interracial home visits

by Mary Dolan

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“I think it (white and Negro families visiting each other’s homes) very helpful, and I think it should start right here in Washington, D.C. . . . All groups, it seems to me, can afford not only to concern themselves as they do with Birmingham but also to look into their own lives.”


“There has generally been no conception at all that the white man had anything to learn from the Negro . . . What the Negro now seeks and expects (or perhaps he has entirely given up expecting) from the white man is not sermons on patience, but a creative and enlightened understanding of his efforts to meet the demands of God in this. What he expects of us is some indication that we are capable of seeing a little of the vision he has seen, and of sharing his risks and courage.”

very heart of the racial issue at this first confrontation. It brings Negro and white together directly. It moves people as nothing else can. Things happen; attitudes change.

There is no more vivid understanding than that which comes from the experience of hearing, in an intimate living room setting, first-hand accounts of racial discrimination. It was in 1955 that Friendship House, the innovator and promoter of the program, “discovered” this Home Visit method by which a basic technique in depth learning—the first hand experience—could be applied to race relations.

One measure of the fruitfulness of the program has been the steady, rapid growth in participants. Friendship House has seen the number of its participants increase from fifty in that first year to 5,000 in 1963.

In 1959 a National Home Visit Center was established at Friendship House to help others throughout the nation begin Interracial Home Visits in their own area. This growth, too, has been heartening: from a single “field” group offering Interracial Home Visits in one other city back in 1959, to seventy groups in as many cities in 1964. One city (Washington, D.C.) has an office and paid staff, established as a committee of the Washington Conference on Religion and Race in 1963, to develop Home Visits in that area.

“The Visits are aimed at challenging racial stereotypes about Negroes and illustrating from Negroes’ personal experiences the extent of discrimination that prevails.”

—“Release from Racism” Program Kit, National Council of Catholic Men.

“Not one of the families who took part in the interracial visits (in Knoxville, Tennessee—the program cited by President Kennedy) had ever before been in the home of a family of the other race on social terms. . . . The results were immediate, tangible, and exactly the kind hoped for . . . .

“‘There is one remark made during the visits that I—will never forget. ‘It was made by a Negro child,’ she says. ‘The family this child visited has a white puppy which jumped on him and, I suppose, frightened him. He said to his mother: “Mommy, do white puppies like us?”’”

—Good Housekeeping, October, 1963.

To Begin: A “Pilot” Home Visit

YEARS of experience with Home Visits demonstrates that the best way people have come to understand the program, to grasp its dynamism, is actually to participate in a Visit. So anyone interested in starting the program in his own milieu is urged to arrange to participate in one himself. This is simply done. Only one Negro conversation leader and one group of five or six white visitors are needed. (Detailed suggestions below on finding and recruiting Negro conversation leaders and white visitors, the choice of setting, the conversation, should be helpful, if needed, to arrange the “pilot” Home Visit.)

A typical new group in upstate New York held such a “pilot” Visit, and the chairman wrote the National Home Visit Center:

“Well, we made it—or at least we made what we hope is a beginning. Last Sunday twenty white visitors were guests of four Negro families in our city. It was not easy to get started as both Negroes and whites had doubts as to the value of the program. However, those who participated are now sold on the idea of getting others for a similar Home Visit. The Negro conversation leaders were very friendly and also very outspoken and to the point. We whites were all a little shocked to find they were wondering whether we were there because we were sincerely interested or because it is ‘fashionable’ at this time. This was a good shock, however; it made us realize how sensitive Negroes are to the problems of civil rights. By the end of the evening it seems we had reached the state of being accepted! Now we plan to approach other community groups to give more whites an opportunity for what we gained, an ‘inside’ concrete understanding of racial issues.”

