**Social Justice Circle Annual Report for 2020-21 Church Year**

This year several key events brought an increased awareness of systemic racism and income inequity into the public consciousness, issues that our Social Justice Circle has addressed together since its beginnings. The Covid-19 pandemic, which was unrelenting during most of the church year, plainly revealed inequities of our health care systems –particularly showing the lack of support in our black and brown communities. The police killing of citizen George Floyd, a black man from Minneapolis in May 2020, inspired many to take to the streets and demand justice for Floyd, sparking the most widely-supported racial justice movement since the Civil Rights-era. In addition, extreme wildfires and storms ravaged US communities with greater frequency and intensity than ever before.

These challenges are likely why our Social Justice Circle increased in size and diversified the types of issues we engaged with this year. Although most of the 2020-21 church year our social justice work was organized at our computers because of the Covid-19 pandemic, we remained effective in our work. We connected with one another regularly, reached out to other advocacy groups, and brought in new people for challenging conversations via our video calls. We also continued connecting with those who are incarcerated by letters and emails.

As always, we recognize that the people who step up to be leaders are so important for this work. We are all deeply missing Kathy Salzano, who passed away early in 2021. She was an enthusiastic leader with DuPage United and with the Reproductive Choice team. She was a courageous participant in the Racial Equity Team. We miss her leadership and most simply, her presence among us.

The current UCH Social Justice Team Leaders are Char Cepek (Welcoming Congregation), Cathy Blanford and Tracey Olson (Prison Ministry), Mary Getty (DuPage PADS), Marian Honel-Wilson (Racial Equity), Dave Lloyd and Lynn Rotunno(Green Sanctuary), Rev. Karen Mooney (UUANI), Gary Noll (DuPage United), Mike Pabian (Reproductive Justice), and Tiffany Schafer (Animal Ministry). Thank you to all of the team leaders who use their valuable time and share their amazing talents to organize these efforts for our congregation so we can live our values, together.

The UCH Social Justice Circle work includes service, education, advocacy, and public witness. Each Social Justice Circle team is encouraged to have their work within the team connect with the congregation as a whole and with the larger community outside the church. As such, we organized monthly collections for Austin Scholarship, UUPMI, Night Ministry, DuPage Pads, UUANI, Third Unitarian Pop Up Food Pantry, The Food Empowerment Project, Faith in Place, and Black Lives UU (BLUU). Thank you to the congregation for donating $7275 this year to these organizations.

Thank you to all who have given your time and commitment to this work, and especially to our congregation who supports it.

Tracey Olson

Social Justice Circle Coordinator

**Animal Ministry Team**

Animal Ministry is pleased to report on another productive year for the animals, although one filled with many challenges due to the pandemic. We mailed cruelty free candy to each child at church when it was announced that trick or treating was restricted this past Halloween. We held a socially distanced brainstorming session with our vaccinated members in person. Unfortunately, we had to cancel our Worldwide Vegan Bake Sale and Meat Out Day tables this year because of COVID-19. We'd love to expand the committee's membership in the coming church year, and revive our children's group, KAMP! We also look forward to continue partnering with the new Animal Ministry chapter at DuPage Unitarian on various events and to work with the UU Animal Ministry in its international efforts.

Submitted by Tiff Schafer

**Dupage PADS Team**

DuPage Pads changed their approach during the pandemic and provided housing in hotels rather than moving their clients from one church to another. We did not do any work with them during this year, but, as of this writing, plan to help with meals in the new format in late May 2021.

Submitted by Mary Getty

**Green Sanctuary Team**

This year the committee created four programs that we are now promoting to the congregation:

Pollinators and Native Plants: We will make available to every single household a butterfly weed plant—a type of milkweed that is a monarch butterfly host—and seeds of nectar plants, including dill, zinnia, and marigold. We have also prepared a list of native plants that are food and host plants for native pollinators. We are publicizing programs like Homegrown National Park, Monarch Waystation, and the National Wildlife Federation’s Wildlife Habitat certification.

