

After the Flames

A new Andrews University / Benton Harbor Partnership

■ by Joseph W. Warren

The Benton Harbor community unrest of June 16-17, 2003, served as a motivator to the larger Andrews University faith community to continue its commitment of serving as supporter, peacemaker, reconciler and healer in all of Berrien County. At no other time in recent history has this faith-based community had a more urgent opportunity to live out its Great Commission, theology and teachings.

Community in Crisis

The Benton Harbor community is recognized, by some, as one of the more economically disadvantaged cities in Michigan. At times, this persistent systemic poverty has been blamed for the area's infamously high murder per-capita and teenage-pregnancy rates. The endless cycle of social ills for this near all-Black community has seemed insolvable in

light of the persistently low high-school graduation rates. Some respected

observers believe that the larger Benton Harbor community is not developing and/or retaining the necessary numbers and quality of young citizens who can make productive long-term differences. Others point to another significant consideration: that the area has not attracted significant corporate investments and jobs after similar civil disturbances in the 1970s. Some local leaders see the absence of an expanding corporate and residential tax-base as the key missing component in a complex set of socioeconomic challenges that plagues this once thriving industrial and tourist community.

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"We will do it [the recovery] together." By June 25, 2003, Governor Granholm appointed a Task Force for Benton Harbor to develop strategies for current renewal and future growth. Through community-wide debate and support, Benton Harbor leaders have generated nearly 50 million dollars in grants, loans and economic initiatives to fund new housing, pregnancy-prevention interven-

tions, and a comprehensive range of school and community enrichment programs.

The renewed community com-

mitment and promises of capital prompted Granholm, in June 2004, to say, "The Benton Harbor community has demonstrated that it has a vision of how it can become stronger and self-sustaining in the years to come."

Prior to June 2003, the city was designated a Michigan Enterprise Zone. This covenanted title permits new businesses to set up shop in



Bright Lights in the Harbor

Three days after the disturbances of 2003, Governor Jennifer Granholm visited Benton Harbor to prove that "We [governor's office] are paying attention" and to assure the entire southwestern Michigan community that

Benton Harbor and qualify for a schedule of tax-relief, employer training compensations and other benefits. To meet the needs of new employers, Michigan Works, the state employment and training agency, has been restructured and enlarged.

Since June 2003, many private individuals and businesses have sought cooperation agreements with local civil and community leaders to develop recreational, family-related, economic and educational opportunities for Benton Harbor families. Traditionally, the largest area of current support is provided by the community's 100-plus churches. Taken as a whole, these congregations provide a rich diversity of community programs and services that aid families, youth, and those with emergency needs.

Adding to the city's positive outlook, Paula Downing, Superintendent for the Benton Harbor Area Schools, recently announced that elementary achievement test scores in math, English language arts, science and reading have increased significantly. This good news is coupled with the community's passing a new millage that will generate 1.3 million dollars for school-building repairs and needed renovations.

The Andrews University Faith Community: A Tradition of Caring

Andrews University has a well-documented history of performing acts of practical mercy for Benton Harbor residents. Most popular is the Benton Harbor AU out-REACH program (formerly Benton Harbor Street Ministries) operated jointly by campus chaplains and students each academic year. Each Sabbath, busloads of students go door-to-door and recruit children for craft and recreational activities that often include some character-building instruction. Recently, members of this student-led group passed out chilled bottled water to families without electricity after a cycle of severe storms battered the area.

Since my 1976 adoption into the broader Andrews University faith community, I have met many individuals who practice "true religion" as described in James 1:27. Examples of positive personal involvement have included tutoring, mentoring, and information sharing. But



Part of the newly renovated Benton Harbor arts district, from left: Benton Hotel, New Moon Gallery, The Book House Cafe, and Hinkley Building.

there is no accurate way to tally the large number of health seminars, parenting and family classes or cash donations provided each year to Benton Harbor individuals and agencies by those associated with Andrews. Recently, one individual served as a four-year consultant to help an area school develop self-esteem and violence-

prevention programs. During this summer, several individuals from the Andrews community committed to participate in Habitat for Humanity's future construction projects in Benton Harbor.

After the Flames: Partnerships for the Future

As the Benton Harbor community moves forward in developing a positive image and agenda for future growth, the larger Andrews University faith community can be supportive in several ways. However, a major word of caution is necessary.

Jeff Noel, president of Cornerstone Alliance, the Twin Cities-Area economic development organization, warns that some Benton Harbor residents and leaders may have the "we don't-need-outsiders-fixing-us" mentality. This misalignment of sincere faith-based support and locally perceived crisis and needs can only be prevented by the Andrews University faith community formally and consistently informing Benton Harbor leaders what this richly diverse and multicultural community can contribute in response to needs as prioritized by Benton Harbor policymakers.

