

THE DETROIT ROUNDTABLE OF CATHOLICS, JEWS AND PROTESTANTS/ MICHIGAN ROUNDTABLE FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION, 1941-2011

The Detroit Roundtable of Catholics, Jews and Protestants grew out of the Detroit Council of Catholics, Jews and Protestants, founded in 1941. It is the oldest of the organizations that has been involved in race relations in Detroit. The organization was a response to “the growth of totalitarianism abroad and divisions within the Detroit community inflamed by such preachers/ politicians as Gerald L. K. Smith and Father Coughlin. The aim of the Roundtable was to foster religious and racial brotherhood and to counter those who would divide the community [on] religious or racial lines” (Michigan Roundtable, n.d.-b). The organization carried out this aim by conducting and sponsoring seminars, workshops, lectures, dinners, and annual Brotherhood Week observances (Michigan Roundtable, n.d.-b).

Throughout its long and distinguished history of combating discrimination and promoting religious and racial harmony, the Roundtable has changed its name several times, “reflecting changes in scope and objectives.” First, it was the Detroit Roundtable, then it became the Greater Detroit Roundtable of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, next it became the Greater Detroit Interfaith Roundtable, the National Conference for Community and Justice of Michigan and in 2006, it changed its name to the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity (Michigan Roundtable, n.d.-b).

The 1943 riot brought the so-called “Negro Problem” to the forefront of the Roundtable’s agenda, “so that the organization which began as a mediator of religious differences grew into a strong organ of human relations” (Detroit Free Press, December 12, 1965).

Even before the riot, the Roundtable engaged in efforts designed to foster good relations with the African American community. For example, in October 1942, it announced, “On October 29 . . . outstanding leaders of the Negro community will be present at a luncheon meeting of [the] National Association of Colored People at the Lucy Thurman YWCA.” It also mentioned that a team of speakers from the DRT would be addressing the gathering (Detroit Times, October 24, 1942).

Several years after the 1943 Detroit race riot, the Roundtable participated in the Interracial Workshop Conference sponsored by the City of Detroit Interracial Committee. Reverend Joseph Q. Mayne, the executive secretary of the Roundtable, expressed a rather radical view when he suggested the “churches were not as active as they should be in fostering harmonious group living and proposed that all places of worship be thrown open to all persons regardless of color” (Detroit News, June 2, 1946).

During this period, the Roundtable played a key role in sponsoring and supporting major African American leaders and organizations, such as the October 1947 visit to Detroit of Father Herman A. Porter, of the Society of Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, “the thirty-first Negro priest in the United States (Detroit Interracial Council, October 4, 1947).

By the end of the decade, the DRT had established itself as a leader in promoting harmony among racial, religious, cultural, and economic groups with an increasing focus on racial issues. One of its most impressive efforts was its work with students from Detroit area high schools. During the summer of 1949, the organization sponsored a gathering of students from twenty-five high schools “to discuss how to get along with high school neighbors” (Detroit Free Press, June 4, 1949). According to one report, “More than 250 delegates from Detroit Ferndale, Royal Oak, Birmingham, Grosse Pointe, Inkster and Mt Clemens will meet. . . at Highland Park High School” to discuss “ways of breaking down barriers among students of differing racial, religious, cultural and economic groups.” The gathering was “the largest of its kind for teen-agers” (Detroit Free Press, June 4, 1949). While much more remained to be done, the Roundtable was at least preparing the next generation to take up the important work of addressing racial problems in the city.

The persistence of racial discrimination over other forms of discrimination in Detroit clearly indicated a need for the Roundtable to focus more attention on the former. As Frank J. Wurtsmith of the Roundtable said, “Racial prejudice is still Detroit’s most serious problem. Much more attention must be given to the need for adequate housing and job opportunities than has been given in the past” (Detroit Free Press, February 19, 1950).

In 1957, in the wake of the nationwide publicity of the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, which prompted President Eisenhower to send in federal troops (Franklin and Moss, 1998) a Mumford High School senior working with the Detroit Roundtable proclaimed, "I want to find out about prejudice and everything that goes with it—not in Little Rock, but here in Detroit" (Detroit News, December 28, 1957).

The student was a member of a group called Teens Quiz the Experts that interviewed Richard Marks, director of the Detroit Commission on Community Relations. The teens asked Marks the following questions: - How can young people of Detroit better understand minority groups? - Is it true that modern youth has begun to overcome racial prejudice? - How can we combat the subtle attempts at discrimination made by Detroit restaurants when they refuse service to those of minority groups? (Detroit News, December 28, 1957)

Mark's response to the students was instructive: "Suppose you went into a restaurant with a group of Junior Roundtable members and the waitress refused to serve two of the members because they were Negroes. Would you ever go back to that restaurant? I don't think so" (Detroit News, December 28, 1957).