Healthy Food, Shared Widely: We are encouraging all church members to grow and buy organic food, and to share the bounty of their gardens with the hungry. We are sharing the “Dirty Dozen” list—those fruits and vegetables with the most pesticides—so that people can grow those varieties at home, and shop for the organic versions. We will provide lists of food pantries that accept garden produce so that gardeners can share fresh healthy food with our community. We will encourage people to keep track of how much we all contribute so that we can celebrate the total at the end of the growing season.

Energy Saving to Fight the Climate Crisis: We are sharing information on the many ways to save energy, and we plan to make it fun. We are testing on-line apps that make it easy to keep track of the energy-wise steps we all take, and even compete against each other—maybe with fun prizes!

Waste Reduction: There is a world-wide Zero Waste Movement that we can all join—if not to eliminate all trash and garbage, then to make serious reductions. We will provide lists of actions and make it fun by providing ways to keep track and compete against each other.

In addition to the above new programs, we have continued to share environmental action with other houses of worship through Faith in Place, and we provided volunteers for several styrofoam recycling events. We held a Winter Solstice event in December, and even found a way to hold a virtual Beltane Maypole dance in connection with our annual Green Sanctuary service.

**Submitted by** Lynn Rotunno and Dave Lloyd, Co-Chairs

**Prison Ministry Team**

The prison ministry team keeps our first principle at the forefront of our work: the worth and dignity of all people. This includes those who are incarcerated. We have the goal of supporting those who are incarcerated through letters and at the same time, understanding what it means to be incarcerated. We believe that developing these personal relationships is a key foundation for advocacy that aims to undo the systemic racism built into the prison system.

**Pen pal program**

We doubled the number of UCH pen pals this church year. We now have 14 members writing to 17 different “inside” pen pals. Most are incarcerated in our Illinois prisons, but we do have a couple of pen pals who are in Federal prisons. Most pen pals are matched through the Church of the Larger Fellowship Ambassador program. The Prison Ministry team held monthly meetings to support UCH-based pen pals in 2021. We share what we’ve learned and discuss issues that arise while trying to both develop a friendship and understand the larger systemic issues at play. The team also sends a small amount of money to each of our inside pen pals to cover the cost of stamps and emails each year from the UCH Social Justice Budget.

We are grateful to Rev. Karen Mooney who has been attending each of these meetings to offer support and perspective to our experiences.

**Education and connection with UCH**

Many other UCH members joined in at the holidays and sent cards to our pen pals and others who are incarcerated. We sent 80 cards.

A couple of the outside pen pals have submitted or are working on clemency petitions for their incarcerated friends. The team has assisted in this in a variety of ways, including several members of the congregation contributing letters of support.

Three UCH services highlighted the stories of those who are incarcerated. The summer service was called “Letters from Inside our Prison Walls” and the November service, “Thankful for Freedom: a Story of Transformation.” In March, Rev. Allison Farnum of UUPMI reminded us that everyone including those in prison are in the circle of love.

**Advocacy Work**

Our advocacy work is informed by our UCH inside pen pals. In 2019, they highlighted for us both Illinois’ lack of parole and the efforts inside to get the word out. Parole is the chance to stand in front of a parole board with the possibility of early release; it was discontinued in 1978. Since the sentences were so lengthy during the tough-on-crime years, our prisons are full of elderly people who have served decades but have no mechanism for a review to get out early.

UCH Prison Ministry partners with Citizens for Parole and Parole Illinois to bring a parole system back to Illinois. We are currently advocating for a parole bill (HB 2399 and SB 2333) for this legislative session which runs from January 2021 to December 2022.

Advocates within the church have written many of the Facebook posts, and, along with our Social Media director, have contributed videos and letters to the editor in support of parole. Both UUANI and UUPMI are key supporters of this bill as well.

In the summer, we met together to talk about conditions in the prisons in relation to Covid-19. We made calls to the Governor and Illinois Department of Corrections, and wrote letters to the editor advocating for better conditions including, masks, sanitizers, soap etc.

The Racial Equity Group also drew attention to the lack of parole in Illinois by hosting the film, Stateville Calling and a discussion panel afterward. Fifty-five percent of those who are incarcerated are black, while our general population is only 13 percent black, which highlights the racial injustice underlying the prison system.

