



Vincent Harding

1931-2014 by Omer R. Galle with Zona
Galle and Kristin Galle

Note: This is a story of our connection with one of the lesser known giants of the Civil Rights Movement, Vincent Gordon Harding, a close friend of Martin Luther King, Jr. Vincent died in Philadelphia on May 19th at age 82. Our friendship with him began at the University of Chicago in 1959.

Vincent Harding was born in Harlem on July 25, 1931. Reared by his mother, Mabel Lydia Broome, a domestic worker, they moved to the Bronx when Vincent was a youth. After graduating from Morris High School, he received a B.A. in history from the City College of New York and a master's in journalism from Columbia. In 1953, he was drafted into the US Army and served for two years as "private first class" at Fort Dix, New Jersey. He said that his time in the army transformed him into a pacifist.

After the army, he was accepted into the graduate history program at the University of Chicago. There he met Elmer Neufeld, a Mennonite, who was also working on a PhD (Philosophy). Elmer invited Vincent to the Woodlawn Mennonite Church located at Woodlawn and 46th St. This was a transformative meeting for Vincent and the Mennonites. He joined Delton Franz as co-pastor of the Woodlawn Church and found the pacifist community he had been seeking. The Mennonite Church found an inspiring and influential figure in preaching non-violence and civil rights.

The Woodlawn Church building and two residential buildings

were all that was left of the Mennonite Biblical Seminary, which had started in 1945 when it was almost all white. By the mid-50s, it had become totally African American and moved to Elkhart, Indiana. The buildings and church were kept by the General Conference Mennonite Church to start up an independent, interracial church in that area. The white population of the church were a combination of young Mennonites attending graduate school at the University of Chicago plus youth doing voluntary service in the church and elsewhere (as an alternative to the armed forces). African Americans attending the church were primarily from the local neighborhood and worked in the city.

Vincent and Delton and three other church members, (2 black and 3 white men), made a trip to the South the summer of 1958. Vincent said that while the church in Chicago was developing into a real, loving, interracial community, they wanted to explore whether such relationships could happen elsewhere in the South. In Alabama, they stopped in Montgomery and visited Coretta and Martin Luther King, Jr. Before they left, King told Harding that, with his background as an African American Mennonite and a pacifist, he should come south to help in the battle for civil rights.

My wife and I first met Vincent when we moved to Chicago in the fall of 1959 to begin graduate school. We lived in a small apartment next to the Woodlawn Ave. Mennonite Church. Vincent was living on the 3rd floor. The basement had cooperative laundry facilities and a shared freezer so many conversations between Zona and Vincent occurred there. Omer sang in the choir and taught a high school Sunday school class. The class included the niece of Elijah Mohammed, leader of the Black Muslims, whose mansion was near the University of Chicago. Omer walked by it daily on his way to the University and to work at the Population Research Center. Elijah Mohammed's family had been members of the Woodlawn Mennonite Church earlier, but the brother had subsequently passed away (his funeral was at the Woodlawn Mennonite church), and the family no longer attended the church.

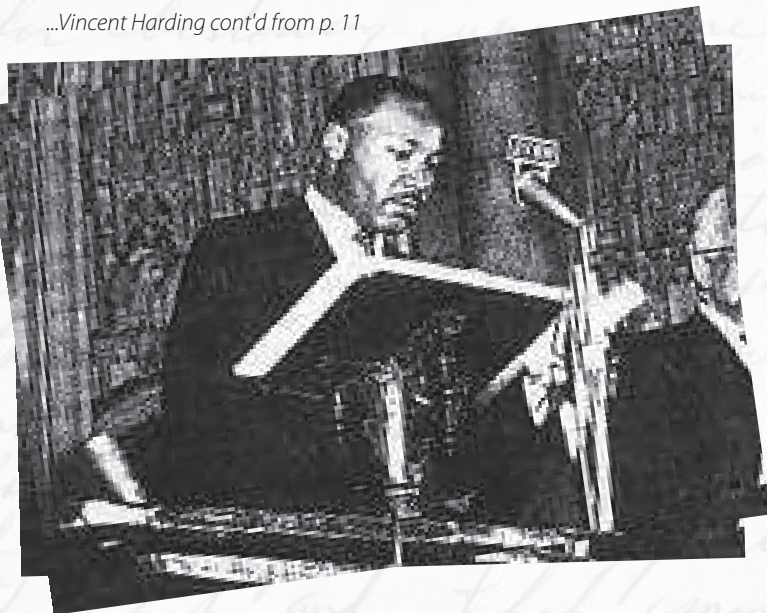
Vincent met Rosemarie Freeney during this time. We well remember their wedding. Rosemarie belonged to an "Old Mennonite" church in another area of Chicago, and was the first African American we had seen wearing a white "prayer cap" (similar to what Amish women wear). She shed that eventually, after they moved to Atlanta.

We moved out of our apartment at 46th on Woodlawn in 1961. At about the same time, Vincent and Rose moved to Atlanta to start a "Mennonite House" around the corner from where Dr. King lived. Vincent became one of Dr. King's close advisors. For the next three years, the Hardings became deeply involved in the civil rights movement in the South. Vincent was jailed for his activities in the Albany, Georgia area where Dr. King visited him. According to Vincent, King asked, "What are you doing in there?" Vincent responded with, "What are you doing out there?"

