

Healing the Heart of America: How to Have Safe and Meaningful Conversations

Unity of Houston

Congregants:

Rev. Karen Tudor (Associate Minister Unity of Houston)

[Cindy Wigglesworth](#)

Diallo Kantambu

Alyce Coffey-Scott

Natasha Sylvester

Jean Kantambu Latting

Jean 0:00

Hello, everybody! I am totally excited to be here with my friends and colleagues from Healing the Heart of America. All of us participated in [Safe Conversations at Unity of Houston](#) for about a year and a half, two years, and we are here now to talk about it. I wrote about Safe and Meaningful Conversations on my blog two or three times. And each time someone asked me, What's that? How did you do it? How did you all get started? How did you manage to have that kind of a group?

And so, I decided that we would do this session where we would explain what Safe and Meaningful Conversations was, why we all participated, and how it worked out. I went to the new senior minister of Unity, when he first got appointed, and said, I want to be involved. And I know you have a strong social justice orientation. How can I be involved? And he referred me to Cindy. Cindy, why don't you take it from there? Explain your involvement and how Safe Conversations evolved.

Cindy 1:21

Healing the Heart of America emerged out of my own sleepless nights, as it seemed our country was going into a very dark place with a lot of polarization around multiple things, but a frightening reemergence from my perspective in White supremacy being openly expressed. In my mind, I realized I had deluded myself into thinking that we had solved these problems in the 1960s and 70s, that it was just a question of time before we adapted and generations moved on. And I looked at the election of Barack Obama as confirmation of my misunderstanding of history, that this was done, we're on the path, we're working our way through it, isn't it great?

Shortly after his election, it became clear that we weren't done, and the forces of White supremacy started reasserting themselves in very visible ways. I slowly became aware that this was something that was on my heart and something I wanted to deal with personally, to try and make the world better around this. And one impediment to my being able to be useful was my own ignorance. In order to address my ignorance, I had to get educated – there were good books, and I was starting to read the good books – but I really needed conversations with people that would help me understand what was going on and what were the perspectives of Black people about what was happening. Clearly, I had been intentionally isolated through our

systems in our country from appropriate contact with people of color so that I wouldn't know what the lived experience of Black people was.

And as we began the Healing the Heart of America series, we did a whole bunch of different things, lectures, activities, you led some of them, Jean, they were fantastic. It became clear that we needed to be in conversation deeply and without fear. But the fear was so high, especially among White people, myself included, that I would say something that was offensive, that I would show my ignorance and be embarrassed. There were just so many impediments to me becoming the person I wanted to be, which was fully informed. In asking for a safe conversation setting, we were blessed to have your husband Diallo step up and say he would be willing to facilitate that. Because clearly, I didn't have the skill set, couldn't volunteer to do that, I was needing to be the student in that setting. So I'm very grateful that it emerged from that collective request. And that Diallo stepped up.

Diallo 4:08

I was reluctant at first, because my experience had been to talk and run conversations. And this required something different, which meant that you had to be a deep listener, and keep yourself out of it. And so, I thought about that for a while and remembered back to a very important experience I had when I first got into sales. What made you successful was to learn how to listen and to listen deeply. Then you would know what to say, in order to solve people's problems and get them what they want. So when we started Safe Conversations, that was my opportunity to start practicing that again. And it turned out I really love that because when you listen deeply, you actually get to know people better, of course. For me, it was a great experience to improve me. But also, to continue to participate in Unity Church activities which I came to really enjoy.

5:24 Why did you choose Unity?

Rev. Karen 5:29

Unity as a movement is very progressive-minded and also very inclusive and looking at strengthening its ability to relate to diversity, inclusion, and all of the ways in which educating people and moving forward together socially as well as spiritually is just a part of our DNA. Unity of Houston under Rev. Michael Gott's leadership, beginning in 2017, was about the time that I returned to Unity of Houston, it's my home church, and coming on board as his senior associate. I had already been doing some work at my church that I had been pastoring for 13 years in New Braunfels. I just felt that it was absolutely imperative to me as leader to have conversations in my church.

