

Racial Justice—2024

POP's Racial Justice Team continued to lead the congregation in efforts to work toward more just and equitable communities while educating ourselves on ways that systemic racism affects all of us and our neighbors, no matter our race, religion, nationality or ancestry. In our monthly meetings to share resources and knowledge and plan programs, we partnered with other local groups for relevant local events, shared our learning and opportunities for members and friends to raise their own awareness, and added monthly discussions of the many different Asian cultures for the past year. The team sponsored two major events in 2024 which brought in community members in addition to church members and friends.

As follow-up to the orange banner hung since 2023 in honor of the many children who lost their lives in residential schools, the team worked with the CNA (Coalition of Natives and Allies) to bring two Native American speakers and their ally, Lynn Azarchi, to POP as speakers. Donna Fann-Boyle (Choctaw/Cherokee) and Kelley Bova (Dakota Sioux) shared their personal experiences fighting against Native American sports mascots, retrieving the remains of children from the Carlisle residential school, and finding her birth family and tribe after being adopted off her reservation as an infant. To encourage advocacy, those attending were given the opportunity to sign letters to their representatives in support of establishing a Truth and Healing Commission to continue researching the truth about such schools.

In September for God's Work Our Hands Day, the team organized a Refugee Welcome Picnic and forum. Speaker Diana Bowen, Executive Director of Interfaith Refugee and Immigration Service and Empowerment (I-Rise) and Louise Sandburg, coordinator of The Jewish Center Interfaith Refugee Resettlement Committee shared their work helping refugees (families and individuals approved by the government before coming to the US and brought to Central Jersey) find homes and jobs, learn English and assimilate to life in Mercer County through minimal government subsidies and the help of many volunteers from various faith communities. Our last speaker was Farida Almouslem, a Syrian mother, wife, and ObGyn with twenty years of professional experience before and during the war in Syria, now studying to get her license to practice and continue saving lives in America. Almost thirty refugees and volunteers joined POP members for a typical American picnic including Halal food (since most were Muslim), games and activities, and walks through the Peace and Cherry Tree Gardens where they could get fresh herbs, cherry tomatoes, and a surprise favorite, green tomatoes (to make a special chutney) to take home along with Goody Bags filled with practical items as well as a book about NJ.

Team members represented POP at meetings of community and Synod anti-racist and advocacy groups and volunteered at events such as the Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum Juneteenth celebration. Pastor Froehlike led other related forums and the team's Free Racial Justice Lending Library expanded with more fiction and nonfiction books for all ages to check out at your leisure. Many thanks to Kathy and Greg Nowak, our volunteer librarians.

Submitted by
Nancy Reyes (nancyauerreyes@gmail.com)