



Center for Sustainable Justice at Lyndale UCC Annual Report

As a way to further clarify the work of the Center for Sustainable Justice (CSJ), and its role both inside Lyndale and out in the world, we are sharing some of the writing we did for two successful grants: from the UCC New and ReNewing Church Fund and the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation. We hope this helps illuminate further the work of CSJ and inspire us even more.

Mission and Vision and Work of the Center for Sustainable Justice

Lyndale United Church of Christ's Mission Statement:

We are a growing community:
Deepening our curiosity and faith
Embodying God's healing and love
Building a more just world here and now.

Vision of The Center for Sustainable Justice:

The Center for Sustainable Justice is a new ministry, started by Lyndale United Church of Christ in the Spring of 2015. The Center for Sustainable Justice helps build the movement of religious leaders and communities working together on LGBTQ, racial, food and climate justice in the Twin Cities and across the Midwest. We do so rooted in an understanding that movements for justice are strongest and most successful when there is simultaneous work in four areas: 1. setting and sharing the vision of how the world ought be, 2. helping individual organizations work better and creating and tending the “connective tissue” between organizations, 3. mobilizing people for ethical spectacle, direct action and/or campaigns, and 4. cultivating healthy people (bodies, relationships, communities). Our work places particular emphasis on work at the intersections, relationship-building over the long-haul, connecting and building coalitions between people and organizations. This can be illustrated in this way:



The Center for Sustainable Justice emerges out of the reality that much religiously-based justice work is “siloed.” Folks tend to either work in ecumenical and multifaith ways around one justice issue or within one movement (ex. Pro-LGBTQ, environmental justice, racial justice) or they work within their own religious community on one or a variety of justice issues. But there are not many spaces where people are invited together around an ecumenical and/or multifaith vision of justice that includes the dreams of many different people and bodies (in other words, that is intersectional). This is true in the Twin Cities, in the Midwest and nationally.

A word about how solidarity is embodied practically within our vision

The vision of the Center for Sustainable Justice is that it works at the intersections of LGBTQ, racial, climate and food justice in order to build the intersectional, multifaith movement for justice. A central value and operating principle for CSJ is that, as we are working within contexts of Systemic Sin (Empire, Doctrine of Discovery, White Supremacy, etc), we all need to do good analysis of our own social locations and the power we hold. This analysis enables good spiritual reflection for the individual and it enables good strategic decision-making in any given moment about whether one is a member of a targeted community or acting in solidarity. This then informs who takes a leadership role, who takes a “follower” role and how decisions are made about any given action.

This kind of analysis happens for those things which we do inside our community and when we form partnerships outside the congregation. For example, in 2015, Black Lives Matter Minneapolis, the Black Liberation Project and other Black leaders in the Twin Cities led the occupation of the Minneapolis Police Department 4th Precinct headquarters. The Center for Sustainable Justice coordinated Lyndale members in participating in the occupation by bringing food, participating in marches and simply being present over the course of the nearly month-long occupation. However, because this was a Black space, those of us who were white clergy were asked to refer any media to religious leaders of color. In that moment, the Center for Sustainable Justice provided both leadership within the Lyndale Community and “followership” with Black Lives Matter Minneapolis and the Black Liberation Project.

Additionally, The Center for Sustainable Justice has several core values around ministry: 1. As articulated above, power-analysis and social location are taken very seriously in determining roles of leadership, followership, solidarity, 2. We take very seriously the tenet of “no decision about us without us” and seek to operate in ways that take direction from the communities who are targeted on a particular issue or situation-- those targeted communities are both within Lyndale and in the broader community, 3. We explicitly seek out collaborations and alliances with other organizations and traditions.

Specific Center for Sustainable Justice program areas are:

1. Movement Building Convening

Because building a religiously-rooted movement for justice is at the core of our work, we understand that gathering people for the purposes of shared dreaming, storytelling, skills-building, relationship-building, healing, worship and action is critical work. In other words,

we believe that in order to build a successful movement, the intentional gathering of people is necessary. Therefore, we take it as one of our responsibilities to provide an annual gathering of pro-LGBTQ religious people working on justice issues in the Twin Cities and across the Midwest.