Having experienced the Home Visit, the participants can begin establishing an organized program, offering the Interracial Home Visit educational experience to other groups. This can be done for small groups of visitors at various dates, set to each group’s convenience, or it can be done for a large number, recruited on a city-wide basis, for a single day . . . or both. The large scale day of Home Visits has usually been grounded on experience gained locally from an ongoing program—and such a day also gen-
erates requests for Home Visits on other dates, too. Special aspects of the organizing of city-wide days are treated later; let us first consider the basic program elements, upon which all programs are based. The basic “ingredients” of the Interracial Home Visit are: the Negro conversation leader, the white visitor-learners, and desirably—though not absolutely essential—the escort; the setting also must be arranged. All of this is the work of the organizers.

One of the outstanding features of the Interracial Home Visit program is that neither its organizational leader nor its most important participants, the Negro conversation leaders, need be experts in the field of race relations. Nor is it limited by regional boundaries; it is workable and has been successful in the North, South, East, West.

The Setting

MOST of the Interracial Home Visits arranged by local committees and by Friendship House in the past nine years have been in the homes of the Negro conversation leaders.

It is the rare white visitor who has previously been in a Negro residential area or in a Negro home. Thus the learning experience is given a further dimension for the white participant if the setting is a Negro home. The fact that many visitors are surprised when they enter a nice neighborhood which is Negro and then a nice home is the first step in the process of enlightenment.

Many Negro conversation leaders prefer having the group come to their own homes. It saves the Negro host the time and trouble of traveling to another home—sometimes in a far area of the city. Usually the Negroes recruited as conversation leaders are already quite busy with civic and social affairs; they are willing to give time to such a discussion, but glad to spend no more time than essential.

Home Visits held in a white home are useful, too, for somewhat different reasons. It seems that this program—especially when a white host invites in his immediate neighbors for the conversation with the Negro leader—might bring those whites who are not yet willing to make the effort to go to another neighborhood and to a stranger’s home. Also, through such an invitation the white host may find “allies” among his neighbors. Even if turned down by a neighbor, the host has the opportunity to explain the purpose of the interracial gathering, thus forestalling needless speculation or baseless fears. One white host said after having such a Home Visit that he was no longer “threatened” by what his neighbors thought; he had “put his cards on the table” about his own attitude on race in a dignified and constructive way. And it can be hoped that Negro conversation leaders, as they participate in Home Visits in white neighborhoods, might come to be interested eventually in the big step of considering a move to such an area.

Another reason for offering some Home Visits in white homes is the symbolic value such an invitation has. However, when Negro participants have been offered a choice of settings, most have preferred to open their own homes rather than go to a white home. This may be because it is customary to act as conversational leader in one’s own home where the host normally takes the lead; it may also be simply a matter of convenience in not having to travel to another neighborhood for the Visit.

The Conversation Leader

E S S E N T I A L “ingredient” of the Interracial Home Visit is the Negro conversation leader. As the visitors are encouraged to bring up any and all questions on race, the Negro conversation leader should be able to talk frankly about experiences with racial discrimination, his own and friends’. He need not be a scientist nor a human relations professional; he has the irreplaceable impact of the first-hand experience, recounted as he has experienced it.

Rarely if ever will a Negro refuse to serve as conversation leader if he has been given to understand how little white people in general know about race . . . how “expert” he is, by contrast . . . and how much he can help understanding on the part of these whites by con-
tributing his experience, to make racial issues come alive to them.

The Negro conversation leader can serve again and again in his role, as each Visit is for a new group of white learners. In fact, he will become more expert in drawing out the white participants and in expressing clearly his own ideas as he has added experience with the Visits. He is also the best recruiter of additional conversation leaders from his own friends, relatives, associates.

Pastors of Negro churches can also be helpful in recruiting leaders. Then there are work groups—teachers, social workers, lawyers, factory and office workers, and the like, as well as groups like the Negro membership of the Urban League, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and interracial organizations. The key qualities of effective conversation leaders are not those of formal education or economic standing but a hospitable willingness to share with white strangers one's personal ideas, feelings, insights on race and the ability to do this in a small, informal group.

(Throughout this booklet, “leader” is used in the singular. In most cases, of course, the leader is a couple. Occasionally, too, the leader may invite another Negro friend or two to sit in on the Visit. This is useful as a “selling” device for new conversation leaders, but there should not be too many added, or the conversation may tend to go off in too many different directions.)

