



# Interwoven Congregations<sup>®</sup> Quarterly

Helping faith communities be agents for racial justice and healing.

Issue 9: October 2023

## From the Editor

Welcome to **Part II** in our series of *Doing* Racial Justice! In [Part I](#), we considered the role that the apology may play in pursuing justice. In Part II, we profile three approaches where people of faith are rolling up their sleeves and working to impact systemic racism. Each of these efforts highlights the importance of education and relationship building, but then go further to seek to disrupt the systems that continue to drive racial inequity in America today. We are grateful to all who shared in the interviews and hope these examples help equip and inspire other congregations for *doing* justice!

*-Pat Jackson*

## In this Issue

The Calloway UMC and Rock Spring UCC partnership.....	2
The Series at-a-glance.....	15
The Reimagining America Project .....	16
Topeka JUMP.....	18
The Interwoven Pilgrimage & supporting our work .....	28

[www.interwovencongregations.org](http://www.interwovencongregations.org)

Part II in a series:

# Congregations *Doing* Racial Justice

*A look at three approaches*



Rock Spring  
CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

*Let all we do be done in love.*

**Three approaches.** We do a deep dive with Calloway UMC and Rock Spring UCC in Arlington, VA to trace how they use in-depth education and Racial Equity Action Groups to press for racial justice. In shorter features, we highlight how the Reimagining Project in Charlotte harnesses public hearings as levers for change, and Topeka JUMP applies the DART organizing model to advance racial justice in the heartland.



The Reimagining America Project



**TOPEKA  
JUSTICE  
UNITY &  
MINISTRY  
PROJECT**

# Courageous Conversations & Racial Equity Action Groups

*The Calloway & Rock Spring approach to Racial Justice*



P. 3

## The Pastors



Rev. Kathy Dwyer  
Rock Spring UCC



Rev. Dr. DeLishia Davis  
Calloway UMC

P. 6

## The Planning Leaders



Christine Purka  
Calloway UMC



Leslie Atkins  
Rock Spring UCC

We had the rich opportunity to interview the pastors, planning leaders, and Racial Equity Action Group (“REAG”) leaders from Calloway United Methodist Church (C) and Rock Spring United Church of Christ (RS) in Arlington, VA, along with four community partners, for this issue of Interwoven Congregations Quarterly. We want to thank Rev. Davis, Rev. Dwyer and all the participants for sharing a real picture of congregations doing justice — the successes and challenges alike. We hope that this profile will encourage and guide other congregations in their own efforts to dismantle systemic racism. Special thanks to Interwoven Congregations Board member Roxane Rucker whose outreach to Calloway and Rock Spring made this in-depth feature possible. The interviews were conducted and edited for publication by Pat Jackson.

P. 8

## The Racial Equity Action Group Leaders



Bernard Carpenter (C)



Marty Swaim (RS)

Education REAG



Sandra Green (C)  
Criminal Justice REAG



Gerri Ratliff (RS)



Michael Jones (C)  
Housing REAG

P. 10 & 12

## Community Partners



Michael Hemminger  
President  
Arlington County NAACP



Parisa Dehghani-Tafti  
Commonwealth Attorney  
Arlington County



Monique Brown-Bryant  
Interim Executive Director  
Challenging Racism



Margarite Gooden  
Panel Speaker on the  
Halls Hill Community

## The Pastors

**Rev. Pat Jackson, Interwoven Congregations Quarterly (ICQ):** Rev. DeLishia Davis and Rev. Kathy Dwyer, thank you, and all your congregational members and community partners, for sharing in these conversations about the racial justice partnership between your congregations. How did you personally come to this work of antiracism? And how did you find each other?

**Rev. Dr. DeLishia Davis:**

I think Kathy and I were destined to meet each other and for our congregations to be joined together at this time. Long before we arrived at our congregations, there is history of our congregations meeting together 60 years ago, 42 years ago, and about 11 years ago for racial justice and reconciliation. Kathy and I did not set out to look each other up; there were people in our congregations working behind the scenes who brought this to us.

**Rev. Kathy Dwyer:** I went back and checked Rock Spring's history book which talks about 1963, the march on Washington and the movement for desegregation. That year our two congregations worked together to hold an integrated vacation bible school that attracted 150 kids. I think that memory inspired our congregations to come back together, because members of both of our congregations were seeking to do more than educate about racism, but come together for some kind of action. DeLishia is right -- we had people from both congre-



*Rev. Kathy Dwyer and Rev. Dr. DeLishia Davis.*

gations setting up this partnership, telling DeLishia "You need to call Kathy" and "Kathy, call DeLishia. We want you to meet so we can take a next step."

**ICQ:** That speaks to the power of champions in a congregation!

**Kathy:** Yes! But you asked about how we personally came to the work. I grew up in a home that talked about the importance of civil rights, equity and inclusion and people of privilege using their voice to help lift other voices and make changes. So it's always been in me. But in 2014, with the murder of Michael

Brown, I remember standing in my kitchen just weeping, and that really activated in me a desire to do something. And so in 2014 our congregation began an intensive learning process to understand history that wasn't taught in schools and our own white privilege and biases. We kept going deeper, culminating in a course I led with Profes-

sor Beverley Mitchell from Wesley Seminary called *Challenging White Supremacy*. But there was a burning desire to move beyond education to some kind of action, and Calloway was a natural partner.

**DeLishia:** I'm part of a clergy family so I grew up thinking that speaking about injustice was the norm. In 1991 in Baltimore County, a young man, Roy Mason, was driving his parents' car and was stopped by the police. He was reaching into the glove compartment to take out the paperwork, and he was shot. That event put a righteous determination within me to speak out, to unite and educate people and stand together. So if you see an African-American male



pulled over by the police, stop your car and just be a presence there. If I see that happening, no matter what's going on, if I'm late to church, I will stop and wait because it's a way of showing people that they're not by themselves. I have a tremendous respect for the police department, but we can all fall into stereotypes and make assumptions. Today I look at my responsibility as pastor as being not simply for members of Calloway Church, but for the entire community. So when social injustice happens, regardless of where, I feel called to speak up about it.

**ICQ:** What would you say is the significance of a black congregation and a white congregation coming together in partnership for racial justice?

**DeLishia:** I think we have a bond in understanding that we are all created equal. Also, I think it was important from the African-American community side to see that there are other cultures that are willing to sit down to learn, to embrace, and to grow together, because all of us have cultural biases.

**Kathy:** I serve a congregation that loves to learn and for me there is a big difference between learning from reading and learning from experience. We can read about implicit bias and stereotypes. But I think



*The Zoom interview with Rev. Dwyer, Rev. Davis and Rev. Pat Jackson*

bringing difference around a table together is one of the basic keys that will bring healing to community – being in conversation not just for one night but again and again and then elevating that learning model to an action model.

**DeLishia:** I think one of the key parts of what we did during the initial Courageous Conversations was to create a safe space where people could say “I've experienced racism,” or “I have implicit bias or white privilege and I didn't realize it.” We were able to

share openly, without judgment, and be heard.

**ICQ:** If the Courageous Conversations education program was the first step in your renewed partnership, then a second step was forming these “Racial Equity Action Groups” to get at systemic racism. How did you get from Courageous Conversations to the Action Groups?

**DeLishia:** During our Courageous Conversations we lifted up particular topics – education, housing, etc. Towards the end of that, there were signups for people who wanted to continue the conversation. Those groups decided the direction they're going in. They brought in guest speakers to talk to them about current affairs in Arlington and they made decisions about where they're going to take action.

**Kathy:** The initial conversations with our steering committee for the Courageous Conversations emphasized that we don't want this just to be “What is racism, what is white privilege, what's the history?”

We wanted to focus on issues that we can understand and have an impact on. So there was some brainstorming and four action groups emerged on criminal justice, housing, education and environmental justice.

**ICQ:** What do you see as the specific role for you as pastors in this partnership?

**Kathy:** The gift of a faith community is that we get to practice -- we get to practice agape love and forgiveness. So I think part of our job is to provide ongoing vision and encouragement for practicing love boldly, practicing using our voice to speak truth to power. The more we practice, the more powerful and effective we'll be.

