

COVENANTERS TAKE A "JOURNEY TO MOSAIC."

A Small Step Towards

RECONCILIATION



Jocelyn Dong An asphalt ribbon that unfurls among rolling hills and valleys, California's Interstate 5 is a popular route for vacationers traveling between metropolitan areas in the north and south and for trucks moving the state's farm-fresh produce to market. But on a rainy weekend in January, I traveled this path on a different sort of trip—a journey toward racial reconciliation.

I am a fifth-generation Chinese-American woman, raised in the predominantly white suburb of Palo Alto, California, thirty-five miles south of San Francisco. When I was in elementary school, I was often the only Asian kid in my class. It's safe to say that I dealt with my share of identity issues growing up.

My pastor, Steve Wong of Grace Community Covenant Church in Los Altos, California, recruited me to be one of thirty-two participants in the inaugural Journey to Mosaic, organized by the Pacific Southwest Conference's Multiethnic Commission.

Modeled after the Covenant's Sankofa Journey through the American South, which focuses on black-white relations, Journey to Mosaic aimed to raise awareness of the experiences of

Hispanic and Asian Americans as well as blacks and whites.

Over the course of three days, our group of pastors, conference staff, and lay leaders visited cultural landmarks throughout the Golden State. We toured sites of historic Black Panther Party activities in Oakland, migrant farm workers' camps in the fertile Central Valley, the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, and the Fred Jordan Mission for the homeless on L.A.'s skid row.

We also watched videos about race in America, engaged in guided conversations with our assigned partners (who were of a different ethnicity), and ended each evening with a group discussion. We got the rare opportunity to share about our lives and tell of how our ethnic backgrounds have impacted us. Half of our group was European American, the other half Hispanic, Asian, and African American.

Our full schedule gave structure to an evolving, three-day conversation on racism, oppression, and social justice. After the trip, many said they had gained a perspective that changed their lives.

Modestine Fain, a deacon with the mostly black South Bay Community Church in Fremont, California, com-

pared the Journey to Mosaic with a mission to Malawi, Africa, that she had gone on earlier.

"This trip made just as much impact on me as that trip, because I saw things that I hadn't seen before. I saw people in their own culture and places of worship. It was just as significant," she says. "It was life-changing."

I admit I didn't know what to expect from the Journey to Mosaic. Visiting cultural landmarks appealed to me, as did sharing about my experiences as an Asian American. But I soon learned my attitude was that of a "tourist"—a person who sees without engaging in a culture. The goal of the diversity program, however, was to lead people from being tourists to being "resident aliens"—those who are not from the community, but who choose to stay and become a part. That transformation would begin soon enough for many of us.

On our first day together, many of us had a heightened sense of awareness of our and others' ethnicities. Even the simple act of trying to remember each other's names raised the color issue.

"Young, black," was how one member identified a woman in the group to himself. "Older, white guy, tall," was how I labeled a pastor.

I was forced to consider and confess my own prejudices, realize the impact that being a minority has had on my life, and reach for ways to level the playing field for all people.

But we settled into a groove by that first evening, as our African American brothers and sisters shared about their lives.

Talking about racism can be a difficult proposition—both for the speaker and the listener. Each with our own perceptions, experiences, prejudices, and pain, it's in some ways a miracle that understanding around race relations even occurs.

I found questions popping in my mind as I listened to stories of discrimination: "Is this true?" I wondered. "Was this an isolated incident or part of a pattern? Would this person be better to let go of the incident, or is he right to raise it?"



My skepticism wasn't so much an attitude of disbelief as of ignorance.

Black Panther Party member David Hilliard, for example, brought us to a neighborhood where, decades ago, police had purposely shot a young black man to death after telling him to run away. I was shocked at the violence that had occurred, but it pointed me to the police brutality that still occurs today.

Testimonies were honest, raw, and at times painful. In the Central Valley town of Visalia, community activist Teresa DeAnda told of an incident in which pesticides from farms floated into her neighborhood, making scores of residents violently ill. People thought they were going to die, DeAnda recalled. She and her husband quickly gathered their children and elderly neighbors and fled by car, while

residents on the most severely affected blocks were evacuated to a local middle school. There, however, with few government protocols in place to help the pesticide victims, emergency workers treated people like cattle.

Joe Taylor, a Korean American pastor from Los Angeles, felt his heart sink as DeAnda spoke of how the frightened men, women, and children were directed to remove their clothing and, then, sprayed with fire hoses.

"I was shocked to hear about the dignity taken from families.... It was heartbreaking," Taylor says.

Through DeAnda's and others' perseverance, however, a pesticide drift bill was signed into California law



last year, promising to improve the government's response and pledging payment for medical bills of victims of exposure.

