

Anti-Racism Work in Our Churches Since 2015 Annual Meeting

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Mankato

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In January, 2016, we gathered together the people and leaders of seven houses of worship (Methodist, Catholic, Lutheran, Unitarian, Presbyterian and the Mankato Islamic Center) for an interfaith service to celebrate Martin Luther King's vision of the beloved community. In addition to readings and music of the day, we had story tellers who spoke in deeply personal and moving ways about hate and hope: (Jaylani Hussein (CAIR, Minneapolis), Michael Fagin (MSU Institutional Diversity), Abdi Sabrie (Mankato Islamic Center), Renita Robinson (Committee Against Domestic Violence). After, we broke bread together -- Somali and midwestern loaves!

This event came on the heels of a series of educational events (films, local speakers, bible study) held at our church this past fall on immigration, resettlement and prejudice. It also yielded new projects: over the winter and spring months, with leaders of the Unitarian Fellowship and the Mankato Islamic Center, we've engaged in monthly conversations that have been honest and probing about privilege and racism in our schools in particular. This core team is continuing to gather, and events are being planned to engage the larger community: this summer we'll be sharing an intergenerational meal in the park to mark the end of Ramadan, and we're talking about a neighborhood mission project and a voter registration event. Also, our youth have been gathering for conversation at our different houses of worship -- with more to come!

St. Paul's United Church of Christ (SPUCC) in Saint Paul's Focus on Racism

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SPUCC's Journey of Faith adult faith formation program featured a 3-part series on race in 2015, based on the film "Cracking the Codes: The System of Racial Inequity" (75 minutes, World Trust). Two members of the congregation led group discussion about segments of the film and introduced related materials to illustrate how racism operates at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels. Specific topics included our assumptions and beliefs about race, unconscious racial bias, cross-racial interaction, white privilege, and forms of institutional racism in law enforcement, education, and the economy. Besides the film, used supplemental materials to illustrate key concepts, including online Implicit Association Tests, McIntosh's classic essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," the YouTube video "Racism Is Real," and media commentary on the Baltimore uprising and the social and historical context of current racial tensions and conflicts. A follow-up series on "Rethinking Race" is planned for this summer. We will explore some common beliefs and misconceptions about race and racism, and examine the reality of ongoing racial disparities and injustices in a supposedly "post-racial" America.

During worship our five delegates gave a report on the annual meeting sharing significant takeaways about racism. Rev. Norma Rae Hunt preached a sermon titled "Dear White Christian" drawing from keynote speaker Dr. Jennifer Harvey. Our youth delegate brought new understanding to her social studies class, receiving recognition by the teacher who wondered how she had such advanced

understanding of racism. This youth's mother said that the Conference's annual meeting had given her that additional awareness and insight.

Pilgrim Congregational UCC, Duluth

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While the real engine for developing change in Duluth has come through a community effort generated by Jackie Falk at Peace UCC, there was intentional coordination of efforts between the churches and with the African-American community, especially St. Mark AME. St. Mark has had a partnership with both churches over the years, and has a long, proud history of racial justice work.

With the annual Martin Luther King Day events in the city happening in January, and Peace UCC's powerful "Living Into the Difficult" event (with Jennifer Harvey and Melanie Harris) in March, Pilgrim Congregational UCC intentionally set the date for a Prayer Service of Remembrance for Mother Emmanuel AME for February. This service was offered as part of an effort by the Minnesota Council of Churches to see that a service of remembrance is offered every week for a full year following that tragic event. The local newspaper published a perspective piece by Pilgrim's interim pastor, Rev. Jennifer Amy-Dressler, inviting the community to join in remembrance and to commit to facing and dismantling racism.

At the Thursday evening service, candles were lit for each victim of the shooting as a short personal biography was read. Rev. Richard Coleman of St. Mark AME spoke, and St. Mark's small but mighty choir rocked the sanctuary. Pilgrim's Rev. Amy-Dressler also spoke. The service moved from memorial to confronting the challenges of racial injustice, acknowledging that even well-meaning white privilege will make further mistakes, and asking for the chance to learn and to do better.

The evening's offering went to the "Living Into the Difficult" event and to St. Mark AME, to support these vital witnesses.

United Faith Community, Buffalo

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United Faith Community meets in Buffalo, a community of predominately white citizens. Our Bible study group reflected on the fact that we do not encounter many persons of a different race in our area, and would like a better grasp on what is appropriate/offensive dialogue. In an effort, to educate ourselves about racism, UFC devoted our Bible study time to reading and discussing the book, "But I Don't See You As Asian": Curating Conversations About Race, by Bruce Reyes-Chow. He is a Northern Californian, 3rd generation Chinese/Filipino, and a pastor, who writes and speaks extensively on faith, politics, race and technology.