In October of 2016, our gathering was entitled *Healing Justice: Building a Religious Movement for Justice*. It was very well-received with 125 people attending and relationships forged which have already resulted in shared work with Two-Spirit people at Standing Rock, with supporting the ongoing work of Sanctuary across the region—particularly that led by pro-LGBTQ immigrant groups, and the deepening of work around embodied justice—particularly helping Welcoming Religious communities to engage support of queer folks of color. The publicity for *Healing Justice* suggested:



We know that justice work is sacred work. And building intersectional movements for justice that take seriously racial, LGBTQ, economic, climate and food justice all at once is critically important.

But we cannot build justice movements that are populated with broken bodies, traumatized bodies, exhausted bodies. We must find a way to heal, build resiliency and practice new habits... personally, communally and as an earth-body.

In 2017, we hosted our second Movement-Building Convening, *Sacred Places, Sacred Stories: A Reclamation Journey into Healing Justice*. Here is how we described it:



As we seek to be spiritually and religiously-rooted people doing the work of justice, it is important to name the realities of what oppression has sought to destroy: our very bodies, the land, our stories. But, too often, we only tell the stories of the death-dealing, the stealing, the destruction and we forget to name and claim the resistance, the healing, the reclamation.

Sacred Places, Sacred Stories: A Reclamation Journey into Healing Justice is an opportunity to both name the context of colonization-- of bodies, land and stories-- that White Supremacy has wrought and tell the stories of successful healing, resilience and resistance.

Planned collaboratively by Black, Native, white, queer, cisgender, straight, Christian, Jewish and traditional activists, artists and storytellers from Black Lives Matter Minneapolis; the Center for Sustainable Justice; Healing Minnesota Stories; the Kaleo Center for Faith, Justice and Social Transformation; and Minnesota Interfaith Power & Light, *Sacred Places, Sacred Stories* promises to be an important opportunity for people from diverse backgrounds who wish to learn more powerfully how to be working in spiritually and religiously-rooted ways to bring about embodied justice.

Join us as we share stories of resilient community organizing in three places around the Twin Cities in response to what white supremacy has stolen: bodies, land, and stories. Each day will include ceremony, listening to stories, actions of service, and an opportunity to process and grow as a group. Together we will find resistance and healing that have emerged and flourished.

Here is just a snapshot of what each day included

October 7th from 12:00 Noon- 6 pm: Reclaiming Our Bodies from White Supremacy in North Minneapolis. Storytellers: Jim Bear Jacobs and Danny Givens

October 8th from 12 Noon- 6 pm: Reclaiming Our Land from White Supremacy at the Gandhi Mahal Urban Farm. Storytellers: Ruhel Islam and Joy Persall with food from Gandhi Mahal.

October 9th from 9 am to 1 pm: Reclaiming Our Stories from White Supremacy at Bde Mka Ska. Storytellers Wakinyan and Thorne LaPointe with water ritual and food from the Sioux Chef.

2. Facilitate and Convene MARCH (Multifaith Anti-Racism, Change and Healing)



The Center for Sustainable Justice is a key member of the Steering Committee of MARCH and Rev. Dr. Rebecca Voelkel serves as facilitator of the MARCH table.

MARCH (Multifaith Anti-Racism, Change and Healing) is a diverse, explicitly pro-LGBTQ coalition that provides spiritual grounding, political education, movement infrastructure, relationship-building and pathways to mobilization for people across varied spiritual traditions, faith traditions, and religious practices, so that we can show up in effective and accountable solidarity with interconnected movements for justice.