Now, I wasn't skilled, I didn't have diversity in my church, I had one wonderful, amazing, evolved, beautiful spiritual woman, who's African American and a veteran and had been a leader of our ministry, had been our board president, and so I asked her if she would be with me in having some of these conversations, and teach us, just as Cindy said, how to see things. That experience over several conversations that we were able to have, were nowhere near what I was wanting to achieve but it was a beginning and it was dipping my toe into this, such that when I joined the Healing the Heart of America effort and sort of took over in co-leadership from Rev. Michael, so he could become the senior minister and take on those duties, I got to be with Cindy and to meet Jean and Diallo and have the opportunity to just jump into a program in process already. And when Safe and Meaningful Conversations came along, to be so much more skillfully led and facilitated, I was all in.

8:00 Looking back at Day 1

Alyce 8:04

I came because to have the conversations, you have to have people of all races in order to get all perspectives. And I came because I was just willing to share, as appropriate, my experiences as a Black woman in America and to allow people to say, “Hmm, well, I didn't mean it that way.” Or, “Wow! I didn't realize how hurtful that statement or activity or action could have been.” I was just open. I was just open and willing. And, it was a great experience for me. I think the conversations helped a lot of people get more comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Natasha 9:03

The thing that I remember the most was being optimistic that it was something being taken on by the church to offer an environment that would promote some sense of positivity, given everything that was going on. And so, like Alyce mentioned, there was a sense of expectancy, there was a sense of hope that especially being an immigrant, who, for me personally, I idolized this country a lot as a child. And having been immersed in all this turmoil, I just remember feeling, well, there's going to be something to help me process everything that's going on. And there was a sense of, okay, if there's going to be sharing, there's going to be perspective. So, it was hopeful, it was an extremely hopeful environment. I do remember it being mixed. And I do remember people sharing from their hearts. That, I remember.

Rev. Karen 10:22

Yes, I was really grateful. Grateful to see the longstanding members of our church, the representation of, certainly, the Black participants, in particular. I recognized in my previous experience at the church, my 13-year gap, or 15-year gap, actually, and then coming back, and then seeing that they were still actively involved. And that they were showing up for this, was so exciting to me to be able to hear their stories, and to understand what it was they were hoping to get from it, because I knew what I needed to get from it. I needed training and education. I needed perspective and understanding. But I didn't know what they would get from it. And so, it was such an opportunity.

Cindy 11:35

My recollection of day one is profound gratitude that the people who showed up showed up, because we couldn't have a conversation if people weren't courageous enough to enter the room. I was scared, like Karen was, to say the wrong thing, or put my foot in my mouth or demonstrate my ignorance. So I just kept saying to myself, “Shut up and listen. Shut up and listen.” That was like a little internal mantra, because I had become aware of how often White people speak over people of color. And I was determined not to do that during these conversations.

12:10 How did you decide to conduct your facilitation?

Diallo 12:13

There was a mental model for me, which would be The Truth and Reconciliation Commission out of South Africa, where it was a place for people to come and open up and not be attacked for

doing so. The other thing was having been a talk show host, I had to learn how to take me out of it. Which is hard sometimes when you've done that so much. But again, for me, it was a chance to learn. And thus, my approach was to take me out of it, use the commission's model, and see where it would go.

And believe me in the first month or two, I was definitely learning. Probably one of the biggest surprises were White people who were sort of shocked to hear what some Black people were saying. It was interesting to find out, to some extent, how some people grew up, especially Black people in that they weren't exposed to certain things. They hadn't experienced certain things. And as time went along, I saw how people got more and more comfortable.

One of the fears I had was, I didn't have any doubt that Black people would be able to express themselves and talk about how they experienced the world. What I didn't want to see was a situation where White people felt like they were being put upon. And as it went along, I found out that wasn't anything I needed to control. Every one there was kind and willing to listen. And especially when I heard Black people ask White people questions so that they could get more information, White people were asking Black people, Black people weren't there just to spout off about their pain. They were there to listen and learn. And that was a beautiful thing to see.

14:20 Was there a pivotal moment for you?

Alyce 14:26

Just the ability of Black people to be open to sharing without judgment, their experiences, and willing to ask gentle questions of the White people that were present, not out of blame or shame or anything like that. I think that the conversations were not just friendly, they were open like with an open heart. You know, you call it Healing the Heart of America. I think that the Black and White people there were really willing to come from the heart in a way of saying, I want to hear you, I see you, I want to hear you, I want to understand, I want to know, I want to do better.

