

## **George Hrbek: The Selma Minister Who Built a White Antiracist Spiritual Community in Chicago**

*By Lynn Burnett*

George Hrbek was a White Lutheran minister in Selma during the early civil rights era... a minister who once got into a fistfight with the president of the White Citizens Council, and who would pull his car over to confront groups of robed Klansmen. This not-entirely nonviolent minister also played a small role in helping found the Selma chapter of Martin Luther King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Hrbek's destiny was not to stay in Selma, however: he moved up to Chicago, where he helped found a White antiracist spiritual community focused on educating White folks about systemic racism. He did so with the input and blessing of Martin Luther King, who was tackling discriminatory housing policies and economic disparities in the city. King believed that Hrbek was on the right track: real change would require White people to deepen their understandings of racism as something that was not merely an attitudinal problem of personal prejudice, but a systemic problem built into the very structures of American society. This was a vision that the Black Panther Party could get behind as well. George Hrbek soon became a comrade of Fred Hampton, and members of the Rainbow Coalition came through his White antiracist spiritual community from time to time. Shortly after Hampton's assassination, George relocated to Cleveland, where he has lived and worked ever since. There, he has leveraged local religious networks to support antiracist programs and policy changes, with the goal of making citywide and regional impacts. He turned 90 during the twenty-five hours of interviews on which the following story is based.

### **Youth: The Roots of an Antiracist Life**

Born in 1931, George Hrbek was raised amongst a large extended Czech family in New Jersey, whose elders had emigrated from Bohemia. George's great-grandfather was a musician who had been excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church, partly because the church insisted that the money the band made playing for weddings and funerals should be turned over to the church... whereas he insisted on giving it to the musicians who had families to feed. Excommunication made finding work impossible, and thus began the immigration story of the Hrbek family... as well as an intergenerational opposition to institutionalized religion. George's grandfather embraced Marxism and joined the Communist Party, and George's father became a committed New Dealer and an agnostic. Every Sunday during George's childhood, the large extended family would gather for dinner at his grandmother's house, where George remembers being entranced by the passionate political debates of his elders. As George recalls:

“At home, we ate our family meals together. Always. And my dad insisted that after we ate we had to spend a half hour, at the table, talking about the world,

what was going on in the country. Social issues, politics, literature. I hated it! I wanted to be out playing stickball or something! What was very important was that I used to listen to my grandfathers and my uncles get into these political discussions, talking about social issues . . . and I was fascinated by those discussions. They talked a lot about the social conditions of miners, and the conditions of Blacks. And I remember my mother's mother saying to me – they lived on Long Island, and I'd go out there every summer – she said to me, 'Georgie, if I were a Negro, I'd burn the whole damn country down!' And I felt I needed to know what she meant by that. So I was picking up this sense that we had some responsibility to deal with injustice . . . I picked that up from my grandparents, my uncles and aunts, my parents."

George was deeply shaped by his father's seriousness and his extended family's passion for justice... but also by his mother's playfulness. She was a pianist who came out of the 20's [flapper era](#), who had met George's father on a party boat during Prohibition. George credits the humor and playful spirit he inherited from his mother for helping him stay in the movement for the long haul, and for navigating and deescalating many a difficult circumstance. He smiles remembering her:

"She was the fun one in the family. I don't think she ever lost her flapper identity! She loved to dance. She delighted in all the simple things. She used to sit at the piano and play Saint Louis blues. She was an avid reader. She kept a sense of humor well and alive in our family life, and was my great encourager and affirmer. I think I look more like her than my dad . . . I'm probably more like her in personality."

For the first four years of his life, this extended Czech family was George's world. Then, his New Dealer father took a job in Warm Springs, Georgia, working as an architect for a passion project of Franklin Roosevelt. The small town had mineral hot springs that Roosevelt hoped could benefit children with polio, and George's dad helped design and construct a free therapeutic center, which was funded by Roosevelt's [March of Dimes](#) program. Roosevelt visited so frequently that his retreat home was called the "[Little White House](#)." George remembers the president as an avid swimmer – George learned to swim in the pool Roosevelt swam in – and that he always ate his meals in the large dining hall with the residents. Every Christmas and Easter, Roosevelt also threw parties for the people working on the project:

"One Christmas, my parents and I were in the line of guests to be greeted by FDR and Eleanor. When we got to the seated president, he sat me on his lap. I was four-and-a-half years old. I have no idea what he said to me. Thinking back now, I think... 'Wow, I sat on President Roosevelt's lap!' But at the time I wasn't wowed. The big thing for me was that they were handing out Santa Claus ice cream popsicles to all the kids! That's what I had my mind on!"

Much more formative for George's life than being around the President of the United States was the experience of walking down the sidewalk. Warm Springs had dirt

streets that turned to mud in the rain, and the sidewalks were made of elevated wooden planks. George had never seen Black people until he moved to Warm Springs, and watching them step off the sidewalks into the mud when [White](#) people walked by disturbed him. As George recalls:

“When I asked my dad why that was, he spent quite a bit of time with me, trying to explain to me in some way that I might understand what Jim Crow was about. He told me it was wrong, that it had to change, and that it *was* going to change. That was my first conversation about race, at age four and a half.”

By the time George was six years old, the project at Warm Springs had completed. He moved back to New Jersey, living in a world that was almost entirely White. However, the image of Black people having to step into mud stayed with him... as did his father’s words.

### **A Troubled Teenager is Called to the Ministry**

Shortly after his return to New Jersey, George began struggling in school, and was suspended numerous times as a child. The juxtaposition between a large, caring family where everyone was affirmed and supported in expressing themselves, and the rigid, disciplinary school system that practiced corporal punishment was too great. In 4<sup>th</sup> grade, George had to go to the bathroom badly, but the teacher wouldn’t let him no matter how much he asked. Instead of peeing in his pants George went over to the corner of the classroom and relieved himself. He had a gleam in his eye recalling this story: “I never had any problems after that!” George laughed: “The strategy worked.”

The rigid discipline, however, continued. In fifth grade, the children had to line up and march back to the classroom after recess. Once, some of the kids tripped George. His teacher, seeing only that he was out of line, yelled at him to go stand in the corner of her classroom and face the wall. She then berated him in front of the class, grabbing him by his chin with one hand and his hair with the other and shaking him. He yelled: “Let me go! Let me go!” When the teacher kept shaking him, he punched her in the stomach. When he was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, another teacher ordered George to hold his hands out on the desk, to be hit with a yardstick. As she raised her arm to swing, George grabbed the straight pen out of his inkwell and held it up. Her hand swung right down onto the pen. After that incident, George wasn’t allowed back into school until he had a psychiatric evaluation – which, perhaps to the teacher’s ire, found that he was a “healthy, all-American boy.” Recalling that moment, George laughed: “I did not do that intentionally. But I was not sorry about it!”

When George was 13, the passionate discussions at the dinner table turned to religion. He came up with a clever way to avoid participating in the subject. He

exclaimed that since his agnostic family had never taken him to a church, he knew nothing about religion, and therefore couldn't participate in the conversation. He should be allowed to go outside with his friends. However, George's father turned the tables on him, in a way that would shape the rest of George's life: he exclaimed that for the next eight Sundays, they were going to go to different churches, so that George could learn something.

They went to Presbyterian, Baptist, Dutch Reformed, and Methodist churches, until one Sunday they arrived at a Lutheran church. To his surprise, the pastor who came out to greet them was a young man who George knew from the streets. The kids were always organizing sporting events for themselves, and Arthur Hawlicheck – a Czech in his late-twenties who the teens thought of as a cool guy – would always cheer them on and volunteer to umpire their baseball games. Hawlicheck always dressed in Levis, and George had never known he was a pastor. "I was fascinated by that," George recalled, referring to the way Hawlicheck embodied kindness and community in his daily life, without emphasizing his status. "And I went back to that church on my own. He became a mentor for me, at a critical time in my life."

The sermon George heard on that first day at Hawlicheck's church spoke directly to the anger he felt at an education system that "treated kids like shit":

"What I heard – and what I think Hawlicheck meant me to hear – was that you are created by God, and there's nobody who can add to your worth as a human being, and there's nobody who can take away from your worth. You're gifted; every human being is gifted. And when I heard that, I decided I wanted to go back and talk with this guy."

Arthur Hawlicheck took George Hrbek under his wing. George was passionate about justice, and the pastor helped the young man frame the pursuit of justice within the context of Jesus's teachings. George was especially drawn to how Hawlicheck lived those teachings, and found himself thinking that he wanted to live that way too. And so, the rebellious teenager who despised the rigid and oppressive school system began thinking about becoming a minister. Although George's parents were agnostics, they saw how good the church was for their son, and affirmed his choice. A few years after George's baptism, his parents had a series of chance encounters with Hawlicheck in the neighborhood tavern. The conversations they had there convinced them to join the church as well. George chuckles at this recollection: "My dad used to kid around and say, 'we had a little child who led us.'"

### **Before Seminary... Birmingham**

At the end of George's sophomore year in high school, his father went into partnership with an architect he had worked with on Roosevelt's project in Warm Springs. The new project was in Birmingham. And so, George's dad arranged for him

to take his final exams a month early. Then George headed south on what was to be an epic month-long road trip with his father. They took their time: George's dad, the New Dealer son of a Marxist, wanted to make the journey an educational experience for George. And so, they visited the mining towns and the mills. They drove through Black neighborhoods, past Black schools and hospitals, so George could witness the disparity with his own eyes. As George recalls his father saying, "I want you to see what's happening."

"For a month, we journeyed south. We slept in fleabag hotels; we slept by the side of the road. It was a really great experience for me to spend that time with my dad. And it gave me a broader exposure to the South. Not only Jim Crow, but how Whites were exploited also. And it further convinced me that I couldn't ignore that... whatever shape or form that took in my life, I couldn't ignore that. And it made being in Birmingham all that much more difficult for me . . . I went to a segregated high school. I hated it."

It wasn't long before George was being kicked out of class for pushing back on the Jim Crow narratives in his history classes... and on [Lost Cause](#) mythologies of the Civil War in particular. But this wasn't all he pushed back on: soon, George Hrbek's passion for justice and dignity would lead not only to suspensions, but to his first arrest.

"I got on a streetcar. Every seat was taken... so I stood. At the next stop, this White guy gets on... he walked right past me and moved the 'Colored' sign one seat back, and made these two women get up. I immediately reacted, I moved the sign back and told him to give the women their seat back. The man shouted a bunch of epithets and then took a swing at me. We got in a fistfight and I got arrested and taken downtown, and my dad had to come and get me. My dad got the brunt of it – the sergeant told him that he had to keep his kids under control. But once we left the police station, my parents affirmed what I did. They told me I had done the right thing."

### **Seminary: Rebellion Against Institutionalized Religion**

After graduating, George attended a small Lutheran college in Indiana, with plans never to return to the South again. Although he remembers being quite average academically, he enjoyed the social life that college offered. In addition to carousing with his friends, George sang in the travelling college choir. He was assistant editor for the school newspaper... alongside editor (and soon-to-be renowned civil rights minister) Joseph Ellwanger, whose family would soon have a profound influence on George. He was also a starter on the basketball team, and worked as a fry cook at a popular hamburger joint during the off-season. During the summer he took on a series of jobs that also influenced his understanding of the world:

“I worked in a marina one summer, down in Florida. And then one summer I worked at a cannery in Wisconsin – for Dole – which had big farms up there. And I worked with migrant farm laborers, harvesting peas and cabbages. And then I worked up in North Dakota, on a cattle ranch . . . that was all due to my dad, who encouraged me to do that. So if I’m going to talk about my education, I have to talk about those experiences, that gave me a more global sense, a sense of different cultures, and a sense of what people were really struggling with.”

Although George enjoyed his college years, he was still searching for something deeper. He hoped he would find it in seminary, (during which he worked at a cocktail lounge, and as a cab driver.) However, unlike his previous experiences in the Lutheran church, the seminary was rigid and dogmatic. As George recalls:

“The theology I heard there was not the theology I had embraced. They taught us in seminary that we should not be too close to the people. That people should only see us pastors at our best . . . I always felt that church ought to be the one place where you can be really open and honest, where you can be who you are and be loved and accepted . . . I began to feel very cynical. I told myself, ‘Well, I have to get through this institution if I want to be a pastor.’”

After an escalating series of events, George was expelled from the seminary. In his speech class, the professor assigned him to give a speech on the topic “What do Blacks Have to do to Succeed?” George was expected to argue that Black people needed to lift themselves up by their bootstraps. Instead, he argued that “you couldn’t lift yourselves up by your bootstraps if you didn’t have boots to begin with.” When the professor lowered George’s grade based on the content of his speech, George forthrightly reminded the professor that the grade was about the quality of the speech, not the position it took. Even though George was polite – as he had been in high school when he critiqued Lost Cause mythologies – such feedback was not appreciated.

On another occasion, George told a different professor that he wasn’t going to buy his book, because he didn’t think what was inside was worth the money. But the final straw leading to his dismissal was getting married over the summer, to a woman named Gertrude, with whom he would soon have four children. Seminary students weren’t allowed to marry until they graduated: George was out. He spent two years working as an elementary school teacher and basketball coach at an inner city parochial school, during which he questioned his calling to become a minister. And yet, when he had the chance to return to the seminary, he took it.

Seminary offered George the opportunity to immerse himself in the work of figures who represented the spiritual lineage he aspired to. Chief amongst them was [Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#). Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor who ran a network of underground seminaries during the era of Nazi control, as part of the anti-Nazi

[Confessing Church movement](#). He had lived briefly in the U.S., worshipping in Black churches, studying [Black Spirituals](#), and teaching Sunday school in Harlem. Instead of staying safe in the U.S., he returned to Germany to organize against the evils of Nazism. In these dark times, Bonhoeffer taught underground anti-Nazi congregations the Spirituals as a way to generate the inner strength needed to forge ahead. Bonhoeffer rejected the term “Christian,” because of how seriously he felt it had been misappropriated and misunderstood. Instead, he talked about being a follower of Jesus. For Bonhoeffer, the teachings of Jesus offered a way to show up for good in the world, to move through fear and do the right thing no matter the obstacles. His underground congregations provided Jews passage out of Germany at great risk. Bonhoeffer was hung by the Nazi regime a mere month before Germany’s defeat, after being accused of participating in an assassination plot against Hitler. George read everything he could by this great German theologian and master of organizing spiritual communities in the face of fear and oppression.

Over time, George also connected with a handful of like-minded students... including John and [Joseph Ellwanger](#), who came from Selma, and whose father was the president of the Black Lutheran Academy and College, and the Association of Black Lutheran churches in the Selma region. The White Ellwanger family was, in other words, extremely well connected to Selma’s network of Black churches. George admired the Ellwangers, and during his time in seminary, took two road trips down to Selma with Joseph. Joseph Ellwanger would later become the only White person who [Martin Luther King](#) invited into high-level discussions with President Johnson and Governor George Wallace during the Selma campaign.

George admired the Ellwangers’ work in Selma, but was dismayed when, upon graduating, he was tasked with starting a church there. He wanted to get as far away from the Jim Crow South as possible. “I have to confess to you,” George told me, “the last place I wanted to go to when I graduated from seminary was Alabama. When I got assigned to go to Selma, I was not happy. And especially to start a White church! But I look back on it now and see how fortunate I was.” George’s early life had laid all the right foundations for a deeper journey into racial justice. Now, that story was about to begin in earnest.

### **Selma: Initiation into the Movement**

At age 27, George began growing a congregation: Saint John’s Lutheran Church, in Selma. The year was 1958 – two years after the Montgomery bus boycott, but also two years before the sit-ins turned the civil rights struggle into a truly region-wide, mass movement. Through his connections to the Ellwangers, George arrived in Selma with connections to the Black community. The Ellwangers, working with a group of Black pastors and lay leaders, planned an integrated ordination for George. The ceremony was held in a small chapel on the grounds of a Methodist orphanage...



the only location where an integrated ordination service could legally be held. George recalls the moment: "It was okay. I'm not too much into tradition."

For George, his own ordination was not the most important moment of the day... although sharing the moment with his family was a deeply meaningful experience. What excited him the most was the opportunity to meet [Rosa Young](#) at the reception. The granddaughter of slaves was a legendary advocate for Black rural education and trainer of Black teachers. Her enormous efforts involved collaborating with the Lutheran church to found roughly 50 one-room schoolhouses throughout the Southern Black Belt, as well as a Black high school and junior college in Selma. As George recalls, "She was considered the mother of Black Lutheranism and was part of the high school and college staff. I had read [her book](#) about her life. So after the ordination service, at the social reception, I asked if she might be willing to meet with me." Rosa Young didn't hesitate: she told him they could meet the very next day.

And so, the day after his ordination George found himself sitting on the front porch of one of Selma's great Black community leaders. He expressed his concerns to her: "I've been sent down here to start a White congregation. I call it Caucasians for Christ," he joked. Then getting more serious, George expressed that creating a segregated church was deeply troubling for him. "It goes against everything I believe," he told her. George remembers Rosa Young's response vividly:

"She just looked at me and said, 'Do it.' I asked her why. She didn't analyze it, she just said emphatically: 'Pastor George. Just do it.' And then she repeated again, calmly: 'Do it. At the right time... I'll let you know.' I had no idea what she meant and I asked her to explain, but she just laughed and said, 'Don't worry, Pastor George!' She kept it simple. She didn't make anything complicated. . . . But what I think is that she had some confidence in me. She thought that I would deal forthrightly with the Whites who became members of the church."

And so, George got started:

"I rented a room in the YMCA. I set up fifteen chairs. And I started advertising that we were going to start having services there. Nine people came that first Sunday. When thirteen people came I set up twenty chairs. Pretty soon we had fifty people gathering at that YMCA room. And we in a sense became a congregation then."

George grew his congregation by becoming deeply involved in the community... just like his mentor, Arthur Hawlicheck, had done. George worked with youth, and consulted with the child welfare system in Selma. He and his wife Gertrude took in foster children. He spoke up for better schools and hospitals in the Black community... a moral stance that could be admired even within the confines of Jim Crow. He didn't make waves by directly challenging segregation, and his community



involvement, charisma, and religious leadership soon made him popular. A passionate speaker, when the new YMCA opened he was invited to be the dedicatory speaker. When the statewide banker's association asked him to speak at their annual conference, George gave a speech titled "The Injustice of Economic Disparity." His challenging of the status quo seemed to bring admiration: George was named one of Alabama's "Young Men of the Year." Because of his community involvement, more progressive (or less conservative) Whites were drawn to the congregation. And because Craig Air Force Base was just outside of Selma, many White military families from the North gravitated towards George's church. Perhaps as Rosa Young had suspected, the congregation helped to build a more open-minded White community, at least relatively speaking.

