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Building a bridge between African immigrants and African-Americans

Summit lets both sides air their differences and heal

It was a beginning — a first step that brought together 100 African immigrants and African-Americans for a summit on a dreary November Saturday in Minneapolis. The two groups have a history of local friction and while some strain was apparent at the summit, more noticeable was the candid conversation, the respect, and the sincere desire to connect.

The Twin Cities has the third largest African immigrant population in the nation. As the two groups have begun to mix in local schools, work places, and neighborhoods, tensions have surfaced — borne out of unfair stereotypes and ignorance.

The Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches (GMCC) and its Center for Families partnered with Hennepin County to organize the Pan-African Summit and unite both groups simply to talk — open up about misunderstandings and take steps toward healing relations.

Pain on both sides was evident, as was the willingness to admit mistakes.

“We forgot to welcome you guys when you came to America. On behalf of my group, I would like to apologize for that. If we were to go to Africa, you would welcome us . . . We should have been a resource to you — not look down on you because you are not the children of slaves,” said Gerald Montgomery of Brooklyn Park, who relayed thoughts offered by African-Americans in an earlier break-out session during the summit.

Fartun Aden came to Minnesota from Somali during middle school. She said she knew her Muslim religion and her scarf would set her apart from most students, but she didn’t anticipate the reaction African-American children would have toward her. “The African-American kids would try to be friends with the white kids. I didn’t understand why they wouldn’t be with me. I kept thinking: ‘I’m African, just like you.’”

“Now I know your history. I’m sorry,” Aden said weeping. “I didn’t know what you went through.” “I came here knowing more about you than you knew about me,” said one Liberian native. “There needs to be more education about Africa in the U.S.”

“We are written out of our history books,” explained Robbin McLaurin of Minneapolis. “We didn’t know about you because we don’t know about us.”

Some African immigrants admitted to being raised with stereotypes about African-Americans. Yeamah Brewer, who came from Liberia at age 5, remembers her parents telling her to “behave and don’t act like African-American kids. I grew up with that,” she said.



About 100 African-Americans and African immigrants took part in a summit to help heal some of the tense relations between the two groups. The Pan-African Summit was organized by GMCC’s Center for Families and Hennepin County.

See Pan-African Summit, Page 2

Make ready for the 2009 March Campaign food drive

IMAGINE...

if every Minnesotan shared with their local food shelf...

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The new 2009 March Campaign promotional poster. This year Minnesota FoodShare has upped its goal, hoping to raise 10 million combined dollars and pounds to restock Minnesota food shelves.

Beginning Jan. 1, materials for the 2009 Minnesota FoodShare March Campaign will be available to congregations, corporations, and schools interested in running a local food or cash drive.

FoodShare, a program of the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches (GMCC), has posters, stickers, balloons, and other resources to help plan local food and cash drives. There also are scriptural bulletin inserts and hunger fact sheets. Most materials are available at: www.gmcc.org/foodshare/marchcampaign.

Each March, FoodShare directs the largest food drive in the state (known as the March Campaign) and restocks food shelves across Minnesota. It recruits thousands of congregations, businesses, civic groups, and schools to run local cash and food drives to aid in the effort. Half of all the groceries distributed at Minnesota food shelves each year are generated by the March Campaign.

The goal for 2009 is to raise 10 million combined dollars and pounds of food. That number is huge and has never been reached. But if ever there was a time food shelves needed the community to try, this is it.

There was a 13 percent jump in visits to state food shelves in the first half of 2008, and 2009 is not expected to look much better. The Minnesota economy is plummeting right along with the national economy. The state’s unemployment rate is 6 percent, a 25-year high. Grocery prices are rising faster than wages. More families are facing home foreclosure and the stock market beating and credit sector crisis are triggering more than just increased anxiety. Fixed-income retirees are losing wealth exactly when they can’t afford to. Small businesses and families are losing cash flow. And many are plain losing hope.

For more information, please contact Minnesota FoodShare at 612-721-8687 or e-mail Sue Kainz, March Campaign coordinator, at skainz@gmcc.org.



DIW 2008 Holiday Appeal

About 500 low-income American Indian families received groceries for a traditional Thanksgiving feast, thanks to the Division of Indian Work’s (DIW) 2008 Holiday Appeal. Little Earth of United Tribes in Minneapolis provided Christmas food packages.

The DIW food shelf has struggled to meet mounting demand since the economy began its serious downturn in early fall 2008.

“I will have food on my shelves on a Monday, by Wednesday it’ll be gone,” said Maren Hardy, DIW food shelf manager. “2008 brought about a 30 percent increase in the number of families needing help and demand is still growing. People are losing their jobs or their hours are being cut, and they just can’t keep up with the prices at the grocery store.”

Sign up to receive GMCC news via e-mail

The Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches (GMCC) is putting out the call for e-mail addresses.

If you are interested in receiving GMCC's newsletters and other publications via e-mail, you can sign up one of two ways:

Go to www.gmcc.org/news.html, fill out the brief online form, and click submit. It only asks for your name and e-mail address. Or call us at 612-721-8687, ext. 316 and leave your name and e-mail address.



Paint-A-Thon homeowner applications

Elderly and disabled homeowners with homes in need of a fresh coat of paint are encouraged to apply now for the 2009 Metro Paint-A-Thon.

