

Panel traces segregation by design

By Harold McNeil, NEWS STAFF REPORTER, January 23, 2010



A panel of local advocates for social justice Friday agreed that racist home-lending practices of the past are largely responsible for the racial segregation that is evident in the region today.

The panelists were participants in a forum held in Westminster Presbyterian Church and sponsored by its racial justice committee. About 40 people attended.

There was agreement among the four panelists that the Buffalo Niagara region's current racial landscape owes much to history and housing policies that were designed to keep African-Americans segregated in the city.

"You may have heard that the Buffalo Niagara region is the seventh most segregated statistical metropolitan area in the nation. We did not get that way by accident. Nor have we remained so by accident," said Scott Gehl, executive director of Housing Opportunities Made Equal.

"Buffalo was the subject of restrictive covenants and a real estate board that once had ethical guidelines against integrating communities, but government was really the larger contributor to our patterns of segregation today," added Gehl, a longtime fair housing advocate.

Other members of the panel were Frank Mesiah, president of the NAACP Buffalo Chapter; Louisa Pacheco, lead organizer of VOICE-Buffalo; and Rod Watson, columnist and urban affairs editor for The Buffalo News.

Church member Lavera Johnson, a social justice advocate, was the moderator for the event.

Louisa Pacheco, left, of VOICE-Buffalo, addresses a panel discussion on racism Friday in Westminster Presbyterian Church as Frank Mesiah, president of the Buffalo Chapter of the NAACP, listens in.

Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News

"We're asking people in positions of responsibility who would be knowledgeable about these issues to give us their report card . . . on the issues," said Johnson.

Mesiah noted that while home lending policies allowed whites to move to the suburbs, historically, blacks did not have that option.

"Blacks could not, because the banks would not give you a loan or would not guarantee the loan. So, therefore, the suburban areas and parts of the city became all white, not by accident, but by design," Mesiah said.

Pacheco noted how such policies impact the quality of choices — from the kinds of neighborhoods children are raised in to the schools they attend.

"It is something that is a systematic issue. This is not an accidental issue that is impacting a whole community, Buffalo as a region," Pacheco said.

Watson added that while some may measure racial progress by African-Americans achieving slots in local seats of power, the true gauge is the well-being of those among the masses.

"It's not about minority faces in high places for me, it's about the masses of people. You look at people on the ground and in the neighborhoods," Watson said. "They're not doing nearly that well — and that's not by accident."

hmcneil@buffnews.com