Meanwhile, George was also meeting quietly with Black civil rights leaders who had much bigger plans. John Moss, a Black high school teacher, recruited him to help develop the Selma chapter of Martin Luther King's organization, the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#). The group met clandestinely . . . often at the soon-to-be famous [Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church](#), from which the 1965 Selma march was launched. Martin Luther King visited to help generate interest in the chapter and brainstorm future actions, and George met him briefly, just to shake his hand. George and his wife Gert also hosted Black students from the Lutheran college as dinner and dialog guests. During those gatherings, they had to close all the shades and sneak people into their house: while it was legal for Whites to have Black maids and servants in their homes, meetings of a more friendly nature were illegal. Recalling this, George remembers feeling guilty: "The Blacks who were participating were in much more danger than we were. We weren't taking nearly as big a risk."

One day when George was driving, he passed by a group of robed [Klansmen](#). He pulled over to ask them what they were doing, and then confronted them... something he could probably only get away with because he had become a popular community leader. When a friend of his was captured by the Klan, tied to a tree, and beaten, George didn't stay silent. "In my naiveté – I sometimes like to call it my holy naiveté," he said chuckling, "I contacted the head of the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama.

"It was [Bobby Shelton](#). I told him I wanted to meet with him, and Shelton set up a meeting at a local mom & pop diner in his hometown of Tuscaloosa. I was really angry. Shelton considered himself a Christian, so I confronted him with how he was out of step with the tenets of his own faith. Which of course went nowhere. Shelton was kinda a congenial guy and he was forthright in his racism and what he felt. And I was very frank with him about how I felt about the Klan. It probably didn't do any good."

Just like calling for better Black schools and hospitals could be accepted even within the Jim Crow system, so too could challenging groups like the Klan, whose violent tactics not all segregationists agreed with... but tolerated. When I asked George if he knew that he would have to take a stronger stance one day – one that directly challenged Jim Crow – he replied, "Yeah, I knew at some point that the bubble had to

burst.” On the one hand, he was trying to follow through on Rosa Young’s advice to focus on building the church, which meant not making too many waves. However: “I was unhappy about what I was *not* doing... and I was really happy when that time came, to get off the fence.”

George began to get off the fence once the congregation became large enough that they decided to build their own church. George’s dad was the architect. After the new church’s dedication ceremony,

“Rosa contacted me and said, ‘Now’s the time.’ I wanted to ask her, ‘What do you mean, now’s the time? But I just said, ‘Okay.’ And then, at our first Sunday service... here she comes, with thirty or forty Black Lutherans, parading to the service! And just came in like everybody else.

“Of course, the cops arrived within 5 minutes. I was leading the service, and a police officer yelled at me: ‘What are all these niggers doing here?!’ I simply said: ‘Worshipping.’ And then I invited them to worship with us as well. I think the police didn’t know what to do... there were some prominent members of the community in our church, and half of the families were military. So they just left. Nothing like it had ever happened in Selma before.

“We had Eucharist at that service, and I wondered if that would cause any problems... you know, everyone communing together, drinking out of the same common cup. But it didn’t. It turned out to be just a wonderful event. We had the usual kind of thing... after service coffee hour, fellowship, there was a lot of interaction and so on. But the next day it broke loose. Word got around quickly.”

At first, George was primarily concerned for Rosa Young’s welfare. He worried that she was more vulnerable to violent reprisal than he and his family were. However, the wrath of the White community turned instead towards George. His period of being a highly sought after speaker came to an abrupt close. He was kicked out of the White Clergy Association. The mayor even called George into his office: “He asked me if I was going to let ‘nigras’ come into my church. I responded, ‘It’s not my church. It’s Jesus’ church. You have to take it up with him.” None of this bothered George much: aside from reprimands from officials who he didn’t admire anyway and a handful of threatening phone calls, the backlash was surprisingly minimal. In fact, the public attention surfaced other sympathetic Whites, some of whom reached out to him. This included members of Selma’s Jewish community:

“Art Lewis, who was Jewish, owned the Buick dealership on the other side of the Edmund Pettus Bridge. He contacted me and said, ‘Some of the members of the temple would like to meet with you, but we have to do it clandestinely.’ And so they arranged a meeting in the garage of the Buick dealership, with about 20 Jewish men from the Temple. They apologized for not meeting publicly. They encouraged me to speak out more forcefully against Jim Crow,

and even offered me financial support. I told them to contribute to SCLC instead.”

Following that meeting, George was invited to speak at a Sabbath Day service. He didn't take the invitation lightly: the Jewish community was already a target in the Jim Crow environment, and inviting George to speak was a risky move for them.

Beyond the Jewish community, there were some White folks in Selma who opposed Jim Crow but were not open about it due to fear of retribution. George's church became a place for such people to gather. There were a small handful, however, who were outspoken. This included the town pharmacist, George Carter. Carter spoke out forcefully against his own church for supporting segregation. When Ross Barnett – Mississippi's rabidly racist governor – came to town, Carter invited Hrbek to attend a luncheon with the governor. Hrbek was puzzled by the invitation and declined, to which Carter responded by saying, “Aren't you my friend?” And so Hrbek went.

When Ross Barnett was introduced, there was thunderous applause... and then a few minutes into the speech, George Carter jumped up onto his chair and yelled, “Ross Barnett! You're a SON OF A BITCH!” As Carter was roughly removed from the audience, Hrbek understood why his friend had wanted him to attend. And yet, Carter was tolerated. Hrbek laughs: “Maybe because he was the only pharmacist in town!” And then more seriously: “Or maybe Selma was just willing to put up with a few people like that, and just say ‘Well, they're our town crackpots, we've all got a few of them.’” Many years later, Hrbek returned to Selma for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery March. He was surprised to see that Carter's Drugstore was still there. Carter had passed away, and when George asked the new owner – who was a White man – why he had kept the name, he responded: “Mr. Carter was a great man. No way would I change the name of this drug store.”

The time for George to get fully off of the fence came two and a half years after he arrived in Selma, when a White Baptist preacher gave a speech at a White Citizen's Council barbeque for high school students titled “Better Dead than Intermarried.” The event made the front page of the Selma Times Journal, which also reprinted a summary of the speech. George felt that he had a moral duty to respond. He personally delivered a rebuttal to the editor, Ed Fields... who showed up that evening at George's home and begged him to retract it: “George, please take this back. If you don't I'll publish it, but I really don't want to. I like you, and I don't want your family to get hurt.” When George refused, his rebuttal to the Baptist preacher was printed on the front page. It was one thing to say that Black people deserved better schools, and that the Klan's violence was unacceptable. To argue that interracial marriage, and thus implicitly interracial dating and sex were acceptable... that supported an intimacy that went far beyond sitting together at lunch counters or attending school together. George Hrbek had broken the White South's greatest taboo. “All hell broke loose. That was the end of my acceptance in Selma. I was physically attacked, a cross was burned...” He shrugs: “You know, that kind of thing.”

Shortly after the article was printed, George walked into an appliance store run by [Joe Smitherman](#). Smitherman was the head of the [White Citizens Council](#) (and the future mayor of Selma.) He made it clear that George wasn't welcome... by assaulting him. George had practiced boxing as a teenager as a way to let off steam, and quickly turned the tables. His eyes twinkled and his voice was gleeful as he told me: "I decked the head of the White Citizens Council right in the face!" However, there were more frightening moments. Once, a group of men ambushed George in a narrow hallway. George was able to push through them and make a run for it, but such moments left him shaken. One of the mothers of the foster children he and Gert cared for asked to meet with him, and then held a knife to his belly and accused him of turning her daughter into a "nigger lover." "I told her that if it made her feel any better, she should go ahead and kill me. And her hand started shaking and she put that knife down. And then I started shaking like a leaf... AFTER I left!" Reflecting back on this time, George once again expressed that he was naïve: "I was in my twenties when I moved to Selma. I wasn't in touch with my mortality."

Although there was no way he could know it at the time, George's reaction was a transformative moment in this woman's life:

"She never forgot that. Eight years later, I was in Oklahoma, and I got a letter from her... a long letter, asking me to forgive her, and saying that that was a changing point in her life. She thanked Gert and me for the love and care we gave to her daughter. That was powerful. It had an impact on me . . . She later lived with my sister in Birmingham, for four years."

Although George's broad, public popularity had collapsed, the moment brought a certain kind of joy: "I could finally live out my commitment more authentically. And the Black community, they embraced me like never before. It was a liberating time." He laughs: "When segregationists are calling you the enemy, you're doing something right!" Of critical importance was that when George Hrbek took his stand, it did not isolate him. He had the Black community. He had kept in contact with friends doing good work elsewhere, such as Joseph Ellwanger, who had become involved in Birmingham's civil rights efforts. And whereas other White ministers had been run out of town by their congregations when they took a stand for racial justice, George Hrbek's unique congregation stood by his side. This included the head of the local IRS office, a man named Charles Glass. When the White Citizens Council pressured Charles to leverage his social standing and organize the congregation against George, he told the Council to go to Hell.

Most importantly, George's own family was immensely proud of him for taking a stand. His most significant source of support was his wife Gertrude. As George recalls,

"She was raised on a farm in North Dakota. It was an environment where women were just expected to get married, have kids and take care of the

house. She had no previous experience in wrestling with race relations. But when we went to Selma, she was like a rock. Outspoken and forthright – if she didn't think something was right, she would say so. She supported me in everything I did. And she built powerful relationships with the women in the congregation – they related to her.”