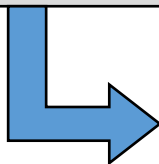
*(continues on p. 21)*

# The Calloway & Rock Spring Program At-a-Glance



## 1. 6-Month Overview: *Courageous Conversations for our Community*

Date	Topics	Speakers
1 26 Jan 2021	<b>Program Launch RockSpring &amp; Calloway:</b> Our Shared Past, Present, and Future	Hosts Rev. Kathy Dwyer and Rev. DeLishia Davis Special Guest JD Spain, President Arlington NAACP
2 23 Feb 2021	<b>Criminal Justice in Arlington</b> Issues such as Restorative Justice.	Commonwealth Attorney Parisa Dehghani-Tafti Kimiko Lighty, Coordinator Restorative Arlington
3 23 Mar 2021	<b>Equitable Education in Arlington</b> Issues such as School Segregation, Achievement Gaps, and Inequity.	Sherrice Kerns, NAACP Education Committee Co-Chair & Black Parents of Arlington Arron Gregory, Chief Diversity Equity Inclusion Officer, Arlington Public Schools
4 27 Apr 2021	<b>Housing in Arlington</b> Issues such as Residential Segregation, Affordability, and Gentrification.	Michael Hemminger, Arlington Housing Commission, VP Arlington NAACP Kathleen McSweeney, former Chair Arlington Housing Commission, current Chair Joint Facilities Advisory Commission
5 25 May 2021	<b>Special Walking Tour / Virtual Field Trip</b> Historically Black Neighborhood Halls Hills	Host Wilma Jones, Historian & Panel of Past & Present Halls Hill Residents
6 22 Jun 2021	<b>Culminating Event</b> Next Steps to Action	Special Guest Speaker Dr. Susan Smith Moving Forward & Taking Action



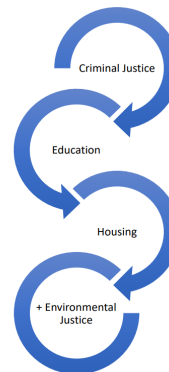
## Moving into Action

### 2. Courageous Conversations Quarterly



- Open to new participants
- Racial Equity through Faith-based Lens
- New topics, guest speakers, community concerns
- Relationships thru Small Group Breakouts
- Updates from 3 Racial Equity Action Groups
- Newsletter, updates to *Resources Grow & Connect*

### 3. Racial Equity Action Groups



- Invitation to go deeper
- Individual + collective actions
- Align with partner orgs of color
- Group-led structure w/conveners
- Open to all issues & concerns
- Collectively select priorities
- All participants welcome; both passive and active
- Share updates & resources to CC

## The Planning Leaders

**ICQ:** Leslie and Christine, could you share how you came to be involved in the project for racial justice between Calloway UMC and Rock Spring UCC?



**Leslie Atkins:** I've been a member of Rock Spring UCC for five years. I first got involved in issues of racial equity through Arlington's Challenging Racism program. Until then, I had no real understanding of structural racism. To understand for the first time in my late fifties that the government played a huge role in the racism that we see today in housing made me want to be involved in changing things.



**Christine Purka:** I've been with Calloway for five years now. The impetus for these racial justice conversations came during Covid, when we were starving for connection and struggling with racial equity issues. I was at an interfaith event and started chatting with someone from Rock Spring. They spoke about the work they were doing in racial equity and I had the idea of bringing the two churches together. I'm very mindful that you can't just match up a white church and a black church. You need a white church that has been doing the work and understands systemic racism. They're not learning about their whiteness for the first time. And Rock Spring had done their education, but they wanted to move into action. So we built this Courageous Conversations program to move people from education to action, to come together and dive into the criminal justice, housing and education inequities in Arlington.

**ICQ:** How did you decide to focus the initial Courageous Conversation program on those three areas?

**Christine:** The NAACP of Arlington was a real anchor for us. Our pastor, Rev. Davis, is the chair of their

Religious Affairs Committee and Calloway is a member. So we knew that the NAACP has their own committees on housing, education and criminal justice, which got us to focus on those three topics initially. When we moved into the second phase of our work, participants said "What about environmental justice?"

**Leslie:** An important thing we had to do at Rock Spring as a white congregation was take the lead from the black community. During the Courageous Conversations program, the chair of the NAACP was in my small group and he was very firm in saying, "The most important thing you can do, once you've done this learning, is to come out and help us advocate for these issues."

**ICQ:** How did you run the six month Courageous Conversations program?

**Christine:** Leslie and I had a fantastic Planning Committee from both churches, including both pastors, and we met regularly to support each of the six monthly sessions. We were very disciplined in having pre-work. We would send articles, podcasts or videos on the systemic nature of the session's topic. Then, when they came to the program, we always had a panel of local experts like the Commonwealth Attorney Parisa Dehghani-Tafti for criminal justice or Michael Hemminger of the NAACP for housing. Small breakout discussions [8 groups with 10 per group] followed the panels. We tried to make the small groups as diverse as possible and keep them together throughout the six-month program. Each group had two leads, one person of color and one white person, one from each church. We'd conclude each session with a bigger share.

**Leslie:** We had slots for 100 people to join on Zoom, 50 from Rock Spring and 50 from Calloway. Because Calloway's congregation is smaller, they opened it up to NAACP participants and the neighborhood around the church. We always had 80 participants or more.

**ICQ:** How did you decide what to do next after the six months of Courageous Conversations?

**Leslie:** People didn't want this to be the end. And it's a huge step to move from education to action. So we came up with these "Racial Equity Action Groups (REAGs)." It naturally flowed to pick what we had discussed in our sessions: criminal justice, education and housing. Let's start with that. We felt it was important that these be self-led groups. We wanted to set up the structure and see how things could evolve.

**Christine:** We did a participant survey to ask people which of the topics had the most resonance for them and whether they would be interested in taking this forward in an action group and leading those groups.

**ICQ:** So the Action Groups formed. How did the people in those groups decide what steps to take?

**Leslie:** We trusted that the people involved would find their way. A lot of them started with more education to help hone in on an issue. So the action groups developed very organically.

**ICQ:** What do you see as the most significant accomplishments and challenges thus far for the REAGs?

**Christine:** After our Courageous Conversations, Temple Rodef Shalom came to us and said they wanted to do a program across Arlington, Fairfax and Alexandria, VA. They used a lot of our format and speakers – so I love that we inspired that to happen through the Jewish community. I also am proud of the work that the REAGs are doing. As an example, members of the criminal justice group are attending sentencing on Friday in court to help make sure judges are treating people fairly. As for challenges, I think it's just hard to keep it going.

**Leslie:** Another impact that we've seen is that all of the Racial Equity Action Groups have access now to leaders in the community. If they ask for a meeting with the chief equity officer in the schools, the chief equity officer meets with them. We had people, including myself, who had never testified at a county council meeting, testify on why zoning for housing needed to be changed to deal with systemic racism. I had the information and was able to amplify concerns in the community. White people need to say the truth that they see. I think part of the challenge is expanding our leadership and continuing the work with the limited time that people have. We want to embed this work in the congregations so that it continues even if the pastors move on to new positions in their denominations.

**ICQ:** What keeps you going?

**Leslie:** For me it's helping create a better world for my children. I want to be an example to them and others in my congregation so that they go out and continue this work. We have to take what we've learned and do something to make that difference.

**Christine:** Racial inequities are deeply embedded in all of our systems and institutions, so it has to be intentional work to undo it. We just can't look away. We can make progress one conversation at a time, changing hearts and minds. But there is the white privilege of being able to go to sleep at night and not live it every day. It's harder work for people of color who commit their life to this, who live it in their day job, in their personal lives and through their children. Engaging people in these conversations, particularly through our faith communities, is that common ground where we can all share in these conversations and turn to action. □

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*“Racial inequities are deeply embedded in all of our systems and institutions, so it has to be intentional work to undo it.”*

— Christine Purka

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# Racial Equity Action Team Leaders

**Saundra Green:** My family has been a part of Calloway for over a 100 years and my great-great grandmother was one of the earliest persons buried in the cemetery. I was born in Washington, D.C. because in 1946 the Arlington hospitals were segregated. I was among the first students to integrate the Arlington schools, so I've seen Arlington transition over the years.



**Bernard Carpenter:** I was raised in Halls Hill, a segregated community in Arlington County. In 1965 my mom had to go into Washington D.C. to have me even though we lived a block away from Arlington Hospital. Calloway UMC was the church my family went to up at the top of the hill.