The Visitor-Learners

RECRUITING new groups of white visitors proves to be the challenge—and the measure of effectiveness—of the Interracial Home Visit program.

The Home Visit is a tried-and-true way of bringing truth to those who seek it. White visitors are enlisted by interesting them in this opportunity to get the facts on racial problems from those best qualified to give the facts— informed and articulate Negroes. And most whites, if they know a conversation of this kind is available to them, will respond. Some may think they have little to learn, but unfailingly they do learn.

Visitors have been of all walks of life, adults and young people (college or senior high school age), religious and lay. The best “salesmen” of the program are those who have already participated so a special effort to enlist help of visitors in recruiting new groups is often fruitful. Friendship House experience has been that the recruiting is most easily done in groups—a class, a club, a church society. Members may also, of course, extend invitations to relatives, friends, neighbors, co-workers, fellow students.

Another method of recruitment would be to seek out leaders: clergymen, school administrators and faculty members, political figures.

One sales technique which has been used successfully is to provide for a white audience a short “demonstration Home Visit” followed by explanation and discussion of the program. The demonstration is simple: at the beginning of the program five or six members of the audience are drafted to act as “visitors” and are sent outside the auditorium to begin a “visit” with a Negro conversation leader. While they are warming into their conversation, the audience is briefed on the general idea of the program. Then the group is brought on, to continue their conversation at whatever point it has reached. Fifteen or twenty minutes of listening to the conversation gives the audience an idea of at least, the free-wheeling nature of the Home Visit conversation (though they should be cautioned that listening to a conversation is a different experience from participating), and then they can ask questions about aspects of the program which are not clear.

As an aid to answering the questions most frequently asked about the Visits, these are discussed fully in “A Few Further Points” at the end of this booklet.

The Escort

THE escort is the link, representing the organizers of the Home Visits, between the white visitors and the Negro conversation leader. He meets the visitors at an agreed-upon place and
orients them briefly on the Visit; then he escorts them to the home and makes the introductions. The escort can also support the conversation leader and help keep the conversation on racial matters, should a visitor tend to move the talk away. It must be remembered, though, that the Negro conversation leader is the key person in the discussion. The less the escort needs to say, the better the job is done! Often the escort is a member of the organizing group; it seems to make no difference to the Visit whether he is white or Negro.

When a Visit is held in a white home, usually the host performs the functions of the escort. And when many Visits in Negro homes are arranged at one time, as on a citywide day, the press of numbers may require that the role of escort be eliminated. In that case a spokesman can be chosen by each visiting group.

The Conversation

THERE is no set structure or outline for the conversation. The discussions, in any case, take their own individual course, depending upon the interests of the participants. A sampling of ideas that have been raised in various Home Visits suggests the variety possible:

"Would there be any difficulty in getting service in our city's restaurants today?"
"Have you always felt welcome to churches and religious groups?"
"Were there special problems in obtaining your home?"
"Were there jobs you wanted that were closed to you because of racial discrimination?"
"Do you have facts on school segregation?"
"A friend noticed Negro patients were placed together in rooms—is this a common practice in hospitals?"
"How do parents of Negro children prepare them to face segregation?"
"How can one prevent prejudice growing in children?"
"In the back of many peoples' minds is the fear of interracial marriage. How can this be answered?"

"How about moving into a white neighborhood? Do Negroes you know fear doing this—or want to?"
"Crime and welfare are bugbears one hears about."
"Does vacationing or traveling present special hardships?"
"Do many Negroes have prejudice, too?"
"How do you feel about the Black Muslims?"
"Do Negroes think alike?"

To get these and other questions answered, the Home Visits bring the questioners to those best qualified to answer—informed, articulate Negroes.

The Organizers

THOSE who devote themselves to organizing Home Visits do not see these as a total or only program for racial change, but they recognize their worth as an effective method of opening minds and hearts of whites to the challenge of race, beginning the change from "bystander" to "committed." They know they will usually not have the satisfaction of seeing the final fruits of their efforts, for like any educational program the Home Visit is in many ways a "work of faith."