Their children were too young to be in school, and thus avoided the kind of harassment that caused other parents to cave to pressure. George's parents, of course, had his back and showed their love. As George's sister, Janet Griffin, expressed to me:

“The church told him that he could have been the youngest president in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod if he would just quit his radical ways. He gave up so much power within the power structure to speak out . . . George showed me what it meant to *follow* Jesus, to do what Jesus would have done, instead of just believing some formula that's supposed to get you into Heaven.”

However, the Southern District of the Lutheran Church had other ideas for George. They told him there was a large church – Our Savior in New Orleans – that was willing to be a forerunner in church desegregation efforts. They thought George was the right pastor for the job. George expressed that he wanted to continue his work in Selma, but the Southern District was insistent. Under pressure, he and his family packed their things. After four years in Selma, they left in late 1962... just as the movement was escalating. Leaving Selma, and losing the chance to be part of its great civil rights struggle left George with a sense of regret. And yet, he emphasizes: “People hear that you were in Selma and they kind of romanticize it . . . But I guess I just don't feel that way. I was just fortunate enough to be there. It meant a lot to me in terms of my own growth. But I don't know how much I contributed.”

### **Out of Migrant Ministry... a Deeper Understanding of Racism**

The church in New Orleans was a big status bump for George as a pastor: he would now head a large, established church, with his own staff, a parochial school with 150 students, and a comfortable parsonage for his family to live in. George quickly came to regret accepting the position, however. He had met with the church leadership to make sure they were truly invested in their desegregation effort... but it turned out the leadership hadn't discussed their plans with the congregation. When George began the desegregation effort by welcoming a kindergartener from a Black Lutheran family into the church-affiliated school, the congregation turned on him. The leadership, unprepared for the backlash, left George to go it alone. In a mass meeting, 90 percent of the congregation voted for a resolution stating that they were an exclusively “Caucasian church.” George resigned in protest. Returning home from

a family vacation, he found that the congregation had moved his family out of the parsonage. He took a job selling office supplies to make ends meet.

The uproar over this short-lived desegregation effort went far beyond the congregation. The Bishop of the Southern District requested a meeting with George, and when he arrived, he found that the entire, all-White council was there. "It was unbelievable," George recalled. "They had all the chairs circled around, with me sitting alone in the middle." The effort at intimidation was so obvious that he found it almost laughable. He wasn't willing to play their intimidation game: "They accused me of being the shepherd deserting the sheep. I simply said, 'No, that would be you.' And I got up and left."

George wondered if his time as a minister had come to an end. His doubt, however, was mixed with an anger that made him more determined than ever. The scandal made waves throughout the national Lutheran community and, ironically, turned George into a highly sought-after minister. It was, after all, the civil rights era: George Hrbek was soon flooded with offers from other Lutheran churches in the South that were trying to desegregate. But after getting burned by the New Orleans congregation, he was wary. He decided to give being a pastor one more shot... but in a new environment, outside of the South. In 1964, George accepted a position in a small congregation in Altus, Oklahoma, at a church that was also named "Our Savior." There was no way he could have known that the experience he was about to have would take his understanding of racism to a much deeper level.

George began to get more experimental with his ministry during his time in Oklahoma. In his second week with the new congregation, he expressed that there was an important task to be addressed, and requested that volunteers meet with him the following evening. Fifteen men showed up in work clothes, assuming that the task was about repairs to the church. Instead, George shared that his intention was to find ways to link the church and the community. He requested that the congregants go out to the bars and bowling alleys of the town, and strike up conversations to learn what people were concerned about. The group was astounded – and George was impressed when they threw themselves into the task despite their surprise. They returned two hours later, full of excitement. George says that this moment "opened everything up, changed what the congregation was willing to do and wanted to do in terms of getting involved in the community."

When George noticed that the congregation had been uneasy around some longhaired San Francisco hippies who visited the congregation, he grew his own hair long. When the congregants finally asked him why he wouldn't get a hair cut, he gave a sermon about how the congregation had treated the hippies, and the importance of being welcoming to all people. During one service, George recruited two high school students in the audience to interrupt him and debate the content of his sermon. When it caused an uproar, George told the congregation that the interruption was staged... and proceeded with a sermon in which he told the congregation that "This is a place where we can be free and honest and can express

our doubts – as well as our faith – without fear of condemnation. We don't all think the same thing, and we can talk about our differences here.”

After a year of working with his new Altus congregation, George was approached by the director of the Peace Corps – [Sargent Shriver](#) – about participating in a domestic pilot program called [VISTA](#) (Volunteers in Service to America.) George was to lead a team that would work supportively with the migrant farm families who came into the Altus region each year, to harvest cotton and cucumbers. George readily accepted, and after attending a series of trainings around the country, was sent a team of five volunteers. They understood that the migrants were being ripped off by the growers, and were passionate about helping the migrants fight back. However, George urged them to be patient: “I know you want to tackle these problems, but I want you to get started by spending a month getting to know the families. Listen to them. Get to know them and what their priorities are.” During our interviews, George explained his position to me: “We could see priorities but it was from our perspective. I wanted to know *from them!* Because I suspected that their priorities would be different from ours.”

Indeed, it turned out that whereas the volunteers were focused on big-picture changes, the priorities of the migrant farm workers were about their immediate needs. By listening to those concerns, and then collaborating with the migrants to fix them, George Hrbek and his group were able to build trust. As George recalls: “I think our whole approach gave us a legitimacy within the migrant community. Because we didn't go in as White saviors, we went in to listen to them, and then to advocate for what they felt we should advocate for. So we took our directions from them.”

The first big trust-building moment came over the simple issue of fixing an outdoor light bulb that had burned out, leaving the migrants to navigate in the dark if they had to use the outhouse:

“We gathered those who served as a planning group to address this problem... how we would gather money to buy a light bulb, who would purchase it, who would climb the pole to install it, etc. When the installation time came, the whole camp gathered. When the light was screwed in and lit, there was a mighty uproar – ‘Ole! Gracias Dios!’ On that day, more than a light bulb lit up for the migrants, for the VISTAs, and for myself.”

The installation of the new light became the first step on the road to organizing for better conditions: working on land known as “tornado alley,” these migrants soon pushed for, and gained, access to tornado shelters. And then they kept going.

Malnutrition in the migrant camp was another severe problem. During our twenty-five hours of interviews, I never saw George more emotional than when he described the conditions in these labor camps. Entire migrant families lived in one room, on dirt floors with tin roofs. There were only two outhouses for the entire



camp. He had never seen such poor conditions, not even in the depths of the Jim Crow South. Babies who he first assumed were just one month old turned out to be six-month-olds suffering from extreme malnourishment. One day a migrant laborer came into George's office and laid a baby on his desk. The baby was dead. The migrant worker had taken his baby to a doctor's office, where he was forced to go through the back entrance because he wasn't White. He was then refused help for hours while his baby died in his arms. The man wept uncontrollably.

Although half a century had passed since that moment, George's face was ashen as he recalled it. He said with emotion: "And so... that became my focus. And it became the congregation's focus." Through George, the congregation became active in advocating for healthcare and education for migrant children. In fact, migrant rights became so much of George's focus that when Martin Luther King urged ministers from across the country to come to Selma, George decided not to go. He felt it was important to stay invested in the work that was right in front of him... and which was much less visible than the high-profile Selma movement. When George's congregation urged him to go to Selma and offered to fund his travels, George replied that there was a Selma right there in Altus, Oklahoma. George Hrbek chose not to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on that momentous moment in the civil rights movement, and to this day he stands by that decision.

Within a year of working to support the migrant farm workers, George helped co-found the Southwest Oklahoma Migrant Ministry, and began officially ministering to the migrant workers. It was through his work with the Migrant Ministry that George Hrbek was contacted by the Farm Workers Movement based in California. Soon, [Eliseo Medina](#) – a United Farm Workers representative who traveled the country to spread the movement and cultivate nationwide boycotts – visited the migrant workers. Medina helped George and his volunteers understand the broader history of organizing for migrant rights, and helped them grasp some cultural issues they needed to be more sensitive to, including cultural and gendered notions of pride that needed to be considered when seeking to discover and support the needs of the workers. Through Medina, George began advocating not only for serious concrete physical needs such as tornado shelters, but for issues of basic dignity and respect, such as advocating for food that acknowledged the cultural traditions of the migrants. (Years later, when George had relocated to Cleveland, he and Eliseo reunited over grape and lettuce boycotts being waged in that city, during which Eliseo fasted for 14 days. George offered him a tortilla Eucharist to break his fast.)

More importantly, Eliseo Medina helped the migrants understand that they were part of something much larger than what was happening in Oklahoma, and helped them broaden their visions for what they wanted to accomplish and believed they could accomplish. César Chávez also came to visit for a couple of days, but George emphasized that it was Medina who really had an impact: the farm workers movement was new, and many of the migrant laborers in Oklahoma had not yet heard of Chávez. As George put it, "It's not like he came in like the guy on the white horse or something." But Medina, Chávez, and the Farmworkers Movement were

responsible for helping the migrant workers of Oklahoma realize that they could do far more than tinker around the edges of injustice, such as gaining the bare minimum right to tornado shelters and enough food to keep their babies alive.

