



Rabbi James Wax speaks to Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb in April 1968. Wax and the Memphis Ministers Association submitted "An Appeal to Conscience" and demanded that Loeb resolve the sanitation workers strike. Their efforts led to the formation of MIFA a few months later. THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

MIFA at 50

Longtime group still showing its faith in Memphis



Your Turn
Dorothy Sanders Wells
Guest columnist

Among the images emerging from Memphis immediately following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, was the image of a group of interfaith clergy calling upon Mayor Henry Loeb to bring an end to the Sanitation Workers strike that had brought Dr. King to our city.

That group of clergy – Caucasian and African American, Jewish and Christian – represented a unity around a single, critical cause that had rarely been seen in Memphis, and one that was desperately needed for Memphis to move forward from those very dark days.

Over the next several months, many of that group of clergy, together with a committed group of laypersons, would go on to lay the foundation for an interracial, interfaith alliance to address the needs of the most vulnerable poor in the city, and Metropolitan Inter-faith Association was born.

From the beginning, the Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association represented something new and different for Memphis, a model of unity in service that was in fact so different that it nearly crumbled within its first years. How could such a diverse group of people in the community find a core mission and work together for its fulfillment? But with time, continued commitment and faith, MIFA not only survived, but also became a model of cooperative community leadership and action for other area ministries, as well.

Fifty years later, MIFA's name is still synonymous with uniting our community in service; those who give

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The famed 'Memphis Miracle' arose from distress of 1968



Your Turn
Harry Danziger
Guest columnist

In 1968, Memphis was a city depressed and discouraged, disdained and divided.

It was depressed and discouraged because the sanitation strike and assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had held a mirror to the face of our city, and the image we saw was not pretty.

Memphis was a city disdained by the nation as the epitome of what was wrong with the South.

It was divided, not just by race, but by economics and religion, by neighborhood and zip code. Our community was hardly the place to look for an urban miracle.

Enter MIFA, a new organization begun by a few religious leaders and concerned laypersons. The name -- Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association -- offered no hint of the powerful force MIFA would become over the next half century.

Who could have foreseen 50 years ago that "Inter-Faith" did not mean well-meaning people telling each other about their own faiths, but people of every faith and no faith united to transform the ugliest realities of life in Memphis?

Behind that name were dedicated staff and committed volunteers, people and institutions who were moved to give time and treasure. They came together to change a community and a culture one life at a time.

People who might never have known each other or worked together found in MIFA a way to live out their deepest commitments. MIFA stalwarts may have prayed in their various ways, but, through MIFA, they

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joined together to become the answers to other people's prayers.

That was only a part of MIFA, the Memphis Miracle. What else was it that, looking back on 50 years, no one could have predicted?

Those who led and founded MIFA dreamed big. But they knew that, to make those dreams come true, MIFA's compassion must be matched by its competence. Volunteers and committed staff from the community formed a MIFA admired for its ideals, but also trusted for its ability to get the job done.

MIFA became a well-managed business. but its business was God's busi-

ness of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless. Again and again, government agencies and charitable foundations have turned to MIFA as a caring, capable and committed partner in fulfilling their unique missions.

And MIFA has been a job creator. Time and again, the staff and leaders of MIFA saw a need and created a process to answer it. And then, the seedling they planted was permitted to grow on its own as a new and focused agency in the community.

MIFA's leaders always looked to see what were the emerging issues in our multi-county community. But those leaders never insisted that only MIFA could answer those new needs. From food to clothing to caring for the homebound. everywhere the offspring of MI-

FA transform lives while MIFA moves on to new missions for a new age.

To count those blessed by the founding of MIFA 50 years ago, we would have to add all those whose lives have been touched by MIFA's many "offspring."

Out of our divided, depressed, discouraged city, imaginative leaders, passionate volunteers, dedicated staff, generous givers and a faith community built the model of community transformation we call MIFA.

Unless and until poverty and infirmity, hunger and homelessness, despair and loneliness are no more, MIFA will continue to be vital as a Memphis Miracle.

Rabbi Harry K. Danziger was chair of MIFA's board of directors from 2002 to 2004. He is Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Israel.



MIFA is celebrating its 50th anniversary this month during its CommUNITY days. Here volunteers from Breath of Life Christian Center and Rosemark Church of God in Christ stuffed backpacks for youth at area schools with food donated by Kroger. MIFA

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of themselves daily to our work – whether delivering meals, sharing in our financial support, or helping to serve our families in crisis – cross racial, ethnic and religious lines, and exemplify treating every human being with dignity and respect.

Our mission has been shaped by the vision of our founders, and that mission continues to bring us all together, joining hearts and hands that know neither creed nor color, in serving at-risk seniors and families each day.

The meals that help sustain seniors for whom a daily meal means both health and independence, and the emergency services that help families overcome periods of crisis to remain in

their homes, positively affect thousands of lives.

Our work is the kind of work that can only be done because we come together, crossing our artificial human boundaries, and uniting with a common goal of highly impactful service.

There really is no better way for us to celebrate 50 years of MIFA than to reinforce the message that has always been at our core: We can do more together.

More than 70 faith communities have accepted MIFA’s invitation to join together during our CommUNITY days in September, and to work hand in hand to continue to effectuate transformative change in our community.

From delivering meals to seniors, to tackling long-overdue community clean-up projects, to creating resource sites, to preparing gifts for senior clients, to packing emergency provisions for families in crisis, the faith communi-

ties that have come together for our CommUNITY days are crossing boundaries, growing together in service, and making our community a better place. There really could be no better way to celebrate all that MIFA has been and continues to be in Memphis.

Fifty years ago, a faithful group of Memphians saw beyond race and religion, beyond class and ethnicity, beyond age and ability, and dared to envision a community in which all people could unite in serving the most vulnerable among us.

Fifty years later, we invite those who are looking for a way to make a difference to join us – and to be the change that you’d like to see. There’s room at our table for everyone.

Rev. Dr. Dorothy Sanders Wells is chair of MIFA’s board of directors and rector of St. George’s Episcopal Church in Germantown.