

# Congregational Spotlight: St. John, Cedar Falls

by the Racial Justice Advocacy Network

One goal of the Northeastern Iowa Synod Racial Justice Advocacy Network is to lift up congregations throughout the synod that are engaging in racial justice work in an effort to encourage and inspire other congregations. St. John Lutheran Church in Cedar Falls is one such congregation.

Members at St. John engaged in two book studies offered by the University of Northern Iowa that centered on issues of racial justice. They found themselves both challenged and enlightened, and several of them felt it was important for some folks to be accountable for keeping racial justice work something the St. John community engages in an ongoing way. Thus, the St. John Racial Justice Team was formed.

The five members of the team span ages from 20s through 70s. According to Pastor Brian Julin-McCleary, their goal is “to follow Jesus and joyfully take God’s love into the world by faithfully engaging in uncomfortable conversations and challenging learning experiences that help us make life more livable for our neighbors of color. We acknowledge that the responsibility for this work, while in partnership with others, lies squarely on the shoulders of people that have actively and/or passively benefited from centuries of white supremacist thinking and doing.”

To meet this goal, the St. John Racial Justice Team has gathered St. John folks for book reads; organized dinners out to restaurants owned and operated by African American neighbors (celebrating the gifts of food and fellowship while financially contributing to the livelihood of neighbors that have endured white supremacist



Members of St. John, Cedar Falls, visit the “I Am A Man” civil rights memorial in Memphis as part of last fall’s MLK Freedom Bus Tour sponsored by the Waterloo Human Rights Commission.

ideology); hosted a film-viewing session about the Algona Brownies baseball team, an African American team in rural Iowa 100 years ago; encouraged St. John members and sent four people on the Waterloo Human Rights Commission’s MLK Freedom Bus Tour that visited civil rights sites in Birmingham, Selma, Montgomery and Memphis; and is initiating a group that will gather in 2024 to train with Standing Up for Racial Justice (a national organization) to learn how to be white allies.

If you or your congregation are feeling called to ask important questions and engage in challenging conversations to learn and grow as God’s faithful people around issues of racial justice, here are some words of encouragement from Pastor Brian to inspire you to begin: “My encouragement is to gather folks that care about

transforming white privilege and increasing the bonds of fellowship that God has given all of us of different backgrounds. Gather those folks, pray together and dream about conversations you’d like to have and actions you’d like to take. Then set about doing some things that are meaningful to the group and invite others to join in. I also recommend setting up a calendar that can track annual events and keep the group cognizant of the things they’ve done and the things they’d like to do again. There are many local actions to take and experiences to share in — simply showing up and witnessing, or being present for a meaningful event is a great step forward.”

Many thanks to Pastor Brian Julin-McCleary of St. John Lutheran Church in Cedar Falls for sharing the story of the St. John Racial Justice Team.