In order to deepen our own understanding of our justice system, and as a way of supporting people who are incarcerated, we encourage those who are interested in being matched with a penpal to reach out to us.

Submitted by Cathy Blanford and Tracey Olson

**Racial Equity Team**

The Racial Equity Team was chaired this year by Marian Honel-Wilson, with support from UCH minister Rev. Pam Rumancik. The RET focuses on encouraging UCH members to learn about racism and actively work for justice for all people of color.

The Racial Equity Team:

* The Racial Equity Team encourages UCH members to learn about racism and work for justice for all people of color. The Racial Equity Team:
* Coordinated a Summer Read of the book How to Be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi in partnership with the following organizations, which hosted four book discussions among them and promoted reading the book and attending a book discussion to their members: Baha’is of La Grange, CommUNITY Diversity Group of La Grange, First Congregational Church of La Grange—Ministry of Missions, First United Methodist Congregation of La Grange, Indivisible La Grange, Indivisible Western Springs, League of Women Voters of the La Grange Area, Lyonsville Congregational United Church of Christ, and the Sisters of St. Joseph - La Grange Park.
* Supported UUANI efforts to pass the Illinois Fair Tax Amendment, including helping to coordinate and host four town hall sessions.
* Hosted a virtual screening and panel discussion of the documentary Stateville Calling, which is an Emmy-nominated documentary exploring parole reform and Illinois’ aging inmate population. The panel discussion featured Bill Ryan, prison reformer; Oscar “Smiley” Parham, former inmate; Rev. Allison Farnum, Exec. Director, Unitarian Universalist Prison Ministry of Illinois (UUPMI); and Jeanne Bishop, author of Change of Heart: Justice, Mercy and Making Peace with My Sister’s Killer.
* Provided technical and promotional support for an antiracism conference sponsored by several community organizations.
* Started working with UUANI to implement an Anti-Racism Capacity-Building Project, which is kicking off with a Listening/Peace Circle Training being held at UCH on June 17-19.

In addition, the RET held monthly virtual “Uncomfortable Conversations” to provide motivation and support for individual, church and community antiracism actions and provided a weekly link to a racial justice article for the News and Notes. RET members also supported the UCH Prison Ministry Team’s efforts to pass parole and prison reform legislation.

Submitted by Marian Honel-Wilson.

**Reproductive Justice Team**

Our team of about a ten abortion clinic escorts served in pairs on Saturday mornings, hopefully making it a little easier for clients to enter the clinic and have full access to clinic services.

Submitted by Mike Pabian

**Unitarian Universalist Advocacy Network of Illinois (UUANI)**

There is an old football saying: when the going gets tough the tough get going. From 2020 into 2021 the world, our country and this community struggled mightily with a pandemic and its disastrous effects. The popular song from Rent reminded me that we lost approx 1 person every min in the first year. We lived in a haze of fear and anxious movements. Still the people here at UCH got going. We helped to reach out to many different communities around the country to remind people to Vote in Love not out of hate or fear. We sent postcards, registered voters, worked the election polling places and one of us even acted as a voter in IL electoral college.

The leadership team of UUANI working with a coalition to pass a constitutional change for fair tax enjoyed the acumen and energy from members here. As we transitioned from the historic 2020 election the community began work with UUANI on bringing the uncomfortable conversations model crafted here at UCH to several other UU churches as a pilot project called anti racism capacity building. UUANI looks forward to working more in concert with the Prison Ministry team as they continue their investment in ensuring parole for people locked up in our prison systems.

Together we are better than we ever will be as individuals. To find out more about the work of UUANI please contact the church or the social justice leader.

Submitted by Rev. Karen Mooney

**Welcoming Congregation**

The Welcoming Congregation team worked with Age Options to establish Thrive with Pride Café, an online meeting room where LGBTQ older adults could connect and have access to pertinent health and lifestyle information. While the monthly zoom meetings never quite took off, the team was grateful to partner with such a well-established agency and connect with other groups who support the LGBTQ+ community. We hope that the partnership will provide other opportunities to work together in the future.

Submitted by Char Cepak