

Praxis-Reflection Small Groups Piloted in Justworks Journey

Rev. Marti Keller, Decatur, GA, *Small Group Ministry Network Quarterly*, Winter 2006

Last summer more than sixty people gathered at an airport hotel outside Atlanta, Georgia to begin a civil rights journey. The week-long bus trip across parts of the Deep South retraced some of the marker events of the movement to secure equal access and voting rights for African Americans more than 40 years ago. This intergenerational gathering, sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), was designed to educate, motivate, and inspire its participants to work in new arenas of justice-making in the 21st century.

For its second annual Justworks Civil Rights Journey, the UUSC designed small groups using the praxis-reflection model of many religiously based liberation movements, such as efforts to eradicate poverty and preserve the rights of native peoples in South America. It is not enough, many human and civil rights activists have found, to boycott, march and protest. Without education before hand and intentional reflection afterwards, social action efforts can be mechanical and soul-depleting. By forming "cell" groups, workers in the field of peace and freedom find their spiritual centers and strengthen community.

From the first night, the civil rights work camp incorporated praxis-reflection groups into the daily schedule. Each group had six to ten people with facilitators briefly trained and then coached by Rev. Marti Keller, board member of the SGMN, longtime advocate in reproductive health and poverty rights, and adjunct teaching supervisor with the contextual education program at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. The facilitators were chosen from the UUSC staff and young adult counselors.

The purpose of the small groups was to have a more intimate place for participants to share experiences, observations and feelings about what they would see and do along the route from Atlanta to Montgomery to Selma and then Birmingham, Alabama. The groups were also described as places to help understand personal and social transformation better, and to find why and how what would change members over their week together. Each participant received a journal, and there was time during each group session for

writing, with the choice of sharing or keeping private what was written.

Each member of the group was encouraged to reflect on what he or she had learned, what the "ah hahs" were as they walked down Sweet Auburn street in Atlanta and stood at Martin Luther King Jr.'s crypt and reflecting pool, or gathered where young people had been set upon by dogs and hosed down in a city park, or crossed the bridge where Bloody Sunday had taken place. What was revealed about what it means to be human, about good and evil, about what it means to be in solidarity with the oppressed?

Other suggested exercises included reflecting on words such as liberation, freedom, transformation, righteousness, and justice, especially in light of the "praxis" or work of re-living the sit-ins, teach-ins, and voter registration drives that shaped the civil rights movement.

Each day's experiences provided rich materials for group conversation. A late night walk down a dark country road in the southern countryside led to the topic of fear. When do you remember being most afraid? How did that shape your sense of yourself, of personal power or disempowerment?

Scott McNeill, a college senior from North Carolina, remembers that one night after viewing an extremely moving but complex museum, his small group had some structured questions and moments of silence to aid in processing the events of the day. He recalls that some of the questions asked: what images stuck in your mind today? Were any of these, they were asked, that were especially gruesome, tragic or otherwise jarring, or did they bring up other emotions?

"That night, wheels turned and sense was made somehow of tragedy and pain," Scott observes. This happened for him because there was time set aside to relive his experiences, and that, along with the guiding questions, "prompted the consciousness-raising that was impossible to do with a large group."

Kim McDonald, senior program staff member with

the UUSC and director of the Justworks trips and work camps, says she is committed to forming small groups again for this summer's journey. She will be consulting with Rev. Keller, and they will both be looking at ways to provide earlier and deeper facilitation training, as well as coming up with topics and discussion questions that meet participants where they are in their own processes of transformation.