The groups offering the Home Visit program in cities throughout the country are always interracial but vary in structure. Some were formed just to do this program; others are committees of an existing (usually, a civil rights) organization. All but the Home Visit committee of the Washington, D.C., Conference on Religion and Race and the committee at the National Home Visit Center are volunteer groups without paid staff or office. Planning meetings often are held in the members' homes. Offering a well-organized program of Interracial Home Visits under such limitations is no small accomplishment.

A new group needs to build a list of available conversation leaders and escorts. Initially this list can be very small as both leader and escort can serve for many Visits, since each visiting group is new. As the number of Visits held in-
creases, in order to share the work and also to expand the circle of leaders and escorts, new ones will have to be recruited. Each newcomer must be oriented to the purpose and requirements of the program.

The big challenge for the organizers, as explained in the section above on “The Visitor-Learner,” is recruiting with regularity new groups of visitors. Helpful hints on ways of recruiting are also given in that section.

To arrange a Home Visit once visitors have been recruited, most organizers set a date two weeks ahead. Then allowing an average of six visitors (maximum eight or nine, minimum three or four) to a home, the organizers check with leaders and escorts until enough to handle the total visiting group are found who are available on the date set. (A few organizing groups have varied this format slightly; they set certain dates when leaders and escorts are available; then they recruit white visitors for those dates. This, of course, eliminates the flexibility of offering Visits at any time convenient to the visitors.)

One hazard organizers have encountered has been lack of firm reservations from white visitors. A solution found successful at Friendship House has been charging a fee, which is due two weeks before the Visit date when the reservation is made. The amount may be token, 50¢ or $1 per person, but it seems helpful in assuring definite commitments and without any slowdown in the steadily increasing number of visitors participating. (There may be involved a something-free-can't-be-any-good psychology.) It should be made clear that the money goes to cover expenses in promoting and arranging the Home Visit; that the host, conversation leader, and escort all contribute their service without remuneration.

The Citywide Day

In 1963 a new dimension was added to the Interracial Home Visit program with the development of the idea of the citywide Home Visit Day. The first, held January 6 in Chicago, brought over 2000 visitors. The largest, November 3 in Cleveland, served over 3000 visitors. On such days the basic unit remains the same — a living room-size group of white visitors locked in dialogue with a Negro conversation leader—but the number of these units is multiplied by the hundreds. The same person-to-person confrontation occurs, but there are also added certain aspects of a demonstration in the widespread attention and interest this kind of citywide program generates, even among those who do not participate. Conversation leaders and visitors have the satisfaction of feeling themselves part of a big, popular program for racial understanding.

Most of the days have been done with interreligious sponsorship, thus adding a moral imperative to the program. The recruiting of white visitors, as well as additional Negro conversation leaders, was done through the city's churches and synagogues as a cooperative effort. Enlisting such interreligious sponsorship is recommended.

It is also helpful to gain participation from an agency (or agencies) that can furnish office space and/or staff. In one city the official human relations commission provided this; in another, an interfaith organization. Still another city set up temporary phone numbers for making registrations; these were manned by teams of college student volunteers.

Decisions about the choices to be offered must be made by the planners of the day. A few citywide days have offered both Visits in white homes and Visits in Negro homes. This meant that whites were recruited as visitors and as hosts; Negroes were recruited as hosts and as conversation leaders for Visits held in white homes. (One committee added flexibility to these registrations by adding a third option—“willing to do either”—to their registration forms.)

Because of the complications inevitably inherent in a large scale operation of this kind, most citywide days have limited the choices by making the day one of Home Visits in Negro homes; thus, all the whites recruited were visitors, and all the Negroes were hosts.

Keeping reservations “in balance” is perhaps the biggest challenge in arranging a large scale day. Careful and frequent checks need to be
made as to the rate of recruitment of visitor groups in proportion to conversation leaders. Lagging on one side needs to be counterbalanced with additional recruitment to restore the proper proportions.

