Trio quietly guides Houston's conscience and policy

Archbishop Emeritus Joseph Fiorenza, Rabbi Samuel Karff and Baptist minister William Lawson have worked together for 30 years.

By Jayme Fraser

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It starts like a joke, but braided into decades of Houston history is the story of a transformative friendship binding community leaders together.
Anna Babin, president of the United Way of Greater Houston, stepped to a lectern earlier this week, telling educators and nonprofit directors, as well as city, county and state officials why they gathered that morning.

"A priest, a rabbi and a minister …" she began, pausing as laughter filled the room, "… called on me to share their concerns."

The first time Babin worked with them 30 years ago, they sought to tear down shantytowns under bridges by rebuilding the lives of residents. This time, she said, the trio seeks to stop the "school-to-prison pipeline" - discipline plans and police policies that make misbehavior into crimes and slash graduation rates.

To each other, they are just "Joe," "Bill" and "Sam" - three friends adept at playful jabs and clarion calls for social justice.

To city and county leaders, Catholic Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza, Baptist Rev. William Lawson and Rabbi Samuel Karff, though retired, remain committed partners for solving Houston's most challenging problems, from racial equality to homelessness.

**Strength in numbers**

Fiorenza marched from Selma to Montgomery and oversaw the construction of a new cathedral. Lawson invited Martin Luther King Jr. into his parish when many black clergy scorned him, and was let out of jail by a Houston mayor to calm down some civil rights rioters. Karff piloted the nation's oldest rabbinical organization and helped build Chicago's landmark Conference on Religion and Race.

Together, they do much more.

They anchored the Anti-Defamation League's Coalition for Mutual Respect to combat anti-Semitism, rallied diverse faith leaders to condemn the bombing of a local Islamic mosque, called for high schools with large minority populations to offer college prep courses rather than
bricklaying, and fought for fair housing standards.

Lawson and Fiorenza linked arms with other clergy during the civil rights era, while Karff lived and collaborated in Chicago. Pope John Paul II later elevated Fiorenza to Bishop of San Angelo and moved him to the same post in Galveston-Houston a few years later.

Just as Fiorenza returned, one issue transformed their working relationships into the beginnings of friendship.

"The recession of the '80s came," Lawson said.

Detroit, Philadelphia and other American metropolises lost more jobs than could be created. Thousands moved to Houston, seen as surviving rather than sinking. Many ended up jobless, then homeless. Several clergymen shed their robes, clerical collars and suits to walk the nighttime streets, learning why people built cities under bridges. They returned to their congregations and civic leaders with a vision.

The Campaign for the Homeless began.

It evolved into the Coalition for the Homeless, a nonprofit that still coordinates area services today. Lawson, Fiorenza and Karff sat on the inaugural board along with then-Mayor Kathy Whitmire and then-County Judge Jon Lindsay.

"Gosh, it's one of those things that just kind of evolves, just seemed to be natural," Lindsay said, remembering how the effort came together. "They were passionate about it. And they had a pretty keen sense of humor."

'Word just gets around'

The three downplay their roles in the campaign for social justice.

"They call us," Fiorenza said of local leaders. "I think word just gets around … We're all retired. I guess they think we have time."

In truth, the calls often came from each other.

About five years ago, Lawson and other black pastors, primarily from Ministers Against Crime, regularly filled the front row at Commissioners Court calling for a public defender office. Harris
County was the last major American metro area with no safety net designed to ensure poor residents receive fair and attentive representation in court.

The creation of a pilot program lagged until Lawson asked Fiorenza and Karff to help rally a more diverse group of clergy. Lawson called County Judge Ed Emmett for a meeting. "I think this is what sold him," Lawson said. Within weeks, Emmett led county to budget for a public defender.

"I don't really look at them as religious leaders as much as I look at them as thought leaders," Emmett said. "I just appreciate their insights."

**Good humor and hugs**

The three rarely see each other outside government meetings, the offices of business leaders and interfaith events, although Fiorenza ate enough dinners at Lawson's home that one of the minister's daughters began calling him "Uncle Joe."

Yet, playful ribbing and tender hugs reappear at each meeting as if they are reunited brothers.

When lightning caused a fire that razed Karff's home, Lawson called to say his congregation at Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church wanted to replace every book.

"The most important thing about a rabbi's house is his library," Lawson reasoned.

Karff forgot to call back.

A member of Lawson's parish delivered a basket of kosher goodies to the temporary home where Karff and his wife would spend Passover.

"This note is being sent to you by an angry black Baptist preacher who is still waiting to hear about your books," Lawson had written on a paper tucked into the basket. It also reminded Karff that the story of Jewish liberation from Egypt inspired black Americans' own struggle for freedom.

At a Sabbath eve service a few weeks later, Lawson surprised Karff with a new Torah, the Jewish holy book.

"Reverend Lawson gifted me with the replacement of the most precious book I had lost," the
rabbī said.

Karrf refers to Lawson and Fiorenza as his "soulmates."

"We are mindful of one overarching story," he said. "God loves us and we best show our love for God by our love of God's children, especially the most vulnerable among them."