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Diann & Terry McCabe

San Marcos, TX

The 1975 Atlanta Local Community Convocation: Precursor to the Town Meeting Effort -Revised

It was a time of change in the South in 1974 reflecting urban trends of hope and fear in the years since the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The Institute of Cultural Affairs in Atlanta staff residence and office, on the corner of East Lake Drive and Memorial Drive in the East Lake community, was in a prime location in a changing neighborhood. Surrounding the house were experimental as well as traditional institutions including the Unification Church next door; Reverend Grissom's funeral home across the street opened just in 1974; and stretching past the end of East Lake Drive, the Atlanta Golf Club, a fixture since 1908. Memorial Drive intersecting East Lake Drive led from downtown Atlanta all the way to Stone Mountain. The MARTA bus stopped at this intersection to carry ICA staff, local residents and domestic workers downtown. On Memorial Drive about a quarter of a mile from the Atlanta House stood East Lake Meadows, a multi-storied housing project referred to as "Little Vietnam" because of the high crime rate there. In the early 70s Atlanta had the highest murder in the U.S. and East Lake Meadows had the highest murder rate in Atlanta.

In 1973—1974 Warren and Geri Tolman along with Bonnie and Greg, Bill and Maxine Norton along with Teresa, Jean Long, Gene Humphries, and John LaRoche made up the EI/ICA Atlanta staff. Terry McCabe, a graduate student at Emory University, and I joined the house just after Thanksgiving in 1973. The staff focused on the local church and RS-1. Reverend Thomas Grissom often served as celebrant for House Church, pouring from the bottle of wine with his one good hand. An elderly dignified minister, he talked about hoping to find and mentor the next Martin Luther King. <https://grissom-clarkfh.com/our-beginnings/>

In 1974-75 Warren and Geri Tolman and family returned to Atlanta as EI/ICA staff along with Michael and Margie Gergan and children, Teresa and Paul; Marcella Buchanan, Terry McCabe and myself. The focus in 1975 centered on planning a local community convocation (LCC) or town meeting in a national effort to hold two hundred such LCCs across the United States on June 8. We also studied the Dark Night of the Soul and often Reverend John Cross came as a celebrant for House Church, breaking bread with us under a chart on the wall holding the visions of St. John of the Cross. Reverend Cross had been the minister of the Birmingham church bombed in 1963, killing four little girls. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/17/AR2007111701404.html>

Seeking support of the local churches for the LCC, Marcella Buchanan and Terry McCabe visited Reverend Barhnhardt and members of East Lake Methodist Church to invite them to a

community meeting to hear about the idea. There, community members expressed concern that Whites had fled the neighborhood after Blacks had moved in. Many who remained worried about safety and considered leaving, too. Whites did return to the neighborhood to attend church but it was a time of unease and tension in the East Lake Community. Subsequent planning meetings built support for holding the LCC in the East Lake neighborhood to examine the hopes for the future, name what stood in the way of that future, and determine what action could address those blocks.

During the recruitment and marketing phase of the LCC, WAGA-TV Atlanta reporter (and now PBS Nightly News anchor) Judy Woodruff interviewed Terry McCabe and Warren Tolman for a tv news story about the upcoming LCC.

The Atlanta LCC, held June 8, 1975 at a neighborhood school, brought in outside facilitators Larry Ward and Deborah Harris. The event lasted all day, beginning with Larry Ward's talk on the New World followed by the morning workshop brainstorming the community's vision and naming the contradictions faced by the residents in the community. After lunch on site, Deborah Harris gave the New Human talk followed by two simultaneous workshops: proposals to deal with the contradictions, and a workshop to create a song, story and symbol for the community. Some 200 people attended the Atlanta LCC, the largest among the many held across the U.S. that day.

The local community convocation did many things. It brought together a cross section of a changing community and, most significantly, it awakened hope in the participants. This event hinted at what was possible in bringing together different parts of the community—church people, librarians, teachers, blue collar workers, social club members—to reimagine together the future of their community. The key to the meeting was the perspective built into the methods and talks, a perspective that local residents were the experts and could work together to affect positive change.

More such events would be planned in the future and the work to improve the methods for such events would be the focus of the ICA for many years to come.

For information on the structure and method of the LCC, see https://wedgeblade.net/gold_path/data/comd/100830.htm