By 1960, the Roundtable had earned a reputation for its teacher scholarship program that 1941 "had encouraged 401 Michigan residents . . . to increase their efforts to better their community climate." Sara Colvin, educational director of the Roundtable, praised the of the teachers who had received the scholarships. "Their influence in the fight against misunderstanding among people of different faiths, races and national backgrounds has been felt by thousands of school children, PTA groups and youth groups" (Grosse Pointe News, June 10, 1960).

Five year later, and two years before the 1967 riot, the Roundtable had contributed more than its share to the promotion of racial harmony. Its Junior Roundtable group brought students together from eighty-one public, parochial, and private schools. The group had also spent thirteen years sponsoring an annual Rearing Children of Good Will Border-Cities Conference dedicated to stamping out "prejudice before it takes hold of children's minds" (Detroit Free Press, December 12, 1965). The Roundtable awarded close to forty tuition scholarships to summer workshops in human relations at Michigan colleges every year and contributed to training programs for police in "handling community tensions involving racial and problems." Furthermore, the Roundtable's Speaker's Bureau assisted community organizations in obtaining expert speakers to address human relations issues and made available at its office an "extensive library of booklets and films on racial and religious problems" (Detroit Free Press, December 12, 1965). In explaining the purpose of the efforts, an official of the Roundtable commented that he had seen a lot of progress over the years, and that he was optimistic. "People don't like to hear bigoted cracks any more, and getting past that is a good sign" (Detroit Free Press, December 12, 1965).

Unfortunately, while the Roundtable's decades of efforts were sincere and noteworthy, they fell far short of understanding and addressing the core issues that resulted in the 1967 riot. The following winter, Nate S. Shapero, a leader of many civic and charitable projects, essentially expressed this view when he was honored by the Roundtable at the Seventeenth Brotherhood Dinner in Cobo Hall. "I believe no one of us tonight needs to be told that a cure for racial strife may be the first order of business before us. . . . we have the first ingredients for such a cure in our hand," he said. Shapero added, "How can we in good conscience, not accept the responsibility of finding solutions to the problems that brought mobs howling through our streets?" He told them, "Be the leader in this movement. We have in this Roundtable the brains, the talent and the money to find and implement any program we chose to establish. I suggest we can find out why Twelfth Street went up in smoke, why some of our brothers believe we have abandoned them and why they seek brutal and undemocratic revenge." He then reminded the Roundtable, "We were instrumental once in conquering hate and fear and we can do it again" (Michigan Roundtable, n.d.-b).

The Roundtable could indeed conquer "hate and fear" again during the post-1967 era, much as they had attempted to do, albeit with limited success, during the post-1943 riot. Three years after the riot (amid the lingering conflicts and tension between the black community and the Detroit Police Department), the Roundtable received "the Civilian Award of the Detroit Department for its key role building police-citizen relationship in the city" ("Detroit Roundtable Receives Police Commissioners Civilian Award," 1970).

In the 1980s the Roundtable engaged in a range of activities around issues of social justice and intergroup cooperation and harmony. In the early 1980s, it supported the efforts of the Chinese American community to gain justice for Vincent Chin (Roundtable Responds to Vincent Chin Case, Pall 1983).

In its annual report and newsletter of 1984-85, the Roundtable reported that “A major part of our work . . . is ‘looking for trouble,’ trying to identify situation which can lead to conflict and hatred among different groups.” Once the observers “locate trouble,” they “engage in trouble shooting, trying to create understanding where there is hostility and get people of good will to work positively on constructive solutions to conflict (Greater Detroit Roundtable, 1984-85).

An example of such “trouble shooting” occurred during the conflict between blacks and Jews during the presidential primaries as a result of Reverend Jesse Jackson’s derogatory remarks about Jews as hymies” and New York City as “Hymie Town” (Washington Post, February 13, 1984). The Roundtable in cooperation with the Pontiac Urban League cosponsored a forum at Oakland University to defuse the tension that erupted from that situation. It also provided “resources, materials, help and advice to a group of people from both minorities who met for over six months at Marygrove College to study the problem.” The study group concluded “that while there were ‘valid reasons’ for the recent tensions, both Jews and Black people ‘have more that unities them than divide them” (Greater Detroit Roundtable, 1984-85). The group pledged to “defuse tensions as they erupt”, to “encourage organizations within the two communities to tackle the more long range tasks of creating and enhancing general understanding, and to work together on a ‘common human agenda’ to make our city, state and nation more economically viable, compassionate, and . . . , more ‘open’ dealing with the frustrations which lead to prejudice” (Greater Detroit Roundtable, 1984-85).

