was reading at the time Paul’s letters to Timothy, his letters regarding the work of a pastor caring for his community, and I felt as if they were addressed to me.” This was the fall of 1998.

CHRISTIAN, UNITED METHODIST

A few months later, January 1999, Hughes joined the Mennonite’s Bluffton University, in Bluffton, OH, 20 miles north of Lima. He spent there four years, graduating with a Bachelor’s in Communication, and pursuing at the same time his pastoral work at his church in nearby Lima.

“Studying at the Mennonite University raised my awakening to social justice, to pacifism and to community,” says Hughes. “My religious upbringing was predominantly spiritual, but my four years at Bluffton connected in a direct and inseparable way my faith to social justice.”

At the same time as being a student, Hughes worked as a staff member custodian cleaning the student union; he got to hang out with other staff members, custodians, cooks, etc. listening to their stories and resonating with their social problems. He served also on a university team called “Damascus Road” which had for goal to address, identify, and offer solutions to the systemic racism prevalent in the American culture, “a racism that robbed both white and people of color of dignity, equality and mutual respect,” he says. Hughes also joined many peace and social justice clubs on campus, participating in their vigils and marches for various causes, such as, for instance, against the capital punishment.

“During my college years and thanks to the Mennonite’s influence, I was living liberation theology, knowing that God is a liberator on the

side of oppressed,” says Hughes. “And I was bringing that experience to my church community in Lima.”

After graduating from Bluffton University, Hughes went to the University of Bowling Green to complete a Master’s in Communication, and then returned to Bluffton University to teach. “But I felt the need and the call for something more,” he says.

Continuing his teaching, he accepted the position of Assistant Director at the Lima Housing Authority.

“I thought it would be a good way for me to help and impact the lives of average poor people. I found out quickly, however, that I was not meant for politics and decided to quit.”

Hughes’ experience working for the Housing Authority, nevertheless, exposed him further to the prevailing injustices of the system and to the unequal privileges many white individuals blindly live. It determined his deeper involvement in the community. A police shooting that killed for no reason Tereka Wilson, a young African American mother, at her home in Lima, presented him with a good opportunity. The police officer responsible for the killing not being indicted, the city erupted into riots, and Hughes, as one of the religious leaders, was pulled in the center of it. He started working with other black and white religious denominations and groups, with schools, with the mayor, trying to find common ground and bring real healing and change to the city.

“When Tereka was shot I felt as if my apathy and selfishness had allowed it to happen,” states Hughes. “Her blood, like the blood of Jesus, saved me and gave me the courage, like the Jews in the Old Testament, to ‘leave my Egypt’, i.e. the comfortable and secure system I was living in, for a promised land where there would be justice and no oppression.”

This is also when Hughes was introduced to the United Methodist Church (UMC) through a white pastor from one of Lima’s suburban churches who reached out to him. Finding similarity between them they decided to work together to fight injustice in the city. Few years later, he was offered the pastorship of Shiloh UMC at Price Hill. He has been there now for four years.

Hughes’ church in Price Hill is diverse in its membership and very involved in its neighborhood. It works, for instance, with the local Recreation Center offering there social programs and events, services, also free meals to the community. It also partners with Shiloh Sober Living providing financial support to returning citizens who suffer from substance abuse and who have opted to live drug free.

In collaboration with the non-profit LIT (Living In Testimony), housing and a supportive community will soon be offered to men coming out from prison. The church also provides mentors for young juveniles with felony, part of the Block ministry, and offers its facility for narcotics and alcoholic anonymous, and to various Santa Maria activities.

Hughes visits the jail at the Justice Center downtown Cincinnati every week. He provides faith and other support to the inmates and is planning a Returning Equity program which will offer them an alternative economy when released and ready to reinsert society. “When freed, these individuals do not feel they belong and are not being accepted,” he says. “They are ‘the others’, a feeling at the heart of their many problems.”

Hughes also leads the Price Hill Faith Alliance, trying to create relationships between the various local Christian churches; and participates in the Faith Alliance citywide.

With other faith leaders of the city he started a year ago the JustLove movement, a movement based on bringing people together to share their experiences, connect by love, and work for justice.

Last April, Hughes’ Shiloh Price Hill UMC separated from its Delhi sister church and changed its name to the Incline Missional Community. Its new goal is to love people the way they are, liberate them, lead them, and help them realize who they are. The Sunday service has changed as a result and with the parishioners’ input is now based on a monthly theme which, in addition to the religious service, progresses with various activities and teachings throughout the month, ending up with an active community service in the neighborhood.

“This helps us address important issues we face in our culture and our life, examine them deeply and plan our faith response to them,” says Hughes. “Our members own the process, and it gives all of us practical tools to apply.”

Going from there Hughes would like to create spaces for people to belong and be vulnerable. For him who studied Communication, communication is all about connections that these spaces will facilitate, letting people thrive and flourish. They will break isolation, foster acceptance, and attract people to the Jesus who is both in them and in “the other”. “They will incubate love and hopefully will help change the world,” he says.

What Is the UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*The **United Methodist Church (UMC)** is a **mainline Protestant** denomination and a major part of Methodism. It was founded in 1968 in Dallas, TX by union of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church. The UMC traces its roots back to the revival movement of John and Charles Wesley in England as well as the Great Awakening in the United States.*

*The **basic beliefs** of The United Methodist Church are:*

- *God is one God in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*
- *The Bible is the inspired word of God.*
- *All humans are sinners and Sin estranges people from God and corrupts human nature so that we cannot heal or save ourselves.*
- *Salvation is through Jesus Christ.*
- *The grace of Sanctification draws one toward the gift of Christian perfection.*
- *People, while corrupted by Sin, are free to make their own choices because of God's divine grace enabling them; they are truly accountable before God for their choices.*
- *The church opposes social injustice and evils such as slavery, inhumane prison conditions, capital punishment, economic injustice, child labor, racism, and inequality.*

*The UMC recognizes **two sacraments: Holy Baptism** (by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion) and **Holy Communion**. Confirmation, Ordination, Holy Matrimony, Funerals, and Anointing of the Sick are performed but are not considered sacraments.*

The UMC, with at least 12 million members (7.5 million in the US and 4.5 million in Africa, Asia, and Europe) as of 2014, is the largest denomination within the wider Methodist movement of approximately 80 million people across the world. In the US, it ranks as the largest mainline Protestant denomination and the largest Protestant church after the Southern Baptist Convention. The Pew Research Center's 2014 US Religious Landscape Study concluded that the political preferences of UMC members was 54% Republican, 35% Democrat, and 11% Independent/other.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on **sosartcincinnati.com** on **August 24, 2018**

Reverend TROY JACKSON

Called by His Christian Evangelical Faith *Reverend Troy Jackson Lives With Mercy & Compassion, and Fights Systemic Injustice*

“How can one read the 66 books of the Christian Bible and not have a sense of the Christian mission in the world, which is not only what happens to someone after death, but also on this earth,” says Reverend Troy Jackson, to which he adds: “In his Lord’s prayer, Jesus said: ‘Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,’ pointing specifically to an earthly mandate for His followers.”

In fact, for Jackson, an Evangelical minister, God’s call is not only for mercy and compassion for the afterlife but also, and as importantly, for justice and peace on this earth, achieved by recognizing and fighting the systemic causes that prevent their being.

Growing up, Jackson at age six was sent to a white Evangelical church where he developed a discipline at reading regularly the Bible, a routine he has kept ever since. In his senior year of high school and part of a youth group event, he discovered the religiously based video series “*You can make a difference*” by Tony Campola, an Evangelical theologian. Struck by their strong social justice message, he was pleased to find that it resonated very well with his own biblical understanding.

At age 17 traveling to Haiti to do service work, part of a group his church connected him to, he was shocked by the massive poverty he encountered there.

“Enlightened by Tony Campola’s now familiar analysis, I quickly realized that poverty in Haiti was systemic in nature,” Jackson says. “Major baseball leagues had their baseballs fabricated there and paid workers only \$1 an hour. It was increasingly obvious to me that global inequity was shaping the world.”

From that time on Jackson became very animated about the importance of justice for the poor, the outcast, the immigrant, the widow, and orphan, for racial and all other kinds of justice, convinced they were part of God’s scheme and finding references to them in his readings of the sacred scriptures.

CHRISTIAN, EVANGELICAL



Attending Franklin College in Indiana, he graduated with a bachelor’s degree in religion, philosophy, and Spanish. He served also for a while as the president of its intervarsity Christian fellowship and facilitated a “miss a meal, make a difference” plan whereas students willingly skipped a meal and gave their saved money to fight world hunger.

Having wanted from a very young age to become a minister, “wanting to have some impact on eternity,” as he says, Jackson then joined Princeton Theological Seminary and graduated with a Master’s degree in Divinity. During his study years he became increasingly exposed to the issue of racism and the injustices of the system. At the end of his 1st year in seminary, for instance, the Rodney King verdict came out absolving the police officers from his brutal beating, and triggered, as a result, major racial riots in South L.A. Jackson, very affected by the situation, was at the same time very surprised to see most white students at the Seminary not reacting as if not concerned, sitting on the sideline, indifferent.

Part of his field education then was also time spent in Plainfield and Camden, NJ, communities involved in racial unrest in the 60's, which still were experiencing racial tension and a growing immigrant population. "In my Evangelical church I had heard about challenges around the globe but almost never about American racism or poverty in America," he states. "White privilege refuses to acknowledge racism and behaves as if it did not exist. Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Laureate, once said: 'The opposite of love is not hate but indifference' and we, white Evangelicals, are guilty of massive indifference when it comes to racism."

After Seminary, Jackson moved to Cincinnati and joined the University Christian Church (UCC) where he was ordained minister and where he served as Senior Pastor for 19 years. During these years he was involved in an immigration effort to prevent the deportation of Bernard Pastor, the 18-year-old Dreamer, who, in 2010, was held in custody by the Springdale Police Department because he was unable to produce a driver's license after a fender-bender. Pastor had been in the US since the age of three but his parents had no asylum status. Jackson was also involved in passing a set of ordinances in City Council providing opportunities for returning prisoners to get service jobs in the city. He also worked as a faith outreach coordinator on the campaign to repeal Senate Bill 5, Issue 2 on the 2011 ballot, which would have restricted Ohio's 400,000 public workers' ability to strike and collectively bargain for wages, health insurance and pensions.

At the same time as his ministry at UCC, Jackson pursued his education and obtained a Master's then a doctorate degree in US history working specifically on the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project. This culminated in the 2008 publication of his book *Becoming King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Making of a National Leader*, which explores the critical role the grassroots Montgomery Movement played in the development of MLK.

Spending time discovering, analyzing, and reminiscing on MLK's writings and on his life, further determined Jackson to become himself more involved in grassroot activities, in community organizing and coordinating, in local work building power with regular everyday people, addressing economic and racial injustices wherever they were. He decided then to leave his church and four years ago joined the Amos Project as its Executive Director.

"Amos is a justice organization that is multifaith," states Jackson.

"Our main focus is to build power with people affected by injustice in order to bring a change; and being multifaith enhances our work and makes it stronger."

Under his leadership, Amos is growing, with new congregations involved, and is moving deeper into evangelical justice-based work. Some of the issues addressed since have been, for instance, the Cincinnati Preschool Promise that aimed at insuring paid pre-schooling for every three- and four-year-old child in the city. Pairing with CPS, the proposal was presented to the community as part of Issue 44 on the November 2016 ballot and was widely passed. Amos has also been very involved at fighting mass incarceration, mostly of people of color and at undoing the detrimental effects of the war on drugs. It has also been concerned with wages and work conditions in the service sector and in the healthcare industry where positions are mostly filled by women of color, and where the average wage is \$9 per hour, resulting often in child poverty.

Right now, its emphasis is on collecting signatures in favor of an Ohio-wide 2018 ballot initiative for a constitutional amendment to retroactively make class 4 and 5 felonies for drug possession, misdemeanors. This change will result in lower prison population, in the absence of felony mention on records, in increased opportunities for housing, jobs, public support, family reunion, and in saving the State, at the same time, \$100 Million every budget cycle, dollars that could be invested in drug prevention, drug treatment, childhood recovery. Amos recently put together an agenda for the years to come titled "Forward Together" in which economic and racial justice are forefront.

Working with Crossroads, Jackson has been involved for the past two years with a program called "Undivided" which offers participants a six-week experience around racial reconciliation. Including lectures, small group discussions, interactive activities, the program looks at history, at the role of empathy versus sympathy, at systemic and structural issues, at personal culpabilities... and moves those engaged at living an "undivided" life.

"My faith is very important to me at the personal level," says Jackson, "but it is not a personal piety faith alone. Evangelical beliefs have at their core that one influences the world, that one has a responsibility in the world... These beliefs are mine and are rooted in the scriptures."

After leaving UCC Jackson joined for four years the diverse People church, and this year, in the wake of the Trump election, the predominantly African American New Prospect Baptist church, led by Reverend Damon Lynch III.

"I wanted a faith experience more justice-oriented when it came to teaching and preaching," he says. "I also wanted to be part of a black congregation."

Jackson likes to quote the revolutionary sermon of MLK, *The one sided approach of the Good Samaritan*, in which MLK expands upon the Samaritan's good, calling attention to the need, in addition to mercy, for deeper actions to uproot from systems the evil responsible for the victims along the road.

"We need to understand the reason for injustice which is baked in the system," he says.

"If we limit ourselves to just charity without asking the why of the problem and trying to remedy it, we may be working in the vested interest of those in power, and indirectly perpetuating the problem."

Jackson's relation to God and his commitment to a Christian community trigger his passion for justice and serve as his call. He is working now at bringing people of different faiths into the mix of justice, at addressing inequities wherever they are, at finding their root causes and at empowering people at solving them.

What Is EVANGELICALISM

Evangelicalism or Evangelical Christianity is a worldwide, trans denominational movement within Protestant Christianity, the origins of which are traced back to early 18th century, with various theological streams contributing to its foundation.

According to the National Association of Evangelicals, a large network of American Evangelical churches, Evangelicals, in addition to a Trinitarian view of God, share the following beliefs:

- **Conversionism:** *the need for lives to be transformed through a "born-again" experience and a lifelong process of following Jesus*
- **Activism:** *the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts*
- **Biblicism:** *the high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority*
- **Crucicentrism:** *the stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity*

Today, Evangelicals are found across many Protestant branches, as well as in various denominations not part of a specific branch. The movement gained great momentum during the 18th and 19th centuries in both the UK and the USA; and today, the Americas, Africa, and Asia are home to most of its members.

Worldwide, Evangelicals are estimated at 550 million, their largest concentration being in the United States, where they form a quarter of the population, are politically important and based mostly in the Bible Belt.

Evangelicalism, a major part of popular Protestantism, is among the most dynamic religious movements in the contemporary world, alongside Islam. While on the rise globally, the developing world is particularly influenced by its spread.

Note: Article published in *Streetvibes* and *Online* on *sosartcincinnati.com* on **January 26, 2018**

DEBORAH JORDAN/BILL CAHALAN

QUAKERS

Listening to the Spirit, *Deborah Jordan & Bill Cahalan* Work Toward a Sustainable Peaceful Earth & Holistic Mental Health

Deborah Jordan and Bill Cahalan are partners in life and in faith; they complement each other and their actions for a peaceful, natural and just world. Raised Christians, Jordan with no particular denomination, Cahalan in rigid Catholicism, both, as adults, drifted and joined The Religious Society of Friends, aka Quakers. "What I love about Quakerism is its combination of mystical and activist traditions," says Jordan. "Bringing them together is very powerful, the spiritual informing the activism and vice versa." "The beliefs of the Quakers met my interest in mystical traditions such as Buddhism, Daoism, Native Americanism," says Cahalan. "They invited a shift from the image of God as a loving but punitive distant patriarch presented to me by Catholicism, toward that of a divine Spirit living equally in nature, humans and all creation." He adds: "I always had, since a child, a very strong spiritual connection with the natural world."

The peace, social justice, and equality teachings of the Quakers resonated also very strongly with both of them, already exposed to these values through their upbringing. Growing up, Jordan always spoke up for the underdogs; and Cahalan was inspired by the ethical and moral values of Catholicism, mainly charity, love, and compassion. It is in college, however, that their activist involvement clearly materialized. Jordan, then at Ohio University, protested actively the Vietnam War going on at that time, and was jailed as a result; and Cahalan, at Xavier University, demonstrated with other students against the scheduled talk on campus of George Wallace, segregationist Governor of Alabama, and succeeded at getting his invitation cancelled.

Jordan's journey took her since on many paths. She dropped out of college and became the coordinator for the Nuclear Freeze local chapter in Cincinnati; participated in antinuclear protests at the Nevada Test Site and was arrested; wanting to counter violence, got a Master's degree in Education and took a job at the Center for Peace Education (CPE) providing peace education, conflict resolution and mediation services to Cincinnati public and private schools; provided mediation to the juvenile courts; and, interested in healing, had become an R.N. and practiced as such for many years.



Cahalan graduated with a Master's and PhD degrees in Psychology and worked as a clinical psychologist. After being inspired by the anti-Vietnam war movement, the Counterculture Revolution, Black Power and Women's movements, he became actively involved in ecological activism in the 80's, protesting the damage that our economy and current culture were causing the natural world. In 2011 he went to Washington, DC to participate in the march and direct actions against the Keystone XL Pipeline which would increase reliance on fossil fuels and negatively affect climate change. He also protested the Dakota Access Pipeline, a threat to the Standing Rock Indian Reservation's clean water and ancient burial grounds. On December 8, 2014, rallying a protest movement launched by EQAT (Earth Quaker Action Team), he and Jordan joined 27 other groups in 8 different states for a sit-in at PNC bank branches demanding an end to the Bank's financing of mountaintop removal coal mining in Appalachia. As a result of this, culminating five years of action, PNC Bank announced March 2015 its divestment from such projects.

Both Jordan and Cahalan became very involved in the local food movement. They are part of a neighborhood community supported agricultural group, or CSA, in their neighborhood of East Price Hill where they contribute to organic gardening, building a healthy soil,

protecting the environment, and sharing food and camaraderie with other participants. They are also members of 'Imago', a grassroots, environmental education organization located as well in Price Hill and which aims to promote living in concert with the natural world, reconnecting people and planet, building a human community that sees the Earth as sacred. "One of the slogans of 'Quaker Earthcare Witness', a national network of Friends who seek to address the ecological and social crises of the world from a spiritual perspective, is 'Peace on earth, Peace with earth'," says Cahalan. "If we do not protect the earth, we will continue destroying the matrix of life, and, as a result, will continue eroding peace among people."

Ten years ago, Jordan started the publication of *CORV (Central Ohio River Valley) Local Food Guide*, a grassroots yearly magazine with the mission to connect community members with local growers and fresh, healthy local food. "We aim to promote self-sufficiency, sustainability and the wise use of resources in the building of our local food system," she states. "We want also to educate our readers on the importance of eating local."