Civic Partnerships

The first fixed principle of civic partnering is hospitality. From my nearly 30 years of close interaction within both communities, I know that few leaders in either community have developed cross-cultural personal relationships with each other. Leaders at Andrews can begin by systematically inviting Benton Harbor policy makers and leaders to the campus for tours, presentations, class-interviews and a permanent series of information exchange

sessions. Alternately, these sessions, presentations and interviews can be hosted in various venues within Benton Harbor's city limits. The immediate positive outcome is that both sets of leaders can become better personal friends. These natural and easy-going cross-cultural/racial friendships form the bedrock of trust, sympathy and understanding that stands firm when philosophical and/or procedural differences arise. Historically stubborn racial, economic, cultural, and geographic barriers fall completely only when people agree to do things with and for people they personally know and genuinely like.

Faith-based Partnerships

Another open door for the Andrews University faith community to partner with Benton Harbor is to intentionally build partnerships with its many clergy, their congregations and social action leaders.

As a faith-based institution of higher learning with a theological seminary, Andrews has a ready-made opportunity to positively impact the single largest opinion-forming constituency in Benton Harbor—its many religious and social leaders. My close associations with many of them reveal that they have high regard for Seventh-day Adventist systematic theology, church funding methods, global mission work and the high personal and professional standards of Adventist clergy. Some pastors privately confess that the seventh-day Sabbath is God's day of rest and that they see many practical family and social advantages for those who observe the "true Sabbath."

I am often asked by Benton Harbor clergy how they can take introductory classes, mini-seminars or extension

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classed offered by the Adventist Theological Seminary. As spiritual shepherds, each laments the unfortunate circumstances that often reflect poorly on Benton Harbor's many fine families and religious organizations. As a whole, I find these men and women to be sincere Christians who

long for better ways to improve the lives of their congregations and the larger Benton Harbor community. As the university partners with Benton Harbor's faith community and its leaders, it can

expect long term and meaningful positive results.

Another ready path to building long-term positive partnerships includes developing more faith-based cross-cultural arts exchange programs. The predominately Black congregations of Benton Harbor are usually honored and blessed to share their worship services and religious programs with most guests from Andrews University's culturally diverse community. Certainly, the return visit to campus by the New Paradise Baptist Mass Choir or the Gospel

King Brothers would serve to diminish racial and cultural stereotypes in the guests and in the larger Andrews University faith community.

Educational Partnerships

Recently a Benton Harbor community leader compelled me to use all my influence to ensure that local Seventh-day Adventists always operate at least one elementary school in Benton Harbor.

From his perspective, an Adventist school adds significant educational, moral and cultural value to the Black community. He added that Adventist educational philosophy and programs are simply the best for lifting disadvantaged Black children and their families above the perils and handicaps of transgenerational poverty.

As one of America's model Christian multicultural faith-



Michigan Works, a state employment and training agency, helps to meet the needs of Benton Harbor employers.

based communities, it seems appropriate that we link arm-in-arm with Benton Harbor area public education leaders and discover several pathways to carry the "Adventist Advantage" to

Benton Harbor families. While all forms of proselytizing in public schools are illegal, historically the close relationship between faith-based organizations and Black public schools has produced the lion's share of America's Black leaders. It is a sure bet that America's Black local public school administrators and faith-based organizations will always maintain informal and formal partnerships. Traditionally, the strident debate over the separation of church and state has been and remains largely ignored by the nation's Black American community.

Perhaps Andrews University's School of Education, if invited, can share in forming a partnership with the Benton Harbor Area Schools, Lake Michigan College, the Lake Region and Michigan conferences and the Lake Union of Seventh-day Adventist. Together, they could create a small exemplary "Adventist-style" faith-based elementary school for Benton Harbor families.

Personal Partnerships

Mattie Roddy of the Whirlpool Corporation has set an excellent model of personal partnerships for those who want to make acceptable and valuable contributions to the Benton Harbor community. Roddy, a former Benton Harbor pastor, was recently baptized into the larger Andrews University faith community because she believes that the Seventh-day Adventist Church's contemporary worldwide programs for assisting the disadvantaged most accurately reflect the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In response to the social unrest of June 2003, Roddy developed "Hearing Our Voices," a multicultural reli-

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The renovated Kay building will house approximately 100 Whirlpool employees in downtown Benton Harbor.

gious media-training program for Benton Harbor's youth. Young people compete for positions in classes that teach on-air announcing, music programming, script writing and

audio editing. All students are instructed by on-air professionals and peer teachers. In a short time they graduate, co-hosting on the "Sunday Morning Religious Hour" and addressing many of the emotionally confusing issues that distract young people from God's fixed standards of moral living. Beyond the studio, the students are involved in community advocacy through town-hall meetings with school, community and elected local and state officials.

Lessons from the Flames

The leaders and members of the Andrews University faith community can expect positive outcomes from future partnerships with Benton Harbor's near 12,000 residents. Civic, faith-based, educational and youth-centered partnerships are but the beginning of what's possible.

More importantly, the Benton Harbor community can teach the larger Andrews University faith community many valuable lessons on how to better serve everyone in the dignified and humble spirit of Christ. These renewed and expanded cross-cultural, transeconomic, and spiritual partnerships can be as much of a healing undertaking for the entire Andrews University faith community as they can be for God's children in Benton Harbor.

An English professor at Andrews University, Dr. Joseph W. Warren speaks, writes and consults on diversity and multicultural issues. He is also a specialist in racial and cultural conflict prevention, management and resolution. Currently, Warren is preparing a new class in African-American literature.