

FCCW Racial Justice Report
Declaration and Covenant for the NHCUCC Racial Justice Mission Group

First Congregational Church of Wilmot, UCC Racial Justice Covenant

*...and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)*

All humankind is created in God's image, and each of us is a beloved child of God. The presence of inequality and racism embedded in our systems harms God's creation. As followers of Jesus, we are called to confront and heal the racial injustices that separate humanity from God's will and God's kingdom.

We, the First Congregational Church of Wilmot, UCC commit to: walking humbly in a continuous journey of learning about past and present racism and inequality; challenging race-based injustice to change cycles of oppression; becoming allies with Black, Indigenous and all People of Color; and reaching out to collaborate with local and distant community partners.

We covenant to allow our deep sorrow about the evil of racism to sustain our passion to work toward justice and equality for all God's people.

**Overview of Our Process and Insights as We Journeyed
Toward Becoming a Racial Justice Church**

The FCCW-UCC formal journey began in the spring of 2020 with the establishment of an ad hoc Racial Justice Steering Committee (RJSC), in the midst of Black Lives Matter and national outrage over racial inequality and injustices. Prior to this launch, there had been deliberate readiness within the congregation through the voice of our pastor with church leadership, sermons, and programs like a book group on D. Irving's *Waking up White*. Using *The Process for Becoming a Racial Justice Church* provided by the Racial Justice Mission Group of the NHCUCC, the RJSC and the congregation took the recommended Welcoming Diversity Inventory as a catalyst for our own soul searching, embracing the question, "What do we need to learn in order to understand racism in our society?." We also set up an extensive bibliography of resources, and during the summer read two books: *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nahasi Coates. Over the next 18 months we would together read four books, view ten videos, sponsor ten educational zoom sessions, provide ongoing readings and resources in a weekly column in the church newsletter that was both historical and current issues oriented, and conduct four in-person workshops. Additionally, with each of the three phases of this journey (Learning, Interrupters, Allies) Reverend Sara Marean facilitated a conscious effort to keep our work faith-based, integrated with each Sunday service through sermons, scripture, and music. The original five members of the

RJSC also shared racial justice moments with the congregation. Although Covid19 delayed in-person meetings for many months, we sponsored five workshops once we were able to again meet live. Three were in collaboration with the Wilmot Public Library and two were designed to collaboratively lead us toward a racial justice covenant. All these programs with relevant links and much more are provided in the attached summary, *Toward Becoming a Racial Justice Church*. *¹ A high level of participants in our activities is noteworthy - typically 15-30 and a high percentage of open rates on our newsletter and e-mails, ranging from 50-70%.

Please find our specific responses below to the requests made by the Racial Justice Mission Group that demonstrate our learning, our change, and our journey:

I. Welcoming Diversity: An Inventory for Congregations – What has Changed?

The Racial Justice Steering Committee took this assessment when first convening in the spring of 2020 and the leadership of the church took the assessment once new committees and chairs were in place at the beginning of 2021. The assessment was re-administered with a combination of these two groups shortly after the congregation approved our covenant, in January 2022. We compared the results of these before and after assessments, identifying the responses that showed a significant positive change (greater than 24% shift). We then met to discuss what this analysis was telling us. What has changed? The results are summarized below.

Perceptions, Attitudes and Values: What we hold in our minds and hearts

Although the leadership initially perceived that we were already strong in this category, we demonstrated an increased appreciation for racial and ethnic diversity and were open to addressing the root causes of poverty, racism, and other forms of discrimination. We also demonstrated notable positive change addressing past attitudes/actions of prejudice and discrimination, and healing was taking place around these issues. There was a major change in understanding historical root causes of racism. Additionally, there was recognition that the RJSC worked hard to expose underlying issues of racism and consulted people of color on how we might address these critical issues.

Worship: Does our worship inspire us to greater understanding and appreciation for the diversity of God's people?

We were also perceived strong in this category but improved with intentional efforts to include liturgies and music representing a variety of racial and ethnic traditions.

¹ The attachment entitled, *Toward Becoming a Racial Justice Church: Summary and Calendar of Our Journey*, provides links to resources that were included with each program or activity. A red asterisk will denote when there is such documentation.

