

ON RELIGION

Christians and Jews Rediscover Interracial Haven



Chris Bergin for The New York Times

At South Calvary Missionary Baptist Church in Indianapolis, Ind., black Christians and Sephardic Jews who once shared a neighborhood are brought together in the spirit of harmony.

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN
Published: April 6, 2012

INDIANAPOLIS — After the summons to worship, the Lord's Prayer and the first hymn of the morning, the pastor of the [South Calvary Missionary Baptist Church](#) here asked the visitors to stand. Among the several hundred African-Americans in the pews on that Sunday last month, about a dozen elderly guests rose to introduce themselves as former neighbors, all of them Jewish.

Connect With Us on Twitter

Follow @NYTNational for breaking news and headlines.

Twitter List: Reporters and Editors



Enlarge This Image



Chris Bergin for The New York Times
Dorothy Patton listened to the sermon at South Calvary Missionary Baptist Church in Indianapolis, Ind.

Readers' Comments

Readers shared their thoughts on this article.

[Read All Comments \(50\) »](#)

"I lived at 1145 South Capitol, right behind the church," said one woman.

"My name is Lee Mallah," added another, "and I lived at 1015 Church Street."

"My mother and father ran Terry's Market," said a third.

With each address, each detail, murmurs of recognition and sighs of "Amen" floated up from the worshipers. Then the pastor, the Rev. John W. Woodall Jr., called on a white-haired man with wire-rim glasses, a retired judge named William Levy.

"All my homes, unfortunately, are under that interstate," Mr. Levy said, nodding in the direction of Interstate 70, two blocks north of the church. And now his listeners emitted a communal groan, the sound of lamentation.

In the service lay a story of black Christians and white Jews who once shared a kind of promised land, a peacefully integrated section of Indianapolis called Southside. Its decades of harmony were a rebuke to the

RECOMMEND

TWITTER

LINKEDIN

COMMENTS (50)

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

SHARE

Log in to see what your friends are sharing on nytimes.com. [Privacy Policy](#) | [What's This?](#)

[Log In With Facebook](#)

What's Popular Now

Debt Collector Is Faulted for Tough Tactics in Hospitals



I Hunt, But I Oppose the N.R.A.



MOST E-MAILED

MOST VIEWED



1. [A Place for Old Chickens, Outside the Pot](#)



2. [WELL: Should Your Dog Be Watching TV?](#)



3. [MARK BITTMAN: Wendell Berry, American Hero](#)



4. [Debt Collector Is Faulted for Tough Tactics in Hospitals](#)



5. [OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR: I Hunt, but the N.R.A. Isn't for Me](#)



6. [WELL: A Surprising Risk for Toddlers on Playground Slides](#)



7. [DAVID BROOKS: The Creative Monopoly](#)



8. [NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF: Veterans and Brain Disease](#)

9. [How Exercise Could Lead to a Better Brain](#)



10. [MAUREEN DOWD: Brutality of Servility](#)

[Go to Complete List »](#)

[Show My Recommendations](#)

Southern-style racial divisions that characterized Indiana for much of the 20th century, from the Ku Klux Klan's heyday in the interwar years to George Wallace's popularity with the state's voters in the 1960s.

Upward mobility, Interstate 70 and the construction of a football stadium hollowed out the neighborhood starting in the late 1960s, scattering its residents and severing bonds of commerce and friendship. But in the last four years, an anthropology professor at [Indiana University-Purdue University](#) Indianapolis, [Susan B. Hyatt](#), has set about finding former Southsiders and restoring those ties through social events and reciprocal worship services at South Calvary and the [Etz Chaim Sephardic synagogue](#).

At no time will her efforts be more meaningful than during this weekend's convergence of Christianity's holiest days, Good Friday and Easter, and the beginning of the Jewish [Passover](#). Passover's exodus narrative is arguably the central text for both Judaism and black Christianity. And Passover is one of Judaism's pilgrimage holidays — which is why Jesus traveled to Jerusalem to visit the Temple and to share a Seder meal with his disciples, which would become known as the Last Supper.

A different kind of pilgrimage has reunited the former exiles of Southside. How else would Henry Dabney ever have bumped into Becky Profeta, the girl whose hair he pulled in grade school 70 years ago? How else would Anne Calderon have recalled the pastor of South Calvary asking her mother in the 1930s to please not hang laundry in a backyard next to the church during Sunday services?

"All I know is this neighborhood was full of nice people," Mr. Levy, 82, told the congregation at South Calvary last month. "Something exceptional about this place and that time. Two totally different peoples, different color, different backgrounds, different language, coexisting beautifully. What I saw was acceptance of all of those differences, coupled with friendship. A perfect match."