Another area that strongly connects Jordan and Cahalan in both their interest and activism is the field of mental health. As a clinical psychologist Cahalan chose from the start to help individuals suffering from serious breakdowns in their personality and life. He sees, however, mental problems as disordered ways of relating with others and with self, and not as brain diseases, and deviates in this respect from mainstream mental health which relies heavily on hospitalization and medication, often against the patient's own will, for alleviation of the most disordered states, such as those labelled psychotic.

"Forced hospitalization, medication and community probate are violations of human rights," he says. "Worse, they have often proven ineffective, keeping the individual dependent on medication for life. More humane psychosocial alternatives are needed."

In fact, alternatives, such as 'Open Dialogue', for instance, have been used successfully and for decades in Finland. They provide psychotherapy and social network support to the individual at home or in open households and have resulted in more than 80% recovery on five-years follow up.

"Unfortunately, the mental health field, strongly influenced by the pharmaceutical industry, resists a more relational, empowering and human approach that does not focus on disorders as illnesses and is not medication-centered."

Two years ago, Cahalan helped Jordan and Valerie Chronis Bickett found 'Greater Cincinnati Holistic Mental Health Network'. It came out of Bickett and Jordan's personal experience with mental disorders in friends, family members and juveniles Jordan met through her mediation work.

"It felt like a calling, a leading," Jordan says. "There was a need to bring awareness to people suffering from mental health distress, that holistic, bio-psycho-social approaches to treatment, with no stigma and expected full recovery, were available to them."

The 'Network', a grassroots effort, provides education, support, advocacy, and outreach, all focused on propelling to the forefront the whole person, whole community, alternative approaches to mental health care. It achieves this through open meetings, expert speakers, public events.

Jordan and Cahalan find strength and inspiration for their work and activism in the Quakers' testimonies and practices of peace, justice, equality, integrity, earth care and community.

"In Quakerism, there is no pastor," says Jordan. "We're all considered ministers and get to do all the work. When meeting ends, service begins; our service to the world, that is..."

As to how they view their service to the world in the years to come, Cahalan sees it in helping build a local resilient community and a sustainable, grounded life, connecting to local neighbors and friends, living in harmony with the earth; also in more political activism, taking a stand on issues of social justice importance, getting out to the streets, marching, protesting, sitting-in, getting arrested... For Jordan, building resilience within herself and others is of paramount importance. She will continue her current involvements. Faithful, however, to the Quakers' process, she will keep a space inside for silence and deep listening; will keep doing what she knows and is able to do; and leave the end result to the Spirit.

Who Are the QUAKERS

The Religious Society of Friends, aka Quakers, is an Alternative Christianity which emphasizes the personal experience of God in one's life. Quakers understand the necessity of first listening to God before working in the world. They affirm the equality of all people before God regardless of race, station in life, or sex; this belief informs their social concerns. Quakers find recourse to violence intolerable.

Quaker thought is both mystical (waiting upon God) and prophetic (speaking truth to power). Friends believe that God's revelation is still continuing, that God is not absent or unknowable but that we can find God ourselves and that the search for a closer relationship with God is the Way. They maintain that the teaching of Jesus is a practical method for the guidance of the world today and that religion is concerned with the whole of life.

from "Facts about Friends" by Ted Hoare

Note: Article published in *Streetvibes* and Online on sosartcincinnati.com on September 22, 2017

Reverend DAMON LYNCH III

Reverend Damon Lynch III's Ministry Started Thirty-Five Years Ago in the Streets of the City. It Continues Today, for Everyone, at the Well of the Village

As a child, Reverend Damon Lynch III, current pastor of New Prospect Baptist Church in Roselawn, would watch Evangelical Evangelist Billy Graham's Crusades on Television and be impressed by the huge number of people coming forward, responding to his appeal. He told his father then, that one day he, himself, like Graham, would also attract the many through his preaching.

Lynch III received his call for ministry at age 22. Not only he had grown up in a family of Christian preachers, his grandfather, three of his uncles and his own father, ministers, but also in a family very involved in the civil rights movement and in the plight of African Americans.

"Growing up, I would often sit on the steps of our home in North Avondale listening to my father, Rev. Damon Lynch Jr., discussing civil rights issues and planning strategies to fight injustice, with his friends Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, Rev. Otis Moss Jr., and other civil rights leaders, followers of Dr Martin Luther King Jr.," says Lynch III. "Fighting for justice and for the rights of the oppressed permeated then my soul and became since part of my DNA and of my bone structure."

Having asked God to give him, like he did Gideon in *Judges*, a sign to confirm his vocation, and having received it, Lynch III took his ministry immediately to the streets of Avondale, spending many hours every night meeting distraught lonely people, gaining their trust, listening to their problems, sharing with them the love of God, and helping them moving their lives around.

"Churches nowadays are closed at night and the 24 hours welcoming sanctuaries of solace they once used to be are gone now," he says. "I felt I had to go forward toward those in need, and the street, particularly at night, was the place."

Reaching out to others, particularly the vulnerable, the mistreated, the abused was not new to Lynch III. As a kid, he used to stand up for those who were bullied, always protecting the weak, especially



his Jewish friends in the North Avondale community, whenever they were discriminated against.

This role increased significantly and would soon become applicable to the entire African American community, when Lynch, in 1990, and at the age of 30, was offered the pastorship of the New Prospect Baptist Church in Over the Rhine. OTR was then the center of a crack epidemic, also of poverty and crime... But Lynch III fell in love with its people and their resiliency and continued there his street ministry, at least 5 nights a week, sharing the love of Christ with its residents, also working with them at confronting the evils of police brutality, of bad landlords, fighting for better living conditions for all. This is when he met the late Buddy Gray, Bonnie Neumeier, Linda Brock, and other community leaders living in the area, and added his voice and that of his church and of its members to their struggle.

In July 2000, Lynch III faced his first broad challenge when 13 downtown restaurants refused to serve African American clients attending a predominantly black jazz festival. To fight this discriminatory practice, the Cincinnati Black United Front (CBUF) was formed with Lynch as its president.

Few months later, November 2000, two African American unarmed men, Roger Owensby Jr. and Jeffrey Irons were killed within 24 hours of each other, becoming the 12th and 13th black men killed by the Cincinnati police since 1995. CBUF took to the streets and in March 2001, after gathering 400 supportive stories, filed a class action lawsuit against the City of Cincinnati for racial profiling and police brutality. This eventually led later to the Collaborative Agreement (CA) between the Cincinnati Police Department and the community, agreement forged thanks to thousands of local individuals who came together, met, discussed, and provided their input on how to improve relationships.

In April 2001, Timothy Thomas, another unarmed young African American, was also shot down by the police, and his death triggered widespread riots in the city. Lynch III, his church, and the recently formed CBUF became then at the center of the civil unrest, protesting police brutality, coordinating marches, demonstrations, and public gatherings, and orchestrating at the same time an economic boycott of the city. As a result, many celebrities, including Bill Cosby and Woopy Goldberg, canceled their scheduled appearances in the city, and various Conventions pulled out their planned meetings from it.

For a short while, Lynch III also co-chaired Cincinnati Action Now (CAN), a group formed by the mayor in response to the ongoing events and tasked to address the inequities in the city. It included many community and business leaders as well as various official representatives. Quickly, though, tensions arose within the committee as Lynch was still fighting on the outside, still presiding CBUF and still leading the ongoing boycott of the city; he was asked to leave.

“When you go inside the system, you’re expected to conform to it,” says Lynch III, “and I was not ready to give up my grassroot fight for the things I strongly believed in.”

Reflecting on these times and on the situation that followed up in OTR, Lynch III now questions whether they indirectly helped, in some ways, accelerate the gentrification of the area.

“The CA with its resulting police reform was a significant victory,” he says, “but the events also indirectly led to a switch, in OTR, from project-based housing to a voucher system, and thus enabled people to move out easily from the area and for gentrification to take place.” “Unless you’re thinking strategically and foreseeing what may be beyond your immediate struggle, you might win the battle but lose the war. The system you’re fighting is strong and has often something else in mind that it is surreptitiously pursuing...,” Lynch III adds.

Armed with his experience and knowledge, Lynch III is now always ready to provide his how-to advice to other cities who have been recently facing similar issues.

Due to his numerous grassroot activities and his wide outreach, Lynch III’s church membership grew up significantly in recent years. People have been joining in and attending services in large numbers, coming from the entire metropolitan area. With 1700 current members the church had outgrown its small facility in OTR. In 2013, it moved to a 20 acres site in Roselawn, still a predominantly African American neighborhood.

“Our new church functions as the Village Well,” says Lynch III. “The Well is usually the one place in the community that is essential to life; and all our people are invited there. They come, meet, are nurtured spiritually, and participate in many of the services.”

Lynch III preaches and teaches there, always spreading the message of Christ and sharing the love of God. He accomplishes also his priestly services providing prayer and support to those in need, visiting the sick, consoling those in pain or those afflicted by death, offering spiritual guidance to the many. The prophetic dimension of his faith, on the other hand, keeps him all the time strongly connected to social justice, his heart always for the underdog and the oppressed. Concerning events and injustices, local or nation-wide, are addressed in his church and with his parishioners, also at the many meetings he attends in the city, at the committees he serves on, the panels and discussions he participates in or moderates. Lately, for instance, he has facilitated discussions on the CA Refresh, fifteen years after its initial implementation; has met with a group about the Poor People’s Campaign; has moderated a panel on poverty...

When asked what he would like to focus on in the near-future, Lynch III quickly replies and without hesitation: “Build economic wealth in the black community.”

He quotes a recent article from Forbes Magazine which predicts, based on current data, that by 2053 the wealth of African Americans will be nil.

“African Americans need to own control of their resources and of their economy,” he says. “They need to build wealth, keep it in their community, and pass it on to their families; otherwise, their progress will be seriously limited.”

Actually, Lynch III would like to apply his future efforts at teaching financial literacy to young African Americans.

Lynch III has always fought for peace and justice and for equality for all. He did it on the streets of Cincinnati, at the 'Well of the Village', which is his church, and throughout his ministry. Called and guided by God, his faith has served as the engine that allowed him to persevere, to touch the many and make a difference in their lives.

What Is the BAPTIST CHURCH

*A **Baptist church** consists generally of a group of believers who subscribe to the doctrine that baptism should be performed only for professing believers (as opposed to infant baptism), and that it should be done by complete immersion. Other tenets of Baptist churches include soul competency or liberty (i.e. that a person is responsible alone to God for his or her own personal faith in Jesus Christ), salvation through faith alone (i.e. only by divine, and not human, action), Scripture alone as the rule of faith and practice, and the autonomy of the local congregation.*

*Baptists recognize **two ministerial offices, pastors, and deacons, and two ordinances, baptism, and the Lord's supper** (also called communion). Baptist churches are widely considered to be **Protestant**.*

Historians trace the earliest church labeled "Baptist" back to 1609 in Amsterdam, Dutch Republic with English Separatist John Smyth as its pastor. In 1638, Roger Williams established the first Baptist congregation in the North American colonies.

Diverse from their beginning, Baptists today differ widely from one another in their beliefs, their worship, their attitudes toward other Christians, and their understanding of what is important in Christian discipleship.

With 40 million members worldwide, Baptists form the fifth largest Christian church in the world. The largest Baptist denomination is the Southern Baptist Convention, with total membership exceeding 15 million. Baptist churches are found in almost every country of the world.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on **sosartcincinnati.com** on **March 9, 2018**

JENNIFER MORRIS

A Passionate Advocate of Women & Children's Rights, *Jennifer Morris'* Episcopalian Faith Informs Her Life & Her Actions

Jennifer Morris' father always told her: "Don't let anyone ever tell you that you cannot do something because you're a girl." She grew up in a gender-neutral family where both parents were equal and interchangeably tackled the needed domestic chores; she developed thus, and since childhood, a strong and committed sense for women and children's rights. When in 4th grade, she researched her elementary school library for books featuring women and was surprised to find only very few. Nevertheless, she read again and again the ones she discovered about Louisa May Alcott, the well-known American novelist and poet, author of *Little Women* and *Little Men*, also a feminist and an abolitionist; and about Amelia Earhart, the American aviation pioneer and author, the first female to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. Morris savored their success and took pride in their achievement.

Born and raised in Springfield, OH, in a typical midwestern family, growing up, she and her family attended the local Baptist church. "It was more for the community it created and the social activities it offered than for its specific denominational teachings," she says. Later on, engaged to an Episcopal man, she researched the Episcopalian church and, attracted to its openness, its non-judgmental prefaces, and its inclusiveness, converted to it. She has been since one of its committed and active members. "I currently attend the Episcopalian Ascencion and Holy Trinity church in Wyoming, OH, and am very involved in it," states Morris. "I serve on its Christian formation and ministry outreach commissions, work with its youth organization, and has functioned, until recently, as one of its Eucharistic ministers."

Morris' awakening to community service and to social justice started at home. Her father, now 83, volunteered all his life in the community, serving on the Boy Scout board and the Senior Citizen forum; he still tutors children in the nearby elementary school. Her mother, an oncology nurse, smuggled, during the devastating AIDS epidemics, same sex partners of hospitalized patients to see their beloved

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ones, access to whom, otherwise, would have been denied. She was also politically active, always working the polls, getting very involved in the recent presidential election.

Morris herself, following her parents' steps, always volunteered. In middle school, she donated her time to help younger kids; and in college, she was part of Amnesty International and participated in many of its human rights campaigns. She attended Miami University graduating with a Bachelor's degree in International Studies, and a Master's and PhD degrees in History. Her specialty is modern Europe, modern India, and Japan but most importantly gender and comparative women's history, and human rights and citizenship issues.

At the Mount Saint Joseph University, a faith-based institution founded by the Catholic Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, where she is currently Professor of History, Morris teaches, among others, a semester-long senior seminar on women and children global human rights. She divides the course into two parts, addressing in the 1st one issues women and children face in general, such as education, health care, sexual safety, right to work, right to earn a wage... asking her students to research one specific topic that moves them

and to write a detailed paper about it. And in the 2nd part she gets the students to put into action what they've learned and participate in a service project of their choice. Over the years her students have contributed to many projects including, collecting hygiene products (toothpaste, toothbrushes, shampoo...) for Bethany House, a shelter that serves Cincinnati homeless and disadvantaged women and children; raising money to build a water well in Southern Sudan; researching the most meaningful candidate for a \$3000 grant and awarding it to Wordplay Cincy, a non-profit organization which mission is to help Cincinnati's youth fulfill their potential, by making connections through reading, writing and storytelling; raising money to allow a recreation center that had lost its federal funding for its summer program to continue providing the service to its neighborhood; setting up a blog for a non-profit organization short on resources and time, thus providing it with a media presence and exposure.

"Through my course I intend to open my students' eyes, educate them on important issues and provide them with opportunities," says Morris. "They learn and grow, and getting involved in something local triggers their interest to continue volunteering in their community," she adds.

When asked what triggers her interest and passion for women and children's rights, Morris is quick to answer that it is not just because she is a woman.

"Telling the story of women's lives is important by itself," she says.

"There are injustices and inequalities that need to be addressed, and the specific narrative has, therefore, to be shared."

Morris is currently writing a book about Priscilla Parker, a devout woman from New Richmond, OH who, with her Presbyterian minister husband James, started in 1839, in Clermont County, The Parker Academy. It was the 1st co-ed and racially integrated school for children in Ohio - and possibly in the nation - and emerged from the Parkers' belief that education for all (regardless of gender, class, religion, or race) was a calling from God. The Parkers were also vocal in combatting slavery and inequality and their views antagonized many of their compatriots', putting their lives often at risk. The Parker Academy operated until 1889, and its site is now being excavated, part of an ongoing archaeological project, initiated by Northern Kentucky University, with the hope to make it a historical place.

"We need to keep alive the voices of these women who served as examples and enriched our history," says Morris. "Billy Jean King, for instance, the famous tennis champion and avid advocate for gender equality, triggered in the 70s a wide discussion about women's rights.

I still remember it growing up, also the excitement around *The Battle of the Sexes* tennis match that she won against Bobby Riggs."

In addition to her students, Morris serves as a role model to young girls. For the past two decades she has been a girl scout leader, encouraging assertiveness and independence in her team members. She would like, however, to become more engaged. Encouraged by her friends, she recently applied for a position on the Hamilton County Commission for Women and Girls. If selected, it would give her more influence and the possibility to work with a large diverse group of individuals to make a meaningful and impacting difference for the common good.

All of Morris' actions are deep down informed by her faith.

"I try to live by example, doing every day the best I can do," she says. "The Episcopal church stresses personal responsibility and social justice, and that's also how I have been raised at home, always taught to be responsible for myself and for my actions." But Morris' faith does not distance her from others. As a good historian she has studied most religions and has found them to be similar with many commonalities.

"The Episcopal church encourages our questioning and wants us to understand what other people of faith believe," she says. "And at the end, all religions preach the same: Love one another and treat others the way you want to be treated."

A pressing interest of Morris now is to figure out how to build a community; how to make people connect, hold a reasonable conversation, and listen to each other; how to eliminate the fear that is often caused by difference. It joins the philosophy of her Episcopal faith which is to be open and accept diversity.

"We are all part of God's kingdom," she says, "all of us, the good and the bad. This can be scary to some; but it can also be liberating, thanks to the strength and bravery one gets from an inclusive community."

What Is the EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The word “**Episcopal**” refers to **governance by bishops**, who are to continue the work of the first apostles in the Church, guarding the faith, unity and discipline of the Church.

The **Episcopal Church** is **part of the worldwide Anglican Communion** with 70 million members in 164 countries.

Episcopalians **believe in the Holy Scriptures** as the revealed word of God; **in the Nicene Creed** as the basic statement of belief about God; in the **two sacraments given by Christ to the Church**, namely the **Baptism** and the **Holy Eucharist**.

The Episcopal Church follows the “*via media*” or middle way in its theology and discussions because it believes that, whether or not we agree on a particular topic, we all are beloved by God and can have thoughtful and respectful discussions; and that **everyone is welcome**.

Historically, bishops oversee the Church in particular geographic areas, known as dioceses. In the worldwide Anglican Communion, the Archbishop of Canterbury occupies a special position by virtue of history and tradition.

The Episcopal Church **celebrates diversity of people and worship styles**, striving to live by the example of Jesus Christ, welcoming the stranger and the outcast, helping neighbors and offering love and forgiveness.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **December 1, 2017**

Reverend NELSON PIERCE

Community Organizing and Political Advocacy Are Reverend Nelson Pierce's Powerful Tools for Systemic Changes Toward Justice.

Reverend Nelson Pierce knew, as early as three years old, that he wanted to become a minister. He started preparing himself for it since the age of 13 through the Baptist church that he attended regularly with his parents.

"I grew up in a very religious household," he says. "I was very active in the church, sang in the choir, attended every week Sunday school, participated in children retreats, and developed strong relationships with mentors." "It is there also that I learned about black history..." he adds.

In fact, both Pierce's parents were active during the civil rights movement. His mother, a member of the Black Panthers, participated in their many protests between Detroit and Chicago; and his father, from New Orleans, took part in the 1st class of black students trying to desegregate Louisiana State University.

