

Public Witness Team A Brief History

In April 2007 the NT-NL Synod Council adopted a strategic plan that included six goals, each of which were to be pursued by a team of volunteers. Goal C was to “sew disciples by giving public witness to peace and justice.” The charter for the Public Witness Team included three priorities:

- Priority 1: Assist congregations in their efforts to be public church within their communities by developing networks that connect people of similar interests for peace and justice.
- Priority 2: Engage 100% of our congregations in an earnest annual response to the World Hunger Appeal by the end of 2008.
- Priority 3: Focus annually on a selected social issue for our synod’s study and action beginning in 2008.

The Public Witness (PW) team supports the ministry of the Mission Area in its effort to address issues of peace and justice. The team was established as part of the DiscipleLife initiative for Sowing and Growing Disciples of Jesus which began mid-year, 2007. In our earliest discussions we explored many topics that deserve the attention of thoughtful disciples. Some of the most pressing issues related to social suffering and inequities (e.g., the need criminal justice reform, immigration reform, responsible care for the unemployed, homeless and hungry in America) were driven – at least in part – by institutionalized racism. We did not feel at the time that we were adequately equipped to *help ourselves* face such a socially sensitive (and for some, off-putting) topic.

Community Organizing and Leadership Development --December 4, 2007 -- In the earliest discussions of the team, questions were raised about whether the team should help equip congregations to deal with issues of their choice or whether the team should select an (e.g., immigration reform) and provide resources for exploring it. Early in 2008 the team decided to do both. Plans were made to offer a workshop that would equip congregations to address social issues of their choosing utilizing the tools of community organizing (“Vital Congregations – Just Communities”).

Task Groups (early use), World Hunger and Immigration -- January 12, 2008 -- The team decided to establish task groups for promoting the ELCA World Hunger Appeal program and developing strategies for exploring the issues of immigration and environmental stewardship.

February 5, 2008 – The Immigration Task Group of the Public Witness team settled on purpose statement that reads: *“Ours is an educational task that encourages faithfulness to the leadership of Christ, apostles and prophets in weighing the question of how to respond to the immigrant among us. We hope for an outcome that demonstrates the noble character of the church as a caring and inclusive community. This is most likely to happen when the circumstances of the immigrant are personalized in face to face discussions. We hope that this educational process will result in our people being better equipped to articulate their perspectives – whatever they may be – in the public realm.”*

World Hunger Resolution, February 28, 2008 – A resolution on world hunger was presented to the synod assembly and adopted. It set as a goal that of **“increasing the per capita giving of**

the members of our synod to the ELCA World hunger Appeal from \$302 to \$6.00 by December 31, 2009.” A well developed strategy for promoting the World Hunger Appeal was enacted by Tom Petrick, Bernard Kern, and Janet Follsteadt.

World Hunger and Environmental Care, May 17, 2008 – A task group was established to devise a strategy for meeting the requirements of a resolution adopted by the assembly written by Peggy Ogden-Howe calling for the synod to join the Lutheran Earthkeeping Network of Synods. Pr. Howe eventually agreed to lead our environmental care task group.

Further Development of Task Groups: As of the May, 2008 meeting the team had developed task groups: Immigration, World Hunger Appeal, Environmental Care / LENS; “Spread the Spirit’s Fire” and Israeli-Palestinian Awareness / Peace not Walls (Ann Hafiten)

Texas Impact: Participation on the Board of Texas Impact has resulted in direct benefits to the team and synod through access to resource persons who have helped us address various social issues and awareness of state policy issues that are worthy of being addressed. Franz Schemmel has been a leader on the board of Texas Impact for a number of years.

Seminars, workshops and opportunities offered

- **“Vital Congregations—Just Communities”** – November 20-22, 2008 -- This three day event focused on leadership identification and development within the congregation and organizing for the purpose of promoting issues related to justice in the broader community. It was part of an ELCA training initiative (“Leadership Development for Public Engagement”) designed to cultivate the arts and skills of community organizing among clergy and interested lay persons. Most of the funding for the event came from the ELCA. The primary presenters were community organizers Willie Bennett and Steve Sylvester. It was hoped that participants would recognize the benefits of participating in the community organizing efforts of entities such as Allied Churches of Tarrant County or Dallas Area Interfaith.

