

Public Witness Moves Forward

By Susan Shafarzek

When the congregation voted on Sunday, April 17, to move forward the proposed Public Witness Statement, it was a move that took this church further toward a commitment to address racial injustice, both in the community at large and in the life of the church. Among priorities the statement addresses a commitment to organization to recognize the interconnected nature of racism with all systems of oppression that impact people based on class, gender identify, sexual orientation, ability and language.

This Public Witness Statement, originating from the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly meeting of June 2015, in appreciation of and resonant with the work of the Black Lives Matter Movement, was brought to the congregational meeting after a year of hard work by the current Racial Justice Steering Committee and its subcommittee for Public Witness. However, this initiative also represents the cumulative effect of the work of many people, over many years at TJMC.

Making TJMC friendly to people of all races was a concern for many members of this congregation from its very inception in the middle of the twentieth century, despite the presence of a community at large that was devoted to a strict and harsh system of segregation. During the civil rights struggle of the 1950's, many members of the congregation were active in actions and demonstrations to support the struggle for equal rights in this country.

In 1956, for example, TJMC provided meeting space for the Council on Human Relations, an integrated public organization that advocated for desegregation and affordable housing – and on August 23, 1965, members of the Seaboard White Citizens Council burned a cross on church property. In 1958, in opposition to what was called "massive resistance," the church board unanimously declined a request from the Charlottesville Foundation to establish a high school for white (only) students in the church building. In 1967, the Unitarian Cooperative Preschool (precursor to the current preschool) was founded and was the first integrated cooperative preschool in Charlottesville. Throughout the period of the early Civil Rights struggle, and for years afterward, many members of the congregation and ministry of the church were active in promoting racial justice in this community and the country.

Then, in 1994, with the formation of the Undoing Racism Committee, this church took a significant step toward deeper, congregation-wide involvement in anti-racism activity. This committee, active for fifteen years, pursued a program of multiple activities, which included tabling at church, encouraging anti-racist education and participation in community-wide efforts.

In 1995, for example, TJMC participated for first time in a citywide Martin Luther King Celebration. In 1996 the undoing racism committee presented the first "Journey Toward Wholeness" Sunday service. In that same year, TJMC participated as one of the 16 pilot

sites in a UUA project to move congregations further along the way to becoming more multicultural and anti-racist and initiated its first concerted attempt to participate in community based multicultural efforts.

In 1997 the Undoing Racism Committee initiated a film series, which, over the course of several years, presented over fifty films, documentary and popular media about the struggle for racial justice. The committee also offered, over the length of its tenure, a significant number of Adult Religious Education courses, dealing with a wide variety of oppression. At the same time, the committee supported and encouraged participation and cooperation with community wide organizations, such as the NAACP, and the Monticello Community Action Agency, and cooperation in such vital interfaith initiatives as IMPACT and PACEM.

The above examples are just a small representation of the intense work of the Undoing Racism Committee, which truly laid the groundwork for current racial justice work in this congregation. At the congregational meeting in October this coming fall, TJMC will have the opportunity to complete the process of ratifying the Public Witness Statement. The Racial Justice Committee looks forward to using this church wide endorsement of activity for racial justice to enable a range of educational projects within the church and deeper participation in community wide efforts toward full justice in the wider community.

Several years ago, in a forward looking document, the Undoing Racism Committee, as addenda to its Five Year Plan, proposed a series of objectives for a "20 – 30 Year Vision." These included TJMC being seen by the larger community as an active anti-racist congregation, deeper involvement by church members, anti-racism training as a regular part of the ARE curriculum, and full support for anti-racist work by the church as a whole. Endorsement of this Public Witness could well be another step in the direction of those goals.