

First Parish in Concord
Commission on Institutional Change (COIC) v.2
Status Report to the First Parish Standing Committee
April 15, 2023

COIC Charge

The First Parish Standing Committee established the Commission on Institutional Change (COIC) in the fall of 2021 with the following 3-point charge:

- *Assess congregational policies, practices and procedures for their alignment with our UU values of equity, inclusion, and diversity.*
- *To engage First Parish members, friends and staff in identifying opportunities for systemic change that will help FPC realize itself as a place of radical welcome and anti-oppression work. An example might be working toward congregational adoption of the 8th Principle.*
- *To recommend action(s) that serve to dismantle white supremacy within the culture, practice, policies and procedures within FPC. An example might be carrying out the “Welcoming Walls” initiative.*

COIC Membership

Darien Smith, co-chair
Toby Smith Ropeik, co-chair
Peter Nobile
Ken Reeves
Cindy Soule
Dana Snyder-Grant

In November 2022, personal priorities forced Jennipher Burgess to resign from COIC. We have been unable to find a person of color to replace her on the COIC, though there are several people willing to consult with us on an *as needed* basis.

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Eliminating Oppression

While we all wish there was an easy and effective way to end all forms of societal oppression, we have learned that every task we undertake winds up being more complicated and time consuming than first imagined. That, despite the fact that there is already measurable support for COIC's goals within the First Parish community.

Righting the ills caused by institutional racism, for example, will require many privileged white people to acknowledge the enormous advantages they and their ancestors have had across the generations, as separate from individual abilities and efforts. That requires a profound psychological shift.

Anti-oppression work invariably requires the steady chipping away of practices and policies that have intentionally and unintentionally fostered the status quo and sustained systemic oppression. The members of COIC understand our work will be a long and slow process. And this is an *interim report*, which will be updated as our work continues. We are pleased to be engaging with the First Parish community and together contributing to the wider, generations-long, societal shift that is so badly needed.

COIC Work Completed

Created and filed COIC charter.

Approved a COIC covenant.

Met with Rev. Howard Dana, Rev. Seth Carrier-Ladd and Rev. Paul Langston-Daley.

Created our own [web page](#), which we update regularly.

Read and discussed the UUA's [Widening the Circle](#) report.

Explored what nearby towns and congregations are doing with DEAI work.

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Engaged in training on the nature and process of change.

Studied ways to handle *difficult conversations*.

Supported the [8th UU Principle](#); passed by the First Parish congregation.

Sponsored Kickoff Event - [Afro-American History in Concord Tour](#) - October 16, 2022 - led by Mary-Wren vanderWilden.

Three additional COIC members completed Jubilee Three Training.

Conducted one-on-one interviews with congregational leaders to learn more about their work, what they think COIC needs to know, and how COIC can best coordinate any related anti-oppression efforts. Interviews were conducted with leaders of the following groups:

The Standing Committee	Trustees
Congregational Life	Diversity Committee
Wright Tavern Legacy Trust	WPA
Partner Church Committee	Nominating Committee
AWE	Reclaim Our Democracy
RJAG	Immigration Justice Task Force
First Tuesday Group	Jewish Awareness Group
Pastoral care (Liz Weber)	Religious Exploration (Amy Freedman)
Social Justice (Paul Langston-Daley)	Music (Beth Norton)

Removed the brochure entitled “*A Brief History of First Parish*”, which contained some potentially offensive language.

Co-sponsored CB Beal workshop and sermons (Winter 2023)

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Submitted a preliminary report (February 1, 2023) to the Standing Committee with recommendations to help dismantle white supremacy at First Parish.

Met with the Standing Committee to review our report. (April 11, 2023)

Ongoing COIC Work

Working to improve accessibility to First Parish pulpit with the addition of railings, an effort led by Peter Nobile.

Maintaining a list of FP members who have completed anti-oppression training of any type. (*Waking up White*, [*Beloved Conversations*](#) (both virtual and in person), [*Healing Embodied Racism*](#), [*Transforming Hearts*](#), [*Jubilee Three*](#)). We hope First Parish will co-sponsor and participate in a Jubilee Three training in the Boston area, currently scheduled for October, 2023.

Determine if any content from the UUA's [*Widening the Circle Study Guide*](#) curriculum is relevant to First Parish in Concord.