## Criminal Justice

Saundra & Gerri

## Education

Bernard & Marty

**Gerri Ratliff:** I moved to Arlington after college and I've been here for 40 years, and a member of Rock Spring UCC for six years.



**ICQ:** What does this partnership between the churches mean to you?

**Saundra:** For me, it's a re-igniting of a relationship because I remember when Rock Springs and Calloway had a relationship before and my mother being very involved. I hope that this reignited relationship will help us garner a greater understanding and respect for each other's perspective on racism -- because I've learned from our partnership more clearly why people may think the way they think. It's led for me to be less opinionated until I really get to know you.

*(continues from p. 9)*

**Marty Swaim:** I moved here in 1978 and taught in Arlington public schools for 20 years. After I retired, I got involved in conversations on race at Rock Spring where I found a welcoming community and people who didn't think I was crazy.



**ICQ:** Bernard, how did you get involved in the anti-racism efforts at Calloway and the education Racial Equity Action Group?

**Bernard:** When I heard about the Courageous Conversation with Rock Spring and Calloway, I thought that was amazing because we have to have a conversation. You can't walk around thinking everything is fine and it's not. I joined the education

*(continues on p. 22)*

**Michael Jones:** We have a family of seven brothers and sisters, and we all grew up in Hall's Hill in Arlington, which was racially segregated back in the day. My sister wrote a book about it (*My Family and Halls Hill*). I went to an all-black elementary school. When I reached the age of 12, myself and three other students integrated Stratford Junior High in 1959.



## Housing

Michael

**ICQ:** How did you feel going that first day to that school? Were you terrified? Or was it just another day?

**Michael:** I was one of 30 students who applied to integrate the segregated schools *(continues on p. 26)*



*(Saundra & Gerri, Criminal Justice REAG, cont. from p. 8)*

**Gerri:** Although I'm a white person in a county that thinks of itself as progressive, I still live in a mostly white neighborhood and attend a mostly white church. And so I value the opportunity to develop relationships with folks from Calloway and learn through their life experiences and perspectives, including how systemic racism and our white-centric society affects them. For me, a way to tackle white supremacy is by following the lead of people of color and groups led by people of color.

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*"We have to be more patient because criminal justice has a lot of pieces to it. But I think we are moving in the right direction." — Saundra Green*

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**ICQ:** Can you describe the work you're doing through the criminal justice REAG?

**Saundra:** We have at least 12 people registered in our group and we generally meet monthly. Individually, we've done research on what is of interest to us to introduce to the group. I've done a lot of work over the years with an individual on the board of the Northern Virginia Juvenile Center. So I invited him to the group to talk about the Juvenile Center, what they did there, who was housed there and why. I've heard that a lot of black students are the students that go through the court system and are referred to the detention center. Is that true or not? He came and gave us a wonderful presentation and then their executive director invited our group to come tour the facility and have a direct dialogue with her. We'll go through with that and then talk about how we might have more involvement.

**Gerri:** We don't require consensus from everyone in our group to take action. If one or two people want to support a particular project, great! For example,

we learned about a new court watch program from our local Public Defender when he met with our group. Volunteers sit in court proceedings and take notes on the judges' demeanor and decisions. Are some judges seemingly meting out harsher sentences against certain kinds of defendants? I've volunteered with the organization several times. Another group member, who's very interested in the school-to-prison pipeline, knew the Arlington Public School DEI (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion) director and invited him to speak to us. The Education REAG also joined that meeting. When we asked the DEI Director what we could do to support his work, he invited us to serve on an informal community council. So we've now had three or four meetings with that office and hope it will lead to concrete action to increase equity in the Arlington schools.

**ICQ:** How do you feel about your progress and impact so far?

**Saundra:** I was hoping that we could get a lot of action going to address some criminal justice issues in the county, but it's been slower than I thought. We have to be more patient because criminal justice has a lot of pieces to it, but I think we are moving in a good direction.

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*"For me, a way to tackle white supremacy is by following the lead of people of color and groups led by people of color."*

*— Gerri Ratliff*

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**Gerri:** I was hoping we would come up with specific actions that would move the needle for racial equity in the criminal justice system. It's easy to support one-time actions like backpack drives for returning offenders. But if you are looking for actions that will

*(continues on p. 24)*

## Community Partners

**ICQ:** How did you get involved with racial justice?

**Michael Hemminger (President, Arlington County NAACP):** I got connected to this work of racial justice from my own life experience. I grew up in California and was in and out of 12 different foster homes. I lived under bridges, in homeless shelters and in the back of a U-Haul truck at one point. So I grew up in circumstances that some people would say might predict a different life outcome for me. But throughout my life, strong mentors and people of faith have surrounded me and told me “You’re going to make a difference in this world, you’re going to be someone someday.” So I grew up believing that. My personal experiences led me to want to do my part and give back to people who look like me and might be in similar living conditions. I’ve been in Arlington since 2017 and signed up to do things that help me fulfill my purpose; and the NAACP is one of those avenues. I am six months into the role as branch president.

**ICQ:** What are you most passionate about in your role with the NAACP?

**Michael:** Criminal justice is my top passion and mass incarceration is the greatest civil rights injustice of our time. When you look at root causes, you learn that there are things at the systemic level causing

*(Continued on p. 11)*

**ICQ:** What potential do you see for congregations like Calloway and Rock Spring to help make the criminal justice system more just?

**Parisa Dehghani-Tafti (Commonwealth Attorney for Arlington County):** I applaud Rock Spring and Calloway for having their Courageous Conversations. To go in depth with stakeholders in the system is a huge step in the right direction. I was so grateful that when they asked me to be a presenter I asked if I could also be a participant, because I thought it would give me an opportunity not just to contribute but to learn.

**ICQ:** What did you cover during your presentation in the Courageous Conversations series?

**Parisa:** I talked about the disparities we have in our criminal justice system; restorative justice; how we are approaching reform; and why it's better to not ask for cash bail and create a safer community.

**ICQ:** What would you identify today as the chief challenges around racial equity in the criminal justice system for Arlington County?

**Parisa:** When I ran for office, a simple marijuana possession was the most frequently occurring charge in the county and it had

*(Continued on p. 13)*



*(Michael Hemminger, continued from p. 10)*

these outcomes -- housing insecurity, food insecurity and inequity in education, employment and health care. These other systems are working together to produce a predicted outcome. So I feel compelled to do my part.

**ICQ:** How did you first connect with this project between Calloway and Rock Spring?

**Michael:** Pastor DeLishia Davis of Calloway UMC leads the Arlington NAACP's Religious Affairs committee and is also president of the Arlington Black Clergy Association. She called me and said "You really need to check this out." So I joined the Courageous Conversations and was really inspired by the work that was happening. I could see in real-time the lights turning on and I could see people connecting things and feeling empowered to make a difference.

**ICQ:** I understand you were a panelist for the session on affordable housing.

**Michael:** Yes, I helped unpack some of the racial history here in Arlington. I think a lot of people are surprised to learn that there are deed restrictions that exist even today that say things like "black people shall never be allowed to own here." They didn't understand that in 1938, when black people were only permitted to live in rowhouses, Arlington County took explicit action to ban rowhouses and made those types of housing nonconforming so that the people that lived in them couldn't update them. People were also surprised to learn that the American Nazi Party was also founded right here in Arlington, or that Arlington used to be 40% black and now it's only nine percent black.

**ICQ:** The Calloway and Rock Spring partnership is about helping people move from education to action to impact systemic racism. What would you say to congregations that are trying to do that?

**Michael:** It's a million dollar question. But we have to do something because these systems were designed that when we do nothing at all, they're going to con-

tinue to produce disparate impacts on historically under-represented or disadvantaged communities. The topics are very heavy, but we have to have enough courage to say, "Hey, I'm going to do even one small thing to make a difference." What ends up happening, unfortunately, is two things. One, as I said, is that these systems end up running on autopilot because we don't have personal awareness. But then when we do the book clubs and conversations, and we're trained to be more aware of what racism looks like, when we see it, the fight or flight kicks in. A lot of times we might say, "Oh, I know this is wrong, but I don't have the courage to speak up." Dr. King spoke about this in his [Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#) when he talked about how the white moderate actually causes more harm than the racist people who are out there on the front lines. At the NAACP, we could say the same thing a 1,000 times as loud as we can, and then one person that has that relationship with the person who has the key to that door can have a very casual conversation, and that door is immediately unlocked. So it's up to all of us to use that privilege for the advancement of other people. So to answer your question: find one thing that you're going to commit to do to make a difference. It could be big or small, and if we all did that, I really think we would see progress.

