

Community Circle Conversations on Racial Justice

The Social Justice Committee of First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church of Kennebunk (FPUU) is inviting churches and organizations throughout the towns of Kennebunk, Kennebunkport and Arundel to help implement Community Circle Conversations on Racial Justice during the month of April, 2019. The goals of the conversations are to create a greater awareness of unconscious racial bias in our community, engage community members in challenging racial injustice, and identify opportunities for action. The conversations will also help us gain awareness of why people of color do not feel welcome here.

Following the revelations of racial incidents in our schools, activities have been initiated by the School Board, administrators and Student Civil Rights Teams to explore racial bias and racial injustice. However, we cannot leave it up to our children and schools to resolve this difficult issue. As adult members of the community, we must gather to share our thoughts and begin to plan how we will become a community that welcomes all.

The committee has engaged Fred Van Liew, J.D., of the Portland Center for Restorative Justice to train facilitators in the Circle Conversation method. Called Circle Keepers, they will come from a variety of local area organizations and businesses. The intention is for these newly trained Circle Keepers to hold the conversations at their respective organizations or businesses. The final event will bring together all participants to share their experiences and discuss next steps. Our committee is made up of members of the community — not all are members of First Parish. Our approach will be non-sectarian, and leadership will come from Mr. Van Liew.

What Are Community Circle Conversations?

The circle is a dialog process that works intentionally to create a safe space to discuss very difficult or painful issues in order to improve relationships and resolve differences. The intent is to find resolutions that serve every member of the circle. The process is based on an assumption of equal worth and dignity for all participants and therefore provides equal voice to all participants. Every participant has gifts to offer in finding a good solution to the problem.

The process is deliberate in discussing how the conversation will be held. Consequently, the circle works on values, guidelines and relationship building before talking about differences or conflicts. The responsibility of the Circle Keeper is to help the participants create a safe space for their conversation and to monitor the quality. If the atmosphere becomes disrespectful, it is the responsibility of the Circle Keeper to bring the group's attention to that problem and help the group re-establish a respectful space.

Helen Newton and Rev. Jim Anderson from Christ Church have spent a Friday evening and Saturday morning being trained as Community Circle Conversation Keepers. They invite the members and friends of Christ Church to join them in conversation at 11:30 AM following worship and coffee on April 14, 2019 and/or at 7:00 PM on Wednesday, April 24, 2019. Join us in a safe environment to explore our attitudes and biases.