I grew up Presbyterian with some experience with youth who happened to be White, and that whole organization, and as an adult person, eventually getting to Unity, I became a licensed teacher and understood more about opening the heart, and not letting race be a determiner of anything. So I showed up, because I was trying to grow me. I was trying to be what I really think I should be in the world – open, accepting, willing to listen, to support – that's why I showed up. And for me, that was a big step. I learned that I have a big heart. I learned that I am open; I am more and more open than I am closed. And that we're all the same; we really, really, really, really, we're all the same, and we can learn to connect.

Natasha 16:28

I just was really astounded at some of the stories shared, but kind of like what is being expressed it kind of opened my heart to understand that people were just sharing from their hearts. And as a listener, I needed to grow and be open minded and understand that this was their experience. And it's okay. They're sharing it now, with the hope to understand, and in listening during the conversations, to gather these different perspectives. So, from that standpoint, it ultimately was a real growing experience or an opportunity for tremendous growth, in terms of getting out of my state of naivete of how the world or how our country works

or my perception of people, and understanding that everybody is really and truly living an individual experience.

And hopefully, the Healing the Heart of America, and Safe and Meaningful Conversations, get people to share their experiences, recognize and appreciate differences. And not be tolerable or tolerant to their differences, but actually embrace it. Recognize it, appreciate it, and embrace it. As Diallo was saying, when you listen to people and you can hear them and you can empathize with them, you can share, there is something about being in the same room with people and sharing in a safe space in an environment of trust. You can't put a price on that. You cannot put a price on that. And that's one of the big takeaways from this program for me.

Cindy 18:43

One of the earliest pivotal moments for me was, I was so fixated on listening. And someone, one of the Black ladies said to me, I need to know what you think. And I had been so differing, that it was creating this impression, I think, that I wasn't engaged or I wouldn't be vulnerable. And I realized I needed to speak. But I also felt like, you know, I'm the person of privilege who's ignorant here, what am I speaking about? What do I speak about? But I realized sharing the perspective of my ignorance was in and of itself helpful. I think Diallo kind of indicated he was a little bit surprised to see how little we knew. And we meant it. We weren't lying, we really had been sheltered in these little bubbles.

And once I realized how I had been separated from reality very intentionally, not because of my parents doing anything wrong, but because society set up these White suburbs and White schools and I just didn't have any friends of color, and how are you going to know what you don't know? But what I realized was, I had to have the courage to share those very feelings that I felt betrayed, that I felt lied to, that I realized it was far more systemic and deep the racism in our culture than I had any idea. And I think, being willing to share that really helped build trust.

The second big "a-hah!" I had was awakening to my own expectation that there would be one Black perspective about everything. And the brilliant thing about listening to multiple people of color in a room is you realize there's a whole lot of perspectives on pretty much anything you bring up. And why did I assume there would be a "Black" perspective? I mean, that's just like another part of the deprogramming you have to do is that issues are complex, and there are multiple perspectives on all of it.

Rev. Karen 20:46

You know, I was really so impressed, and still am, by, as I said, the people in the congregation that I thought I knew well. Now I'm talking about, you know, the Black congregants, that as I said, have been leaders and deeply participating for decades. For me to know them before, they had to have been at least 20 years or longer, and many of them 30 years, almost 40 years that this was their church. And they told stories: about their experience in civil rights, and the various marches that they had been part of, and what they had done, and how they had acted in amazing ways in their lives, or the struggles or the pain or the ways in which they were not allowed or given the simple basics that I took for granted that I thought everyone had. And these were people I loved and respected, I knew, but I didn't know.

And so, it was a way for me to understand the magnanimity and the generosity of their souls that they said their experience of what we were doing, and speaking from our ignorance, my ignorance as a White person, my misunderstanding of things and misreading, that they never

expected to be able to have this kind of a conversation with White people or with a representative from the ministry, in their own church that they served so faithfully all those decades. They listened to my background and to my questions and my ignorance. And they even made excuses for it. I mean, there were times, well, you didn't know.

And I was like, no, it is not okay to me, because I began to see how, just as Cindy said, how I'd been lied to, how I'd been set up, how racism affects all of us. And it robs us all. And it puts us in bubbles that we don't even get the same information. We can't even interpret things. And the anger became real for me, it became personal. And it really penetrated my heart in a whole different way. My heart has been broken open, because it matters to me. I know people I love and care about, and it's not right and it's not fair. And it has to be changed. And that's where I live right now, I live there, of knowing things are not the way they need to be and they need to change.

