



# **RESURRECTION REMIX: Strengthening the Community**

## **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

**Sunday, March 30, 2008**

**Meri-Li Douglas, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator**

Research Associate, Department of Research and Development Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Durham, NC

**Lectio** - Acts 2:42-47 (New Revised Standard Version)

### **I. Introduction**

#### Remix as a Relational Concept

Remix is a musical term and for those of us new to its use, its adaptation to another cultural context requires some explanation. Its dictionary definition is: “To combine (audio tracks or channels from a recording) to produce a new or modified audio recording.”<sup>1</sup>

Lawrence Lessig, a copyright attorney and Professor of Law at Stanford Law School, has a particular interest in this concept of remix. He places the term within a broader social and cultural context. He proposes that in a social/cultural setting where a merger of genres and or ideas are encouraged, the result, “derivative works,” would be a desirable ideal and suggests that “the health, progress, and wealth creation of a culture is fundamentally tied to this participatory remix process.”<sup>2</sup> Use of this broader societal understanding of remix as a “participatory process” can facilitate a more comprehensive grasp of the Christian doctrine of Resurrection. When we understand that as the people of God we have a creator in common, we are better able to envision and remix a vision of the African American community that is holistic, healing, and empowering.

### **II. A First Century Post-Resurrection Story**

Imagine this scene. It is the Day of Pentecost,<sup>3</sup> a joyful celebration of the end of the harvest. Most activities center on the Temple in the City of Jerusalem, as it is also the annual remembrance of the Covenant of Mt. Sinai, the gift from God to the people of God.

This festival is one of the three sacred events Jews were required to attend. Huge crowds of pilgrims flow into Jerusalem, increasing its population three or four times the norm. They arrive from all parts of Asia Minor, and with them come merchants, traders, and crafters from equally

diverse regions. Merchants compete for space to sell their spices and incense, fruits and vegetables, fish and salt. There are sounds of musicians, the rattle of cart wheels and the clicking of animal hooves. Permeating throughout all this activity is the constant chatter of many different languages.

The disciples are there as well, together in a room, no doubt, grieving the death of their Messiah and contemplating what their futures might hold. Suddenly, a powerful, howling wind blasts into the room. Just as suddenly, the disciples are surrounded by fire and a single flame comes to rest above the head of each of them. It is the spirit and breath of God filling the crowd with such power that each speaks in a foreign language, and all the multicultural, international people in the streets find that what is spoken is understood in their own languages, and they are “filled with awe (vv. 1-13).”

Having witnessed such a life-affirming, incomprehensible display of divine presence, many (we are told approximately 3,000) “received his (Peter’s) words and were baptized (v. 41).” No longer strangers who happened to be in the same geographic area at the same time, the breath of God has entered into each, gathering them into a community with “all things in common (v. 44).” They receive the Holy Spirit which transforms and unites them into a community of believers where their diverse cultures, different languages, and varied worldviews enrich their relationships. They embrace an intensely profound sense of fellowship and shared religious life.

### **III. A Twentieth Century Post-Resurrection Story Remixing<sup>4</sup>**

Imagine this scene. It is Sunday evening, January 31, 1960 on the campus of NC Agricultural and Technical College (A&T).<sup>5</sup> A&T is an African American college in Greensboro, NC; the spring semester has just gotten underway. Four first-year students (Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair, Jr.,<sup>6</sup> and David Richmond) are together in a dorm room. Engaged in intense conversation, they share anger and frustration with life under the tight perimeters of the deeply ingrained Jim and Jane Crow laws. Even a US Supreme Court mandate ordering desegregation in public schools “with all deliberate speed”<sup>7</sup> has met with minuscule, if any, compliance. The fact that a mandate from the highest judicial body has basically been ignored, they see little hope for relief from segregation practices in the private sector, denying access to restrooms, hotels, theaters, and restaurants. Even water is segregated – public fountains for whites and, on occasions, a separate fountain for African Americans.

Talk is cheap, they decide; it is time to take action. Guided by their own consciences and the strength that comes from a collective commitment, a simple, but bold, plan takes shape. They will confront the segregation practices at the F.W. Woolworth store located in the city’s central business district. Its modestly priced goods attract many African Americans and college students go there to purchase toiletries and school supplies. The four are quite familiar with the store’s segregation policy: Anyone can receive service anywhere in the store, except at the large lunch counter where service to African Americans is strictly forbidden. Thus, the volume of business provided by African American community makes Woolworth a worthy target for protests.

