

Opinion

Sunday, March 5, 2006



Allen Johnson: Behind all the warm and fuzzies

Some people have dismissed the Mayor's Mosaic Partnerships as a shallow exercise in feel-goodism, and I don't doubt that they're right in some cases.

At least a few people who enrolled in the program, modeled after an initiative in Rochester, N.Y., probably did so because it looked impressive on their resumes. Others began the program and never finished it. And still others invested minimal time and effort in Mosaic, which matches people from different cultures, races and backgrounds in an attempt to build better community understanding.

But my Mosaic experience has been rich and rewarding. And I suspect that's the case with many.

In fact, my "cluster," which consisted of periodic meetings of small groups of Mosaic partners, just kept right on meeting after the program officially ended for our class in November.

The dialogues had become so meaningful and the comfort level so high, we simply didn't want to stop. The plan, as it stands now, is to meet for brunch or early dinner once a month, until, well, whenever.

We are a diverse group from different races, religions and walks of life: a Montagnard minister who immigrated here from the jungles of Vietnam, a Jewish lawyer, a small-business owner, a female corporate executive, a former postmaster, a member of the state legislature.

In our most recent brunch meeting, on Feb. 18, we tackled cartoon depictions of Muhammad and the ongoing controversy surrounding the Greensboro Police Department, among other things.

As a light snow dusted the grass outside, we ate brunch and chewed on one difficult topic after another.

We didn't agree on many points. And that was perfectly OK. We listened. And we learned from one another.

Several months ago, this wasn't so easy. But it makes sense. We know each other better as people. We trust one another. We're not threatened anymore by disagreement, even vigorous disagreement.

We've even tiptoed into territory many of us had long avoided and raised issues that we'd long wondered about but were afraid to ask. Incredibly, there was no fighting or cussing. No sudden rips in the fabric of the universe. We just kept on talking. And listening.

Individual relationships also have grown.

My partner for the past year, a private investigator, former police officer and Vietnam veteran named Ed Cobbler, is a gregarious guy who has never been shy about expressing his views. This became abundantly clear when Ed, a former Greensboro police officer, and I debated over a lunch the need for the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

We have double-dated innumerable times for dinner and lunch and more than a dozen movies. We've attended church together. And, like the group, we decided to keep meeting after our Mosaic obligation had ended. We're friends.

As for the larger group, we think we've figured out when we turned the corner. For several months, frankly,

we'd struggled to find our way. Then one day, we wandered into a passionate discussion about a topic I no longer remember, except that it had to do with race.

Something clicked, and even though we all had things to do and places to go, we stayed overtime.

Suddenly, we weren't strangers anymore. And suddenly we weren't so terrified anymore of saying what we really felt.

Looking back on it, the timing couldn't have been worse.

As a prelude to that day's session, The Greensboro Times, published by a fellow cluster group member, state Rep. Earl Jones, had printed an unflattering front-page story featuring me and my colleague, News & Record Editor John Robinson.

Wouldn't you know it. Ed had a conflict that day and couldn't attend the session. So had Earl's partner. We were asked to pair up for a warm-up exercise.

I'm pleased to report that Earl and I did not kill one another.

In fact, without discussing the newspaper article, we dutifully completed the exercise.

What's more, once the session shifted into a group discussion I found myself agreeing with Earl on most of his observations.

Since Earl and I hadn't found much common ground in recent years, this was no small surprise to either one of us.

But I guess it may be the best recommendation of all for Mosaic: It not only helps create connections between races, religions and cultures, but maybe once in a while it even can bring two middle-aged black guys together.

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