

by Bonnie Svrcek and JoAnn Martin

Engaging the Community In a Dialogue on Race and Racism

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

—MARGARET MEAD

Lynchburg, Virginia, chartered by the General Assembly of Virginia in 1786, is today a changing community, and issues of diversity and inclusiveness continue to be increasingly important in a number of areas, including public safety, housing, and employment. The past five years have seen such troublesome situations as increasing youth gang activity, vocal opposition with undertones of intolerance to a low-income housing development, and an emotionally charged incident during which an African American man died while in police custody. Data also indicate that disparities based on race exist in home ownership, medical care, educational achievement, wealth, and the criminal justice system within our community.

Early in 2007, in the spirit of the city council's vision that "Lynchburg acknowledges and values its rich cultural, ethnic, racial and religious diversity while promoting a respectful and cohesive community," Mayor Joan Foster and City Manager Kimball Payne proposed that the community begin a dialogue on race and racism. Community stakeholders came together to explore methods that would lead Lynchburg to an open, honest, inclusive, and sustainable discussion of race relations. Following research and discussion, a model for community dialogue was chosen, and planning began in earnest in May 2007.



Participants gathered to hear the action ideas that were generated by all the study circles.

The model that was chosen, “study circles,” is a dialogue-to-change program created by the nonprofit organization Everyday Democracy (www.everyday-democracy.org) that advocates an approach to community change that puts small-group, facilitated dialogue at the center. This study circles model works because it brings different kinds of people together around a public concern and creates a space that enables constructive, respectful conversation. During the lengthy period of time that city residents meet, people develop trust and relationships as well as a shared understanding of the issues under discussion. A vital part of the model is moving from dialogue to action.

After this dialogue model was chosen, the diverse group of stake-

holders and committed city staff came together as a working group dedicated to the planning, execution, and ongoing implementation of the “Lynchburg Community Dialogue on Race and Racism.” The working group of 20 active members operates through a working committee structure. Seven committees (communications, facilitators, documentation and evaluation, kick-off, recruitment, planning and implementation, and logistics) worked independently to execute overall work plans. Each group stayed connected through biweekly meetings to share progress, gather input, and generate new ideas.

Group members created a clear project plan that set the stage for small, diverse groups of people to meet and discuss race and racism, and

every group had an overall mission as well as goals:

Mission: To promote honest and open dialogue in order to gain an understanding of the challenges of race and racism and to improve the social, economic, and educational opportunities in Lynchburg.

Goals:

- Enhance the understanding of the perspectives and experiences of other races.
- Improve attitudes and behaviors concerning individuals of diverse backgrounds and experiences.
- Generate ideas and implement strategies for improving race relations in the community.

PILOT STUDY CIRCLES

Formally launched on July 20, 2007, the initiative “Many Voices, One Community” attracted 187 businesses, organizations, and individuals to be a part of a diverse sponsoring coalition that offers a wide variety of such tangible support as recruitment of participants, meeting sites, hosting presentations, transportation, and financial donations.

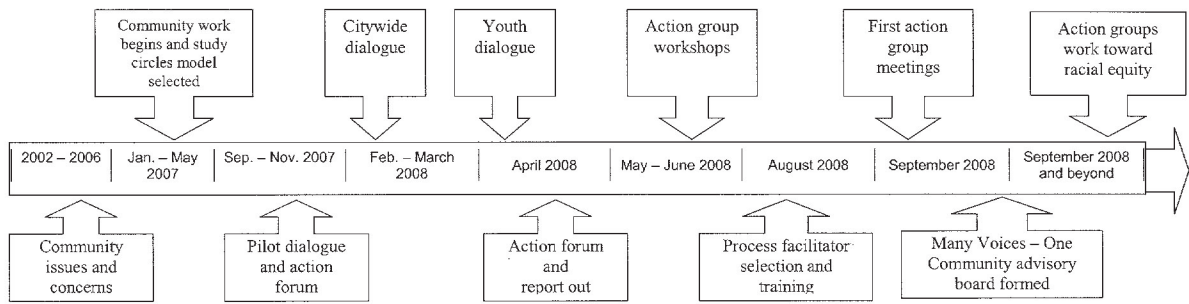
The members of the coalition comprise representatives of the overall community and include medical, governmental, faith, business, arts, and nonprofit organizations as well as interested individuals. Here are a few examples of support:

- Greater Lynchburg Transit Company (GLTC) provided bus transportation as needed for participants in the communitywide study circles.
- Centra Health, the region’s largest employer, donated \$10,000 and provided information to its workforce as well as opportunities to participate.
- The Central Virginia Community Services Board (CVCSB) provided time during the workday for employees willing to be facilitators.
- The Martin Luther King, Jr., Lynchburg Community Council (MLKLCC) acted as the project’s



Many Voices – One Community Vision

Lynchburg is a community in which race does not act as a primary predictor of how one will fare socially, economically, educationally . . .



Timeline of Lynchburg's Work

501(c)(3) partner for accepting tax-deductible donations.

- The Boys and Girls Club of Central Virginia provided a meeting site for a pilot study circle.
- Lynchburg College hosted the two-day training for facilitators; this included all meals and facilities.
- The Chamber of Commerce endorsed the project and in all chamber newsletters included information about the project and how to register.

