

Building Accountable Relationships with Communities of Color: Some Lessons Learned

by the Pax Christi Anti-Racism Team, November 15, 2007

One benefit White Pax Christi folks are discovering as a result of engaging with Communities of Color during the Peoples Peace Initiative process are the new insights and wisdom that have deepened their understanding of the challenges of peacemaking in this new century. As a result, White Pax Christi groups around the country are becoming more committed to transformation Pax Christi into an anti-racist multi-cultural Catholic movement for peace with justice.

These local Pax Christi groups are also becoming more intentional about building accountable relationships with Communities/Organizations of Color where they live. (A Community/Organization of Color is one that is led and directed by People of Color. This does not mean that there are no White people in the group, but it does mean that the leadership and direction of the group is in the hands of People of Color.)

We use the phrase “accountable relationships” in order to distinguish them from other types of relationships that are often found in coalitions and collaborations between Communities/Organizations of Color and White progressive groups. Sometimes in mixed-race coalitions and collaborations, People of Color are treated as junior partners or window-dressing while the real power and decision-making remains in the hands of the White folks.

Accountable relationships, on the other hand, signify a different kind of dynamic. More than just treating People of Color as equals in our work, being in accountable relationships means that, because of the persistent legacy of white supremacy and privilege in our culture (even in our Pax Christi culture), we create mechanisms that allow People of Color to exercise a preferential option in our decision-making process.

This is not easy for White folks to do; even for those who are committed to the nonviolent struggle for peace with justice on the side of those who are oppressed and marginalized. Many White progressives are so used to speaking and acting *on behalf* of People of Color that they sometimes fall into the trap of thinking they have the right to speak and act *for* People of Color. While White progressives are good at taking *account of* People of Color in their public statements and campaigns, they don't always make themselves *accountable to* People of Color. Allowing People of Color to have their own voice, even when they say things that don't fit into White Progressive's preconceived notions, ideologies or theologies about them can be very challenging to White folks. Being in accountable relationships means not making assumptions about People of Color and allowing them to speak for themselves.

White folks can also give the appearance of following the lead of People of Color while still remaining in control. One way this can be done is by selectively choosing Communities of Color with whom to work. One of the biggest ironies in the U.S. White

peace movement over the past 30 years is that often more time and resources were spent building relationships of solidarity with Communities of Color in the Third World than were invested in fostering solidarity with Communities of Color in the cities where they lived.

In some ways the distance provided by these Third World solidarity campaigns allowed White activists to stay in control of their level of accountability, commitment and most importantly to stay in control of the shaping of the agenda for the solidarity work once they returned home. Could it be that one reason why White peace activists preferred Third World Communities of Color is that many of these communities were so grateful for the attention and concern from White American activists, that they were careful not to challenge their White comrades too much? The safety of distance and the assumption of good intentions afforded to White activists who participate in solidarity campaigns with Third World Communities of Color may be difficult to duplicate when White activists move into accountable relationships with Communities of Color where they live.

As Pax Christi USA begins this transformational journey of moving into accountable relationships with Communities of Color there are important issues to be considered. Many Pax Christi groups already know Communities/Organizations of Color in their area that work on social justice issues but they may not have tried to intentionally engage in building accountable relationships with them. Other Pax Christi groups might find themselves in a position of not knowing any organizing for social justice being done by local Communities/Organizations of Color.

1. Identifying Communities/Organizations of Color in Your Community

Often the first step in building accountable relationships with Communities/Organizations of Color is to identify who they are. This can be done by a process called “mapping.” There are many ways of doing this. One way is to make a list of Communities/Organizations of Color in your area that fall under one or more of the following categories: congregations/parishes (those with a reputation for social activism), unions (like the SEIU [janitors], UNITE/HERE [hotel workers] and other trade unionists), empowerment groups (like the NAACP, Urban League, La Raza and many community organizing groups) and issue groups (like those that work on fair housing, civil rights, immigration reform, criminal justice reform, living wage campaigns and anti-gun violence campaigns).

Once you have taken your mapping as far as you can, try to identify specific people you know from each of the communities/organization on your list. (This will reveal the level of familiarity you have with each group.) As you put names on the list take note of any “connectors.” These are individuals whose names come up in more than one community/organization, especially across one or more categories. These people may represent key contacts who you may want to invest extra effort to get to know.

The next step is to think strategically about where to begin the work of building accountable relationships. This is more of an art than a science; but it includes asking the

following questions:

- **Which of these communities/organizations are working on issues that would provide the most common ground with your Pax Christi group?**
- **Besides common issues, which of these communities/organization share common values/beliefs with your Pax Christi group (for instance you might want to start your work with Catholic Communities/Organization of Color)?**
- **Which of these communities/organizations would be most open to exploring a relationships with your Pax Christi group?**
- **In which of these communities/organization do you already know some People of Color with whom you have some good history?**

The point is that you cannot be every where relating with everyone at the same time. You have to make choices based on a criteria that will both help your group to grow in its anti-racism commitment and also provides the best chance for some success.