"My parents did not speak much about the struggles they went through during that era, but it was very present in the ethics of our house and of what was considered important."

Pierce attended Country Day Summit school, a predominantly white Catholic private school, in Cincinnati, OH. He felt there a subjugated racism, subtly embedded in the system, as he had to always prove himself, even though as successful academically as other white students.

"There was also very little social justice awakening during school," he states. "We talked about it in the context of religious ethics, but it could barely compare to what I learned through church or at home, especially regarding being black in America."

After high school, Pierce went to Washington University, in Saint Louis, MO, to study English literature. While there, he experienced some typical racial tensions. Black faculty, for instance, was not representative of the black student population, neither in number

BELOVED COMMUNITY CHURCH



nor in tenured positions. African American studies also were not recognized as a separate Department, did not have their own budget, and could not hire their own professors. Pierce participated in struggles supporting such demands, also in fights for workers' rights.

"Secretaries, mostly white, had many benefits, including free tuition for themselves and their children, also very good health care plans," says Pierce. "Groundkeepers and food workers, 80% Black or Latino, on the other hand, did not. We protested, occupied the administration building, and went on hunger strike, until we got equal, equitable benefits for all."

Graduating from Washington University with a Bachelor's degree in English, Pierce decided to join Eden Theological Seminary, right outside Saint Louis, to deepen his study of religion. A year earlier, at the age of 22, and crowning many years of preparation and a final taxing exam, he had already been ordained a minister. And a year into Divinity school, at age 24, he was hired as the senior pastor of an independent church, in Alton, IL, also near St Louis.

Pierce's ministry for his new church lasted four years, during which he preached every Sunday and taught Bible studies every week. This is also when he connected with Gamaliel, a foundation that

trains and develops leaders in low-income communities, helping them create, maintain, and expand independent, grassroots, and faith-based community organizations with the power to influence political and economic decisions that impact cities and regions. Exposed to community organizing, Pierce became taken by it.

At the same time, he was pursuing his divinity studies, discussing daily issues of social justice through his various classes. Being black, he was also experiencing the prevailing racism and discrimination of the city of St Louis.

“Before, we felt discriminatory behavior to be normal,” says Pierce, “just for being black in America. But at Eden, our conversation became about the world, what it should be and look like, and especially about the role and responsibility of the church as an instrument for social justice everywhere.”

This led Pierce and his student friends to create a NAACP local chapter and to start using various resources to fight black-targeted police violence in the area.

After graduating in 2008 with a Master’s degree in Divinity, Pierce left his church and joined the staff of a larger local Baptist church where he participated in its mission and outreach programs. Two years later, in 2010, he returned to Cincinnati to become the senior pastor of the also independent Beloved Community Church in Norwood, a position he holds until now.

For the 1st four years, and at the same time as ministering for his church, Pierce worked for Amos as a community organizer. He acted through churches, training pastors to help them understand issues and present them to their parishioners or provide someone to do it; gather petitions, canvassing from door to door asking people to sign them; helping changing laws and rules, etc. His efforts contributed significantly to the repeal, in 2011, of Senate bill 5 which would have limited collective bargaining for public employees in Ohio, and, in 2012, to reinstating weekend voting that the Ohio Secretary of State wanted to eliminate for the then presidential elections.

In 2014 and in the wake of the killing of Michael Brown by white officer Darrel Winson in Ferguson, Pierce responded to a call from PICO and went to St Louis to volunteer on a task force to organize, help the local clergy pay attention to what was happening in their city, teach them how to engage their voice in the debate, how to help their young black kids who were out in the streets.

“I thought I was going to St Louis for only few days,” says Pierce, “but I ended up staying there four full months. What I saw was so atrocious and the civil rights violations so egregious that I could not leave. The police had transformed Ferguson into a real war zone...”

Taking advantage of his connection with Eden Theological Seminary and being one of its board members, Pierce used their facility as a home base for his and his friends’ activist actions.

For the past couple of years Pierce has also been working at Xavier University’s Dorothy Day Center for Faith and Justice where he trains and directs a gospel choir consisting of students. They offer their services to various local churches.

He also plans once a year retreats and trips exposing students to what community organizing is, how it can be beneficial, teaching them the tools for relationship building. He just returned from such a week trip to St Louis where he took ten Xavier University students to study racial and economic justice; engaging them with community activists; examining what happened in Ferguson and the protests in the wake of the recent acquittal of Jason Stockley, the former officer who had shot to death in 2011 African American driver Anthony Lamar Smith; experiencing the current homeless crisis in the face of the bitter cold wave that has been affecting the area.

Pierce recently joined the Cincinnati Homeless Coalition board where he will be using his community organizing skills to make a difference. He served as the field director for Yvette Simpson’s recent mayoral campaign. And he is very engaged with the Black Lives Matter movement, supporting it in any way he can.

Pierce also keeps his church community involved in many of his activities.

“I try to equip my parishioners with tools and resources to always stand on the side of justice,” he says. “One cannot do Christian religion without speaking of social justice. It is an important part of the Gospel, and an important part of who we are as a church.”

Pierce’s church will be soon leaving Norwood to relocate in Avondale, sharing space with Fred Shuttlesworth’s Greater Light Baptist church. He hopes that this proximity will create even more opportunities for his church’s engagements in social justice.

When asked what he would like to achieve in the future, Pierce is quick to answer: “Help the most vulnerable, the poor and oppressed, which often times mean the blacks, high on the list in America.”

"I would like to help them organize and create the power necessary to start a systemic change toward an equal and just society," he states, "empower them to fight for their dignity," he adds.

Pierce would like also to help reframe and reimagine what religion is like and what society should be. He would always use his strengths of community organizing and political advocacy to achieve his goals of a just and peaceful world.

What Is BELOVED COMMUNITY CHURCH

Beloved Community Church is an Independent Protestant Christian church.

Its Beliefs:

**God is always on the side of the oppressed in the struggle for liberation. God is on the side of Black People in the United States and around the world in their struggle against institutional and systemic racism.*

**The church can and should be a healing place where people can come to be loved and accepted as they are.*

**The church can and should be a place to strategize, not only to worship; a place where members can plan how to work together to make sure that God's love and justice is at work in the world, and not just something they talk about.*

Its Mission:

**To live into and share God's revolutionary love and justice so that Cincinnati becomes God's Community of Peace.*

Its Vision:

**To be passionate in the pursuit of God's peace, and intentional in resisting oppression, in oneself, the church, the community and the world.*

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **June 1, 2018**

WILL PORTER

Will Porter's Christian Calling Is to Fight for Justice for the Outcast, the Oppressed, the Marginalized, in Inner Cities and Where He Lives

In his first year of college, Will Porter read the book *"When Helping Hurts"* written by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert in which they address poverty. It opened his eyes to the ways injustice persists not only in other parts of the world but also and especially in his own backyard.

"The book shifted my understanding and views of missions," says Porter. "It showed me that I could be a religious missionary not only overseas but just as well where I live... learning about and fighting the injustices that so many people in my country, particularly in inner cities, face daily, i.e., poverty, racism, inequality, health disparity, injustice against women, etc." "The book also helped me realize that engaging and dismantling these injustices had to be an essential part of the Christian church's mission," he adds.

Porter grew up in a small town in North Central Indiana, in a family devoted to Christianity and to Jesus, both his parents being children ministers at the small local Wesleyan church. He accompanied them every Sunday to service and to Bible school, also learned from them the basis of his faith.

At the age of 13, he started dating a girl, his future wife, whose father was a youth pastor in a different Christian church in the neighboring town. He switched to attending it, his future father-in-law serving as his spiritual mentor.

"As I matured, I began to see religion through the lens of engaging with the world around me," he states.

In school, Porter was very successful, not only academically but also at sports, playing on the football team. In his last two years of high school, he led the school's chapter of FCA, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, a nationwide organization, and facilitated a Bible study, once a week, with his classmates; they met, addressed, and discussed different religious topics, exchanged, improved, and deepened their knowledge and faith.

CHRISTIAN, NONDENOMINATIONAL



During middle and high school, he also participated in his church's mission trips to Haiti, to an Apache Native American reservation in Arizona, and to Cincinnati. He helped in various manual labors, building a basketball court in Jacmel, Haiti, painting walls and buildings, in youth activities, and Bible teachings, etc.

For three years, he was also involved, in his own town, with Kokomo Urban Outreach, which mission is to mentor and provide tools to empower others to reach their highest potential. Twice a month Porter will participate in the hosting of cook outs, in helping at soup kitchens, engaging with kids in the projects, serving the underserved and helping them face many of their ongoing issues - financial, physical, etc.

For undergrad, Porter went to Ozark Christian College in Joplin, MO, and earned a Bachelor's degree in Biblical Justice. The summer following his freshman year he married his longtime girlfriend, who also had enrolled in the same college and graduated at the same time with the same major. Porter's years at Ozark were eye-opening, exposing him to diverse thinking, shaping his worldviews, and

guiding his faith toward justice, familiarizing him with the Bible's teachings in that area, and especially with Jesus' outlook at injustice and how He interacted with those who experienced it, the poor, the vulnerable, those at the fringe of society.

"My awakening and passion for justice happened during my college years," he says. "They determined my future path and involvements, my calling to a different type of mission, one which would take me to inner cities to confront and fight injustice."

The same summer he married, Porter and his wife both got a job with Boys and Girls Club of America, a national organization of local chapters which provide after-school programs for young people. Most of the kids they interacted with were 5th grade and younger, poor, minorities, facing rough home situations. For two years, Porter learned about their situation, helped them with their homework, and functioned as their sports coach. "It was a great opportunity for me to build a relationship with the kids, to serve as their role model and to impart a positive influence on them," he says.

To fulfill a class assignment focusing on community service, Porter also volunteered for a year at God's Resort, a transitional housing community which provides safe and affordable housing as well as relationship-based programs, events, and activities to its residents. Located in Joplin, MO, it was based in a rehabbed church in a very poor part of town, where drugs and crime prevailed. Porter dealt with individuals with various addictions, many struggling financially, some just out of jail... He led Bible studies, worshipped with them, and helped them get back on their feet in an otherwise unfriendly world.

In their third year of college and having to do a summer long internship for their Biblical Justice degree, Porter and his wife searched for one in an inner city setting. Through a conference they attended they learned of an opportunity at BLOC in Cincinnati. BLOC, which mission is to build relationships with neighbors and share hope in brokenness, was starting a performance center focused on sports activities, also a woman ministry, in their Price Hill location. Corresponding to their respective interests, the Porters visited the place and accepted the invitation to join. They have been there now for a year and a half, interns the 1st two months, full time staff members afterwards.

At the performance center, Porter provides kids with general athletics training, also coaches them in basketball and football. Most of the kids, 10 to 18 years old, live in the vicinity of the center, where Porter and his wife also live.

This provides the Porters a great opportunity to build and grow relationships with them and their family, and to share with them their values and their faith.

Porter's wife works as a house manager for Weightless Anchor, a BLOC program that provides a respite to women from the world of the street by creating a safe haven where they are not shamed but accepted and welcomed. These women struggle with addiction, prostitution, homelessness, and the center offers them a place to stay, eat, take a bath, be supported.

Through his position at BLOC, Porter is also connected to kids in and from the juvenile detention center. He spearheads his organization's engagement with the Juvenile Justice System in Hamilton County offering, through the Tribe program, mentoring, tutoring, sports training, and assistance in completing probation, to kids convicted of felonies.

"These kids on probation come to us after school," says Porter. "We feed them, cloth them, teach them, drive them to probation meetings, advocate for them in court, etc." "Our mission is to guide them down a path toward college or a career instead of recidivism and continued incarceration."

Porter also goes to the detention center twice a month, on Saturdays, to organize recreation time for the jailed kids. This is how he meets other kids in detention, gets to know them, plays with them, tells them about Tribe and invites them to visit once out of jail or on probation.

"We help these kids get out of tough situations and move back into a place where they can be active, valued and worthy members of society," he states.

Outside of his BLOC involvement, Porter volunteered freely his time for several months to the Amos Project, helping with Ohio issue 1, the Drug and Criminal Justice Policies Initiative, which unfortunately failed this last November. It was designed to reduce the number of people in state prisons for low-level, nonviolent crimes, such as drug possession and non-criminal probation violations.

"I think that the current drug laws within the criminal justice system in Ohio are unjust," he says. "They only set people up to fail and prevent them from hearing the gospel of Jesus."

During that time, Porter created and led a team of 10-15 individuals within his church and neighborhood to canvass the community, register people to vote, and collect signatures for the initiative.

After the initiative made it on the ballot he led community meetings, and organized door to door campaigns to educate people about it.

Even though non-denominational in their Christian beliefs, the Porter's have been attending the Incline Missional Community, a Methodist church open to all, located in Porter's neighborhood of Price Hill. "Rev. Daniel Hughes, the pastor, is my mentor," says Porter, "and attending the church helps me share my Christian faith and my commitment to peace and justice with others, often my neighbors, who are like me."

After this past November election, Porter has been leading a new initiative within the Amos Project, this time to reduce gun violence in the city.

"Two boys I knew were recently shot and left with serious injuries," he says. "And East Price Hill where I live has one of the highest rates of homicides in the city."

Porter is trying to learn how to reduce gun violence outside of gun control measures, finding out what others around the country are doing. He is researching the topic and has started formulating an action strategy and organizing a team to implement it.

When asked what he would like to achieve in particular in the future, Porter is quick to answer: "Help eliminate racial oppression in America." "As a young white male with privileges, I would like to always be perceived as a staunch advocate for black equality," he adds, "to help tearing down the systems and societal norms that plague the black community and prevent my black brothers and sisters in Christ, to benefit from their full rights. I would like this to be my identity."

Porter's faith is the number one motivating factor behind his actions and involvements in the community where he lives. Like Jesus, he would prefer to exist on the margins of society, always fighting for justice and peace for the outcast and the oppressed, turning the normal working of the world on its head.

A Text WILL PORTER Likes to Quote

Jesus Talks With a Samaritan Woman (John 4:5-15)

⁵ So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar... ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus... sat down by the well.

⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?"...

⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

¹¹ "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

Note: Article published **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on December 28, 2018

KARTHIK RAGHAVAN

HINDU

For *Karthik Raghavan*, Love Is the Way for Self-Realization, and Serving Others With Love Is Serving God

Born in a Hindu family in the city of Chennai, South India, Karthik Raghavan grew up religious and from a very young age, participated in Hindu rituals, celebrating religious festivals, and going regularly, at least once a week, to the temple, to chant, pray, and meditate.

"I was also vegetarian," he says. "It was the way to be and almost second nature. I never questioned it and just followed by example." Raghavan was also from the beginning, and throughout his life, guided by the moral duties of the *Sanatana Dharma* (or Eternal Duty), also called Hinduism, a code of ethics incumbent upon all Hindus, regardless of class, caste, or sect, and which, when closely followed, would allow one to reach enlightenment and liberation (*moksha*).

In school and through a moral sciences class, Raghavan was taught virtues and was exposed to other religions, learning their creeds and their prayers. For college, he left his birth city and went North to attend an engineering school near New Delhi. There he befriended many Sikh students, accompanied them often to their temple, and found commonality with their faith.

Even though aware of social injustices all along, he had not been actively engaged until then. This was, however, bound to change. "While in college, our Indian prime minister was assassinated by her Sikh body guards, and full-scale riots ensued targeting the Sikhs," he says. "I had to protect my friends and hide them from the mob; this could have been me."

Raghavan also ran for the student government; and protested cheating on campus by a hunger strike and by working at changing the college rules.

In 1987, at the age of 21, he enrolled at the University of Missouri, in Rolla, to pursue a Master's degree, then a PhD degree, in chemical engineering. This was his 1st exposure to the US, where he has been living since, save for a four year hiatus, back to India, to take over his father's firm. His six years in Rolla were mostly devoted to studying, but also punctuated by social services to the community, mainly during the holidays, gathering clothes and food for the



homeless and the underserved, also providing help and guidance to newcomer students on campus.

Late 1990's Raghavan moved to the Cincinnati/Dayton area for professional reasons and got married around the same time. His wife and her parents were followers in India of Sathya Sai Baba, an Indian guru and philanthropist who passed for being the reincarnation of Sai Baba of Shirdi, himself an Indian spiritual master of the early 20th century, regarded by his devotees as the true guru, a saint, and an incarnation of God. Introduced to the spiritual teachings of Sathya Sai Baba, Raghavan was quickly taken by their wisdom, their focus on love and on self-realization, and saw them as complementing his Hindu faith; he quickly became one of his fervent followers.

"Sathya Sai Baba wants each of us to recognize the divinity inherent in us," says Raghavan, "to emphasize and experience the One in all we do or speak, and this principally through Love. He said: 'Love All; Serve All. There is only one caste, the caste of humanity. There is only one religion, the religion of love. There is only one language, the language of the heart.'"

In fact, in his teachings, Sathya Sai Baba always stressed the unimportance of a differing religion, sect, status or color, the main goal being to help each individual be the best he could be, in

harmony with God.

“Following Sathya Sai Baba actually helps me be a better Hindu,” says Raghavan. “He gives me rules of conduct to live well my life; he guides me; he gives me the tool.”

In Mason, north of Cincinnati, where he and his family currently live, Raghavan joined the Sathya Sai Baba Center (SSBC) of Cincinnati-Dayton located there and recently became its president.

All like Sathya Sai Baba who through his life stressed devotion through prayers; education through his teachings, writings, and the many schools he founded; and service through the many free hospitals he started and the programs of free water distribution he established; the SSBC has also created 3 wings along the same lines. Raghavan, in his position of president, oversees them and helps coordinating them, and also as a member participates actively in each of them.

At SSBC Devotion is achieved every Sunday by unison group singing and chanting in many languages and of prayers of many religions (bhajans), also by individual prayer and meditation.

Education which focuses on values is achieved by different means.

Classes are offered every Sunday of the school year to kids of different grades. They emphasize the universal human values of Truth (*Sathya*); Righteousness (*Dharma*); Peace (*Shanthi*); Love (*Prema*) and Nonviolence (*Ahimsa*), essential for leading moral lives. They are taught by parents who would have undergone themselves specific training for that matter. Study Circles also occur every Sunday during which spiritual writings and topics are discussed by a group of adults who will also examine their effective application to their daily life.

“We are now discussing the topic of mindfulness,” says Raghavan, “also finding ways on how to practice it in our lives. We will evaluate ourselves and our efforts afterwards.”

Speakers and lecturers are also frequently invited to come to SSBC to instruct and enlighten the community on various topics pertaining to spirituality and religion.

The Services to the community that Raghavan facilitates and in which he and his family participate are numerous. They include: providing food, cooking and serving dinner and lunch several times a month at 3 shelters in both Cincinnati and Dayton (the David & Rebecca Barron Center for Men, formerly Drop Inn Center; the Esther Marie Hatton Center for Women; the St Vincent de Paul Gateway Shelter for Women & Families); participating in medical camps and health centers in the area, providing medical manpower, and helping in any task needed; singing, playing music and reading stories to the elderly residents of Mason Health Center.

