

Catalyst Grant Supports Creating a Healthier Multicultural Community

By Elizabeth Janvrin, La Crosse First Congregational Church, UCC, Ministry of Missions and Social Justice

How does a predominately white congregation work for racial justice? That question is what started First Congregational Church (FCC) in La Crosse on their recent social justice journey.

PREPARATION

As a Congregation we needed a greater understanding of the issue and opportunities to discuss how our own experiences have shaped our views. Over two years we used the study guides of *Becoming an Immigration Welcoming Community, On Behalf of Our Children*, *Wisconsin's Racial*



Disparities, *Conversations on Race and Privilege*, and *The Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery* to examine racial issues as members of the UCC community of faith. Additionally, we have members of our congregation serving on the local Immigration Task Force and coordinating book studies and speakers with other congregations.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS and CATALYST GRANT

In the UCC *Conversations of Race and Privilege* study guide John Paddock states:

"To be effective allies, we must steel ourselves to hear the anger and the pain endured over the centuries. I want to close my ears to it. I want to avoid the guilt and grief I feel. I don't want to experience fear and anxiety. But I finally realize that only white privilege allows me to escape what my black sisters and brothers face every day of their lives."

This quote from Paddock captures where our Congregation and community were in our racial justice work; the realization that we must do uncomfortable work within ourselves and our community. Because of our participation in community-wide efforts we were invited to be a part of 2019 "Creating a Healthier Multicultural Community."

It was clear that this initiative was our Congregation's way to go beyond understanding and talk, but how would we help fund such a big project when our Church budget was so tight? The answer was a Wisconsin Conference Catalyst grant. The grant allowed us to become major partners in this innovative ministry.

***To bring about a true change in
our community,
people must think differently
about differences.***

THREE COMPONENTS OF THE COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

- 1) Two public presentations by Dr. Fran Kaplan and Reggie Jackson on implicit bias, racial disparities in Wisconsin and the La Crosse community and racism as a public health crisis. Mr. Jackson and Ms. Kaplan are founders of Nurturing Diversity Partners, highly recognized social justice advocates and have worked at Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee.
- 2) Twelve hours of training for our 24 diverse local facilitators, including a member of our Congregation. Facilitators were trained in how to guide very personal and tough

discussions about race in our community. The facilitators worked in pairs, one person who was white and one who was colored.

3) Four Deep Dive Sessions over 2 months.

The 48 deep dive participants were personally invited to ensure that the group was made up of people who would have lived realities quite different from each other, serve in prominent community roles and were equal number of whites and people of color. Community participants represented health care, judicial, business, elementary – post secondary school administration, police, faith groups, non-profits and advocacy groups. The trained facilitators along with Nurturing Diversity Partners enabled individuals to discover biases within themselves and were challenged to overcome the wired-in racial stereotypes we all carry. Each 3-hour deep dive session followed a “caring circle” model that requires participants to actively listen without judgement. The teams had honest dialogue about realities that are rarely discussed among friends, let alone strangers. In addition to further discussing the public presentation topics the teams discussed institutional racism and the legacies of racial violence and trauma. After each 3-hour session the facilitators met to debrief and adapt plans for the next session.

BE THE CHURCH

Our ministry of missions and social justice worked with the planning group to determine how we could help ensure this program’s success. Our ministry continued to keep our Congregation informed and to provide opportunities for engagement. We were pleased with the attendance by our Congregation’s members. Those who attended serve the Church and community in varying capacities. But our work was not always smooth. At one point in the journey, I shared with our catalyst grant coach some concerning perspectives we were hearing. We received the encouragement and guidance we needed to continue the work.

“Congratulations! You are reaching deeply enough with this effort and people are paying attention and now they are going to resist... Your efforts are political in the ways in which Jesus was political – they challenge power structures, they engage citizens (the “polis” in Greek) in activity aimed at improving their communities and they suggest ways of drawing those who have been marginalized into the center of our communities and lives. All things we see Jesus doing on a regular basis. In addition, your efforts are about healing, redemption and reconciliation – deeply Christian activities with scriptural ties throughout the Bible and throughout our history as God’s people... - Tisha Brown, Wisconsin Conference UCC catalyst grant coach

As a result of our integral work on *Creating a Healthier Multicultural Community* I feel our Congregation accomplished the following:

1. Further educated our members outside the walls of our Church in a more diverse community through the 2 public presentations.
2. Helped to create a safe and healthy environment for the Deep Dive with nourishment and space to work with materials to de-stress.
3. Influenced and educated our community leaders.
4. Be seen in the community as a Church of social justice.

REFLECTION

Mathew Bersagel Braley, Ph.D., associate professor of ethics, culture and society, member of FCC and Deep Dive facilitator shared with our Congregation about the impact of Creating a Healthier Multicultural Community. *"One clear sign of hope that our Church is changing lives*

The catalyst grant helped the community beyond our church walls to recognize that many FCC, UCC members are co-conspirators in the "commitment to rebinding our community, not by ignoring the realities of race, but by facing it together, honestly."

came during a closing circle after the initial training for facilitators, many of whom are young racially diverse members of the La Crosse community. These younger facilitators, many who were skeptical of the dialogue process, shared how this experience had revealed to them unexpected "co-conspirators" in La Crosse – folks who were willing to stand with them as witness to both the realities of racism in our community and to breathe together a commitment to rebinding our community, not by ignoring the realities of race, but facing it together, honestly.

For me, the existence of co-conspirators in our community was less surprising. I suspect that this is because I have participated with many of you over the past couple of years in the adult education offerings on the United Church of Christ's call to address white privilege. I have seen, firsthand, your commitment to relearning our histories so that we might more fully live into our collective calling to "live by faith, embody love and seek justice."

WHAT'S NEXT?

1. Community-Wide Big Read of the book *Waking Up White* by Debbie Irving Summer – 9/20
 - We will be involved by purchasing books and leading discussions
2. Talking to Children about Race, by Dr. Winkler 9/19/20
 - Sponsored by FCC in La Crosse.
3. La Crosse White Privilege Symposium* 10/16-17/20
 - This is a regional gathering allowing communities to come together to discuss what white privilege is, how it is systematized in our culture, and how we can work together to eliminate race-based privilege and create more equitable, welcoming communities.
 - I am a representative on the planning committee and will hopefully have a good number of members attending from our congregation.
4. Many of the Deep Dive Teams are continuing to communicate and plan for future work.

*White privilege is not the suggestion that white people have never struggled. Many white people do not enjoy the privileges that come with relative affluence, such as food security. Additionally, white privilege is not the assumption that everything a white person has accomplished is unearned; most white people who have reached a high level of success worked extremely hard to get there. Instead, white privilege should be viewed as a built-in advantage, separate from one's level of income or effort.

For details on La Crosse's Racial Justice initiatives and resources please visit:

<http://www.laxwakingupwhite.com>

Please also feel free to contact me at eandfamily@gmail.com