



## The road ahead on race

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By Randall K. Bush and Glenn G. Grayson /

Two ministers met for lunch -- one African-American, one white in the eyes of the world. In the eyes of heaven, they were two people called to serve churches -- one in the Hill District, one in East Liberty.

They met to talk about race. Sadly, this is a difficult task today. You can't just hopscotch over the tough stuff, and the tough stuff is still all around us, even in Pittsburgh. Especially in Pittsburgh.

Food was ordered. The waiter was solicitous and polite. This was no 1960 segregated lunch counter in Nashville, Tenn. The two men could sit together in peace. But where to begin the conversation?

Jobs seemed the most pressing issue. Unemployment for African-Americans in Pittsburgh stands at over 19 percent, 2.5 times higher than the rate for whites. How can people "have a dream" if they aren't able to earn a living wage or support themselves and their families? Can we honestly argue that a level playing field exists here for job training, apprenticeship and work opportunities?

But maybe the issue isn't jobs so much as it is education. Those statistics also are readily available -- showing achievement gaps delineated along racial lines, unequal graduation rates, the disparate locations of closed neighborhood schools, the unjust disparity of resources between urban and suburban districts. Can the job problem be solved if we don't address the schools crisis?

But aren't school problems tied to neighborhood issues? Shouldn't we start by pushing for home ownership, challenging exploitation by bad landlords, re-directing gentrification into healthier, mixed-income housing models? Shouldn't we make sure everyone lives along functioning bus routes, near good grocery stores, close to affordable health clinics? Mellon Arena is gone; Consol Center is up, but is the Hill District any better for these changes? Are the Hill, Garfield, Homewood and Larimer places of potential or still (in many folks' minds) just neighborhoods to avoid?

The food arrived. The meal was easier to digest than the knotty problems being considered. All these topics seem almost intentionally interrelated, as if their intrinsic complexity was designed to prevent any solutions from ever being truly successful. So the conversation shifted from the conceptual to the anecdotal, from the abstract

to the personal.

We talked about what we see on the streets every day: "Do you notice that a lot of urban crime is built around an unholy trinity of drugs, money and guns? Take away one of the three in that equation and the whole system largely collapses."

It is sad that there is so little serious conversation about this community crisis, about our political timidity, especially when it comes to legitimate gun control. So the black homicide rate in Pittsburgh continues to be one of the highest in the nation -- as of this writing, 30 of the 49 homicide victims in Allegheny County this year were African-American. Can't we do better in this most-livable city?

"Did you notice that when the verdict in the Trayvon Martin case was announced, some spontaneous demonstrations broke out in the Hill District -- gatherings driven mostly by social media and a communal sense of outrage. At one point, the demonstrators were met by a phalanx of officers from Zone 2 -- all white officers. Looking quite ready and willing to make arrests."

It is worth noting that in the recent police academy graduating class, only one of 22 graduates was African-American.

That demonstration that night on the Hill was finally defused when the duty commander arrived. Commander RaShall Brackney, an African-American woman, knelt and listened and told the protesters that they wouldn't be going to jail.

There are enough recruits of color to improve the diversity of the police force. Why aren't we doing better in this city of ours?

Daring to raise any of these topics is guaranteed to provoke a reaction: Some people are quick to argue that apprentice programs really are open to all applicants, that schools are doing a good job for our communities, that neighborhoods are making forward strides, that today's police force is sensitive to diversity issues, that gun-control laws wouldn't resolve any of the real problems. Yet these defensive responses too often serve to distract the conversation from the deeper issues of racism and structural injustice in our community. So, ultimately, nothing of lasting substance or real value gets done.

The bill is paid and the two ministers get up to leave. To break bread together and talk was an important step. To give thanks to God for the meal and to learn more about each other's family was an important step. To name the things about race in Pittsburgh that too often are left unspoken, undiscussed and unresolved was an important step.

Ours remains far from a post-racial society, a term often used to squelch efforts to honestly discuss race. But, in the end, the two men share a common faith and a persistent hope.

Thankfully, here in Pittsburgh, we are not without resources, either of the soul or of the will. The challenge remains to talk about what steps come next, to work for

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lasting change, to commit ourselves to walk the road ahead together.

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