

‘We Make Things Right’

ISAAC tackles issues of social injustice

BY OLGA BONFIGLIO



Brian Powers

With a mission to help “hope triumph over fear,” the local interfaith organization ISAAC has been advocating and problem-solving on issues of social injustice in the Kalamazoo community for more than 15 years.

ISAAC (Interfaith Strategy for Advocacy & Action in the Community) is a faith-based organizing network with more than 20 member congregations and community partners from the region.

“ISAAC is all about social justice, people power and policy change,” says ISAAC Executive Director Charlae Davis, who works out of an office at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church. “It’s all about people in the community collaborating together to solve our problems. There have been some victories but also many hard-fought fights. It’s like chipping away at institutional inequalities. It doesn’t fall all at once.”

ISAAC emerged out of the Northside Ministerial Alliance, a long-standing group of clergy who work to enhance relations with community leaders. During an anti-racism training the Alliance held in 2000, it became evident that there was a need for collaborative work on community concerns such as fair wages, adequate housing for all and racial inequities. ISAAC became a formal organization in 2002 and since that time has tackled those issues and others, including a millage to provide public transportation on Sundays and late nights, health and early childhood education for children in poverty, and prevention of youth violence.

ISAAC is affiliated with the Gamaliel Foundation, a faith-based organizing group that trains leaders in 17 states to build political power and create organizations that unite people of diverse faiths and races. It’s the largest group of its kind in Southwest Michigan. Gamaliel had much success in advocating for change in Detroit, and the Northside Ministerial Alliance wanted to effect such change in Kalamazoo in the same way: through a faith-based organization that seeks “to build a world where hope triumphs over fear, where God’s abundance meets the needs of all, where we live in sacred and beloved community.”

ISAAC currently has a 14-member board that works with 24 member congregations, strategic partners, sponsors and affiliated organizations like the Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety, Kalamazoo Public Schools,

Charlae Davis oversees the operations as executive director of ISAAC.



the former Kalamazoo County Poverty Reduction Initiative and a plethora of others to achieve specific goals.

“What I love about ISAAC is the members' ability to come to the table knowing that we don't have to agree on everything,” says Davis. “But we stay at the table and try to find common ground and a strategy to make things right. That doesn't always happen in society.”

ISAAC follows a strict process in order to decide on the issues it will address and actions it will take. It starts with a “listening campaign” in

ISAAC members and volunteers engage in activities aimed at solving social justice issues in the community such as the listening campaign, above, and anti-racism demonstrations, at right.

the Douglas, Edison, Northside and Vine neighborhoods to learn what is going on in those communities and the concerns people have. It does this through one-on-one or two-on-one conversations as well as random surveys. Survey and interview responses are tallied, and the organization holds a convention at which each issue is presented to ISAAC community members along with a skit to understand the issue better. The group votes on the top three issues ISAAC will address over a two-year cycle.

The current cycle, which began in 2015, is dedicated to issues of early childhood education, youth violence prevention and anti-racism.



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Meet Charlae Davis

ISAAC Executive Director Charlae (Shar-LAY) grew up in Kalamazoo with parents who were educators and had a strong religious faith.

They encouraged her to take time for reflection and to build a support network that would propel her to success, but it is perseverance and strength from God that keeps her going, she says.

"I have a God-given purpose, and I remember it especially when I'm tired, because it energizes me. This is what I want to do in this life, and I am fulfilled by that purpose," says Davis.

The Kalamazoo Central graduate is well prepared in terms of education. She holds a Ph.D. in educational policy from Michigan State University and a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Michigan.

Davis says her parents taught her that God calls you to love and be concerned about your fellow community members. She also learned from them to avoid "living in a bubble" and instead to recognize and understand societal structures of inequity.

"They taught me that we are not successful if others are oppressed in society and that we should challenge inequities we experience not only in our own lives but within the community as well."

A key to achieving its aims is ISAAC members' efforts to work directly with local government officials to gain support and commitment for the policies of change that ISAAC advocates. ISAAC also works to educate the community about social issues.

For example, over the past year, ISAAC has been hosting multiple film screenings in churches and service-related agencies of *The Raising of America: Early Childhood and the Future of Our Nation*, a documentary that examines how racism, poverty, violence and other factors can lead to traumatic stress that affects youth and their behavior.

"If people have access to opportunities and they live in a community that is equitable, safe and clean, they have a better chance of succeeding," says Davis.

In its efforts to prevent youth violence, ISAAC volunteers are teaching youth in Kalamazoo County how to be leaders for peace through community organizing. Future Leaders for Peace is a program held once a month at St. Luke's where kids in grades 8-12 learn how to facilitate roundtable discussions, to approach and work with legislators and to work with the community. It is hoped the youth will take this knowledge and do what adults in ISAAC do: pick issues and organize for change in their communities.

For its anti-racism agenda, ISAAC has partnered with the local organization ERACCE (Eliminating Racism and Creating/Celebrating Equity). In September 2015 the two groups collaborated to conduct a racial healing and action interfaith service, like those held by Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South

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Banners of several of the faith-based organizations that participate in ISAAC.

Carolina, after a June 2015 shooting of nine people at a prayer service there. This approach is also reminiscent of the truth and reconciliation commissions that worked in post-apartheid South Africa and post-genocide Rwanda. Around 300 people attended the ISAAC event, and 100 committed to signing up for ERACCE's anti-racism workshops.

"You've got to name it, talk about it, before you can be healed by it," says Davis. "You've got to be aware of how racism works and

then go back to the congregation, the community, the workplace and form anti-racism teams that train people to recognize and dismantle racism. You can't do it alone."

Davis acknowledges that every institution has some element of racism in it because it is ingrained in our society. Many people do not know it is automatically embedded or how that happens.

"They say, 'Well, I'm a nice person. We're a nice institution,'" says Davis. "But they've got to ask certain key questions: Do all people have access? Do all people feel safe? Do all people have the ability to climb the ladder of success?"

It's easy for people to exist in silos where they associate with people like themselves, says Davis. However, when diverse people talk to each other, they discover that they don't all see the world in the same way. This realization can create continued awareness as well as empathy, compassion and knowledge about what it's like for others, she says.

"Then they can start chipping away at racism as a team," says Davis.

Last spring ISAAC celebrated its 15th anniversary, and one of its founders, the Rev. J. Louis Felton, returned to Kalamazoo to serve as keynote speaker at the organization's annual fundraising dinner. Felton said that ISAAC was all about its members "being servant leaders" for the people of Kalamazoo and that it was important for ISAAC to continue to "go out and do some awesome work" for the community.

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