Raghavan and members of the Center also lend their hand to Christmas in April, a program like the one Habitat for Humanity organizes.

They help fixing houses, painting, cleaning, doing yard and landscape work.

To strengthen interfaith exchange, collaboration, and to promote unity in diversity, SSBC also celebrates the holidays of the various religions (Christmas, Ramadan, Hannukah...) by special gatherings and events.

Raghavan would like to have a Walk for Values started in Cincinnati. He would see it as a culmination of many other widespread activities throughout the year, focused on moral values, peace, and justice.

Spirituality is an important part of Raghavan's daily routine. He always aspires to be mindful of his thoughts, words, and deeds, so that they are in sync with each other. His goal is to self-realize himself and serve his community. For him, religion implies that: eternal duty to himself, to his family and to society.

“By serving others, I am serving God,” he says. “Love is responsible for everything. It is the only way to self-realize oneself and the God who is in each of us.”

What Is HINDUISM

Hinduism is one of the oldest known organized religions; its sacred writings date as far back as 1400 to 1500 B.C. It is also one of the most diverse and complex, having millions of gods. Hindus have a wide variety of core beliefs and exist in many different sects.

Although the third largest religion in the world, with over 1 billion followers, Hinduism exists primarily in India and Nepal.

The main texts of Hinduism include the Vedas which contain hymns, incantations, philosophies, rituals, poems, and stories from which Hindus base their beliefs.

Even though Hinduism is considered polytheistic, it has one “god” that is supreme—Brahman, believed to inhabit every portion of reality and existence throughout the entire universe. Brahman is both impersonal and unknowable and exists in three separate forms: Brahma—Creator; Vishnu—Preserver; and Shiva—Destroyer.

There are many schools of Hinduism and “Hindus” are very diverse. To be Hindu one has to recognize the Vedas as sacred. The Vedas are “Theology” books deeply rooted in India’s history and culture and a Hindu has to embrace to some extent the Indian culture.

Because Brahman is everything, Hinduism asserts that everyone is divine. The spiritual goal of a Hindu is to become one with Brahman, referred to as “moksha”. Until moksha is achieved, a Hindu believes that he/she will be repeatedly reincarnated.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **December 15, 2017**

JOE RICHARDSON

From US vs THEM to Only US TOGETHER: *Lieutenant Joe Richardson Gets Rid of Labels and Lives With Mindfulness & Compassion*

On the attendance board at the police station to which is assigned Lieutenant Joe Richardson, his colleagues often write next to his name and instead of “In” or “Out”, “At Temple”, and this even when he is on duty. In fact, Richardson, a Buddhist, lives his religious beliefs at all moments of the day and wherever he is. They have become an integral part of him and of who he is; they dictate his thoughts, actions, and reactions; and have transformed him and his daily life into the real temple of his faith.

“Searching for a religious identity, I became attracted to Buddhism because of its emphasis on compassion,” says Richardson, “also for its Bodhisattva ideal to always work for the benefit and enlightenment of all human beings.” Not keen, however, on the idea of “reincarnation”, he was reassured by a statement from the Dalai Lama that one does not have to espouse all Buddhist beliefs in order to become a Buddhist.

Born in Belleville, a small village of Northern Ohio, Richardson was not raised religious but, nevertheless, with strong moral values. His parents expected him to always be respectful and well behaved. Growing up he was not exposed to diversity, but rather to a very homogenous white community with little to no encounters with minorities such as Blacks, Latinos, or gays. Like his father he was very conservative, with extreme right-wing views, and deeply believed that anyone or any group who had a problem was entirely responsible for solving it. In 1985 and at the age of 18 he joined Miami University to study political sciences and was an active member of its college of Republicans. Three years later, he dropped out of school, got married and joined the police.

“Becoming a cop appealed very much to me,” he says. “I was big and imposing, and always protected my weak friends from the bullies. I felt I had the ability to help others.”

Richardson came to policehood with altruistic ideas and no prejudices. He succumbed, however, quickly to its culture of separation, the work tending to impose a perspective of “Us” versus

BUDDHIST



“Them”, the good guys against the bad ones, police versus civilians... “Cops learn to see themselves as guardians, like sheepdogs, and view criminals as wolves,” Richardson states. “That also reinforces the us-versus-them mentality.”

This mentality accompanied Richardson all the way until 1999 when he was promoted supervisor and was assigned to work with “Citizens on Patrol” in East Price Hill. His initial skeptical approach to the group changed quickly when he encountered instead wonderful individuals who were friendly, competent, responsible, police-supporting and who wanted to help take care of their own problems and improve their neighborhood.

“They all became my friends and they showed me that there were things outside the police department which were as good as within, in order to address neighborhood issues,” he says.

Richardson’s new perspective was also quickly reinforced by the April 2001 racial riots in Cincinnati which followed the killing of unarmed African American Timothy Thomas by a white policeman. These riots prompted a self-reflection within the police organization as a whole and an examination of police actions at all levels.

“It was a wake-up call,” says Richardson. “I was almost

simultaneously inside the department looking out and outside looking in. It made me realize that policing was something we had traditionally done “TO” the community instead of “WITH” the community and that it needed to change. And I wanted to be a part of that change.”

Serving as a liaison to community councils and neighborhood groups, Richardson would attend their meetings, talk to them regarding security and police issues, and listen to their complaints. He would always strive to be open, receptive and honest, and bring back the awareness he acquired from his interactions to his superiors and other police officers. “It ceased to be only about zero tolerance and jailing the offender, the approach prevalent before,” he says. “Trying to understand the issue, seeing it from different viewpoints, and collaborating to finding a solution, became instead the focus.”

This new vision coincided in Richardson with his discovery of Buddhism which also stresses in its teachings that there is no Us vs Them, that in fact there is no Them but just all Us, and that, as a result, it becomes difficult to hate someone who is part of you. Richardson progressively learned more and more about Buddhism. He frequented and attended classes at the local Buddhist temples, first the Theravadan monastery in Forest Park, then the Tibetan one in Colerain where he discovered a very strong sense of “sangha”, community. In 2011 he took his refuge vows as a declared Buddhist.

“To me Buddhism is how to live life,” he says. “I don’t do it for the promise of heaven or eternal life. I do it to make me a better me now and in the future.”

In fact, every morning Richardson meditates and prays with the explicit purpose to be reminded to be a good Buddhist throughout his day. In 2014, wanting to learn more about religions, he decided to pursue his education and joined the University of Cincinnati focusing on religious studies. He graduated last month with a Bachelor’s degree and hopes to pursue a Master’s degree in the near future.

At the police department, Richardson is now responsible for enlarging the Police Academy into a regional enterprise. It is where civilians are trained to become police officers, and where policemen get their continuous professional training as required by the State. Richardson would like to expand the program, and, in addition to social justice, bring more diversity training to it, also introduce mindfulness and equanimity as topics of discussion. He likes to quote Rodney Muterspaw, the chief of Middletown police, who, for instance, added social awareness and emotional intelligence to his officers’ training.

At work and with his colleagues, Richardson tries to live by example, with honesty, and according to his Buddhist faith.

“When needed, I do not hesitate to be the hand who stops somebody to only go so far and no further, or to say, “that’s wrong”, “that’s mean”, or “that’s bigoted”. I’ve had to learn that a lot more good comes from consistently being the person willing to say, “this is not welcome here”,” he states.

Richardson would like to learn more about the Black Lives Matter movement and establish liaison with its local leaders. He thinks that communication and respect are keys for dealing with any community. “At the start I was a white male protestant policeman part of the majority. When I started getting rid of labels, I saw the diversity and embraced it. Others stopped being my enemy; they became part of me, me and me vs me and them.”

Richardson aims at living his life truthfully, honestly, with mindfulness and compassion. He aims also at being a Bodhisattva, at helping bring everyone else along to a better place.

What Is BUDDHISM

Buddhism, founded by **Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 BC)**, the Buddha, a rich prince who led a life of an ascetic mendicant, in Nepal, teaches people how to end their suffering by cutting out greed, hatred and ignorance. For Buddhism, doing bad things brings bad consequences, and good things, good ones; and good and bad do not cancel out. This cause-and-effect chain is reflected in the endless cycles of life, death, and rebirth (reincarnation) in which Buddhism believes. The ultimate goal of a Buddhist is to reach the state of enlightenment (Nirvana) and liberate oneself from endless reincarnation and suffering. Buddhists do not believe that Buddha is a god, but rather a human being who has woken up and sees the true way the world works; and that this knowledge represents the final extinction of desire. Buddhists take refuge in the three Jewels, the Buddha, the Dharma (the way to live life as taught by the Buddha), and the Sangha (the congregation of monks and other Buddhists). They are encouraged to follow five precepts, or rules: not to hurt a living person or animal; not to take something that is not given; not to engage in sexual misconduct; not to lie or say hurtful things; not to take intoxicants (like alcohol or drugs) which cause heedlessness. Some see Buddhism as a religion, others as a philosophy, and others as a way of finding reality.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes and Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **October 6, 2017**

QUANITA ROBERSON

A Water Spirit, *Quanita Roberson* Is a Healer of Trauma, an Enabler of Love and Compassion, a Builder and Bridger of Community

"I am the promise of forgiveness and reconciliation in the world," says Quanita Roberson, "and my work is to heal trauma wherever it is, on the individual, interpersonal and organizational levels, bringing peace and building bridges between individuals and communities."

Roberson grew up until the age of seven with her maternal grandparents, in a house always open to all. She was raised religious and regularly attended her grandfather's church, a Protestant non-denominational church in Mount Auburn, Cincinnati, where he was the minister; and after the age of seven, practiced Catholicism, when her mother married a white Catholic man. "I was also later exposed to Jehovah's Witnesses," she says, "my mother and stepfather having converted to their religion when I was 15; and to the Unitarian Universalists when I was 16, having lived then for a year with a family who belonged to their faith."

Growing up, Roberson was thus exposed to different religions and incorporated a little of each in her beliefs, but it is the spiritual teaching of the Dagara medicine wheel from Burkina Faso, West Africa, to which she was introduced at the age of 20, that resonated the most with her.

"Dagara is about spiritual healing," she says, "also about community building and how we are together and how we each live our purpose."

According to the Dagara wheel, each individual, depending on the last digit of her/his birth year, represents one of the 5 elements of Fire, Water, Earth, Mineral, Nature. Roberson falls in the "Water" people category, usually considered the peacemakers, the ones with the ability to reconcile differences within the self and with one another.

"I am a water spirit and I bring forgiveness, reconciliation, peace building, the medicine of the emotions," she states.

DAGARA, MEDICINE WHEEL



Four years ago, Roberson complemented her knowledge of the Dagara by completing a yearlong apprenticeship with Fanchon Shur, a Cincinnati-based movement artist, movement therapist and choreographer who has been practicing movement and trauma healing since the 70's.

"I learned from Fanchon about healing through movement, how water responds to it, moving and shifting in our body, and how it affects us."

Actually, trauma had been part of Roberson's life from a young age. At fifteen, she went to court and pressed charges against her stepfather for sexually abusing her. Her religious family forgave him, but she was initially unable to do so herself and went through a deep depressive phase. Facing at that time the choice to heal or to die, she let herself go to the spirit, was pulled, and saved by it, and said yes to life.

Later in life, she worked for the Red Cross as an instructor and an instructor trainer, predominantly in the area of HIV infection. She thus met many individuals suffering from AIDS or infected with the virus and was very touched by their condition and their traumatic experience.

"I saw individuals and coworkers dying from AIDs, and parents suffering from the loss of their loved ones," says Roberson. "I lived their pain, witnessed their grief, and wanted to help them and ease their agony."

After the Red Cross, she joined for a couple of years Public Allies participating in their activist work and in their yearly retreats focusing on social justice; but when her son was born, she decided to quit her job and stay at home.

"I was already in my late 20's," she says, "and I felt the need to complete my education and so went back to school."

Roberson received a Bachelor's degree in Organizational Leadership from Wilmington College, then a Master's degree in Organizational Management and Development with a concentration in Integral Theory from Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, CA.

"I wanted to help people heal from their trauma, also do organizational development work, and wanted to approach both from a holistic perspective."

This is when Roberson established her own practice and started coaching.

"My coaching is reconciling internally, interpersonally or organizationally," says Roberson. "I lead individuals, families and organizations through grief rituals, help them learn to grieve, to empty out and make room for the new to come in. I do it one on one, also through workshops and retreats."

In helping others do their grief work, Roberson, in addition to easing their pain, takes them on a forgiveness and reconciliation journey, freeing their spirit and thus allowing them more space for love and compassion. She has been doing coaching for seventeen years now and in five countries. Her feminism healing retreats, for instance, help empower women; and her work through the Center for Progressive Leadership, helps activists and politicians in the state of Ohio widen their perspective, discover greater choices, and acquire more personal internal power.

One of Roberson's main interests, however, is healing the ancestors' legacy of slavery, not only for African Americans, but "for all Americans," as she is quick to precise. She is currently finishing writing a book on that same topic; it is titled *'The Innerground Railroad: A 40 Day Journey to Remembering Self and Spirit'*. In it Roberson uses the Dagara wheel and takes the reader on a 40 day journey through which she shares her own story.

"I am a dark skinned African American girl, raised in a biracial family, formerly married to a white man who lives on the Kentucky side of the

Ohio River, and my kids are multiracial descendants of slaves and of the sons and daughters of the Revolution," she states. "I grew up exposed to diversity, born in both cultures, and do not hold either as victim. We can shift and become connected and that's what community is about."

In addition to coaching, Roberson has been heavily involved in organizational development work.

Partnering with Tenneson Woolf from Utah, a facilitator, and a workshop leader, she has been conducting yearly retreats involving young pastors from the United Church of Christ, guiding them into team building and into community engagement.

Working with the Kellogg Foundation, she serves as both an evaluator and a participant in their grants on truth, racial healing, and transformation. As an organizational development person, she will help in the local training of their grantees for community engagement.

With People's Action she is currently collaborating on a project designed to identify, across the country, rural communities which voted for Obama and later for Trump, trying to determine within them the thread of conversations around race, religion, and immigration. The purpose is to pinpoint the messages that made it through pop cultures and learn how we can better listen to each other and build improved relationships.

In New Jersey, Roberson trained both community and police members in trauma-informed responses to violence. She tried to remove their preexisting biases and bring instead their commonality and complementarity, reinforcing what one participant simply stated, that "they're all trying to get home safe to their families..."

Addressing diversity and inclusion in the workplace, Roberson helped design a self-assessment tool for managers, stressing an approach that will shift the topic from just being a subject of discussion to becoming an actual practice.

Roberson is also very concerned about the activists in the community, about their need to tend to their own healing in order to become healthier and able to continue their engaged work. She is considering partnering with JustLove to develop an activist cohort to address their issues and, as a result, to increase the efficacy of their involvement.

In addition to her coaching and organizational development work Roberson is involved in various social justice activities locally, nationally and internationally.

In collaboration with the YWCA, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation and the Freedom Center, she arranged for the screening of *"I Am Not Your Negro,"* a documentary based on James Baldwin's writings and that explores the history of racism in the US. It was followed by a Q&A session led by Aisha Kiefer Smart, Baldwin's niece, and by Roberson herself. Conversations on race, open to the public, will continue later around the city, also facilitated by her.

"The movie connects past to present," she says, "but we also need to connect present to place and examine what race means to us in Cincinnati and what we want to be together."

In 2016 Roberson was the Keynote Speaker for The National Diversity Conference in Brazil, also a presenter on Community/Police Relations at the NAACP National Convention in Cincinnati.

Going from there Roberson would like to spend time reinforcing the initiatory process in our country.

"We're still an adolescent country," she says. "We need to become initiated adults in order to initiate our youth."

Asked what she means by initiation, Roberson states that it is how we grow up, how we make our purpose and our calling clear, how our soul meets ourselves, and how we become spirit instead of only earth-centered and earth-led in our decisions. She is currently planning, with Tension Woolf, a 3-year cohort for individuals age 40 and under, focused on that issue. Since initiation is culturally specific, Roberson will ask participants to have their ancestral DNA study done and the information available prior to joining the group.

For Roberson the essence has always been community. Through trauma healing and through organizational development she has always tried to empower individuals, families, and organizations, to create bridges between themselves and to reinforce communities throughout the world. She will continue using the wisdom of the Dagara Medicine Wheel, her water spirit, her skills, and knowledge to contribute to peace in all settings and wherever she is.

What Is the DAGARA MEDICINE WHEEL

A Medicine Wheel is the basis of the cosmology and five element rituals of the Dagara tribe of West Africa. In Dagara, people are categorized according to the five elements of fire, water, mineral, earth and nature, each imparting to its respective people a very specific role they are supposed to fulfill in order to keep the community together.

Fire, the original element, is seen as a most potent connection to the spirit world. It puts people back on their spiritual track by consuming that which stands between them and their purpose. It is also the state the ancestors are in. Fire people are the link between the village and the world of the ancestors.

Water brings cleansing, purification, reconciliation; it is essential to the spiritual journey. Water people are considered peacemakers, with the ability to reconcile differences, both within the self and with one another.

Earth, the central element in the Wheel, is the mother who is inviting us to come home to the community and to the earth, our true home. The Earth person takes care of others and, like a grandmother, wants all people to be fed and to feel content, respected and loved.

Mineral is the elemental energy that invites us to remember, through ritual, who we are and why we are here. In Dagara physiology the bones, not the brains, are the storage place of memory. Mineral individuals are story tellers; their gift to society is that of remembering.

Nature is the element that asks us to open to transformation in order to realise our true and authentic selves. It signifies change. The magic we crave and our attraction to the supernatural are nature in their essence.

The energetics of the five Dagara elements have been translated into a modern healing system in the US.

Note: Article published in *Streetvibes* and *Online* on *sosartcincinnati.com* on **September 7, 2018**

DON RUCKNAGEL

Don Rucknagel's Commitment to Peace, Non-Violence and Health Coverage for All Is Directly Linked to His Faith

"One of my priorities is health care for all," says Don Rucknagel. "I have been a member of Physicians for a National Health Program (PNHP) now for over 50 years and of Single Payer Action Network (SPAN) of Ohio for over 15 years."

Rucknagel in fact believes that accessible and affordable health care is an individual's human rights and that it is society's responsibility to make it available and free to everyone. Being a physician who devoted all his life to treating predominantly African American patients suffering from sickle cell disease, he knows quite well the debilitating problems that patients face when they are unable to seek needed care due to either their disadvantaged socioeconomic condition or the high cost of their treatment.

Rucknagel grew up in St. Louis, MO, in a non-religious family. His parents, however, allowed one of their acquaintances to take him and his brother regularly to Sunday school at the downtown Grace Lutheran church. He was baptized there and stayed with the Lutheran faith for a good part of his life.