Vincent and Rosemarie moved back to the Chicago area in 1964, so that Vincent could finish writing his dissertation on Lyman Beecher, the Protestant minister, the antislavery advocate and father of Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. In 1965, Vincent was invited back to Atlanta to become chair of the department of history and sociology at Spelman College where he continued in his role as friend and advisor to Dr. King.

Along with the civil rights movement, the growing involvement in Viet Nam by the U.S. concerned both men. Dr. King asked

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Harding to write up notes that eventually became the speech Dr. King gave at the Riverside Church in Manhattan, New York on April 4, 1967. It became known variously as “Beyond Viet Nam,” and/or “A Time to Break the Silence”.

In the speech, he argued that what the U.S. was doing in Viet Nam was morally wrong. “A time comes when silence is betrayal,” he said. “And that time has come for us in relation to Vietnam.” He added: “If we continue, there will be no doubt in my mind and in the mind of the world that we have no honorable intentions in Vietnam. If we do not stop our war against the people of Vietnam immediately, the world will be left with no other alternative than to see this as some horrible, clumsy and deadly game we have decided to play.”

The speech, which articulated a relatively unpopular position then, touched off a firestorm. In an editorial titled “Dr. King’s Disservice to His Cause,” *Life* magazine called it “a demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi.” The NAACP described the address as “a serious tactical error.”

Despite the furor around “A Time to Break Silence,” neither Vincent nor Dr. King disavowed the address. But Vincent would come to have profound regrets about having composed it for Dr. King.” It was precisely one year to the day after Dr. King gave this speech that that the bullet which had been chasing him for a long time caught up with him,” Vincent said in a 2010 interview: “And I am convinced that that bullet had something to do with that speech. And over the years, that’s been quite a struggle for me.”

After King’s assassination, Coretta King asked that Vincent help her found the Martin Luther King Jr. Documentation Project and Memorial Center in Atlanta. He became its first director.

In 1969, Vincent became the founder and director of the “Institute for the Black World” in Atlanta, dedicated to defining the field of Black Studies. By 1979, Vincent and Rose were at Pendle Hill (the Quaker Center outside of Philadelphia). In the summer of 1979, Zona and our daughter Kristin attended a retreat they were holding at Pendle Hill for some of the more seasoned civil rights veterans and younger people to ponder the connection between spirituality and social transformation, and where the civil rights movement should be heading.

In 1981, the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado, invited Vincent to join their faculty as “professor of religion and social transformation” and according to Vincent to “teach anything you want to teach in whatever way you want to teach

it.” He remained until his retirement in 2004. While at Iliff, he continued to speak across the nation (and the world) as an advocate of equality, social transformation, and peace.

The next time we made contact with Vincent was when he came to Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas in January of 2010 to be part of the 50th anniversary celebration of Dr. King’s speech. King had spoken there in 1960 about how sometimes it is “necessary to be maladapted” to the world around you in order to bring about needed change. Fifty years later, Vincent continued to push for such “maladaptation.”

The last time we saw Vincent was in September, 2012 at the 70th anniversary celebration of the founding of Koinonia, the Christian Intentional Community outside of Americus, Georgia. Former President Carter was the first speaker at the Conference on Friday and Vincent was the last on Saturday. We shared a meal with Vincent and met his close friend from Atlanta, Aljosie. They were flying off to the Middle East after the meeting, so we drove to Plains, Georgia (Carter’s hometown) to purchase a copy of Carter’s book on the Middle East to give to them before we separated. Vincent also founded, with his first wife, Rosemarie Freeney Harding (who died in 2004), the “Veterans of Hope Project” at Iliff, which collected stories of past civil rights workers and used those as an outreach project to train young activists, especially African Americans, Chicana/os/Latino/as, and Native Americans working for peace. The Veterans of Hope Project “encourages a healing-centered approach to community-building ... and an appreciation for the value of indigenous and folk wisdom for contemporary times.” (See www.veteransofhope.org/)

Despite having retired from Iliff School of Theology, Vincent continued to be very active working toward peace and reconciliation speaking at various places and working on projects like the Veterans of Hope Project. With his new wife Aljosie (whom he married in December of 2013), he helped launch the “National Council of Elders,” a mentoring group to train young social activists. In these last meetings with him (in 2010 and 2012) we continued to be impressed with his clarity of purpose to continue the struggle for equality and social transformation in the world, and his concern for both the poor and for young people.

Vincent and Aljosie were staying at Pendle Hill in May where Vincent was planning to write his autobiography. He became ill and went to the University of Pennsylvania hospital in Philadelphia where he died from a heart aneurism on May 19th. His spirit lives on in the many people he loved and influenced. ♦

Bios: Omer, Professor Emeritus in Sociology at U.T. Austin, and Zona, a Social Worker Emeritus, live in North Newton, Kansas. Kristin, Interim Pastor at Friedens United Church of Christ in Geronimo, TX lives in Brenham. Thanks to Kamala Platt who made this tribute possible.

Vincent Harding, historian who co-wrote MLK’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech

