

Transcending Race, Class

Adrian Walker, Boston Globe – May 27, 2008

Its first meeting was held in the basement of Hurmon Hamilton's church a decade ago, an organization that was interfaith more in name than in reality.

The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization was founded on the idea of bringing religious leaders together for social activism. It has succeeded beyond the expectations of anyone - except, perhaps, its founders themselves. Tonight the organization will host a 10th anniversary celebration at Boston University's Case Gymnasium. The governor, the mayor, and the speaker of the House have all confirmed that they will attend. They should be warned: This is not the traditional celebration. The politicians should expect to hear a few demands. "We're going to have home-court advantage," said Hamilton, pastor of Roxbury Presbyterian Church. "The center of political power is no longer Beacon Hill. It's wherever the people gather."

The GBIO has emerged as a voice on liberal social issues, especially healthcare and housing. It was one of the driving forces behind the passage of universal coverage, as well as the creation of a \$150 million trust fund for affordable housing.

As Hamilton said yesterday, the group was initially made up mostly of Christian ministers, with a handful of rabbis. Now, its ranks have broadened to include more Jewish and Muslim leaders. The Rev. Ray Hammond of Bethel AME Church, a co-chair of tonight's event, predicted that it will be the city's largest gathering of Christians, Muslims, and Jews since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The ministers and their audience - expected to number around 1,500 - will be looking for, among other things, a way to fix the health insurance system, which they believe is underfunded by as much as \$200 million.

"The administration has dug deeper and come up with greater subsidies, and 70 percent of the employers have done tremendous work in providing credible coverage for their employees," Hamilton said. "We're aiming at those employers who have not done so. They're freeloading off state government."

Other priorities, Hamilton said, include better elder care and more attention on youth violence, both in the city and in the suburbs. While youth violence is widely viewed as an urban phenomenon, GBIO believes that the same issues that drive youth violence manifest themselves in the suburbs in forms such as drug addiction and suicide.

"These are all our kids," said Rabbi Stephanie Kolin of Temple Israel. "For an organization to say these are all our kids and we're going to take care of all our kids is an unbelievably profound partnership."

Within the organization the task of bridging gaps between city and suburb is a common theme.

"One of the greatest parts of GBIO is that we say we can transcend race and class, to get at issues that affect all of our lives," said Kolin. "The issues are different, but they connect."

There is nothing original about clergy getting involved in political or social issues. But GBIO has been successful in bringing together groups that historically pursued similar agendas independently. Hamilton describes the group's mission as creating "shared power, shared responsibility, and shared sacrifice."

Despite the glittering guest list for the celebration tonight, GBIO will have its hands full in persuading the state to invest more money in healthcare or youth violence, given the state's deepening fiscal woes. Still, bad times don't mean that social problems disappear. Clearly, GBIO has gained the attention of the city's power structure, and plans to keep pushing what it views as needed changes.

It has also accomplished something more subtle, in breaking down unspoken barriers between religious groups.

"I have this opportunity to personally and professionally build relationships with pastors and Muslim brothers and sisters, and I can't even begin to express how fulfilling it is to have these partnerships with people who care so deeply about repairing that which is broken among us," said Temple Israel's Kolin. "We meet on common ground. We meet at GBIO."

Adrian Walker is a Globe columnist. He can be reached at walker@globe.com.