Successful in high school he was given a scholarship to attend Washington University in St. Louis, obtained a Bachelor's degree in Chemistry and Biology, and proceeded to Medical School at the same University to become a Medical Doctor in 1954.

At Washington University he was active in the Lutheran student fraternity to which he belonged; also enrolled in ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps), the college program that prepares young adults to become officers in the US Military. Through this program he got the grade of 2nd lieutenant in the Air Force artillery and attended one time a summer training camp at Fort Bragg, NC; this was, however, all his active exposure to the armed forces.

After completing medical school, Rucknagel went to Duke University for his medical residency, the University of Pittsburgh for a fellowship in Hematology, then returned to St. Louis on the medical staff of the University. Now married and interested in the genetics of Sickle Cell

QUAKER



disease he moved, few years later, with his wife, to Ann Arbor, to join the group of James Neele, the prominent American geneticist, then Chairman of the Department of Human Genetics at the University of Michigan.

"Initially planned for 2 years, our stay in Ann Arbor lasted much longer," says Rucknagel. "I ended up obtaining a PhD degree in human genetics and served for many years on the faculty of the medical school."

While in Ann Arbor, the American Vietnam war started, initiated by orders of President Johnson to bombard North Vietnam; it was March 1965. In view of the misinformation presented by the administration to justify their involvement and the resulting massive drafting of Americans in the war, a group of history and political science professors from the University of Michigan offered a series of teach-ins to inform the public about the real issues, situation, and problems, relating to Vietnam. Rucknagel and his wife attended. "It became clear to us that all the American and Vietnamese deaths were unjustified, and that the reasons given for the violence and extensive destructions were only based on lies and only to profit the powerful military industrial complex," says Rucknagel.

Revolted and committed to become an antiwar activist, Rucknagel soon discovered a local antiwar group called "Interfaith Council for Peace", founded by a rabbi and a Disciple of Christ minister's wife, Barbara Fuller. He and his wife joined the group and also started attending the Disciples of Christ Church led by Barbara's husband.

"Since our arrival to Ann Arbor we had gravitated around Lutheran liberal congregations," he states. "But the members of the Lutheran church we were attending at the time were fighting with the pastor and with each other, so we decided to leave."

The Rucknagels' participation in the Interfaith Council for Peace was fruitful as they lobbied legislators, picketed, marched, joined antidraft protests in the street and helped organize the resistance to war of young students on campus.

"The war of Vietnam was like a flash of light in the darkness to me," says Rucknagel. "It brought a much needed social and political awakening, exposing the military industrial complex, the role of arms manufacturing, the influence of retired generals who are recycled in the system and become pro-war consultants to the Congress...."

It also brought to the Rucknagels' a strong exposure to the social message of the gospel, and to the important role of faith as a promoter of justice in this world.

In 1987, Rucknagel was offered the direction of the Sickle Cell Center at Children's hospital in Cincinnati and he and his family moved there. Wanting to continue his involvement in peace and antiwar activism, he looked for a church which would offer such a venue.

"We were directed to the Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church, which was led then by Harold Porter, a progressive minister," says Rucknagel. "The congregation, however, was wrapped up in fighting the Presbytery regarding the ordaining of gays and lesbians and I participated in the fight, but also continued looking for other antiwar platforms."

Soon Rucknagel was serving on the IJPC (Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center) peace committee working with their Justice Seeking group. But looking for a more specific focus on war and peace, he decided to join the Religious Society of Friends, aka Quakers; this was five years ago.

"I find the Quakers to be religious and scriptural, and also with a strong antiwar stand," he says. "They have a peace and social concern committee, and I am its clerk."

Rucknagel continued all along his various social justice and peace activities. He helped with the passing of the Amos Project's Preschool promise that allows children to attend affordable quality preschool.

Believing in Obama's platform for change, he canvassed for his election, going door to door downtown Cincinnati, encouraging and inviting people, mostly African American, to register to vote. In 2010, however, disappointed by Obama's handling of the 2008 economic crisis and his appointment of Timothy Geithner and Lawrence Summers to solve it and whose solution was to bail the banks, he left the Democratic party and joined instead the Green one. "I currently serve on both the Hamilton County and the State of Ohio coordinating committees of the Green Party," he says, "also involved in their national affairs."

But most of Rucknagel's latest efforts have been directed toward advocating for a single payer health care system for all, working closely with SPAN Ohio.

"SPAN proposes the establishment of a public fund that would pay for everyone's health care bills without co-payments or deductibles," says Rucknagel. "Funding would come from the savings realized by eliminating the administrative waste and profits of the many private insurance companies and HMOs, savings from greater utilization of preventive medicine, and from additional mechanisms (such as reasonable sales tax) to ensure the necessary financial resources."

In Ohio, policy would be determined by a board of 14 individuals from the different counties, chaired by the director of Ohio Department of Health. Rucknagel served twice on its Executive Committee, and he is very active lobbying for the passing of its house bill HB 440 and senate bill SB 91. To that effect he meets regularly with representatives explaining the why and how of the bill, pointing to its advantages for their constituency. When I met with him, he had an appointment the next morning with Louis Blessing III, Republican member of the Ohio House of Representatives. Blessing III being very interested in small businesses affairs, Rucknagel intended to illustrate the advantages of the SPAN proposal to small businesses who currently cannot afford expensive health care coverage for their employees who, as a result, leave employment prematurely due to lack of benefits. He had also met with Tom Brinkman, Jr., also a Republican member of the Ohio House of Representatives from Cincinnati, for the same reasons.

Rucknagel is also very involved in helping raise funds to support the operation and success of SPAN Ohio, as he believes that proofs of feasibility and of success of the program need to be demonstrated first at the level of the state before the program is generalized nationwide.

Universal health care and the elimination of wars have been all along two very important issues for Rucknagel, and he will continue fighting for them as long as he lives. He thinks it is also urgent to reduce significantly and quickly our military budget, at the risk, otherwise, of seeing our planet disappear.

When asked about the role his faith has played in his many activist commitments, Rucknagel is quick to reply:
 “My faith has always been and will always remain my strong ally and an essential support in my various peace and social justice activities.”

Texts from the RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS’ Meetings and from FRIENDS LEADERS’ Writings About Peace and Justice

“From its earliest days the Religious Society of Friends has held that war is contrary to the spirit, the life and the teachings of Jesus, who renounced the weapons of worldly passion and used the methods of love and self-sacrifice in their place.”

“There is that of God in all people, and we believe each person has equal access to the divine. This fundamental belief led Friends to appreciate women’s spiritual gifts and to reject practices designed to maintain distinctions among social classes. Friends came to recognize that no one could justly hold another in slavery. We are also coming to realize how such unjust inequities are maintained by an unequal distribution of wealth and resources...”

“Ongoing exploitation of the Earth’s resources threatens the delicate ecological balance that sustains the current web of life. Friends find unity around the principle of sustainability as a basic standard for responsible living...” (from Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice)

“(Our gracious Creator’s) tender mercies are over all his works; and so far as his love influences our minds, so far we become interested in his workmanship and feel a desire to take hold of every opportunity to lessen the distresses of the afflicted and increase the happiness of the creation.”

“To say we love God as unseen and at the same time to exercise cruelty toward the least creature moving by his life ... is a contradiction in itself.” (John Woolman, 1763)

“We are a people that follow after those things that make for peace, love and unity; it is our desire that others’ feet may walk in the same, and do deny and bear our testimony against all strife, and wars, and contentions that come from the lusts that war in the members, that war in the soul, which we wait for, and watch for in all people, and love and desire the good of all...” (Margaret Fell, 1660)

Note: Article published in *Streetvibes* and *Online* on *sosartcincinnati.com* on **November 2, 2018**

DANIEL SCHNEIDER

Spiritual Freedom and Inclusive Love Dictate *Daniel Schneider's* Actions & Advocacy for Social Justice

When Daniel Schneider was eight years old, he learned that about a mile south of where he lived, in Shelby County, OH, was a church previously attended by black people from the Rumley community, a community established around 1840 as a haven for freed slaves. He also learned that his own family had had a strong relationship with it.

"I am told that my grandfather, when he was born, got his 1st bath from a black woman," he says. "And that when his mother, in 1909, was near her death due to cancer, she was upset at the idea of being buried in a white people's cemetery, instead of with her black friends."

This was Schneider's first exposure to a personal story of inclusive diversity relating to black history. The black community, when he was growing up, had moved away, and the church and the school that he attended were then predominantly white.

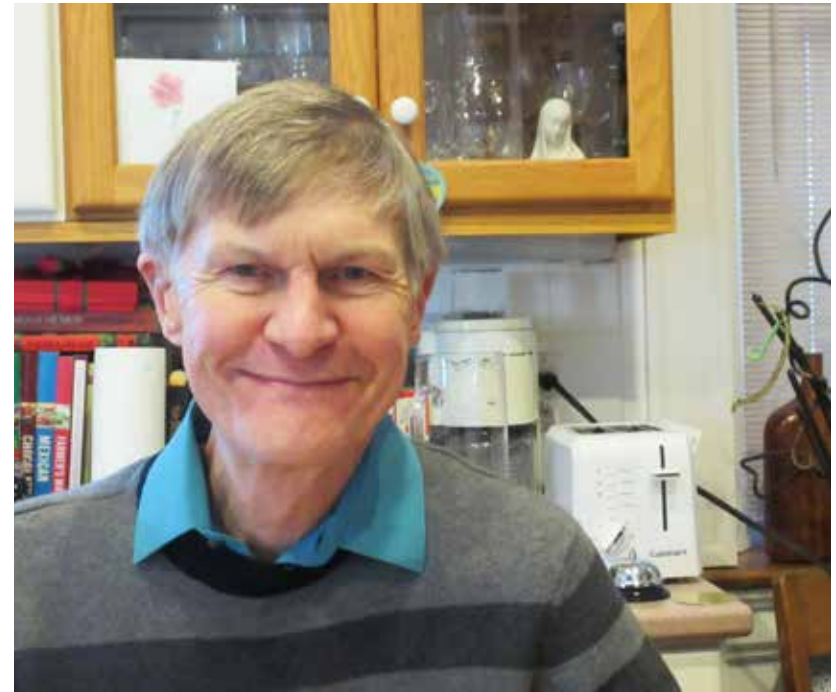
Schneider belonged to a religious family and went every Sunday with his parents, to the First United Church of Christ, a conservative Evangelical church located near the farm where they lived. After retiring, his father had actually become a lay minister.

In high school, in the 1960s, he was inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr. and by the Civil Rights movement that he, and his father, supported strongly. But living in the countryside, away from a city, prevented him from participating actively in it.

For college, he attended Wittenberg University, a liberal arts college in Springfield, OH, and he studied history. After graduating, he was drafted for a year in Vietnam, where he was given clerical, instead of combat, responsibilities and also served as the chaplain's assistant. He, nevertheless, strongly opposed the war that he found wrong.

Upon his return from Vietnam, Schneider joined Drake University in Iowa where he received a Master's degree in Education, then Ohio State University in Columbus for his PhD in History.

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST



While in Columbus he attended the university's Lutheran chapel, met his wife, also a Lutheran, and got married. Few months later, in 1977, they both moved to Cincinnati where his wife had secured a teaching job in the Cincinnati Public School system and he, himself, a job in business.

From 1983 and until his retirement 3 years ago, Schneider worked vocationally in a field of educational opportunity, helping young persons, primarily low-income students, get into better positions in life. For the 1st 15 years, he worked with Jobs for Cincinnati Graduates, initially as a staff of the organization, and later as its director, preparing high school seniors to get jobs, providing them with skills training, teaching them how to interview, and how to become successful. This exposed him to individuals from different backgrounds, low-income, African American and working-class students, and led to his interest in and appreciation of diversity.

In 1999 he transitioned to UC Clermont College to direct two federally funded programs, Educational Talent Search and Upward

Bound, both aimed at helping prepare low-income, mostly 1st generation students, go to college. There would be presentations made to schools, and also direct work with kids as young as 6 grades until 12, providing them with tutoring, monthly workshops on what to expect from college, college visits, helping them with their ACT tests and with their college and financial applications. Through the Upward Bound program, weekend workshops, field trips and summer sessions would also be offered to high school students, all with the intent of preparing them for college.

Being federally funded, these programs exposed Schneider to politics, to congressmen and senators with whom he needed to maintain good relations, and once a year took him to Washington, DC, for lobbying.

"This got me to become outspoken, to learn how to better talk to people about what's important, also to function more into an activist mode," he says.

In 2003 he joined the MLK coalition choral directed by Catherine Roma and sang in its choir for 11 years. The choral would participate every year in the MLK day celebration, and at the occasion, would also perform at the Warren Correctional Institution in Lebanon, OH, where a group of inmates, also under the direction of Roma, had formed a choir called the UMOJA Men's Chorus.

"The inmates would sing for us, and we would sing for them," states Schneider. "I met and mingled with people different from me and from the ones I grew up with and I got to respect them as individuals. They made me look at things from a different perspective."

In 2006 and during one of these celebrations, Sharon Dittmar, a young Unitarian Universalist (UU) woman minister, spoke. Schneider and his wife were very impressed with her message and teaching. They investigated her faith, resonated with its tenets, and a year later decided to join her church, the First Unitarian Church, in Avondale. "We felt that everyone there was accepted and respected and that there was a strong commitment for social justice," says Schneider. "My wife and I had been looking for more freedom to explore our own ideas, and our views of God were different from what the Lutheran church was offering us. We found the Unitarian Universalists a very good fit for us."

Through his new church, Schneider joined its UUJO (Unitarian Universalist Justice Ohio) statewide organization, became very active in it and was elected co-chair of its board. He also became co-chair of the church's social justice committee, helping coordinate many social justice-oriented activities in the community.

He is, for instance, heavily involved in the Interfaith Hospitality Network, inviting, several times a year, homeless families to come and stay at the church and be fed; as well as in the operation of the Shiloh Seventh Day Adventist Community Services Food Pantry in Avondale. He also tutors kids at the South Avondale elementary school.

Participating with the Amos project, Schneider and his church supported, in 2016, the Preschool Promise initiative, canvassing door to door in favor of Issue 44, the school levy that insured opportunities for young kids to attend preschool.

Through UUJO he participated, in October 2015, along other social justice groups, in a Walk to Stop Executions in Ohio. They started at the death house in Lucasville, walked through Chillicothe and ended, seven days later, in Columbus. Accompanying them was a man previously on death row but since then exonerated. In addition, Schneider wrote a letter to the editor of the Cincinnati Enquirer and sent several others to Ohio politicians and legislators urging them to abolish the death penalty. In 2016 he participated in a Rally for Racial Justice at the Ohio Statehouse. UUJO is currently trying to partner with other organizations in support of the Poor People's Campaign, originally organized by MLK and later carried out under the leadership of Ralph Abernathy. The campaign which demanded economic and human rights for poor Americans of diverse backgrounds has been recently resurrected and re-imagined by William Barber, the former North Carolina NAACP leader who rose to prominence behind the Moral Monday's movement. The goal of the new Campaign is to consecrate a new movement to transform the political, economic, and moral structures of society. It plans to organize mobilizations in the spring of 2018, and to orchestrate 40 days of concentrated episodes of civil disobedience in at least 25 states, waging war on child poverty, racism, and economic injustice.

Schneider also serves on the board of the Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center where he helps raise money.

Few years ago, he attended training on the fair food campaign, and since then has worked and advocated with public entities, such as universities, the purchase of food which has public value and is environmentally healthy. He also worked on getting Cincinnati City Council to approve the Wage Theft Ordinance which penalizes any company that does business with the city and gets tax abatement if found not paying its workers a fair wage.

Every Tuesday and Thursday night, and from September until May, Schneider and his wife now teach English as a 2nd language to immigrants, mostly undocumented Latinos, at the Robert Academy in Price Hill.

“Teaching English to immigrants is a priority for me,” he says. “I like being useful and helping others, but also I find language skills to be essential for the integration of foreigners into our society.”

With his wife he also went to the Women’s march in Washington, DC, in January 2017 and in Cincinnati this past January. Through the social justice committee that he chairs, Schneider also keeps his church involved in social and political issues. He got for instance the congregation to vote on a Black Lives Matter banner now displayed on the church building. Also, on having a yearly reconciliation service and a monetary fund to honor the memory of William Carter, a black Unitarian Universalist minister who had started in 1920/30s the Unitarian Brotherhood Church in the West End of Cincinnati but who was ignored and snubbed by ministers of the other Unitarian Universalist established churches. Descendants of Carter are invited at the ceremony during which a public apology is expressed.

“I am interested not only in social services but also in advocacy for social justice,” says Schneider. “I serve currently on four different boards and try through them to effect public policy in order to better the world.”

In all his doings, Schneider is motivated by his faith and by his deep desire for social justice. He abides by what represent for him the two most important messages of UU - spiritual freedom and universal uniting love.

What Is UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

Unitarian Universalism (UU) is a liberal religion characterized by a “**free and responsible search for truth and meaning**”. It emphasizes that religion is a universal human quality and focuses on the universal principles of most religions. Unitarian Universalists (UUs) assert no creed, instead are unified by their shared search for spiritual growth. As such, their **congregations are inclusive, counting many atheists, agnostics, and theists** within their membership.

The roots of UU lie in liberal Christianity, specifically **Unitarianism** - an open-minded and welcoming approach to faith which has its roots in Jewish and Christian traditions but remains open to insights from all faiths, science, the arts, the natural world and everyday living - and **Universalism** - which theology is defined by universal salvation, the belief that the God of love would not create a person to be destined for eternal damnation, and therefore the rejection of the idea of hell.

UUs state that from these traditions comes a deep regard for **intellectual freedom and inclusive love**. Congregations and members seek inspiration and derive insight from all major world religions.

The beliefs of individual UUs range widely, including atheism, agnosticism, pantheism, deism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, neopaganism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Humanism, and many more.

The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) was formed in 1961 through the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association, established in 1825, and the Universalist Church of America, established in 1793. The UUA is headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts, and serves churches mostly in the United States.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **June 15, 2018**

DEB SIMONS-REEVES

Connecting With the Spiritual, *Deb Simons-Reeves*, a Christian Scientist & Practitioner, Extends Her Help and Prayers to Others to Manifest the Presence of God

"I was born an activist with a natural inclination at helping people," says Deb Simons-Reeves. "Already as a child I wanted badly to help my father who was an alcoholic."

Simons-Reeves grew up in Saugatuck, a small resort town on Lake Michigan, and from a very young age attended, with her mother, the local Episcopal church. At age 14 she discovered the stories and the teachings of the Bible through an illustrated cartoon-style book, and inspired by it, regularly taught Sunday school.

She graduated at age 16 from high school and attended Ringling College of Art and Design, in Sarasota, FL, to study arts. A year later, however, she eloped, interrupted her college education, and became, like her husband, a river boat pilot, maneuvering an excursion boat on the Kalamazoo River.

Thanks to her husband, a Christian Scientist, Simons-Reeves became interested in the Christian Science faith. Her interest deepened significantly when at age 19 and pregnant with her 1st child, she became very sick and was healed by Christian Science prayer. She has been a staunch Christian Scientist follower ever since.