Each year, Paint-A-Thon organizes volunteer teams from corporations, congregations, and civic groups to paint homes for low-income elderly and disabled homeowners. The program is designed to help seniors remain in their homes and keep neighborhoods looking well cared for.

This year's paint weekend will take place Aug. 1-2. Last year, 139 homes were painted.

Homeowners must meet income guidelines, and homes are inspected and ranked in terms of need. The application deadline is May 8, 2009.

Homeowners interested in receiving an application should call Metro Paint-A-Thon at 612-721-8687, ext. 321 and leave a message, including your address and phone number. The application also is available online at www.gmcc.org/paint-a-thon.

Legislative Day on the Hill

The annual "Day on the Hill" legislative training and lobby day at the State Capitol will be held Tuesday, Feb. 3, from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The Joint Religious Legislative Coalition (JRLC) organizes the event each year to better prepare social justice activists to meet with their legislators and effectively lobby. The public is invited to attend and meet other people of faith committed to social justice.

The theme for this year's Day on the Hill will be: "Led by the Prophets." The keynote speaker is Dr. Ingrid Mattson, president of the Islamic Society of North America and a professor at Hartford Seminary. Dr. Mattson is a scholar on poverty and Islamic law.

The day will begin at 8:30 a.m. at RiverCentre in downtown St. Paul. Participants will hear the keynote address as well as legislative briefings on poverty, the minimum wage, health care, and child abuse and neglect, as well as briefings on other topics. Shuttle rides will take participants from RiverCentre to the Capitol to meet with lawmakers.

All participants are asked to make appointments with their legislators between noon and 3 p.m. on Feb. 3. To identify your legislators, call the Minnesota House of Representatives at 651-296-2146 (outstate 800-657-3550) and the Minnesota Senate at 651-296-0504 (outstate 888-234-1112).

Participants are encouraged to visit lawmaker web sites to learn about their views and anticipate their responses to social justice causes. Good places to start are the House and Senate web sites at:

www.house.leg.state.mn.us

www.senate.leg.state.mn.us

The "Day on the Hill" fee is \$30 if registration is made by Jan. 23, and \$40 after Jan. 23. Registration is available online at www.jrlc.org, or call 612-870-3670 (888-870-1402) for a registration form.

The Joint Religious Legislative Coalition began in 1971 as a nonpartisan, interfaith public policy group and has a reputation for helping to shape policy in Minnesota.

Pan-African Summit from Page 1

Saundra Crump of Minneapolis wanted the African-born audience members to understand that sometimes they say things that appear to exclude. "When you say 'back home,' it's an issue for me. 'Back home' is so much better, yet no one is going back home.... We (African-Americans) don't have a 'back home.'"

The words 'back home' can cut both ways, one immigrant noted, relaying a story of breaking up a fight between two African-American boys who sniped: "go back home!"

The use of speaking one's native language was also raised. McLaurin spoke about going into businesses owned by African immigrants and not being able to understand what is being said. "When we are in a room full of you, you speak your own language and it makes us uncomfortable. You should make us feel comfortable at your business."

One Kenyan-native agreed, saying she has left hair salons owned by other African immigrants because she felt uncomfortable when they only spoke their language.

Crump acknowledged the cultural importance of passing down one's African language and heritage, but asked immigrants to understand it from the African-American point of view. "I want you to keep your language and I want your children to have it. I am sorry I don't have one, too — but that is really separating us."

Each group was asked to come up with a list of inaccurate stereotypes others believe about their group. That led to some interesting entries. African-Americans noted the following stereotypes about their cultural group: lazy, less than whites, "still crying about slavery — still waiting on their 40-acres and a mule," unclean, on welfare, looking for a fight, and lower than Africans.

African immigrants cited stereotypes such as: their accents are inferior, they are taking away jobs from 'real' Americans, they are primitive and poor, and they are snobbish or think they are better than African-Americans.

Even more revealing was what both groups held in common. When asked independently to cite the unwritten rules for their group's success in America, African immigrants reported many rules but among the top were hard work, education, and perseverance. And among the top of the African-American's list: hard work, education, and determination.

There was discussion about whether racism exists in Africa to the extent it does in America. Many African immigrants acknowledged some prejudice in their native countries, but were more likely to label it as classism or tribalism. "I experienced racism in Liberia, but not to the extent that I was bitten by police dogs," said Liberian native Kerper Dwanyen, expressing respect for the hard-fought struggles of the Civil Rights Movement in America, a respect shared by many in the audience.

By the end of the summit many on both sides were asking for quarterly gatherings to help clear the air and bring African-born and African-Americans together.

"We should start inviting our African-American brothers and sisters to our Liberian or Nigerian, or Somali or Kenyan social gatherings," said one excited audience member.

"This is a family gathering.... We need this kind of family gathering to work on our issues. We are one people who all came out of one continent. Regardless of where you come from, I am glad you are in the family," said Rev. La Andriamihaja, a native of Madagascar and pastor of the Jordan New Life Community Church in Minneapolis.

The Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches' Center for Families opened its doors in 2006 to help the growing number of immigrant families, especially those from West Africa, plant new roots in the Twin Cities. The center is open to all families, regardless of their country of origin, and offers job training, health screenings and referrals, mental health services, pre-school learning programs, and help with locating housing.



People from across the Twin Cities shared their personal stories and thoughts about local relations between African-Americans and African immigrants during the Pan-African Summit.

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EXPRESSIONS

K. Darcy Hanzlik, Editor

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