Working with the migrant farmers ushered in one of the most important periods of antiracist growth in George's life, and guided him towards more sophisticated understandings of racism that would shape his future work. Through his desire to better understand the problems facing the migrant laborers, he began studying the history of U.S. relations with Mexico and Latin America. "I began reading," George told me. "I learned that we overthrew democratically elected governments, because the corporate world operated better in countries where there was a dictatorship." As George wrestled with this history, the many military families in his congregation forced him to wrestle with what was happening in Vietnam. Veterans of the war brought brutal experiences back home, and George and the congregation began participating in antiwar demonstrations and antiwar advocacy work. He began to see that White supremacy was not only a problem that hurt Black Americans, but was a system that was used to justify oppression around the world... used to justify war, and to maintain brutal international systems of labor.

Oklahoma was also where George began to develop a deeper understanding of racism as a systemic problem. Up until this time, he had viewed racism as primarily an issue of personal prejudice. From that perspective, solving racism meant changing people's attitudes. However, getting up close and personal with such an intense form of racialized labor exploitation guided George towards an understanding of the ways that racial inequity was an essential ingredient in one of the country's most important economic sectors: agriculture. He began to see that racism was not merely a personal attitude of bigotry but was part of the very structure of key sectors of the economy. During his time in Selma, so much of the focus had been on [voting rights](#) that it had shielded him from this deeper analysis. George's realization came just as the civil rights movement was transitioning away from the most egregious inequities of Jim Crow in order to focus on the systemic racism that existed throughout the country: inequities in [housing](#), [healthcare](#), [economic opportunity](#), and of course, [policing](#). George's evolving thinking was in sync with the larger tide of history.

In the summer of 1967, George was contacted by the Lutheran Human Relations Association of America. A decision had been made to support a program to address racism in Chicago, and they wanted George to head the program. They told him that there was a church, based in a mansion in Hyde Park, which had a very small congregation. George and his family could live there as long as he pastored for the church and used the mansion as a base to develop the Chicago Project. Although George loved working with the migrant farm workers, he felt the Chicago Project was an opportunity to continue the work he had begun in Selma. It felt more in alignment with what his life experiences had prepared him for. Before making a decision, he talked it over with his congregation: "God bless them," George told me. "They urged me to do it. They thought it was my calling." And so, after three years in

Oklahoma, George and his family moved to Chicago, where he would put his deepened understandings of systemic racism to work.

### **The Mansion: Building a White Antiracist Spiritual Community**

It was 1967 when George Hrbek arrived in Chicago, during a transitional moment in the civil rights era. [Urban rebellions](#) were erupting across the country, typically initiated by police brutality in Black communities. Those communities were sinking deeper into poverty as the jobs of Black workers – unprotected by discriminatory unions – were mechanized or sent overseas, and as Whites fled to redlined suburbs and took the tax base of cities with them. Civil rights successes against Jim Crow had not touched these nationwide, systemic problems, which were often dealt with by pouring yet more police into Black neighborhoods. George arrived in Chicago shortly after [Stokely Carmichael](#) had issued his famous call for [Black Power](#): what was “freedom”, Carmichael asked, if Black people remained economically destitute and powerless in the face of systemic inequity? The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which had grown out of the sit-in movement, had recently asked their White members to leave and to focus on educating and [organizing White communities](#) for racial justice. And Martin Luther King had initiated the [Chicago Freedom Movement](#) to fight discriminatory housing and racialized poverty in Chicago, and was beginning to build a national, multiracial [antipoverty movement](#) focused on systemic change.

As George settled into the Hyde Park Lutheran Church – soon to simply be called “the Mansion” – a Baptist minister by the name of [Al Pitcher](#) reached out to him. Pitcher was a professor at the University of Chicago’s famous department of religion, and was an advisor to Martin Luther King and Jesse Jackson. Pitcher told Hrbek: “I can arrange for you to meet with Martin Luther King. You can bounce your ideas off Dr. King and he’ll give you feedback.” George’s jaw dropped. He was astounded to have such an opportunity.

Shortly afterwards, George found himself sitting with Martin Luther King in the basement of a union hall. It was just the two of them. Martin listened intently while George expressed a concern they both shared: if White people – even sympathetic White people – thought that overcoming racism was only a matter of changing attitudes, further progress would be impossible. A focus on individual, personal prejudice would obscure the racial inequities that were built into the core institutions of society. George told Martin that his plan was to build a program and a community that would help White people wrestle with the nature of systemic racism. As George told me: “I wanted to help them understand that we weren’t just talking about Jim Crow in the South. We were talking about policies and practices in Chicago, in the North, everywhere. That was my intention and that was what I shared with King.”

“I felt somewhat embarrassed that I was sitting with this important person. We spent an hour and a half together, and I shared with him what my thinking was, and what I thought the project should do. And he gave me some really good feedback. He affirmed it. And he especially affirmed that I should focus on the White community.”

George laughed:

“He STRONGLY affirmed that part! And he urged me to focus on young people. He also felt this ought not just be lectures, but that we needed to find a way to dramatize systemic racism, and give people the kinds of *experiential* learning that would help them understand . . . He helped me refine my thinking. I was really impressed that he gave me so much time. I thought I might meet with him for 15 minutes, because this guy was busy!”

Shortly after that meeting with King, George Hrbek launched his program: a combination of weekend and weeklong intensives, during which participants lived and worked and learned together. They cooked and ate together over meals that echoed George Hrbek’s childhood of passionate political discussions over the dinner table. Gert once again played a vital role: her ability to build strong relationships of trust with the women who came to the Mansion was central to the inclusive and immersive community building experience that emerged there. As George put it:

“We were fostering relationships. Music, singing, people sharing their journeys, doubts, struggles, commitments. Community building. It was providing a space, where people felt FREE . . . We were crafting new music in our worship services. We were creating new services that were expressive of our commitments and what we were trying to do.”

White participants in the Mansion process not only learned about systemic racism, but engaged in self-reflection about their own racial upbringing and identity, shared the stories of their lives with one another, and envisioned their own future antiracist growth. George emphasized that “Nothing was rushed. We weren’t rushing things. We made room for silence. We tried to keep it going in a smooth way . . . We wanted it to be at the people’s pace.” Groups were limited to 20 people to ensure that everyone received attention and experienced connection. The professors and pastors in George’s network, along with the local Lutheran seminary and college, helped spread the word. Eager students arrived, many of them working on ministerial degrees... future religious leaders who could bring an understanding of systemic racism and the need for White people to work for change into their future congregations and organizations. These students then spread the word to their friends. It was these young people who dubbed the three-story church “the Mansion.” One visitor [recalls the space](#) as being in somewhat “glorious disrepair”:

“A long driveway built for horse-drawn carriages ran along the north side of the property on its way to the ancient 2-story carriage house. The driveway

passed the old side entrance, built several feet above the ground so guests could dismount directly onto the covered porch. On entering the mansion from the front, instead of turning left to the big room where the church services were held, you could climb the grand staircase to the upper ballroom, where a massive chandelier hung from the high ceiling . . . I remember fireplaces and chimneys everywhere, and old detail work in tile and wood spoke of former glory.”

The weeklong intensives began with a bit of an initiation... an attempt to dramatize systemic racism, as Martin Luther King had suggested. When participants first arrived, they were divided up into three groups. One group lived on the top floor: they got to decide the dinner menu... and who would do all the cooking and cleaning. The top floor group passed their decisions down to the people on the second floor, who were responsible for communicating this plan to the group who had been placed in the basement, and managing the implementation. The basement group was responsible for the actual labor, as overseen by the second floor group, while the third floor group was shielded from having to deal with any direct grievances from the laboring group. “After a single day,” George said laughing, “the people in the basement were not happy campers! Then we’d get the whole group together and get them to reflect on the experience, what it felt like, including what it felt like to be on top. That’s how we began to get them to think about White domination, and about systemic racism.”

To introduce systemic racism, George collaborated with another [White antiracist](#) Lutheran Pastor named [Joseph Barndt](#). They [used a parable](#) originally attributed to [Saul Alinsky](#) and [Irving Zola](#), creatively adapting it to better portray how ineffective attempts to fight racism were when they ignored systemic racial inequity. The two pastors went on to collaborate for years. As George recalls: “He and I once holed up in a motel for the weekend. We had butcher paper up on the wall, mapping ideas out... I learned a lot from Joe.” Here’s the parable, in George’s words:

“There was a town, by a river. One day there was a man, fishing, and he sees a baby floating down the river. He drops his fishing pole, jumps in the water, pulls the baby out, gives the baby resuscitation, and takes the baby back to town for warmth, nourishment, and medical care. Then he goes back to fishing. And all of a sudden he sees TWO babies... He calls to some other people and two people jump into the river to pull out the two babies. Pretty soon there’s a whole rescue operation going on, because babies are floating down the river! Some people are jumping in the river, others giving resuscitation, others gathering milk and blankets, others taking donations, others driving babies to the hospital... and then finally someone asked the key question: *Why are there babies floating down the river?!* So the town has a big meeting, and they send a delegation up the river to find out why. A day later the delegation comes back and says: There’s a big catapult launching babies into the river! And so the town gets in an uproar: We’ve got to dismantle that catapult! But then someone says: ‘Uh-oh. We can’t do that.’

Someone else says, 'Why not?' 'Because our factory here makes parts for that catapult. And our livelihood is dependent upon that catapult.' The dilemma... That was one of the little parables we used to get people to realize the nature of systemic racism."