Diallo 24:41

A lot of Black people have grown up keeping certain things to themselves. So as an example, I've always smiled at the fact that Black people actually know more about White people than White people know about Black people because we used to work in their homes – not me personally, but my grandmother did – and they would know the families intimately. But they wouldn't talk about their own families intimately. And then they would come back and bring that information and talk to the family and the extended family about what they had learned and what things were like.

So it was interesting, in conversations, when some of that started to come out the reaction, good reaction that some White people had to that and it came a time when I thought, well, a good thing to do would be to expand the conversation in a way outside of the group by bringing in subject matter from outside of the group, so there was more to talk about and more to be spoken about. And I would look at news during the day, and I would see news clips where people were talking about things, subjects of the day. It was clear that that particular subject would work to bring it in and lay it out on the table or as we did, play some clips, people will listen to it and then start to comment on that. But then when they commented on it, the conversation always went past the material that I brought in, because what it would do is, it would loosen something else inside of people, and they would talk more about.

26:33 What was your takeaway?

Rev. Karen 26:39

It was getting the privilege to hear the stories that I would never have heard from the people I thought I already knew, at the depth that I did, and I feel drawn in. The other thing is that I witnessed anger and rage in the in Black congregants telling their stories. And, of course, you know, the ways in which the White people kept professing what we knew and what we didn't know. What we saw and what we didn't see, and all of that. And seeing those things coming together.

What it did for me was it drew me closer to each and every person in the room in greater respect. But it also drew me closer to those I thought I already knew. And now I feel a kinship, I feel a deeper connection in broken heartedness and pain and anger. It really helped me to see them, honestly. And I felt drawn in and closer and privileged to be let in. And again, the respect

just goes through the roof. I can't express that enough of how I feel about the holiness of what transpired in that room and in those conversations.

Alyce 28:39

I think it was an awesome experience. And I encourage others who are willing to be willing and open to try to have these kinds of conversations and just go slow. And you can grow and you can uncover so many wonderful things and new relationships even, I think it's just an awesome process. I think it's worthwhile.

Cindy 29:04

What I got out of it was new friendships which are treasured and invaluable. I got some humility and some skill around listening deeply and speaking deeply and re-understanding everything. Just deconstructing what I thought I knew and being willing to rebuild it from a better, stronger place. The ability to just be in this conversation, and stay there, was what I wanted, and that's what I got. And from that has just come so many important and valuable things. But the most valuable are the new friendships.

Jean 29:49

One of the things that I discovered, which was how silent I had been. The other was actually a pivotal moment for me. When there was some discussion going on, and the Black people kept saying to the White people, "You had to have known." And the White people said, "No. We really did not know." And then we, as Black people, debated did they really not know, or are they jiving us? And then the Whites kept saying we really did not know your life was like that. I have relayed that story to friends of mine. And I have one friend who says they had to know. And I said, I was there, the White people do not know what we go through. And my friend to this day, argues me down, because she's working with some Whites whom she's sure know that what they are doing is offensive. And I'm telling her what they're doing, they may not know.

So, for me, this whole discrepancy between we as Black people, assuming White people know, what they really don't know, was a big learning experience for me because I worked around White people for the last umpteen years. And I've taught social justice in graduate school. So, I thought I knew what White people did know. But Safe Conversations taught me otherwise. And I learned the depth of it.

Rev. Karen 31:37

There're two things I want to say. One, in response to what you were saying, I'm going to say I have become aware, I was trained not to see, I was trained. When I would ask questions at any juncture, I was given a pat answer. And I was put back into the protection of, they reinterpreted my reality, it would be reinterpreted back to me. It wasn't polite to stare, it wasn't polite to look, don't look, don't look at a Black man that is walking down the street, don't make eye contact, look down, look away. I now find myself even now struggling to be in a room with people I know. People whose names I know, people whose stories I know. And somehow, I'll look around for a Black person that I know was supposed to be here, and I'm looking and they're not here. And then suddenly, they're right over here next to me, or they're right there.

