

# People's School

by Joyce Hollyday, April 2002

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The larger-than-life-sized sculpture towers over our group gathered on a warm April afternoon at the campus of North Carolina A&T University in Greensboro. The likenesses of David Richmond, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr., and Joseph McNeil stare over our heads, determination set in stone on each face.

Dr. Vincent Harding, historian of the Civil Rights struggle, tells us that on February 10, 1960, members of the House Un-American Affairs Committee were scouting around Harlem, looking for the next “black radicals” to target. That same day, a few hundred miles south, the four A&T freshmen depicted in the sculpture strode up to the lunch counter at Woolworth’s and sat down, making history. “Out of the poorest and most despised section of the nation, from the poorest and most despised people there, came a redemptive movement,” says Dr. Harding. He smiles. “Can anything good come out of Greensboro?”

Those of us gathered for the inaugural event of “Word and World: A People’s School” discovered that good things have been coming out of Greensboro for decades. The student sit-in movement of the 1960s, sparked by the bold action of the A&T freshmen, was the first of a series of events that shaped our week in this historic city. Our mornings were steeped in stories of courage from the Civil Rights era and ongoing labor struggles, as well as eyewitness accounts from the November 3, 1979 massacre of marchers by Klan and Nazi groups.

Rev. Nelson Johnson, who was wounded and witnessed the murder of five of his friends that day, framed our week with rich theological reflection arising out of years of persecution in the effort to bring justice to Greensboro. He spoke of his personal struggle early in his life to understand Jesus’ words at the cross: “Forgive them for they know not what they’re doing.’ I thought, they know what they’re doing; they’ve been doing it for a long time.” Johnson is now a leader in the Greensboro Massacre Truth and Reconciliation Project, which is seeking healing of the community through telling the truth of the events of that traumatic day.

“Word and World” embraces the premise that all theology is rooted in, and rises out of, the particulars of historical context. Those of us involved in its founding and future agree that we could not have chosen a better place to launch this effort. Throughout the week, the power of the Bible, the poignancy of Greensboro, and the pain and promise of our current political situation remained in constant conversation as we wrestled with biblical texts, social analysis, and hope.

We went to Greensboro not only to learn from one another, but also to be nurtured for the work back home of feeding hungry people and abolishing the death penalty, welcoming refugees and working for peace. Rivers of music, poetry, and prayer flowed around us throughout the week. From hip hop to jazz, spirituals to chants, and a Salvadoran brother’s songs from the *Misa Campesina* (“Popular Mass”), spirits were uplifted by creative expressions of joy and promise. Energy was high from the first whispers of early-morning prayer to the last camp song offered around the bonfire late at night.

Dr. Harding reflected, “No true transformation can take place without some people—usually a minority—saying there is nothing else for me to do now than this.” Such was the commitment of four A&T freshmen

42 years ago—and of all the others who followed them to lunch counters, and buses, and police-filled streets. As people of faith confront each new moment in history, we need to ask what is required of us for this time. The answers and paths may vary, but one thing seems clear: we need one another to keep moving forward.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” was the honest question posed by one of Jesus’ disciples at the beginning of his ministry. The Gospel record tells again and again the story of good news coming from the margins, from the most unexpected places. “Word and World” is committed to seeking out the voices of good news, wherever they may be found.

The next “Word and World” school will be held November 9-16, 2002, in Tucson, Arizona. Voices there will invite us into the stories arising out of border issues, the historic Sanctuary movement, labor struggles and racism in a different context. If Greensboro is any indication, Tucson—and all the sites to come (we hope there will be many)—promises to be another rich feast. We hope you’ll consider joining us.

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