

Bridging racial divisions: Start up honest dialogue

By Wade Norwood and Danny Wegman

(August 3, 2005) For months, the city's future has been discussed in detail at news conferences and forums. But absent from this mayoral race has been a communitywide dialogue on challenging issues related to race.

We believe the flap over T-shirts and a local Web site masks a fear of engaging in a

real conversation on race. Because the topic makes us uncomfortable, we turn away, saying, "Race doesn't matter." Yet it does, and cultivating racial tolerance and understanding is a measure of our progress as a people.

The world is changing. The term "minority" is inaccurate as communities of color grow in the city. Clearly we have a "teachable moment," and we urge the community to seize the opportunity to engage.

Given our individual life experiences it is unlikely that we ever would have become friends had we not been partnered in Mayor Johnson's Biracial Partnership for Community Progress. Through it, we engaged in open, honest dialogue — and traversed territory many people never have the opportunity nor the courage to confront.

Ours is not a colorblind society, nor need it become one. Through our partnership, we learned that

we may use the same words but may walk away from a conversation hearing different things. We learned we may unintentionally offend, but no disrespect was intended. We learned there is richness in diversity. Through honest, respectful and fearless expression, we can get past these things and forge true relationships.

T-shirts you will soon see on Wade Norwood supporters will bear the simple, powerful slogan: "We are One".

Norwood, the Democratic nominee for Rochester mayor, faces a primary challenge Sept. 13. Wegman is Norwood's honorary campaign chairman.