Wanting always to help others, Simons-Reeves served for nine years on the school board of her town, aiming at improving its school system. In doing so she involved mothers in the community and insured the schools were running well and the best teachers hired. She also served on the chamber of commerce helping develop the businesses of the town.

Relocating later with her family to Murray, Western Kentucky, she volunteered in the Kentucky State penitentiary, providing Bible studies and counseling to the inmates. Working in the prisons prompted her to pursue her education and she joined Murray State University, graduating with a Bachelor's degree in both criminal justice and social work. She was then 41 years old.

CHRISTIAN SCIENTIST



As a social worker, Simons-Reeves worked for Brighton Center, in Northern KY.

"I ran a government-funded program, helping high school dropouts find jobs, also reintegrate school whenever possible," she says.

Simons-Reeves also always cared for and empowered kids. She has been a longtime cub scout and girl scout leader, guiding the youngsters and taking them regularly on camping trips. Now older and having difficulty facing the harshness and inconvenience of outdoor camping, she sets up, during the entire summer, a tent in her own backyard, inviting kids from the neighborhood, also their friends, to spend time there. She also has been regularly teaching swimming to children, initially in Saugatuck and Murray and now at the YMCA in Norwood where she currently lives.

"I have a large van," she says. "I use it on a regular basis to pick up kids of various ethnic backgrounds and from various neighborhoods, taking them to Sunday school at my church, to the YMCA for swimming, to roller-skating, or simply to my backyard to camp and do bonfires."

For many years she also set up, with other members of her church, an after-school program at the Pendleton Arts Center, downtown Cincinnati. The program was open free, 3 afternoons a week, to any kids from the neighborhood who wanted to study, do arts, or get involved in other recreational activities.

In addition to her community, Simons-Reeves remained all along very involved in her Christian Science church. On many occasions she represented it on church councils, meeting with ministers and other representatives, discussing what could be done to improve matters in the community. She has been working in the Christian Science Reading room now for 20 years, initially as a volunteer, and since last year as a head librarian. Interested in becoming a Christian Science practitioner in order to help people heal by prayer, she attended school for that purpose and obtained a certificate that allowed her to practice.

"I wanted to ease people's suffering and pain, to help them heal, and I believed in the efficacy of the Bible," says Simons-Reeves. "Most people do not pray or trust in prayer, but I had seen wonderful things happen through Christian Science practice." "I wanted to help others deal positively with their fears, gain confidence, and understand the power of the Bible," she adds.

When asked about her practice in relation to modern medicine, Simons-Reeves is quick to answer: "It is not either or; they can complement each other." And she clarifies the essence of Christian Science practice stating: "It is not faith healing alone. It is based on connecting with the spirituality of human beings who are created at the image of God. A Christian Science practitioner heals by understanding that spiritual reality which is in fact the real person."

Simons-Reeves stresses the importance of establishing a relationship with God thanks to which many wonderful things can happen. She mentions Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's prayer, and the psalms 23 (The Lord is my shepherd...) and 91 (The Lord is my refuge and my fortress...) on which Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, based her religion. "I try to live according to the Sermon on the Mount which teaches us how to behave as human beings, how to show compassion and love, how to lift up our fellow men, she says. "It is a daily discipline not always easy to follow; the human ego is a devil..."

Now in her eighties, Simons-Reeves would like to continue to grow, always trying to be a better person, learning by helping others. "When I was doing social work, we studied personality types. I am

the helper type and have it in my genes. I want to help everyone, humans, animals, you name it..." she states.

During the winter months, for instance, Simons-Reeves is always concerned for the birds, making sure their feeders are full, and asking her relatives for bird seeds as Holiday gifts. She also takes care of several dogs and cats, domesticated and stray, in her own home.

Living her life, Simons-Reeves is in tune with her spiritual being and with the presence of God in herself and in others. By her actions and her prayers she always try to extend that presence and make it manifest, wherever she is, and with whomever she deals.

What Is CHRISTIAN SCIENCE

Christian Science is a set of beliefs and practices developed in 19th-century New England by **Mary Baker Eddy**, who argued in her book **Science and Health (1875)** the need to return to "primitive Christianity and its lost element of healing;" that a permanent relationship with God results in physical, mental, and emotional healing; and that sickness is an illusion that can be corrected by prayer alone. The book, claimed to be divinely inspired, became Christian Science's central text, along with the Bible.

The Church of Christ, Scientist, was founded in 1879 and in 1894 the Mother Church was built in Boston, Massachusetts.

*Even though a **Protestant Christian religion**, Christian Science theology holds key differences with other branches of Christianity. Its adherents believe that reality is purely spiritual and the material world an illusion; that Humans are "incapable of sin, sickness and death" and that disease is a mental error rather than physical disorder; and that the sick should be treated not by medicine, but by a form of prayer that seeks to correct the beliefs responsible for the illusion of ill health. Eddy taught that the healing Christian Scientists do is in line with what Jesus taught his disciples to do.*

Christian Scientists refer to God as "Father-Mother." They believe that Christ's call is for all Christians, across denominational borders, to unite to profess his message.

*The church is known for its newspaper, the **Christian Science Monitor**, which won seven Pulitzer Prizes, and for its public Reading Rooms around the world.*

Membership in the Christian Science Church has been steadily declining over the past 45 years. There are currently approximately 800 Churches of Christ, Scientist in the U.S. and approximately 85,000 members worldwide.

Deb Simons-Reeves (1937 - 2021), passed away July 21, 2021

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on **sosartcincinnati.com** on **May 4, 2018**

JAIPAL SINGH

Jaipal Singh Lives to Be a Guru and to Spread Sikhism's Peace & Spirituality

While a freshman at the University of Washington School of Architecture, in Saint Louis, MO, Jaipal Singh asked one of his favorite teachers what it took to be a good architect. His teacher responded that the world was in need of good people and not of good architects. This startled Singh at first, but the more he thought of it the more it became clear that his teacher was telling him not to focus on labels as such but rather to strive to be the best he can be as a human being and that all the rest will follow.

This message has always accompanied Singh ever since. Actually, it was not foreign to him and very much in tune with the education he had received all along from his Indian Sikh parents. Since childhood, Singh's parents had instilled in him and in his older brother the basic Sikh values of reaching perfection in harmony with the spirit of a unique, everlasting, ubiquitous, loving and just God; to aim at becoming in some ways a "guru", similar in spirit to the 10 gurus who have founded and shaped Sikhism.

"Every Sikh is a guru, a leader," says Singh. "God is everywhere and in every one of us. His name is truth, "satnam," and we each need to realize this truth within ourselves."

Growing up, Singh was like an everyday American boy, active in sports and on the US karate world team, member of almost every club at school, playing music, excelling academically. Even though religious, he was rather secular in his approach and did not pray every day. He grew long his hair, however, in accordance with the Sikh teachings, and at home, spoke Panjabi with his mother, so to keep alive the connection to his ethnic origin.

It is in high school that he started questioning who and what he was and became more involved in religion.

"At age 15 spirituality found me," he says. "I went to a Sikh summer camp for one week and it changed my life. I found my home."

At the camp, Singh decided, like strict Sikhs, to become vegetarian, and to devote, from then on, his life to the guru. He started learning the Sikh scriptures; also reading and writing Gurmukhi - a script tightly associated with the Sikh religion, created, and standardized in



the 16th century CE by the second Sikh Guru Angad, in order to make the reading of Panjabi at the reach of every individual and not only the priestly class -; also reading and singing the hymns of the congregation. He also started wearing a turban, instead of only a hair bun, a sign for him of entering manhood, and at the same time of his identity.

From age 15 to 21 Singh made stride in his spiritual growth, adhering strictly to the principles of Sikhism, letting himself be imbibed by its history. It became clear to him that, throughout centuries, Sikhs had not only defended themselves from persecution, but also other religions and humanity as a whole, and that the story of Sikhism had to be seen through the lens of justice for everyone.

By then, Singh having finished high school, had joined the school of architecture.

"My goal in studying architecture was to make the world a better place, to improve people's lives," he says. "I also saw social justice in building a space that could be inspirational, in particular a spiritual space of worship where people would connect to the divine and serve others." In fact, Singh contributed significantly to the building of the Sikh house of worship in West Chester, now home to close to 1000 families of the local Sikh community.

SIKH

JAIPAL SINGH

At age 21, Singh was asked to join again the summer camp that had radically changed him, but this time as a teacher to the youngsters. "My role as an educator grew and became very important, forming youth and teaching them about Sikhism and its spiritual and social values," says Singh. "Half of it is Sikhism one on one, and the other half human activism; divinity and humanity hand in hand..." he adds.

This was also 2001 the year of the terrorist attacks on the USA carried on by individuals who, because of their physical and wearing attributes (dark skinned, long beard, donning a turban), could be easily mistaken for Sikhs.

"But they are not us," states Singh. "We're not related and we're different."

Since that moment, Singh went on a mission to educate and enlighten others about Sikhism, its history, and its legacy fighting for freedom, for peace and justice, and for the underdog.

Singh by then had also become himself an activist. In 2000, while at Washington University studying architecture, he was caught unwillingly in a demonstration protesting the presidential election's debate taking place between only major party candidates Bush and Gore, excluding Green Party candidate Ralph Nader. Witnessing, however, police brutality beating one of the protesters, he strongly objected to it, was arrested, and temporarily jailed. This reminded him of the many Sikhs who, in history, opposed oppression, and determined in him social activism, not to be scared, and to always stand up for who he was and for the right things. Years later, believing in the social values propelled by presidential candidate Obama, then more recently by Hillary Clinton, Singh volunteered at their respective campaigns, canvassing neighborhoods, encouraging people to vote.

In 2003, at the age of 23, and part of his personal spiritual evolution, Singh underwent the Khalsa baptism ceremony committing to total dedication to Sikhism, to shedding his ego and personality, and to fully living up to the high spiritual expectations of the guru.

"My aim has been to live my life with righteousness under the direct authority of the only and ever-present God," says Singh. "Divinity is humility and love, in which one finds compassion and service, no strife, only peace." "It also requires equality and social justice," he adds. "I want to live like a guru, and contribute, in whatever I do, to peace and to a better world."

What Is SIKHISM

Sikhism is the ninth largest religion in the world with a population of close to 30 million worldwide. There are an estimated 250,000 Sikhs in the USA.

Sikhism is a **monotheistic religion**, founded in the Punjab region in India, in the 15th century, by Guru Nanak Dev. It broke from Hinduism due, in part, to its rejection of the caste system.

The fundamental beliefs of Sikhism, articulated in the sacred scripture *Guru Granth Sahib*, include faith and meditation on the name of the one creator, unity of all humankind, engaging in selfless service, striving for social justice for the benefit and prosperity of all, and honest conduct and livelihood while living a householder's life.

The Sikh place of worship is the *gurdwara* which means "doorway to God." Traditionally there is no official clergy within the Sikh tradition. Over time however, priests have become more commonplace. Now, many *gurdwaras* employ priests to conduct services, while others are run entirely by members of the local congregation.

Most Sikhs wear one or more of the Five Ks articles of faith as ordered by the 10th Guru Gobind Singh:

- **Kesh**, or unshorn long hair, protected by a turban.
- **Kangha**, small wooden comb to comb the hair twice a day.
- **Kara**, iron bangle worn on the hand used most.
- **Kachera**, specific undergarment for men and women.
- **Kirpan**, short dagger.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **October 20, 2017**

DORSEY STEBBINS

Retired Lutheran Minister *Dorsey Stebbins*' Voice for Peace and Justice Are His Patient and Persistent Protest Signs One at a Time

When Dorsey Stebbins, 12 years old, was not able to successfully help his father in his business as this latter expected, his father, fearing for him, bluntly told him that he "would not make it" in his life. This affected Stebbins very much and remained with him ever since. It, however, also created in him the determination to be persistent in whatever he did, to put in longer hours at tasks to make up for what he lacked, and that eventually he would succeed.

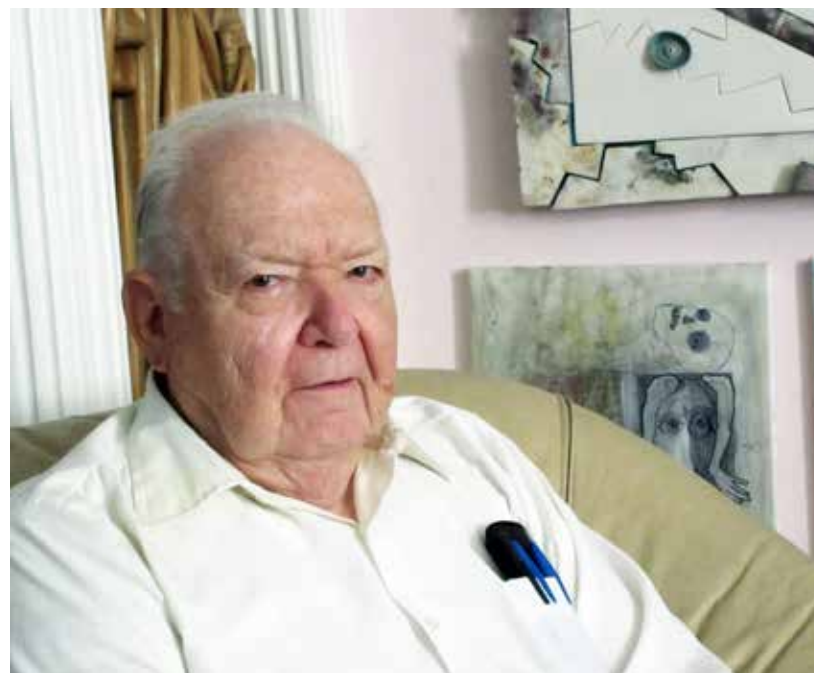
"I am not eloquent at words," Stebbins says, "but I use signs to protest injustice wherever I see it, and I do it day after day, without being deterred, until someone notices." "My persistent protest signs are my voice, and I hope they make a difference, even if a little at a time," he adds.

Stebbins was born in 1932 in a religious family, his mother a Lutheran and his father member of the Church of the Brethren. Baptized as an infant, he attended, growing up, the Lutheran church of Miamisburg, OH, the town where his family lived. He felt all along that he was a "child" of God. He was pious, and all those who knew him assumed he would become one day a minister. Heading to college and doubting his capabilities, he tried successively Education, Engineering, Liberal Arts, and finally the Lutheran Church Gustavus Adolphus College in St Peter, Minnesota. He worked hard, succeeded, was ordained a Lutheran minister, and was offered two parishes in the same area.

"I wanted to do my best to be a good minister wherever I was needed," he says. "I recognized that God loved me and everyone else, and I wanted to share this message with my parishioners."

Stebbins remained six years in Minnesota, then moved to lead other ministries in Dayton, then Loveland and Mason; he served as a Lutheran pastor for 22 years total. In 1977, and due to a misunderstanding with his bishop, he had to leave his last parish,

CHRISTIAN, LUTHERAN



the Holy Trinity Church in Mason, and remained without one for 3 years. This lapsed time, according to the Lutheran Church rules, terminated officially his ministry. He later got a job as a high school teacher of mathematics in Dayton, OH, and remained in this position until 1992, when he retired to take care of his then wife, diagnosed with Alzheimer.

In the meantime Stebbins had met Maurice McCrackin (1905-1997), an American civil rights and peace activist, also a Presbyterian minister who was removed from his church St. Barnabas in Cincinnati's West End, for standing up for his beliefs against the Vietnam War and refusing to pay his federal taxes as a result. McCrackin had then started the small Community Church on Dayton Street, downtown Cincinnati, and Stebbins joined it. "Meeting McCrackin in 1985 triggered my real involvement in social justice as an activist," says Stebbins. "When in college, I was, however, fascinated by any gifted person advocating for social justice and, thus, did contribute a little bit myself."

Stebbins first act was in the Fall of 1958 when he and another seminarian went to Little Rock, Arkansas, to interview then Governor Orval Faubus, a Democrat, who was standing against desegregation of the Little Rock School District; and Daisy Bates, the American civil rights activist, publisher, and journalist, who, on the other hand, was actively supporting it. They also interviewed a local author who had written an article in *The Progressive* in favor of it; the president of the White Citizens' Council, a white supremacist organization founded in opposition to racial integration of schools; and various students at a junior college.

In 1960 and as a pastor, Stebbins attended a businessmen's gathering and spoke out against accusations made by the House Committee on Unamerican Activities, the committee created in 1938 to investigate alleged disloyalty and subversive activities of citizens and organizations suspected of having Communist ties. A local paper editor soon after and in response to his intervention, wrote in an editorial that colleges in America were now graduating communist sympathizers.

After meeting McCrackin, Stebbins followed him and participated in his numerous pacific activities, namely fighting for racial equality, for prisoner's rights, for an end to militarism in the United States, for the sanctuary movement affecting then Hispanic immigrants from Central America, against tearing down hotels that lodged the city poor... After McCrackin's death in 1997, he followed leads by Buddy Gray, IJPC, Contact Center, and ACORN, participating in their various struggles for social justice.

In recent years, Stebbins protested Econocide (as defined by Alice Skirtz) and the gentrification of the Cincinnati neighborhood of Over-the-Rhine, regularly standing on its street corners, holding signs against the city and corporate actions that displace, in the name of economic development, poor residents they consider neither needed nor wanted.

With *Streetvibes* contributor writer Jim Luken, he protested 5 years ago the proposed takeover by Western & Southern of the Anna Louise Inn downtown Cincinnati and its conversion into a deluxe hotel. The Inn had been functioning for over 100 years as a shelter for single women providing them with low-cost housing and various health services. Stebbins picketed persistently for 6 weeks in front of the Inn, holding his protest signs in locations visible to Inn's employees and to passer byes, calling their attention to the unjust issue. His tenacity triggered an increasing number and size of local demonstrations that weighed strongly in the final sale settlement of \$4 million by W&S, enabling Anna

Louise Inn to continue its mission by building a new home at an alternate site.

In 2012, Stebbins was also one of the 1st Cincinnatians to religiously participate in the Occupy movement, hoping for a cultural and political revolution. He picketed, marched, demonstrated and attended the many strategic and sharing gatherings of the movement.

"I saw in the Occupy meetings something I had never seen before," he says. "There was respect for everyone's voice, and a lot of diversity; so many African Americans and so many Whites involved together, and all committed to non-violence and to an equal and just world."

Stebbins has also been participating in many of the Amos Project activities, for instance in the fight against massive incarceration, and now, for a couple of years, against Judge Tracie Hunter's criminal sentence.

"They convicted her in 2014 for unlawful interest in a public contract, maintaining that she used her position as a judge to hire her brother. But they had no proof of it," says Stebbins. "Just recently, Hamilton County Prosecutor Joe Deters broke the same law by offering a paid internship to the son of his good friend Ohio Supreme Court Justice Pat DeWine upon his request, and nothing has been done about it," he adds.