Presenters included: Bishop Kevin Kanouse; Terry Boggs; Gordon Roesch, Mae Jean Zelle, Willie Bennett, Steve Sylvester

- **Aggregated Energy Purchase** -- The opportunity was offered to eligible congregations to purchase “green” electricity as a group, which would both save money and make use renewable energy.

Peace not Walls

- **“Spread the Spirit’s Fire”** -- January 31, 2009 -- Levelland, TX Janet Follsteadt and Chuck Hubbard shared issues being considered by the Public Witness team and listened to social concerns raised by participants
- **“DiscipleLife University”** – April, 2009, Synod Assembly

Course topics identified and speakers recruited by the Public Witness team: “Good for the Soul-Good for the Whole”, an overview of congregational and community organizing by Terry Boggs; “Your Voice Matter” relating to legislative engagement, Bee Moorhead;

“World Hunger”, Jennifer Barger and Dan Rift; “Muslims/Christians”, Mohamed Elibiary; “Peace not Walls”, Ann Hafften; and “Eco-Justice”, Bee Moorhead.

- **World Hunger Program** -- Emphasis on 100% participation among churches in world hunger program led to increased participation. Pr. Bernard Kern led us in that effort.
- **Ethics of Food** -- March 20, 2010 -- The purpose of the seminar was to explore the consequences of choices made about food production, policy, marketing, selection and use. Of particular concern were the implications and consequences for the poorest among us. Even simple choices made at food markets amount to moral speech on behalf of personal health and the well being of others: “Every scan is a vote!” :

Speakers and strategy: Pastor Ginger Georgulas on theological foundations; Willie and Laura Hunt provided testimonial of the impact food can have on personal health; Marco Grimaldo of Bread for the World on political engagement; segments of the movie “Ethics of Food” were watched and discussed by participants

- **“Lifestyle Stewardship: Hope for a Healthy Future” (Ethics of Food II)** -- September 18, 2010 -- This was a morning conference (3 hours) that focused on lifestyle choices that impact personal health.

The featured speaker was Dr. Ann Georgulas, MD who spoke about the alarming rise in obesity among children and how small, practical changes can have significant effects. An overview of The End of Overeating by Dr. David Kessler was presented by Chuck Hubbard; and portions of the film “Killer at Large” were discussed.

- **“Who Is My Neighbor?” I** -- November 6, 2010 – A one day conference intended *“to equip participants to respond from a faith perspective to current immigration concerns: and to encourage faithful dialog regarding immigration reform.”*

Speakers: Bishop Kevin Kanouse on biblical and theological perspectives; pastors and lay members of synod congregations that have immigrant members; Leslie Velez, attorney with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services; David Molina, professor of economics; Pia M. Orrenius, economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas; Sylvia Danielson, director of La Frontera Ministries International.

- **“Who Is My Neighbor?” II** -- “April 9, 2011 -- A follow-up to the initial conference (November, 2010) with an added emphases on measures being considered by the Texas Legislature and how the church can have a meaningful impact

Speakers: Bishop Kevin Kanouse; Gabriela Dowson, testimonial from the perspective of an immigrant; Eric Sigmon, director of advocacy for Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, Pia M. Orrenius, economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas; Bee Moorhead, director of Texas Impact; Jay Alanis; director of the Lutheran Seminary Program of the Southwest

- **Anti Bullying Programs** -- Developed anti-bullying resources in response to a resolution adopted by the synod assembly and promoted an anti-bullying program for use at Briarwood Camp

- **Listening Event for the Social Statement on Criminal Justice, "Hearing the Cries";** Fall, 2012
- **Trip to Israel / Peace not Walls** -- The team has championed the ELCA approach to dealing with the Israeli – Palestinian issue, "Peace not Walls," seeks to promote mutual understanding between Jews and Palestinians. Ann Hafften has been a strong advocate for this cause. She has taken a number of groups to Israel to meet people and see the conditions first hand. The latest trip was taken in early, 2013.

Task Groups: By late 2012 the Team had used task groups initiate planning for major events and occasionally had three task groups working simultaneously.