**ICQ:** How does this partnership between Calloway UMC and Rock Spring United Church of Christ look to you from your seat in the community?

**Michael:** I love it. It reminds me of the history of the NAACP which was actually founded by both black and white people who were willing to be on the front lines for change. To have people of faith who are white say I'm willing to use my position and privilege in order to help our common cause and then black folks bring the real lived experience of what it's like to deal with racism and the toll that it takes on your entire wellbeing on a daily basis -- I think there's nothing that can stop that type of partnership, and I'm inspired by the change that can happen. □

## Community Partners

**ICQ:** Monique, Calloway and Rock Spring reached out to you to serve as the emcee for their six month Courageous Conversations program. What was that experience like?

**Monique Brown—Bryant (Challenging Racism):**



Serving as the emcee for the six-month Courageous Conversations program was a profoundly enriching experience for me. It was a genuine gift to witness not only the growth of others but also my own personal and spiritual development throughout the program.

The opportunity allowed me to witness the power of dialogue and community in fostering growth, understanding, and a shared commitment to challenging racism.

**ICQ:** What do you think is the significance of the Calloway and Rock Spring partnership?

**Monique:** I believe the significance of the Calloway and Rock Spring partnership lies in its potential to inspire faith communities not only in their region but across the nation. By opening hearts and fostering compassionate conversations, they serve as a model that can be replicated in other communities, amplifying the impact of their work and benefiting individuals and the broader community.

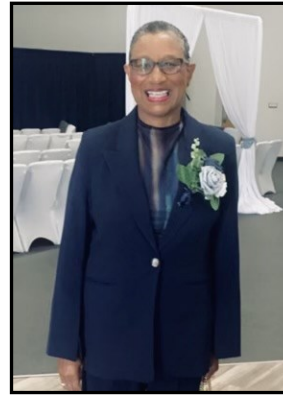
**ICQ:** What do you see as the impact and challenge for this program?

**Monique:** The program's impact is far-reaching, as it inspires people to take the principles and conversation home and to work, creating a ripple effect in the broader community and influencing even future generations. The challenge, that's a tough one.

*(Continued on p. 26)*

**ICQ:** Marguarite, you served as a panelist during Courageous Conversations on the historic Halls Hill community in Arlington. What is your background and what should people know about Halls Hill?

**Margarite Gooden:** I am a native of the Halls Hill



community. My great grandparents came as a result of the freed slaves being offered land from the plantation that was owned by Basil Hall. My parents had a house built on the land that my grandfather owned and I still own that house today. My

dad happened to be one of the first paid black firefighters at Station Eight here which was the first station below the Mason-Dixon line to pay black firefighters. Halls Hill has very strong roots in the historic revolution of integration in Arlington as our county was the first county to integrate a school in Virginia and some of those students were from Calloway.

**ICQ:** Why did you get involved with the Courageous Congregations project between Calloway and Rock Spring?

**Margarite:** After my retirement as a teacher and then a principal of an alternative high school in Arlington, I got involved with Courageous Conversations because conversations, especially among Christians, need to start happening. There was quite a division between North Arlington, Rock Spring, and our community. Over the decades, it seemed that never the twain were intertwined.

**ICQ:** It's interesting you say that because some might think Northern Virginia is super progressive, a place where racial justice has been achieved.

*(Continued on p. 14)*



*(Parisa Dehghani-Tafti continued from p. 10)*

extraordinary racial disparities attached to it. 57% of the defendants were people of color even though they're only 9% of county residents. In 2020, when I came into office, I had a study done by independent researchers of the charging decisions in 2017— 2018. They learned that if you were black, you were charged at a 50% higher rate of seriousness when you controlled for all other factors than if you were white. If you are black or Hispanic, you are more likely to get convicted, get a carceral sentence and more likely to have a longer period of probation than if you were white or Asian. So, we've adopted policies that address that, such as not asking for cash bail so poverty is not criminalized. People are less likely to get convicted or incarcerated and have lower recidivism rates if they're released quickly, as opposed to languishing in jail for months before resolution of the case.

**ICQ:** Where can congregations help?

**Parisa:** I really want to change the pretrial system to what probation was supposed to be when it was first envisioned. I've seen cases where somebody has done something seriously wrong but they get out on pre-trial and they have the support systems that they need to stop using drugs, to finish a GED, to start taking community college courses or getting into apprenticeships -- and they end up being rehabilitated so that we don't have to continue prosecuting them. But the vast majority of the people in our criminal legal system are indigent and don't have any capital or social capital. I would love to see faith communities give attention to pretrial ministries. If somebody has a business, take the risk to hire some-

body, take them out to dinner, build a relationship with them, help them get a mentor so they can get the support systems that they need to pull themselves out of their situation. Then I also think faith communities are an incredibly natural place for restorative justice to flourish, like the [Metropolitan Christian Council of Philadelphia's Restorative City's initiative](#) for restorative justice.

**ICQ:** Can you describe a restorative justice program?

**Parisa:** The retributive system asks what law was broken, who broke it and how do we punish them? The restorative system asks who is harmed, what do they need to heal and who is re-

sponsible for that healing? In the restorative process there is a facilitator who communicates with both parties, an acceptance of responsibility, and an acknowledgment of harm. There's a focus on what is needed for the healing of the victim, but also holding the individual who did the harm accountable. At the end of the restorative processes you see victims reporting upwards of 90% satisfaction rates with the process, and a reduction in recidivism. We have a system right now where if you're in prison for a number of years for stealing a car and you come out, you have an 80% nationwide recidivism rate. This system is a failure, so let's try something else.

**ICQ:** Are there any faith communities involved in restorative justice in Arlington?

**Parisa:** I know that [Restorative Arlington's](#) executive director has been involved in Courageous Conversations with Rock Spring and Calloway and other communities like Arlington Presbyterian Church.

**ICQ:** What opportunities do you see for the criminal justice Racial Equity Action Group from Calloway and

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*"I would love to see faith communities give attention to pre-trial ministries. If somebody has a business, take the risk to hire somebody, take them out to dinner, build a relationship with them."*

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— Parisa Dehghani-Tafti

Rock Spring to help in addressing systemic racism?

**Parisa:** There will be more opportunities the more we talk. Can people help those who are out on pre-trial build social capital? Can people volunteer with Restorative Arlington and learn how to facilitate cases?

**ICQ:** I understand some folks with the criminal justice REAG participate in a “court watch” program.

**Parisa:** Yes! That's very important. The idea is to have people in court observing what's going on -- like one circuit court judge who actually put somebody in jail because they couldn't afford to pay \$600 of restitution -- and then act to get the word out. People can also engage those who hold the purse strings and stand behind the people who are trying to reform the criminal justice system.

**ICQ:** What does that look like?

**Parisa:** That means putting pressure on the county board members by writing to them, calling them, and saying this is a priority for our community. There are criminal justice reformers who have had recall campaigns against them and a lot of us have felt like the communities that were excited about the work kind of went home. They still care about it, but the pressure wasn't kept up on the people who hold the purse strings to get the resources we need.

**ICQ:** What other advice might you offer our readers who want to try to impact systemic racism in the criminal justice arena but aren't sure how?

**Parisa:** My office, in partnership with many stakeholders, had the first pre-expungement clinic in the history of Arlington. We had it because the clerk of court agreed to be there to do the paperwork filing. We had it because defense attorneys agreed to be there on a pro-bono basis. We had it because Arlington Presbyterian Church gave us their space for an entire Saturday. We had it because the Coalition of Black Clergy got the word out. We had it because Arlington for Justice agreed to pay for people's filing fees. That's what partnerships can create. □

*(Margarite Gooden, continued from p. 12)*

**Margarite:** It would seem that way. With Courageous Conversations, I think a lot of folks at Rock Spring, for the first time, heard that that perception was not shared with many of the black and brown folks who lived in Halls Hill. Our neighborhood has changed. Halls Hill used to be a 100% black, I think we might be maybe 15% black today. What happened is that land here in Arlington is very expensive and as the elder people passed on, it became a real lucrative place for developers who came in and made offers. But my grandfather said, “Keep the land. Too much blood has been spilled to get this land.” I'm the oldest of 22 grandchildren and only two of us still live here. I so appreciated the Courageous Conversation with Rock Spring and Calloway because we need our communities to join together. If our kids are going to have a righteous and just place to live, we have to do something to counteract the ugly rhetoric and belief systems that are happening today that divide us.