George found this parable helpful as a way of introducing some key concepts. One was that when the town (White people) sought to dismantle the catapult (systemic racism), their response was to be afraid that their own interests were tied up in that system. The town members still felt compelled to pull the babies out of the river, however: as George's collaborator Joseph Barndt expressed to me, "It's the fulfillment of the White need to rescue, rather than *empower* communities of color... which is what's involved with going up the river." The parable directed the White audience towards some important questions: if the town members were spending huge amounts of time and energy and resources rescuing babies, was their investment in the catapult truly in their own interest? What were the real-life examples of rescuing babies from the river, instead of dismantling the catapult? What were the ways that White people wasted time and energy and resources "fighting racism," that actually allowed racial inequity to continuously perpetuate itself? For George, getting White people to wrestle with such questions was an essential first step towards developing an effective antiracist practice of the sort that might one day actually dismantle "the catapult." Or, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once put it: "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself."

After spending some time learning and building community together, participants of the Mansion's intensives then traveled to Black and Brown neighborhoods, where they met with grassroots leaders fighting systemic racism in their communities. Going into those spaces, seeing the effects of systemic inequity with their own eyes, and listening to the people suffering from it and fighting it had a powerful emotional impact that no amount of study and discussion could bring. As George put it, for these workshop participants – most of whom had lived segregated and comparatively affluent lives – these intensives were "an urban plunge to see the effects of racism and meet some of the people working to deal with issues of racism." It was an effective model: although the programs at the Mansion were focused on educating White people rather than directly organizing them, the experience inspired participants to organize. George Hrbek has been deeply moved by the decades of incredible work that many of these workshop participants went on to engage in. He sees that work as the true legacy of the Mansion.

Over time, some activists moved into the Mansion and made it their home. For those who desired to live there, George asked: "What do you want to BRING to what we're doing? What will you add?" One seminary student named Michael Koch wanted to create a community newspaper: and thus, the paper "Incite!" was born. It was a monthly paper, complete with political cartoons, an op-ed section, reporting on local social justice struggles, and stories about goings-on at the Mansion. As George



recalls: “It had a broad circulation. Mike really got it out. It went out to churches and social justice organizations. It was meant for the White community.”

Another seminary student named Charles Numrich wanted to develop a social justice theatre project: and so Charles moved in, and set up a theatre in the basement. The actors were made up of community members. As Charles recalls:

“I took a room in the basement, created a small black box theater right next to it, and named it Phoenix Theatre. The basic idea was that I could . . . create theatre around the issues that were most pressing at the time. Those issues included exposing white suburban groups to inner-city realities, the struggle against racism, political and social inequality, and so many of the other serious social issues that faced us in the late 1960s. We presented theater productions almost every weekend for the groups that came to visit the Mansion. We also did theater productions for worship services on Sunday mornings. We did live performances as well as multimedia productions . . . My first published volume of plays was titled [\*Finding a Way, the plays of Hyde Park Lutheran Church 1971 to 1973\*](#).

Of course, the Mansion was also a church. At one of the church services, some Black Power youth showed up and demanded that George turn the building over to them, in the spirit of [reparations](#). George said, “Well, I have a very brief response: Fuck you.” The room fell into a silence deep enough to hear a dime drop. But then George continued: “My longer response is that if you want to discuss this with me, we can meet after this worship service is over.” The youth were soon operating their community-organizing project out of a space in the basement, and even sharing the printing materials used by the Mansion’s “Incite!” for their own publications. George laughs: “The congregation never forgot that moment! I’ve often thought about why I responded that way. It was just automatic. But I think I wanted to do something they didn’t anticipate... It was a way of getting their attention.”

Many of the participants of the intensives joined the congregation, creating a close-knit, thriving White antiracist spiritual community at the Mansion. These church services “attracted many young people who were disillusioned with institutionalized religion,” as George put it, “and were searching for more authentic expressions of spirituality.”

“If you came to the Mansion on a Sunday morning, you didn’t participate in a traditional Lutheran worship service... and I had already begun to move in that direction when I was in Oklahoma. It was Jesus-oriented, but very open to everybody, a place where everybody could share what was on their hearts and minds. A lot of what we sang wasn’t out of a Lutheran hymnbook. People were writing their own songs. There was guitar music. The members of the theatre group were dramatizing the gospels. And I wasn’t in any way acting like a traditional Lutheran clergyman. I didn’t preach from a pulpit. My quest was to get to know Jesus, and I shared that . . . I had developed my own



understanding of historical Christianity, and how it became co-opted by empire, and a lot of what emerged had an empire mentality. I expressed what might be called a 'radical' Christianity. But I didn't use that word. I was just trying to teach Jesus."

There's no better way to understand the sense of community at the Mansion than through the words of the community members themselves. [Melanie Morrison](#) – who went on to found [Allies for Change](#) – was one of the activists who made a home for herself in the Mansion. As Melanie recalls,

"It was an intense community of people who were asking all kinds of questions, studying, and also finding ways to celebrate... to celebrate even the smallest breakthroughs! There was a lot of music. Some of it was music coming out of the Black Freedom Struggle. George had friends who were writing contemporary hymns, which were addressing the issues of the day. That was wonderful music. It was not a somber place! There was a lot of joy. A lot of *caring* for one another."

Like so many other White people who came to the Mansion, Melanie had been raised in a segregated world, and that reality was part of what many community members had to wrestle with. In Melanie's words: "I grew up in racial apartheid." Honestly reckoning with that fact wasn't easy. For people like Melanie, moving to Chicago was a shock. She saw severe, [racialized poverty](#) for the first time:

"So I went through a kind of faith-crisis while I was living at the Mansion. But the gift of living at the Mansion was that that was *honored*. And there was a context in which that could be explored. And the faith crisis had to do with... I mean, how am I supposed to find hope when I don't see change, I just see things getting worse by the day. So I had a real crisis of *hope*. And I remember late, *late* night conversations with both George and Gert about that. They *understood* that crisis. And they made space for me living through it, and they also shared with me their own struggles, and where they themselves found hope . . . The worship was not distinct from the struggles that were causing that faith crisis for me . . . I heard an interpretation of the scriptures and Biblical stories that really helped nurture a rebirth of faith and a rebirth of hope in me.

"What I so enjoyed and benefited from were the *endless* conversations at the dinner table, about really difficult subjects... about economic oppression, and police violence, and what was going on at the trial with [Bobby Seale](#) . . . They had a commitment to mentoring young people. When I say mentoring, I mean a mentoring into critical thinking. A nurturing of agency . . . George enjoyed asking provocative questions: so if you sort of made a statement at the dinner table, he would say, 'how can you back that up?'"

George's younger sister Janet, who spent a month at the Mansion and was a civil rights activist in Birmingham, added yet another dimension to the role these long conversations over dinner had in the Mansion community: George would weave the big topics of conversation and the questions that were alive in the community into his sermons, where he would "bring it all together." Eyes gleaming with joyful memories, Janet also recalled a unique fusion of communal living, celebration, and worship:

"One thing he would do, when we had a party... everybody got together, and we'd eat and we'd drink and we'd sing and we'd party... And George would bring the whole group together, and have Communion, at the end of the night. And it would bring *everybody* together. It was the most beautiful experience. You felt a oneness with people. Everybody might have been off having their own conversations about this and that, but at the end... to be able to be in a circle, and take bread, and drink wine . . . The Eucharist isn't used that way, it's become so formalized. But George would make that Communion probably what it was originally all about. It brought people together."

### **George Hrbek & The Chicago Black Freedom Struggle**

As George helped to nurture the White antiracist spiritual community at the Mansion, he also developed ties with figures in Chicago's Black Freedom Struggle scene... just as he had built his church in Selma in communication with Rosa Young, and while supporting Selma's SCLC. Now, he plugged into SCLC's Chicago campaign, and especially Jesse Jackson's [Operation Breadbasket](#). Every Saturday, George took the members going through his antiracist intensives to attend the Breadbasket gatherings, which typically started with a mass meeting of a thousand people, ninety percent of who were Black. But during a few months of heightened activism – including collaborating on huge anti-Vietnam War protests and important local elections – George met with Jesse Jackson's crew more intensely:

"There were perhaps five of us. We would meet three or four days a week in the back room of a cocktail lounge on Hyde Park Boulevard. It was Jesse Jackson, Al Pitcher, and [Al Raby](#), a well-known community organizer in Chicago . . . The lounge owner was Black. He made that space available to us. We would walk through the bar to get to the backroom. It was a rather upscale lounge . . . we would touch base, hear what people were doing, figure out where we needed to collaborate and so on. It was a sharing time. Kinda freewheeling. Everybody would drink. When I went to those meetings, I would have a couple of gin martinis. By the time I got home I was half-crocked."

George felt that he was valued because of his ability to mobilize White support through his church network and Mansion community. Still, he confessed: “I gotta tell you how I felt about being at those meetings. I felt like George the Least,” he laughed. “I thought I was really fortunate to be invited to those meetings! Because they were doing things at a much, much greater scale than I was doing.”

In early April of 1968, with the support of Jesse Jackson, George hosted a retreat for 70 Lutheran pastors at a Lutheran camping site. Jackson himself was supposed to be there, but the [Black Freedom Struggle in Memphis Tennessee](#) was escalating, and Jesse rushed to Memphis to be with King. George was at the retreat just north of Chicago when [the dreaded moment](#) arrived: “I got the call... that telephone call, while I was at that conference.” George was the one who had to tell the other pastors that Martin Luther King had just been assassinated.

“We all left immediately to get back to our communities, because we knew what was going to happen... Chicago was going to explode. I came back to the Mansion. By then everyone had heard the news. And the community in the Mansion... people just wanted to be together; to mourn together. So that’s what happened. The Sunday morning gathering was enormous. Not only the chairs were full, the floor was full; people leaning against the walls. People were trying to comprehend it. It was a time of mourning... and confusion.”

