

March 28, 2011

Good work in progress

A look at the Interfaith Center for Racial Justice

By Brian Louwers
C & G Staff Writer

WARREN — Born in response to violence and long dedicated to promoting peace, tolerance and acceptance of cultural diversity, the Interfaith Center for Racial Justice has transformed since its foundations were first laid in the early 1970s.

Like the times, the ICRJ's programs, many of its leaders and the name of its signature annual dinner are different. But its mission remains the same.

"God's been good. Let's put it that way," said the Rev. Michail Curro, the man recruited to become the group's executive director in 2006. Since then, he's been working alongside a core group of directors and volunteers to develop programs that accomplish that mission.

The group that eventually became the ICRJ formed in 1971 as the Northeast Center, one of several centers based in the suburbs that formed an umbrella organization headquartered in Detroit.

The ICRJ's concept of organizing "interfaith action centers" emerged among a group of metro Detroit religious leaders in response to civil unrest in the United States during the late 1960s. Their idea was a direct response to the findings of the Kerner Commission, which concluded that America was growing into separate black and white societies.

By the end of 1968, there were eight interfaith action teams working in the region. A steering committee was formed to organize the Northeast Interfaith Center for Racial Justice in 1970, and the center, led by the Rev. Lee Tyler, its first acting director, came into being with the election of its first Board of Directors in January 1971.

"From the very beginning the ICRJ was kind of focused on helping the white majority have a better understanding of what is racism, specifically structural racism. What might we do to alleviate or dismantle some of those walls," Curro said. "All these little satellite organizations were supposed to be coordinating with one another."

The Northeast Center was bolstered by support through churches, and from the forward-thinking individuals who volunteered in the early years. They set about working to accomplish objectives that included confronting racist attitudes, identifying and eliminating discriminatory policies and practices,



Photo courtesy of the ICRJ
Former ICRJ Director Cindy Melitz points out the Green Circle. The ICRJ hopes to continue its youth summer camp this year, one of its many programs promoting cultural diversity.

promoting equal participation among all races in society, and dismantling mechanisms within church institutions not consistent with those objectives.

Sharon Gire, a former state representative, Mount Clemens city commissioner and Macomb County commissioner, began volunteering with the Northeast Center in the early 1970s, when Tyler served as its director. Gire later served as the director from 1977 to 1984.

“He (Tyler) did a terrific job. In the early days, we had a variety of things, in addition to some educational programs,” Gire said. “The Green Circle was one of the first sort of consistent educational programs.”

Green Circle originated in Pennsylvania decades ago as a way of explaining concepts of diversity, acceptance and inclusion to young children by manipulating cutout figures of various colors inside and around a green circle.

Gire said other early programs included monitoring the administration of Community Development Block Grants to ensure fair and equal opportunity for benefit, and “court watching,” which involved just that, in a much different social era.

“In those days, there was just some real blatant kinds of things that went on,” Gire said. “It was a little different then.”

Eric Jackson, director of community outreach at Macomb Community College who now serves on the ICRJ’s Board of Directors, said he started working with the group in the early 1980s, when its emphasis was on their annual Brotherhood Sisterhood Dinner. The event went on to become the ICRJ’s signature annual event, the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Celebration of Macomb County, in 1987.

Jackson said the group spent those years building the dinner, which grew its attendance to about 600 back then. They were also “putting out a lot of fires” by working through issues in community, including disputes involving students in Fraser and St. Clair Shores.

Ironically, he said, those types of issues crept up as support for the umbrella network of interfaith centers was eroding in the late 1970s and 1980s.

“During that time, as folks were saying that we didn’t need it, we started being asked to come in,” Jackson said. “We, at that time, acted as mediators, and the educators and the facilitators for different programs.”

As support among the churches fell away, a decision was made. One of the last few centers left, the Northeast Center became the ICRJ, a stand-alone organization, in 1984.

“With that we had to regroup, and that took several years of going through the incorporation papers,” Jackson said. “We had plenty of work to do.”

The ICRJ continued building its programs including Green Circle, Passport America, Macomb Mosaic, and Kindness & Justice Challenge under the direction of leaders including Gire, Julie Matuzak, and Cindy Melitz, until Curro was tapped to lead the ICRJ in 2006.

Based at a small office in Mount Clemens, Curro now works to bolster the MLK dinner, which has grown to exceed capacity with more than 1,000 attendees each year.

The ICRJ also hosts a Listen, Live and Learn program that promotes an understanding of various cultures and faith traditions. The effort to spread that message to younger people led to the organization of a summer camp last year at Warren’s Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church.

Forums on Diversity is the ICRJ's series of 30-minute segments spotlighting various faith communities.

Among the group's accomplishments, Curro said, was encouraging leaders to support a Re-Affirming the American Values of Freedom, Equality and Justice resolution. Warren Mayor Jim Fouts and the members of the Warren City Council endorsed the resolution in 2010.

"Those are important things in that Warren and other areas, Macomb County regionally, does not have the best reputation of being an open and accepting place," Curro said. "I think that's the past. It's not the present or the future. We need to build on that."

For more information about the ICRJ and its programs, call (586) 463-3675 or email Curro at curroicrj@sbcglobal.net.