The resulting outpouring of support clearly indicated that this project resonated with many members of the community.

A pilot was implemented to allow sponsoring coalition members the opportunity to experience the process and enhance support for the communitywide dialogue. The pilot also allowed the working group to test plans and to gain experience from this smaller effort.

A launch of the pilot process was held on October 2, 2007; more than 100 people attended. Ultimately, five pilot study circles composed of two co-facilitators and eight to 12 participants began meeting during the week of October 8, 2007, for two hours a

week for six consecutive weeks. A pilot action forum was conducted in early December; this brought together study circle participants to identify ideas that would advance racial equity in the community.

Topical ideas identified by the pilot study circles included working with the police department to diversify its workforce, establishing school-based study circles, creating more opportunities for communication, forming a community commission to coordinate further study circles, and providing resources for action groups. These ideas were assigned to action groups for study, planning, and implementation.

COMMUNITYWIDE STUDY CIRCLES

After an extensive participants and facilitators recruitment campaign and armed with lessons learned from the study circles, the city launched 58 communitywide study circles in February 2008. In April 2008, 16 youth study circles were held. The communitywide study circles met for six weeks, two hours a week. Study circles met in the early morning, mid-morning, late afternoon, and evening, Monday through Saturday.

Every opportunity was made avail-

able to accommodate any citizen who desired to be a participant in the initiative. With the help of trained facilitators, more than 600 individuals with a connection to Lynchburg through residency, work, school attendance, or leisure activity had a safe and supportive environment in which to discuss the issues of race and racism. Although the discussions themselves created some individual change, a more strategic transition from talk to action has been a core component of this project.

Testimonials from participants in the study circle included:

“. . . Even if there were no action ideas that came from the dialogue, the relationships formed and opportunities to talk about the difficult issue of racism are priceless.”

“. . . The community dialogue has been a highlight of my 68-year life.”

“. . . Participating in the community dialogue has been as stimulating for me as being in the rat line in college.”

Everyday Democracy reported: “Of more than 500 communities assisted by Everyday Democracy, Lynchburg has recruited the most people for a single round of dialogue.”

ICMA

Calendar of Events

For information about ICMA events
Visit icma.org/calendar

November 13

1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m. ET

Practical Steps to Successful 311/CRM Service Implementation (Mark your calendar now! This is a working title - Details to come)

UPCOMING IN 2009

February 12-13

Leading Practices Conference: "A Whole New Mind—Moving Our Communities from the Informational to the Conceptual," Grove Park Inn, Asheville, NC

Young Leadership Professional Institute

March 4-5, Savannah, GA

March 18-19, Jersey City, NJ

April 1-2, Oak Brook, IL

April 15-16, Boulder, CO

ICMA Regional Summits

March 5-6, Southeast, Savannah, GA

March 19-20, Northeast, Jersey City, NJ

April 2-3, Midwest, Oak Brook, IL

April 16-17, Mountain Plains / West Coast, Boulder, CO

April 25-May 2

ICMA SEI, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA

Following the communitywide study circles, the Lynchburg community as a whole was invited to attend a three-day action forum. The forum was held in a vacant storefront in the center of the city, and it incorporated some of the attributes of a charrette. Liberty University, owner of the storefront, graciously donated the space for the forum. Attendees were able to find out more about the study circles process, to sign up to participate in an action group, and to vote on the more than 180 ideas presented by the 500 individuals who attended this event.

NEXT STEPS

The Lynchburg Community Dialogue on Race and Racism is now in the dialogue-to-action phase. Individuals who expressed an interest in working on ideas that the study circles brought forward have participated in capacity-building workshops and began meeting this fall to formulate plans and strategies in order to implement the ideas. Seven action groups will focus on police; communications and media; diversity events; workforce development; citizens' advocacy and strengthening the community; faith-based initiatives; and education, youth, and family.

These topics were the highest priorities identified at the action forum. Each action group will work toward the "Many Voices—One Community" racial equity vision: "Lynchburg is

a community where race is not the most powerful predictor of how one fares socially, economically, educationally. . . ."¹

Plans are under way to develop a strategy to continue study circles on a smaller scale so that more individuals can be engaged in the dialogue and then participate in an action group if desired. A timeline of activity that summarizes this initiative to date is shown on page 15.

The Lynchburg Community Dialogue on Race and Racism has been extremely successful at creating an environment that welcomes and encourages citizens to come together in dialogue. While proud of the success of the dialogue, the working group is well aware that this is a journey, not a destination. As the dialogue moves toward action, community members believe strongly that through this open and candid dialogue lasting relationships are built and that those relationships will begin to foster positive change in the Lynchburg community. **PM**

¹The ellipsis (. . .) in this statement are intentional; they are meant to include all indicators of racial equity.

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PM Fast Facts

The ICMA Fund for Professional Management

- The Fund was created in 1985 to support professional management in all forms of local government and to encourage local government to adopt and retain the council-manager and general manager plans.
- On June 30, 2008, the Fund showed a balance of more than \$1.27 million.
- Since 1994, when disbursements began, the Fund has provided more than \$326,000 to citizens' groups in 65 communities in support of professional local government management.

To learn more about the fund, visit icma.org/fund or contact Abigail Lundy at icma.org; 202/962-3594.

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