Stebbins regularly picketed the streets of Cincinnati, holding his signs in favor of Justice Hunter. In the beginning, he got no public acknowledgement, but after 3 weeks or so, drivers passing by started honking their horns in support.

"The issue is not out in the open and very few vocal leaders speak of it," he states. "I am one of the rare white individuals to protest Hunter's unjust sentencing; I see, however, my signs starting to make an effect. Unfortunately, racism is still alive and healthy in our society."

Stebbins' main concerns have always been what is right and good for the community, the country, the world. He is for equality for all, and for opportunities for a good and decent life across board. His commitments stem deeply from his Christian faith. Even though now retired as a Lutheran minister, he still attends the Ascension Lutheran Church, in Montgomery, OH, where he occasionally teaches Sunday school, also the Community Church, at Dayton St, founded by his mentor McCrackin, and which recognizes his ordination.

"I see myself as an activist for justice and peace," says Stebbins. "When unjust issues come up, I jump. I respond to the immediate, and my signs become my voice."

Quoting Micah 6:8: *"The Lord God has told us what is right and what He demands: 'See that justice is done, let mercy be your first concern, and humbly obey your God',"* he adds: "This core sums up my approach as a follower of Jesus Christ."

What Is LUTHERANISM

Lutheranism is a major branch of Protestant Christianity which identifies with the theology of **Martin Luther** (1483–1546), a German friar, ecclesiastical reformer and theologian.

Luther's efforts to reform the theology and practice of the Catholic Church launched the Protestant Reformation in the German-speaking territories of the Holy Roman Empire.

The divide between the Lutherans and the Catholics centers primarily on two points: the proper source of authority in the church, or the formal principle (Scriptures alone for Lutherans, Scriptures and Tradition, i.e., doctrinal and spiritual authority of the Christian Church, for Catholics); and the doctrine of justification (i.e., salvation), or the material principle (justification by "grace alone" through "faith alone" in Jesus for Lutherans; through faith and good works for Catholics).

Lutherans retain many of the liturgical practices and sacramental teachings of the pre-Reformation Catholic Church, including baptism and the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper.

Today Lutheranism is one of the largest denominations of Protestantism including approximately 80 million adherents worldwide.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **February 23, 2018**

Pastor ENNIS TAIT

For Pastor Ennis Tait, to Be a True Advocate for Peace and Justice Requires Compassion and the Belief That God Can Change Hearts

"The practice of my faith is very important to me," says Pastor Ennis F. Tait. "It has always helped me maintain my composure and keep alive my hope."

Tait grew up and lived most of his life exposed to and confronted to racism. Learning the true history of his African American people and realizing how often his race had been intentionally subjected to destruction could have made him easily angry, vindictive, and prejudiced. Instead, he always made a point to remain responsibly positive and to look at things in a different light.

"Compassion and being non-judgmental are very important in order to embrace all peoples, religions, races..." he says. "We have to get rid of our implicit and explicit biases and not allow hatred, even when justified, to poison our hearts." To which he adds, "We are all invited to become part of the body of Christ, brothers and sisters united by his teaching."

Tait grew up in the 70's in Moss Point, Southern Mississippi, in a religious family, his mother deeply rooted in her Christian faith and imparting onto him, early on, the beliefs that Jesus is our salvation and the Holy Spirit, the spirit of God in us. He has been a practicing Christian all his life, belonging to the African American non-denominational Church of the Living God, that he attended in his neighborhood as a child, and which exposed him, through faith, to the work his pastors, community leaders, teachers, were doing in his local area confronted with racism and injustice.

"There were marches, Ku Klux Klan rallies, cross burnings," says Tait. "I saw all of these at work but also the power of the church as a true advocate for peace in the black community, and I embraced it as part of my life."

In 1976 and as a little boy he participated in his 1st rally marching in favor of Chris Moore, a young black man accused, with no proofs, of having raped and murdered a white female schoolteacher in Pascagoula, MS. If convicted, Moore would receive the death penalty.

CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD

PASTOR ENNIS TAIT



A regular church goer, Tait also learned how to help people and respond to their need, meeting them where they were without prejudice or looking down at them.

For college he decided to study banking and finance and went to Alabama State University, Montgomery, AL, a historical black college located few blocks away from the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where Dr Martin Luther King Jr. pastored. Montgomery was then the center of the civil rights movement and Tait met there many civil rights leaders and understood the history and the plight of African Americans. This empowered him, gave him a sense of confidence and legitimacy, exposed him to activism and thus shifted his mindset.

"I got involved with the Board of Registration getting students to vote, marched protesting discrimination against our black college not receiving funding from the State while other white colleges were, helped celebrate African American history..." he states.

All along, Tait remained, however, very faithful to his religion, going to church every Sunday, participating with his musical skills in religious services of other denominations, helping start a church and earning how to plan it and organize it.

Graduating in 1995 with a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration, and now married with a child, Tait left Alabama and relocated in St Louis, MO, a large metropolitan city still segregated by its isolated geographical pockets of African Americans, striking by their disparity and poverty. Despite his academic degree and knowledge Tait was very discriminated against in his Fortune 500 company and spent there many years fighting for equality and acknowledgment. This prompted, however, his community involvement with United Way, the Urban League, various projects to help those in need, learning at the same time about collaboration and capacity building.

In the meantime, he had decided to become a minister, studied for it for three years, got ordained in 1998 and became a pastor in 2000, still working during the day and ministering at night and on weekends. "My 1st church in St Louis allowed me to develop and acquire the skills of leading a congregation, caring for it, using my influence to advocate for it, and thus become a voice for its people and for peace and justice wherever needed," he says.

Fourteen years ago, in 2003, Tait got a call from the late Chief Bishop W.E. Crumes, then 89 years old and pastor of the Church of the Living God in Cincinnati, inviting him to join him as a co-pastor to attract more youth into the church. Tait accepted the offer but still took a finance job at A.G. Edwards Investment firm downtown Cincinnati, since then acquired by Wells Fargo. He was the only African American on the job but connected there with many supportive and genuine individuals open to embrace his culture. He found Cincinnati, however, to be a racist city, still experiencing civil unrest as a result of the 2001 killing of unarmed African American Timothy Thomas by a white policeman. This was nevertheless a great time for Tait, the city trying to heal, the Collaborative Agreement being negotiated, various justice issues being widely discussed. After few years, he decided to resign from his job and became in 2008 full time pastor of the church, also appointed regional Overseer for the Churches of the Living God in Columbus and Cleveland, OH, and Midland, PA.

In 2016 and due to a real estate disagreement with the Organization of the Church of the Living God, the community decided to separate from it and for the church to become independent; it also changed its name recently to New Beginnings Church of the Living God, but still following the same biblically based beliefs and teachings as before.

Coached by Tait, the members of the church, in addition to their religious involvement and, without proselytizing, try to bring evangelical awareness to others, participating as volunteers in various community and church events. They contribute to the church's Child Development Center; to an educational enrichment program tutoring students with academic difficulty; to a self-confidence and self-awareness program for young girls and boys; to a 2nd Sunday evangelism and walk the street of the neighborhood event, distributing cloth and food; to a toy give-away program at Christmas; to a food offering service at Thanksgiving...

Tait himself is very involved in the greater Cincinnati community participating in many of its peace and justice organizations and programs. He is part of violence reduction strategies through Serve and Ceasefire, and of Concerned Clergy of Avondale, a cluster of pastors working together to improve quality of life in the neighborhood. He serves on the City Manager Advisory Committee, on "Every Child Succeed" Board of Directors, and on the Preschool Promise Board. He is also a member of the Community Police Partnering Center, the Avondale Community Development Corporation, and the Poverty Collaborative. Tait also works with charter and public schools, and collectively with all faiths, as part of the Faith Community Alliance, to build capacity for causes and issues addressing the plight of the people.

All of Tait's activities and actions are informed by his deep Christian faith based on the teachings of the Bible. He believes in Heaven on earth and that it needs to be cultivated for everyone and to invite all people to join in, come together and be saved by Christ, irrespective of who they are, their past or their belonging.

"God gave us the church to take care of people," he says. "It offers a great opportunity for people from all backgrounds to be united, gain strength, and move forward."

Tait would love to open his church to non-African Americans and embrace everyone. He would like to help all people go from one stage to another, become free in Christ, empowered by love and compassion.

What Is the CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD

*The **Church of the Living God** was founded in 1889, in Arkansas, by Rev. William Christian, a former pastor of a Baptist church. It was during the desperate days of slavery, when blacks were not allowed to participate in white ministries. Rev Christian, through divine revelation and close study of the scriptures, was led to the truth that his church bears the name of God and be known as Church of the Living God.*

*The **Protestant, non-denominational, non-sectarian church** is Bible-based and works at promoting the teaching of Jesus Christ.*

It emphasizes believers' baptism by immersion, the use of water and unleavened bread in the Lord's Supper and the washing of feet when one unites with the church.

The Church of the Living God is in more than 30 states in the US and has several hundred thousand members. It has both male and female pastors and leaders. It was established in Cincinnati for the 1st time in 1914.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **January 12, 2018**

Rabbi MIRIAM TERLINCHAMP

JEWISH

RABBI MIRIAM TERLINCHAMP

Spirituality, Social Justice & JustLOVE Are at the Heart of *Rabbi Miriam Terlinchamp's* Life, Actions & Pastorship

As she was growing up, Rabbi Miriam Terlinchamp's maternal grandfather would always tell her she needed to become a rabbi to continue the Jewish tradition in her family. She was born to a Jewish mother and to a Catholic Belgian father who converted to Judaism upon marriage. Her parents exposed her at home to the cultural and ritual aspects of Judaism, but it was her grandfather who opened her eyes to its religiosity.

"As a baby already, my grandfather would take me every weekend to the synagogue to pray," she says. "He would also tell me the stories of the different individuals whose pictures were hanging there, including those of my relatives who had passed away, in particular Miriam his wife."

Born in Texas, Terlinchamp lived in Seattle, WA, from the age of eight. Up to the 2nd grade she went to a Jewish school and afterwards to the International School, an alternative liberal arts public institution. But all along she attended three days a week a supplementary after-school program receiving a Jewish education, learning Hebrew, and getting familiarized with Jewish rituals. She also went to the synagogue every weekend.

At the age of 16 she had a marking experience witnessing the death from cancer of her best friend, also being part of the spiritual conversations that the latter had on her death bed with her rabbi. These were for Terlinchamp moments that strengthened her faith, pointing to what was important, and to the encompassing presence and love of God.

For college, she attended Scripps College in Claremont, CA, double majored in Philosophy of Religion and Studio art, and right after went to London to the London Slade School of Art where she received additional training in painting.

"I led in London a free and quite enjoyable life," she states, "but I found it empty, not focusing on 'what things mean'. I knew I was avoiding the essential. So after six months I quit, returned home and changed my path. This is when my real quest towards the rabbinate began."



Back in Seattle, Terlinchamp worked as a graphic designer for a while, then at the Temple De Hirsch Sinai, as their assistant director of education. Around the same time her sister was in a very bad life-threatening car accident, hit by a negligent and very likely inebriated speeding police officer. The Washington law, then, did not require an alcohol test for officers. Angry by the situation and revolted by the pain and agony of her daughter, Terlinchamp's mother sued the city and the state, won and was able to change the law in order to also have police officers alcohol- and drug-tested.

"This made me aware of the privilege we were carrying as white individuals, privilege that enabled us to fight and obtain justice," says Terlinchamp. "If we were Black or Hispanic, it would have been more difficult to change things." "I realized then the power I had to effect the system; also, that I needed to use it to make things better," she adds.

This is also when she decided to apply to rabbinical school. Terlinchamp was accepted at HUC-JIR Reform Rabbinical School, in Los Angeles, spent her 1st year studying in Jerusalem, the four succeeding ones in LA, and in 2008 received her Master's degree in Hebrew Letters.

Her years at the seminary were happy and productive. During them she served as chaplain at the Los Angeles Country Men's jail working one on one with a group of LGBT inmates, at the Los Angeles Home for the Aging ministering for individuals over the age of 100, as a rabbinic fellow 3 weekends a month at Temple De Hirsch Sinai in Seattle, WA, and as a national Kol Tzedek fellow for AJWS (American Jewish World Service).

In 2010 Terlinchamp was ordained a rabbi and came straight to Cincinnati, OH, to join Temple Shalom, selected by its congregation as their spiritual leader. Temple Shalom was then located in Amberley and owned a 30,000 square foot building on a 7 acres property; it was, however, deteriorating, its membership decreasing. Terlinchamp right away raised important questions, asking the congregation to reflect on what it meant to be a relevant faith institution and how the huge space they owned affected them both financially and spiritually. A listening campaign was thus started during which it became quickly obvious that, despite all the attachment and memories the place offered, the wisest solution was to sell the place, get rid of the "stuff", straighten the finances, and focus more on the essential faith.

Two years later, all the goals that were then set were met, the membership was increasing with more youth and minorities, the previous dues model replaced by voluntary participation and contribution by members, and all motivated by faith and spirituality. "Our actions and efforts became to manifest God in us and in the world, to be all about love, and not be tied up by our possessions," she says.

This also allowed Terlinchamp to be more vocal for social justice, to serve as the president of the Amos Project and through it to involve her community in various projects such as making the synagogue a solidarity sanctuary for immigrants, supporting the Preschool Promise, participating in various multifaith activities. In a gesture of solidarity, for instance, members of her synagogue participated on several occasions in the Friday prayers at the Clifton Mosque, and their kids mingled and shared activities with Muslim kids at the same place.

They also march every year in the Pride parade, manifesting Jewish presence in support of the LGBT community; last year, they were joined by the Black Lives Matter movement. They have been active around the trial of University of Cincinnati police officer Ray Tensing who shot and killed African American motorist Samuel DuBose at a traffic stop in July 2015, asking for justice to be implemented and for police violence against black individuals to stop. They have also worked for immigrant rights.

Actually, following the ICE decision to deport Maribel Trujillo Diaz, an Ohio Mexican mother of four and Catholic lay leader who has been living in the US for 15 years, almost 500 individuals, including many from Temple Shalom, manifested and met in a little church in Carthage. Their reunion triggered the formation of JustLOVE, an association which organizes multifaith spiritual and music gatherings and which is directed by Terlinchamp. The group's monthly meetings prepare for the journey, discussing themes of forgiveness, love, leadership, establishing larger conversations and building allies. "JustLOVE is multi-faith," says Terlinchamp. "It brings people together; they share their experiences, connect by love, and work for justice. I would like to see it as an example of a harmonious proactive systemic change replicated in various cities across our country."

Terlinchamp is also one of 11 invited citizens of different backgrounds and political philosophies to serve on the Cincinnati Enquirer's Board of Contributors. In that role she writes a monthly editorial in the Cincinnati Enquirer and uses that platform to further her call and message for justice. She is active in Ohio Organizing Collaborative and serves on several boards and committees within the Cincinnati Jewish community.

"My goal in life is to do good in the world and work for justice," says Terlinchamp, "and my Jewish faith enlightens me and shows me the way."

And as a Rabbi, Terlinchamp uses her power and her privilege to expand her mission through all the members of her congregation and through the many allies that her leadership role allows her to foster and create in the Greater Cincinnati community.

"At Temple Shalom we welcome all people: seekers, interfaith families, and those in search of a spiritual home. We are defined by spirituality, social justice and love, and our mission is to extend these values everywhere and to everyone," she adds.

Jewish Texts That RABBI MIRIAM TERLINCHAMP Likes to Quote

"It was for this reason that humans were first created as one person [Adam]: to teach you that anyone who destroys a life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a life is as if he saved an entire world."- Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

"[If] we truly believe that one life is like an entire universe, then all you have to do is change one life, and you've begun to change the universe the only way we can, one life at a time, one day at a time, one act at a time. So when, out there, there is despair, let us bring hope. When out there there is hurt, let us heal. And when out there is division, let us show that we are enlarged and not diminished by our differences. Let us show the world what it is to stand together and respect one another.

Therefore, I say this, never waste a crisis. Never stand still. Go out there, continue the Jewish journey, and be a blessing to the Jewish people, and to the world."- Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Note: Article published in *Streetvibes* and *Online* on sosartcincinnati.com on **June 29, 2018**

SUDEEP THOMAS

Syro-Malabar Catholicism, *Sudeep Thomas*' Faith and Heritage, Naturally Dictates His Actions for a Fair and Better World

"Syro-Malabar Catholicism is part of my identity; it is my culture," says Sudeep Thomas. "All my life has been connected to it and nothing can take it away from me. It comes with me wherever I go."

Born in Kerala, India, Thomas grew up within a religious family that had belonged for many many generations to the Syro-Malabar Catholic church. The church, which got its name based on its Catholic faith, its Indian culture, and its Syriac/Oriental liturgy, is thought to have been founded originally by the Apostle Thomas. According to tradition, the Apostle would have sailed, in the year 52 A.D., to the western southern tip of India, to the state of Kerala, to preach the Gospel and baptize its people.

Thomas' parents were both very religious, his mother participating regularly in the church's activities, in the church's mothers' organization, helping the poor; and his father, in addition to his leadership role, having established the church-associated St Vincent de Paul branch in Thrissur, where they lived. Thomas accompanied them every Sunday to mass, also attending Sunday school, studying catechism.

He grew up in an area predominantly Hindu and Muslim, with only a small Christian community, and participated in the feasts and festivals of all 3 religions. At the public school he attended, he was also one of the very few Christian students. "My friends were from all religions," he states, "but most of my own activities were connected to the church."

During rainy season, for instance, Thomas would go and help poor farmers and invite them, on Sundays, to a free lunch at the church, also help them fix and mend their short-lived thatched roof. He would also assist his father collect money for the St Vincent de Paul chapter this latter had started, participating in clothes distribution, also lending a hand with the sick and hospitalized.

CHRISTIAN, SYRO-MALABAR



Using dowsing for water divination, a skill he had developed and acquired as a child thanks to his father, Thomas, using a pendulum, would help farmers locate ground water in their land, guiding them on where to dig their wells.

"I would do it always free of charge, and not rarely, help them also in the digging," he says.

In pre-degree college, i.e., in grades 11 and 12, heading a small youth group from his church, Thomas planned and arranged for a movie projection and for a magician performance in order to raise money for a public library to be located in the church. The library was started, open to everyone, irrespective of religion.

For college, Thomas went to the National Institute of Technology, in the state of Bihar, in the north of India. He studied electric and electronic engineering and graduated with a BS degree five years later. These years, however, were not very socially productive as he felt isolated and not connected to a community.

"The area was almost entirely Hindu," he states. "There was no Syro-Malabar church, and the closest Catholic church was 15 miles away and of difficult access."

Thomas, nevertheless, belonged on campus to a small Christian group of prayer and spiritual exchange that met regularly. They were, however, at some point threatened by a fellow Hindu fundamentalist and were forced to relocate. He also joined a yearly Evangelical students' fellowship gathering, offering his services, cooking for and helping those in need.

