

TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes

January 14, 2014, 7:30 AM

Room 201, Westport Town Hall, Westport, CT

Attendees: Jim Marpe, Catherine Onyemelukwe, Judy Hamer, Brett Aronow, Steve Daniels, Maggie Mudd, Dolores Paoli, Harold Bailey (Presiding), Bernicestine McLeod, and Barbara Butler

Guest: Rev. Alison Patton – Pastor, Saugatuck Congregational Church

The meeting was called to order at 7:35 AM. Catherine moved that the minutes of the December 3, 2013, meeting be approved. Judy seconded the motion. The minutes were approved and will be posted.

New Business

Jim Marpe, First Selectman, joined us for the first part of the meeting.

- Jim recommended that TEAM Westport should connect with ‘Celebrate Westport’. The kick-off meeting was last week where 25-30 groups were represented. This will enable TEAM to promote events and get the word out better. Social media tools are going to be used more in the future to communicate as well as a community calendar.

Action: Catherine will contact Avi Kaner, Second Selectman, re: ‘Celebrate Westport’.

- Jim will distribute a letter to the town this weekend as to why the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday this coming Monday is important and why we celebrate. TEAM Westport will provide him input by Thursday.

Rev. Alison Patton:

- Her congregation has been discussing films. Most recently, Wilton Congregational Church’s Rev. Arnold Thomas and she partnered to discuss *12 Years A Slave*. Twenty discussants attended after seeing the movie. Rev. Patton wants to open up the discussion to others and to do other things. They are now planning with the Library to screen the film *The Amistad* on Sunday, March 2nd. People are invited each year by the United Church of Christ (UCC) to commemorate the events and issues surrounding the Amistad, so this will fit well.
- At Norfield Congregational Church in Weston, Rev. Bernard Wilson is hosting an interfaith MLK event this year on Sunday, January 26th at 3PM. Rev. Wilson has developed a piece that tells the story of slavery, the Underground Railroad, and escape to freedom interlaced with spirituals.
- At Wilton Congregational Church on Sunday, February 16th at 4PM, *The Meeting*, a dramatization of a meeting between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X will be presented.
- Rev. Patton is also planning follow-on book studies along with Rev. Thomas and Rev. Wilson:
 - The New Jim Crow, by Michelle Alexander;
 - Twelve Years a Slave, by Solomon Northrup.
- Rev. Patton stated that the Connecticut office of UCC established a fund during the time Rev. Jeremiah Wright was receiving negative press – the Sacred Conversation on Race Fund – to encourage conversations and projects to dismantle racism.

What is our trajectory? How can TEAM Westport partner?

Harold responded with a description of TEAM Westport, what we have been working on, and how we work.

- We’ve partnered with the Library (lectures, conversations, films – *Eyes on the Prize*, author sessions), the Playhouse (*Raisin in the Sun*, *The Good German*, *Intimate Apparel* – in planning now), and churches.
- We are now sponsoring a diversity essay contest (self-funded) and we sponsored a town event around the Amistad when it was here in Stamford a few years back.
- We used ‘Open Space Technology’ as the format for several community conversations (Is America ready for a black president? and Sonia Sotomayor’s appointment to the Supreme Court). This technique might work for a further discussion of Twelve Years a Slave.
- The events in *12 Years a Slave* and *The Amistad* are within a few years and locales (loosely speaking) of each other and have similar cultural contexts. As for *12 Years a Slave*, It is harder to pull ourselves into the present and see how these events still impact us. The brutality makes it easier to remove ourselves; however, the wagon track is laid and it’s hard to get out. We have inherited patterns that still play out. It’s a 2.5 hour film and does not cover the whole story. A group of people felt free to discuss issues that they had not before. Watching the film in December was depressing since it’s painful to see. The bigger issue with *12 Years A Slave* is that it points a finger at the country and what was permitted to go on. It’s uncomfortable that it happened here and that we did it. Because Mr. Northrup was a freedman, living in NY, there is possibly an increased sense of empathy with his story since he lived a life that Euro-Americans can recognize. The outrage was recognizable so it may help a white audience understand the conditions of slavery more because he was uprooted from his established life versus being ‘imported’ as property.

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Question: Are discussions on race confined to African American issues?

There is no current leadership at the church level to bring people together to reduce Islamophobia. However, there is encouragement of engagement through the Interfaith community to increase understanding about African, Euro, and Latino American communities. The Interfaith Community here is really strong. The town does better with a Christian/Jewish dialog. Since there are only 60 Muslim families in town, it is harder to engage the Muslim community. There was a program where Muslim youth participated in a reading at Thanksgiving. The Saugatuck congregation is open. LGBT folks are welcome. The congregation, though, has not had a proactive conversation about sexual orientation.

What might collaboration mean?

TEAM Westport proposed role:

- 1) We could help get people to the Amistad event and facilitate discussion and conversation.
- 2) It would help to set up a 'revisit' of the Amistad replica this year. We can help arrange this.
- 3) We could participate with the discussion of the book Twelve Years a Slave.
- 4) Other resources that may help us all see the 'tracks' of slavery and racism and hopefully work on laying down different 'tracks':
 - a. Michele Norris, NPR, 'The Race Card Project';
 - b. Edward Jones, The Known World;
 - c. Center of Slavery and Social Justice at Brown University – especially the work on how slavery supported the lifestyle the North depended upon via cotton and the wealth cotton created;
 - d. James Basker, The Gilda Lehrman Institute;
 - e. Baratunde Thurston, How to be Black. This book is being read by a group at the Unitarian Church. Thurston is a comedian with a bite;
 - f. More discussions about inequality and social justice – we just observed the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington last year which, bottom-line, was about jobs. Current nomenclature is the "War on Poverty", but the concerns are the same.

Old Business

Education Committee - Diversity Essay Contest:

- We are on track in promoting the contest. We met with John Dodig at Staples in December and have been distributing and putting up posters around town.
- We still need funds. We have a balance in our account, but will need more to be able to present the prizes.
- It MAY be helpful to publicize the judges for the Essay Contest.
- We talked about the status of the Staples Award that we have been giving out for quite a few years and whether we should continue to give it. The suggestion is to rewrite the criteria for the Staples Award and to make sure people know about it. Make it a prestigious award. Give it only when someone is outstanding, but not necessarily every year.

Programming Strategy and Game Plan:

Westport Country Playhouse – Intimate Apparel Follow-up:

We had a great meeting with the Playhouse in December. The play is multi-themed with a textile industry tie-in. It talks about what NY was and how it was organized racially and religiously and how the communities interfaced. There is a hint of LGBT presented in the play. Women could have relationships with women. Different organizations are already on board. NCC (via David Levinson) has committed that it will be studied at NCC. Stephane Kirven has indicated that Sacred Heart will also participate.

Outreach Committee:

Harold will be presenting to the Rotary at noon today.

Marketing Committee:

- Everyone was asked to review the TEAM Westport website to suggest what needs to be added. Archives with the full write-ups. Please review.
- This year marks the 10th Anniversary of TEAM Westport. We have to decide how to celebrate.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:10AM.

The next meeting will be held Tuesday, February 4, 2014, at 7:30AM in Room 201, Westport Town Hall.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine E. McLeod

Secretary