

## HISTORY of the RACIAL JUSTICE TASK FORCE By Arthur Perkins and Jean Crichton

The Racial Justice Task Force was the natural extension of a special UU anti-racism curriculum, "Building the World We Dream About," which 14 members of our congregation studied in 2007-2008. Former member May Daniels was the prime mover and Instructor, along with Diane Maurer and Kimi Nakata. Rev. Emilie Boggis helped in getting it started.

After about 12 months of attending twice-monthly workshops, we stopped meeting with a number of sessions unfinished. Disappointingly, the seminars we missed were those aimed at taking action to challenge racist attitudes. As a result, Melvyn Polatchek proposed that we resurrect an earlier effort at a Racial Justice Task Force.

Melvyn chaired our first meeting in early January 2009, and we began by setting goals. Lorraine Wearley, an early member, helped us develop a Purpose/Function/Value statement for RJTF with the following overall goals:

- a) **Affordable Housing**
- b) **Eliminating police brutality**
- c) **Discrimination in the court system** and the lack of affordable legal representation for low-income people.
- d) **Inequities in education**
- e) **Human trafficking (current-day slavery)**
- f) **Racism in foreign policy**, including activism in partnership with other groups on behalf of genocide victims in Darfur.
- g) **Socioeconomic equality**

The mission statement reads as follows:

The Mission of the UCS Racial Justice Task Force is to create a better, safer world for people of all races, ethnicities and cultures through the elimination of injustice based on these differences. As UUs, we value the inherent worth and dignity of every person and affirm justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Thus, we will accomplish our mission by modeling our values; influencing decisions through advocacy; opposing egregious incidents of discrimination and raising awareness within the UCS Congregation and the broader Community.

Our first area of interest was Affordable Housing. Arthur Perkins suggested developing a sub-task force focused on the topic, and he chaired it for one year. One of our first efforts was to educate ourselves on Affordable Housing, and we invited several speakers, including Vito Gallo, former Director of the Summit Housing Authority; Arnold Cohen, policy coordinator of the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey; and Linda Flores-Tober, executive director of the Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless. In September 2009, we sponsored an art show in Fellowship Hall by clients of the Elizabeth Coalition.

(The Affordable Housing subcommittee split off from the RJTF in 2010 and formed its own Task Force under the Social Action Committee. Lorraine Wearley has provided leadership for the group.)

In October 2009, we sponsored the Celebration of Cultures, Potluck Dinner and Showing of the film *El Norte*, in Fellowship Hall. Mia Morse was the event manager. This was the first film we showed in an effort to educate our congregation on racial/cultural issues.

One of our major activities in 2010 was to participate in Summit's Martin Luther King Day of Service on January 18, 2010. Arthur had attended MLK Day activities in 2009 and proposed that we

sponsor a reading of one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches in 2010. At Mia's suggestion, we selected King's speech "Don't Sleep Through the Revolution," given as the Ware Lecture at the 1966 UUA General Assembly. We assembled a group of 10 readers, representing different ages, races and religious affiliations, and, under Arthur's leadership, we rehearsed several times over three months.

MLK Day 2010 was a complete success. All speakers performed well, and more than 60 people attended, some from outside our congregation. In addition to the reading, we collected 62 grocery bags of non-perishable food for Ed Huberman's Box with the help of 20 Summit Middle School students. The food was given to Helping Hands and Ears, a crisis prevention and intervention outreach center in Orange, and the food pantry at the East Orange/Orange Community Development Corporation.

At the request of minister Rev. Vanessa Southern, we undertook a research project completed in March 2010 into what support our UU congregation and the city of Summit gave to the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s. We reviewed our (admittedly incomplete) church archives of board minutes, sermons and newsletters and interviewed some congregation members. In addition, Carol Royal, an RJTF member, interviewed members of the primarily African American Wallace Chapel AME Zion Church in Summit.

We presented the information at a potluck at the home of Jean Crichton, attended by retired UU minister Mark Morrison-Reed, who was collecting similar information from UU congregations across North America. We were fortunate to have Wallace Chapel members Capitola Dickerson and Mr. and Mrs. Wiley Clark join us. They fascinated and shocked us with their descriptions of life during the segregation era of Summit, which lasted into the early 1970s.

Among other activities in 2009-2010, we wrote letters protesting specific incidents of police brutality to area police departments, clergy, prosecutors and newspapers. We also discussed strategies of educating minority youth on how to act and what to say when stopped by the police, and we investigated partnering on anti-discrimination initiatives with the YWCA in Bergen County and Princeton. We purchased some books on the Civil Rights struggle for our church library.