After his graduation and a couple of brief jobs in Kerala, Thomas moved to the state of Andhra, 1000 km away from home, where he had secured an engineering job in a steel plant. He stayed there for what he describes as six boring years, connected to a very small Syro-Malabar church which would operate infrequently, only when a visiting priest would come to celebrate mass. Through the church, however, he continued his charitable actions, regularly providing food to the poor and help to the needy.

"I also commemorated Onam, the harvest festival celebrated once a year by Keralites all over the world," he says. "It kept me connected to my base."

At the end of 6 years, Thomas decided to leave and emigrate either to the United States or to Australia. His father not in favor of the US, Thomas obtained a permanent resident visa to Australia and ended up in Sydney. It was 1992.

"At my arrival, I had only 6 dollars in my pocket, and was completely lost," he says. "I did not know how to apply for a job and where to seek help..."

For four months he had no steady income and survived selling water, cleaning carpets, washing dishes... He came across a St Vincent de Paul store which helped him furnishing his shared apartment. He volunteered his services, made deliveries for them, and assisted them in their various activities...

"I experienced then real poverty and was very lonely and depressed. I clearly saw the downside of capitalism," he reminisces.

Two years later, Thomas joined the university and got a post graduate diploma in optical fiber technology. This allowed him to obtain a job with the government teaching computer skills to soon-to-be freed inmates. It is also when he decided to return to India to get married.

"My wife is also a Syro-Malabar Catholic," he says. "Right after our wedding, we returned to Sydney, lived there a few more years and had there our 1st two daughters."

Six years after his arrival to Australia, in 1998, Thomas, his wife and his two children left for Cincinnati.

"I was offered a better move by my company which had its main office in Cincinnati. They needed my expertise in interactive business systems to consult with other US firms."

When he arrived to Cincinnati there was also no Syro-Malabar Catholic church, but progressively a small community got formed and initially masses were celebrated whenever visiting priests would come along. Now, the community, which consists of approximately 40 families, has a small, rented church, the St. Chavara Syro Malabar Catholic Mission at the Our Lady of Rosary Church in Greenhills, and a steady priest who is a current student at Xavier University.

According to their tradition back in Kerala, Thomas and his Syro-Malabar fellows will gather every Christmas and tour homes in their neighborhood singing carols; they would often be paid in return. "We did not know initially what to do with the money," says Thomas, "but then we decided to each add to it and to send our collection to India to help a worthy cause."

Over the years they were able to help a heart patient for his surgery, several families in need, and many organizations, in particular the Deepti Foundation of the Missionary Society of St. Thomas the Apostle (MST) in New Delhi, which takes care of orphaned children whose parents had died of AIDS. They also sent financial help during this last August's devastating Monsoon floods in Kerala. Thomas and his fellows also do voluntary work at the Michaela Farm run by the Sisters of St. Francis in Batesville, Indiana; they help with farming, cleaning up, and other necessary chores. They also help regularly, with their family, in soup kitchens.

As far as his own activities, Thomas is very involved with One Church of Mercy, a collective of Eastern churches in Cincinnati, which mission is to fight persecution and provide support to persecuted Christians all over the world. He is now trying to coordinate collaborative work between the collective and CNWA, the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, which helps Christians in the Near East.

Thomas has also been sponsoring all along children in third world countries through Unbound, formerly CFCA Catholic relief. He sends money to the organization which forwards it to a given child in need. Thanks to him, for instance, a child in Peru was able to complete his education and become a veterinarian.

"When I do charitable work, I try to not let my left hand know what my right hand is doing," says Thomas. "For me the essential is to contribute and help even if I do not see the effect right away. It is like planting a tree; the planter rarely gets to enjoy its fruits but generations to come will," he adds.

When asked about his future involvements, Thomas answers that they will be directed toward relieving the plight of refugees.

"Refugees are the most ignored and most suppressed individuals," he says. "We need to help them in any way we can and find a permanent solution to their case."

Actually, Thomas had already welcomed them and facilitated their insertion in society when he was part of the social justice group at All Saints Church that he had attended for a while.

Thomas will continue doing whatever he can to make this world a better place. His Syro-Malabar Catholic faith and heritage will always and naturally dictate his actions.

"My motto is that life is not fair and that it is everyone's responsibility to make it fair," he states. "By doing so we will be helping someone along the way, especially the weak and the vulnerable."

What Is the SYRO-MALABAR CATHOLIC CHURCH

*The **Syro-Malabar Catholic Church** is one of the 22 Eastern (Oriental) Catholic Churches. It is in full communion with the Pope and the worldwide Catholic Church and is governed by a Synod of Bishops headed by a Major Archbishop, with self-governance under the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches. It is based in Kerala, India.*

*The Church uses the Divine Liturgy of the East Syriac Rite, dating back to 3rd century Edessa, and as such is a part of **Syriac Christianity** both by liturgy and heritage.*

*The Church is said to be "**Catholic by faith, Indian by culture, and East Syriac/Oriental in liturgy.**"*

The name Syro-Malabar is coined from the words Syriac (referring to the East Syriac liturgy) and Malabar (the historical name for Kerala). The name has been in usage in official Vatican documents since the nineteenth century. It is the third-largest particular church in the Catholic Church (after the Latin or Roman Church and the Ukrainian Catholic Church).

The Syro-Malabar Church has around 5 million believers and traces its origins to the evangelistic activity of Thomas the Apostle in the 1st century. Its members are mostly of the Malayali ethnic group and their vernacular language is Malayalam.

*Due to emigration of its members, various eparchies (i.e., dioceses) have opened up in other parts of India along with various parts in the rest of the world due to a worldwide Syro-Malabar Malayali diaspora living in North America, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The members of the Church are colloquially known in Kerala as **Roman Catholic Syrian Christian (RCSC)**.*

Saint Alphonsa is the Church's first canonized saint, followed by Saint Kuriakose Chavara and Saint Euphrasia.

*The **Syro-Malabar Catholic Church** is one of two Eastern Catholic churches in India, the other one being the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church which uses the West Syriac Rite liturgy.*

In the Greater Cincinnati area, there are approximately 40 families belonging to the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church.

Note: Article published **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **December 14, 2018**

Father BENJAMIN URMSTON

Co-Creator to Better This World: *Father Benjamin Urmston's Faith Is Inseparable From Justice*

"What I am is God's gift to me. What I become is my gift to God," says Father Benjamin Urmston, S.J., adding: "This implies that I also participate in creation as a 'co-creator', helping this world become a better one now, preparing the heavenly one to come."

This dynamic and engaged view of his faith led Urmston to actively work for peace and justice from the beginning, wherever he was and whatever he did. It was his main focus while teaching, coaching baseball, working in campus ministry, instituting peace and justice programs and studies, hosting a community radio show, traveling around the world...

"My faith is directly linked to justice as I cannot love God and ignore my sisters and brothers or the one earth on which I live," he states.

"Peace to me is the presence of justice, based on a proper relationship between ourselves, God, animals, the earth."

Born in North College Hill, Ohio, Urmston grew up on a farm in close contact with animals. His father, a kind, compassionate and hard working farmer, developed in him, early on, love and concern for the earth and all its inhabitants, also a strong interest in food and its production advocating for widespread ownership of farms and for a democratic economy. His mother, a devout Catholic, and the Precious Blood sisters at St. Margaret Mary Grade School where he attended, determined his faith and religion. After graduating from high school he joined the army, participating in World War II, serving on General Patton's Third Army in Europe, then in the Philippines. In 1946 and at the age of 21, he entered the seminary to become a Jesuit priest; he has been a member of the Society of Jesus ever since.

His experience in the army provided Urmston a strong sense of community and allowed him at the same time to see the world, opening his eyes to many human issues such as violence, death and poverty. He describes it as a rich spiritual retreat, one with time for reflection and prayer. It led him, however, to rethink the use of destructive wars to solve world problems; it also indirectly cemented his fate as a religious servant.

CHRISTIAN, ROMAN CATHOLIC



"I thought becoming a priest was the best way to make this a better world," he says. "I instinctively wanted to rid our planet of wars and poverty..."

His priesthood studies earned Urmston several degrees, each bringing a different dimension to the understanding of his religious involvement toward peace and justice. Studying philosophy exposed him to the concept of natural human rights as promulgated by God's act of creation. It stressed the importance of human rights for a positive peace, every human enabled to become an independent and equal actor closer to God, to others, to the physical world. Theology equated peace with an improved relationship with God, to Urmston the most important goal of his life. Religious education, emphasizing the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, made him realize the need to be a co-creator with God; also that peace studies and social analysis, integrating the wisdom of various disciplines, were an important way toward that objective and toward fighting an unjust and war-driven world.

His academic education also led him to teach English and theology, initially at University of Detroit Jesuit High School, then at St. Xavier High School and later Xavier University, both in Cincinnati. In all three places Urmston coupled his teaching with the institution of a Christian Life Community involving students and faculty, combining faith and justice. At Xavier University, part of Urmston's responsibility was campus ministry. While he felt it important to promote a student's religious life, he soon realized there was an added need for more involvement in peace and justice issues. He became active in neighborhood community councils, particularly in Evanston and North Avondale, served on the social action committees of the archdiocese, participated in the National Catholic Rural Life Conference. Wanting the students to be also directly involved, he proposed to the administration a new department, Programs in Peace and Justice, part of Student Life and Leadership. It was approved and Urmston became its director. The Program offers co-curricular activities and sponsors off-campus service learning and field experiences that facilitate exposure to the poor, to those who serve the hungry and the homeless. He also initiated "rural plunges" that take students to family farms to learn directly about their daily life and the problems they face.

"These field experiences provide orientation and trigger reflection," says Urmston. "A first-hand witnessing of material poverty or injustice can shake someone's state of apathy."

Also at Xavier, Urmston initiated a committee that started a Peace Studies Minor, an academic curriculum focusing on peace using an interdisciplinary approach and a social analysis methodology. He himself taught a course *Faith and Justice*.

"My purpose was to introduce students to human rights, international law, active non-violence, economic democracy, the social teachings of the church."

For twenty-eight years Urmston hosted a weekly radio show, *Faith and Justice Forum*, on WVXU. It served as an outreach service to the community, and featured local and national figures whose work had been instrumental for peace and justice. They included Cesar Chavez, Baldemar Velasquez, Monsignor George Higgins, Gar Alperovitz. For few years he also wrote a column on Faith and Justice, *The Catholic Moment*, for the Cincinnati Archdiocesan paper *The Catholic Telegraph*.

Now retired from his administrative and teaching role at Xavier University, Urmston, ninety two years old, remains as active as ever. He is Coordinator of the Greater Cincinnati Chapter of Citizens for Global Solutions, a national group that proposes non violent and democratic

means to solve the world's problems. It joins his long time interest and membership in the movement for a better world that promotes more equitable dealing with international issues such as the environment, world trade, terrorism, civil and ethnic strife, the war system. Urmston, for instance, has actively lobbied in favor of treaties to reduce nuclear weapons; and he is very involved in raising awareness to the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli problem and the injustices caused by the occupation.

"We need to listen to each others," he says, "and let go of fear and distrust. We need to respect the equality and dignity of all human beings. Might does not make right."

Urmston summarized his entire philosophy, his *Vision of Hope*, in a 15 minute DVD that he placed on his website (www.xavier.edu/frben). It discusses what he perceives as the 5 pillars of a new world building: human rights, a global ethic, non violence, democratic world order, and economic democracy.

"I have a strong and deep passion for peace and justice," he says.

"My relationship with God has moved me outward toward my neighbor and the earth. I have a responsibility to contribute as a co-creator to improve this world. There is continuity between this life and the world to come, and the better this life is the better the world to come will be."

A Catholic Text FATHER BENJAMIN URMSTON Likes to Quote

"The expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age. ... After we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured."

from Gaudium et Spes (Joy and Hope), No. 39, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (1965), Second Vatican Council

Note: Article published in *Streetvibes* and *Online* on sosartcincinnati.com on **November 3, 2017**

DEBORAH VANCE

Living Her Baha'i Faith, *Deborah Vance* Wants to Contribute to Unity and to a Strong Community

Deborah Vance, a Baha'i, grew up in a secular, not overtly religious, but spiritual family. She was raised with high moral and ethical values by very scrupulous, sincere, and trusting parents. As a child in the 60's she attended Sunday school at the Congregational Church in Wilmette, IL, where she and her family lived. She was very inspired by the then progressive pastor, Buckner Coe, who was trying to integrate the predominantly white church, inviting Blacks to join in; and who was openly critical of the Vietnam war going on at the time. "Reverend Coe taught us Sunday school and took us all 7th graders to visit places of worship of the various religions in the area, for instance, the Mormon temple, the Catholic church, the Jewish synagogue...", says Vance. "He had heard of Martin Luther King Jr., went to Selma, AL, and marched with him for civil rights."

Vance's social study teacher in 7th grade was also instrumental at introducing her to social justice. He gave her assignments to research and write essays on current social issues. This is how she learned about Cuba and Fidel Castro, also about the prevalent poverty in the world. He got her also involved at tutoring in social sciences children from underprivileged backgrounds, in inner-city Chicago.

In 1968 during her last year of high school, Vance went with a youth group from her church, part of a cross-cultural/interracial service project, to Puerto Rico, to help other African American youth of her age fix a community center. While there Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

"I remember all of us gathering and discussing the news, what it represented and meant for our country and for the African American communities," says Vance. "I felt the pain of my newly made African American friends; it affected me deeply."

Even though in a predominantly white high school, the civil rights movement was discussed there daily by students and teachers. With some of her tutoring friends and sympathetic parents and teachers, Vance started a group they called POWR: People to Overcome White Racism. They demonstrated, picketed, and marched; produced public programs; invited speakers; fundraised; targeting primarily



white suburbs, in order to raise awareness of institutional racism in the metropolitan area. At the same time Vance began her open opposition to the Vietnam war, triggered in part by police violence against protesters during the Chicago Democratic Convention.

Having graduated from high school and ready to pick a college, she opted for Boston University, Boston known then for the prevailing activism within its universities. Over there she was quite active in demonstrating against the Vietnam war, marching, striking, participating in resistance group discussions and activities. "It all went well," she says, "until I started hearing discourses from fellow protesters and leaders encouraging violence and killing... I also found some of the protest leaders to be just looking for self-glory and charisma, and not really interested in a change..."

Disillusioned, Vance decided to move away, leave the United States, and settle in Italy. It was 1970 and she had by then cut her ties with her congregational church which, due to its increasing opposition to the progressive views and positions of its pastor Buckner Coe, had prompted his resignation; also, had embraced the Baha'i faith, having discovered it thanks to the soft rock duo Seals and Crofts, who were both Baha'i, and having realized that she adhered to all its tenets.

In Italy, Vance tried to pursue her education, met her 1st husband, and had children. Her stay was interrupted by few returns to the US,

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a short one in California where she lived self-sufficiently, growing food, chickens and goats, with no electricity or running water.

"I was extremely poor then," she states. "I can understand well poverty now, having been without and having experienced distrust and prejudice from people who think that something is wrong with you if you're poor."

After six years of marriage, Vance divorced and returned to Wilmette. She resumed her studies and got a BA degree in Communication (Radio-TV & Film) from Northwestern University, an MA degree in Mass Communication from Towson University, and a PhD degree in Intercultural Communication from Howard University. In the meantime, she had moved to Baltimore, MD, worked in educational TV, did freelance journalistic writing, and taught.

"I wanted to work in instructional TV to teach children," Vance says.

"I wanted to instill the idea that the US system is a commercial system which wants our money; that we are bombarded with fake news; and that our children need to learn how to talk back to the media."

To that effect, in the 80's, Vance got involved with the "Great Atlantic Radio Conspiracy", a group who researched in depth news topics in order to shed light on their truth, away from misinformation. The findings would then be scripted, radio recorded, and distributed to radio stations across the country. Vance contributed to two such episodes, one on air pollution caused by the use of chlorofluorocarbons in aerosol cans, the other on the true story of Guatemala.

At McDaniel College in Westminster, MD, where she also was an Associate Professor, Vance taught media courses at the cultural level. "A person needs to know what it is about him/herself that's cultural vs. what is essentially him or her," she says. "To me, this is the basis for justice, seeing what role we play in continuing the system that oppresses certain people vs. being able to treat everyone as individuals while respecting their differences."

As a professor and a researcher, Vance always advocated for the oppressed, raising awareness of diversity. She constantly asked her students to consider ethics and morals in their judgments and analyses. In Baltimore, Vance met her current husband of 16 years. Both recently retired, they decided to relocate a year ago in Cincinnati.

"We felt the vibes," Vance says. "Cincinnati is a culturally rich city with a major league baseball team and a well-established Baha'i community."

Since in Cincinnati, Vance has joined the League of Women Voters, and has lectured to them on public speaking and on understanding media. During the recent presidential election, she served as poll watcher in Corryville. She has also been very involved in gardening and volunteers at the Civic Garden Center. She is particularly interested in community gardens and would like to start one at the Baha'i center in Westwood.

"Community gardens enable people to attain freedom and control over the food available to them," she says. "They are also a great way to connect and build communities."

Vance has a small garden of her own. She also volunteers at the Rothenberg school, downtown Cincinnati, where a rooftop garden has been created for students and their parents.

In Cincinnati, Vance's other activities are now mostly centered around the Baha'is. She participates in study groups of the Baha'is writings and helps in youth programs trying to teach virtues. Her main purpose is to strengthen the community, and spread the messages of unity, peace, love and justice of Baha'u'llah, the founder of Baha'ism. "Central to teachings of Baha'i Faith is that on this planet, there's one unfolding religion, one universal faith," she says. "Baha'i Faith is only the most recent revelation. At its core, this means there's no "Them", there's just "Us."

This unity is what Vance would like to continue to live for.

What Is BAHÁ'ISM

The Baha'i faith was founded in 1852, in Iran, by Baha'u'llah, a persecuted follower of the Báb. Bahá'ís believe that there is only one God, transcendent and unknowable, the source of all creation. He has sent great prophets to humanity, through which the Holy Spirit has revealed the "Word of God." They are: Adam; Abraham; Moses; Krishna; Zoroaster; Buddha; Jesus Christ; Mohammed; The Bab; Baha'u'llah. A new prophet is not expected for many centuries into our future.

*The Bahá'ís believe in the **unity of the great religions of the world** which they view as sprung from the same spiritual source. They believe that every person has an **immortal soul** which is not subject to decomposition; and that at death, the soul is freed to travel through the spirit world, "a timeless and placeless extension of our own universe..." Bahá'ís support gender and race equality; world government; freedom of expression and assembly; world peace; religious tolerance, and religious cooperation, and they actively promote these concepts.*

Baha'u'llah said: "The best beloved of all things in my sight is justice" Unlike many other religions, Bahá'ís view scientific inquiry as essential to expand human knowledge and to deepen faith. They feel that science needs to be guided by spiritual principles so that its applications are beneficial to all humanity.

Bahá'ís have no clergy, sacraments, or rituals.

There are currently more than 8 million Bahá'í followers throughout the world.

Note: Article published in **Streetvibes** and **Online** on sosartcincinnati.com on **November 17, 2017**