Preaching and worship that encouraged the congregation to recognize the sin of racism and understand and appreciate diversity also changed for the better.

Visuals: Visuals are strong messages. What do we see around us?

This category improved significantly from the initial assessments. The bibliography that the RJSC developed, classroom visuals, book groups, videos, and live and virtual guest speakers consistently offered the congregation exposure to a range of ethnicities and races. The congregation is now very aware of the availability of these resources and the strong messages sent by our programs. Consciousness of racial justice issues significantly increased, and our leadership reported a meaningful change in presentation of our faith in terms of history, traditions and contributions of minority and dominant cultures.

Events: Do we schedule events to broaden our experiences and perspectives?

The initial assessments identified this category as needing the most improvement. We were able to have multiple live and Zoom conversations with people of color and immigrants during our eighteen months of racial justice programming, and we now see a significant change in the congregation's interest in becoming involved in further interactions such as with a local Black church and immigrant issues, as COVID abates. The greatest change was noted in promoting times for members to visit or to participate in other racial/ethnic groups' work, play or worship experiences.

In addition to the changes that were evidenced by the three administrations of the assessment, the RJSC observed several other differences in our congregation as we traveled toward becoming a Racial Justice Church in a pandemic environment. We were cognizant of the fact that we were able to obtain speakers via Zoom that normally might not be able or willing to come to our rural town of Wilmot, NH. The insular nature of living with COVID-19 and the impact of racial unrest, more than likely increased attendance both within our congregation and with community residents. Subsequently the virtual conversations we had in January, February, and March 2021, as well as the workshops held in late spring and fall, put a face on the issues of racial justice, providing support through a challenging time while also increasing people's comfort levels in talking about racial justice and diversity. We also were able to tap into our FCCW love of reading at a time when folks were home more and looking for opportunities to understand better and more deeply what was happening across our country. Articles and books that we offered in our programming reinforced what they heard about racial justice issues from live presentations in our virtual conversations and workshops. The extensive bibliography informed by the NHCUCC Racial Justice Mission Group, current events and research was made very accessible with reminders and links throughout our journey. *

Youth programming throughout the 18 months of our racial justice exploration also offered experiences for involvement in racial justice issues. Christian Education made a conscious effort to engage all ages thereby increasing awareness of students and their

families. It was clear that our youth were sometimes in the lead with their open-minded and vocal responses to our mutual learning and their increasing dissatisfaction about silence or passivity.

II. Realizations about how your group or congregation experience white privilege in your everyday life.

Before starting our formal racial justice journey, the congregation had read D. Irving's book *Waking up White* and our pastor had facilitated a discussion of M.L. King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Our formal journey started in summer of 2020 with two books by renowned Black authors juxtaposing their distinctively different experiences within the world of white supremacy, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me** We then 'assigned' Peggy McIntosh's original article about white privilege as we started Dr. Henry L. Gates's 6-part film series, *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*. * Three zoom discussions focused on participants' learning during their viewings. These conversations frequently centered on how everyday lives of privileged white citizens differed from the experience of our Black brothers and sisters throughout our 400-year history – both positive and negative. From a white privilege perspective, it was notable that participants learned that the narrative about U.S. history was highly biased toward white advantage and white perspectives, and that this dominance of thought and experience is still evidenced daily.

Other programs that specifically raised the issue of white privilege as experienced in everyday lives continued throughout our journey and are listed below:

- Two outdoor workshops, "But I Don't Feel White" and "Understanding Unconscious Bias," co-sponsored with the Wilmot Public Library for the entire community (with 30+ attendees each) gave participants a venue in which to talk about struggles of "owning" their whiteness and a chance to talk about implicit bias and white privilege as these realities impact their identity.
- Rev. Dawn Berry, our summer minister, delivered a sermon on unconscious bias which provided in-depth examples of white privilege and its impact on social injustices.
- A virtual book discussion with Drs. Marlene Fine and Fern Johnson, the authors of *Let's Talk Race: A Guide for White People*, dealt directly with white privilege. * The authors are white mothers of adopted Black sons and spoke about how much their own privilege became evident as their sons experienced everyday prejudices and microaggressions. The individual prompts and group discussion suggestions in their book also helped develop our conversations about white privilege.