In June 2010, Mia and some other members attended a meeting on gang violence at the First Unitarian Society of Plainfield. We hoped to join with the Plainfield interfaith community to try to stop gang violence there.

Some of our plans back then did not pan out. We wanted to invite actors from the Playwright's Theater to our church (or to a community-wide event in Summit) to present a series of skits about racial stereotyping, much like those presented at the annual Maplewood-South Orange Conversation on Race. We never got the funding together to do this.

We also tried unsuccessfully to organize our own "conversation on race" with an African American congregation in Summit. On the suggestion of Mia, we discussed getting involved with the Summit YMCA's Achievers group, which focuses on racial justice issues, but found we did not have the time or manpower.

In August 2010, Melvyn resigned as Task Force chair and was succeeded by Arthur. Around the same time, Vanessa and Bill Foley joined the group. Valerie Pipoli joined us more recently.

In 2011, for the second year in a row, the task force organized the reading of a Martin Luther King Jr. speech for the Martin Luther King Day of Service. On January 17, eight people presented the speech "Address on the March from Selma to Montgomery March 25, 1965," again under Arthur's leadership. The UCS choir participated in the service, singing "Joshua fit the Battle of Jericho," a spiritual quoted in the speech. We developed a Civil Rights timeline, explaining details and the context of the Selma march.

Once again, the audience numbered more than 60. Non-perishable groceries donated to Ed Huberman's Box were distributed to food pantries in Orange and East Orange.

On May 5, 2011, the RJTF sponsored a lecture by Unitarian-Universalist Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed on issues of race, immigration and multiculturalism within the UU movement. The talk was part of the congregation's Adult Education program.

In the fall of 2011, we showed the PBS film "Freedom Riders" in conjunction with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the summer of 1961, when Civil Rights activists faced fire bombs and bullets in integrating interstate bus lines. We invited two Freedom Riders, Laura and Francis Randall of Manhattan, to attend and describe their experiences. The Nov. 12 event was successful and well attended.

The next RJTF event was on Martin Luther King Day 2012, when we sponsored a reading of the speech "Paul's Letter to American Christians." Six speakers participated, under Arthur's leadership. Bill Foley invited Rev. Ronald Allen of Pilgrim Baptist Church in Summit to follow up with remarks. Music was provided by our choir and vocal soloist Elijah Griffin of Pilgrim Baptist. More than 70 people attended. The Youth Group staffed the lobby all day, and 20-25 bags of non-perishable groceries were collected for Ed Huberman's Box.

Bill volunteered to manage the MLK reading in 2013, when we agreed to read the "I Have a Dream" speech in its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year.

Juneteenth is the holiday celebrated each June 19 to commemorate the freeing of the slaves in Texas two months after the end of the Civil War. In 2012, we decided to hold an observance of this holiday on the closest Sunday, June 17, which also happened to be Father's Day. After reviewing dozens of slave narratives collected in the 1930s, Task Force members selected several accounts to read at the service. We also read the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. Sage Johnson, a 4<sup>th</sup> grader from Maplewood, sang several spirituals, including Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.

We have tried through our public programming to raise consciousness about racial justice and continuing discrimination in American society. But we are still asking the question of what actions we can take to fight racism and bring about racial justice.

Task Force member Melvyn Polatchek has consistently urged us to take action, rather than dwell on issues of the past. In May 2012, horrified by the Trayvon Martin killing and other recent shootings of African Americans seemingly based on their race, Melvyn drafted a statement on racial profiling, both by police and within the hearts of even some well-intentioned white people. The RJTF adopted the statement unanimously, and 30 congregation members signed a petition endorsing the proposal.

The RJTF plans to present the petition and accompanying resolution at a congregational meeting where the congregation will be asked to take an official stand against racial profiling. The key is to develop an educational plan for the congregation.

The resolution reads:

*It is the intention of the members of The Unitarian Church in Summit to stand against official racial profiling and the continued resulting violence. As individuals we intend to exercise our humanity to counter our own private racially prejudicial thoughts. To the best of our ability we intend to teach others. To the best of our ability we will not silently accept disrespect of people of color.*

*Two of our principles, "We Affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person" and "Justice, equity and compassion in human relations," demand that we take our stand against racial profiling and violence. It demands that we look into our own hearts.*

We are still working on two other action issues, one of which is to improve our RJTF page on the Unitarian Church in Summit website, [www.ucsummit.org](http://www.ucsummit.org). The other issue is immigration reform and treatment of immigrants. The UU Legislative Ministry of New Jersey is studying the immigration issue under the leadership of Ted Fetter, and we are considering our resources and ability to cooperate with them.