Drafting, reviewing, and finalizing an apology for our congregation's role in slavery, colonization, and other acts of oppression. To be presented first to the Standing Committee, with the goal of getting congregation adoption at Annual Meeting 2024.

Creating a congregational covenant - vote scheduled Annual Meeting, June 2023. (Two COIC members serve on the Covenanting team.)

Examining First Parish history vis-a-vis indigenous peoples: include developing a meaningful land acknowledgement, spoken at our services or written in our *Order of Service*.

Examining and educating our congregation about the history of Concord and First Parish and their role in slavery.

Expanding our congregation's understanding of the characteristics of white supremacy culture. Planning and co-sponsoring *White Supremacy Teach-in*. (Two COIC members are working with

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Rev. Paul Langston-Daley on developing a presentation to be shared with congregants and groups.)

Sharing articles and information of interest with the wider congregation that inform about diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion.

Maintaining ongoing liaisons with RJAG (Cindy) and Diversity (Dana)

Partnering with RJAG to create a resource area for DEAI information.

Partnering with RJAG on goals for common congregational reads, associated with anti-oppression.

Coordinating our work with related work by the Wright Tavern Legacy Trust.

Collecting, reviewing and suggesting revisions to key First Parish documents: bylaws, policies & procedures, hiring guidelines, standard lease, standard contract

Co-sponsoring Democracy Festival (May 20, 2023)

Educating our congregation about the suggested revisions to Article II of UUA Principles.

Our Recommendations

Create a brochure on First Parish's history that acknowledges its involvement in slavery and indigenous peoples oppression. (A useful model is the North Andover UU church brochure, [*Hidden in Plain Site.*](#))

Create *Welcoming Walls/Spaces*. Re-decorate the vestibule, central hallways, Parlor, and Parish Hall to fully reflect current First Parish activities, engagement, UU values, and social justice work. Include our commitment to anti-oppression as a central theme. As we continue to celebrate our history, we suggest information about our history and past ministers be fully balanced.

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Install a plaque or other permanent fixture (outside the building and/or inside near entrances) acknowledging our church's past role in harming enslaved and indigenous peoples.

Devote a full church year to congregation-wide, anti-oppression book reading and discussion, where multiple services coordinate with those shared readings. Guest speakers/authors might be invited, with events open to the public. Books might include: [*My Grandmother's Hands*](#), [*The Warmth of Other Suns*](#), [*White Fragility*](#), [*American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*](#), [*How to Be An Anti-Racist*](#), [*The Color of Law*](#), [*Biased*](#), others.

Increase parishioner participation in anti-oppression trainings: *Beloved Conversations*, *Jubilee Three Training*, *Transforming Hearts*, *Healing Embodied Racism*

Offer congregation-wide training in conflict management. (Proposed for 2023-4)

Offer congregation-wide training on microaggressions. (Proposed for 2023-4)

Offer congregation-wide training on intersectionality.

Share the UUA's own history of reckoning with DEAI by screening [*The Wilderness Journey*](#) movie (Proposed for 2023-4)

Revisit the First Parish mission statement to see if the congregation wants to change/add to reflect our congregation's anti-oppression efforts.

Eliminate, simplify, or reduce reliance on the formality inherent in using [*Robert's Rules of Order*](#) at church meetings. Prioritize the welcoming of different voices instead.

Study whether any portion of the land we claimed from indigenous people can be returned to its original state.

Solicit media coverage of First Parish's anti-oppression actions, locally and nationally, as a possible model for other churches and groups.

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Operational Recommendations

In choosing material for worship services, include more voices from marginalized groups (i.e. indigenous people, Black Americans, Latinx people, people with disabilities, others.) [Voices from the Margins](#) is a good resource.

Expand the connection between worship and congregational social justice work. Include relevant groups and committees in worship planning and increase lay participation and/or references to their social justice work in services.

Review congregation-wide social justice efforts and continue restructuring to facilitate cooperative work and eliminate or reduce redundancy (Diversity, RJAG, Immigration Justice Task Force, etc.)

Respectfully submitted,

Peter Nobile

Ken Reeves

Toby Smith Ropeik, co-chair

Darien Smith, co-chair

Dana Snyder-Grant

Cindy Soule