MARCH works in the following areas:

Sacred Solidarity Network:

MARCH is in the middle of its second cohort of congregations into what has become a very important network of welcoming, multifaith congregations. The first year included twelve congregations (Jewish, UUA, Christian) who concurrently participated in retreats, trainings and monthly check-in calls hosted by MARCH and led their own education, action and worship programs within their welcoming congregations around racial justice. This year's cohort is eleven congregations and has further explored the question of how congregations can participate in disrupting and dismantling white supremacy in ways that are spiritually grounded in the work of confession, repentance, repair and reconciliation.

Educational Events

Understanding that the work is always a balance of deepening knowledge, inspiring action and rooting spiritual practice, MARCH hosts regular educational opportunities ranging from Sabbath Practice as Radical Witness to Discomfort and Disruption trainings to Relational Organizing.

Mobilization and Direct Action

MARCH understands that mobilizing pro-LGBTQ religious people for action is critical. In the last several years, MARCH has built a mobilization network (using a listserve, Facebook, Twitter and Signal) of congregations and religious leaders who have been present at marches, protests and events ranging from the Two-Spirit camp at Standing Rock to Rev. Dr. William Barber's Revival in the Twin Cities to the Capitol to protest the killing of Philando Castille to planned religious witness during the 2018 Super Bowl.

CommunityWell

MARCH members have begun the work of framing what repair/reparations work might look like and how we might more concretely help support LGBTQ and pro-LGBTQ people of color and indigenous (POCI)-led organizations and transfer resources and money to them. They began mapping the resources of MARCH member communities and the needs of several POCI-led organizations with which MARCH members have relationships.

Multifaith Worship Opportunities

MARCH is first and foremost a multifaith coalition and, as such, seeks to speak and act in religiously-rooted ways in all that it does. Additionally, it provides multifaith worship opportunities on a regular basis, including, most recently, a Week of Spiritual Resistance and Resilience with five worship opportunities from five different traditions and an educational opportunity done in coalition with Auburn Seminary to better equip folks to root their justice work religiously.

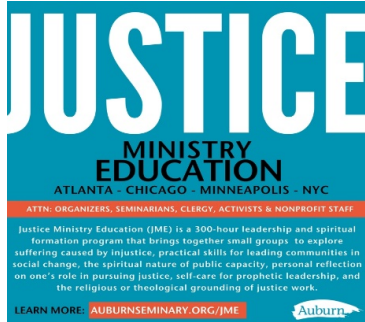
3. Standing Rock and Indigenous Solidarity Work



Beginning in the Spring of 2016, The Center for Sustainable Justice began a partnership with Healing Minnesota Stories, a Native-non-Native collaboration focused on story-telling as a powerful tool to convey the history of Dakota peoples in Minnesota. Emerging from this partnership has been important shared work including:

- The closing water ceremony at the 2016 Healing Justice conference (which several participants referred to as the most important ritual they'd ever experienced);
- Shared planning and facilitation of the 2017 Healing Justice conference;
- Solidarity work in support of the water protectors at Standing Rock. The Center for Sustainable Justice brought religious people to the Oceti Sakowin camp at Standing Rock on three different occasions, each trip lasting several days, in the Fall of 2016;
- Hosting #StandwithStandingRock rallies, protests and meetings with officials in the Twin Cities;
- Participation in the Native Nations Rising Worship Service at the National Cathedral and March on Washington in March of 2017
- Co-hosting the *Good Friday in the Shadow of the Fort: When Empire Betrays B'dote* (Lyndale's 2017 Good Friday service which many have referred to as one of the most powerful services they've ever attended. One participant said, "I understood Good Friday for the first time."

4. Justice Ministry Education project with Auburn Seminary



Justice Ministry Education is a new form of leadership and spiritual formation for people who want to strengthen their approach to faith-rooted social justice work. The program is 300 hours: 150 hours of intensive hands-on work in a field site combined with 150 hours of small group theological reflection and learning. The program is open to leaders of any faith from a variety of professional and educational settings, including organizers, seminary students, clergy, activists and nonprofit staff. Participants who complete the program will be awarded a Certificate of Justice Ministry

Education (1 unit) from Auburn Seminary. The Center for Sustainable Justice hosted the pilot cohort of this program in the Twin Cities with Rev. Dr. Rebecca Voelkel as it supervisor with six participants. (There were also pilot cohorts in New York, Atlanta, Nashville, and Chicago). There will be a second Twin Cities cohort that Rebecca will facilitate in the Fall of 2018.

