

19 leaders pledge to do more to end racism

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"Did the ship come in?" former Mayor Theodore Berry asked after comparing 19 religious leaders to ships setting out to sea.

Berry's barely audible request symbolized the task the 19 leaders of different denominations have committed themselves and their congregations to do: end racism. Berry was Cincinnati's first African American mayor.

The leaders - Muslim, Christian, Jewish and Unitarian - gathered at City Hall to issue a statement on race to Mayor Roxanne Qualls, former Mayor Eugene Ruehlman and Berry.

Berry said he was honored to read the statement on race as council member Tyrone Yates held the microphone for him. He said the symbol of the leaders' unity is admirable for a challenge that began

30 years ago.

The Metropolitan Area Religious Coalition Cincinnati (MARCC) organized the event at City Hall. MARCC was founded 30 years ago after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The event also honored the religious holidays - Passover, Easter and Eid al-Adha - all being celebrated within the same week.

Qualls said the group's action is a beginning for Cincinnati's future. "Racism and the barriers it creates are still a problem in our society and in our city. Improving those relations between races and cultures is the key to the city's economic future and moral future," she said.

In 1997, Qualls concerned with the racial issues stemming from the death of Lorenzo Collins, convened a meeting of judicatory delegates in Cincinnati to begin to develop a statement on race. On Jan. 1, the delegates signed their statement on

race pledging to bring everyone together.

Qualls acknowledged that the process to change laws is much faster than to change a person's attitude toward another. She said despite the achievements made in education, employment and income by the civil rights movement, the statistics show the African American community still lags behind in many areas including poverty and opportunity.

Former Mayor Eugene Ruehlman questioned why it took a crisis to change a community's attitude. Ruehlman served Cincinnati as mayor when Dr. King was killed. "If there is improvement in race relations in Cincinnati, it will be the church and synagogues that lead the way," he said.

Rev. Damon Lynch, Jr. agreed, saying, "Let us not let this rest and just become a press conference. Let us go out of this place and tell everyone we meet, I am your brother."