The book generated some spirited conversations. One session was devoted to a discussion of "white privilege". In another session, it became apparent that some of the language we use often is racist (referring to a minority as "those people"). The book also pointed out how we tend to generalize, and make assumptions because of a person's race. One of the main points that the author emphasizes

numerous times is that we need to have meaningful and respectful conversations across racial lines. That is the way that we can come to understand and peacefully coexist with each other.

Peace UCC, Rochester

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Peace UCC in Rochester started a study group in January to move the conversation on race and white privilege forward. We have been doing a book study using Debby Irving's **Waking Up White**. This has initiated a very productive discussion and developed insights for us into white privilege to which we were previously oblivious. We have been meeting twice monthly and meetings are well attended with 20-25 people each session.

Our goal is to have on-going discussion and study using various forms of media, books, magazine articles, and current events as well as be ready to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters of color. We currently have members sitting on the community committee addressing the Office of Civil Rights report on the disparity of discipline of black students in the Rochester Public Schools.

We want to examine what may make Peace a more welcoming space for people of color by engaging our current members of color. The group will be ever evolving and hope to have dialogue with people of color with white people being the listeners!

Plymouth Congregational Church, Minneapolis

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Approximately one year ago, Plymouth Congregational Church formed the Racial Justice Committee as an extension of our Board of Outreach to initiate dismantling white privilege within our church. The Committee has sponsored book studies (including Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*), lectures, and film screenings all at Plymouth engaging guest moderators experienced in leading discussions about race and white privilege. The Committee has also organized an off-campus field trip to attend the play "Clybourne Park" presented by the Yellow Tree Theatre company. Additionally, we've commenced conversations with several consultants and have issued an RFP to solicit proposals to further guide us in this important work. We've received several responses to the RFP and are in the midst of reviewing proposals. Plymouth recently committed to joining the MARCH (Multifaith Anti-Racism, Change and Healing) collective to "link arms" with congregations also interested in dismantling racism. Within the last few months the Racial Justice Committee was converted to a task force, under the purview of our Leadership Council. The Leadership Council is made up of the chairs of the six boards of Plymouth Congregational Church, and is responsible for the day-to-day operations of Plymouth. This move will allow the vital efforts of the task force to more fully integrate into the entire life and operations of our church.

Linden Hills UCC, Minneapolis

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Over the past year Linden Hills UCC has held three book discussions on the topic of white privilege and issues it creates. The books discussed were; Waking Up White by Debby Irving (Elephant Room Press),

Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson (Spiegel and Grau) and The New Jim Crow, by Michelle Alexander (The New Press).

In partnership with presently incarcerated at Lino Lake Prison, and The Justice For All Program of TakeAction Minnesota, Linden Hills hosted two afternoons of conversations involving men locked up at Lino Lakes (joining in by phone), their family members and others on the "outside". The conversations are ongoing and all are welcome. These conversations are designed to build understanding, meaningful relationships and to organize a base of leaders both inside and outside of prison to jointly address the injustices of the criminal justice system.

St. Anthony Park UCC

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At St. Anthony Park United Church of Christ in St. Paul, 15 people attended a session on the first Saturday in March. It was a book discussion group, using Jennifer Harvey's *Dear White Christians* as our text. We met for two hours – yes, two hours on a Saturday morning! The level of honesty, vulnerability, critical thinking, and theological reflection was profound. We explored key concepts of White Supremacy, Segregation vs. Separation, the White Narrative of the Civil Rights Movement, and Harvey's core thesis: a Reconciliation Paradigm vs. a Reparations Paradigm.

We are not sure what next steps will be, but SAPUCCers are hungry for this kind of conversation and sharing as people of faith. More to come!

Peace UCC, Duluth

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On March 12-13, 2016, Duluth's Peace UCC and St. Mark AME hosted a community workshop that focused on promoting racial justice and dismantling oppressive social structures. Dr. Melanie Harris, AME minister and professor of religion and ethics at Texas Christian University, and Dr. Jennifer Harvey, professor of religion at Drake University and American Baptist Minister, guided 130 participants in a racial justice analysis of Duluth and helped explore ways to repair racial relationships.