In 1990, the Roundtable prepared to troubleshoot yet another issue “the skinheads.” It published an article in its newsletter, “Our Answer to the Skinheads—Taking Back the Future,” in which it stated: “It was not too long ago that we believed that prejudice was declining [and] and the new generation saddled with antiquated hatreds. Such hopes were dashed b Klan recruiters in the 70s, the rise of the skinheads in the 80s, and overt acts of brutality in the 90s” (Greater Detroit Roundtable, 1990).

In keeping with its long history of challenging religious and racial hatred, the DRT decided to take action against this new wave of racism. “To protect the next generation from the burden of bigotry, the Greater Detroit Interfaith Roundtable is meeting this challenge by bringing together the large number of constructive youth organizations working For good will in the Detroit metropolitan Area” , it wrote (Greater Detroit Roundtable, 1990). To counteract youth racism, with a grant from the Skillman Foundation the DRT started “The Youth For Unity program,” which helped youth organizations “publicize their activities in the general community and make them known to each other, so they can help each other and work together on joint projects” (Greater Detroit Roundtable, 1990).

The Roundtable’s annual Anytown, USA Retreat youth program was another way of protecting “the next generation from the burden of bigotry.” Each summer for one week, young people from the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades met in a program “where they have the opportunity to express themselves and their own heritage and to appreciate others different backgrounds through communication, sharing, and closeness.” During the summer of 1990, the group of young people “decided to continue keeping the experience alive by continuing to see each other and holding periodic meetings to spread what they have learned to other young people in the Detroit area” (Greater Detroit Roundtable, 1990).

In November 2006, the Detroit Interfaith Roundtable announced a name change: Michigan Roundtable For Diversity and Inclusion. “We . . . are celebrating a new name! What’s in a Name Change? Some people would say not much . . . but we have been burdened with a name people could not remember and could not connect with our mission” they explained. “Now, if you understand the importance of both Diversity and Inclusion, you will get it! You’ll remember and know the organization to call for help with your school, congregation, or business [if] racism or sexism or religious discrimination or any other of the cultural ‘isms’ [that] raises its ugly head” (Michigan Roundtable, 2006).

The new name reflected the organizations dedication to the new challenges facing the city, state, and nation. An official of the MRT took note of these new challenges when he lamented the passage of Proposal 2 in November 2006, which outlawed affirmative action in regional, state government, and higher education designed to “redress long-standing discrimination against women and people of color.” He mentioned the surprise of some people over the “overwhelming defeat” of affirmative action. “Sometimes,” he said, “those of us who spend time with leaders of human relations board members who ‘get it,’ and corporate foundation leaders, may forget how ingrained prejudice and discrimination are in this country. Thus, the passage of Proposition [sic] 2 sent an

undeniably clear message to human relations and groups across Michigan. A large majority of voters have strong biases and against helping women and people of color” (MRDI News, Spring 2007).

The official then listed the lessons learned from the passage of Proposal 2: Discrimination is alive and well among many individuals and institutions. The private sector (e.g. business and faith communities) will need to take the lead if racism, sexism, and religious discrimination are [to be] significantly reduced. Outstate areas are the most deficient in terms of institutional and individual bias” (MRDI News, Spring 2007).

According to the official, the Roundtable’s programs “are ideally suited to create change in those outstate areas,” noting that most of the eighty-three counties in Michigan “voted against affirmative action, including some with significant numbers of Hispanic and African Americans.” Therefore, he continued, “Michigan must face the fact that not only are we in a state of economic distress; we are a state now known as one of the most segregated” (MRDI News, Spring 2007).

Notwithstanding the sad state of race relations in the region, the official did see hope in the ability of the Roundtable to made a difference. “The Michigan Roundtable knows how to change both attitudes and behaviors found in traditional forms of bias and discrimination against Jewish, African, Catholic, Asian, Americans, among others” (MRDI News, Spring 2007). He cautioned, however, that “change takes long periods of struggle . . . too often in Southeast Michigan, we have bought into some slogans or simplistic solution to create racial harmony.” This approach obviously had not worked in the past. “With the defeat of affirmative action, we have to recognize that attitudinal change takes serious dialogue with those who are different, a longstanding commitment to learn about different cultures, and a willingness to change the behavior of our institutions. Simple solutions are a pipe dream” (MRDI News, Spring 2007).

The official claimed that the Roundtable’s programs work and that their evaluations “speak to serious change.” He argued that the organization had “witness[ed] major shifts in attitudes and behavior at companies, schools, and even some historically racist communities like Howell which are rapidly making changes” (MRDI News, Spring 2007).