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*“Arlington is very expensive...  
but my grandfather said  
‘Keep the land. Too much blood  
has been spilled to get this land.’”*

*— Margarite Gooden*

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**ICQ:** What's the significance to you of the Calloway and Rock Spring congregations coming together to promote racial justice?

**Margarite:** The more intertwined we are, the more power and significance our voices have for the entire community, in the criminal justice system and in the school system. The Rock Spring community is still very white so they have much less of an oppor-

*(Continued on p. 25)*

The Interwoven Congregations' Series:

# *Doing* Racial Justice

**Part I (June 2023):**

## The APOLOGY

**Nine interviews.** Nine views on whether an apology is needed for racial justice and healing or just a waste of time. And if apologies do matter, what makes for a good apology and what pitfalls should we avoid?

**Part II (Oct. 2023):**

## Congregations *Doing* Justice

We highlight the work of two congregations in Northern Virginia (Calloway UMC & Rock Spring UCC) and the Reimagining America Project in Charlotte, NC to see the steps people of faith are taking to impact systemic racism today.

**Part III (Jan. 2024):**

## REPARATIONS

Several interviewees from Part I (plus new voices!) help us examine whether or not reparations for African Americans can be a path to racial justice and healing. What's the case for and against reparations? And how are they happening TODAY, in the civic sphere and thru faith communities?

**Part IV (April 2024):**

## What does racial justice look like for **NATIVE AMERICANS?**

Mark Charles and other Native American leaders speak about the state of Native communities today and what racial justice and healing might look like for indigenous people.

**We need your support!** If this kind of in-depth engagement of issues and resources to promote racial justice and healing is important to you, please contribute to the [Fall Campaign for Interwoven Congregations!](#) Thank you for helping to make this work possible and grow!



## Two Other Approaches to *Doing* Racial Justice

**ICQ:** What is the origin of the Reimagining America Project (“RAP”)? How did it come to be?

**Mayor Jennifer Roberts (Co-founder):** The day that



George Floyd was murdered was the tipping point and people just took to the streets in Charlotte. I ended up on Beatties Ford Road which is the center of a part of our black community here and people were just outraged. I look across the street and there's Rodney. We started walking together down Beatties Ford Road, talking about how this keeps happening. There's a flash point. We get outraged. And then things go back to the way they were. So Rodney called some friends of his, I called friends of mine and we got together on Zoom (because of Covid). We started asking how do we remove this awful division of race in our communities? How do we heal? How do we see that justice is served, that equity is embraced by all? We recognize that this racist perspective is in the water, it's in the air, it's not any one person or one organization, it's what we breathe every day. How do we get past that?

**Rev. Dr. Rodney Sadler (Co-founder):** I remember



very clearly running into Jennifer that night on the street. She was standing there trying to figure out what was going on amidst the chaos. There was no clear leadership, there was a lot of anger and frustration, and there were many people with weapons. So Jennifer and I started talking. How do we transform the systems that are perpetuating this? We need to not just change people, but to change the systems that are in place to make sure that we have a just, equitable and fair society. So we began to come together around two principles. Number one was the



**The Reimagining America Project**

principle of Beloved Community that Dr. King talked about, where people who come from different backgrounds, different ideologies, could come together and see each other as sisters and brothers. Another principle is that none of us is guilty of creating the system in which we live. But, that being said, we are all responsible to do something about it.

**ICQ:** What is the mission of RAP today and how does it aim to promote racial justice and equity in the United States?

**Claude Forehand (Executive Director):** RAP's mis-



sion is to call out the realities of racialized oppression and then to reimagine something different. We employ three strategies. First, through a series of public hearings, we advocate by bringing awareness to systemic racist structure through **historical witnesses** (people who can provide data of how this racism has existed); **impacted witnesses** (people who have experienced the inequity); and then **confessing witnesses** (people who confess that they've been a part of this system of oppression and are open to reimagining it). Secondly, RAP is committed to developing curricula that other organizations can use to identify the systemic nature of racism and how it engages the structures of our society. And



third, we invite different, perhaps opposing, voices around a subject of racial inequity to “bridge the gap” and start to re-imagine systems in a different light. We base all this work through five committees that focus on education, environmental justice, healthcare, voting rights and criminal justice.

**Jennifer:** One of the ways that we have started to spread awareness is by inviting some elected officials into the conversations and hearings. So we've had judges, a state senator, school board members, county commissioners. We saw some results when we had a hearing on housing that showed how most of the unhoused are people of color. We helped bring those voices forward which led to action. One of the things I know as an elected official is that story-telling is so impactful. RAP has dozens of videos on the [RAP YouTube page](#) that capture those stories and can continue to be used.

**ICQ:** How does RAP enable people of faith to impact systemic racism?

**Rodney:** We started off as a movement of faith leaders, so there's an inherent faith dimension to the work we do. But we intentionally were not trying to limit our efforts to Christians, we wanted to be a broad-based table where everyone could find a seat. But I hope that what we're doing can find expression in congregational life. I'd love to see faith communities as confessing communities, I'd love to see faith communities that want to listen to other stories and develop relationships across racial lines.

**Cindy Adcock (Criminal Justice Committee Chair):**



I had left my employment, teaching law, because I wanted to get back to my social justice roots— I was a death penalty defense lawyer. I attended an event at a local church on truth and reconciliation efforts. and met Rodney, who invited me to participate in RAP. RAP welcomes persons, whether they are persons of

faith or not. But for me, our religious roots are important. We begin all meetings with an ecumenical prayer, which keeps us mission-focused. It's where I can be a bridge to my church (Myers Park Baptist), which is very interested being anti-racist. We're also hoping to connect more congregations of faith through our five committees and sponsored events. We need to acknowledge how racism is not something that's in the past or just a little part of our society, a “few bad apples.” It is pervasive. At least for me, as a follower of Jesus, we have to pursue justice for all.

**ICQ:** “Reimagining America” is a big mandate. What does Reimagining America mean to you?

**Claude:** I initially thought this title was outrageously too broad. Reimagining America? Ending racism? But here is the reason I embrace it whole heartedly: I may not physically experience that, and I'm a young man, but that's the beauty of the title. It's a vision, an idea that lives beyond me.

**Cindy:** Ninety percent of the people who are sitting in our jail right now in Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, are African-American men. There is something structurally wrong here. Therefore, we have to reimagine and rebuild our justice system. I want to be part of something that's big like that. I want to be part of something like reimagining America.

**Rodney:** One of things that I hope people get from the Reimagining America Project is: don't wait for a savior who going to come fix things. Don't wait for the next president, or the next governor. Get started where you are right now, with whomever you have. Gather together and begin to do the work. We are the saviors we've been waiting for. Let us get started doing the work now and seeing the change that can come. We don't have to be perfect. Do what you can with what you have and let's see if we can start a wave across the country that grows. ☐

## Two Other Approaches to *Doing* Racial Justice

**ICQ:** How and why did [Topeka Jump](#) get started?

**Anton Ahrens (Topeka JUMP and Trinity Presbyterian Church):** I was here 10 years ago when the first



organizer from [DART](#) (Direct Action and Resource Training Center), Shanae' Calhoun, came to Topeka. She had meetings with clergy and lay people in faith communities around Shawnee county and found that there was interest in doing justice through the DART process. Then we had a planning meeting where we looked at the call to do biblical justice with people from 10 or 11 faith communities. Now we've grown to about 28 churches.

**ICQ:** What's DART's approach?

**Jason Maymon (Topeka JUMP):** DART's approach is



to bring congregations of various faiths in a community together to identify what community problems need to be addressed. Those problems are identified through stories we collect from members of the community. After problems are

identified, the community votes on what issue they want to focus on. Then they'll conduct research with policymakers and community partners to identify the best viable solution. They then present that solution to the appropriate decision maker in what we call Nehemiah Action Assemblies, which are big assemblies with a large chunk of the population of the community. So listen for problems, research the problem, organize to prompt action, and then follow-up.

