



**Carter Sunday 2016**  
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As I read the Carter Weekend racial reconciliation documents prepared diligently for this Sunday under the leadership of Leslie Edwards, Linnea Lose and Ann Retford, I thought about how fifteen years ago, I challenged Unitarians to do differently from, say Southern Baptists, and really work for change in Avondale, your home neighborhood.

That was a time for choice, and now it is time for choice again.

The Unitarians have taught me a lot. This experience has been a lesson in how to make apologies meaningful. I could not have believed all the blessings that flowed from this process. Some have been overwhelming for me personally. Some have come to my family. Some have given me friendships I never could have imagined 20 years ago. Some have gone to people I will never know, but with whom I can certainly empathize because of how I grew up in Cincinnati.

I lived in Avondale enough to call it one of my homes. My mother, a single mom, supported us with welfare and jobs that never seemed to last very long. We lived in public housing in the West End and Winton Hills and old houses with weird wallpaper and the occasional critter or two in Avondale and Walnut Hills. When I was 18, they tried to kick my mom and sisters off welfare because I had graduated from high school and I was living at home for the summer before leaving for college. Instead we defied them, and I went to Knoxville College in Tennessee with a couple of summers at Harvard.

There was a lot of pain in my growing up. At the same time there was great joy in my culture, in the southern roots of my neighborhoods. The language, the food, the dancing, the music, the history, the swag that earned Cincinnati the nickname Da NatiNO among blacks. I took pride in being Negro just like W.H.G. Carter taught his descendants. I had a keen awareness that the outside world could not know our lives, our worth, our spirituality, our joy, our suffering, but we could gain great sustenance from each other.

So what would my life be like now if I were growing up a poor black kid in Cincinnati? Depressingly very similar to what it was more than 50 years ago. I know that from what I have seen being here and from reading the The Urban League of Greater Southwestern Ohio report on the The State of Black Cincinnati: Two Cities. It seems the names of the neighborhoods have changed slightly, but too much is still the same. How can cities keep building and renovating new hot neighborhoods for the middle class and well off without realizing that the poor need a place to live too? According to the U.S. census, Cincinnati is one of the most racially polarized metropolitan areas in the country.

I have never been naïve about how intractable social problems can be. I think for that reason while I fully celebrate advancements; I am also looking around for the next thing to be accomplished. There is a reason why enslaved people and old civil rights workers used to speak in terms of advancement for the next generation: You have to be in this for the long haul. #blacklivesmatter.

I am relieved Cincinnati is making some progress, but my God! There is still so much to do. Let me share with you some statistical information from the Urban League report:

- From 2005 through 2009, a little more than three fourths of poor families in Cincinnati were black;
- The infant mortality rate for black people in Cincinnati is twice that of whites;
- Black men live an average of ten years less than white men; black women live an average of seven years less than white women. In Avondale the life expectancy is 68.2 years compared to 85.9 years in Mount Lookout;
- Because of economics and racial discrimination in the real industry, only 33 percent of black people in Cincinnati own their homes as compared to 74.5 percent of white people.
- The unemployment rate for blacks is almost triple that of whites in Cincinnati.

Notice that these statistics provide stark comparisons between two groups. This is the picture we get of the lives of poor black people in Cincinnati: the housing is not good, and your family often pays exorbitant rents for substandard homes and apartments. The federal government defines affordable housing as costing no more than 30 percent of a family's income. If you are among the working poor, you cannot get decent housing for 30 percent of your income. Finding a job is an accomplishment. Many people have to work two or three jobs to support their families in today's job market where part-time and low wage jobs are common. Despite food stamps, food, especially fruits and vegetables, is still scarce sometimes. Welfare is better than nothing, but it is harder to get nowadays, and families can only rely on it for short periods of time. Welfare may seem free, but it is not. You have to give up your dignity, to disclose all your personal information to the government, to sign over your child support if your co-parent can pay it to the government, and to condemn your family to the psychic shame of poverty. You will likely never get ahead.