- **World Hunger Appeal**– very effective in raising support for World Hunger under leadership of Bernard Kern . . .
- **Environmental Advocacy** – Peggy Ogden Howe and David Buland have provided leadership
- **Immigration Reform Seminar Planning** – Led by Gabriela Clagett
- **Peace not Walls and Trip to Israel** – Led by Ann Hafften
- **University of Samaria Workshops** – Led by Dean Franz Schemmel
- **Confronting Racism** – Led by Doris Harris and Chuck Hubbard
- **Speakers Bureau** – Coordinated by Ginger Georgulas

Racism: Major Focus of Concern, late 2011 -- After the two immigration workshops and with the publication of The New Jim Crow, the team decided to take a direct approach in addressing racism, particularly as it is evidenced in the criminal justice system.

- **The New Jim Crow** – The team read and discussed The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander. The author documents the realities and effects of institutionalized racism and calls for the development of a new consensus intended to dismantle a system that currently creates a permanent social undercaste.
- **Study on Disproportionality in School Discipline** -- A landmark study on school discipline was released: "Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement" (Texas A&M University and the Council of State Governments Justice Center). The study clearly showed that "race was a predictive factor for whether a student would be disciplined (suspended or expelled), particularly for discretionary disciplinary actions" (p. 46). A student who is suspended or expelled is much more likely to be in contact with the criminal justice system.
- **The Center** -- The team became aware of the Center for the Elimination of Disproportionality and Disparities ("the Center"), an agency of the Texas Health and Human Services Commission. At that time Texas had perhaps the most progressive strategy in America for detecting and address in racial inequities in majored systems such as public education, child welfare, and juvenile justice. Two team members became active on the Dallas Advisory Board of The Center.
- **Relationship with the Rev. Joseph Barndt** -- Some team members developed a working relationship with the Pr. Barndt, an author and leader in the anti-racism movement. Pr.

Brandt is one of the resource leaders for the “Undoing Racism” training events offered by The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond. He became an important resource to the team as it engaged in planning for the 2014 Mission Area Assembly. . .

- **Undoing Racism Training** -- At least five members of the Public Witness team have attended a one-day “Undoing Racism” training event (The Peoples’ Institute for Survival and Beyond).
- **Criminal Justice: Death Penalty** -- Members of the team have participated in groups working to abolish the death penalty in Texas; one member is on the board of Texas Impact.
- **Criminal Justice: Prison Culture** -- Pr. Jane Mar, assistant to the bishop, structured a “Table Talk” event for pastors featured the film “The House I Live In”, which exposes the realities of incarceration.
- **“The New Jim Crow in Texas”** – May 14, 2013. King of Glory, Dallas
 - Theological foundation by Bishop Kevin Kanouse;
 - Training in the realities of racial disproportionality and inequities by Ms. Joyce James and specialists from the Center;
 - Panel discussion which included a judge, a theologian from Perkins School of Theology, a lay person who has promoted courageous conversations on race, an educator, the director of the Juvenile Justice Department and a pastor;
 - **Keynote address in the evening by attorney/author Michelle Alexander (*The New Jim Crow*).**

Oddly, the event was well attended by people other than Lutherans including our clergy. This has raised some cause for concern among team members.

- **Institutionalized Racism Workshop** – March 15, 2014 -- Mrs. Joyce James and Ms. Wendy Hill presented a four hour workshop at Bethany Lutheran Church, Dallas, for educators and religious leaders (primarily lay), on “Institutionalized Racism as the Root Cause of Racial Inequities.” It was extremely well received. The same workshop will be presented at the mission area assembly. The event was sponsored by the PW team. (Continuing education credits for professional educators were made available through Region 10 Education Service Center.)
- **2014 Mission Area Assembly Focus on Social Justice** -- The PW team agreed to serve as the 2014 Assembly Planning team. A large number of mini-courses dealing with a broad range of topics related to the witness of the church in public realm will be offered. It was called the “University of Samaria”. Educators who attended were able to earn continuing education credit through the Region 10 Education Service Center. Keynote speakers for Assembly and the University:
 - *The Rev. Dr. Barbara Rossing* , who will help us understand the implications of the biblical call to be witnesses among people identified with Samaria. She will also explore issues related to responsible environmental stewardship.
 - *Mrs. Joyce James*, who will talk about the challenge of changing a culture for the sake of greater equity. She addressed the profound and socially debilitating

nature institutionalized racism and why it must be courageously faced. Mrs. James is a widely known anti-racism consultant. She helped establish and formerly directed the Center for the Elimination of Disproportionality and Disparities (Texas Health and Human Services Commission).