**ICQ:** What were the problems lifted up in Topeka?

**Anton:** Most every year for the past ten years we've lifted up a new campaign from that listening process. Our first campaign was to ask the public schools to



make sure kids had access to services like food after school and on weekends and materials for schools. There were about 750 people in attendance at our Nehemiah meeting to watch that exchange with the superintendent of schools here in Topeka. We've also had campaigns to increase the stock of affordable housing, support mental health, anti-violence, and a transportation campaign to help people get to living wage jobs by providing door-to-door service from home to work and back for a minimal charge.

**ICQ:** How did that campaign work out?

**Anton:** The Joint Economic Development Organization of Shawnee County and Topeka receives \$5 million annually to give incentives to big employers. And we said: "Can we have a little slice of that pie? We could finance this transportation program with \$100,000 a year." That was approved and over the course of three years people took 45,000 rides to work or back home, door to door, for \$5 one way. But then the county said "We don't have money in our budget next year for this pilot" and it was cancelled. These are the ups and downs in this work. But since then, the city has stood up a new program that's very much like our ride-to-work program where in a segment of southeast Topeka you can ride anywhere, door-to-door, for two bucks. I think Topeka JUMP's action moved this community to reimagine what transportation can be. I doubt otherwise whether that would have happened.

A Nehemiah Assembly in Topeka, KS



**ICQ:** That's impressive. I'm struck that every year there's an opportunity to identify a new issue. Do you set aside the project from the previous year or is there follow-up?

**Jason:** Once we pick up a campaign, even if we vote on a new one the next year, we don't drop one until we get what we're looking for. For example, we've been working on that affordable housing campaign for eight years.

**ICQ:** How can congregations engage with DART to become an affiliate like Topeka JUMP?

**Jason:** A group of clergy can invite DART's national staff to come and assist them in building an organization, and that assistance usually comes with grants. People can go on the [DART website](#) and email our executive director, John Aeschbury. The only restriction is that DART tries to not plant an affiliate where there's already another interfaith organization doing this kind of work.

**ICQ:** What's the structure of Topeka JUMP? And Jason, are you a Topeka JUMP or a DART employee?

**Jason:** I'm an organizer with Topeka JUMP and DART is the national affiliate that we rely on for training. There are three organizers working for Topeka JUMP today.

**Anton:** I'm one of the two co-chairs of Topeka JUMP. Then every participating faith community has a number of leaders whose job is to recruit what we

call "network members" who agree to bring at least three other people to the Nehemiah meeting. That's key because that's what builds our people power, having a lot of people listening when we ask the public official to take an action on one of our campaigns.

**ICQ:** What's the budget for Topeka Jump this year and what are your fund sources?

**Anton:** It's about \$250,000. About 35% comes from congregations, 25% from companies, and the remainder comes from grants. We didn't have nearly the budget when we started up with one organizer.

**ICQ:** How many congregational members take part in the DART training?

**Anton:** I think we've gotten about 100 congregational leaders over the years to go to at least one training. I've been to seven myself. The trainings cover how to do investment meetings with companies when we ask for support, and research meetings with public officials where we're seeking their agreement to come to the Nehemiah Assembly. Then we're trained on how you negotiate with the public officials during the Nehemiah Assembly. One Topeka JUMP leader is on the stage with the public official, asking the question: "Will you provide a program to get people more housing in Topeka by putting money into the affordable housing trust fund?" You just stop and let them answer and then you negotiate. Dart provides training to do that in front of thousands of people which, as you can imagine, is kind of stressful.



**ICQ:** That sounds intimidating.

**Anton:** I've done it twice. It is intimidating, but it's also freeing because even though you're just an individual on the stage asking the question, you've got these masses of people in front of you who the public official also feels, which makes a difference in how they respond.

**ICQ:** Have you ever had a Nehemiah Assembly where the public official says, "I'll get back to you on that."

**Anton:** Of course! We call them "the Ds" -- Divert, Delay. So during the Nehemiah Assembly, we acknowledge the official's response and then bridge back to our ask, while trying to engage that public official's self-interest. "Don't you think that housing in Topeka is in a critical state and we need more?" Let them decide if they're going to answer that, yes or no. It's not rocket science, but it's very effective.

**ICQ:** So some years the official on stage says "Yes, I'll do it" and other years they don't make a commitment. Is that a failure, or a time for follow up?

**Anton:** It's all in the follow-up. *Even if they say yes, that yes might not be yes!* So we have to be clear about what they've said yes for. Our housing campaign is the best example. In 2015, we asked the official on stage, "Will you start an affordable housing trust fund for Topeka?" And they said "Yes." But then it took two years just to get an ordinance written so the city could create an account. That was 2018. And here we are in 2023, and they have only put \$500,000 in that fund when their own housing study concluded that they need \$50 million to make a dent in our housing shortage. We continue to have conversations back and forth. For me it's a

good illustration of the peaks and valleys because you get that "yes" and you think "Oh great," but then you do the work — and that takes a while.

**ICQ:** What have been the biggest accomplishments and challenges for Topeka JUMP?

**Anton:** We've provided justice for Topeka / Shawnee County. We haven't had victories where we got everything we wanted, but we've moved the dial. People know about these issues and that there are people ready to act on them. That's huge. And then we have developed community across racial and other barriers which is fantastic.

**Jason:** I'm amazed by the relationships that have been built. Having such a diverse group of people with different beliefs and backgrounds coming together because they're united around making their

community better is amazing. Then I think the biggest challenge, particularly for our longer campaigns, is to make sure that people don't lose hope. But we just have to remember that justice takes a lot longer than most of us would like.

But I think it's important to

keep going because I think God calls us to do this work and God's going to continue it after we're gone.

**Anton:** I've talked with many people who were in tears when we've not been successful. But I also remember Micah 6:8, which is, to paraphrase, "do justice now." That's the point. It's not your responsibility to complete the task, but it is your responsibility to make sure it continues. Topeka JUMP has given me the opportunity to live out my faith in doing justice in a way that I never would have been able to through any single faith community; and that's been a really great gift to me. □



*Organizing for Affordable Housing in Topeka*



*(The Pastors, continued from p. 4)*

**DeLishia:** I think the involvement of our members allows us to shift to providing spiritual support, undergirding the work that's being done. That includes preaching, teaching, bible studies, the Pastor's Word in our newsletter which all revolve around us being courageous and working for social justice. We have people who asked us "What does this anti-racism have to do with the Bible, with who we are as believers?" It's a special time when a congregation actually wants to grow more in a particular area, and it pushes you as a pastoral leader to study more, to know more, to encourage more. We have to be very careful that we are hearing from God, so that we are able to share and direct people in the path God wants us to be on.

**ICQ:** What do you think is the significance of your personal relationship, DeLishia and Kathy, for the broader partnership?

**DeLishia:** I think the bond and friendship that Kathy and I have is essential because it has helped us to be able to work together. And our team was able to move forward because they knew we were going to be in agreement, that there was unity.

**Kathy:** When you're doing work that takes people out of their comfort zone, I don't think it will go forward without that relationship of pastors and the support of pastors. I strongly feel that learning, change and growth happens through relationship. Then there is how this goes beyond our congregations. When either of us are engaged in the community, we can text one another, find different resources, and come together with one voice. I think that's added richness and breadth, and made us

stronger because we have one another.

**ICQ:** Lest our readers think you're in racial justice Nirvana, can you speak about the challenges that you have encountered as you've sought to take action against systemic racism with your congregations?

**Kathy:** This has gone more smoothly than anticipated. I wouldn't call it racial justice Nirvana, but we really have come together well. We had trainings for facilitators from each congregation so that they felt confident wading into these waters. It took time and intention to help set that up. In the initial Courageous Conversations, each program dealt with a different community issue. I think there was angst and frustration that, "Yes, we're talking about racial justice and housing, education, and criminal justice, *but how do we have more action and impact?*" Out of that process came the Racial Equity Action Groups, and those are



*Rev. Davis and Dwyer concluding a joint worship service.*

much more organic. As with any organizational structure, the challenge is communicating, getting people all on the same page, figuring out together the best action steps and keeping the momentum going.