So a stark dichotomy exists. White middle class life is held up as the norm in this country, and if you live that life, you need never have to think much about the lives of the poor, Latinos, blacks. In an essay called “Cause of Death: Inequality” Alejandro Reuss wrote:

You won’t see inequality on a medical chart of a coroner’s report under ‘cause of death.’ You won’t see it listed among the top killers in the United States each year. All too often, however, it is social inequality that lurks behind a more immediate cause of death, be it heart disease or diabetes, accidental injury or homicide. Few top causes of death are ‘equal opportunity killers.’ Instead they tend to strike poor people more than rich people, the less educated more than the highly educated, people lower on the occupational ladder more than those higher up, or people of color more than white people.

I need to mention another evolving situation both locally and nationally. Because of immigration and a high birth rate among Latinos, the racial/ethnic makeup of the country is changing rapidly and dramatically. About five years ago, Latinos surpassed blacks to become the largest racial/ethnic minority group in the country. It is predicted that by 2043, there will be no racial/ethnic majority group in the U.S. The year was revised downward from 2050, a couple of years ago. Things are changing faster than my colleagues in demography predicted. Counted together, all the groups that are now minority groups will comprise the majority of the U.S. population.

We have already heard the racist anti-immigrant rhetoric of some presidential campaigns. We have already elected a black president without the majority of votes cast by whites. I live in Texas, which is the fourth state, behind Hawaii, New Mexico and California to become a “majority-minority” state. As a newspaper reporter, in Austin, I did stories on immigration, and I have noticed reports of wage theft in Cincinnati. Here is how that goes according to the men I interviewed. They agree to work two weeks for someone who comes to the day labor corner and makes an arrangement with them. They work, and then on the last day of the job, payday, the employer does not show up to pay them. Even undocumented workers pay taxes and contribute to Social Security, which often they do not get to collect. When I asked “de donde esta Ud?” they responded, “Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba, Honduras, El Salvador.”

According to the Greater Cincinnati Latino Coalition, 40 percent of Latino immigrants in Cincinnati are from Mexico and 16 percent are from Guatemala. They are drawn to the U.S. where they earn ten times what they did for the same work at home because they need to earn a living for their families. That means that they can pay for their children’s educations in Mexico, where there is no free school. Had they stayed home, they would have faced an agonizing balancing act every week. Do I pay the electricity this week or school fees? Do I buy food or shoes for my children? Sound familiar? Immigrants from Central America should be more accurately seen as refugees fleeing extreme poverty and murderous gangs who may have threatened them or killed members of their families. The Latino Coalition estimates that 80 to 90 percent of Latino immigrants in this area are undocumented, meaning illegal. Most of them are poor.

While the census says the Latino population of Cincinnati is about 2.8 percent, I know that number is not accurate. The state of Texas lost out on millions of federal dollars because thousands of Latinos, both legal and undocumented immigrants and American citizens, did

not take part in the census and so the state's needs in infrastructure and other things were underestimated. The Latino Coalition says most Latinos in the Cincinnati area are poor.

I don't want to leave you discouraged and overwhelmed. Just the contrary. I remember what adults who worked with me as allies to my community did to inspire and help me. I remember my mom and the arts programs that took me to the museums, the symphony, the opera, and the Charlotte Schmidlapp girls' scholarship fund that supported me so when I was at Walnut Hills High School. I remember the lady who looked me in the eye when I was 13 and told me "you will go to college," and made me believe it.

When there is so much to do, any accomplishment, any undertaking is to be commended and celebrated. I have been delighted with the way that First Unitarian Church has taken up the ministry of my great-grandparents and reshaped it in ways I could not have imagined. It is the kinds of insights you are gaining and sharing now that will mean so much to struggling families and individuals so they can survive and even overcome.

Let me tell you a story: About ten years ago, I was walking across a humongous parking lot of a Kmart store in Denton, Texas. I was dressed in poor black student chic, which means I was barely presentable. I saw an older black lady and anyway, we got to talking as we headed for the store. Conversation is mandatory when you see another human being in Texas. So finally she said, "Honey, do you have a church home in Denton?" She invited me very graciously to her church where they have a good time and would love to see me. I know that now I have a church home in Cincinnati here with you.

The time always comes to recommit, to strategize, to make choices. Yes, I am challenging you again, but this time I know, First Church and its allies will do very well. I am so happy that we Carters accepted your apology 15 years ago.