- *Mr. Jose Huerta*, Principal at Garfield High School, Los Angeles, who has changed the culture at his school and is interrupting the infamous “pipeline to prison” in part by dramatically reducing the use of suspensions and expulsions.
 - *The Hon. Charles Stenholm*, former member of the US House of Representatives, who will speak about the citizen’s role in participatory government.
- **Courageous Conversation on Racism** were initiated by two Mission Area congregations: St. John, Dallas, a predominantly black congregation and Gloria Dei, Garland, a predominantly white church. The conversations were the result of encouragement from Mrs. Joyce James, a keynote speaker at the 2014 Mission Area Assembly.

Public Witness Team Retreat, early 2015: The purpose of the retreat was to define our missional foci for two years. The retreat was led by Pr. Deb McCann. Bishop Kanouse was among the participants.

- **Racism:** There was a strong consensus that the team must continue to address institutionalized racism and the injustices that result from it. A significant majority of the team members are committed to this.
- **Environmental Stewardship:** There was consensus around addressing issues related to care for the earth.
- **Anti-poverty Training:** The team affirmed the great potential of the Congregation-Initiated Community-Based Advocacy (CICBA) program that is being implemented by the Southwest Texas Synod (SWTx). The team had been visited by representatives of the SWTx synod late 2014 and had accepted an invitation to participate in training that is being provided to interested congregations there.

Activity since team retreat, 2015-2016

- **Racism**
 - *Remembering Emmett Till:* The team developed a video resource designed to help congregations explore the social implications raised by the movie, “The Untold Story of Emmett Till.” The sixtieth anniversary of Emmett Till’s lynching was August 28, 2015. Emma Rodgers, director of the Dallas Civil Rights Museum, Pr. Chuck Hubbard, and Pr. Doris Harris were the panelists.
 - *Video Promotion:* Criss Forshay conducted a video interview of Pr. Harris and Pr. Hubbard which briefly describes the history and nature of Courageous Conversation on Racism. Hopefully it will be a source of encouragement for churches that would like to do something similar in their communities.
 - *A presentation to the Candidacy Committee and seminary students on addressing social justice issues* from the pulpit and in other church related settings was made December 19, 2015. The discussion also focused on how conversations on racism are structured and managed.

- *Team Conversations on Racism:* The team read and discussed Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates as well as The Cross and the Lynching Tree by James Cone. Thanks to the strong participation of members from St John Lutheran Church, Dallas, a predominantly black congregation, the team book discussions became an experience in constructive dialog on racial issues.
- *Desire to Coach and Encourage:* Members of the team are willing to help congregations that are interested in beginning their own Courageous Conversations on racism. Two training events were offered for pastors and lay leaders who have interest in establishing a relationship between two congregations of different ethnicity or color for the sake of constructive dialog.
- *Resolution Adopted by Assembly:* A resolution calling for anti-racism training and encouraging congregations to engage in conversations on racism was developed by the team and adopted by the 2016 Synod Assembly.
- *Bridges Study groups:* The anti-racism task group led by Pr. Doris Harris hosted a series of discussions on literary works related to race. The study project was named “Bridges,” based on the first book, America’s Original Sin – Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America by Jim Wallis. Participants later read and discussed, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson.
- *Service of Lament:* After the shootings in Dallas in the summer of 2016 and with tension between the cries of “back the blue” and “black lives matter”, the team created and led a synod-wide Service of Lament that was held at Shepherd of Life Lutheran Church, July 9.