I still have some sort of unconscious trained not to see; not to see Black, not to see different or something. And so, I'm aware that the training goes really neurolinguistic or whatever, really, really deep. It doesn't explain everything. And it doesn't mean we can do harm, and then act like it doesn't hurt or anything. I mean, we can all be in denial, that's always the case. But there

are certain things that we were simply trained to see or not see or speak about and not speak about, and that we've forgotten that we knew.

The other thing I really want to say is, especially for anybody who wants to do this kind of work, Diallo's facilitator-ship was really important and pivotal. You know, the things that I heard Cindy explaining, I think she represented a lot of our White fears of being blamed or being wrong in how we speak or inadvertently hurt or look ignorant or anything else. And it was really Diallo's presence, his very open, peaceful state of bringing something to provoke us or to invoke reaction whatever the subject was, however it was. He told his story. He told it unvarnished as far as I can tell, and in doing that he created a real safe space where I felt heard. I felt safe to ask questions. I really felt like he provided an atmosphere of acceptance. And that he wouldn't let things go off the rails.

Maybe that was my other fear at the very beginning that I told you, in case something blows up in the room, I was taking on a lot of responsibility but I was able to relax and know that Diallo has got this and he's going to help us navigate things that he can see are incendiary, and how we can address them, and how we can come back to being able to hear one another. So, I just don't want to underestimate the importance of the figure of facilitation and the skills that that person might have.

Diallo 35:39

Thank you very much for those comments. That was very nice. But one of the things that came out of this for me was, it was clear that people wanted to talk, they wanted to understand, and they wanted to listen. So, intervention was not something that happened all the time, because people really wanted to hear, they really wanted to talk and understand each other. And in a room of people with that many differences, it became like a family. And, yeah, people came back. I mean, they kept coming back. That's a family. So, I appreciate the opportunity of having been able to do that.

Cindy 36:22

I don't want this to just be educating the White people, although certainly educating the White people is a big part of the job these days. But I hope there was a healing on the other side as well, to know that there is good intention. And antiracism is a real commitment that I have made, I know Reverend Karen has made, Reverend Gott has made, to try and make some permanent change in the world. So that this is not just a wasn't that a nice, sweet experience thing? But also, wasn't that the beginning of something important?

Alyce 37:00

Well, Reverend Karen and Cindy, I really want you to hear from me that I told Jean early on, well, not really early on, but halfway through. I said, "I am so tired educating White folks." And she said, "Alyce, Alyce, think about it." And so, what I've come to is that it is okay. It is okay, if this is a part I can play in the life that I am in, in this space and time is to help someone, whether it's related to racism or any other "ism" then I'm willing, I'm willing. And so, Cindy, it's okay. It is okay. Karen, it's okay. It's okay. You had Black people in those groups, in those meetings that were saying, it's okay. There's no judgment here. We're willing to share, we're not going to beat you up for what you didn't experience, what you don't understand, that it's okay.

And because they're present, or we're present, it means that we're willing, and there's no guilt that you should feel about it at all. Just the fact that you're willing to share and understand and

grow. I mean, that's wonderful to me. That's all. That's everything. So, I'm just saying, if Black people show up in these kinds of meetings, it's because they're willing to listen and to hear and support, and to guide and to allow you to understand and grow. And that's all that matters to me.

Jean 38:40

I will add that I saw it as a lot more balanced than Karen and Cindy are talking about. In the beginning, the White people came and I at some point – I wanted to say the flow of it – the White people came and the Black, we were so excited. We the Black people just overflowed with our stories, competing for floor space so we could tell our stories, and the Whites sat and listened.

And then at some point, we started saying, what are they thinking? What's their story? How come? What do they know? And then it flipped. And for several sessions, we wanted the White people to tell their stories. And so, I remembered when the flip happened and it came about White people's stories and why you didn't know and why you cared. And to me that balanced it out. We had more stories to tell. So proportionately it might not have been the same but energy wise it was the same for me.

So, to those of you who are listening to this, in case you haven't figured it out, it was a wonderful, great, life changing experience for all of us. So, I would like to say to all of you who showed up for this record of what we did, thanks for being here, thanks for sharing your memory of what happened. And to those of you who are listening, thanks for listening.

Healing the Heart of America website: <https://unityhouston.org/spiritual-teaching/healing-the-heart-of-america/>

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