But social inequality wasn't solely a part of the communities we visited; it was all too familiar to some of us as well. The sites simply prompted us to share about our lives.

As darkness blanketed a migrant farm workers' neighborhood on the second evening, our bus slowly moved along the road. Yesenia Magallanes, a member of our tour, looked out through rain-streaked windows. "I used to live in places like this," she said out loud, surprising several of us sitting nearby.

"The rooms didn't have any doors," she later recalled about the dilapidated homes. "We lived in one place without an indoor bathroom.... You had to go

outdoors."

Now a medical assistant and a lay leader of La Viña del Señor Covenant Church in Kerman, California, Magallanes explained that her parents used to do farm work, moving the family as they heard of jobs around the state.

"You don't realize that it's not a normal life until you step out of it," she said.

Another time we watched a documentary called *The Color of Fear*, which exposed deep feelings on how discrimination affects people of color. One of our African American sisters stood up on the bus. Turning to face the rest of us, she confessed that throughout her life, when meeting strangers, a con-

Left: Stacey Greely and Yesenia Magallanes
Center: The Fred Jordan mission in Los Angeles
Above: front row: Debbie Blue, Teresa DeAnda (presenter), Walter Contreras. Back row: Greg Yee, Ernest Tsui, Evelyn Johnson, Jocelyn Dong, and friend of Teresa DeAnda.

stant refrain has played in her head. With syllables punching the air, she said slowly, "Which one are you going to be?" Are you going to be the person who respects me as a human being, she explained, or the person who looks at me as a negative stereotype—as lazy or perhaps dumb?

I was gripped by her testimony. She had spoken the question that I too have carried around while navigating in a white world—only I hadn't realized it. ➤

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Kalon Kelley, a European American who grew up in a white middle-class neighborhood in Santa Barbara, California, was also struck by her words. “That seemed like such a heavy burden to bear every day of your life,” he said later.

The cumulative effect of people’s testimonies began to sink in by the third evening. We could no longer act as tourists, given the truths that we were confronted with systematic discrimination and tragic inequalities in our society.

Stacey Greeley, youth pastor at Kerman Covenant Church, said that as an Anglo, she began to feel like the “bad guy.”

“The majority of the Anglo story shared was about how whites have oppressed other people groups through the years; it was very difficult to hear,” she said. “I couldn’t deny the truth of the stories of the people on the trip with me... It was overwhelming—heart-breaking, angering, and very, very sad. I guess I didn’t want to believe that the ‘in America’ experiences of people who aren’t Anglo have been that intense and that awful—but they have been.”



Johnnie Jones and Alan Forsman

Our final group discussion that night, in a cold second-floor room at the homeless shelter, lasted for hours, as people wrestled with thoughts and feelings, and poured out their hearts.

Provocatively and earnestly, one African American pastor asked, “What I want to know is—what is it like to be white?”

For all the questions and attempts to answer, we ended that night in wor-



The Journey to Mosaic group at the Japanese American National Museum

ship. Rain pouring outside like a cleansing flood, we gathered in a circle with arms around one another, and lifted our voices, “We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord. And we pray that all unity will one day be restored. And they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

Months after the trip, many of us are still considering the impact of Journey to Mosaic.

“There is no question that the matter of class issues is the lingering memory that continues to stimulate my thinking, regarding changes needed in my own lifestyle and the way in which we carry out our various Pacific Southwest Conference ministries,” said conference superintendent Evelyn Johnson.

For Taylor, the glow of the journey has not faded; he called it “heavenly.” In March, Taylor returned to skid row with his youth group to serve food to the homeless.

Fain said she hoped to introduce worship songs of other cultures into her church. “The point is to make people feel comfortable. I can’t be Spanish but I can show you I’m willing to try and to listen,” she said.

Greeley is hoping to collaborate with Magallanes’s Spanish-speaking church, which shares the same facility in Ker-

man. Greeley also said she is making a renewed effort to defend those who are defenseless.

“I try to speak up when someone makes a comment that could be perceived as denigrating another race. That’s one of those ‘I can’t do everything, but I can do something’ sorts of responses,” she said. “It’s also a matter of love and justice.”

As for me, I cherish the memories of talking with my brothers and sisters about the vitally important yet difficult topic of race. Along the way, I was forced to consider and confess my own prejudices, realize the impact that being a minority has had on my life, and reach for ways to level the playing field for all people.

Later this year, my Asian American church will be offering a cross-cultural training weekend to introduce our members to people of another culture. I hope it will be even half the experience the Journey to Mosaic was. □

The next Journey to Mosaic trips are scheduled for August and October in California. For information contact Greg Yee, director of leadership and congregational development, at 916-479-3544 or greg.yee@pswc.org.