**DeLishia:** I think the work that the Racial Equity Action Groups are doing continues to motivate others. This has not been Nirvana, though. When we started this work there were several questions of me, "Why is that important in Arlington?" So there was a little pushback initially, because not everyone sees the value in that. But we'll see it in the long run and that's what's happening in our community. We're all in this together to make our future a lot better — for ourselves as well as our children and generations to come. □

*(Marty & Bernard, Education REAG, cont. from p. 8)*

group because I just retired and I'm getting ready to be a math teacher in the public-school system.

**Marty:** This idea about public schools that it's really difficult to overcome achievement or opportunity gaps between African American kids and other kids of color and white kids drives me crazy. From my perspective as a teacher, that's nonsense.

**ICQ:** Why do you say that?

**Marty:** Because it's not rocket science to teach kids to read. It's a skill and I respect the teachers who do a good job of it. But we have a school system in which maybe 45% of the kids of color on sixth and seventh grade tests are way below grade level and it's just irresponsible. The reason is because they're not reading on grade level at grade three and then by the seventh and eighth grade kids start talking about dropping out. I feel that if you could pick one leverage point in systemic racism that would make a huge difference, it would be education. If you can persuade members of the school board to invest in the areas of pre-K and three-year old education, you have a possibility of really changing the community. Of course you're talking money, but this is a rich community.

**ICQ:** What does the education Racial Equity Action Group do? What are its goals?

**Bernard:** We started meeting right after the 6 month Courageous Conversation series to decide what our goals and mission were going to be. Goal #1 is to ensure that students are at reading level by grade three. Goal #2 is ensuring that children hear or experience *all* of history. Children deserve to understand what this country actually was developed on.

**Marty:** We wrote a letter to the school board with our mission statement and arguments for what they should pay attention to in their budget. We started talking to people in the school system and the lady who runs the early childhood department said, "Don't focus on four-year olds. We have resources for four year olds, but we have almost nothing for three-year olds. So focus on that." So we put together an analysis and testimony about things in the budget that would improve early childhood services through grade three. We met with two schoolboard members this past year and other school system people.

**ICQ:** Do you think you've been able to impact things, or are you still finding your legs?

**Marty:** We work with 5 or 6 people on our REAG and we're finding our legs. I do feel that cultivating relationships with school board members has the potential to be very productive, even though we lost the chairman of the school board with

whom we talked last year when he didn't run again. I feel like one of the biggest productive investments of time is talking to people in the school system at the middle management level, like the early childhood person.

**Bernard:** We're still learning where to prioritize our time and effort. I agree with Marty, we can go to the school board and advocate for what is needed in the middle management areas. We met with the director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion for Arlington Schools, Dr. Ottley, but he has left. There's going to be transition in people, but the office staff knows us and what we're doing and how to reach out and advocate for us and ask us to advocate for them.

**Marty:** That's true. When Dr. Ottley set up a new diversity, equity and inclusion advisory group group, we

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*“Goal #1 is to ensure that students are reading by grade 3. Goal #2 is ensuring children hear or experience all of history.”*

*— Bernard Carpenter*

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were the beginning people in the group. Some of the members of the criminal justice Racial Equity Action Group have gotten involved too.

**ICQ:** Was that DEI advisory group something that Dr. Ottley had in the works, or did your outreach play a role in its creation?

**Bernard:** I think it was a brainchild of a meeting we had at Calloway with Dr. Ottley where we discussed the possibility of a community advisory group. Based on that conversation, Dr. Ottley birthed the group.

**ICQ:** So you engage the school district at multiple levels. Do you use other strategies to advance your goals?

**Marty:** We'll talk to the NAACP about their goals and see if we can support them. They have a tutoring program that some of us have supported financially.

**Bernard:** We are still young as a group, we're passionate, and we're still learning to prioritize and to find opportunities to advocate.

**ICQ:** So this takes time. I think it's helpful for other congregations to hear that.

**Bernard:** Don't give up!

**Marty:** Yes!

**ICQ:** What are your challenges and encouraging signs in your work to impact systemic racism in education?

**Marty:** I think our practice of sharing our goals with school board members laid a good foundation so that those in the system understand that we represent people very committed to educating everybody by third grade. You just have to take the long view. You have to get your oar in the budget cycle one year and keep going back and back and back. And if you're

lucky, you get two or three people on the school board who can really push it along. I think our biggest challenge is our lack of time.

**Bernard:** I see the challenge as keeping the ball rolling. The good things that I've seen are the relationships that we've built with the people in early childhood education and the DEI office -- relationships not just with one person but with a staff. Those relationships are just going to grow.

**ICQ:** Can you speak about the significance of your own relationship between the two of you?

**Bernard:** I think that's huge. Marty and I just clicked.

**Marty:** And vice versa! I mean from the first time we met over lunch, we've had a good time.

**Bernard:** (laughter)

**Marty:** I think that's a really important part of organizing. If you're going to be in this for 5-10 years, you've got to have a good time along the way.

**ICQ:** How do you keep the whole Racial Equity Action Group together for the long haul?

**Bernard:** Respect and let everybody's voice be heard. Understand that Rome wasn't built in a day; systemic racism wasn't created in a day. So it's not going to take just a day to break it apart.

**Marty:** You don't need a lot of people. We would be glad to have another six people, but dance with the people who come. I do think the experience of doing the testimony and writing letters was very affirming and empowering. "Yeah, we can do this."

**ICQ:** What advice would you have for congregations who want to take a swing at systemic racism but just aren't sure how to go about it?

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*"One of the most important things if you're interested in education is to not be intimidated...there are people doing a really good job of this. So if your school district isn't, hold them accountable."*

— Marty Swain

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*(Saundra & Gerri, Criminal Justice REAG cont. from p. 9)*

effectively tackle systemic issues, those are harder to identify and work on as a small group of volunteers. So we look at existing groups, especially groups led by people of color, to see what they are doing that we can support. I also wanted to develop relationships with people who also are committed to racial justice so that when there's a need for community action, you know who to call and you already trust each other. So we keep educating ourselves and meeting relevant local officials so when an opportunity for systemic reform comes up, we'll be ready!

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*“Every day, when I look at the news, I am reminded of the importance of us having this group...of doing something.*

*So start. Just start.*

*... It doesn't always have to be big to be effective. ”*

*— Saundra Green*

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**Pat:** What advice would you have for other congregations that want to work to address systemic change in the criminal justice system?

**Gerri:** I would add that local leaders are usually very generous with their time. Congregations that are starting out might think, “Oh I hate to bother them, they're so busy.” But we've had success in getting these local leaders to come talk to us. I would also advise congregations to be patient. It's hard for volunteer groups to work for systemic change on their own. Find an organization that's already working on an issue you'd like to be involved in and support it. Even providing financial support to those organizations makes a real difference. I guess I have a very

*(continues on p. 25)*

*(Marty & Bernard, Education REAG cont. from p. 23)*

**Bernard:** First thing, if you see an opportunity to participate -- participate. Don't be afraid, jump into it. You're not going to find out if you don't try.

**Marty:** I feel like one of the most important things if you're interested in education is to not be intimidated. The skills involved in running a really good school system exist and there are people doing a really good job of this. So if your school district isn't, hold them accountable. Just show up and talk about it -- because the kids who aren't succeeding in third grade in reading are not different from the other kids who are succeeding. I'm sorry, they aren't. So don't be intimidated by the bureaucracy or by people who say how complex education is. I would recommend that anybody who is thinking about working on education in public schools reads [“Whatever it Takes.”](#) It's about the Harlem children's zone and the young man who takes the children from birth when their parents are raising them through third grade and gets them all passing the New York state regents tests. The book demonstrates what's possible.

**ICQ:** Final question. To what degree does your own faith and participation in your congregation sustain your personal commitment to anti-racism?

**Bernard:** As a black man growing up in a segregated Arlington County, I had nothing but faith to hold onto. This is not a society that was going to help me. My faith is what brought me through all of what I've gone through in my life, and so I stand here today, giving honor to God and my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If it wasn't for them, I'd be dead and gone somewhere.

**Marty:** I don't talk about faith in the same way that Bernard does, but I do feel very strongly that the underlying assumption of the Christian faith is that all things work together for good. That gives me support. □



*(Saundra & Gerri, Criminal Justice REAG, cont. from p. 24)*

simple theology about this work. Like Jesus said: love your neighbor. That's it, do it. And finding ways to apply that on the systemic level is just as important to me as on the individual level.