5. Carnal Knowledge of God: Embodied Love and the Movement for Justice



Drawing on the success of the April of 2016 Sacred Intersections Retreat, co-hosted by The Center for Sustainable Justice, Interplay and The Open and Affirming Coalition of the UCC, the Center for Sustainable Justice is hosting a series of events, trainings and retreats based on *Carnal Knowledge of God: Embodied Love and the Movement for Justice*, the newly released book by our Director.

Strategy and Grounding of the work of the Center for Sustainable Justice

Lyndale UCC started the Center for Sustainable Justice as its pastor of thirty-five years was retiring (Don Portwood) and it was hiring a new, millennial-aged pastor, Rev. Ashley Harness. Starting the Center for Sustainable Justice is one part of our renewal strategy and comes out of our understanding that renewal is a by-product of ministry that is: relevant in a particular context and moment (speaks to concrete justice needs) and is deeply rooted in the witness of the Christian gospel.

One example which affirms this strategy: since our pastoral leadership change, we notice our fastest growing demographics are social justice-minded millennials, young families with children and retiring service-sector and public service professionals. Additionally, since our leadership change and the advent of the Center for Sustainable Justice, we have

gone from a congregation of 85 members to one of 105 members and our worshipping numbers have doubled.

We believe the Center for Sustainable Justice is meeting a particular need in a particular place but we hope to remain open to how long and in what form it might continue.

Unique Role of CSJ

The Center for Sustainable Justice at Lyndale understands itself as deeply connected to a web of faithful and amazing folks in the Twin Cities and beyond: religious communities, organizations, individual leaders, etc. And we believe that “when the tide rises all boats rise.” But even as there is a vibrant existing community, we see a gap in three ways:

1. There really doesn't exist any organization tending to the movement-building task of intentionally connecting organizations to one another. In other words, there doesn't exist a tender of connective/interstitial tissue across the multifaith, intersectional movement for justice in the Twin Cities.
2. Currently, a lot of the secular and religiously-rooted justice work requires the sacrifice of peoples' bodies, relationships and lives. The sense of urgency and transactional relationships is literally killing people. Our frame of healing justice and practicing resiliency offers a different and needed model.
3. Currently, a lot of the religiously-rooted work—particularly around racial and LGBTQ justice—utilizes a Reconciliation frame. Our work draws upon the work of theologian Jennifer Harvey and shifts the focus of our justice work to a Confession-Repentance- Repair-Reconciliation frame when talking about systemic oppression such as white supremacy, Doctrine of Discovery and Heterosexism.

Addressing both the Source and Symptoms in our work

As articulated above, the Center for Sustainable Justice at Lyndale is deeply rooted in the spiritual and religious practices of Christianity and we draw heavily upon the theological traditions of liberation, feminist/womanist/mujerista and queer theology. These roots call us to take seriously both the individual practice of justice and the transformation of interlocking, systemic sin: Empire, White Supremacy, Heterosexism, Cisgenderism, Capitalism, Ableism, etc. which leads to the building of a Just World.

We understand that supporting individuals and communities in doing deep, individual work and in dismantling interlocking, systemic sin and building a Just World are all ways to address the sources of injustice. Specifically, we utilize several different praxis areas in this work. Among them are: encounter—providing opportunities for genuine and just relationship-building and self-examination; education—rooting any work in good analysis, strategic thinking and deep wisdom and expertise; advocacy—working within existing systems to bring about more just policy; organizing—building power both inside and outside of systems to bring to bear on questions of justice. And all of this is done within the frame of building a movement whose vision and root is that of the gospel of justice and love.