At the national level, with the help of the Pax Christi Anti-Racism Team (PCART), Pax Christi USA has gained some experience about how to begin building relationships with Catholic Organizations of Color. This was done, in part, through the efforts to develop the Peoples' Peace Initiative process. Nearly four years ago we were able to invite representatives of a number of Catholic Organizations of Color around a table to help us develop a process to articulate the new challenges of peace. But getting these key Catholic organization to the table was just the beginning of what turned out to be an important learning process. We would like to share with you some key lessons that we are still learning in hopes that they might be helpful in your own efforts.

2. Explaining who you are and what you are up to:

Depending on any prior experience, you may have to spend a good deal of time explaining who you are to any Communities/Organizations of Color with whom you seek to be in a relationship. This is not something that can be accomplished through a one time introduction, but is something you should be prepared to do time and time again. Whenever you find yourself in a meeting with People of Color always identify yourself as a member of Pax Christi (even if the agenda is not Pax Christi related.) Over time this will help raise the awareness of Pax Christi in Communities/Organizations of Color you want to work with.

It is also important to be honest about Pax Christi to People of Color. For White Pax Christi people to self-identify Pax Christi as a predominantly White peace and justice organization shows a level of self-awareness that many People of Color will respect. For Pax Christi People of Color to identify Pax Christi as a predominantly White peace and justice organization shows a level of awareness and critique that also can be respected by People of Color. It is also important to be honest about your intentions. In your own

words, be prepared to describe your desire to move into accountable relationships with Communities/Organizations of Color and why you think this is important to the work of peace with justice.

3. Demonstrating your Commitment:

As you introduce yourself to Communities/Organizations of Color, one question they may have about you is whether you are serious about being in an accountable relationship with them. When organizing the Peoples Peace Initiative we had to demonstrate that we took our potential partners and this initiative seriously. When it comes to working with White organizations, Communities/Organizations of Color want to know if the White folks will follow through or if they are just passing through.

In many Communities/Organizations of Color there is a long history of well intentioned White folks who say they will stay but in fact were only passing through. Part of White privilege and entitlement is having the option of taking up the anti-racism challenge when it is in their interest and then moving on to something else when it is not. People of Color do not have this luxury. White folks can walk away from the struggle, People of Color cannot.

In our work with the Peoples Peace Initiative we had to demonstrate our willingness to stay engaged. Some representatives of Catholic Organizations of Color kept us at arms length for a long time. It could be that they wanted to find out if we would keep making the effort to reach out to them. As White folks, who were the ones who brought everyone to the table, we also had to demonstrate to the Catholic Organizations of Color that we were committed to forming relationships with them, not just trying to complete a project on our agenda.

One important measure of commitment is the willingness of White organizations to invest both time and resources into building accountable relationships with Communities/Organizations of Color. As Cuban Gooding's character said in the movie, *Jerry Maguire*, "Show me the money." Communities of Color are particularly sensitive to the willingness of White organizations to invest money and resources in the work. This money should not come to the table with strings attached or as another strategy to take control of the agenda. Resources should be made available as a way for White organizations to support and empower Communities/Organizations of Color.

4. Answering the question of who is in control:

In our work to develop the Peoples Peace Initiative we needed to be clear about who was in control of the agenda. There are many ways that Communities/Organizations of Color can express their displeasure if they feel that they are only being used as props by White organizations. One of the most common strategies is to simply walk away from the table. Another way to express displeasure with the way a White organization is controlling the agenda, is by being present at meetings but not being willing to invest themselves or their community/organization in the work.

Nobody likes to be used; this is especially true of Communities/Organizations of Color who have a long history of being used by well-meaning White folks. In order for accountable relationships to develop there has to be a common agenda that can be owned by everyone in the room. As we are learning, the earlier that Communities/Organizations of Color are brought into the process of setting the agenda, the better chance of keeping them at the table and the better chance of creating a truly powerful collaboration across racial lines.

5. Testing our partnerships:

At some point in the process of building relationships with Communities/Organizations of Color there comes a time when these communities/organizations will make a choice about what kind of relationship they are willing to have with your Pax Christi group. Being in accountable relationships is not something that a White group can decide on its own. In our work with the Peoples Peace Initiative each of our new partners had to determine their own level of involvement and commitment of resources. Over time we are learning more about the landscape of Catholic Communities/Organizations of Color in the United States. (Our “mapping” of these organizations is much more sophisticated now than it was when we began this work.) We have a better idea of who is willing to work with us and who is not.

Historically it has been easy for those in power to keep folks who work for social justice divided and in competition for resources and credibility. The temptation to narrow one’s focus and work to one’s own issues (or in one’s own community) is not just a problem for the White peace movement; it is a problem for all groups working on social transformation. It is not easy to make the case for why Catholic Communities/Organizations of Color (who often lack sufficient resources and have little respect in our U.S. Catholic Church) should invest in building an anti-racist multi-cultural Catholic movement for peace with justice.

Just because your Pax Christi group may express a willingness to develop relationships with Communities/Organizations of Color does not mean that you will always get a positive response. There are many reasons why a Community/Organization of Color might decide not to engage in a relationship with your Pax Christi group; and some of them have nothing to do with you. For instance, a Community/Organization of Color may determine that it is not a good time for such a partnership. There might be some issues internal to that community/organization that needs to deal with first. It might be that a community/organization just does not have the time or energy to engage with a White organization.