Other important activities, 2015-16

- *Anti-poverty Training:* Early 2016 some team members began a “shadowing process” in which they participate in training offered by the Southwest Texas Synod in its Congregation-Initiated Community-Based Advocacy (CICBA) program. Congregations identify themselves as being interested in reducing poverty and addressing systemic issues that undermine the well-being of their community. The approach emphasizes building working relationships with those most directly impacted by an adverse issue or condition such as poverty. Much of the training focuses on fundamentals related to community organizing and the dynamics that help people emerge from poverty. The team members who participated in this process believe it has significant potential for our mission area. Participants included Laura Hunt, Criss Forshay, Carol Otterstad and Pr. Deb McCann.
- *Environmental Care:* The team established a task group led by Pr. Franz Schemmel for the purpose of developing an environmental stewardship seminar. The applied for and received a grant from the Mission Endowment Fund to help underwrite expenses of the presenters.
- *A Texas legislative update* was held May 9, 2016 at Shepherd of Life, Arlington; presenters were from Texas Impact.
- *Women and Justice:* A *Women & Justice Issues listening event* was held July 11, 2016. Information from this and other listening events held church-wide will be used in developing a Social Statement on Women and Justice. Sarah Skinner was the coordinator of this event.

2017 has been a particularly intense year because of the adoption of SB 4 by the Texas State Legislature and because of positions taken by the newly elected US Administration particularly on immigration policy. The team has attempted to be faithful in helping churches address prominent social issues of the day while guided by biblical call “to serve and protect” the good earth (Genesis 2:15), to respect the needs of “the widow, the orphan and the alien among you” (Zechariah 7:10), and to care “for the least of these, my brothers and sisters” (Matthew 25:40).

- **Environmental care seminar at Briarwood, February, 2017, “Creation Care and Climate Change – It’s about the Kids”** Dr. Barbara Rossing of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago provided the theological content. Dr. Mark Jacobson, an atmospheric scientist at Stanford University, addressed why it is possible to convert the U.S. to 100% clean, renewable energy by 2050. Ms. Bee Moorhead, director of Texas Impact, addressed policy issues related to Texas. There were 75 registrants; others joined by live-stream.
- **Resolutions sponsored by the team and adopted by the 2017 Synod Assembly:**
 - A resolution that affirmed the work of various organization that educate the public on environment and serve people who are adversely impacted by environmental degradation; the result ion offered support for science, affirming the reality of human influence in climate change
 - A resolution that affirmed the work of immigrant, asylee, and refugee resettlement organizations
 - A resolution calling for various forms of support, including the possibility of “sanctuary”, for undocumented persons
- **Women and Justice:** Sarah Skinner and Lissy Bethmann led discussions using the study document “Faith, Sexism, Justice: Conversations toward a Social Statement.” Participants were urged to provide feedback to the ELCA task group that is developing the social statement.
- **Addressing racism:** The team hoped to offer an anti-racism training event either late 2016 or early 2017. Planning first focused on a highly regarded curriculum developed by ELCA staff members and WELCA, “Today’s Dream, Tomorrow’s Reality.” That did not come to fruition. It is now anticipated that an “Understanding Racism” training event will be held March, 2018. Two well respected resource leaders, Mrs. Joyce James and the Rev. Joe Barndt are scheduled to lead.

Funding has become a major concern. The Public Witness team does not receive direct financial support from the synod. Two and a half day anti-racism seminars conducted by nationally recognized organizations (e.g, the Peoples Institute for Survival and Beyond) easily cost between \$12,000 - \$16,00. The team anticipates providing a high quality event for \$5,000.- \$6,000. It is currently working on fund raising strategies. It is important to keep in mind that anti-racism or understanding racism seminars should be offered annually.
- **Addressing the plight of immigrants:**

- *Exploring “sanctuary”*: A staff member of Faith in Texas twice addressed the team on the nature of SB #4 and the concepts of “sanctuary” and “sensitive location.”
- *“Know Your Rights”*: The team sponsored two “Know Your Rights” events: Advent, Arlington and First Sagrada Familia, Garland. The events were conducted by immigration attorneys from the law firm Shwamkrug, Freshwater, and Lopez; they are located in Richardson, TX. A return visit to First Sagrada Familia is planned toward the end of this year. Anxiety within the immigrant community, particularly among Latinos, is extremely high. Beyond work and taking care of necessities, members of this population are attempting to limit their public exposure.

The team looks to the future realizing that deep rooted social issues require deep rooted commitment and long range vision. The “isms” of injustice – racism, classism, sexism, . . . – have strong roots in our culture. Perseverance for the long haul is required. Liberation and healing will come as grace filled people of God persist in being publicly engaged.

Rev. Charles Hubbard, chairperson
Public Witness Team

Updated October 12, 2017
File: Pub Wit History Updated Oct 2017