Ancestors, Mentors and Forebears

We understand that the story of the gospel is a story of movement-building that began two thousand years ago. Part of being a faithful people is that we re-Incarnate this from generation to generation. Given this, we take very seriously the image of Hebrews 11 and 12—that we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses—freedom fighters, indigenous activists, people of many religious traditions, and folks who have sought to “queer” the systems around them so as to create more bodacious justice and more extravagant love. These are our ancestors.

We also look to those who, in times of crisis, oppression and temptation, have chosen the path of leveraging their privilege and power in the service of solidarity. These are our mentors.

We also look to the artists, the lovers and creative types who have refused to sacrifice beauty, bodies and ethical pleasure either in the face of Empire or to the pressures of unimaginative activists. These are our forebears.

Risk-taking for the Sake of Justice

Jennifer Harvey’s model of Confession-Repentance- Repair- Reconciliation (from *Dear White Christians*) is at the center of our work—individually and communally. We understand that we are living in a particular historical moment in which the forces of Empire, White Supremacy, Christian Supremacy, Homo-, Bi-, Trans-hating, Misogyny, Ableism are revealing themselves in potent and particular ways. As an organization that emerges from a congregation whose social location and identity comes from places and histories of power, much of our work is in the areas of confession, repentance and repair. To do this work, we are risking generations of our church’s resources in order to be responsive to this moment.

Additionally, we have chosen strategies that have put our bodies between the forces of power (police, immigration officials, etc.) and targeted communities. And we have made and continue to discern when we are willing to face arrest in the service of the work.

Speaking Truth to Power

We take direct action seriously and see it as a mandate of the gospel. We see it as what Jesus modeled when he took up the cross and what he calls us to do in remembrance of him. Some of the most powerful work we’ve engaged has been direct action.

We also marked this Good Friday in collaboration with Healing Minnesota Stories, a Native-Non-Native partnership. The service took place at B’dote, the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers which Dakota people consider the site of creation. It is also the site of Fort Snelling which housed a concentration camp of Dakota grandmothers, mothers and children during the winter of 1862-1863 (while 38 Dakota men were hung in Mankato, MN during the largest mass execution on US soil which happened Dec. 26, 1862). At that site, we held a service entitled *Good Friday in the Shadow of the Fort: When Empire Betrays B’dote*. It was a powerful experience of confession, repentance and the beginning of repair.

We also understand that there are multiple models of transforming systems which also include advocacy, organizing and work within the system which are needed in conjunction with direct action.

Our Staff

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Voelkel

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Voelkel is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and currently serves as the Director of the Center for Sustainable Justice. Previously, she served as the MountainTop Movement Building Consultant at Auburn Seminary, as Interim Executive Director for PFund Foundation, as Faith Work Director for the National LGBTQ Task Force, as Interim National Coordinator for the United Church of Christ Coalition for LGBT Concerns, as pastor of Spirit of the Lakes United Church of Christ and as Program Staff for the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence.

She is the author of *Carnal Knowledge of God: Embodied Love and the Movement for Justice* (Fortress Press, 2017) and of *To Do Justice: A Study of Welcoming Congregations, A Time to Build Up: Analysis of the No on Proposition 8 Campaign and Its Implications for Future Pro-LGBTQIA Religious Organizing, Preventing Sexual Abuse: A Course of Study for Teenagers* (Pilgrim Press, 1996) as well as numerous articles and sermons.

Voelkel is a theologian, pastor, trainer, and movement-builder who specializes in coalition and collaborative partnerships across movements for justice. She is a graduate of Earlham College, Yale Divinity School and United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. She can be found at www.RevDr.RebeccaMMVoelkel.com.

Rev. Ashley Harness

Rev. Ashley Harness is a United Church of Christ minister and a communications strategist with over a decade of experience in non-profit media work. Currently Harness is pastor at Lyndale United of Church of Christ. She provides confidential training and counsel to religious leaders seeking to use social and traditional media as a pulpit through Auburn Theological Seminary's digital organizing and media teams. She is a graduate of Brown University and Union Theological Seminary in New York City.