

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Statement on Becoming an Anti-Racist Church

Introduction

Our nation was founded on a contradiction. Our founders sought and proclaimed personal and religious liberty, but pursued their claims through actions rooted in the original sins of colonialism and slavery. Believing themselves superior to the darker-skinned peoples of other continents, our European ancestors took the lands of the Americas from their indigenous occupants and enslaved the peoples of Africa to aid in this conquest. Slowly over the past two centuries—through abolition, recognition of Native-American rights, and the civil-rights movement—our country has made strides to undo that founding contradiction and to extend the principles of liberty to all. But recent social and political events remind us that the legacy of white supremacy and racism remains entrenched in the economic and social fabric of our nation and in our governing institutions.

Our Church shares in this legacy. We were founded in 1865 by abolitionists, who also helped to create Howard University. Our Church was one of the first racially integrated churches in the District. But our building also stands on the ancestral lands of the Piscataway Conoy Tribe, “the people where the rivers blend.” And the same land was used as a plantation worked by enslaved people. Some of the abolitionists who founded our church opposed an integrated communion table, resulting in a major split within the congregation four years after its founding. In the century and a half that followed, our attention to the presence of racism both in our church and wider community has been uneven. We are alerted by current events of the need to be more steadfast and proactive in our response to the enduring injustice of systemic racism.

Scripture teaches that all humans are created in God’s image, worthy of freedom and wellbeing. We are followers of Jesus, who fiercely defended the oppressed. The Rev. Dr. James Hal Cone, the father of Black liberation theology, revealed to us that Jesus was, of course, the Son of the *God of the Oppressed*. Our history and our faith call us to renew and strengthen our commitment to eliminate racism. We acknowledge our failings both personal and collective, and rely on the promise of forgiveness, so that we are not bound by our failures but set free to act justly. In the words of our Covenant, we seek to bind ourselves, in God’s Redeeming Presence, to walk together in ways revealed to us by the Holy Spirit in sacrament and Word, study and prayer, fellowship and mission.

Commitment

1. Acknowledging that systemic racism and subconscious bias burdens every part of our lives, the members of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Washington, DC hereby declare that we are committed to identifying the presence of such racism in ourselves, in our congregation, and in the wider world, and to uprooting it with our whole hearts and minds.

2. We desire as a church to live out our faith through witness and action, to affirm the humanity of and advocate with those who are systematically oppressed in social, economic, and political ways due to their racial identity. We acknowledge that to live into this commitment, we must first listen and hear oppressed people when they speak up—including when they directly challenge white privilege—before we respond. This is fundamental to being anti-racist.
3. We desire as a church to be an anti-racist congregation that confronts racial injustice. We acknowledge the reality of white privilege and the benefits that many of us have received from that privilege. We strive to turn that privilege against itself, to use the resources and opportunities that many of us have acquired through such privilege to combat systemic behaviors and institutional practices that perpetuate racial injustice and oppression. This includes confronting how Christianity itself was manipulated to perpetuate white supremacy and how our congregation benefitted from white privilege.
4. We are a church family related to one another not by any religious or political bonds or dogma, but because we are all God’s children. Like all children, each one is unique. We might not all call God the same name, and we bring a variety of opinions and perspectives to the table. So, we must work toward ways to respond to systemic oppression and racial injustice that carefully consider and reflect a myriad of opinions. We pledge, however, to grant privilege to the voices of those enduring systemic oppression/racism and racial injustice.
5. As we discern ways to be anti-racist and policies to combat systemic racism, we acknowledge the need to proceed with all deliberate speed. Deliberations that merely delay necessary reforms serve only to perpetuate injustice.

Call for Advocacy

The Church hereby directs Council to appoint an Anti-Racism Committee to assist the congregation in living into our calling to the work of racial justice. The Church authorizes and directs the Committee to assist the Church in carrying out the First Church Comprehensive Plan to Dismantle Racism (a working document adopted by Church Council in 2020), as well as any practices and amendments to that plan recommended as a result of the ongoing racial justice audit.

In accordance with our Policy on Social-Action Advocacy (adopted in November 2020), the Church also authorizes and directs the Anti-Racism Committee, as an ad hoc committee of the Social Action and Awareness Commission, and under the guidance of the Senior Minister, to work in partnership with the United Church of Christ, the Potomac Association of the Central Atlantic Conference, and other churches and partner organizations to advocate for federal, state, and local laws and regulations to confront and remedy systemic racism (and to oppose any contrary efforts). Such advocacy work may include work to support:

- voting laws that help insure equal access to the ballot box;
- housing policies that limit displacement of long-term residents from gentrification and that promote residential desegregation;
- policing policies that assure true, just, and compassionate public safety for all;
- criminal justice reforms that confront inequities in legal representation, arrest, and incarceration rates, and that seek to prevent gun violence that disproportionately impacts communities of color;
- education polices that reduce inequities in access to primary and secondary education;
- economic policies that provide for greater investment and job opportunities in low-income and distressed communities;
- health-care policies that address racial disparities in access to quality health care;
- environmental-justice policies aimed at reducing pollution impacts from industrial and municipal facilities disproportionately sited in low-income communities; and
- efforts to attain DC statehood (to provide self-government and representation in national government to the residents of our city, the majority of whom are African American or members of other racial or ethnic minorities).

Prepared and submitted by the Anti-Racism Task Force (2021) (Rev. Jason Carson Wilson, Diane Brenneman, Rev. Karen Byrne, Kim Darling, Lucille Dickinson, Rev. Laura Johnson, Jessica Prentice, LaTayna Purnell, Janneke Ratcliffe, Gail Sonnemann, and Priscilla Waters).

ADOPTED by vote of the Congregation

DATE: _____

CERTIFIED BY: _____

Diane Brenneman, Clerk