Shortly after King’s death, the 1968 Democratic National Convention was held in Chicago. During the intense protests that followed, [Rennie Davis](#) and [David Dellinger](#) – two members of the [Chicago Seven](#) – paid visits to the Mansion. [SDS members](#) poured in. [Julian Bond](#) came through. George recalls being “out there every day. I was out in Lincoln Park when that thing just blew up. I got out of there by sprawling over the hood of a car.” It was during this time that members of the [Rainbow Coalition](#) started coming through the Mansion. [William “Preacherman” Fesperman](#) of the [Young Patriots Organization](#) – a poor White Appalachian group in alliance with the [Black Panthers](#) – came through twice. [Jose Cha-Cha Jimenez](#) of the Puerto Rican [Young Lords](#) came through to speak with the Mansion community. Cha-Cha invited George to a Young Lords meeting, to “hear their articulation of the issues they were concerned about . . . I felt honored to be invited to come. I wasn’t going to say anything unless I got asked to say anything. I was there to listen, and to learn.”

However, George’s strongest connection to the Rainbow Coalition, by far, was to [Fred Hampton](#) himself. George had met Fred Hampton while Fred was a high school senior leading demonstrations against segregated swimming pools. An NBC reporter named [Ted Elbert](#) and his wife Joan made the introduction. (Ted later reported from the inside of the [Wounded Knee Occupation](#). He and Joan had greeted George at the Mansion as part of the welcoming committee... with a fifth of Jack Daniels.) As George recalls:

“I met Fred at a meal at the Elbert’s home, which they organized to introduce us to one another. The next time I saw Fred – he was the president of the

youth component of the NAACP. And the summer after he graduated, he went to Milwaukee, because there was a national meeting of all the leaders of the NAACP youth groups throughout the nation. They met at a primarily Black Roman Catholic Church, where the priest was [Father Groppi](#), and he worked with a group of young Black men called [The Commandos](#). So Fred was exposed to this more radical group. And when he came back from that experience, he hooked up with the Panthers.”

George Hrbek and Fred Hampton met for lunch after Hampton had emerged as a Panther leader. By this time, George had developed an extensive church network, and was speaking regularly to churches in the Chicago area about the historical Jesus, his nonviolent anti-imperial spiritual practice and philosophy, and how White Christian Americans should be called by Jesus’s teachings to reckon honestly with systemic racism.

“Fred asked if I could help him get some speaking engagements in front of some White audiences. Which I did. I organized for him to meet with some churches. And then I organized for him to meet with the whole student body of Concordia College . . . I drove him to these engagements, and also introduced him. Fred didn’t pull any punches in front of White audiences. He wasn’t theoretical. He talked about his own raw experiences, even coming from the suburbs. And he used those personal experiences to legitimize what he was doing with the Panthers.

“I probably met with Fred five or six times for lunch, in addition to taking him to speaking engagements . . . He was interested in what I was doing at the Mansion, and he said he’d love to come sometime. He visited three times. He would sit and listen... and then he would share. I’ll tell you... when he gets in front of an audience! But when he’s with a small group, he had a whole different approach. Then it wasn’t about speeches, but discussion. He really valued dialog.”

On those few occasions, the Mansion, with its more intimate space, became an opportunity for Fred Hampton to dialog with a receptive White audience. However, George describes the Mansion audience as “intimidated.”

“They were intimidated in a way where they didn’t want to appear to disagree with what he said. Many of the questions members of the Mansion asked were about the programs the Panthers ran; the [breakfast programs](#)... the safe stuff. But the audience seemed to avoid questions that would challenge Fred.”

George shrugged:

“They wanted to express solidarity with him.”

During the twenty-five hours of interviews on which this writing is based, George Hrbek expressed more fondness for Fred Hampton than for any other single person, with the exception of his own family:

“When I met with him, it was more about personal conversations than conversations about the movement. He shared a lot with me personally, his feelings, his thoughts. Fred was extremely committed to the Panthers. He said, ‘George, they’re going to get me.’ He told me that when they did, he wanted to be buried in Louisiana, in the cemetery of the Baptist church his grandparents had belonged to. He repeated this to me just two months before he was assassinated . . . I took it to some degree seriously. What do you say to a person who says ‘I think they’re going to get me?’ I tried to show him that I understood why he would feel that way, but also expressed that he’d be fine. I don’t think I felt guilty. But I had an awareness that I could have responded differently. I don’t think I had a very thoughtful response to his concern.”

When Fred was indeed assassinated, the funeral was massive, and George “went through the line like everyone else.” His mentee, Melanie Morrison, remembers picking up [Noam Chomsky](#) and [Dr. Spock](#) from the airport to drive them to the funeral. “After the murder,” Melanie recalls, “some of us went to stand in front of the Black Panther offices, as White people to offer some protection.” George traveled down to Louisiana for the smaller family funeral: “I mourned.”

Things came crashing to a halt for George at the Mansion in 1971. When he had arrived in Chicago in 1967, Martin Luther King had asked George about what kind of support he had:

“King was concerned about some of the things I might face... He wanted to know what the Lutheran groups funding the project wanted to see me do, and he was right to be concerned about that because their ideas were not my ideas. What I later discovered was that their ideas about an antiracism program was stuff like opening hunger centers... I didn’t want to be involved in that kind of charity, that false generosity that lets the system off the hook. If you’re worried about hungry people, you have to address WHY people are hungry! So if you want to deal with racism, you have to deal with the White community.”

To return to the parable, George was concerned with dismantling the catapult, while the church hierarchy was interested in pulling babies out of the river. As George recalls,

“For three and-a-half years, the implementation of the Mansion’s mission prevailed with little opposition. There were two raids by Chicago police’s infamous [red squad](#), and it was infiltrated by at least one police informer. But that was it. However, over time, backlash emerged. There was a core of White

clergy who really tried to undermine what we were doing. These were kind of the orthodox right-wing groups within the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. They were putting out publications that were highly critical of what we were doing; highly critical of *me*. The message was that the Mansion programs – and my ministry – were radical departures from Christian orthodoxy, and needed to be shut down as unrepresentative of the Lutheran Church. However, I think much of the backlash was because we were focused on the White community . . . They expected us to do charity work. It was publishing ‘Incite!’, combined especially with my association with Fred Hampton, that really led the church to bring the heresy charges.”

In 1971, George was brought before a Lutheran council to be tried for heresy. He sat before thirty-one members of the church hierarchy, all dressed in either clerical collars or business suits. Thirty of them were White, and one Black. The council asked George if he was now or ever had been a member of the Communist Party. They asked him a series of detailed questions to see if he had a literal interpretation of the Bible: did he believe that Jonah had truly been swallowed by a whale? George was determined to go out with a bang, so he requested to answer all of their questions at once. He proceeded to give a two-hour speech laying out his beliefs. When he finished, the sole Black member of the church hierarchy sprang to his feet in applause. George believes that this was the only thing that saved him from an official heresy charge: the council worried that after such a strong endorsement from the single Black leader present, that a charge of heresy could appear racist.

However, George was stripped from his position at the Mansion, effective immediately. He took a job loading trucks on the nightshift to keep his family afloat, and they moved into public housing. It was an exceptionally difficult time. A seminary student who George had mentored, named Bill Weed, became the new pastor. Bill was able to keep the Mansion running... for a couple of years. Long after the Mansion dissolved, however, the strange twists and turns of history took the building’s fascinating story in a new, unexpected direction: it became the [Hyde Park home](#) of Barack and Michelle Obama.

### **Cleveland: Putting Down Roots**

George was forty years old when he finally arrived in the city where he would put down his roots: Cleveland. In 1969, a young pastor named [Richard Sering](#) had been hired by the Lutheran Human Relations Association to develop a plan to engage Lutheran congregations in the racial justice issues that were alive in that city. Sering had been the pastor of a Black Lutheran Church in St. Louis, where he was engaged in civil rights efforts. Before moving to Cleveland to initiate the program, Sering stopped by Chicago and spent four days at the Mansion... perhaps as a way of learning something about the work he was about to engage in. A year later, Sering was looking to expand the capacity of the program – called [Lutheran Metropolitan](#)



[Ministry](#) – and when he heard that George had been forced out of the Mansion, quickly gave him a call.

The decades that George went on to spend with Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry (LMM) are packed with enough activity to write a book about. But to summarize, his first task was to create a supportive reentry program for people who had been released from The Cleveland House of Corrections. The program was later expanded by LMM into what became a nationally recognized reentry program, for all people returning to Cleveland from throughout Ohio’s prison system. To create this program, LMM consulted and hired those most impacted by the system: former prisoners. Likewise, when local congregations expressed concern about disability rights in Cleveland, LMM hired members of the disabled community to create a task force. A demonstration of 200 people – many of them wheelchair users – created pressure to make public transportation accessible. When LMM engaged around homeless issues; they built relationships with homeless people and hired people who had experienced homelessness themselves. The major lesson from these decades of work was that George, and LMM, always took on these issues by being in relationship with, and taking leadership, from those most impacted. As George puts it:

“We didn’t grow by sitting around in some kind of smoke filled room figuring out what we were gonna do. It was people from out of the congregations coming to us and asking for assistance. It was a bottom up approach. We spent a lot of time building relationships in grassroots communities, and especially in Black communities. Members of those communities were represented on our board. We built grassroots relationships and support for what we were doing. Everything we did grew out of grassroots issues, challenges, and concerns.

