



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Role of Governments and Civil Society in Promoting Tolerance, Respect and Mutual Understanding, Particularly Through Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue and Partnerships

As prepared for delivery by Robert L. Woodson, Sr.
to the OSCE Conference on Tolerance and the Fight Against Racism,
Xenophobia and Discrimination, Brussels
September 13, 2004

Over the past 50 years, the United States has undergone significant changes in its policies toward race. Segregation was outlawed. Discrimination is against the law in hiring, renting, selling, school admission, doing business, and any other conceivable function in American society.

But passing laws is not the entire answer. And merely mixing races does not promote understanding. If racial understanding were the antidote to conflict, why is it that most crimes against people are committed by those of their own color?

The most effective way to bring about harmony is to identify common interests that are shared by all groups, and organize around those interests. Armies and athletic teams understand that—a shared goal or adversary can bond people of all races and classes.

An example carried out by my organization, the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, is that of school safety. Youth violence has become an increasing problem in the United States, with the kind of incidents once associated with poor urban neighborhoods now emerging in rich suburban neighborhoods. Interestingly, a characteristic of young people today in suburban white neighborhoods is to mimic the culture of inner-city blacks—their dress and their habits.

What we have done to address the problem of youth violence is to go to the source of cultural pollution—the leading predators—and to change them so that their character changes, but not their characteristics. We have worked with leaders of major youth gangs who wanted to change their lives. Once transformed, they become agents of health. We have seen whole communities in inner city black America transformed from zones of violence to oases of peace. We have promoted and exported this solution to suburban America by bringing in white youths to learn—from black urban youth—how to be peaceful. As a consequence, when it is perceived that inner city blacks are not the source of expanding violence and crime but a source of solutions, the by-product of this new relationship is racial reconciliation.

We saw an excellent example of this last fall when NCNE took four black inner city youths to St. Petersburg, Russia, for a conference on youth violence. There they met their white counterparts, with the young people—white and black—bonding together in a way that no one ever would have thought possible. There was no talk about racial differences—because

race is not their problem. And if these most troubled young people can learn to come together, then other elements of a more peaceful society should surely be able to as well.

We should always look for surrogate ways to address racial issues, and not to focus on race itself. While racial reconciliation can be the by-product of coming together to solve a mutual problem, that problem conversely will not be solved if the process focuses only on racial reconciliation.

The key to racial harmony is finding a point of mutual need that exists among the diverse groups.