All four students were young -- still in their teens (McNeil was only 17). Sustained by a confidence in their personhood and their rights as citizens, they were motivated and committed to do what most adults would never consider – a public challenge to the deeply entrenched and presumptive self-righteousness of the Southern social order.

They met the following afternoon to walk several blocks to the Woolworth store. They took particular care to dress well, one of them (Franklin McCain) still wearing his uniform from a late afternoon ROTC class. Once in the store, each makes a purchase to reiterate the store's policy of otherwise accepting patronage from African American customers. Then they took seats at the lunch counter and waited to be served. At first they are ignored, then told that "colored people" would not be served. The students refused to move and remained seated until the store closed. They returned to campus relieved they had not been assaulted or arrested.

Energized by the experience, they make a commitment to continuing the protest. The next day, they returned with just under 30 students. Again, service is denied, and again, they are not harmed nor arrested. However, they received the attention of local media – a camera crew from the local TV station and a reporter from the News & Recorder newspaper. Word spread quickly and by the third day, their ranks swell to over 60 protesters, and they have the support of local NAACP Chapter and many local clergy, both African American and white. By end of the week, there were enough protesters to fill all lunch counter seats in *two* stores, Woolworth and a similar business, Kress Five and Dime, two blocks distance – and enough to form picket lines outside both.

With increasing media coverage, the growing participation of multiple aspects of the community, the movement takes on its own persona, most especially unifying and reviving the African American community. The city's governmental structure cannot ignore this growing civil disobedience, and they are pressured to address the matter on a community-wide level. By February 12, less than two weeks after the Greensboro Four (as they became known) first sat at the counter, leaders from all parts of the city make a creative effort to fashion a fair and honorable solution. A few days later, Woolworth and Kress owners agree to integrate their facilities, a decision brokered by influential city leaders, with a representative city-wide advisory committee functioning as primary mediator. Perhaps motivation differed, but the vision was the same and a resolution was engineered in little more than two weeks

#### **IV. Different Stories, Different Centuries, One Resurrection Light**

##### **A. Koinonia: The Ultimate Relationship**

The word *koinonia*, a derivative of the Greek *koine* (common) is usually translated "fellowship" or "community." As is often the case with translations, the deeper nuance of meaning is lost. In this case, *koinonia* carries with it the nuance of a, dynamic, ongoing process. Rather than a singular goal or even an aspiration toward a singular goal, the essence of *koinonia* is a spiritual connection among of those traveling a sacred mutual journey defined by common beliefs, visions, and values. Christians in *koinonia* are bound by the Holy Spirit into the most intense and rewarding of human relationships – a shared commitment to a collective mission. Life in *koinonia* flourishes from an awareness of the transforming love of a transcendent God. There is a rich sense of well-being and a humble confidence and faithfulness that is individual and collective. Illuminated by the Risen Christ, together they are led from darkness into the Light of the Resurrection.

##### **B. Jerusalem: The First Koinonia, The First Church**

Christians in that First Century were far more than neighbors who worshiped together. Their shared experience of the Holy Spirit was of greater depth and breath than any kind of family or

community that they had ever known, and it changed them forever. They became a fellowship of believers, surrounded and sustained by common understanding of Divine Grace. They had a shared vision and common mission. They evolved spiritually and socially into the ultimate *koinonia* – the Church, the Body of Christ.

### C. Greensboro, NC: A Twentieth Century *Koinonia* Experience

The change in the response of the local white political and business leadership to the sit-ins was shifted by the efforts African American protestors and one white man--J. Spencer Love. He was owner of Burlington Mills (now Burlington Industries), the largest textile mill in the country. Love levied his considerable financial and social influence to create a city-wide Advisory Committee on Human Relations, one that would reflect the diversity of citizens and leadership throughout the city. To solidify a commitment from local government, the committee was placed under the auspices of the Mayor's Office. Love provided the salary for a well-qualified individual to serve as its full-time chair, thereby ensuring that it would be well-manage, effective, and inclusive. Thus, support for the process came from a wide cross-section of the community: the African American and white community leaders, church groups, civic groups, and, perhaps less enthusiastically, endorsement from the NC Association of Quality Restaurants and the Greensboro Police Department. And so it happened. This complex newly-formed community of different constituencies and motivations, sought and engineered a resolution in little more than two weeks. The miracle of this new formed local community is that it set off a wild fire such that within two months there were sit-ins actions taking place in 54 cities in 9 states. This new community remix with their commitment to non-violence and change, ushered in a new spirit of community, and their efforts walls raised in racial disrespect and hatred, crumbled.