“Our core group at Metropolitan Ministry did a lot of reflection together. [Paulo Freire](#) had a huge influence on us. We all read [Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#). Everybody who joined our team read that book . . . some of us even met with him for a few days in Binghamton, New York. We were doing community building. When we hired new people to LMM, even before they did an orientation, we had them share their story with us... and we shared our stories with them. We got to know each other. We needed to be to each other what we were trying to be in the community. And we needed to foster that internally.”

Although this was a time in George’s life that was full of possibility, the early years with LMM were hard ones when it came to George’s personal life: it was during this time that his marriage with Gert came to an end. In George’s words:

“We had a good marriage and the end was not contentious, but a time of confusion and sadness for both of us. I take full responsibility for it. Thanks



to Gert's graciousness, we have remained friends through the 45 years since. I am grateful for that.”

George kept moving forward. “In Chicago,” he told me, “we had more of an impact on people, on individuals. In Cleveland, we had more of an impact on policy, on the city, on the county.” LMM also put on educational presentations about racism for Lutheran schools and congregations. These programs examined racism from a personal, historical, and systemic lens. When presenting to students and congregations, George worked alongside Black colleagues who brought their personal experiences to the table. He also helped to set up a community garden, called Rurban... a combination of Rural and Urban. At Rurban, farmers mentored members of the urban community in learning to grow and harvest their own plots, and those members were invited to travel to the farms and participate in harvests there as well. Launched in 1976, Rurban continues to this day.

Of the many, many issues and programs that George would get involved with over the years, perhaps the one closest to his heart was a theatre project. When George moved to Cleveland, he gravitated towards its oldest and most diverse neighborhood: Ohio City. The neighborhood – now gentrified (as George says, “we fought it. But it came through like the railroad”) – had once attracted poor White migrants from Appalachia to Eastern Europe, and was home to a thriving LGBT community as well as Black, Latino, and Native American communities. There was a strong sense of hospitality and community engagement. However, the neighborhood also had a soaring poverty rate, along with all of the accompanying difficulties. “Back in the mid-70s,” George recalls,

“There were small groups of kids... young, just 11,12 years old, who were engaged in a lot of vandalism. And many adults in the neighborhood started to have negative feelings about *all* kids. At that time I was having coffee each Tuesday morning with a Jesuit priest, to talk about what was going on in the neighborhood. And we asked ourselves if there was some way we could creatively deal with this issue of older people being down on kids. We wondered if we could give older people a different way to experience the neighborhood kids, and thought that maybe the arts could be a way of doing that... so we came up with the idea of young people doing theatre performances for the neighborhood, including of course the adults.”

The city gave them a grant of \$800 to put on a summer youth theatre project, and they started searching for someone to direct the program. By this time, George had entered into a serious relationship with a woman named Stephanie Morrison, who was the sister of Melanie Morrison... the former Mansion community member quoted earlier in this story.

“So I said to my buddy, ‘I know somebody who would be perfect for this.’ And he said to me, ‘Oh, a woman would never want to do it in this neighborhood. But I know I guy who I think could do it.’ So I took a risk, and told him to

interview both of them and choose whoever he thought was best. And things turned out as I hoped... he came back and said 'This woman is dynamite!' So Stephanie was hired to establish the theatre.

"Steph and I went out to the projects, and we came up with 13 diverse young people who wanted to be involved, aged 13 to 16. It was a substantial commitment for them, four hours a day, five days a week for eight weeks . . . We didn't talk immediately about the theatre production. We created an opportunity for them to talk about themselves and what drew them there. Then, we took a look at the social issues inherent in the show. And then discussed those issues, gave them a chance to talk about where they're at in terms of those issues. And the third thing, was to bring in resource people to talk about those social issues... if we talked about homelessness, we'd bring in homeless people, or people who had been through homelessness . . . Our first show was Godspell... about half Black and half Latino youth. Jesus was played by a Latino. We had a full house each night! It was such a success that we traveled to East Lansing and other communities in Michigan to put on the show, which was a great experience for those kids. We didn't have to recruit after that!"

George and Stephanie were married the following year, and [she went on to run](#) Near West Theatre (originally [Near West Side Shared Ministry Youth Theatre](#)) until 2017. The theatre – recently moved to a multimillion-dollar location within the Gordon Square Arts District, which it partnered to create – is still going strong, and still embodying its original mission of empowering young people, creating a positive connection between youth and adults, building community, and using theatre to educate about social issues on a sliding scale that's affordable to everyone.

For fifteen years, George also served as pastor to Calvary Lutheran Church, a predominantly Black church in Cleveland. Because the church had a growing population of Liberian refugees, George got involved in refugee resettlement work. He also played an early role helping to establish [International Partners in Mission](#) (IPM), which recognized the problematic, paternalistic nature of much missionary work, and sought an approach that was more in alignment with how George had worked with the migrant laborers in Oklahoma.

Sometimes through IPM and sometimes through other initiatives, the 1970s ushered in a period of George's life that included much global travel. In fact, just before the invitation to Cleveland, he had been invited to Germany to meet with students, clergy, academics and corporate leaders regarding immigration and social justice in Germany. In 1971 he was invited to the World Peace Conference in Moscow, where he met [Hortensia Allende](#)... soon to be the living symbol of Chilean opposition to the dictatorship of Pinochet. At George's invitation, Hortensia visited Cleveland to advocate for the U.S. to open its doors to Chilean political refugees... during which she stayed at George's home. Her advocacy played an important role in the U.S. agreement to accept Chilean refugees, and LMM personally resettled 12

Chilean refugee families. In 1988 George spent time in Israel and Palestine, which he summarizes as “a plunge into complex and difficult political, cultural, religious, and economic realities.” In 2003, 2011, and 2015 he was invited to El Salvador, and to Kenya in 2013 to listen and learn from IPM’s grassroots partners. During those visits George especially enjoyed teaching movement songs, and was requested to orient the partners towards Paulo Freire’s work. Each of these journeys are stories unto their own.

IPM’s founders – Jim Mayer and Paul Strege, who had been missionaries in India and Japan – had actually floated the idea for a new, Freirean type of missionary work years ago at the Mansion, during a New Wine Exchange event... yet another group George helped get off the ground. The name came from a parable of Jesus, that you couldn’t put new wine in old wine skins. The New Wine Exchange was a national network of clergy and lay leaders, who met for years to brainstorm how the “old wineskin” of the church wasn’t meeting the needs of the day. Indeed, much of George’s life could be summarized as a search to create a “new wineskin” for the church, which would embody how Jesus might respond to contemporary issues... and to systemic racism, in particular.

### **Into the Present**

“I’ve gotten a lot of awards,” George laughed as our interviews came to a close. “I keep them all in a box in the basement . . . I mean, I appreciated the awards, but I was getting recognized individually for something that a lot of people helped build! So I have somewhat of an aversion to awards.” This was exactly the type of attitude that had drawn me to George in the first place.

I first met George in January of 2021. I had just launched the [White Antiracist Ancestry Project](#) – my own personal attempt to use history to help strengthen the surge of interest in White antiracism following the [uprisings of 2020](#). A friend of mine in Cleveland who knew George sent me [an article](#) about him and said, “You’ve got to meet this guy.” The article was less than a year old at the time: and there was George, nearly 90 years old, interrupting a Cleveland City Council meeting shortly before Covid closed everything down. The council tried to continue on with their business, but George Hrbek’s booming pastor’s voice drowned out the proceedings. Cleveland had just cracked down on a church that was sheltering homeless people from the cold, leading to a large protest that evening. George told the story of Lorraine Van De Venter, a homeless woman who had frozen to death on the streets. He demanded that she, and others like her, be seen as fully human and treated with dignity and respect. His voice was a moral thunder: “She was our neighbor and a member of our community!”

When I first met with George, I immediately gravitated towards his humor and his rebellious spirit, his spiritual and movement wisdom, and of course his passion and

his compelling story. Although I had already lined up numerous movement elders to work with – including [SNCC](#) leaders I deeply admired – I decided to throw myself into George’s story first. Outside of a few short articles that [briefly traced](#) the chronology of his life, George Hrbek’s story didn’t seem to have ever been told with the depth it deserved. The lessons to be learned from his life felt especially relevant during a time of backlash against the very notion of systemic racism, and during a moment when young activists are seeking antidotes to burnout, including through building stronger movement communities that can be sources of inspiration and joy that sustain their commitment to justice [for the long-haul](#). That, and George was getting old. I wanted to get this man’s story into the historical record. It has been a great joy and a blessing to work with him, and I’m especially grateful for his incredible patience as I circled back to moments in his life again and again, searching for the details that would make it all come together.

As we closed out our interviews, I asked George what his single most important piece of advice would be for young antiracists today. He replied: “We all need community or we burn out. You’ve got to have people you can talk with, reflect with, eat with, cry with, laugh with, joke with!” When I asked, “What builds strong community?” George said:

“You need to really spend *time* in community and be with one another. You’ve got to encourage people to listen to each other, help one another, lift one another up, support one another. You build community not by telling people what to do or how to do it, but by helping people figure out for themselves how to tackle the things they care about, to realize that they have the knowledge, the resourcefulness, the gifts, and the wisdom to address their issues of concern and to shape their future – – and that we are in this together.”

As for his own growing edges, at age 90: his eyes gleam and he says with joy, “I’m *always* learning! There’s a whole new generation of young people out there for me to learn from.”