The point is that at some point you need to determine which communities/organization to focus on and which communities/organization to walk away from. In those situations the challenge will be in determining if there are things your group is doing that makes building relationships across racial lines difficult. Doing this kind of discernment requires a lot of honest self-evaluation and openness to getting honest feedback. If you are

constantly being put off by Communities/Organizations who are working on social justice issues, it might be a good idea to do an inventory of your attitudes and behaviors.

6. Developing and demonstrating the right attitudes and behaviors:

As was mentioned before, this is not easy work. It is more of a long-distance run than a sprint. In order for our efforts bear fruit it is important to cultivate the virtues of patience and persistence. The legacy of racism has been with us for over 500 years. Each of us has been socialized into false identities based on racial superiority and racial inferiority. These evil forces will not yield easily and there are many vested interests in keeping them in place. Discouragement with ourselves and with our efforts to build accountable relationships across racial and ethnic lines will always tempt us to give up the struggle. The only way to move forward with this work is by being grounded in prayer and by staying engaged in building these relationships. We cannot do this work without grace nor can we do it alone.

It is also important to cultivate the virtues of flexibility and openness. We need to be willing to change course and to be open to the unexpected. Sometimes what we think we need or want from a relationship at the beginning does not turn out to be the most important thing that we get. For White peace activists, who often are focused more on agendas and issues than on relationships, working to build accountable relationships with Communities of Color can mean letting go of our to-do lists and 5-year goals and objectives. What we are learning is that when we start with cultivating relationships based on trust and accountability; the “work” gets done a lot quicker and more effectively. In the end it is all about the relationships. Agendas and projects are merely the means to building a movement for social change. In the final analysis any movement strong enough to challenge “the powers” needs to be built upon the foundation of relationships of trust, respect and mutuality.

When we are open to change we put ourselves in a position to receive benefits we did not plan for. For example, when we began working with Catholic Organizations of Color on the Peoples Peace Initiative we were focused on the goal of creating a document that articulated the challenges of peace for our new century in a way that was accountable to the poor, the marginalized and to Communities of Color. Over the many years of work in this regard-- seeking the trust and respect of Communities of Color and learning how to be accountable to them --we experienced many unexpected benefits that were not directly related to the Peoples Peace Initiative.

Among the most significant unexpected benefits was the willingness of our Communities of Color partners to participate in a two-and-a-half day Crossroads anti-racism workshop co-sponsored by Pax Christi USA. In this first-ever event in the U.S. Catholic Church, representatives from Black, Latino/a, Native American and Asian national Catholic organizations, along with representatives from key national Catholic social justice institutions came together to reflect upon the challenge of dismantling institutional racism in the Church and dealing with the problems of racial superiority and entitlement

socialized within White People and internalized racial inferiority socialized within People of Color.

Bringing this group of people together for this event would have been impossible for Pax Christi USA to do if it had not been for all the work we had done through the Peoples Peace Initiative. We did not plan for this; it was an unexpected blessing that became available to us because we were open to receiving the unexpected.

Another important attitude to cultivate in this work is openness to learning from our mistakes. For all the confrontational protesting we Pax Christi folks engage in, when it comes to honest and direct confrontation within our own group, we often avoid it at all cost. But if we are to grow as anti-racist peacemakers we need to become comfortable with the confrontation that comes from being in honest relationships with people across racial lines.

For all Pax Christi members, we need to face that fact that each of us have been scared by racism and that we are all operating out of mis-shaped identities that make building relationships across racial boundaries very difficult. We will make mistakes. White folks will say and do things that enforce White power and privilege. Pax Christi People of Color will say and do things that perpetuate the internalized racist oppression of People of Color. The only way of exorcizing these demons is by staying open to learning from our mistakes and by creating a safe place where people can deal with the legacy of racism in their own attitudes and behaviors.

One useful tool in helping with this very important work is caucusing. It is a time set aside on a regular bases for White folks to get together and for People of Color to get together in order to work on issues of internalized racist superiority (for Whites) and internalized racist inferiority (for People of Color). (When you get to the point of regularly working with groups across racial lines, contact PCART for more resources about how to use caucusing to build accountable relationships.)

We are just getting started.

The insights and suggestions we have shared with you only represent the beginning of what we are learning as we work to transform Pax Christi USA into an anti-racist multi-cultural Catholic movement for peace with justice. We have not written the last word; only the first. As each Pax Christi group begins to engage in this work our collective body of experience and wisdom will grow. This is why we would like to hear from you about your efforts to build accountable relationships across racial boundaries in your peace and justice work. We learn as much from our failures as we do from our successes. No one person or group (including PCART) has all the answers or all the resources to do this work.

It is important that we not only do this work, but that we reflect upon the work that we are doing. We invite you to keep a diary or journal of your anti-racism work and, when you think it is appropriate, to share your experiences with PCART and the rest of Pax

Christi USA. Thank you for making the effort to step outside of your own comfort zone in order to take risks to build a powerful movement for social justice that can transform our nation and our world.