- We were honored to have Kira Morehouse as a guest preacher. Her sermon spoke to the issue of white privilege, with resounding agreement and appreciation of her vulnerability from the congregation. Reverend Marean and Ms. Morehouse together chose to adapt Alydia Smith's poem, *Litany to End Racism*, for our responsive reading during the service creating a deep affirming experience. The church was abuzz about this rich and rewarding opportunity with a woman of color at our pulpit. *
- We held two after-church workshops in fall 2021, leading to the development of our covenant, in which we addressed the need to break through our "rural NH" insulation from racial issues and the ubiquity of white privilege.
- In a virtual conversation with Reverend René Rouse during her Black History of NH presentation, she reminded us that she does not have the luxury of waking up and ignoring her Blackness or the daily life consequences of her race. Reverend Rouse's presence at the beginning and again toward the end of our journey, had a lasting impact on our congregation as evidenced by continued conversations about her lessons. *

III. Instances of encounters with racial prejudice and racism (please describe one or two).

First incident:

In June 2018, our church was the target of vandals who drew antisemitic graffiti on the front doors of the church,



The graffiti was discovered on a Sunday morning, as we were preparing for church. As far as we knew, the antisemitic graffiti was completely unprovoked, and there had never in recent memory been a similar incident of racial and religious prejudice in Wilmot. A possible motivation could have been that our church is open and affirming and aspires to be welcoming to all, but the actual motivation was a complete mystery. What to do? First (thanks to the quick response of a church member), the graffiti was painted over, and church services went on as usual. And the Wilmot police were called. But, with no leads to go on,

the vandals were never identified. Next, led by our pastor, we organized a community gathering. There needed to be opportunity for local people of good will to come together and affirm that we stand together for peace and justice and against racism, prejudice, and hate. Word went out, mostly by word of mouth, to townspeople, churches, and civic organizations – come to First Congregational Church of Wilmot on a Sunday afternoon to gather with us in condemning the graffiti and the hate behind it, affirming that, whatever our faith, we stand together for peace and goodwill to all, and there is no room for racism in our community. We did not know what to expect for turnout, but as the time drew near more and more people showed up, and soon there was a gathering of well over three hundred people. Led by pastor Sara Marean, we collectively repudiated the hateful words scrawled on the church door and affirmed our mutual desire and commitment to live together in harmony and to welcome all. In addition to a great turnout at the gathering, we received many cards and letters of support. This incident was a wake-up call that racism is present among us, even in small town Wilmot NH. We were the unlikely victims of a racist act but were encouraged to find many allies in our neighborhood that were willing to stand with us for peace and justice.

Here are two links to news stories about the incident:

- https://www.nhpr.org/nh-news/2018-07-05/anti-semitic-graffiti-drawn-on-church-door-in-wilmot?fbclid=IwAR0IF55hJWYGbgqiTvTQCWNbJMa5c6pTpvCWeAWI437C_k3nifWij3KqPZM#stream/0
- <https://www.concordmonitor.com/The-writing-on-the-wall-religions-come-together-18575644>

Second incident: Letter to the Intertown Record (New London) Editor (July 20, 2021 issue) and The Andover Beacon (August 2021 issue) objecting to promotional messages and the Racial Justice Workshop, “But I Don’t Feel White” co-sponsored by the Wilmot Public Library (WPL) and the RJSC:

LETTER TO THE EDITOR/OPINION

Objecting to quote and related activity

To the Editor:

The undersigned fully object to the following quote and related activity promoted by the Wilmot Public Library (WPL) on 5/28/2021:

“White privilege. White fear. White guilt. Ingrained, systemic racism is being revealed and yet many white people have been unable or unwilling to talk about it. The conversations need to start now. Let’s Talk Race confronts why white people struggle to talk about race, why we need to own this problem, and how we can learn to do the work ourselves and stop expecting Black people to do it for us.”

This is the self-proclaimed narrative of the book “Let’s Talk Race: A Guide for White People,” recently promoted by signage, newsletters and a workshop at the WPL. The very embodiment of Critical Race Theory (a divisive and Marxist ideology which divides groups of humans by color and assigns characteristics based on that color while insisting, as the book insinuates, that the pigment of your skin can, inherently, make you an oppressor), it is racism in

its most basic and pure definition.

