

SOLICITED SESSION

LISTENING TO THE STRUGGLE OF CINCINNATI

- Topic: Listening to the Struggle of Cincinnati
Convener: M. Shawn Copeland, Marquette University
Moderator: Jamie T. Phelps, Loyola University Chicago
Panelists: Angela Leisure, Cincinnati, Ohio
Monica McGloin, Intercommunity Justice and Peace Center
Respondents: Christine Firer Hinze, Marquette University
Bryan N. Massingale, St. Francis Seminary

This workshop was organized to bring CTSA members in contact with local citizens affected by and responding to a troubling breakdown of the common human good in the city of Cincinnati. Out of respect for the boycott, this session was held at Christ Church Episcopal Cathedral, which conveniently is located a few blocks from the Westin Cincinnati Hotel.

In April 2002, several African American organizations and groups called for an economic boycott of downtown Cincinnati. This action protested the deaths of fifteen black men in police custody in Cincinnati beginning February 1, 1995. Some of these men were unarmed and frightened, a few were agitated because of mental illness or substance abuse, and several were armed and aggressive. The African American community did not dispute these varied circumstances; rather, they challenged what they perceived as excessive force, unjustified shootings, racial profiling, and callous treatment by local police. The fifteenth man to die was nineteen-year-old Timothy Thomas who was shot on April 7, 2001. A peaceful assembly in the aftermath of Thomas's death turned into several turbulent days of angry rebellion.

Angela Leisure, the mother of Timothy Thomas, spoke in a calm and measured way of this most personal tragedy. A native of Chicago, Leisure stated that she moved to Cincinnati in order to remove her son from the toxic social and moral conditions of public housing. But during their time in Chicago, she said, her son Timothy was never involved in fighting, gang, or unlawful activity; he had never been in trouble with the police. Cincinnati proved a different situation and, here, Timothy Thomas seemed to be a magnet for police interference. Leisure described Timothy as physically imposing, but a gentle and sensitive young man. While she sought to counter negative portrayals of herself and her family in the news media, Mrs. Leisure emphasized that her faith in God made it possible for her and her family to endure the anguish of her son's death

and gave her the strength to forgive Officer Steve Roach who shot her unarmed son. Leisure has committed herself to working, especially with young people, to bring about healing, reconciliation, and peace in the city, and expressed her hope for serious change.

Sister Monica McGloin briefly explained the work of the Intercommunity Justice and Peace Center. Founded in 1985, the Center is a coalition of faith-based organizations and individuals who collaborate to educate the public about justice issues on local, national, and international levels, who take appropriate action and do public witness. McGloin reflected on the antiblack racism that seems to permeate Cincinnati's municipal administration, police force and civic culture and characterized herself as less optimistic than Leisure about change in the city. In addition, she called attention to the national disproportionate number of African Americans and Latinos imprisoned and on death row. In particular, she cited the recent case of Jerome Campbell, who is on death row in Hamilton County, Ohio, for murder.

Christine Firer Hinze began her response by pointing up the "dramaturgical dimension of the terrible story that has unfolded between the police and young men of color in Cincinnati, in which two sets of young, frightened, angry men enact the deeper drama of racial division, anger, and fear" that social and geographic divides confirm and reinforce. Firer Hinze called Mrs. Leisure's example and witness "a breathtaking testimony" of forgiveness, solidarity, and transformative action. Firer Hinze defined forgiveness as "that powerful action by which those who have been subjected to suffering freely choose to release the perpetrators of suffering from being eternally caught in the cycle of consequences flowing from their violent actions." Insisting on an intrinsic connection between forgiveness and justice, Firer Hinze cautioned that "forgiveness can never replace the quest for justice," but is indispensable to it if our hope for peace and healing is to be realized. Firer Hinze further argued that forgiveness and solidarity will remain "impotent or sentimental unless they lead to courageous and costly transformative action."

Bryan Massingale identified three ethical issues that came to the fore as he listened to the struggle of Cincinnati: the underlying sin of racism, the silence of the official church, and the vision of solidarity. Racism, he asserted, creates a "social environment" in which skin color forms the basis for social humiliation and exclusion. The system of race advantage spawned in this environment is supported and mediated in ordinary human living. Massingale directed our attention, in particular, to the role of the media, newscasts, and so-called reality TV shows such as *COPS* in constructing an image of black people as lazy, ignorant, violent, and dangerous. In particular, such an image of black men can lead police officers to the "rational conclusion" that most black men are dangerous and violent and must be treated accordingly. Massingale observed that historically there have always been "brave white" individual exceptions to the silence of the official church on race-related issues. However, he stated when the church stands as a

"neutral arbiter" and urges "solidarity without social conflict," it risks developing into a "means of complicity and collusion in a structure of sin."

On Friday, June 6, an informal 'Brown Bag Lunch' was held at Christ Church Episcopal Cathedral as another means to provide CTSA members with background information on the conditions that led to the economic boycott in downtown Cincinnati. The presenters were Attorney Paul DeMarco, of the Law Firm of Waite, Schneider, Bayless, and Chesley, and Former Member, Citizen Police Review Panel (CPRP) and the Reverend Dr. Calvin A. Harper, Pastor of Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church and President of the Baptist Ministers Conference of Cincinnati, Southern Ohio, and Northern Kentucky.

DeMarco discussed the situation from the perspective of his tenure on the Citizens Police Review Panel (CPRP). This seven-member citizen board was formed in 1999 at the recommendation of the Justice Department mediator following the 1997 fatal shooting of Lorenzo Collins, a mental patient who threatened police with a brick. The purpose of CPRP was to review investigations of police misconduct. Although the CPRP could conduct public hearings, issue public reports on individual cases, request the City Council to issue subpoenas as well as advise and make recommendations to the city manager regarding the accuracy, thoroughness, credibility, and impartiality of other investigations, it held no disciplinary power over police officers. DeMarco catalogued the frustration of the CPRP's effectiveness including inadequate staffing, insufficient funding, office space, and equipment, and breakdowns in communication. Under the April 2002 Collaborative Agreement brokered by the United States Department of Justice, the CPRP was dissolved and replaced by the Citizens Complaint Authority (CCA). DeMarco charged that police force failed to provide its members with adequate training in cultural diversity and underscored the officers' insularity: a significant number of these men and women are European American in racial-cultural descent, Roman Catholic in religion, suburban in upbringing, and graduates of the same Catholic high school.

Drawing on the "Consolidated Demands" issued by the Black United Front, the Coalition of Concerned Citizens for Justice, and the Coalition for a Just Cincinnati, Harper named the City's failures to invest in and revitalize low-income and deteriorated neighborhoods, to challenge discriminatory lending practices by local lending institutions, to increase access to physical, mental, and social health remedies, and to require newly hired City employees to reside in the City. By way of contrast, Harper cited the City's subsidies of upscale department stores in the downtown area, its foot dragging in response to earlier investigations of questionable police conduct, and its impassiveness toward calls for more equitable political representation. Such indifference and neglect, he asserted, results in two cities—one comfortably middle and upper class, fairly well educated, relatively healthy, and largely white, the other poor and low income, lacking access to good schools and health care, largely black. Harper acknowledged the recent decision of the city council to pay \$4.5 million to

sixteen plaintiffs in legal settlement of the class-action suit against the city that served as the basis for the Collaborative Agreement signed by the City, its police officers, and representative citizens. But, Harper concluded, the incidents of police brutality, abuse of power, and gross social and economic disparities are indicators of pervasive racism.

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