

## Race For Justice Invitation for Congregational Input

Like everyone else, I am very excited that the long-awaited Hobbs Hall is becoming a reality! But let us remember that our church is more than a physical structure. We, the congregants, are the church. We are the visionaries.

Because of our church community's encouragement and nurturing of grassroots ideas, a handful of people can ignite something new - such as the school of Hogwarts - and it can root itself into our church culture. I believe that we are on the brink of birthing another significant attribute that will contribute to the wholeness of our church's identity.

Five years ago, Race For Justice began as a vision for Mary Ann Stephens following her attendance at a UUA General Assembly. This was where she learned about the Richmond Pledge, a curriculum created by the Richmond, VA UU church involving 12 hours of education about multiple aspects of racism. Due to Mary Ann's efforts, our church was selected as one of the 13 nationwide Pledge pilot programs.

With the help of members of the congregation, the Kent Pledge workshop was offered, and over 40 of our church members devoted two weekends to learn more about issues of race. It culminated with a personal pledge to stand up against racism. Participants left the program feeling motivated, but also feeling that we needed to devote ourselves to anti-racism work not only as individuals, but also as a church body, knowing that there is strength and support by working together on this important and sometimes uncomfortable work.

As a result, Race for Justice was formed. The mission of Race for Justice is to breathe life into our UU value of racial justice by providing opportunities for education, legislative advocacy, and community action on racism against Black men and women whose worth and dignity have been disregarded and grievously injured.

Besides me and Mary Ann, our current members include: Saunis Parsons, Dina Braccio, Lee Brooker, Rhonda Richardson, Kathy Kerns, Susan Poole-Wilke, and last but certainly not least, Rev. Steven. Our originating members included Deb Newberry, Mary Mask, Becky Cline, Claudia Miller and Debra-Lynn Hook. We are an open group. We're happy to welcome new members who wish to join at any time. If you're interested in attending a meeting, just get in touch with one of us.

Over the years, R4J has offered workshops, films followed by discussion, race-themed covenant groups, and the memorable weekend of inspiration generated by our guest, activist Chris Crass. Our programs have been well-attended and we feel that there's a great deal of motivation among church members to pursue anti-racism work.

This summer, we all have been saddened and outraged by the police killings of unarmed Black men and women. We've felt hopeful by the spontaneous eruption of Black Lives Matter signs and protests. We've experienced frustration by the resulting backlash, and discouragement by the lack of justice and lack of meaningful systemic change. The Board members of our church responded by approving the placement of

the words, “Black Lives Matter” on our exterior church sign as a demand for racial justice.

R4J members believe that the words on our sign should not be the sole expression of our church’s stance on racial justice. Instead, the words on our sign should represent the first step in responding to the call of our faith, which implores us to proudly and loudly take affirmative actions to dismantle racism. To evoke a culture of anti-racism, many of us will want to explore at the personal level, our complicated feelings on race, which we are addressing through R4J's three covenant groups. But we also believe that we need to explore and express our feelings about race at the collective level - our church community.

To initiate this, R4J presented a proposal to the church Board. With guidance from the Board, R4J members are volunteering to facilitate conversations that will possibly lead to an anti-racism statement created and adopted by the congregation. Our hope is that the conversations involving congregation members will result in a statement that expresses our position on racial justice and proclaims our aspirations. The Board extended approval for us to proceed with the convening of conversations in pursuit of a congregational anti-racism statement.

In order to help you better understand our intention, I want to provide a familiar frame of reference by mentioning two examples from the past. In the early 2000s, the church undertook a process to become a Welcoming Congregation. This followed a UUA process for growing our understanding of and commitment to the rights of people who identify as a member of the LGBTQ community. More recently, our congregation undertook the steps to become certified under the UUA's Green Sanctuary program, which states our commitment to environmental values and guides our behaviors.

I see our adoption of an anti-racism statement as a parallel undertaking. However, in this instance, there is no proscribed UUA process. This lack of guidance can be an advantage, as it gives us the opportunity to craft a process that fits with who we are right now and enables us to envision the people we wish to become.

By undertaking the process of becoming a Welcoming Congregation and a Green Sanctuary church, we demonstrated that we have the capacity to co-create ourselves and to proclaim to the outside world, who we are and what we value.

R4J members invite you, the members and friends of the congregation, to share with us your thoughts on the creation of a congregational anti-racism statement of commitment, and your ideas about the process we might follow to gather input from the church community. We want to be transparent and inclusive of a wide variety of opinions.

We hope to begin soliciting ideas very soon and invite each of you to offer us your thoughts. We look forward to hearing from you!