The inclusion of this material into any programming promoted and coordinated by Wilmot Public Library is both advancing a social narrative and a racist one at that: something categorically denied by the WPL*.

We love the library. However racism is not culture and should not be included in programming under the guise of a social justice education. In fact, with the recent passage of NH House Bill 2, this discriminatory and racist programming is now illegal.

As such, we demand no further illegal racist activity be promoted by WPL, its employees, volunteers or board members, else we will be moving to have them replaced.

*Read full correspondence @ <https://nhpatriots.org/is-your-library-promoting-racism/>

**Brianna Marino,
Kathy Prieto and
Jessica Fraioli,
Wilmot**

Divided we fall

(Continued from Page 6)

...ing to ... ed by a clump of pink pony hair ... the paper. She pulls

On May 28, 2021, the RJSC and the WPL sponsored a workshop, “But I Don’t Feel White” that was part of a 3-part series based on the book, *Let’s Talk Race: A Guide for White People*. Three individuals wrote a letter to the editor of The New London Intertown Record and the Andover Beacon, making it clear that they felt the library had crossed a line by joining in the church’s racial justice efforts. The RJSC members, with the help of Rev. Dawn Berry (sabbatical minister) and the blessing of the FCCW Council, responded immediately, clarifying the nature of our racial justice work and the goals and design of the workshop. Meanwhile the library director and trustees dealt with this backlash via a letter to the editor supporting freedom of speech and the library’s role in the community that appeared in the newspapers a few weeks later. The original complaint letter also appeared in the August issue of

the Andover Beacon and the FCCW likewise sent the same response. The co-authors of the book, Drs. Marlene Fine and Fern Johnson, also sent in replies to both papers, specifically addressing the purpose of the book and correcting the record about the definition of critical race theory, including a reference:

[.https://news.columbia.edu/news/what-critical-race-theory-and-why-everyone-talking-about-it-0](https://news.columbia.edu/news/what-critical-race-theory-and-why-everyone-talking-about-it-0)

At the suggestion of the Andover Beacon Editor, we contacted a participant of the workshop who also wrote a letter in support of the workshop. It is noteworthy that the lead author of the complaint letter also published her thoughts in the following newsletter:

- <https://nhpatriots.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/WPL-Racism.pdf>
- Scroll down: <https://nhpatriots.org/author/nhpatriots/>

It is also important to note that this flurry of activity rallied many Wilmot, New London, and Andover residents to respond to our church members in support of our work and our letters. As we were simultaneously reading J. Meacham's book, *His Truth Is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope*, we were most pleased to be called the "Good Trouble Church." We proceeded to plan our third workshop for early fall, again co-sponsored with the WPL, "Understanding Unconscious Bias." We attracted over thirty participants to this workshop, both church members and local residents, including the Chief of Police for Wilmot and the Chair of the Board for the WPL. The Chair of the Board spoke at the beginning of the workshop addressing the disgruntled WPL members who wrote the complaint letter and underscoring the library's support of the Director, freedom of speech and the important educational role of the library.

IV. *What surprised your group regarding slavery in colonial NH? (Also, share your thoughts about how slavery's legacy impacts our living together today in NH.)*

Two events stand out as educating our congregation about slavery in colonial NH. In October, about twenty people went on an after-church field trip to the Black Heritage Trail. All of us were surprised to learn how prevalent slavery was throughout NH, that you could mortgage an enslaved person so that you could borrow against your "slave equity" to increase your business output, and how political leaders and ministers nearly all enslaved people (with some enslaved people coming to a minister as part of the compensation package!),

Another fact that impressed us along the Black Heritage Trail was that enslaved children and teens were not counted in the total number of slave holdings, and thus not taxed. Plus, they could be trained, and were less likely to run away, giving slave traders an incentive to capture younger people. Also, slave cargos were insured through insurance companies, so that traders got paid whether the "cargo" survived passage or not. We had mistakenly believed that the southern economy was slave-based, and that more abolitionists lived in New England, but we learned that the colonial economy in both north and south was highly centered on the institution of slavery.