On large days orientation of the new conversation leaders will have to be done by mailing them mimeographed or printed information on the program, instead of the more informal direct discussion with each new leader that is possible when a few are recruited at a time. When using such mass recruiting methods, it may be important to watch for the occasional Negro who is unwilling to lead the conversation into racial topics or, if the topic is raised, to insist he has known no first hand instances of discrimination. Such people are not useful in this Interracial Home Visit program whose goal is to offer white visitors an opportunity to learn from Negroes about such first hand experiences of discrimination.

Recruitment of visitors will also depend more on mailings and publicity by mass means. Press, radio, and TV coverage increase as the day approaches, and thus many last-minute registrations are likely to occur.

As to arrangements for the Visits themselves, two different methods have been used on city-wide days. One is to give the host the names of his visitors; he then contacts them by phone both to reinforce the invitation and to give directions to his home. The other is the use of "dispersal centers." Visitors are directed to one of these centers—in the general area of a group of homes where Visits will be held. At the center the visitors receive a brief orientation on the program and then are divided into groups of six and given a card with the name and address of their host for the Home Visit. This second method has some advantages in that it gives participants more sense of being part of a large, popular demonstration; from a public relations standpoint, pictures of the dispersal centers make interesting and impressive "shots." Also it is possible to give some orientation to the visitors. Perhaps most important of all, should there be a spate of last-minute visitor registrations or last-minute visitor or host cancellations, the size of each visiting group can be adjusted on the spot. A decrease or increase of one or two visitors in a group will thus accommodate 20-30 percent more or fewer visitors in relation to the number of hosts available.

A variation of the large scale citywide program idea is arranging Home Visits for a large group, such as a school's student body or a convention. (In August, 1962, Friendship House arranged Home Visits for 800 college students from all over the country attending a convention in Chicago; the Visit was part of the regular convention schedule.)

A Few Further Points
(Some questions frequently asked)

Q Isn't discussing race artificial? Wouldn't discussing one another's children or ball scores or the like be more natural?

From Friendship House experience, no. It would be more artificial, in fact, to bring together an interracial group for a single meeting as the Home Visit does and then avoid the subject of race. The aim of the Visit is to give white visitors an opportunity to learn about race; the Negro conversation leaders are asked to share their information on this—not on ball scores or children. That can come later if these particular people develop a close friendship. One cannot form friendships for people; this grows out of individual choices. One can, however, arrange a meeting to educate, and that is the reason for the Interracial Home Visit.

White visitors have remarked that they found discussing race frankly a stimulating experience. Many Negro conversation leaders have also found such discussion stimulating, even—a release; some said it was their first opportunity to speak openly and frankly to a group of whites about race. A few prospective white visitors have raised the question, thinking that this topic might be imposing on the Negro participant; they can be assured that this is the very purpose of the Visit and the Negro conversation leader is expecting to discuss racial issues. With a reason for the Visit—discussion
of racial issues—some Negroes have said they do not feel "on display" as they had in other interracial gatherings without any structure.

One could go so far as to assert that an interracial group which has avoided discussing racial issues has not reached a full communication.

Q You indicate that deeper learning for the white visitors occurs when the Visit is in a Negro home. Isn't it "one-sided" to have most or all of the Visits there?

This suggests repeated visits by the same group of whites. If this occurred, there would be every reason for feeling the program was one-sided, but the Interracial Home Visit is a single meeting, to give a group of whites an opportunity to learn about the race problem from those who know it best—Negro conversation leaders. The pertinent question is, "What setting contributes most to this learning experience?" On this basis, participants have found, as stated before, that the Negro home is the preferred setting. (Reasons for using the white home are given in an earlier section, "The Setting.")

Q What about reciprocal visits? Do you arrange these?

No, for this is something the two parties can best arrange themselves. A white visitor who wishes to invite his Negro host to his own home can do so, of course—and the Negro host accepts or not according to his own personal inclination and availability. Many times such an invitation has come from a visitor on a Home Visit, but it is kept a personal matter—as it surely should be.

