

Justice Council - Quarterly Newsletter

Craig Stevens, Laurie Durkin, Co-Chairs 1.19.24

This report covers the Justice Council (JC) activities from September, 2023 through February, 2024, so it is packed with multiple projects and initiatives that Council members have been busy discussing and carrying out over this period. We encourage you to learn more about each of these projects by accessing the special JC document page of the UUs of MA website where more complete reports on our JC projects are available. See: https://www.uumtairy.org/jc_docs.php

A central theme for the JC over the past year has been reconnecting UUs of MA with our local community while continuing to explore and respond to the systemic and society-wide issues in which our congregation and surrounding community are embedded. In September, the Justice Council decided to focus its **Change for Change (C4C)** giving selections primarily on local community-based organization led by and primarily serving African Americans which mirrors the criteria developed for a possible Community Partnership that we explored over the Spring and Summer.

Since September, the congregation has given as much as \$400 a month to the following organizations: Mt Airy Community Fridge and Pantry; Germantown-based EMIR (Every Murder is Real); UU Justice PA, contributing to its annual fundraising goal; the Museum of Indian Culture, Allentown, PA, in appreciation for their assistance in revising our Land Acknowledgment to the Lenape in this region as well as serving as an ongoing resource for the Lenape and other Indigenous people in PA; Face to Face, serving low income families and individuals in Germantown; and East Mount Airy Neighbors (EMAN) which represents and serves our immediate neighborhood and was formed in the early 1970s partly at inspiration of our pastor at the time, Rev. Rudy Gelsey.

The **Mt Airy Community Fridge and Pantry** has continued to expand its reach in serving people in the community and around the city who are experiencing food insecurity. The pantry was conceived of and is co-managed by UUs of MA member, Courtney Heinerici, and her friend, Nicole Williams, a life-long East Mt Airy resident. Over the past year, the Pantry has expanded from providing 1,500 lbs. to over 7,000 lbs of food per week!! It has done this through partnering with almost a dozen dedicated food suppliers in the area and with the assistance of community and congregation members who have made pick-ups and deliveries of produce and other food products, helped organize and clean-up the Fridge and Pantry area and contributed dry goods that people have requested such as women's personal products. We will be celebrating the Pantry's first anniversary year on Sunday, March 10 during our monthly potluck luncheon.

Healing, repair and reparations for the harms done to Black, Indigenous and other people of color (BIPOC) in the colonization and development of this country - as well as within our own congregation and the Universalist and Unitarian traditions - has become a major learning and action focus of the congregation and Justice Council over the past five some years. A Reparations Coordinating Group was formed in late Fall to pull together the strands of our reparations work and develop a comprehensive plan of accountability and action, including: exploration of the congregation's history; support for the formation of the Philadelphia City Council Reparations Task Force led by the Philadelphia chapter of the National Coalition of

Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA); participation in the ongoing Interfaith Coalition for Building a Culture of Reparations in the Philadelphia area; and a special focus on Indigenous Reconciliation and Repair work led by Mary Lavalley including exploring the development of a Three-Sisters Garden and spiritual space on our grounds in the spirit of Land Back as an intersectional act of healing, decolonization and rebuilding our relationship to the land. To learn more about these areas of reparations study, planning and advocacy work, see the project summaries posted on the Justice Council document web page cited above.

Two project areas which focus on congregational and citizen engagement in advocating for just public policies are our membership and participation in **POWER Interfaith PA** and **UU Justice PA/UU the Vote**.

This past fall and winter, a group of us participated in the **NW POWER Cluster's** organizing around community development projects in Germantown that have been stalled in political controversy and the pandemic in spite of a high level of interest in the redevelopment of several historic Germantown properties, the former Germantown High School (GHS) and Fulton Elementary School, the historic Germantown YWCA, and Germantown's former Town Hall building, all sitting vacant and all but abandoned for over a decade. NW POWER, with the support of community organizer, Rev. Mathew Arlyck, revived a 2019 campaign around the redevelopment of the GHS and Fulton sites, seeking transparency and maximizing community input and benefits in employment, quality, affordable and accessible housing, health and other community resources. After mobilizing nearly 100 POWER congregation and community members to prepare for a community meeting on the GHS, community attendees were surprised to discover that the developer had already begun work on the site and had no clearcut plans for affordable housing or other community benefits and that our City Council representative, Cindy Bass, did not seek to engage community members or POWER representatives in a serious plan for their future input on the project.

With this learning experience behind them, the NW Cluster leadership team, supported by a new Community Organizer, Antonio Hunter, will be carrying out a new community listening and leadership development plan among NW Philly faith organizations to set NW Power's future direction. At the same time, POWER congregations across the state will be engaged in advocating for progressive policy initiatives with PA General Assembly and Governor Shapiro including full funding for our public schools under a new, Commonwealth Court mandated funding equity plan (see report on POWER PA's first statewide policy convention in UUs of MA's February 23rd weekly newsletter).

Contact: Laurie Durkin is our NW POWER Interfaith Cluster lead with Tim Styer serving as an advisor.

Our congregation was the birthplace of **UU Justice Pa**, a statewide public policy organizing and advocacy organization now based in Harrisburg. The bread and butter of UU Justice PA is letter writing to and visiting our state legislators to urge them to support progressive public policies around a range of issues: gun violence prevention, environmental justice, good government, criminal justice reform, reproductive justice, economic justice, and LGBTQIA+ justice. Tim Styer is a board member and our lead person.

In addition, UU Justice PA staff and congregation teams organize and coordinate **UU the Vote** activities including voter education, registration, and turn-out for federal, state and local offices during the major and mid-term national election cycles. UU the Vote will be ramping up in early March with a national and statewide zoom meeting. We include other voter engagement projects, such a ***Vote Forward***, in our UU the Vote umbrella. Contact: Beth Orrell, a new UUs of MA attendee who came to Philly from the Albuquerque, NM UU congregation has stepped up to be our lead for UU the Vote with Tim, Laurie, Craig and others working with her.

A **Social Justice Film and Speaker series**, aimed to engage both congregation and community members, got underway in November with the showing of the Coalition of Natives and Allies' moving film, "***Native Women and Allies Speak: What We Didn't Learn in School***" and informative panel discussion, thanks to the initiation of Mary Lavalley, Indigenous Task Force lead, and the support of others. Series topics under consideration currently are: a new documentary on Reparations, suggested by Rashaun Williams, Co-Chair PHL N'COBRA, and film and panel on East Mt. Airy housing and community development challenges and opportunities - past, present and future, suggested by Craig Stevens. Leading this project are Bruce Pollack-Johnson and Anam Owili-Eger.

Finally, our **Justice Book Study Group** read and discussed ***Carlisle Indian Industrial School: Indigenous Histories, Memories and Reclamations***, Jacqueline Fear-Segal and Susan D. Rose having read over the summer ***Covered with Night: A Story of Murder and Indigenous Justice in Early America***, by Nicole Eustace. This Pulitzer Prize winning book provides an in depth study of early colonial history and the "contest between Native American forms of justice—rooted in community, forgiveness, and reparations—and the colonial ideology of harsh reprisal that called for the accused killers to be executed if found guilty" (Heartleaf Books review) over the murder of a Native American by a white settler in rural PA. The book group is currently reading ***My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts*** by Resmaa Menakem. Feel free to join in on this deep discussion. Contact: Bruce Pollack-Johnson.

To get involved in or learn more about all these Justice Council projects, please contact Co-Chairs, Laurie Durkin (215) 514-7955, or Craig Stevens (412) 760-6478