As previously mentioned in II., we were also fortunate to engage Rev. Reneé Rouse in a Zoomed virtual lecture titled, “The Impact of Early African Americans on New Hampshire” in November 2020. * We invited the public to join us and together we heard how early African Americans left their indelible mark on our history. Reverend Rouse had requested that we submit questions in advance, and she provided extensive answers that helped us to better understand Black History in our state, including the myriad ways that slavery’s legacy impacts life in NH today. To this end, Reverend Rouse encouraged us to explore our towns and cities with this rich history. She planted the seed for us to check out the Black Heritage Trail, NH.

V. *What touched your group the most during your process of Becoming a Racial Justice Church?*

In October and November of 2021, we held two workshops with the congregation after worship that were designed to move us toward crafting our racial justice covenant. The October 10 workshop, *Our Calling as a Church*, helped us identify each person’s insights, learning, reactions and touching experiences because of our racial justice journey together.

We also asked the participants to think about their answers as they may illuminate prayers and hopes for our church. As we reviewed the results from this two-part reflective exercise several themes became clear. Our congregation was very moved by their extensive and deep learning that helped them revisit and challenge their understanding of our local and national history and their connection to these conventional narratives.

There seemed to be a light bulb effect with the many ways racism benefits white people, calling our congregants to confront past and present injustices. There was near universal recognition that this journey which included individually and collectively listening to God and prayer, has just begun. We must change. Members who once questioned what “I” could do as a white person in a rural, mostly white NH community and church, now saw the importance of our stand as a racial justice church and that together we can make a difference. We recognized racism as an evil which endures in our society, and within the church. It is much more than individual sin, but rather corporate sin, which separates us from God and deters us from our imperative to love our neighbors and work for justice in the world.

VI. *Perhaps most important, how do your group and your congregation intend to live into your racial justice covenant beyond your congregational declaration?*

The ‘toward covenanting’ workshops we sponsored in the fall of 2021, were designed to think about next steps in our ongoing process as learners, interrupters, allies, and

advocates. It was clear that our journey had only just begun, and participants eagerly brainstormed about things that could be done on both an individual and group basis within the church and for our greater communities as we moved forward. Examples include: one family has already begun work in their community with low income and housing advocacy, we are looking at partnering with a church of color, and interest has been expressed in prison justice and immigration or refugee sponsorship. Our congregation was also mindful of the importance and power of prayer as we continue to confront persistent and prevailing racial and social injustices.

Throughout 2021, there was an ad hoc committee assessing church organization and structure, asking questions such as: Does the proposed new structure support our key concerns such as racial justice? Are our resources aligned with where we are heading? How can we best work together to have impact given our small size and rural location? At the January 30, 2022, annual meeting of the FCCW, we approved new by-laws that would help us move forward as an ONA and Racial Justice Church. We are well positioned to live into our covenant. The Christian Education Committee, Justice and Witness Committee and the Parish Council will all have former members of our Racial Justice Steering Committee to help ensure that the values reflected in our covenant are integrated and enacted into programs, worship services, activities, and direct service. Additionally, we plan to take the following steps:

- Conduct a planning retreat with our congregation May 15 to identify strategies and priorities to integrate and implement our racial justice covenant. Prior to this mini retreat, we will meet with newly formed church committees to explore their role with implementation.
- Develop a plan for Christian Education for adults and youth that explicitly integrates ongoing racial justice learning and advocacy.
- Collaborate with our new Justice and Witness Committee to keep both Open and Affirming and Racial Justice emphases in the forefront.
- Continue to support Rev. Marean as she integrates racial justice messages and call to action into Sunday services, ensuring that we keep learning, and that we keep the message faith based. One example was lifted up in our January 28, 2021, newsletter:

• Racial Justice Church

Inspiration for Action from our Sunday Service January 23, 2022



Last Sunday we looked at Luke 4:14-21 and remembered how Jesus spoke the words of the Prophet Isaiah, “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And we recognized that Jesus' 'mission statement' is also our call, because in the words of St. Theresa of Avila,

Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

As we live into our designation as a Racial Justice Church, may we take these words to heart!

Respectfully Submitted by the First Congregational Church of Wilmot, UCC

Reverend Sara Marean

Racial Justice Steering Committee:
Nancy Allenby, Director of Christian Education
Bonita L. Betters-Reed, Chair
Paul Currier