## V. **The Resurrection Remix: A Community Covenant for the People**

Christians who formed the first Church in Jerusalem were empowered by forces that were both physical (visible and tangible) and mystical (non-substantive and enigmatic). The powerful winds, the flames of fire, and everyone's ability to hear and understand one another was a shared experience, God was moving within them and drawing them into each other. They "knew" God in ways only God can make possible and that knowledge empowered them to become the Body of Christ in the world.

As the twenty-first century awakens, that Resurrection Grace continues to be at work in the world, and in deed in the hearts of all persons who believe in *koinonia*. For the Greensboro Four, the verbal confrontation, physical assault, and arrest they expected did not happen. Rather, there was what McClain described as "a sign from heaven." That sign came in the form of an elderly white woman. In an interview 38 years later, Franklin McCain recalls her brief remark: "Boys, I am just so proud of you ..." <sup>8</sup> For McCain, this passing affirmation remains an important part of his memory of the entire experience. Said McCain: "... I got so much pride and such a good positive feeling from that little old lady. I mean, she'll never know it, but that really made the day for us." <sup>9</sup>

These four young college students could not have known the momentous rippling effect of their single act of social conscious. They could not have known how a late night conversation between for teens, who had known each other for only a few months, would galvanize an entire community. They could not have known that their action would move the one person with the insight, personality, social conscious, finances, and political influence to draw together all the diverse

components of a separated by historically rigid and intractable norms. They could not have known that the Light of Resurrection would lead them all into a Divine Remix revealing a new awakening to a certain truth. This brought Greensboro closer to a *koinonia* than it had ever been, reshaping that community forever.

In 2008 there are so many community maladies that continue to plague African Americans and all Americans. How will Kononia be reborn yet again in this moment? How can it come for the homeless, the jobless, the healthcare-less? That's what the Acts story asks us to ask ourselves. Who are the builders of twenty-first century Kononia? As those disciples in that upper room knew and as those teenagers in North Carolina knew, we are the builders we have been waiting for. Will we begin the remix that can save and reclaim our communities? The answer put in musical form would be:

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine  
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine  
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine  
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!

In the neighborhood, I'm gonna let it shine.  
In the neighborhood, I'm gonna let it shine.  
In the neighborhood, I'm gonna let it shine.  
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!

### Notes

1. "Remix." American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 2000, p. 1476.
2. "Remix culture." Wikipedia. 29 Jan 2008. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 9 Mar 2008. Online location: [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Remix\\_culture&oldid=187588527](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Remix_culture&oldid=187588527) accessed 30 November 2007
3. Pentecost is also known as Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Harvest, and the Day of First fruits.
4. Greensboro Sit-Ins: Launch of a Civil Rights Movement. Ed. Teresa Prout. 1998 Updated 2004. Greensboro, NC: News & Record Interactive. Online location: <http://www.sitins.com/index.shtml> accessed 30 November 2007 (Compilation of over 100 news articles and photos published over the years by News & Record.)
5. Now North Carolina A&T State University.
6. Ezell Blair, Jr. now goes by the name Jibreel Khazan.
7. Oliver Brown, et al v. Board of Education of Topeka, et al, U.S. 483 Online location: <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?navby=CASE&court=US&vol=347&page=483> accessed 30 November 2007; 74 S. Ct. 686; 98 L. Ed. 873; 1954 U.S. LEXIS 2094; 53 Ohio Op. 326; 38 A.L.R.2d 1180
8. Schlosser, Jim. "The Story of the Greensboro Sit-Ins." Greensboro Sit-Ins: Launch of a Civil Rights Movement. Ed. Teresa Prout. 1998 Updated 2004. Greensboro, NC: News & Record Interactive. Online location: <http://www.sitins.com/index.shtml> accessed 30 November 2007 (Various interviews by Schlosser of participants in the event.)
9. Ibid.