

Genesee Valley Presbytery
2020 PGV Transformational Grant Report
Genesee Central Presbyterian Church

Prepared By Tom Matthews, Chair Advocacy & Action Commission

Anti-Racism Initiative: A major project, which arose during the national discourse on racial injustice in America, sought to address systemic racism. The Advocacy & Action Commission drafted a statement approved by session on June 18; the statement is posted on the CPC website:

Like untold millions, and like you, we've been jolted by the videos of wrongful killings by police and their aftermath jolted from our lives of quiet complacency in the Genesee Valley. As a Christian faith community, we grieve for lives lost, for families torn, for dignity ignored, and for respect withheld on the basis of skin color, gender, or any other of the differences among us. We lament the role that we have played in maintaining systems that are unjust.

Following in the way of Jesus, we are committed to being reconcilers and healers in our community and in our world. We are committed to educating ourselves about the deeply rooted and sometimes subtle prejudices of our culture. We are committed to working against racism, implicit bias, and structural injustices. We are committed to taking constructive steps forward toward creating a society that is fair, loving, and compassionate toward all.

Report to Presbytery on Grant Activities: The commission drafted a proposal to Presbytery for financial support for the church's anti-racism project. The Transformation Grant provided funding for training consultants, guest pastors of color, Zoom presentations, adult forum discussions following worship services, and copies of a book on white privilege and racism for members of the congregation to read and discuss. We proceeded with the project in June long before receiving approval from Presbytery in September. Pastor Nancy invited the Rev. Dr. John Welch from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary to the pulpit and a post-worship forum. The commission members read several books on racism, including racism within the institutional church, and selected *White Awake* by Daniel Hill for distribution, reading, and discussion with the congregation. We contracted with Dr. Sasha Eloi-Evans, Director of Multicultural Programs and Services at SUNY Genesee, to lead two Zoom training sessions held on September 17 and October 6 for Elders, Deacons, the Advocacy & Action Commission and members of the congregation. Members of the congregation also participated in four Zoom seminars on October 7, 14, 21 and 28 hosted by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary on *Jesus Christ and the Dividing wall: Race and God's Mission*. The commission also hosted discussions (for Elders, Deacons, commission members, and the congregation) with the Rev. Dr. John Welch and Dr. Jim Downey from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary on *White Awake* on November 11 and 18. Pastor Nancy also invited the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy, Associate Pastor for Mission Ministries at the East Liberty Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, to preach and to participate in a post-service forum on December 27.

Post Grant Activities in 2021: The anti-racism initiative is continuing in 2021 with Session support and a new budget line with funding of \$750.00. The Advocacy & Action commission meets monthly and anti-racism is a major focus of every meeting. We purchased copies of the *Lent of Liberation* by Cheri Mills

and members of the commission are using the book during the current Lenten season and the response has been so positive that we may recommend that it be used by the entire congregation for Lent in 2022. One of the commission members who is also a distinguished professor of psychology (Ganie DeHart) at SUNY Geneseo is supervising a class student project that is documenting the experiences of students of color with expressions of racism in the community. The taped interviews will be shared with our commission in May. The commission is also in the final stages of negotiating an agreement with a newly formed nonprofit agency, **Cultures Learning Together**, for office space and meeting space for expanding a network of cross-cultural bridges uniting different communities, cultures, and peoples. The agency will share office space with the Geneseo/Groveland Food Pantry that serves the community from our facilities. The commission is also exploring the possibility of Central Presbyterian Church becoming a Matthew 25 church.

Questions from Presbytery

What were you hoping to accomplish? Our Advocacy & Action Commission at Central Presbyterian Church started working on this project as the pandemic unfolded and the Black Lives Matter activities and protests exploded across the county. We felt compelled to engage our church leadership and the congregation in engaging and discussing racism, implicit bias, and structural injustices and we drafted and adopted a statement that is posted on the church website. We submitted the grant application to educate ourselves, our church leadership, and the congregation around these issues with the intention of exploring ways we could make a positive difference in addressing the deep racial divisions in our country.

Who was touched by your project or program? This past year has been very difficult because most interactions, meetings, and church services are virtual zoom events. Almost every member of the congregation is aware of this initiative because it is mentioned in practically every leadership meeting and often referred to at Sunday services.

How did this grant energize or transform your congregation or community? The grant energized our Advocacy & Action Commission and laid the groundwork for our continuing discussions and developing an action plan for the future. Although we have created a healthy awareness of the issues, we realize that we need to be patient and move slowly with our all-white congregation so we are able to narrow rather than widen the racial divide. For example, hosting the new Cultures Learning Together is being accepted without any negative opposition just as the recent move of the Geneseo/Groveland Food Pantry into our facility was enthusiastically accepted by the congregation. The college student experience project will also help educate and inform our members and hopefully lead to greater understanding of what students of color experience in the Geneseo community.

What did you learn from this project and what are your next steps? All of our commission members have clearly learned a great deal about the history of slavery and the prevalence of racism in our society and in the church. We are also learning about ways to work against racism, implicit bias, and structural injustices. Our next steps will be more education, more training, more discussion, and more future planning. We are talking about the possibility of becoming a Matthew 25 church.

For Congregations: Please share a story of where you saw God in this project.

Jesus met the woman at the well and told her that the hour is surely coming when true worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth, for that is what God seeks (John 4:23-24). We cannot know God through a veil of oppressive lies; we know God when Truth breaks through, and the stories of many who have

long been silenced are voiced. These stories challenge our understanding of ourselves, but ultimately allow us to see God through a fuller and wider lens.

Since many of our members are 65 or older, we heard multiple stories from people who remember reading children's books at home or in school like *Little Black Sambo* and going with family members to minstrel shows in town halls and churches. These common experiences in many of our upstate all-white communities were still happening in the 1960s in Livingston County and are examples that we lament as examples of structural racism.

One member of our commission recalled a dinner with a friend and her guest from the Ivory Coast. He teaches Spanish and French in public schools in West Hartford, CT, as well as graduate courses at the University of St. Joseph in Instructional Technology. The conversation turned toward her church group reading *White Awake*, and he said, "Let me show you the book I am currently reading," whereupon he brought out *Me and White Supremacy*, by Layla Saad. Needless to say, the conversation that evening from both a white and black perspective was both fascinating, challenging, and enlightening. She most definitely felt God's hand at work that evening.

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