No one involved in the program . . . organizers, leaders, escorts . . . should expect this to occur automatically or be disappointed if it does not. In coming on a Home Visit many of the white visitor-learners are making a tentative first step in interracial understanding; it is not surprising that few immediately think of arranging a further meeting. Nor should visitors be recruited on the basis of a commitment to entertain their conversation leader—not, at any rate, if the organizers are trying to reach uncommitted whites to give them a needed first experience in interracial matters.

Q Surely you are just "saving the saved." Do any deeply prejudiced white people come on a Home Visit?

Occasionally, yes. However, the crucial group in racial issues are not the out-and-out bigots, who are a relative handful. It is the vastly larger number of "gentle people of prejudice," as Gordon Allport so aptly termed them, most of whom do not even know they are prejudiced, who shape and maintain the racial segregation status quo. These are the people who can be interested in a Visit and who learn so much from one.

Q How typical are the Negroes who serve as conversation leaders?

Who is "typical?" No one Negro can "represent" the entire Negro community nor "speak for the race." If the question means, "Does the cross section of Negro conversation leaders represent a cross section of the Negro community?" the answer is, no, and it may be well to explain to white visitors in the orientation before the Home Visit that the Visit does not attempt to show them the destitute side of the Negro community—it is assumed all whites know this exists. Furthermore, few people who are destitute care to invite strangers to their home. But aside from the materially needy group, the range of backgrounds among the Negro conversation leaders is very broad, from people of very modest circumstances to those who are quite wealthy. As mentioned in the section on "The Conversation Leader," the key qualities of the leader are warmth and openness, not formal educational or occupational attainments.

Q How do you match backgrounds of Negro conversation leaders and white visitors?

This is not necessary; in fact, there may be added interest to the Visit if there is variety
in the backgrounds. Furthermore, in many sections of the country Negroes' job backgrounds are much below their personal and educational attainments; rigid matching might distort rather than insure bringing together compatible people.

Q Does this one-shot kind of thing really do any good? How can a complex problem like race relations be solved in one session?

It cannot—nor does anyone mean to suggest that a single Interracial Home Visit will "solve" the race problem. But thousands of white visitors maintain that they found the two hours they spent on an Interracial Home Visit the best use of two hours learning about racial issues that has yet been devised.

Results

Although results are not usually immediately known, some specific ones—beside the Number One result of the universal change of heart and commitment—have been reported from various sections of the country. These range from minor, spontaneous results, such as a follow-up supper for participants and inviting priests to join the local ministerial association, to long-ranging structural changes, such as opening up employment opportunities in a plant and office and reducing tension in newly integrated school situations.

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This account comes to a conclusion—but not an end. This booklet reflects experience to date with the Interracial Home Visit program. As more and more participate, new ways and means for growing and developing will surely evolve. The reader's participation in that growth and development is enlisted and invited.

"Interest in the discussions became so intense that (many) participants failed to notice the hours slip by and kept the sessions alive far beyond the scheduled time. Although visitors had been recruited with the assurance that they were under no obligation to extend return invitations to their hosts, many were glad to do so on their own accord.

"Summed up one lady visitor her reaction to the program: 'It certainly was educational to have a frank discussion on race, but the most valuable lesson we learned today—and needed to learn badly—was that Negroes are people with everyday problems and cares exactly like our own.'"

—Ebony, April, 1963.

"'At last,' Betty Plank wrote in June '55 COMMUNITY, 'we have a powerful means of correcting stereotypes about Negroes. We realize that we can simply let the conditions speak for themselves.' Betty's words proved to be more prophetic than she or anyone else could have known at the time. She was describing the first Interracial Home Visit, arranged by Friendship House, for a high school group in 1955."


"One guest sat silently for the most part throughout the evening. The next day, however, the P—s received a long letter from the guest, citing his utter amazement. He had accepted the invitation to visit merely out of charity; he thought that he would be coming into an environment of abject poverty. Instead, the comfortable home he was ushered into shocked him, and he was 'amazed to discover that the P—s were normal people.'"

National

HOME VISIT CENTER

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