Following Dr. Harvey's introductory overview of a reparations paradigm, participants broke out into two caucuses. Those who identify as people of African Heritage worked with Dr. Harris, reflecting on how to utilize and equip white allies to be effective. Those who identify as white worked with Dr. Harvey, reflecting on what it means to be white and the moral discomfort that can follow. After reconvening as one group, community leaders of African heritage outlined their priorities for achieving equity, and the larger group identified actions in which whites can be allies that will advance those priorities. Since the workshop, group leaders have met twice to follow up on those commitments. Currently work is being completed seeking funding for a program to provide culturally appropriate conflict mediation in the public high schools—one of the priorities identified by workshop participants.

Peace UCC, St. Mark and co-sponsors for the March event, First United Methodist, Pilgrim Congregational UCC, Gloria Dei Lutheran, and St. Paul's Episcopal churches, along with CHUM (Churches United in Ministry) continue to work to build a model of responsive repair to the legacy of social injustice in Duluth.

First Congregational Church of MN, Minneapolis
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In the fall of 2015, about 30 people from First Congregational Church of MN engaged in small group study around racial justice. Key readings included Rev. Dr. Jennifer Harvey's keynote speech to last year's annual meeting and Ta-Nahesi Coates' article for *The Atlantic* titled "The Case for Reparations".

Out of these small the group sessions, a core group of leaders for our "Racial Justice Action Team" emerged. This group planned a "Day of Action for Racial Justice", held on April 10, which encompassed worship, small group conversations, a meal, and making commitments to act. Future actions this team is planning include offering the IDI (Intercultural Development Inventory) to all members of our congregation and developing a "rapid response network" – made up of people available to attend demonstrations and protests. The congregation is also considering working more closely with ISAIAH MN and/ or entering into a year-long process facilitated by an emerging network in the Twin Cities called "MARCH" (Multifaith, Antiracist Change and Healing). MARCH is a predominantly white group of congregations looking for ways to be in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement.

The Federated Church, Morris
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I presented information about the 2015 UCC Minnesota Conference Annual Meeting in worship one Sunday, and wondered aloud what we could do in Morris, MN to educate ourselves more about the racial issues gripping our nation. Fortunately a young mother, who had grown up in the congregation, came up to me after with a wonderful idea. She said that her minister had encouraged the congregants to read books written by non-white authors in an effort to expose themselves to a wider range of people and ideas. That sounded like something we could do!

From this spark was developed Reading About Race, a book group which has attracted readers from Federated Church and the wider community. We have read and discussed:

- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, a novel by Sherman Alexie
- *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine
- *What if I say the wrong thing? 25 habits for culturally effective people* by Verna A Myers

And in the next two months we plan to read and discuss:

- *How does it feel to be a problem? Being young and Arab in America* by Moustafa Bayoumi
- *Men we Reaped: A memoir* by Jesmyn Ward

We selected books that were very different from one another (memoir, young adult, poetry) and that cover issues for black, Arab, and Native American people. These books have opened our minds and hearts to issues we knew little about, and have made us curious to learn more.

Lyndale UCC, Minneapolis

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Lyndale United Church of Christ (Minneapolis) has taken the experience at Annual Meeting in 2015 very seriously. Prior to last year's Annual Meeting, we presented on Jennifer Harvey's *Dear White Christians* during our Lenten Adult Education series. Following Annual Meeting, we engaged several pieces:

1. In September of 2015, we started a new endeavor called the Center for Sustainable Justice which works religiously at the intersections of LGBTQ, Racial, Environmental and Food Justice (www.CenterforSustainableJustice)
2. We began a community outreach Book Study on both *The New Jim Crow* (Michelle Alexander) and *Between the World and Me* (TaNaehesi Coates). This study was very well-attended, lasted for several months and was transformative for both our Lyndale members who attended and attracted a few new members into the congregation.
3. Concurrent to the Book Study (which took place in the evening, during the week) we did an Advent study on Whiteness which was led by two congregation members.
4. As the Book Study and the series on Whiteness were happening, Jamar Clark was shot and killed by police and several of our members and our pastors spent a lot of time supporting the occupation of the 4th Precinct in Minneapolis. During that time, our worship included prayers for the 4th precinct occupation and deep reflection on our religious role in the situation.
5. Coming out of the occupation, several church members expressed concern that, as a congregation, we had not done enough work around racial justice to determine how, as a body, we would respond to requests for participation in Black Lives Matter events and other protests which included disruptive tactics. In response to these concerns and with all of the experiences described above, we decided to form a Racial Justice Task Force which will create a congregation-wide year-long process of study, action and reflection on racial justice.
6. We have chosen to have our Racial Justice Task Force be part of the cohort of the MARCH (Multifaith Anti-Racism, Change and Healing) Sacred Solidarity Congregational Pilot which will run through much of 2017.