

A Nashville for Everyone

Reverend Bill Barnes
Edgehill United Methodist Church (retired)

In 1966, I became the founding pastor of Edgehill United Methodist Church. As far as I can learn, it was the first significantly integrated (black and white) congregation in the city.

From 1966, when we were 15 members, until my retirement in 1996, when we were right at 300 members, the congregation was always between 35 and 40 percent minority. Shared Black pastoral leadership included such distinguished clergy as Darrell Rollins, Vincent McCutcheon, and Moses Dillard.

My 30 years as Edgehill's pastor were fulfilling and joyful. We were also blessed, because of our proximity to universities, with a wonderful participation of foreign students from many countries.

But counter motions were occurring during those years as well. From the end of World War II and the expansion of suburbs, many aspects of public policy, at all levels of government, were shaped by racial and class biases - policies around zoning and codes, urban renewal, FHA and VA loans, eminent domain, etc. The result was a high degree of "Balkanization"--a term designating the drawing of boundaries based on race or class or ethnicity. Neighborhoods were increasingly segregated--not by simple choice, but by public policy. Many aspects of life were affected negatively--tax base, urban schools, housing choice, geographical separation.

Many of the worst attitudes about race and class have improved (though they have not disappeared). According to a study by the University of Wisconsin/Milwaukee, Nashville has an above average share of "integrated blocks," primarily within the pre-Metro city limits. But we have a long way to go in becoming a city which sees diversity at a neighborhood level as a blessing, instead of a curse.

Like most other cities, there is an acute shortage in Nashville of low income rental units. The 2000 Census reminded us: In Davidson County, among households whose income is below \$20,000 a year, and who pay more than 30 percent of income for rent, the number is 25,472! Some cities have resorted to unusual methods to achieve a greater degree of diversity and additional affordable housing for low income families; methods such as housing trust funds, transfer fees, other "dedicated financing sources." Inclusionary zoning has also been enacted here and there. Surely, where there's a will, there's a way.

Nashville has an abundance of resources to promote acceptance and diversity: a strong multiple source economy, universities, faith communities, excellent private and public leaders, creative non-profits, and on and on. Recently, with so many immigrants settling here, we have seen our diversity multiply. We can see through a gaping window of opportunity, and we can maximize our potential.

I read recently about an older Native American who was asked about how his life was going. He replied that his internal state was like two dogs fighting--one good, the other bad. "What determines which one wins?" he was asked. "Oh, the one wins that I feed the most" he replied.

My hope and prayer is that my city will so "feed the good dog" in us that we will continue, more and more, to rejoice in diversity, welcome it into our neighborhoods, and be sure that none is left behind.

From *The Plan of Nashville: Avenues to a Great City*.
Vanderbilt University Press (Nashville) 2005.