"I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people..."
Amos 7:8

WITNESS

Oregon-Idaho Chapter, Methodist Federation for Social Action

MAY 15, 2021

COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS IN SOUTHERN OREGON

In January of 2020 over 250 people crowded into the sanctuary at Bethany Presbyterian Church in Grants Pass, OR (before COVID) for an annual community Martin Luther King Jr. Day Celebration. In years past the celebration was held at Newman United Methodist Church, but grew beyond the church's physical capacity to host the event. In 2019, Newman UMC partnered with Bethany Presbyterian and St. Luke's Episcopal Churches to pull off the event which included live music, key note speakers, and a panel discussion on racism in Southern Oregon.



Courageous Conversations planning team (Sarah Bristol)

As a result of this event, it became clear that the community was seeking more opportunities to engage in conversations around race and systemic oppression. These are conversations that rarely happen in predominantly white and conservative Grants Pass. Seeing this need for deeper conversation the three churches partnered up with Rogue Community College to host monthly conversations on systemic oppression, specifically as it relates to Southern Oregon, thus the Courageous Conversations Project was born.

In May of 2020 the first Courageous Conversations event was hosted on zoom and has continued monthly covering a wide variety of topics. The events are moderated by Rev. Ryan Scott of Newman UMC, Rev. Tom Berry of Bethany Presbyterian, Rev. Ernestein Flemister of St. Luke's Episcopal, Sally Snyder and Jenny Jackson of Rogue Community College.

Over the one year these conversations have been happening the group has discussed Grants Pass' history as a sundown town, the local historical and ongoing conflicts with Indigenous People, the leadership of women throughout the civil rights movement, environmental racism, and so much more. "These events have allowed us to engage with the community in an ongoing and meaningful way around issues that matter." Says Rev. Ryan Scott, the pastor at Newman UMC. "Not only are we engaging in important topics, we are building connections and relationships that will strengthen our community for years to come."

The Courageous Conversation events are varied in their structure. Some months the event includes a guest speaker and a Q&A session. Other months the moderators lead a guided discussion and then divide the group into smaller breakout rooms for further conversation. In any case participants are sure to leave with new perspectives and perhaps a new or better understanding of the issues of systemic oppression.

"The goal of The Courageous Conversations Project is to get the community talking to one another and to educate ourselves so that we can engage meaningfully with issues of systemic oppression in our community." Says Scott. On May 25th the Courageous Conversations event is titled: "Putting the Civil Back in Civil Discourse." In June, Rev. Scott will be leading a discussion on the Queer Liberation Movement for LGBTQ+ Pride Month.

The Courageous Conversations Project shows what can be done when church reaches beyond denominational boundaries and into the community. "The community response has been very positive," says Scott, "we regularly have over 60 people in attendance. Some of the participants are church members, however most of them had no prior relationship with the church. Not only has this project been a great way to engage in important topics, it has also been a wonderful tool to reach out to our community and deepen our relationship with Christ."

The next Courageous Conversations event will be held on May 25th 12:00pm-1:00pm on Zoom. Anyone is welcome to join in. You don't need to be from Southern Oregon, however, some of the conversation is specific to communities and events in the Rogue Valley region. To access the zoom link visit: https://web.roguecc.edu/diversity-board