

Racial Justice Work at UUCSC: Some History

by Penny Hall

UUCSC has been working for racial justice for well over thirty years, and probably forty. When Guy and I started coming to the Legion Hall in 1994, Doris Anthony had been leading “Common Ground”, which is what the racial justice committee was called for a long time. They did both education and outreach. One of the outreach efforts was to develop a connection with the Church of God on Allen Avenue in Peace Dale. From what I heard, the folks at Church of God were uncomfortable with the lack of God in our services.

Carole Driver took over from Doris Anthony as leader of Common Ground. We began putting together a racial justice service every year for many years called Journey Towards Wholeness. We brought in some amazing speakers and powerful storytellers, and Deanna Camputaro started bringing her student dancers from Central Falls. The collection always went to the Whitney Young Fund at the Urban League. During one or two summers Carolyn Hurdis, Carole Driver, Pam Santos, Betty Kornitzer, and I took Kingian Nonviolence Training at URI.

Carole kept our connection going with Amnesty International for years. Once a month she set up a table after the service and got people to sign numerous letters on behalf of political prisoners all over the world.

When Carole stepped down, she asked me to take over the chair of Common Ground. John Glasheen, Sue Strakosch, Russell Stokes, Mary Finnigan, Rich Evans, Pam Santos, Errol Rowe, Carolyn Hurdis, David Crockett, Deanna Camputaro, Joan Youngken, Gerre Alderwick, Paulette Chamberas, Larry Kelland and others I’ve forgotten continued to be committed and involved. John was active in the UU Legislative Ministry and followed bills in the state legislature, often going up there to lobby our representatives and senators for social justice initiatives. We attended Legislative Ministry meetings at Westminster and John got us to come along to the legislature or call and write to our legislators on behalf of relevant bills.

We reached out to the Muslim community at URI. We attended each other’s services and had Muslim speakers at UUCSC. We hosted a successful potluck with our Muslim friends. After that we learned that they had decided to pursue a relationship with Kingston Congregational

because they could walk there, and many didn't have cars. It was an amicable parting.

We read *Traces of the Trade* and watched the film at Pam Santos' house, with many members of the congregation attending and participating in a lively discussion. Joan Youngken led us on a history walk in Newport. We delved into Peggy MacIntosh's explanation of white privilege and had some difficult discussions. We invited the congregation to read Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* and had a well attended potluck and discussion. I attended an ecumenical council at Kingston Congregational for a couple of years, and I think Clare Sartoris was involved. The council organized a peace vigil to take place on RI's Victory (over Japan) Day.

We continued our work when Carol Layne took over the leadership of the Racial Justice group (formerly Common Ground), under Rev DL. Dorie and Tom Lawson and Dave Ruede joined the group. Dorie learned and shared about support for immigrants in RI. Dave championed and involved the congregation in the successful passage of the Justice Reinvestment bill to reform the situation for former prisoners on parole or probation. We continued to read and discuss issues, and DL lead some large group discussions about racism with members of the congregation. Jean Bowen was chair of the Social Justice umbrella organization then, and it was an election year. She and Carolyn Hurdis organized a forum at UUCSC for us to hear from our legislators and convey our concerns to them.

When Carol Layne stepped aside, Carolyn and Jean kept Racial Justice work going. I was sick, and when I got well Carolyn and I split the responsibility.

Then came Covid and the murder of George Floyd. Our congregation was moved and horrified, so we began meeting on Zoom with Jean and Rev DL. We were a large group, and many came who hadn't before. We began referring to ourselves as the Antiracism group. After DL and Jean, I lead the group with Cathy Solomon and Etta Zasloff. Then Nancy Richman arrived and became our leader. We continue to educate ourselves and sometimes the congregation and we advocate for racial justice wherever we can. In addition to those just mentioned, we include Barbara Beckwith, Barbara Pagh, Barbara Holtzman, Essjay Foulkrod, Adria Evans, Elizabeth Donovan, Johnnie Rodriguez, Donna Caldwell, Russell Stokes, Betty Kornitzer, and Larry Kelland. We're smaller now, but deeply committed!