After the church service ended and the Southside alumni settled into a kosher lunch together, Jacqueline Bellamy, 62, added her assent. "Most times, people of two colors, two religions don't come together," she said. "To see how it's blossomed to this is like 'Wow!'"

The story of Southside begins with two epic exoduses. One brought thousands of Sephardic Jews — those expelled from Spain during the Inquisition — to safe harbors in the [Ottoman Empire](#), like Salonika in what is now Greece and Monastir in present-day Macedonia. Early in the 20th century, their progeny arrived in Indianapolis, where many worked as tailors in a factory owned by German Jews and others were peddlers or opened shops. They all formed synagogues and social groups, including a Girl Scout troop.

The other exodus involved black Africans brought to America as slaves and emancipated years later. In the years after World War I, several thousand of their descendants made their way to Indianapolis, finding in Southside both access to industrial jobs and rare examples of integrated public schools. The black Christians and the Sephardic Jews, fellow outsiders, shared a kind of microclimate of tolerance. When one of the local movie theaters tried to enforce segregated seating, the white Jewish children would sneak their black Christian friends down from the Jim Crow balcony.

All of that history might have been lost to postwar prosperity and the construction boom's wrecking ball had not Professor Hyatt attended an annual reunion of Southside's black residents in August 2008 and heard for the first time about their former Sephardic neighbors. By pure coincidence the next year, she ran into Lee Mallah, one of those former neighbors, selling Sephardic pastries at a local greenmarket.

With students from her anthropology classes and \$14,000 from Indiana-Purdue and other donors, Professor Hyatt set about locating former Southsiders. She and her students have by now taken about 40 oral histories and digitally scanned about 400 period photographs. Some of that material will become part of a book about Southside that is scheduled for publication this summer.

What was impossible to foresee was the depth of the individual connections that have been re-established. Ms. Profeta and Cleo Moore, for instance, discovered that their families had lived at different times in the same house at 1106 South Illinois Street. Beatrice Miller and Gladys Cohen renewed a friendship from their work at Head Start almost a half-century earlier. Henrietta Mervis, 92, met the long-ago customers of her parents' grocery store. She was not even the oldest participant at the service. That honor went to John M. Calloway, 96, who let it be known that he still is a ballroom dancer.

During a bus tour of the old neighborhood — what is left of it, that is — Beatrice Miller said something that she probably meant in jest. But under the circumstances, it sounded profound. “On the Southside,” she said, “every key opened the same doors.”

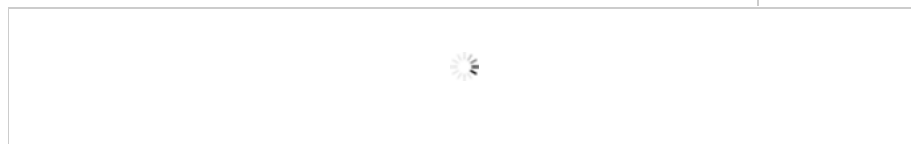
E-mail: sgfi@columbia.edu

A version of this article appeared in print on April 7, 2012, on page A12 of the New York edition with the headline: An Exodus Tale Ends in an Interracial Reunion in Indiana.

49 Comments

Share your thoughts.

ALL | READER PICKS | NYT PICKS Newest | Comments Closed



Get Free E-mail Alerts on These Topics

[Jews and Judaism](#)

[Christians and Christianity](#)

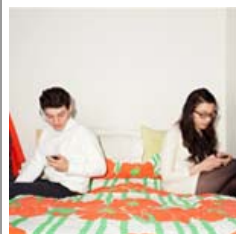
[Passover](#)

[Easter and Holy Week](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



FASHION & STYLE »



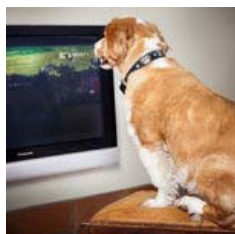
For Couples, New Source of Online Friction

MUSIC »



Met's 'Ring' Machine Finishes the Spin Cycle

HEALTH »



Should Your Dog Be Watching TV?

OPINION »

Fixes: Time to Revisit Food Deserts
 Research on obesity in poor areas suggests that access must be considered alongside factors like price, taste and education, too.

HOME & GARDEN »



Please, Don't Feed the Artist

OPINION »



Op-Ed: Expand Minds, Not the N.Y.U. Campus

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y. / Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | [Travel](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Autos](#) | [Site Map](#)

© 2012 The New York Times Company | [Privacy](#) | [Your Ad Choices](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Terms of Sale](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work With Us](#) | [Advertise](#)