**Saundra:** Every day, when I look at the news, I am reminded of the importance of us having this group. Even though it may not happen in Arlington, it could happen in Arlington. It reminds me of the importance of doing something. So start. Just start. While it

may seem overwhelming in the beginning, you need to go ahead and start. And realize that it doesn't

always have to be big to be effective. So be okay now with small steps and small successes. But do something.

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*“For your readers who are white, a diverse group like this is an opportunity to learn more about just how deeply embedded white supremacy is in everything... I think we need to be open to... follow the lead of the folks who've been impacted by these issues.”*

— Gerri Ratliff

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**Gerri:** I would add, for your readers who are white, a diverse group like this is an opportunity to learn more about just how deeply embedded white supremacy is in everything, including setting agendas and running meetings. Our tendency is to take over and think we know the right way to do things. I think we need to be open to learn, to be sensitive to those dynamics, and follow the lead of the folks who've been impacted

by these issues. I don't think you can emphasize that enough. □

*(Margarite Gooden, continued from p. 14)*

tunity to interact with people of color. The Rock Spring church recognized that and so they reached out. I'm sure there have been some relationships that have developed that maybe never would have had they not deliberately done that.

**ICQ:** What do you hope comes out of this partnership between Calloway and Rock Spring and these various Racial Equity Action Groups?

**Margarite:** I hope that we have more genuine, interactive relationships between the two communities. Eventually, white people in my neighborhood choosing to go to Calloway for worship service and then that black people will choose to live in the Rock Spring neighborhood. I also hope that the two groups stay together to really push for real racial justice throughout the county. I would like to see our school system really grapple with how they are treating black and brown kids across the board. I

really hate that they put out this data saying that there's a racial achievement gap. That always makes me cringe, because messages like that foster the idea that whites are our plum line. I wish we would say that we are going to teach every kid and have them reach their potential. In terms of criminal justice, my whole thing is equitable judicial consequences. I think we're a long way from it and after July we'll have no black judges. Our justice system has to reflect our community.

**ICQ:** Would you have any advice for the reader, someone who's in a congregation, who would like their congregation to do something to DO racial justice?

**Margarite:** You know the Bible says: do not despise small beginnings. Start with having a conversation and sharing with your friends and from that something will evolve. □

*(Michael, Housing REAG, cont. from p. 8)*

in Arlington County. A year before that time we went through a series of trainings on what to expect if we were picked. Two churches in the neighborhood, Mount Salvation Baptist Church and Calloway United Methodist Church, helped in this training. I'd say we were pretty well-versed in what to expect. I wasn't terrified on the first day, but I was kind of apprehensive.

**ICQ:** And how were you received?

**Michael:** Overall it went smoothly. That first day we had national news on us. So there were police officers and reporters all over the place. Throughout the year we had some incidents, name-calling, but no one was hurt.

**ICQ:** How did you get involved in the racial justice project between Calloway and Rock Spring?

**Michael:** I've been a member at Calloway since the 1980s. I joined the Courageous Conversations in early 2021 and then they asked who would want to be in a Racial Equity Action Group. I elected housing.

**ICQ:** How did the work of the housing REAG unfold?

**Michael:** Elizabeth Howard from Rock Spring worked with me as a co-chair. We came in at a good time because people in Arlington were already working on the "Missing Middle" project, which recently passed the county board. When I grew up, Arlington was segregated and now the community has changed overall because it's has opened up and we have a lot of McMansions. And Amazon is coming in, so that's going to raise the cost of housing more. The Missing Middle project aims to change zoning to help affor-

able housing because Arlington had these rules where- by you couldn't have townhouses or duplexes in particular areas, restrictions just like back in the era of segregated housing. There's been some opposition.

**ICQ:** What was the opposition about?

**Michael:** I think it's mostly a monetary thing where people who have a large house don't want a duplex or triplex nearby. So we'll see where it goes from here. I also learned about VOICE, Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement and went to some of their meetings, and I also listened online to a lot of NAACP meetings and actions on housing which really opened my eyes.

**ICQ:** How do you think the housing Racial Equity Action Group (REAG) can contribute to these community efforts to promote affordable housing in Arlington?

**Michael:** I think we can contribute by just participating, giving a voice, becoming parts of other groups and, especially if you're a resident, going to some of the Arlington County board meetings. If I hadn't been a part of Courageous Conversations, I would-

n't have been involved with this. So it just gave me another avenue where I can lend my voice.

**ICQ:** How does the housing REAG operate?

**Michael:** We have a group of about 6 or 7 people that meets every other month. And it can be some different people taking part each time. They receive information about the other groups like VOICE and can share in participating.

**ICQ:** What encourages you the most about these efforts to address the systemic racism in Arlington? And what's the hardest thing about it?

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*“The Missing Middle project aims to change zoning to help affordable housing because Arlington has these rules ... just like back in the era of segregation.”*

— Michael Jones

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**Michael:** The encouraging thing is that there are groups like Rock Spring, VOICE, and other organizations. Sometimes you come up against roadblocks or obstacles like we have now. The country has a percentage of people who still don't want equal justice and they're worried about 2040 when minorities will probably be in the majority. They're worrying about things being taken from them. Fortunately, there are a lot of good people out here, black and white, who are working to make the country a better place for all and we're thankful for places like Rock Spring. I think God would want us to have a nation where everyone's treated equally, fairly and justly.

**ICQ:** What would you say to our readers who may be just trying to figure out how to get started in doing racial justice?

**Michael:** Number one, I would say that no matter where you live, do what you can to help elect someone who feels the same way about racial justice that you do. You can do that and get involved in issues that are important to you. Between email and Zoom, you can help out a lot.

**ICQ:** Raise your voice.

**Michael.** Right! ☐

*(Monique Brown -Bryant, continued from p. 12)*

I'd say the limitation of capacity and the want to reach everyone, but the spreading influence from those we do reach helps mitigate this challenge.

**ICQ:** You mentioned earlier an incident at a high school football game where one player spit on another player and called him the n-word. You counseled the affected player (and school staff) and brought that experience into the Courageous Conversations discussions. As a result, several members from Calloway and Rock Spring went to the next football game to support that player and the team. Did their showing up have an impact?

**Monique:** Absolutely, their presence had a significant impact. When the members showed up at the football game, to "stand in the gap", it sent a powerful message to our youth that their voices are heard, and it amplified their resolve to stand up

for their rights and to have power and agency when doing so. It was powerful to witness active allyship and what it means to support and advocate for those facing discrimination, whether by showing up at events or by engaging in conversations like this that promote understanding and change.

**ICQ:** What keeps you going?

**Monique:** Prayer. Proverbs 31:8-9 and Jeremiah 29:11. Beyond that, the reality of countless instances where we see that we can never stop. When individuals don't make it home after a simple traffic stop, when the world witnesses someone's death because of their skin color, when a child's light is dimmed because of institutional and systemic inequities, it's a stark reminder that we must continue. There will

be tough days, and it can be traumatic, but we can never, ever stop. We must pause, recenter through prayer and meditation, and then get back to the work of making a difference. ☐

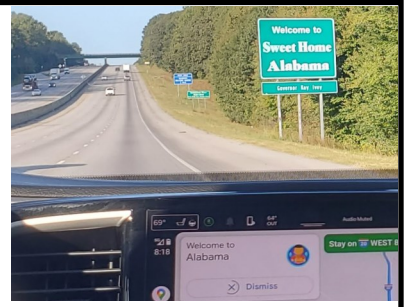
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*“ When individuals don't make it home after a simple traffic stop, when the world witnesses someone's death because of their skin color, when a child's light is dimmed because of institutional and systemic inequities, it's a stark reminder that we must continue.”*

— Monique Bryant

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# Pilgrimage

Atlanta. Birmingham. Selma. Montgomery. Tuskegee.



It was a journey most of us had never taken. For one, it was a homecoming. On October 2—5, six of us, five Board members of Interwoven Congregations and a member of a partner congregation, joined to trace the steps of those who have marched, protested, prayed, sang, been clubbed and lost their lives for the cause of racial justice in our land. This movement, as we know, is still very much underway. So Interwoven Congregations recommits to promoting racial justice and healing, one congregation at a time. **Please join us in this work and support our [Fall Fundraising Campaign](#).** Join us on the pilgrim trail for justice.



*Watch our website for a video that highlights our pilgrimage experience and how you can get involved!*