These changes inspired MRT’s continual efforts to take on more challenges»—in short, to troubleshoot more pressing and difficult racial and cultural issues. “This is why,” the official pointed out, “We are seriously considering expanding the Michigan Roundtable programs, providing services and training outstate and in counties that traditionally have not welcomed people who are different.” The official acknowledged that such changes will take time, but warned that “Michigan will not prosper as a state if we do not become more diverse and more inclusive” (MRDI News, Spring 2007).

On February 5, 2007 the second in a series of community conversations, “Bridging the Racial Divide,” represented one of the Roundtable’s most promising cosponsored projects during the year. The other cosponsors included New Detroit, Kingsberry Productions, and Detroit Public Television/ Channel 56. This community conversation took place in seven metropolitan Detroit locations and was a follow-up to an identical one in 2006, which involved participants’ responses to a documentary The Cost of Segregation, the creation of Kingsberry Productions (MRDI News, Spring 2007).

Dan Krichbaum, the Roundtables president, explained, “The racial divide in our community may involve geographic boundaries, as well as interpersonal barriers such as race, religion, or ethnicity.” Therefore, the project “helps create a new level of understanding between the participants in our conversation groups, as well as spur greater community dialogue in Southeast Michigan” (MRDI News:, Spring 2007).

A diverse gathering of fifty to sixty adults took part in the program at sites across southeast Michigan. After the showing of the film, Roundtable staff facilitated group discussion. Later that evening, Channel 56 (PBS) aired the documentary for the public (MRDI News, Spring 2007).

In the program of the Roundtable’s Sixty-first Annual Humanitarian Tribute on November 6, 2008, just a few days before the historic 2008 presidential election, Thomas Costello, president and CEO, wrote: “As we watch an historic election, one thing is clear: Race is still an important factor in our lives. The survey research and focus group data is showing that even if you are a Harvard educated U.S. Senator, to an embarrassingly large group of

people you are still and foremost, an African American and therefore unworthy to be President” (Michigan Roundtable, 2008).

This sad but very real fact did not deter the Roundtable. Costello proclaimed that the “Michigan Roundtable is preparing to confront this reality, and push hard to get Michigan to recognize it has a serious problem when it comes to race—a problem that affect[s] our economy, our government and our very social fabric.” Costello announced that the Roundtable “was about to engage in an exciting new effort to engage out community and our state in a process of recognition and reconciliation: Recognizing that our segregated community is not the result of accident, but explicit actions by leaders in our state, followed by reconciliation that will involve addressing diversity and inclusion in a variety of ways” (Michigan Roundtable, 2008).

As the first African American president was being elected, the Roundtable was preparing a new generation of youth to participate in a more diverse world culture. “The future of our region lies in the ability of our young people to work and live in a diverse world culture,” the organization declared. It would accomplish this goal by building “leaders, prepared with the Skills to engage those who are different and to collaborate in productive relationships” (Michigan Roundtable, 2008).

In 2008 the Roundtable’s Youth Program planned to “use the internet to provide a forum for on-going dialog on issues of diversity and inclusion . . . and provide resources, recognition support to student groups doing diversity and inclusion work.” The Roundtables Leadership in the New Century (LINC) program, through its annual Connection Conference, played a key role in the improvement of race relations among students throughout the region. In 2008 the Roundtable reported that “Over 400 students attended the conferences which promote diversity and inclusion in schools. These activities provided a foundation for creating youth culture, leading to a more inclusive society” (Michigan Roundtable, 2008).

In 2011, the Roundtable was still working to promote diversity and inclusion region. As it says in its current mission statement: “We work to address inequity throughout our region through a process of recognition, reconciliation and renewal. We strive to build relationships that create social justice and build sustainable inclusive communities.

We believe that achieving trusting interpersonal relations, which bridge racial, religious, ethnic, and other cultural boundaries is critical to building diverse inclusive communities. In our commitment to this cause, we seek to demonstrate the highest standards of interpersonal and institutional conduct through honesty, dignity, fairness, and respect. (Michigan Roundtable, n.d.-a)...

...The Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion, under various previous names, is one of the oldest human rights organizations in Detroit, going back to before the 1943 race riot. Over the years it expanded from being an organization largely confined to building bridges between Catholics, Protestants, and Jews to one embracing more diverse and inclusive interests. To its great credit, the Roundtable has adjusted to the rapid social changes and difficult challenges of the region by developing effective programs geared not only to combatting all types of discrimination but to building and sustaining a diverse and inclusive community. It has been both a leader and a cheerleader in this noble effort for over six decades.