

# An Occasion in Maine

*by Ray Hopkins, July 8, 2016*

Waking up this morning to the news of murdered Dallas police, ambushed at a peaceful protest of police killing of black men earlier in the week, I was depressed. Hostility and gun violence seem to be escalating out of control. It brought to mind, however, a happier occasion.



Some 15 years ago, urged by the head of Philadelphia's Metropolitan Christian Council, several members of the Swarthmore Presbyterian Church participated in a mentoring program in Chester. We spent time each week with teen-age youth. The effort was organized in concert with an unaligned Protestant church, whose youth program was led by "Pastor Dave." After a few months, some of us invited groups of the youth to visit us at our summer vacation homes.

So, mid-July, 10 African-American youth and three of their leaders came to Maine. Driving a rented large white van, they set out to spend 2 nights and 3 days in Boothbay Harbor at our log cabin. Overlooking Linton Bay, built in 1927 by carpenter Elmer Briquets, the cabin had expandable spaces. Aside from a great room, we had 2 baths, 4 bedrooms, and extra spaces for eating and sleeping. Somehow, all 14 of us found places to sleep. The two women leaders slept on twin bed-size sofas, one indoors and the other outdoors. Five boys slept in the bunk bedroom; five girls shared two bedrooms. Pastor Dave (a gruff pro-football sized fellow) and I slept together in the fourth bedroom on a queen bed. He irreverently remarked, "This is the first time I have slept with a man - and it has to be a white one!"

The days went by quickly. Our group did a lot of eating, talking and playing together. Some had sailing experiences on our boat, "Logos." The young people spent lots of time at the beach and playing games around the cabin. Those who were not able to swim walked to a float at low tide. Only one of the youths had been further afield than Delaware; to them, Maine was as foreign as England or Australia or New York City.

After 3 days of fun, the group left Maine before midnight to get back to Chester by 7 a.m. the next day. The van was loaded with luggage, 10 teens and three adults. I waved goodbye from the doorway, and turning back into the kitchen, I noticed the cooler chests, carefully loaded with food and beverages for the trip, and left behind.

It was too late to call after them, and I hadn't gotten anyone's cell phone number. So I did the first thing that seemed helpful: I called the local police dispatcher and explained that a large white van with 13 black folks had just left my house having forgotten crucial items. Could someone intercept the van as it left Boothbay Harbor and tell them? "We'll try," said the dispatcher.

Twenty minutes later the van came rumbling down the hill into our parking lot. The exuberance expressed at the group's initial departure had given way to solemnity. Our guests thanked me for the reminder and loaded up the coolers. Just before restarting the journey back to Pennsylvania, one of the women leaders explained, "When the cop pulled us over with lights flashing I was sure we were off to jail. Everyone was scared or crying as the policeman walked up to the van." Then she said: "My God, what nice police you've got here - all that just to help us get our food. Now that police stop is my best memory of our trip."

My trust in calling 911 as a solution seems naïve now. My assumption of the police's immediate helpfulness to a van of African-Americans traveling late at night and far from home seems way out of line with the realities of their world, where the prevalence of crime and violence can raise intolerable tensions between communities and the police who serve them. I remain hopeful, however, that such positive exchanges of police with black citizens might yet become unexceptional in America.